'Becoming' Subalterns
Writing and Scribbling in Early Modern Prisons

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Abstract

According to Spivak, the subaltern was 'removed from all lines of social mobility' (2004, 531), deprived of their capacity to speak and excluded from representation in both political and aesthetic senses. Such a condition is necessarily subject to sovereign temporality, thus historically determined and rooted. The marginalization is determined through three main lines of oppression – race, gender and class –, whose persistence in time is ineludible. But what happens when new circumstances are introduced and intervene, resulting in a condition of subalternity for a hitherto non-subaltern subject? The essay addresses the issue by considering the experience of early modern imprisonment in Italy through a reading of prison graffiti, viewing confinement as a condition of temporary subalternity. In the light of these premises, the essay addresses graffiti as a potential form of subaltern writing, examining two case studies from Palazzo Steri, the inquisitorial prison in Palermo (1604-1782).

Keywords: Graffiti, Gramsci, Inquisition, Prison History, Subaltern Studies

1. *Introduction*

After several years spent studying historical graffiti, more specifically, inquisitorial prison graffiti, I found myself questioning the common perception of graffiti as subaltern writing that emerges in public discourse (Basilicò 2023a). The application of the materialistic approach of Armando Petrucci to the graffiti of Palazzo Steri, used as the Inquisition prison in Palermo from 1604 to 1782, led me to take this form of graphic production as an exercise on the part of the victims of the Holy Office, whose condition could rightly be defined as one of subalternity. In contrast with the praxis of coeval secular prisons, the Holy Office did not make any distinction of class, confining in the same cell intellectuals, millers, slaves and merchants. We know this from the information about social relations between prisoners that is annotated in archival records. Nevertheless, on the walls of Palazzo

Steri, I could only spot the words of some of them. How is that Agueda Azzolini,[1] Baharàm,[2] Zara,[3] sor Juana Rosselli,[4] Arabia,[5] Hamete[6] cannot be associated with any of the graffiti? The perhaps obvious idea of relativity as a prerogative of subalternity conflicted with both the idea of subaltern as a collective body and as singularity. Could the world 'subaltern' be accompanied with adverbs such as *more* or *less*? I struggled to find a way out of the idea of subalternity as a social product of hegemony, roughly wondering whether ' "popular culture exists outside the act that suppresses it" ' (Ginzburg 1992, xvii) – even though I do not agree with using 'popular' as a synonym of 'subaltern'. I must admit that it was not scholarly literature that persuaded me of the contrary, but a fortunate encounter with the *jineolojî*, the science of women as described by the Kurdish women's movement (Güneşer 2021). Thus, assuming for the subaltern an existence other than that defined by its contrary – and what defines its contrary? –, the problems relied on the 'epistemological availability of subalternity' (Warrior 2011, 86). This contribution aims to address the issue by comparing two different approaches towards subalternity – namely Antonio Gramsci's legacy and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's formulation – and to show the lines of continuity between them.

2. *Scattered Speculations on Subalternity*

In an interview published in the appendix of *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (Srivastava and Bhattacharya 2012, 221-232), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak described a 'certain dilution' (221)[7] of the word 'subaltern' ensuing from her attempt to 'make the work of Subaltern Studies more easily accessible' (*ibid*.). As a result, 'subaltern became a claim to a certain kind of undifferentiated victimage … "subaltern is anybody who feels inferior" ' (221-222). This is far removed from her actual interpretation, which I will try to summarize for the benefit of my argument on prison graffiti and subaltern writings.

The broad literature produced by Spivak provides the scholar with at least three features of the subaltern: s/he[8] cannot speak, cannot be heard and is being silenced. She speaks of subaltern as 'those removed from lines of social mobility' (2004, 531), situated in a 'position without identity' where 'social lines of mobility, being elsewhere, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action' (2005, 476). The subaltern does not have consciousness of their condition, from which Spivak derives the difference between subalternity and class (*ibid*.). S/he occupies a place excluded from representation in both political and aesthetic senses, is a non-agent and a non-subject. What rightly seems to characterize the subaltern is the privation, the negation, insofar as the only possibility to define subalternity is *via negativa*. This is why, addressing historiography, Spivak feels the urge (and invitation) to read the silences of history, to measure them, instead of striving to find records. Such a statement might recall Foucault's archaeology of silence (1961, ii), or even Le Roy Ladurie's area of cultural silence (1978, 189), but Spivak's outcomes substantially differ from both, rejecting both Foucault's aesthetic attitude

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[1] AHN (Archivo Histórico Nacional), Inquisición, 1747, exp. 3; AHN, Inquisición, 1746, exp. 32.

[2] AHN, Inquisición, 1747, exp. 5.

[3] AHN, Inquisición, 1747, exp, 22.

[4] AHN, Inquisición, 1748, exp. 16.

[5] AHN, Inquisición, 1748, exp. 25.

[6] AHN, Inquisición, 1748, exp. 19.

[7] A similar premise was set out in Castillo Gómez 2002, 23.

[8] The formula 's/he' is the one adopted by Spivak to exclude the use of the male universal.

and the process of information retrieval as possible solutions to uncover the subaltern presence throughout history. For Spivak, one must assume the subaltern's speech to be essentially inaudible and illegible for those who 'achieved' the space produced by patriarchy.[9] Reporting the story of Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri, a young woman who hanged herself in Calcutta in 1926, Spivak demonstrated the extent to which historical circumstances and ideological structures colluded to remove any chance of her being heard (1988, 307-308). Shortly afterwards, she concludes her essay by stating that the 'subaltern cannot speak' (308). Subalternity is thus the structurally imposed position from which it is impossible to access the capacity to take power, substantially differing from the possibility adumbrated by Gramsci.[10] If a subaltern escapes from this muting, then s/he ceases to be a subaltern – which is obviously a desirable switch. The sole act of speaking implies the shift from subalternity to something else, being thus the act of a *former* subaltern. At this point, she is not too distant from Gramsci's position, whereby 'when the subaltern becomes leader and is in charge … there will be a revision of a whole mode of thinking because the mode of existence will have changed'.[11] This is the most controversial argument, the already mentioned 'epistemological availability' of the subalterns. Luckily (for me), in her copious production, Spivak slightly mitigated her position, rowing back on this. 'I said in a very violent and enraged rhetorical voice "The subaltern cannot speak" ', she admits, but 'that is not to be taken as an expository sentence' (2014, 11). She eventually rejects the 'totalizing character ascribed to the condition of subalternity' (de Jong and Mascat 2016, 723) and it becomes a sort of space of transition between agency and non-agency, a fluid, temporary condition.[12] The liminal rite seems to be the shift from a locutionary act to an interlocution, which according to Vahabzadeh might, under specific circumstances, lead to the 'hegemonization of the subaltern-turned-subject' (2007, 110).

The issue of the subaltern as a subject/agent, and not as an object, is preeminent in Spivak's discourse. She directly engages historiography, since it seems impossible for the intellectual to elude the fate of 'ventriloquizing' or speaking *for* the subaltern, in fact, of perpetrating a form of epistemic violence.[13] She proceeds by drawing attention to the act of reading performed by the researcher, whose positioning must thus be questioned and, ultimately, deconstructed with respect to its purpose of unveiling subaltern voices: 'chronicling the popular is not subaltern studies' (2005, 481). On these premises, Roger Chartier's statement about Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* appears to reach different conclusions: for him it was 'entirely permissible to explore, as through a magnifying glass, the way a man of the people can think and use the sparse intellectual elements that reach him from literate culture' (1982, 35). Although the debate prompted by Ginzburg's monograph considered power relations, addressing not only historical

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[9] Here Spivak embraces and refers to a decolonial feminist interpretation of capitalism and the nation-state as the most institutionalized form of patriarchy, with capitalist society being the 'culmination of all the previous exploitative societies' (Güneşer 2021, 37). See also Butler 2006; Öcalan 2015; Dirik 2018.

[10] Notebook (N) 3, paragraph (§) 48 (Gramsci 2011, vol. 2, 48-52). The first edition of Gramsci's *Quaderni del carcere* (*Prison Notebooks*) was published between 1948 and 1951 under the supervision of Palmiro Togliatti. Although not altered, the text was profoundly rearranged and re-organized. A comprehensive and philological edition was edited in 1975 by Valentino Gerratana and published by Einaudi. To date, a complete translation of the latter edition in English is still missing. In this article, quotes from notebooks 3 and 8 are from the English edition edited by Joseph A. Buttigieg and Antonio Callari (Gramsci 2011 [1992]), while quotes from notebook 11 are from the selection edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Gramsci 1992).

[11] N 8, § 205 (Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, 353).

[12] 'Agency of change is located in the insurgent or the subaltern' (Spivak 2006, 197).

[13] About the attitude towards the ventriloquization of subalterns in historical records, see Wood 2007, 91-184.

power relations but also historiographic ones, it never included Spivak's arguments. Dominick LaCapra is perhaps the most representative example of this hiatus. He criticizes Ginzburg for failing to explore 'the interaction among the hegemonic culture(s) of dominant classes, popular culture(s), and high culture(s)' (1985, 58) and, later, for supporting methodological elements that could serve to 'reinforce hegemonic relations in professional historiography' (69). At the same time, he discerns the positioning of the author, his emotional identification with the defendant and expresses the limits resulting from this bias (62), but ultimately fails to provide the reader with a valid alternative. For Spivak, the turning point is the shift from the subaltern as the *object* of research to the *subject* to learn from, as the development of Gramsci's understanding of the duality. Deconstructing historiography ultimately means this: to learn how to learn from the subaltern by unlearning the privilege. It is not an easy task, since capitalist modernity has forged a humanity structurally un-provided with tools to unlearn ideology, but this operation is what she calls 'the greatest gift of deconstruction: to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralysing him, persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility' (Spivak 2006, 201).

Therefore, what is the role of the researcher? Not to 'give voices' to the subalterns, which would imply perpetrating the epistemic violence in which they have been confined throughout history. Nor is it to unveil them, or to reallocate the subaltern into the sphere of hegemony, but to allow and learn new languages that are not permeated with patriarchal othering. Languages that overcome the incommensurability between 'the terms of the investigator's analytics and the subaltern as "object" of investigation' (Cherniavsky 2011, 157) and cease using subalternity as a 'terrain of representational maneuver in the production of elite knowledge' (2007, 75). Languages, in fact, that do not estimate the subject/object dichotomy, acknowledging that the first 'always stems from capital and power', while 'the objects are the barbarians, the peoples, and the women excluded from power' (Öcalan 2020, 19).[14] According to Eva Cherniavsky, in the Western context this process begins with a 'political intimacy with the subaltern/South' (2007, 78), the desire to break the epistemological aporia. The choice of the historian is thus a moral fact, crucial to overcome the processes that create and validate subalternity in the present. This shift in mindset also implies a different use of knowledge, which is no longer the instrumental preserve of an elite – a condition that appears to be crucial to Gramsci too. Although, according to Gramsci, subalterns cannot escape subalternity on their own, he does not conceive them as a 'mere thing' and criticizes a certain mechanical determinism that flows into a passive fatalism:[15] the subaltern classes contain the potential autonomy needed to achieve hegemony, which is why making history of the subalterns is a political act, since it means reversing the crumbling of subaltern classes to provide their traces with an inventory, and hence a historical unity.[16] Until then, only the ruling class had been able to unify – the result of such unification happening to be the State –, and so that history coincided with the history of States. This unity can be achieved through discipline and organization, Gramsci says, and 'there is no organization without intellectuals, without organizers and leaders'. But, he adds, 'the process of creating intellectuals is long and difficult'.[17]

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[14] The *jineolojî* derives from this acknowledgment and discusses a methodological frame for subverting this trend.
[15] N 8, § 205 (Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, 353).
[16] 'Traces' is also the word Gramsci uses to describe the plural temporality that undergoes this process of unification that the intellectual is called upon to help establish (Thomas 2014; Morfino 2020).
[17] N 8, § 169 (Gramsci 2011, vol. 3, 330).

For both Gramsci and Spivak, the outcomes of this process, which entail the deconstruction of hegemonic historiographies, are narratives meant to shape a (potentially) new representation – achieving cultural hegemony. In this operation, it is crucial to deal with who is actually narrating, that is, the historian.[18] The 'traces' of Gramscian memory are traces that, as he writes, were deposited copiously by subaltern classes over the course of time, but through which the historian has to navigate without the benefit of an inventory.[19] In this wandering and wondering that we call studying, some historians bumped into a cluster of traces, a lattice of crumbs hoarded at the margins of history. It was the case of Domenico Scandella, concealed for centuries until Carlo Ginzburg encountered him (Ginzburg 1992). I will talk about inquisitorial prison graffiti in due course, but what I am trying to do is to retrace the path that led me to look at them and *re*-read them as subaltern writings. This journey starts precisely from Ginzburg's work, from his attempt (his will) to dig through Inquisition documents until he captured that cosmogony, that milky chaos, and decided to return it to history no longer harnessed in the succession of the inquisitor's questions.

3. *On Poor Men and Subalterns*

When reading *The Cheese and the Worms* for the first time, I was enraptured by the possibility of gaining access to a discourse so far excluded from history, and the goal of re-translating written transcripts into orality was fascinating. Nevertheless, the debate over subaltern and post-colonial studies as developed in the following decades slightly changed the premises on which Carlo Ginzburg built his argument.

The first issue to address is the framing of Menocchio as a subaltern. Introducing the miller to readers, Ginzburg reports that, in front of the inquisitors, Menocchio described himself as 'very poor' (1992, 1). Soon after, the historian qualifies this statement, showing that the miller's economic situation was not so catastrophic. His 'place in the small world of Montereale wasn't the most negligible': he had been mayor of the village and administrator of the parish church. He could 'read, write, and add', having supposedly attended elementary school (2). He was born in Montereale and he was a man. If we were to take marginalization as a process driven by three main lines of oppression – gender, race, and class (Davis 1981) –, it would appear that Menocchio's position was not so marginal. He even 'achieved', to some extent, the State – to paraphrase Spivak's quote on Gramsci (Srivastava and Bhattacharya 2012, 222). Can we consider him a subaltern then? Yes, but on the basis of different premises. Ginzburg refers to the Gramscian idea of subalternity as the opposite of the dominant/hegemonic class, considering it as a collective noun, an attribute of a *class*, and not of a person. Spivak, on the other hand, refers to the debate that originated around post-coloniality in the social sciences, considering marginality to be the result of a multi-situated oppression. The two assumptions are only apparently in conflict. In 1982, Adriano Prosperi devoted an essay to the notion of *otras Indias* (1982), later taken up in the volume *Tribunali della coscienza* (1996, 551-599). His analysis traces the emergence of the analogy between the indigenous peoples – encountered in the Americas and the Orient – and the rural communities of the European peripheries as a domination-oriented process. Although his findings might seem to refute the centrality of racial discrimination in marginalization – attesting to the existence of similar inequalities even within the same geographic context –, I

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[18] This is also crucial for Ginzburg, who quotes Roman Jakobson on this: 'Any reported speech is *appropriated* and remolded by the quoter' (Jakobson 1964, 54, in Ginzburg 1989, 161).

[19] N 11, § 12 (Gramsci 1992, 323-342)

am convinced, on the contrary, that the spread of this label testifies to the historicity of such oppression. The ethnicization of trivialization rests on the establishment of a correlation between racialization and barbarism, and in fact it is not surprising that the most widespread use of these definitions is to be found 'in the circles most associated with the problems of conquest, the Spanish' (555). If until then a difference in culture resulted in a difference in nature,[20] here it is quite the opposite: it is the difference in nature that results in a difference in culture, where 'nature' is defined on the basis of racial and class elements.

One could argue that Menocchio's participation in the institutional apparatus would remove him from the subaltern classes; but assuming subalternity in relational terms instead of ontological terms, he eventually situates himself within the 'fundamental' subaltern classes (Liguori 2015). Should the latter argument also be refuted, what eventually makes him a subaltern is the effect of repression: once incarcerated, he lost the possibility to participate in any space of autonomy. He eventually also lost the possibility to speak, even though his previous ability to speak – and to be heard – is exactly what cost him his life. Ginzburg underlines the prolificity of Menocchio's speech, relating it to the number of questions that the inquisitor, his vicar, and the mayor of Portogruaro posed to him. Could the confidence of the miller while answering be associated with his previous social role? The status of a 'poor man', as he defines himself, distinct from the 'superiors', which included the highest religious and political authorities. Although (or perhaps precisely because of) his 'totally dichotomous view of the class structure', Menocchio already situates himself among the subalterns before his ideas cost him a charge (Ginzburg 1992, 16).

The second issue appertains to Menocchio's epistemic availability as an extraordinary case. Ginzburg makes no secret of his exceptionality. Besides, he confirms that it is solely by virtue of that exceptionality that it was possible to draw the genealogical lines of his cosmogony. The same applies for the *benandanti*, whose extraordinariness pushed the Inquisition to dig into their belief system, enabling the historian, centuries later, to breach the judicial veil. Such a stance would seem to collide with Spivak's warning that 'to historicize the subaltern is not to write the history of the singular' (2005, 481), if microhistory was intended as an excuse to focus on miniscule details, and not as 'an opportunity to subvert pre-existing hierarchies thanks to the intrinsic relevance – demonstrated *a posteriori* – of the object under scrutiny' (Ginzburg 2013a, 110) that 'aims at generalization' (109). But this is not the case. Spivak too, when discussing widow sacrifices (*sati*), talks about a mark of excess as 'the only form in which something like woman's agency can be apprehended' (Morris 2010, 6).[21] Ginzburg knows then that this extra-ordinary nature makes it impossible to use Menocchio as the average common man of his time; he is aware that his work runs the risk of falling into the *histoire événementielle*, but he still engages with the idea of the history of subaltern classes 'only … accomplished through "numbers and anonymity", by means of demography and sociology, "the quantitative study of past societies" ' (1992, xx).[22]

4. *Can the Subaltern Write?*

What does this long introduction have to do with graffiti? I tried to summarize the debate on subalternity and subalternity prerogatives and to briefly apply it to a well-known case study

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[20] In this regard, Luther's judgement of the Saxon peasants is merciless: 'they live like dumb brutes and irrational hogs' (Wengert 2017, 213).

[21] This argument has been taken further by Li, according to whom 'in death, the subaltern is perfected as a concept so pure no living referent can contradict or complicate it' (2009, 276).

[22] Ginzburg is quoting from Furet 1963 (Ginzburg1992, xx).

such as *The Cheese and the Worms* before exploring the actual case study. Indeed, Ginzburg's methodology has also been widely studied by the Subaltern Studies collective as it recurred to sources provided by hegemonic institutions – one of the many cases of 'asymmetric ignorance' (Chakrabarty 1992, 2 and 2000, 28). The same does not apply to early modern graffiti, making this long introduction necessary to make some points that will return in the following analysis of the writings left on the walls of Palazzo Steri.

Prison graffiti should not be considered a representative sample of prison writings in general: the Steri served as an inquisitorial prison for people accused of behaving against the Christian faith.[23] Graffiti represent a palimpsest: walls were periodically plastered. Thus, the scholar has access either to the latest graphic landscape or to a miscellany of graffiti from different periods, depicted on the same plane arbitrarily brought to light through restoration. Additionally, graffiti have limited durability: the scripts were sketched with poor materials and were prone to deterioration. How many writings have disappeared over the centuries? Insofar as scholars have studied the phenomenon, they have focused mainly on written graffiti, whereas walls are also covered with sketches, marks and scratches. Restricting the analysis to written forms involves focusing on those prisoners who had a certain degree of literacy. Within this group, the gender ratio was noticeable. A fascinating study, although somewhat dated, published in 1978 by Marie-Christine Rodriguez and Bartolomé Bennassar on the cultural level of the witnesses and the defendants investigated by the Holy Office in Toledo and Córdoba shows that the male illiteracy rate was 47.3 percent, while the female rate was 95.9 percent (25). Besides, the religious schools of the Counter-Reformation for the lowest strata of the population favoured the teaching of reading rather than the practice of writing, which means that the latter ability was even rarer.[24] Essentially, when looking at written graffiti in Inquisition prisons, one is looking at the graphic production of a limited sample of prisoners, all of whom were men – which answers the question posed at the beginning about the absence on these walls of signs attributable to other social groups.[25] Although the Sicilian Inquisition prosecuted several *moriscos* who fled from Spain between 1609 and 1614 after the expulsion edict, there is only one script in Spanish and none in Arabic. According to Maria Sofia Messana, the Holy Office convened at least 846 trials against renegades between 1500 and 1782, and only 34 percent of the defendants were Italians. The others were Spaniards, Portuguese, French, British, Germans, Hungarians, Romanians, Poles, Russians, Greeks, Turks, Maltese, Cypriots, Barbarians, Africans, Indians, Asians, Bulgarians, Dalmatians, Tunisians, Armenians and Dutch (2012, 175-176). Still, except for a few graffiti in English left by John Andrews, none of the other languages appear on the walls, which further narrows the sample size of the incarcerated people to whom we have access.

In the light of this long premise, the question that arises is: should prison graffiti be considered a form of subaltern writing? To answer this question, it is necessary to answer another: can the subaltern write? Based on the evidence and on the history of literacy, the answer is no. The subaltern could not write. Women, marginal subaltern classes[26] and racialized prisoners were structurally excluded from this practice. 'The world of illiterate people in a written culture' is a huge, blurred field, difficult to deal with and to study (Petrucci 1978, 464). Yet, I assume nobody

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[23] The Steri was also used for *familiares* (non-ecclesiastical employees of the Holy Office).

[24] See Petrucci 1978, 460. In particular, the author frames this praxis as driven by the dominant classes' aim to impose and maintain ideological and social control over subalterns through the mechanisms of the educational system.

[25] The absence of any script attributable to women is due to the permanent alteration of the building that housed their cells.

[26] As such, in Gramscian terms, essentially different from the fundamental subaltern classes (see Liguori 2015).

would consider prisoners writing on an early-modern prison wall to be enduring a condition other than that of subalternity, which is in fact right, since incarcerated people are excluded, by definition, from society. 'Carcer a coercendo, quod exire prohibentur' argued Varro in the fifth book of De lingua latina, associating the etymology of carcer, prison, with the verb coercere, to restrain, 'because those who are in it are prevented from getting out'. Prisoners were physically removed from the spaces of social agency and confined in the heterotopias of deviation, that is 'the places that operate at the margins of society, in the desolate shores that surround it' (Foucault 2014, 69), wherein 'individuals whose behavior is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed' (1986, 25). Continuing the assessment, it follows that the material ability to write should also be distinguished from 'the ability and the possibility to actively intervene in the development of written culture' (Castillo Gómez 2022, 158).[27] The answer to the question 'can the subaltern write?' would therefore be negative not only because of the socio-political phenomenon of illiteracy, but also because the ability to write, if not accompanied by the effective possibility to interfere with material processes, is in fact ineffectual. Yet, this inference should not deter us from investigating prison graffiti by considering the categories of subalternity, nor should it lead to the conclusion that the subaltern is ontologically unknowable.

This argument might benefit from a distinction between a pre-existing condition of subalternity and the condition of those who, as members of the hegemonic class, experienced an abrupt change of status due to incarceration. As previously shown, those are the ones who mainly wrote on the cell walls and their writings provide a glimpse of the result of this change of status. This shift corresponds to the transition between agency and non-agency described by Spivak, the oscillation that allows the scholar to access the subaltern as a historical subject. Moreover, considering the small number of surviving graffiti and the ratio of literate to illiterate prisoners, the specimen available today is a 'segment of exception', confirming Ginzburg's argument on exceptionality as a device to historicize the subaltern. But what happens to all those people who were incarcerated by the Holy Office and were nothing but 'ordinary' in their subalternity? Those whose irrelevance in the face of the hegemonic structures of power determined their absence from any historical discourse? These people did not write in prison, nor could they. But must one assume that they were not marking the walls in any way? The answer is no. But as Maartje van Gelder and Filippo de Vivo put it, 'if the absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, then what is it evidence of?' (2023, 45). In this regard, Elizabeth Hoak-Doering, artist and scholar, suggests on the one hand the need to address this 'blankness' (2010, 91) – it being the *a priori* absence of the graphic act, its *a posteriori* erasure though whitewashing, or the expunction operated by the researcher who does not take it into account –, and on the other hand to adopt 'intentionality' as a theoretical framework to look at informal inscriptions.[28]

5. On the Use of Prison Graffiti as Sources

The number of studies on graffiti has grown significantly in the last few decades, developing around three main approaches. Historical research tends to focus on documentary inscriptions (the most extraordinary, in fact), or to analyse those attributable to a known prisoner. In these cases, graffiti are either the starting point of a survey – because they contain a name

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[27] Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

[28] In this regard, I am very much looking forward to her doctoral dissertation, to be discussed at the Humbolt University of Berlin: *Intentions through hands and time: a framework for analyzing informal inscriptions on ancient objects and surfaces.*

perhaps, or a reference to a relevant historical fact –, or a frill to research that has already been conducted to confirm what emerged from the archives.[29] On the other hand, Armando Petrucci, along with the attention devoted to the social, political and cultural context of the scripts, paved the way for the development of an epigraphic and palaeographic interest in the matter.[30] Partially as an adjunct to this second approach, a third methodological framework, closer to anthropology and ethnology, has developed, especially in the French context.[31] As a result of these studies, at the beginning of the twenty-first century a fourth approach emerged, related to the issue of graffiti conservation and musealization.[32] The emergence of this topic demonstrates the positive impact of previous studies on the matter.

Graffiti, in a broader sense, throw up some methodological issues that have not been entirely solved, as evidenced by the epistemological premises of even the most recent contributions. The debate on the subject dwells mainly on the 'criteria of epigraphic-ness', currently identified as legibility, publicity and visibility (Petrucci 1985; Corbier 1987; Fraenkel 1994). In this paradigm, graffiti – especially prison graffiti – pose several difficulties. Luisa Miglio and Carlo Tedeschi suggest considering (some of) them as hidden writings, as opposed to 'exposed writings' (Petrucci 1985) – others speak of 'intimate writing' (Petitjean 2018, 32) – highlighting the problems connected to the criterion of publicity. Was all prison graffiti meant to be read? If yes, by who? Véronique Plesch (2018) hypothesizes, in places of confinement, a movement from the community to the individual, a self-referential statement that contradicts the principles of readability and publicity. According to Béatrice Fraenkel, the answer depends on the nature of the speech/writing act behind the scripts (1994 and 2018). The anthropological approach interrogates the human-environment interaction: a relationship that, within the *milieu carcérale*, takes on a deeper significance (Sanchez 2018). 'Despite the classifying effort of the scholars … the very nature of the graffiti prevents an exhaustive cataloguing of every single piece of evidence', Miglio and Tedeschi (2012, 615) conclude, and indeed it is not possible to look at graffiti through the usual lens of an epigraphic survey. What are the characteristics of these epigraphic landscapes? Was there a pattern to filling the space? What were the norms? These are unresolved issues that call into question the Lombrosian definition of 'palimpsests': if the hypothesis of a coherent development of inscriptions were to be verified, would it still make sense to speak of a palimpsest? Or would it be more consistent to reason about a rhizomatic development (Petitjean 2018, 27)?

The spatial dimension of graffiti tends to be neglected. Most of the surveys on sites with large amounts of graffiti provide a map of these signs, but they fail to examine the potential implications of position. David Zbíral and Robert Shaw recently published an article on the ongoing Dissident Networks Project (DISSINET), juxtaposing the exceptionality sought by Ginzburg to a 'serial complexity'. The aim of their research is to implement 'a serial and computer-assisted approach to data collection capable of capturing every aspect of relational information within the text', in order to 'capture patterns of relations between … persons, groups, places, objects, events, and concepts' (Zbíral and Shaw 2022, 13). Such an approach is designed

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[29] See, for instance, Messana 2007; Fiume 2018 and 2021; García-Arenal 2018; Sarti 2020.

[30] See, for instance, Petrucci 1986; Gimeno Blay 1997; Fleming 2001; Castillo Gómez 2006, 2018 and 2022; De Rubeis 2009; Miglio and Tedeschi 2012; Giovè Marchioli 2012; Palmer 2016; Foti 2023.

[31] See, for instance, Fraenkel 1994 and 2018; Candau and Hameau 2004; Gándara 2010; Plesch 2018; Petitjean 2018; Sanchez 2018.

[32] See, for instance, Benavente *et al.* 2004 and the outcomes of the Erasmus+ program *GAP – Graffiti Art in Prison* (2021-2023).

to overcome the biases of a study of the medieval Inquisition conducted through inquisitorial records. Zbíral and Shaw pay particular attention to the relational data dimension. In Palermo, a prisoner drew on the walls of the Steri a detailed map of Sicily, which is still visible. Above it, he left a caption inviting *coi l'ha memoria*, 'those who have memory of it', to add missing cities and villages. There are scripts in the corners of other cartouches, embedded between previous writings and sketches. Later additions, images copied in different cells. These interactions suggest the bidimensional surface of walls as a space produced by prisoners, as an interface. There are quotes from classical and late-antique texts, biblical excerpts, liturgical passages, traces from the cultural past of the writers together with pictures of saints, Christian symbols, paintings of cities and buildings, human figures, animals, flowers and historical scenes belonging to the visual memory of prisoners. The approach explored by DISSINET might serve to disentangle this seemingly unconnected – and yet closely connected – information.

6. *Self-representation*

In the wake of Petrucci's approach, I would like to dwell on the fundamental questions of 'who was writing and why' (1991, 315) on the cells of Palazzo Steri in Palermo. The answer to the first question, at least in a broader sense and as far as it emerged, is literate Sicilian men. The reasons for writing, on the other hand, might be explored by detecting the different attitudes on the wall. One of these pertains to self-representation: how did prisoners describe and represent themselves on the walls?

Cell no. 7 on the ground floor has four *cansuni*, four Sicilian octaves, which are quite relevant from this point of view. The first reads as follows:

O tu chi trasi in chisti orendi abbisi
undio chinto dielo ardo di foco
e in menzo un umbra di pirpetua echrissi
stanco ne lotiu e no ritrovo locu
lei sti versi chi iu di sango schrissi
misiru di furtuna stratiu e giocu
naviri fidi alli toi senzi stissi
c'assai fa cui fa nenti: effida poco.[33]

The script appears in the upper left corner of the wall, beyond the height reachable by a man on tiptoe. The text is justified along the left margin, the font size is fairly uniform, and the baselines are fairly regular. Introducing himself, the author states that he is 'burning with fire' whilst in the frost. An evident contradiction. Not far away, on the same wall, there is a second script attributable to the same prisoner. The state of preservation does not allow a full reading of the text, but the lines that are still legible read 'Caudu e fridu sentu ca mi pigla / la terzuri tremu li vudella / lu cori e lalma n'assuttigla'.[34] The coexistence of discordant thermal sensations in this case is attributed to the symptoms of tertian fever, or malaria, which causes swings in body temperature. Renato Malta and Alfredo Salerno, affiliated to the Department

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[33] (Thou who enter these horrid chasms / where I, here in the frost, burn with fire / and amid the shadow of perpetual eclipse / I am weary in idleness and find no place, / thou who read these verses I wrote with blood, / unhappy by fate, wrench, and play, / trust not your own senses, / For much does he who does nothing: trust little).

[34] (I feel hot and cold, it grasps me / the tertian fever, my guts shake, / my heart and soul are fading).

of Biopathology and Medical Biotechnology at the University of Palermo, have tried to read traces of the prisoners' anatomical and medical skills in the Steri graffiti. According to Malta and Salerno, in the second graffiti the prisoner was comparing the fear of burning with the feelings of a malarial attack, since somehow, they managed to read the fourth line of the text adding 'sentu sunari la campanella'. They hence associated the sound with the 'bell that followed the procession that accompanied the released to the stake' and assumed the author to be a woman (Malta and Salerno 2007, 601).[35] Although some of the evidence contradicts their results, their approach is indeed interesting. In fact, the documents collected in the State Archive of Palermo (ASPa), albeit recording the medical expenditure of each prisoner, do not mention symptoms, diagnoses or treatments other than a sporadic variation of diet. Thus, the question that arises from these verses – whether the author actually contracted malarial fever in prison and chose to use the physical sensations experienced to describe the confinement – goes unanswered.

The octaves were written by Michele Moraschino, a nobleman, poet and renowned literate (Sanclemente 1653, 285; Mongitore 1714, 78-79; Auria 1869, 131). Imprisoned on 15 August 1630, for 'haver tenido escritos y libros proybidos, de haver hecho el crescite et multiplicamini y de esto ultimo sin haver contestado Garrano',[36] his accomplice, Moraschino spent three years in prison. According to Bernardo Luis Cotoner, the visitor sent by the Suprema and General Inquisition from Madrid to Palermo, Moraschino was charged despite a lack of evidence and imprisoned with 'tanta publicidad y infamia'.[37] The idea of mortification recurs several times in Cotoner's reports. According to a list of proceedings annotated by the visitor, a year and a half after Moraschino's arrest, on 31 January 1632, Giuseppe di Roberto testified to the Inquisitor Martín Real that a third man, Battista Cutroba, had told him that 'un moro le havia dicho que el reo [*scil.* Moraschino] havia ydo a Monte Peligo a buscar un thessoro y que se havia llevado con sigo a un pagano el qual havia de nefandar tres veces para hallarlo y que solo le nefandò una'.[38] The accusation of sodomy did not fall upon deaf ears and on 10 March 1632 the local inquisitor Juan de Torrecilla summoned and interrogated Cutroba, who nevertheless replied 'que no savia tal cosa',[39] that he did not know any such thing. The inquisitor dismissed the accusation, declaring that 'no era justo se embaracasse al reo',[40] to whom, according to Cotoner, sufficient damage had already been done 'en la profession y hacienda' thanks to Real's harassment.[41] The injustice of the circumstances, stressed and amplified in the document, should not mislead the reader, since Cotoner's visit was aimed at collecting documentation to file a case against Martín Real. After

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[35] (I hear the bell ringing).

[36] AHN, Inquisición, 1754, exp. 14, 24v. (having had writings and books forbidden, having done the crescite and multiplicamini and, in this regard, having done it without opposing Garrano). According to two witnesses, Moraschino borrowed and transcribed the *Clavicula Salomonis* and the treatise *De Insomniis* by Artemidorus Daldianus, while another witness accused him of participating in an orgiastic ritual organized by twenty-eight-year-old Ludovico Garrano, also on trial. Moraschino allegedly went with fifteen other men 'en un magazín fuera de la puerta de la ciudad de Palermo a hacer al crescite y multiplicamini' (in a warehouse outside the city gate of Palermo to do the crescite and multiplicamini) and went 'buscar quince mujeres y … haciendo un raconamiento se mataban las lucis y cada uno tomava la suia' (looking for fifteen women and … convincing them with reasoning, the lights would be turned off and each one would take their woman).

[37] AHN, Inquisición, 1754, exp. 14, 23v. (with great publicity and infamy).

[38] AHN, Inquisición, 1754, exp. 14, f. 25r. (A Moor had told him that the prisoner [*scil.* Moraschino] had gone to Mount Pellegrino to look for a treasure, and that he had taken with him a pagan who he had to defile three times to find it, and that he only defiled him once).

[39] AHN, Inquisición, 1754, exp. 14, 25r.

[40] AHN, Inquisición, 1754, exp. 14, 25r (It was not right to embarrass the defendant).

[41] AHN, Inquisición, 1754, exp. 14, 25v. (sufficient damage had already been done to the profession and the property).

the discovery of his name on the walls, several scholars conducted research into his judicial affairs (see Civale 2017, 288-290; García-Arenal 2018, 60-63; Fiume 2021, 252-253 and 295-297.).

Going back to the dichotomy of hot and cold described by the poet, the motif of burning with fire is a common stylistic feature of love poetry that occurs quite often in Moraschino's poetry.[42] The juxtaposition of fire with ice, on the contrary, appears only one time in his surviving corpus: 'Morsi pr'amuri to 'ntra focu e ielu'.[43] The number of occurrences increases significantly if one considers the most important exponent of Sicilian Petrarchism, Antonio Veneziano, to whose poetic production Moraschino owed a great deal.[44] Veneziano lived an adventurous and stormy life and experienced prison on more than one occasion. In 1578, he embarked for Spain, but the ship was attacked by Algerian pirates and he was taken prisoner. Jailed in Algeria, he met Cervantes, who later wrote twelve octaves praising his poem, 'Celia'. In Sicily, he was imprisoned in Castellammare in 1567-1568, on charges of murder, and again in 1588 and 1593 following a complaint that led to the discovery of placards against the viceroy in his dwellings. The latter imprisonment was fatal, as during his stay the powder magazines of the fort caught fire, causing a violent blaze in which he died together with dozens of prisoners and guards. He was a member of the 'Accademia degli Accesi' – the precursor of the seventeenth-century 'Accademia degli Accesi', which numbered many intellectuals persecuted by the Inquisition, including Michele Moraschino. Among Veneziano's octaves, the motif of fire and frost recurs explicitly in at least seven octaves.[45] Among the *canzunistica* school, this parallel occurs once in Cesare Gravina[46], Mario Migliaccio[47], Giovanni Di Michele[48] and an unidentified poet.[49] Therefore, when writing 'I, here in the frost, burn with fire' on the walls, Moraschino is probably reminiscing about his masters' verses rather than filling the walls in the grip of malaria.

The same remembrance might apply to the formulation 'perpetual eclipse', which also occurs in Veneziano: 'Lu vostru scavu, chi mai vi fu azzettu, / campa, senza di vui, 'n perpetua eclissi'.[50] The reference to the lack of light lends itself to being addressed in emotional rather

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[42] With reference to the octaves contained in manuscript MS603, stored at the Library of the Museeé Condé (Chantilly) and edited by Tobia Zanon, the trope of burning love occurs in Moraschino 2; 3; 4; 8; 14; 15; 20 and 23. The numbering of the octaves follows Zanon 2008, vol. 2, 95-103).

[43] Moraschino 21. (I died for your love between fire and frost).

[44] Moraschino translated Veneziano's poem 'Celia' into Sicilian.

[45] Veneziano 7; 33; 34; 42; 52; 71; 79 (Zanon 2008, vol. 2, 3-35). The *topos* seems to derive directly from Petrarch; see, in particular, *Canzoniere* 134, l. 2 'e temo, et spero; et ardo, et son un ghiaccio' (and fear, and hope: and burn, and I am ice); 298, l. 3 'et spento 'l foco ove agghiacciando io arsi' (and doused the fire where I, freezing, burned).

[46] Gravina 29 (Zanon 2008, vol. 2, 76). In addition to the octave collected in MS603, the manuscript H.X.32 stored at the Biblioteca Comunale degli Intronati of Siena and edited in 1973 by Mariano Fresta contains a collection of Sicilian poems (cc. 47r-92v). Since the heading is missing, it was not possible to attribute the first thirty octaves with certainty, but Fresta guesses it might be Gravina (315). If so, the number of his stanzas mentioning the antonymic pair would be two, since octave no. 19 says 'Ch'arsi friendu in l'amurusu ielu' (I who burned frying in the loving frost). Note that Fresta was not able to identify *friendu* as the gerund of *friiri* (see Traina 1868).

[47] Migliaccio 24 (Zanon 2008, vol. 2, 153).

[48] His name is reported only in the manuscript studied by Zanon. Of the seventy-nine octaves attributed to him, several deal with the theme of prison and two also appear on the walls of the Steri (Di Michele 62; 63), suggesting that they were written either by him personally or by someone who was familiar with his work. According to a list of acts of faith, in 1640 a fifty-year-old prisoner called Joan de Miguel/Micheli, accused of blasphemy, abjured *de levi* (AHN, Inquisición, l. 902, 19r., 118v.).

[49] Autori diversi 23 (Zanon 2008, vol. 2, 197).

[50] Veneziano 17 (Zanon 2008, vol. 2, 17). (your slave, who was never accepted by you, / lives, without you, in perpetual eclipse). It is also worth noting that in the first cell of the first floor another prisoner with a similar background (Angelo Matteo Bonfante) resorts to the term 'eclipse' in one stanza, but the deterioration of the wall made it impossible to read the line.

than analytical terms. Darkness used to be a constant feature of prison architecture and was specifically willed in a way that we now consider cruel and inhumane. But projecting this sense of injustice produces an amplification of this information, which instead of being correctly attributed to any prison, seems to pertain solely to inquisitorial prisons. Far from blaming this legitimate sense of injustice, I tend to attribute it more to the *leyenda negra*'s imaginary (see Lavenia 2013) than to an accomplished critique of Western judicial systems over the past two millennia. The same applies to the composition of the materials used for writing. In this regard, a verse like 'you who read these verses I wrote with blood' is conducive to a pathetic – meaning *pathetikòs* – interpretation: there is no evidence of blood on the walls, nor of other bodily fluids.[51] According to the only available research, graffiti were made with ochre, brick dust – probably obtained from the floor – mixed with watered milk, or charcoal applied with a brush (Mazzeo and Joseph 2005). Besides, archival documents report the presence of ink and colours in the cells, occasionally introduced from the outside[52] – information reinforced by the presence, in Palermo, of some refined pigments in one cell (5-6). Nevertheless, references to corporeality in these graffiti occur frequently and reveal a certain appetite for the pathetic, somewhat morbid, exaggeration of suffering. The same attitude emerges from the use of definitions such as 'soundless screams' or 'voiceless voices', which transpose a sensory quality attributable to hearing – that of inaudibility – to written words (Pitrè and Sciascia 1999; Fiume 2017). These definitions coproduce an idealized conception of victimization, reinforcing a paradigm in which the victim is weak and blameless (Christie 1986; Wilson and O'Brien 2016). The corresponding narrative showcases prisoners in distress, exposed to constant sorrow, so to meet the requirements of the ideal victims. On the other hand, any attempt to acknowledge the subaltern as historical subject conflicts with the framing of the subaltern as a mere victim, whose alleged passivity has, as its only chance of redemption, the external rescue effected by a subject endowed with agency (Gago 2020).

Thus, what is there in Moraschino's words that describes his self-perception in prison? He chose to write in stanzas, to rely on poetry, rather than simply writing his own name or a few lines in prose. In doing so, he draws on the canons of Sicilian *canzunistica*, adapting *tropoi* and love-related motifs to describe his confinement. He feels inert in there, exhausted by protracted inactivity, by the inability to do anything. Imprisonment implies the impossibility of doing anything materially, but idleness, as an Italian saying goes, tires one out. Mental and physical fatigue is the condition Moraschino is talking about.

7. *Signature*

In the West, the history of signature as we know it today begins in the sixth century and develops until the sixteenth century. Within this chronological span, the act of signing both replaced the impression of a seal and helped fix the patronymic formula still in use. Béatrice Fraenkel wrote extensively on the 'sign signature' (Fraenkel 1992), describing it as a performative act of writing (2008, 21) whose implications are inevitably of longer duration than a speech act. Her semiotic analysis establishes four main characteristics of signatures: 'the individualizing function of a proper name, the effect of presence of a hand-drawn graphic,

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[51] Contrary to Fiume 2018, 100 and 2021, 261.

[52] In some cases, prisoners purchased it from the guards, who kept the money from the food rations (AHN, Inquisición, 1746, exp. 32, 8v). More in general, the number of autograph memorials given to Bernardo Luis Cotoner, collected in AHN 1757, exp. 20, show that prisoners could ask for and were given paper and ink.

the visual salience of a personal sign and the strength of an act of speech' (17). The person signing is identifying through their name, stating their presence *hic et nunc*, making their presence visible/legible and performing all these implications. In particular, according to Fernando Figueroa Saavedra, the individualizing character of the signature, partially erased during medieval times, re-emerged with the advent of humanism, 'when anthropocentrism allowed individuality to be revalued and the vital perspective to be redirected towards the construction of the personality' (2014, 40).

In the fifteen cells of Palazzo Steri there are only thirteen signatures. The ability to sign, while not a prerogative of the literate population alone, was not yet widespread, and the deteriorating state of the walls may be responsible for the loss of hundreds of names. Nevertheless, compared to other similar prisons, the paucity of signatures is significant. If one considers for instance the prison of the Caetani castle in Sermoneta, the number of names written on the walls is remarkable. In those cells, which were used as inquisitorial, episcopal and military prisons between the sixteenth and the eighteen century, and as political prisons during the fascist regime, names are the most common writings. The graffiti scratched on the so-called Women's Prison date from 1606 to 1634 (among them, there seems to be a woman's name, Cintia Palazo, although the wording is quite deteriorated and the spelling unsure), when the castle was used by the Holy Office. Comparing two similar records in these two contexts, two different attitudes emerge with regard to revealing one's identity. In Sermoneta, a prisoner wrote:

Io Nardo Ferraro scappel-
lai una ticella un anno
carcerato un ora di corda
- - - - - -[53]

while in Palermo the event of torture is recorded in this way:

A 30 di agosto 1645
hebbi la tortura.
A 9 [settem]bri l'hebbi di nuovo.[54]

In both cases, the detainees include a temporal detail, albeit in different ways – one mentions the length of his detention, the other specifies the exact dates – but if the former presents himself with his name, the charge and punishment, the latter conceals all details. This attitude recurs several times in Palermo, where all the references to torture are anonymous. Why this reluctance? Perhaps prisoners were trying to preserve their image, especially if they used to be part of non-subaltern groups before confinement. In Sermoneta, in fact, names are often accompanied by the profession, which suggests a popular background for the prisoner, and the same applies to another Italian prison of the Holy Office, namely that of Narni in Umbria.[55] Is there a relation between reticence and social class?

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[53] (I, Nardo Ferraro stole / a pan for one year [I have been] / incarcerated, for one hour [I endured] the strappado /- - - - - -).

[54] (On 30 August 1645 / I was tortured. / On 9 September I was [tortured] again).

[55] Although no evidence related to torture has emerged in Narni, most of the inscriptions here were made by Giuseppe Andrea Lombardini, who notes on the walls 'Io Giuseppe Antrea Lobartini caporale / fui cargerato [[innocente]] in questo l[uogo] /A ti 4 tecebre 17[59]'. (I, Giuseppe Antrea Lobartini, caporal / was incarcerated [[innocent]] in this p[lace] on 4 December 17[59]).

The case of Angelo Matteo Bonfante seems to suggest so. Incarcerated in May 1645, he spent ten months at the Steri.[56] In the first cell of the first floor, he left several octaves signed with different pseudonyms such as 'l'infelici', 'lu turmentatu', 'lu meschinu', 'l'abbandunatu'[57] – recalling the custom of assigning a nickname to members of the academies, often a noun-adjective – and a few lines inviting a future prisoner to face adversity with a cheerful spirit and encouraging him not to blame himself and to have faith in Jesus.[58] This graffiti was written in Latin, the author having presumably decided to entrust more circumstantial information to an elite language, and not to sign it – which leads to two assumptions. The first is that the prisoner thought that such information could potentially come back to bite him. The second is that he had chosen to share that information solely with well-educated prisoners like himself. Bonfante was detained in at least two cells – as his handwriting also appears in the fifth cell of the first floor, where the same exhortation to avoid self-blaming recurs together with dozens of graffiti signed with the letter *B*.[59] It has been argued that the signature could have been added by a different prisoner, who associated his initial with the work of somebody else. Given the function and the semiotic value of signing discussed above, I argue instead that the poet of the first cell, the author of the graffiti signed by *B*. and, eventually, of the caption 'D.A.M.B. / pingebat / 1645' were the same person, that is Bonfante. This last inscription was crucial to tracing his identity through the archives. When I got to that graffiti, I felt like I was seeing a sign of meltdown. Perhaps a bit of vanity, perhaps the need to remark his identity, it felt like he made a mistake by revealing something he had so compulsively hidden until then. His attitude changed in the two cells: in both cases, the prisoner hid himself and made his work recognizable, although resorting to pseudonyms that betrayed his membership of a certain social group or to the initial. Bonfante was acquainted with poetry, liturgy and geography (he drew the map of Sicily found on the walls). His verses focus obsessively on pain, and there is no trace of the adaptation of amorous tropes to the theme of prison. The most salient feature, however, was the care he took to sign his writings and drawings to attest his presence in the cells, while hiding his full identity, a sort of attitude towards signing without signing that seems to confirm what was previously suggested.

Michele Moraschino resorted to a similar expedient, concealing his name in a riddle. His cell wall also bears the names of three cellmates: John Andrews, Mahamet/Amet de Brissa (alias Gabriel Tudesco) and Giovanni Battista Guido. Mercedes García-Arenal, who explored the relationship among them at length (2018), relates their incarceration to the development

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[56] ASPa, Tribunale del Santo Uffizio, Carceri, vol. 173, 54. Born in 1604 in Gela (Sicily), he became a member of the 'Accademia dei Riaccesi' in Palermo, and later of the 'Accademia dei Riaccesi' in Messina. According to Antonino Mongitore, he died on 13 September 1676, well after his detention. He was tried for heresy and reconciled in 1646 (AHN, Inquisición, l. 902, 178r-180v), and although the circumstances of his arrest remain unknown, his milieu suggests his trial might have been based on a pretext. The 'Accademia dei Riaccesi' was founded in 1622 with the favour of the Senate, but in 1642 several members left it for the newborn 'Accademia degli Animosi d'Oreto', led by Diego Trasmiera, at that time Inquisitor of Sicily. (see Mongitore 1708, 36; Nigido-Dionisi 1902, 202; Maylender 1929, 430-438; Basilicò 2023b).

[57] (the unhappy, the tormented, the wretched, the abandoned).

[58] 'Qui huc ductus reperit in exil[- - -][- - -]ce[- - -] s[- - -]t ilari animo / sustine lab[ores] hu[- - -] [- - -]f[- - -], quod non es primus / n[e] tu solus consola[- - -] id[- - -] pa [- - -] et imbecilliores te / [- - -]pi[- - -]sti [- - -] p[.] m[- - -]s[- - -] u[- - -] nolite / [- - -] Innocens ne te culpes. In ie[su] d(omi)no / confide et pro[- - -]ora. 1645'. (He who, brought here, finds himself in exile [- - -] faces the labors / with a cheerful soul [- - -] for you are not the first / nor only you comfort [- - -] and more pusillanimous than you / [- - -] do not want / [- - -] Innocent man, do not blame yourself. Trust in Jesus our Lord / and [- - -] 1645).

[59] 'Innocens noli te culpare / Si culpasti, noli te [ex]cusare / Ve[rum] detege [e]t in d(omi)no / confide'. (Innocent man, do not accuse yourself. If you erred, do not apologize. Seek the truth and trust in God).

of a rebellious, nonconforming identity, which in two out of three cases drew on elements of self-assertion from their native religion. In the upper left corner, there are the initials of the three prisoners: G.A., G.B. G., G.T. Palaeographic analysis suggests they were written by John Andrews, who, nearby, also writes, in full, 'Giovan Andres' and 'Giovan(n)i Bat(tista) Guido', adding a chronological reference: 'an(n)o 1633'[60] – the same year as Galileo Galilei's trial. Andrews writes extensively on these walls, his name appears often and, of the three, he was the only one able to write, as it emerges from the records that neither Mahamet nor Guido could sign the minutes of their interrogations.[61] Nevertheless, Guido's name occurs at least three times on the wall, supposedly written by himself. In uncertain handwriting, Giovanni Battista Guido writes his first name in the blank spaces left by John Andrews and the other inmates. He had probably copied Andrews' letters (he even annotates 'an(n)o 1633'), and the modern visitor can spot in his attempts the mistakes children still make at school when learning to write. He miswrites the second *n* of his name, drawing the oblique rod ascending instead of descending, he misses the *a*, writing 'Giovni'. Below the signature 'Ioan Andres Ingles of Pasta, an(n)o 1632', he tries also to copy the date, resulting in rotating the number 2 by 90 degrees and flipping it over. What I argue here is that for him, the ability to write his name was of some relevance. We do not know whether he was writing out of boredom or based on a desire for self-determination, but still it was his name that he chose to copy over and over.[62] Somehow, this reinforces Fraenkel's argument on signature, and the emphasis placed by John Andrews and Giovanni Battista Guido on their names, given their social status, reinforces the connection between class and reticence/proneness. If, however, Andrews' and Guido's names recur frequently on these walls, the same does not apply to Mahamet, who, of the three, suffered the worst fate. He was captured as a child after he ran away from home following an argument with his father, who had whipped him for missing school. He boarded a merchant ship, but it was attacked by the Grand Duke of Florence and he was sold in Messina at the age of seven. For the next two decades he was a slave, brutalised, mutilated, deprived of his name and forced into conversion. Accused of being a Muslim, the Holy Office put him on trial after he attempted to flee from his master with other slaves, and after three lengthy court proceedings he was eventually sentenced to death at the stake.[63] Mahamet could not write in either Arabic or Sicilian; his knowledge of the Islamic religion was limited to what he remembered from his early years, while his knowledge of the Christian religion was associated with the forced conversion at the age of eight and with his life as a slave in Sicily. The second trial reports numerous incidents in which Mahamet allegedly lashed out at graffiti in the cell, daubing some pieces and damaging others: his relationship with the sacred images shown on the walls was visceral. According to García-Arenal, his fury was the result of a process of radicalization resulting from detention.

The stories of these four fellow prisoners are representative of a sort of gradualness of subalternity that I described in the first part of this essay. Moraschino received compassion from Cotoner and was acquitted. Andrews was a young 23-year-old from Padstow, an English sailor captured by the Arabs and forced to convert to Islam. Re-captured by a Christian ship, he was

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[60] (year 1633)

[61] AHN, Inquisición, 1754, exp. 20, 232v and 235r.

[62] At the beginning of the study of prison writings, the approach toward writings like this one was quite different. Without recalling the emotion of Pitrè's volume (1940), Carmen Fernández Cuervo, when reading the signature 'Soy Bega' on the Trovador tower in Zaragoza, assumed that 'Bega had felt the desire for someone to one day take an interest in the fact that he had been there' (1966-1967, 226).

[63] AHN, Inquisición, 1744, exp. 24.

imprisoned in Palermo and in the cells offered evidence of his Christian, albeit not Catholic, faith. Despite bilateral agreements between Spain and England, his Anglican display on these walls costs him a five-year sentence, at the end of which he had to return to the Steri. Guido, a weaver from Messina, imprisoned for blasphemy, who clashed with Moraschino in prison (and was punished for it, unlike the other party), was sentenced to one hundred lashes, seven years at the oar and to wear the *sambenito* forever. Mahamet, born in Algiers, enslaved at the age of seven and sold to a Catholic master, was accused of apostasy and of being a Muslim. In prison he developed a form of psychosis. After two heavy sentences at the oar, he was tried for the third time and sentenced to be burned at the stake. Among them, the only one who did not try to leave his name on the wall, or to sketch anything on the wall, was Mahamet, who nonetheless still engaged with graffiti. His presence is thus characterized by erasure: his erasure of other's sketches, the absence of his real name, the reduction of his Catholic name in full. Among them, he represents what Gramsci would describe as the marginal subaltern and is closer to subalternity as intended by Spivak. Could he write? No. He was the only one who did not.

However, as already argued, the historian cannot the 'absences' of the past. What the historian can do is to notice those voids, describe them in negative, and go in search of traces. Eventually, traces of Mahamet emerged, and scholars chronicled the last years of his life. At this point, the temptation to compile a sort of *microhistoire événementielle* (in which the prefix *micro* precisely indicates the dimensions, not a discourse on hierarchies) is to be overcome, but the road has been paved.

8. *Conclusion*

In this essay, I have tried to draw the lines of a concept, that of subalternity, which is far from defined and definitive. I believe that the epistemological knot is the first that needs to be addressed – indeed, I make no claim that my thesis is complete. As Gramsci – and Spivak – argue, if scientific languages were written by hegemonic groups, it follows that such languages were shaped by a biased and ideologically dependent mindset, designed to maintain this hegemony. The question addressed from the beginning was 'can the subaltern write?' and the answer I got was that no subaltern can, and yet *some* subalterns do. Especially in those historical periods when writing was the preserve of a specific social group. The subalterns who can write are pre-eminently those who *have become* subalterns, and who retain this privilege by virtue of their past – and sometimes future – non-subalternity. In these cases, writing is not an indicator of a transition from a condition of subalternity to one of non-subalternity; it is not an emancipatory act, but rather the opposite. It is the trace of a previous privilege that detention does not erase. But this reflection does not come without criticalities, since the assumption of gradualness, of relativity, in subalternity derives from an idea of subtraction from the hegemonic status, which is fixed as the norm, and the normalization of this operation disallows any process of deconstruction. And since writing has historically been a trait of hegemonic groups, in those cases in which the ability to write pertained to former members of these groups, their writings produce an image of detention – that is, the endured condition of subalternity – in line with the dominant narrative. It almost seems as if the structural compatibility of these testimonies originates precisely from the previous hegemonic experience, while at the same time guaranteeing the possibility to escape from the condition of subalternity imposed by prison. The representation Angelo Matteo Bonfante and Michele Moraschino give of themselves on these walls is in line with what one would expect from a prisoner: pain, misery, loneliness, innocence. Is it a coincidence that they both regain their freedom by returning to their lives, even publishing some of the poems

written on these walls? Did adherence to a norm-dictated image play a role in their ability to write? And again, did their ability to write translate into the possibility to write, granting them freedom? I believe so, which is why I argue that *some* subalterns can write. On the other hand, those who entered these cells as subalterns, while in some cases entrusting their words to the walls, suffer different vicissitudes: John Andrews is condemned perhaps by virtue of those very words. What about all the others, all those who did not master graphic signs? They could not write, but this 'is only the beginning of an answer', as Ginzburg puts it (Ginzburg 2013b, 131). The rest has yet to be written. It would be wrong to take refuge in the eternal illiteracy of the subaltern classes (Castillo Gómez 2022, 165), since if their incapacity does not entail their absence from the graphic landscape, far less does it entail their absence from history.

<p align="center">*Works Cited*</p>

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