

“All we need is a home”

Eviction, vulnerability, and the struggle for a home by migrants from the Horn of Africa in Rome

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Abstract: This article retraces the aftermath of the eviction of a squatted building that took place in Rome (2017). It draws on ethnography among Eritrean and Ethiopian migrants, analyzing their search for home, and critically engages with the concept of vulnerability. It explores how the evictees—hundreds of people living in “vulnerable homes”—coped with this event by relying on community ties and the process of home-making enacted in an otherwise empty setting. It also shows how the language of vulnerability was mobilized as a moral and bureaucratic resource both by public authorities, to select those to protect, and by evicted people, to claim their rights. Vulnerability emerges as an intersubjective space of experience that people learn to navigate and in which anguish and creativity overlap.

Keywords: deservingness, Eritrean migration, eviction, home-making, housing policy, Italy, squat, vulnerability

“I was sleeping. I heard noises coming from the roof and then a man came into my room,” cried Tirhas,¹ an Ethiopian domestic worker in her fifties sitting on the pavement. It was ten o’clock in the morning on August 19, 2017, and I had just arrived in Piazza Indipendenza, a square near Rome’s main railway station and the historical gathering place of migrants from the Horn of Africa. The scene before me was alienating: a huge number of law enforcement officers with their vans; dozens of people who, like Tirhas, had just been evicted from what had before been their home; and, scattered over the ground, their stuff, including suitcases, religious icons, furniture, and TVs. A few hours earlier, police had broken into the eight-story building

(colloquially called Piazza Indipendenza) that had been occupied since October 2013 by hundreds of people mainly from Eritrea and Ethiopia in order to cope with the chronic crisis of the housing sector in Rome. The inhabitants of Piazza Indipendenza were single men, women, and families, mostly refugees² with unskilled, illegal, and precarious work, or no work at all, but also economic migrants whose income wasn’t sufficient to allow them to pay rent. Many had tortuous previous experiences with housing, having lived in apartments, reception centers, shanty towns, or other squats.

Tirhas has been in Italy since 2002 and moved into the building one year prior to the eviction when she lost her job as a caregiver to



an elderly person after the latter's death. The job did not have a regular contract and offered her no social protection.³ She explained to me that, after bursting into the building, police forced residents to immediately leave their apartments and took some of them to the police headquarters for identification. Although the majority hold refugee status, this treatment reminded them that the border regime was still active in their lives. With the exception of a few instances in which anger and despair were expressed, residents quietly left the building and gathered their personal belongings at a nearby traffic island covered in grass. When evening fell, it became clear that no alternative accommodation would be made available (with the exception of mothers and children, and sick and disabled people who had been allowed to remain in the building), and about one hundred evictees decided to spend the night there.

The foregoing scene is not unusual. According to UN HABITAT (2011), forced eviction is a global phenomenon involving thousands of people every year. Contemporary evictions are often the result of the intertwining of local and global dynamics (Brickell et al. 2017), such as the spread of the "new logics of expulsion" of a growing number of people from common social and economic orders (Sassen 2014). Neither was being without a secure dwelling a novelty for the evicted people in Piazza Indipendenza, most of whom lived in the squat because of their ongoing housing precariousness. Yet, this eviction offers a privileged viewpoint from which to explore the nexus between home and vulnerability at the core of the theme section containing this contribution.

This article illustrates how people faced a moment of extreme vulnerability within a situation of protracted precariousness. Eviction implies not only the loss of a physical dwelling (a house) but also of the feelings, social relationships, and symbolic values that shape the sense of being at home in a certain place (Blunt and Dowling 2006). By taking home not as a static and ascriptive concept but as a set of practices, ideals, and emotions that are continuously enacted (Rap-

port and Dawson 1998), the study of evictions allows us to enhance our understanding of the incessant struggles for home characterizing migrants' and refugees' lives in Europe today.

By observing what happened in the makeshift settlement in the traffic island in the days following the eviction, this article shows, on the one hand, how migrants' home-making practices in the square acted as resources to cope with a disruptive event. On the other hand, it illustrates how the language of vulnerability was mobilized both by evicted people to claim the right to a house and by public authorities to exclude the majority of them from this right. As I will show, migrants requested not just a shelter but a place they could call home, and their demand was intertwined with a broader process of emplacement, herein intended not as a question of localization but "a striving toward being positively situated in a relational landscape" (Bjarnesen and Vigh 2016: 10).

As usually happens during the evictions of squats in Rome, the future accommodation of the evictees had not been planned in advance, and the institutional intervention was limited to freeing up an occupied building. Therefore, evictees turned the grassy traffic island into a "public stage" where they advocated for the recognition of their right. In this respect, this contribution demonstrates how vulnerability with respect to one's home is diversely produced and manipulated by different social actors. In addition to being a condition inscribed in people's biographies in certain socio-political circumstances, vulnerability emerges as a political language used to create new forms of mobilization and exclusion among marginalized populations. What does eviction mean for a group of people who have already been forced to move out of their homes at the beginning of their migratory process? How does their feeling of vulnerability affect their experience of eviction? Who has the power to publicly define who is vulnerable and what are the consequences in terms of the possibility of making a home?

This article is based on the fieldwork I conducted in Rome in the frame of the project

“HOMInG—The home-migration nexus” with people from the Horn of Africa, and on my long-term ethnographic engagement with Eritrean refugees in different countries. Besides collecting in-depth interviews and life stories, I participated in the improvised moments of domesticity created by the evictees on the traffic island as well as in the negotiations and tensions with local institutions and police. Staying in an occupied public area meant not only giving practical help to evicted people (e.g., recharging their mobile-phones and taking care of their household possessions) but also participating in their protests. The presence of my white body on the traffic island had an immediate political dimension, recognized both by the police, who sometimes asked me to show my ID, and by the evictees, who identified me as a sounding board for their demands.

In approaching an ethnographic case where different forms of institutional violence overlap, I do not offer a detailed exploration of the unequal political and economic systems that increase and produced certain forms of vulnerability. Rather I focus on daily micro-practices through which migrants give meaning to their vulnerable lives and try to respond to the adverse situations they face. After presenting my theoretical framework in the second section, the third section retraces the housing conditions that led some refugees to squat and to find a shifting agreement between their sense of precariousness and their sense of home. In the fourth section, I analyze how evictees turned a traffic island into a temporarily homely space. In the fifth and sixth sections, I focus on the relationships between evicted people and institutions, showing how the language of vulnerability and deservingness was manipulated by both groups to claim (or to exclude people from) the right to a home.

Eviction, home, and vulnerability

Eviction is a multifaceted process calling into question political and economic dynamics at a

local and global level, and involving politicians, bureaucrats, police officers, landlords, activists, and evictees. In the language of feminist geography, it is a grounded embodiment of “intimate geopolitics” that reflects a manifold relationship between home, bodies, and the nation-state (Brickell 2014). For evicted persons, eviction brings about a sense of loss and displacement and is even more shocking when it occurs without warning and with the threat or use of violence. Inspired by research exploring the experiences of evictees and their struggles for housing (e.g., Desmon 2016; Herzfeld 2009; Vasudevan 2015), this article focuses on the processes of home-making and home-unmaking that take form when domesticity is under attack. As a “domicide” (Porteous and Smith 2001), eviction offers a significant perspective from which to look at how home can become intrinsically vulnerable in specific socio-political contexts, with profound consequences for inhabitants’ being-in-the-world.

In its idealized form (variable according to different times, spaces, and subjectivities), feeling of being at home involves comfort, security, and familiarity, and is connected with sentiments of belonging and identity; it entails intimacy, significant social relationships, and moral values (Boccagni 2017).⁴ While the focus on eviction gives centrality to the domestic space, the feeling of being at home may be elicited by different environments on a variety of scales, from a neighborhood to a country (Miranda et al. 2020; Ralph and Staehel 2014).

The evicted people I worked with had lost their habitual dwelling place and experienced a condition of being “out of place,” which stemmed not only from their being (forced) migrants but also from the adverse conditions they found in Italy. On the one hand, home is not necessarily bound to a specific place: while people on the move (including Eritrean and Ethiopian migrants) may cultivate a feeling of attachment to the place they left behind through transnational practices, they often struggle to associate home with their new environment (Al-Ali and Koser 2002). On the other hand, displacement and be-

ing out of place are not automatically related to mobility but can be understood as an existential condition in which life projects are harder to achieve, and as a sense of future dispossession that crosses the migrant/non-migrant binary (Lems 2018; Ramsay 2019). Likewise, emplacement and the feeling of being at home cannot be reduced to an articulation of belonging, but refer to ongoing social efforts to pursue “existentially meaningful life-making” (Bjarnesen and Vigh 2016) and to act for the present and the future (Jansen and Löfving 2009).

From this perspective, this article focuses on the multiple material and imaginary processes through which individuals, families, and communities continuously struggle to recreate an existential connection to their new place and to possibly turn it into a home, while navigating unequal power dynamics and hostile “domopolitics” (Walters 2004). I argue that this search for home is inherently human and can never be complete once for all (Jacobson 2009) and is vulnerable to moments of crisis as well as open to the possibility of reconstruction.

Eviction is a moment in which home vulnerability becomes evident, both in its political and social mechanisms and in the ways inhabitants deal with it. While I acknowledge that there is a primary vulnerability characterizing every human existence, I conceptualize vulnerability as historically produced within specific power hierarchies (Butler 2004). I am interested in showing how vulnerability and its politics are interwoven in concrete lives, that is, how vulnerability is an intersubjective condition experienced in the singularity of everyday life (Han 2018; Honkasalo 2018). The evicted migrants I met were not vulnerable per se but *became* vulnerable due to their exposure to certain contexts, such as the political crisis that led them to leave their home-countries, the circumstances of their journeys, and their interactions with the European migration apparatus. Their home vulnerability intersects with other vulnerabilities such as job instability, landlords’ racism, and institutional destitution. By observing their lives, we see their agency and their ability to navigate the chronic crises punctuating their existence,

which suggests conceptualizing vulnerability as an active condition that both imposes limits and opens possibilities (Das 2006).

Vulnerability is also a contested category, re-defined by social actors within concrete interactions and power relationships, and is often used in normative ways (Faas 2016). In Europe’s restricted asylum system—increasingly informed by austerity, the decline in welfare provision, and fear of ethnic and religious diversities—the institutions and practices that provide aid often select which migrants to protect on the basis of “hierarchies of deservingness” (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016). These hierarchies are built on overlapping moral frames within which the “deserving human life” can alternatively be the innocent victim, the compliant individual or the productive body (Giudici 2021; Ramsay 2020; Ticktin 2017). Together, they act as a “politics of life” (Fassin 2007) that distinguishes between those human beings who should legitimately be saved and those who should not. Within the moral landscape of “humanitarianism” (Fassin 2010)—where situations characterized by risk and suffering are granted dedicated forms of help by states, international agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs)—vulnerability has turned into a key moral asset in the race for “deservingness” involving both migrants and non-migrants.

Therefore, the definition of who is “vulnerable” and what “deservingness” means shifts in time and space and is negotiated by both “those ascribing vulnerability to others . . . and those who receive, perform, or demand the label of vulnerability” (Grotti et al. 2018: 7). During the Piazza Indipendenza eviction, the language of vulnerability was mobilized as a moral and bureaucratic resource not only by the public authorities offering a housing solution for those labeled as “fragile” but also by the evicted people when claiming their right to a home.

The squat as a home

The building evacuated on August 19, 2017 was one of dozens of structures occupied for resi-

dential purposes in Rome. In Italy the housing emergency is a long-lasting problem as a result of a lack of state interventions and public policies mainly focused on the medium levels of housing needs (Tosi 2017). In Rome, this housing crisis is enhanced by historical dynamics involving urban planning and real estate speculation. Informal housing has been commonly used for decades in the city, and there is a long tradition of housing movements (Cellamare 2010; Vereni 2015). While governmental reactions to these settlements have included indifference, demolition, and efforts at legalization, the recent securitarian approach of urban policy has resulted in a criminalization of those behaviors previously read as expressions of poverty.

Since the 1990s, international migrants have been part of this scenario. The emergency approach characterizing the Italian migration and refugee system (Pinelli 2013), inadequate inclusion policies, and their marginality in the job market have made migrants particularly vulnerable to housing precariousness (Montagna and Grazioli 2019). More recently, these elements of marginalization have intertwined with a political climate characterized by moral panic about migration and narratives of invasion and the scarcity of resources, which spread a sense of vulnerability across the country. Although fueled by growing right-wing populism, this climate is transversal to the political forces in power and is intertwined with the structural denial of the xenophobia that characterizes Italian society (Oliveri 2018).

The building in Piazza Indipendenza had originally been occupied by one of the city's main housing movements, Precarious Metropolitan Blocks (BPM), together with a group of Eritrean refugees, but the latter soon broke off their relationship with the former. As in other occupations that are made up predominantly of people from Eritrea and nearby countries,⁵ they were resistant to the political activities required by BPM, interpreting them as a diversion from the moral obligations underpinning their migration, such as working and sending money to relatives in Eritrea to protect them against eco-

nomie precariousness and to help others to migrate (e.g., Massa 2020a; Treiber 2014). In this sense, much like other "Eritrean squats," Piazza Indipendenza represents an interesting case study, for it is an exception to the majority of occupations in Rome that are managed by housing movements that promote political activism and values such as cosmopolitanism and class struggle (Giorgi and Fasulo 2013; Vereni 2013). In addition to that, the presence of Eritrean migrants calls into question Italy's colonial past. While in Italy the recognition of this past is still lacking (Triulzi 2006), in Eritrea it has played an important role in nation-building, and is often evoked by migrants in Italy to create a historical intimacy between themselves and their country of arrival.

Apart from these peculiarities, Eritrean squats do rely on the expertise provided by the housing movements (Belloni 2016) and, like the other squats, work as a "bottom-up" alternative to the structural lack of official welfare in Rome (Vereni 2015). Occupation implies a "politics of inhabitance" (Dadusc et al. 2019), which creates alternative political logics, autonomous spaces, and new forms of sociality (Mudu and Chattopadhyay 2017).

Piazza Indipendenza not only offered a concrete solution to the need for shelter but was also an expression of Eritrean migrants' struggles for home. In squats like these, squatters can enjoy the proximity of compatriots, friends, and relatives, rely on door-to-door support (such as baby-sitting and food sharing), and reproduce a sociability that recalls practices that have been left behind (Belloni 2016; Costantini 2015; Massa 2020b). Squats are usually equipped with cafés, pool tables, and common TVs where people spend their free time together, as well as with small shops, barbershops, and tailors, which turn them into a sort of urban microcosm. Indeed, buildings not originally designed for residential purposes are concretely transformed into dwellings, reflecting the tastes and needs of the inhabitants and recreating a familiar physical environment, despite the presence of internal conflicts. Living in a squatted building undoubtedly produces forms of self-ghettoization and

makes inhabitants vulnerable to the risk of eviction. However, in a context in which precariousness and vulnerability are the norm, squats are places in which migrants can find an (albeit minimal) existential stability.

The experiences of exclusion characterizing refugees' relationship with the public institutions is clearly represented by Henock, an Eritrean refugee in his twenties who in 2017 was a casual and irregular worker in the logistics sector. He told me in his beginner's Italian:

In Italy they give you documents [refugee status], and then they don't care about you. When I got a resident permit, the asylum center said to me, "Go away." "Where?," I asked, since I didn't have a job or accommodation. "We don't know," they replied. I eventually went to Norway, but due to the Dublin Regulation they sent me away. Back in Rome, when I arrived at the airport, I asked the police, "Where shall I go?" "We don't know, but get out of here," they replied. And now it's the same: they tell us to go away, but where? . . . We knew that living in a squat was illegal and that we could be evicted, but we need a place to stay, and in Piazza Indipendenza we had a home and could have a *normal life*.

Henock's words and his reference to "a normal life" suggest the lack of emplacement characterizing the everyday life of many refugees that I met. This lack is produced by a variety of factors, such as institutional neglect and obstacles to accessing decent housing and a stable job. It is also the result of their perceptions of being discriminated against by the local population and the impossibilities of realizing their aspirations and meeting the expectations of the family members they have left behind (Belloni and Massa 2021). Thus, when the feeling of being "out of place" is persistent, the squat represents a provisional stability in which the sense of home overlaps with the awareness that this experience could end at any time.

Facing vulnerability through home-making practices

Forced eviction meant the former inhabitants of Piazza Indipendenza faced a new form of vulnerability, which they firstly addressed by occupying a grassy traffic island. The occupation of a space nearby an evicted squat is a well-established practice among the housing movements in Rome, through which evictees temporarily find a place to stay and gain public visibility. In these forms of occupation, the demand for accommodation intertwines with the development of ephemeral home-making practices readapted to the new spatial conjuncture.

From August 19 to 12, the grassy traffic island became an open-air home-like setting where the former squatters slept, had their meals, and performed several other practices usually enacted in the intimacy of the domestic space. Through these activities, the evictees not only responded to their basic needs but tried to carry on their broken everyday lives too. Standing, sitting, or lying on the traffic island, they contacted relatives abroad, hung out with former neighbors, received guests, laughed, cried, and organized for collective actions. The area also became a repository of the household possessions—bags, pots and pans, furniture—that some of the former squatters had brought with them. Although giving an initial impression of chaos, these objects divided an indistinct patch of grass into several portions, each of which was carpeted with cardboard and sheets and occupied by a different small group of people. As an external observer, each time I stepped onto the traffic island, I felt like I was entering an intimate space, as if that small piece of land was the orthogonal projection of the three-dimensional space of the squat. In this sense, these household possessions acted as markers of material and symbolic "thresholds" between the inside and the outside, the private and the public. These thresholds, that I was more than once invited to cross in order to sit in the imaginary rooms that they had created, domesticated the traffic island. Indeed, as Mary Douglas (1991: 289) argues, "home

starts by bringing some space under control" and has aesthetic and moral dimensions.

Home also has a structure in time, and its routines are makers and markers of distinct temporalities (Pink 2012). Although in some ways stable, the configuration of the patch of grass changed throughout the day: at nighttime, clothes and objects used during the daytime were removed and pieces of cardboard and sheets were laid on the ground to prepare makeshift beds. This preparation marked a distinction between day and night, ordered the flow of time in accordance with the rhythms of a precarious domestic life, and created a different space, one where people could be barefoot, as if they were in the intimacy of their bedrooms.

Moreover, this occupied space was elastic enough to adapt to the changing needs of its occupiers. For example, one evening, wearing white scarves, a group engaged in a collective prayer to celebrate Saint Mary. That prayer showed the relevance of the Ethiopian and Er-

itrean Orthodox religion in shaping believers' daily lives and in offering emotional support in times of crisis. It also demonstrates the power of certain constellations of symbols to change the meaning of spaces: the religious icon put on display, the white scarves, the rhythm of the prayers, and the codified gestures, all concurred to turn an anonymous corner into a temporary place of worship (Figure 1). Interestingly, the atmosphere of sacredness created by such a visual, acoustic, and bodily landscape overlapped with what was happening in other portions of the patch of grass. That same evening, just behind a couple of suitcases, other occupiers were hanging out and drinking beer. Surprisingly, none of the two groups moved away to seek privacy but reproduced their actions in a place that, in the time and space of the patch of grass, had become their "room," as if walls were (still) separating them.

However, the setting offered by the traffic island was incompatible with many daily activ-



FIGURE 1. A night prayer in the traffic island. Rome, August 23, 2017. Photo by the author.

ities. Parallel to the spatial compression of the patch of grass, other domestic practices were spatially dispersed, shaping a strategy of “mobile homemaking” (Fábos 2015), characterized by the movements of objects and people along urban paths, and by the support of external social ties. Although the traffic island was scattered with cookware and tableware, meals were never prepared there. Occupants received sandwiches from charitable associations, but they often ate *Habesha*⁶ food, provided by friends and relatives or by the nearby Eritrean and Ethiopian restaurants. Following the same paths as the food, the occupants also crossed the city to manage their personal hygiene. Since the issue was remarkably ignored by charitable associations, people resorted again to their own informal ties, using the restrooms of nearby Ethiopian and Eritrean restaurants or friends’ houses spread across the city.

As a whole, these improvised home-making practices helped the evictees domesticate an unfamiliar place and a hostile situation against the background of localized practices, emotions, social ties, and moral frameworks. Arranging room-like space, creating ordered temporalities, praying, and relying on friends became resourceful practices through which evictees were able to face a situation of extreme vulnerability. Since home entails feelings of protection and familiarity, putting into practice a process of collective (re)production of domesticity allowed the former squatters to creatively and temporarily cope with an unpredictable event. This recreation of familiar experiences of home-making practices in a central square of Rome also had political value: it was a form of protest through which evictees claimed that Piazza Indipendenza was their home, expressed their bonds with the neighborhood, and requested their rights as vulnerable people.

“We are refugees, we are not terrorists”

Sitting on the traffic island, Henock and I were drinking a coffee that someone had brought in

a flask and discussing the sadness he felt about the eviction. His emotional turmoil was particularly strong due to the political condition shared by those who had been left without a home: “We are refugees,” he explained to me. In those days, this expression was a sort of watchword on everyone’s lips, and on the banners raised in the makeshift settlement (Figure 2).

Together with other slogans (such as “We are Christians” and “We are not terrorists”) and with the very choice of living on the traffic island, this motto showed the attempt of the evictees to depict themselves as worthy of being rehoused by the Municipality, within a moral frame of “vulnerability” and “innocence.” By declaring “We are refugees” they were stressing their particular fragility and reinterpreting the juridical labels imposed on them from their own perspective. However, it was only a synecdoche, since Piazza Indipendenza also included a minority of economic migrants (such as Tirhas) and naturalized Italian citizens. Likewise, by presenting themselves as Christians despite the presence of Muslim people, evictees tried to publicly represent themselves as close to Italian religious traditions and as “non-violent,” implicitly responding to the widespread Islamophobic sentiments. The former squatters also frequently pointed out that they left the building obediently, distancing themselves from a priori representations of unruly immigrants and riotous squatters. Moreover, evoking the colonial relationship, many Eritreans pointed out that they had welcomed Italians for nearly 60 years and so deserved similar treatment. Representing themselves as refugees, Christian, docile, and welcoming people, the evictees tried to produce a semantic inversion of the figure of the “migrant-squatter” that, as a foreigner and occupier, is often depicted as doubly deviant, as an intruder and a threat (Groham 2017).

Consequently, they initially feared that the involvement of the housing movements would dilute their prerogatives in the struggle for housing rights. Their rhetoric was aimed at denouncing the lack of support they received as people who were granted the right to asylum,



FIGURE 2. A banner claiming “We are refugees not terrorists” raised in front of the squatted building. Photo by the author.

rather than at demanding the universal right to housing (Hung 2019). This *mise-en-scène* of their “vulnerability” and “deservingness” was addressed to the police and the local and national institutions but also to the heterogeneous public who attended or supported the event, such as journalists, photographers, housing movements, NGOs, and international organizations (e.g., the UNHCR). Their audience also included the Ethiopian and Eritrean communities living elsewhere, and the European governments which were often invoked to suspend the Dublin Regulation that trapped them in Italy and that they considered co-responsible for that painful event.

Convincing someone that they deserved a form of protection on the basis of their vulnerability was nothing new for the former squatters. The refugees’ asylum claims had been adjudi-

cated precisely on this ability to demonstrate the physical and psychological suffering they had experienced. Vulnerability was also the criteria through which, during the eviction, the Municipality distinguished those who were entitled to help from those who could be abandoned. Thus, the ways evictees made their claims were in line with the attitudes adopted by the institutions. Moreover, their language of innocence and vulnerability was in opposition to the rhetoric of criminalization implicit in the modalities of eviction (the lack of warning, the transfer to the police station) and, more generally, the ways in which poor and foreign Others are treated in Italian public spheres. As such, this language can be conceptualized as a struggle for representation, through which evictees attempted to legitimize their protest, provoke feelings of indignation, and mark a moral frontier in order

to depict themselves as dutiful people. In this sense, their protest was not “against the system” that distinguishes between acceptable and unacceptable, worthy and unworthy migrants, but was aimed at improving their position within this exclusionary classification. In other words, drawing upon institutional language, the evictees tried to meet the expectations of the Municipality and to emphasize those elements that meant they would be considered to be deserving of support (cf. Benadusi 2013).

Nonetheless, this moral repertoire was not merely strategic but intertwined with evictees’ sense of self and life experiences. As shown before, the experience of being vulnerable was persistent in the biographical trajectories of many, from their country of origin to the present. Furthermore, vulnerability and docility are also the outcomes of migrants’ interactions with the Italian migrant reception systems and bureaucratic apparatuses, herein understood as forms of power that, together with daily interaction with exclusionary and racist discourses, contribute toward shaping (without strictly determining) migrants’ subjectivities (Pinelli and Fontanari 2017). It should also be noted that these descriptions recalled the ways in which Eritreans were represented in colonial times as “docile” and “civilized” (see Sòrgoni 1998) as well as the depiction of Eritrean domestic workers who arrived in Italy during the first waves of postcolonial migration as “good, smart and clean” (Marchetti 2010), showing the persistent ambivalent legacy of colonialism. At the same time, people on the traffic island were trying to raise their voices against what they perceived as an injustice and acting “on the world even as they were acted upon” (Ortner 2005: 31).

The moral frame of vulnerability became even more visible during the second police operation. The occupation of the traffic island did not last long: after occupants rejected the housing solution offered by the municipal government (see next section), on August 24, again at dawn, they were woken up by water cannon aimed at “cleaning” the square (to use the expression of the prefect who authorized the

operation). This second eviction was characterized by the use of more coercive methods by the police, and by forms of resistance adopted by the occupants who refused to move on, as their hope for obtaining an acceptable housing solution was fading. The clearing out involved the repeated deployment of water cannons, the use of charges, pursuits, and batons to suppress scuffles and break up improvised demonstrations, and resulted in injuries and arrests.

While people in the square were trying to escape police attacks and save their household possessions from the water in an escalation of anger and fear, a war of images erupted online. As police circulated videos of a “black migrant” throwing an (empty) gas canister with the evident intention of criminalizing the evictees,⁷ some pictures went viral, especially in leftist newspapers, for their capacity to transmit the police violence and incite feelings of “outrage” (Johansen et al. 2018). These pictures portrayed children protesting from the balcony on the first floor of the building, water cannons hitting women and disabled people (Figure 3), and people with their wrists crossed above their heads.⁸ These images were a good reflection of what happened in the square, where evictees were handling different axes of vulnerability, such as age, gender, and disability, intertwining them with the general condition of being refugees, homeless, and victims of institutional violence. By staying on the frontline, children, women, and disabled people not only protected the group as a whole but also created a spectacle aimed at creating a public outcry. These images and slogans reveal the ability of evictees to “manipulate” vulnerability by claiming help and support in an appropriate language. Nevertheless, in a political scenario in which right-wing populist movements obtained votes by scapegoating black people and poor foreigners, a migrant eviction could command little empathy, and both local and national institutions and the wider public (with few exceptions) were rarely sympathetic with their claims. Likewise, the housing solutions they received were largely below their expectations.



FIGURE 3. Women and disabled people holding the frontline against police water cannons during the eviction. Rome, August 23, 2017. Photo by Angelo Carconi/AP.

“Without a home, I am a child too”

The response to the eviction by the municipal institutions was oriented by an emergency and selective approach, in line with the lack of a social housing system in Rome, and with the way in which the foreign population is governed nationwide. Indeed, the search for alternative dwellings was not planned in advance, nor were durable solutions sought, since the aim of the eviction was simply to get people off a central square. Moreover, institutions took care only of those who had been labeled as “fragile people” by social services, excluding the majority of evictees. Despite migrant, housing rights, and international organizations advocating for a comprehensive response, on August 23, representatives of the municipal government made only a few dozen beds available for six months in reception centers located in the outskirts of the city. Although a rhetoric of vulnerability was also mobilized by the Municipality, its definition

of it was rather narrow. In the institutional understanding, “fragile people” included pregnant women, young children with their mothers, and old and sick people. This definition clearly contrasted with the evictees’ representation and perception of themselves as collectively vulnerable and acted as a mechanism of selection that, while supporting some people, abandoned others. It is not surprising that the offer was rejected by the evictees who refused to abandon the traffic island.

“We don’t ask for food, work, or money, we can deal without them,” Yemane, one of the leaders of the protest, told me, the night before the clearing of the traffic island. Yemane is an Eritrean refugee who has been in Italy for 10 years, during which time he has changed his accommodation several times and has had many jobs, including working in warehouses, washing dishes, and doing seasonal agricultural work. “All we need is a *home* where we could rest, eat, live our lives peacefully. If they gave me a piece

of land, I could build a house myself, but there is no land here. But it is full of empty apartments: why are they empty?" Yemane's rhetorical question clearly highlights the distance between a conception of a "house" as a material asset and a source of profit that fuels the housing crisis characterizing many contemporary cities and the idea of the "home" as a starting point for a stable present and a secure future. His words also shed light on the contrast between the claim for a basic right (a dwelling place), and the persistent feeling of "being out of place" experienced by many migrants and refugees in Rome. He added: "The Municipality only helps 'fragile people,' like children and sick people. I can understand this, but without a home, I'm a child too."

The former squatters were dissatisfied with the Municipality's offer not only because it left most of the evicted homeless but also for what it meant to those who benefited from it. The latter worried that moving far away from their previous neighborhood would shatter their social ties within and outside the squat and make it difficult for children to get to their schools and mothers to get to their jobs. Moreover, living in a reception center for some months would prolong their housing instability and force them back into institutional accommodation. Indeed, living in reception centers implies processes of infantilization and the expropriation of the possibility of controlling the rhythms and spaces of everyday life, with negative consequences on wellbeing (see Grønseth and Thorshaug in this issue). Unsurprisingly, the "fragile" former squatters did not want to share their rooms with other guests, sleep in bunk beds, have an evening curfew, and have no possibility of cooking or of deciding when to turn off the light at night. Although precarious and informal, unlike reception centers, the squat gave their inhabitants the feeling of having mastery of the space, eliciting a sense of being (at least partially) at home. On the contrary, living in a reception center meant pushing long-term refugees and migrants back into the conditions of newly arrived asylum seekers

and migrants, nullifying their previous efforts at emplacement in Rome. Moreover, this offer reflected the position that foreigners occupy in the Italian social fabric. In the intertwining of care, control, and abandonment that characterizes the current refugee regime, this solution insisted on their "difference," treating refugees and migrants not as potential citizens, but as foreigners to be contained (Hung 2019).

After the violence of August 24, the former inhabitants of Piazza Indipendenza called for the reopening of negotiations with the institutions through a large demonstration and the establishment of a picket line near government buildings. However, the negotiation did not produce any results. After a couple of weeks and the clearing by police of the picket line, the protests quickly diminished, due to the aforementioned misunderstandings with the housing movements and the internal fractures among the former squatters that prevented the construction of any long-term activism, as sometimes happens following evictions (e.g., Brickell 2014; Lancione 2017). Indeed, the apparent collective harmony that emerged in those hot days of August 2017 involved only some of the former inhabitants of the Piazza Indipendenza occupation and coexisted with multiple and historically deep political, national, regional, and religious tensions. While these tensions, which echoed those in Ethiopian and Eritrean communities in Rome and elsewhere (Hepner 2015), were initially set aside, they predominated again when anger gave way to resignation, and hopes vanished.

Although some of the so-called fragile people eventually moved to reception centers, it was once again the informal support of *Habesha* communities that provided the most reliable form of shelter and protection: many evictees found a temporary solution thanks to the hospitality of friends and relatives or through moving to other squats, thus perpetuating their housing vulnerability. Others, following the desire to move elsewhere held by many Eritrean refugees in Italy, migrated to other European countries, hoping to be exempted from the Dublin Regulation.

Conclusions

In an influential work, Henrik Vigh (2008) states that for a large part of the human population, "crisis" is not an episodic condition but an endemic one; it is a terrain of action and meaning rather than a moment of chaos or a period of change. By focusing on "chronic crisis" and on its effects on social life and people's experiences, he argues that "conflict, violence and abject poverty can become so embedded in the social fabric that they become indistinguishable from it (Das 2006: 80) . . . forcing people to make lives in fragmented and volatile worlds rather than waiting for normalisation" (Vigh 2008: 8). From this perspective, he suggests that we do not place crisis in a context but rethink "crisis as a context." This is particularly useful for understanding the everyday vulnerable life of people I met during the eviction of Piazza Indipendenza. In their migratory and housing trajectory, crisis emerges as a context that provokes existential turmoil, feelings of fragmentation, and the impossibility of changing the forces that negatively affect their lives, fueling their sense of displacement. It is a context that they learn to "navigate" by re-adjusting their "reading of the social environment and [their] movement within it to its critical characteristics" (ibid: 11).

I have shown how migrants from the Horn of Africa continuously struggle to regain a precarious stability and a sense of home in a context of ongoing crisis and vulnerability. Looking at informal dwellings from the inside, I have shed light on how the latter are not merely spaces of decay and despair, as they are often depicted in public representations, but places in which different forms of inhabiting may emerge (Lancione 2019). Squats are a scenario in which it is possible to feel at home, despite the risks of the present and the uncertainties of the future, and where solidarity and informal support play a fundamental role in managing both the chronic crisis and the unexpected problems of everyday lives, what Vigh (2008: 13) calls the "crisis embedded in crisis."

Focusing on a group of people that had lost their home, I have analyzed the home-making processes that occurred when the ordinary rhythm of daily life was broken. The ethnographic analysis of how evictees domesticated the traffic island with their routines, with the creation of material and symbolic thresholds, and with the ordering of time, have shown how an alien space could be domesticized and how a distressing and dangerous situation could be partially tamed. This suggests a shift of focus from what making a home *is* to what making a home *does*. From this vantage point I have demonstrated, on the one hand, how these different practical and embodied types of knowledge acted as resources to deal with a condition of vulnerability that resulted from the collapse of domesticity, and, on the other, how home-making and the sense of being at home is made, remade, and unmade through daily activities, objects, and relationships.

I have conceptualized vulnerability not only as an existential and socially produced condition but also as a widespread political and moral language that governs contemporary times and is used to justify the right to enable or deny access to public resources for people in need. It is a language that the evictees were able to master to try to advance their claims and challenge the vulnerability that trapped them. Vulnerability also produces forms of institutional exclusion. In this respect, it is worth underlining that exclusion is not a peculiarity of migrants but characterizes all those people who find themselves cast outside of the circles of deservingness.

Although evictees were critical of the housing system, the border regime, and the other institutional powers that made them vulnerable and put them at the margins of the social fabric, their actions were not necessarily aimed at dismantling them. By protesting on the traffic island, they did not oppose, but adopted, the hegemonic language of vulnerability and presented themselves as docile and good. They were also unable to find an easy and stable agreement with the housing movements. While the movements aimed at building anti-capitalist and

resistant subjectivities, the migrant squatters often aspired to achieve other and frequently contrasting models of home, wellbeing, and success, which also related to the aspirations that moved them to migrate. It is in the wider frame of their migratory horizons and transnational networks that their experiences of vulnerability and their search for home can be better understood. From this vantage point, evicted refugees appear neither as agentive heroes nor as passive victims but as complex human beings dealing with intricate social and political scenarios.

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. With this term I refer to all forms of international protection.
3. Illegal work does not involve only migrants but is a feature of the wider Italian jobs’ market.
4. For an analysis of the concepts of home/house/being at home among Tigrinya-speaking Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees, see Hammond (2004) and Belloni and Massa (2021).
5. I am referring to the *Collatina* and *Anagnina* squats (both multi-story buildings hosting hundreds of people) established in the early 2000s in the outskirts of Rome. Only a minority of Eritrean squatters live in occupations managed by housing movements.
6. *Habesha* indicates practices, ways of being and acting, and feelings of belonging shared through which some Ethiopian and Eritrean populations, both in the diaspora and at home, defined themselves. However, the “we” that the term circumscribes differs between groups and its uses are also contested by a significant portion of Ethiopian and Eritrean people (Habecker 2012).
7. In the days of the occupation of the traffic island, the campaign of discrimination against the occupiers was fueled by right-wing journalists and politicians, who wrote that some former squatters had been officially charged with organizing rackets and others with human trafficking and smuggling. These representations selected those elements that criminalized migrants and omitted to say that, as a wide literature has shown, these activities are often ambiguous and a consequence of the processes of exclusion imposed by migratory and border regimes.
8. Since the so-called Oromo protests against the Ethiopian federal government of 2016, wrists crossed in the air have become a powerful symbol of defiance, which evictees readapted to their fight.

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