

Banishing the Abject:
Constituting Oppositional Relationships
in a Maltese Harbour Town

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Doctor of Philosophy

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores abjection as it comes to be socially reproduced across generations, and contested in moments of cultural resistance. It does so by examining how children from the rough inner harbour town of Marsa, Malta, responded to the presence of Sub-Saharan African migrants within their social space. The children seemed implicitly aware of how their working class town had historically been constituted as a socially marginal space, dubbed 'low status' by virtue of the social transgressions and vices which were considered to occur within it. The subsequent state of being symbolically cast off, or socially marginalized, is considered in terms of 'abjection'. I explore how some people come to be devalued according to predominant symbolic systems of classification and value, and I examine how these peripheral social positions often come to be reproduced and resisted.

The introduction of an open centre for sub-Saharan African migrant men in 2005 saw a sudden shift in the demographic population of Marsa, as hundreds of socially marginalized men were relocated within a dilapidated trade school on the outskirts of the town, whilst others sought to take advantage of cheap rent in the area. This thesis explores how my child informants came to constitute oppositional relationships with the migrants and with the Maltese bourgeoisie in turn, by appropriating concepts of dirt and social pollution as a symbolic boundary. In so doing, children subconsciously resisted the states of abjection conferred upon them, effectively and performatively shifting the abject in another direction whilst constructing a vision of their own alterity. In making this argument, my thesis brings together existing literature on social reproduction and abjection, whilst addressing a lacuna in anthropological literature by considering how politicized processes of abjection are undertaken by those who are socially marginalized themselves. It also marks a significant contribution to child-focused anthropology, in understanding ways in which children engage with processes of abjection.



Operational Programme II – Cohesion Policy 2007-2013
Empowering People for More Jobs and a Better Quality of Life
European Social Fund



For Mum & Dad, and Nanna Dow

In Loving Memory of Nanna Marlene & Nannu Maurice, and Nannu Sonny

A Note on Maltese Orthography

Maltese is a Semitic language, descended from a Siculo-Arabic dialect, and integrating vocabulary from both the Italian and English languages.

In order to assist the reader with the Maltese names and words which appear in this text, the following is given as a short guide to correct pronunciation. Whilst vowels often retain the same pronunciation as in Italian, Maltese consonants are pronounced as indicated:

ċ : chair

ġ : giant

g : gate

h : [Remains silent]

ħ : house

għ : [Remains silent, but entails a slight prolonging of the vowel which precedes or succeeds it]

j : year

q : [Glottal stop]

x : share

ż : zebra

z: boots

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Chapter 1: Introduction

As I sat at Rita's kitchen table with my daily mug of tea, chatting as we always did after I returned from spending the day at the local State primary school, I listened to the concerns she shared with me of the social environment in which she was raising her children, and by extension the hopes and aspirations which she held for them. Despite the deep fondness and affinity which she held for her town, and especially its people, she nonetheless felt somewhat dejected and daunted by the limited prospects that she associated with it. Rita told me, "Over here there are many people working, and they make very little money. I can't buy a place in my current situation, so I need to pull together €250 [for rent] each month. There is going to be some messing around [in illegal activities] because people have to do that to earn a living. There are many people who like to gamble... There are many [African immigrants], and in the evening you will find all of them drunk down near Albert Town. There is prostitution there. The power station fumes fill the streets. Main roads to the capital city clog the streets. There is a problem of drainage and sewage overflowing, plus the coal from the factories and the slaughterhouse. Fumes everywhere. Fumes from the cars and fumes from the factories. The population here is decreasing, and getting older. Everyone who grows up, leaves."

I asked Rita what implications all of this has for her, and the concerns which she held as a mother raising her children as best she could. She answered, "For me, the school over here has been forgotten because there aren't many children. Those who are clever and those who struggle are in the same classroom - if you manage you manage, and if you don't you don't. It worries me very much. We have been forgotten in other things as well. You go to other places and they organize many things, and over here we have been forgotten in certain things. This is what worries me with my children, that there isn't a life for them here, and so when they grow up they will have to leave here [if they want to do anything]. I have continued to love Marsa, but for the younger ones, there is nothing to attract them and to keep them here. Absolutely nothing."

The concerns which Rita expressed indeed made themselves evident to me on a regular basis during my fieldwork in Marsa, a working class inner harbour town in the Mediterranean island of Malta. They were representative of things which occurred on a larger scale, and which troubled me on each occasion that I was confronted with them. Residents of this town often expressed a vague and intangible sense of feeling 'forgotten,' in much the same way as Rita did, this in itself tingeing the surrounding social environment with an affective sense of abandonment. It was a town from which many had moved away over the years, as a number of abandoned buildings in the area attested. However, those who did remain often demonstrated a strong attachment to the place, expressing steadfast loyalty and pride towards the place which provided the social context for their own upbringing, and the setting for their closest and most intimate relationships with one another.

The fondness which people regularly expressed for the town and its affable population was countered by the limited prospects it was considered to hold. Some residents regularly faced issues regarding sanitation, varying degrees of poverty, social and mental health difficulties, low levels of educational attainment in the form of schooling, unemployment, and common illiteracy. Their circumstances were conducive to occasional participation in illegal and underclass black market activities, which some of my informants undertook in order to provide for their families and make ends meet. To this end, I must make it clear that by referring to various forms of poverty, I do not restrict a consideration of poverty to narrow terms of 'material deprivation.' I follow Appadurai (2004: 64) in stating that "poverty is many things, all of them bad. It is material deprivation and desperation. It is lack of security and dignity. It is exposure to risks and high costs for thin comforts. It is inequality materialized. It diminishes its victims." The circumstances of poverty are not always self-evident or tangible, nor are they necessarily quantifiable, occasionally materializing in feelings of dispossession, a lack of belonging, desperation, hopelessness, and an underlying sentiment that mainstream institutions do

not address their needs, thus leaving them to occupy a socially excluded and marginalized existence.

The issues described earlier often manifested themselves within the social space¹, amalgamating to render the town a socially marginal area to outsiders, particularly in terms of a wider classification system which views some of the abovementioned activities (often the effects of poverty) as transgressions of the social order. The place was often portrayed by middle class outsiders as a social mess and a potentially dangerous space which should be avoided. Of course, the issues described above were by no means exclusive to Marsa, regrettably present in a number of other Maltese villages; nor did they homogeneously extend to the whole population of Marsa. Nonetheless, they contributed significantly towards what Malinowski termed “the imponderabilia of actual life” (1922: 18) amongst the informants I fostered close relationships with, thus profoundly affecting the very social fabric of their existence in some way. Those who threaten social disorder, or who display severe shortcomings according to the general scheme of the world held by dominant groups and individuals, often come to be symbolically excluded, and relegated to a socially marginal existence. Thus in terms of symbolic notions of hierarchy and classification, areas in which social vices are considered to occur in a persistent manner come to be conceptually cast off by the middle classes and bourgeoisie as abject spaces of social and moral pollution, in which structural victims are largely expected to find ways out of their own predicament, making their own use of available social and educational services. This state of being conceptually cast off, or socially excluded, is what I refer to in this thesis as ‘abjection.’ This refers to Butler’s (1993) politicized notion of the abject in which certain bodies come to matter and be valued more than others. With respect to this idea, certain people come to be cast off as devalued and socially undesirable in relation to others – a condition which subsequently

¹ Throughout this thesis I often employ the use of the past tense, in order to reflect that my research was undertaken at a particular time, under particular circumstances and with particular informants. This is not to say that the social practices and issues which I describe have not persisted. Indeed, they largely remain as true now, at the time of writing, as they were whilst I was conducting my research. Rather, I am unwilling to lend these issues permanence within my text, by describing them in a way which insinuates them as perpetually fixed and inescapably static, as opposed to occurring within a flexible and dynamic social environment.

becomes internalized and frames the set of dispositions with which individuals navigate their social world.

As of around 2005, the demographics of the small town of Marsa shifted with the opening of an open centre intended to house sub-Saharan African migrants, who had begun arriving on Maltese shores three years prior. Many of these migrants attempted to make their way to (and seek asylum within) mainland Europe, arriving on rickety and unsafe boats departing from Libya, having originally fled from countries such as Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and Sudan. To this day, after spending a period of time in mandatory detention in Malta, they are released to reside in large open centres all over the island, one of which was the open centre located in Marsa, intended specifically for single males. In considering this relatively recent immigration issue within Malta, it is pertinent to note that the country has had a long history of being ruled by various colonial powers, and many Maltese subsequently have quite an ambivalent relationship with their own national history (the details of which will follow in the next chapter), in which historical links with Europe are often emphasized whilst historical connections with Africa are downplayed. It is not surprising that the island's colonial past has shaped attitudes of the Maltese towards foreigners, particularly migrants from sub-Saharan Africa. Much like colonial invaders in Malta's past, African migrants (or 'boat people') arrive on the islands in a sporadic and somewhat unpredictable manner, and are often declared as unwanted in many public forums on the topic of immigration, where metaphors of 'invasion' are often employed. In an informal conversation with a Government ministerial employee at the beginning of my fieldwork, I was told the following on the issue of immigration: "The Maltese want to help where we can, but at the same time, not to the point where they are equal. We still need to keep some control." This view is in many ways indicative of the national sentiment on the topic of African migrants, also strongly evident in Marsa: friendliness and generosity is lauded as a primary characteristic of what it means to be 'Maltese', and is framed within a context where the social hierarchy of the Maltese as dominant and the African migrants as submissive is maintained as the status quo. The arrival of sub-Saharan African immigrants in Marsa, who were widely socially excluded in themselves, provided scope for abjection to be conceptualized differently. As this thesis

shall illustrate, it allowed the idea of 'abjection' to be explored in terms of its appropriation by those who had historically been constructed as abject themselves.

Aims and Scope of Research

Within this thesis, I explore the ways in which abjection was made manifest amongst my informants in Marsa, both in terms of how it came to be socially reproduced across generations, as well as the way in which it was contested in moments of cultural resistance. My approach brings together existing literature on abjection, and situates this within predominant debates on social reproduction, the latter of which vary in stance either by leaning more readily towards structurally deterministic ideas, or by proposing approaches which place greater emphasis on cultural production. I particularly draw upon the work of Pierre Bourdieu, confronting existing critiques of his approach and extending his theories of social reproduction in order to incorporate an understanding of how notions of abjection as a form of social and moral pollution also come to be socially reproduced amongst individuals across generations, despite widespread access to schooling and the transformative potential which schooling is held to possess in eradicating social ills. In situating theories of abjection within Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, as I shall later undertake within this thesis, it becomes possible to grasp the enduring persistence of social inequalities which render certain individuals as abject, mired in the circumstances of their marginal social existence. Contrary to popular criticisms of Bourdieu which claim that his approach is overly deterministic and provides no scope for cultural resistance (see Willis 1983 & Giroux 1983), my ethnography illustrates how such resistance may indeed exist within Bourdieu's notion of the habitus, although this resistance is in itself framed by wider objective conditions. Within my particular fieldwork site, the steady arrival of sub-Saharan African migrants within the town of Marsa provided scope for my informants to challenge their abjected social positions, doing so in relation to a group of people who were subsequently constructed as being abject to them. My research analyses how this was undertaken, and in the process adds a new dimension to arguments which postulate the social demarcation of

distinction, often solely considering ways in which the bourgeois socially demarcate and distinguish themselves from the working class poor. Existing theories of dirt (in terms of social and moral filth) and abjection are often limited to a consideration of how the bourgeois distance themselves from the socially impure working classes (Corbin 1986; Stallybrass & White 1986), and fail to fully explore how the working classes socially construct their own abject. I shall argue that this was undertaken by means of a performative act, which served to rehabilitate social esteem and resist positioning on the margins of society. My research shall thus address this lacuna, delving in to how marginalized informants constructed oppositional relationships with their own abject, distinguishing themselves from the social pollution which they considered their own abject to embody.

Anthropology of Childhood and Youth

In addressing this gap, my research also contributes to a growing body of literature on the anthropology of childhood and youth, in which children emerge as social agents in their own right, as opposed to passive recipients of culture and the objects of adult socialization. Anthropology has at times come under fire for the relative lack of attention given to 'children's culture' within ethnographic writing, with anthropologists themselves calling this relative absence into question. The resistance to a more child-focused approach has led scholars such as Lawrence Hirschfeld (2002) to question why anthropologists don't like children, particularly in light of the widely accepted premise that culture is learned, rather than inherited, and should thus provoke interest in how such cultural learning takes place. The tacit assumption appears to be that children are the unfinished products of culture, which would not yield as great an insight into understanding a culture as much as an adult-focused approach, given that adults have completed their process of 'becoming', and are no longer located within the unstable transitory time frame of childhood. As La Fontaine (1986:10) acknowledged, "in general, anthropology has retained an outdated view of children as raw material, unfinished specimens of the social beings whose ideas and behaviour are the proper subject matter

for social science.” There have been numerous conscious efforts to refute these implicit assumptions, and to move children away from their marginalized position within anthropology. These efforts illustrate that not only are children worthy of the anthropologist’s gaze, but they should rightly occupy the attention of anthropologists given that they are active social agents who are fully engaged in the processes of cultural learning and making sense of the adult culture around them, whilst at the same time innovatively creating their own culture. As Montgomery (2009: 45) noted, this perspective “entailed changing the emphasis within studies of childhood from socialization, and how parents raised their children, to how children themselves perceived their lives, surroundings, parents and upbringing. [...] Child-centred research firmly rejected the idea that because children’s roles were impermanent, they were also unimportant.” Montgomery then went on to reference Waksler (1991), James and Prout (1995) and Morrow (1995) in their recognition that children possessed agency and that they could, and did, influence their own lives, the lives of their peers, and that of the wider community around them. Thus, rather than existing as passive recipients of their social world, within this relatively recent focus on the anthropology of children and childhood, children are recognized as acting upon their social world in profound ways, despite being situated in a largely adult-structured existence. This thesis is thus unique not only in considering how marginalized working class individuals socially construct their own abject in a way which is framed by the terms of their own abjection, but it largely attempts to do so through the lens of a group of children living within the same socially marginal space. In this manner, this thesis is able to explore abjection on children’s terms, giving due attention to their status as social agents in their own right, actively learning about and producing their own social world by means of their own perspectives, experiences, and practices. In this respect, the child informants in my own research are not peripheral to social experience, but act upon their social world in socially situated ways, providing crucial insight into existing anthropological debates on abjection and social reproduction. I shall discuss present literature of each in turn, also tying in arguments on social reproduction with existing anthropological scholarship on education and schooling. In bringing these debates together, my thesis contributes to an anthropological understanding of how notions of abjection and social reproduction are

intimately intertwined, the relationship between the two being explored by means of an ethnographic focus on the anthropology of children.

Anthropology of Education and Schooling

A consideration of existing anthropological literature on education and schooling is also necessitated here, given that my ethnographic material and its subsequent analysis was largely (though not exclusively) generated and situated within an educational space, that of the State primary school within Marsa. I consider education and schooling within this thesis specifically in relation to predominant questions about social reproduction, in reaching an understanding of why some children do not do well in school, and how a lack of success in schooling may often come to be reproduced from one generation to the next, leading to many becoming socially excluded and occupying peripheral social positions. The purpose of education and schooling in itself has been the subject of recent debate in Anthropology. Emile Durkheim, one of the first sociologists to write about education and schooling, came to the conclusion that “its object is to arouse and to develop in the child a certain number of physical, intellectual, and moral states which are demanded of him by both the political society as a whole and the special milieu for which he is specifically destined” (2000: 61). In this respect, schooling reflects the ideology of the nation-state, which works towards a transmission of the knowledge and values deemed necessary for the imagined social citizen. Foucault (1977) further regarded the institution of the school as not dissimilar to a prison, existing as a mechanism for social control and intricately structuring an individual’s use of time and space in shaping and manipulating docile bodies accordingly. Schools are indeed intimately tied with the imaginings of the political community (see Anderson 2006: 6), and state discourses ultimately underpin the aims of educational institutions to a large degree, specifically within their aim to create a very particular kind of “educated person,” whereby “all cultures and social formations develop models of how one becomes a fully ‘knowledgeable’ person, a person endowed with maximum ‘cultural capital’” (Levinson & Holland 1996: 21). My thesis largely considers what happens when individuals veer off

from (or blatantly reject) this idea of the 'educated person,' to occupy peripheral social positions which are devalued and thus abjected according to the dominant symbolic value system. This eventuality goes contrary to the transformative potential which education and schooling is largely held to possess, necessitating deeper exploration of the complex reproductive forces at play.

Given that marginal social positions often come to be socially reproduced from one generation to the next, my research shall also contribute to an ongoing anthropological debate of how and why this class reproduction comes about, through engaging with anthropological literature on the topic of education and schooling. Existing theories move along a spectrum from structural determinism theories (see Bowles & Gintis 1976) in which class reproduction is an almost mechanical inevitability, to theories of cultural production and resistance (see Willis 1977, 1983; Giroux 1983) in which individual agency and human autonomy are given greater emphasis. Part 1 of this thesis, and specifically Chapters 4 and 5, shall critically engage with these theories in more depth. As I have already indicated, my research shall draw on Bourdieu, arguing that contrary to the claims of his critics, his notion of the habitus does indeed allow for a conceptualization of cultural resistance (although this is not emphasized by Bourdieu himself), and is therefore capable of successfully mediating between the existing structure-agency dichotomy implicit within social reproduction debates. In this respect, my approach will thus contribute towards understanding how abject social positions come to be reproduced (later considering how this comes to bear upon my informants constructing their own abject in turn). However prior to delving in to this topic in greater detail, it is first necessary to deconstruct what is meant by the term abject, and it is to this that I now turn.

What is the Abject?

This thesis primarily engages with theories of abjection, particularly the way in which the abject is socially constituted and appropriated in the demarcation of distinction and the

organization of systems of classification according to symbolic boundaries. The abject is to be understood as that which is socially undesirable, the rejection of which partially serves to constitute the self, and delineate what the self is not. Much of the literature on abjection, as Navaro Yashin (2012) acknowledges, “is based on the imagination of a ‘border’, in its various metaphorical connotations, that defines the contours around the subjective or the socially symbolic realm and separates it from that which threatens it” (2012: 147). Thus, in constituting and locating the abject, the self and the idea of the ‘other’ (in relation to the self) is brought in to being. As with Kristeva (1982), the abject is to be understood as a border and social boundary which both protects and threatens subjective identity and the integrity of the self, playing a fundamental role in social processes of constituting ‘otherness.’ In defining certain things, spaces, or people as abject, and subsequently distancing oneself from them, it becomes possible to define one’s identity in relation to what a person is not. Chapter 6 in this thesis explores the concept in far greater detail, in considering ways in which children in Marsa carve a space for themselves within a symbolic social hierarchy, partly doing so by distinguishing themselves from the African men living in close spatial proximity to them, and accomplishing this by invoking ideas of dirt and filth.

In her pioneering work on dirt, and by extension excluded matter which comes to take on the form of the abject, Mary Douglas (1966) speaks of dirt as essentially disorder, the very presence of which offends against order, and the removal of which should be considered an active attempt to re-organize the environment in order to make it conform to an idea. Within her structural approach, dirt is to be considered “matter out of place” (1966:44), a culturally relative idea which relates to the rejected and cast off elements of ordered symbolic systems. Douglas’ approach implies two specific conditions – a set of symbolic classifications and order relations, and a subsequent contravention and confusion of that order. Although Douglas argues that ideas of what constitute dirt are culturally relative, she holds that our reaction to dirt is universal, in condemning any objects or ideas which threaten valued symbolic classification systems, and subsequently rejecting them from normal schemes of classification. Dirt is thus abjected in a process of symbolic cleansing,

identified by means of a culturally relative symbolic border which essentially distinguishes order from disorder.

William Cohen (2005: xiii) has since challenged Douglas' notion of dirt as universally offensive, arguing that psychoanalytic discussions such as that of Kristeva (1982) demonstrate how contradictory ideas could be held about dirt at any given moment, claiming it as potentially both polluting and valuable. Georges Bataille (1985) similarly made an attempt to move away from a dualistic way of thinking about dirt, or more specifically, "base matter" (1985: 51), seeing within it a certain potentiality and its own possibilities which go beyond a notion of it as simply that which is anti-system. In re-mapping the human body and its products, Bataille connects the discarded and the valuable and sees the abject as offering an entirely different and 'other' reality to that of the opposition of civilization.

Kristeva goes on to argue that from its place of banishment, and following the re-organization of the social environment, certain kinds of dirt nonetheless retain their threatening quality from their place at the margins. Kristeva considers the abject (holding a status as neither subject nor object) to unceasingly taunt and challenge its master from its place of banishment, and she also draws upon Douglas' work within her famous 1982 essay on abjection, referring to defilement as that which is jettisoned from the symbolic system. Douglas considers dirt to be constitutive of society, by means of a process of identifying and excluding that which is to be considered as filth. Her work is nonetheless criticized by Kristeva, the latter claiming that Douglas gives no attention to notions of subjectivity within the process of abjection. This for Kristeva is crucial, emerging from the subjective need of the individual to protect the integrity of the self precisely in relation to what the self is not. The notion of the abject as that which is "opposed to I" shall be illustrated clearly in relation to my ethnographic material, its significance as a symbolic border being central to the argument I shall later put forward regarding the constitution of oppositional identities.

Kristeva evokes the notion of a strong corporeal and viscerally powerful response of disgust and loathing towards dirt, inducing reflexes of retching and the body extricating itself from the source of its disgust. In bringing the concept of a border to the fore, she is quick to remind the reader that “abjection is above all ambiguity” (1982: 9) in that “while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger” (1982: 9). Therefore whilst a symbolic boundary is also evoked within Kristeva’s notion of abject, it appears to be significantly fragile and vulnerable in the process of constructing the self in relation to what the self is not. The abject for Kristeva is thus located in othering processes, whereby the subjective self defines certain things as abject and distances himself or herself from it, yet is incredibly vulnerable to it at the same time.

My own analysis draws upon Douglas and Kristeva in turn, specifically in terms of their appropriation of a symbolic border in delineating what is and what is not constitutive of filth, and is thus separate from the self and worthy of condemnation. However, my analysis occasionally also echoes Bataille by illustrating intimacy with dirt as a potential virtue which few possess, and which signifies unique qualities of being genuine and down to earth. Thus, although a symbolic boundary comes into play, my research demonstrates how individuals shift the symbolic boundary in relation to which ‘other’ is being constituted in relation to the self at any given time. In doing so, they are able to identify and banish their own abject as a performative act, as proposed by Butler (1993) and later adopted by Navaro-Yashin (2012). I shall here discuss the contributions of Butler and Navaro-Yashin in turn, highlighting the significance of their respective ideas of performativity and abjection in relation to my own analysis.

Judith Butler (1993) creatively adapts Kristeva’s notion of abjection, already outlined, in which culture and the subjective self are founded on the expulsion of the impure. Within Butler’s notion of the abject, certain persons come to be excluded from normative ideals

of subjecthood. In this respect, the abject are those who fail to qualify as a subject, and abjection in itself is politicized in a process of determining who matters. Thus, mechanisms of condemnation are put in to play, leading certain people, objects or practices to become valued less than others and denied subjecthood (See Butler 1993: 3; Lloyd 2007). Rollason (2010) also adopts this approach in relation to his work on Panapompom men within the *bêche-de-mer* industry in Papua New Guinea, whereby he considers the abject as those who are symbolically cast off in relation to somebody else's project of value.

My approach similarly adopts this notion of the abject, tying in Butler's notion of gender performativity, only with relation to the abject. In this regard, banishing the abject should also be considered a performative act, constituting the identity which it is purported to be. Butler makes the point that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 1999 [1990]: 33). Similarly, the banishment of the abject is also performatively undertaken, with the abject taking on the form of what it is already asserted to be. Within my research, this notion of performativity shall be illustrated in relation to children's storytelling, this in itself going beyond the idea of storytelling as child-structured play, and considering the ways in which children address and performatively constitute the prevalent aspects of their social world. Thus with respect to Butler, "performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate 'act,' but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names" (1993: 2).

Thus, within this thesis, the central idea which I apply is that of the performativity of the abject, as illustrated above and particularly as applied by Navaro-Yashin (2012) in her own theoretical focus on abjected spaces. Navaro-Yashin states that "the banishing of the abject might be an ideological, performative, or rhetorical move: We will act as if the abject is only 'there' (or about 'that') and not elsewhere, everywhere, and about everything" (2012: 151). By means of this idea, Navaro-Yashin further illustrates Butler's

politicized processes of abjection, although she does not make explicit reference to it. She illustrated this theory by means of her ethnography of Nicosia, and the abjected space of the Green line which cut through Nicosia and formed a border separating Northern Cyprus from the south. Within her ethnography, Navaro-Yashin illustrated how the symbolic banishment of the abject relegated the abject to the war-ravaged and physically-devastated Green Line, as opposed to deeply permeating the wider social conditions in Northern Cyprus. This performative act brings the abject into being by constituting certain spaces and people as socially filthy in relation to others.

Navaro Yashin's theory effectively paves the way for a consideration of how the socially abject may in turn performatively construct an abject of their own, as a means of deflecting from their own devalued social positions. In this respect, sub-Saharan African migrants become the focus of what Stallybrass & White (1986) term *displaced abjection*, a "process whereby 'low' social groups turn their figurative and actual power, *not* against those in authority, but against those who are even 'lower'" (1986: 53 – original emphasis). Stallybrass & White considered this in relation to an analysis of the pig within post-Renaissance European culture, wherein the pig at the fair was emblematic of Christian sin and disgust, located within an ambivalent site which for the elite dangerously oscillated between 'high' and 'low' relations. In associating the pig with the 'low' Jews at carnival time (this in itself a grotesque and transgressive act in light of Jewish dietary rules), and having them share the same fate of being chased and stoned during carnival, the carnival crowd reaffirmed, rather than challenged, the dominant order.

My own ethnographic material attempts to build upon the theoretical ideas highlighted above, and explore performative processes of displaced abjection from a child-focused perspective, whilst integrating them with Bourdieu's notion of the habitus in understanding how states of abjection often come to be socially reproduced. Anthropological analyses have largely focused on how the bourgeoisie demarcate themselves from the working classes, devoting little attention to how the working classes might actively construct their own abject. In this respect, my research is less concerned

with the nature of dirt and filth in itself, but rather considers how the malleable symbolic border which is deemed to constitute filth is appropriated for political purposes, shifted in accordance with the oppositional relationships which my informants were engaged in constituting at any given moment. Prior to exploring this argument further, it is first necessary to consider works which have addressed the issue of social class and its relationship to dirt, building upon the foundational works cited above.

Class Distinction and Dirt

Existing literature has further focused on how the constitution, identification, and banishment of the abject have been essential to the formation of social classes, allowing individuals to situate themselves within a symbolic social order and hierarchy. Appadurai (2004: 80) has made the point that in India, “distance from your own shit is the virtual marker of class distinction.” Alain Corbin (1986) explored how the bourgeoisie in 18th and 19th century France separated themselves from the working classes through smell, or the fear thereof, this representing danger and a risk of defilement as contained within bodily residues. Corbin considered how persistent anxiety on olfactory contact haunted the French social imagination, and determined class-based social perceptions. In this respect, “the absence of intrusive odor enabled the individual to distinguish himself from the putrid masses, stinking like death, like sin, and at the same time implicitly to justify the treatment meted out to them. Emphasizing the fetidity of the laboring classes, and thus the danger of infection from their mere presence, helped the bourgeois to sustain his self-indulgent, self-induced terror, which dammed up the expression of remorse” (Corbin 1986: 143). Thus, the bourgeois came to distinguish themselves from the stinking working classes, sanitizing themselves from the risk of defilement which the latter were held to encompass, and maintaining the idea of the symbolic border which abjection evokes.

In the same year, Stallybrass and White (1986) apply theories of dirt and boundary violation to European middle class culture from the 17th until the 19th century, doing so by engaging in readings of Freud and Bakhtin. They thus draw on a range of historical documentation in considering class processes of the bourgeoisie, by placing particular emphasis on transgressive carnivalesque forces which were suppressed by the elite. Their work thus similarly conceptualized abjection as an order-making mechanism, identifying a pattern whereby those at the 'top' reject and eliminate those at the 'bottom', this idea being central to the making and self-constitution of the bourgeoisie. These symbolic borders largely depend on the association of the grotesque with the lower classes, and a subsequent rejection of both. In linking this to the idea of carnival, Stallybrass and White make the point that "the carnivalesque was marked out as an intensely powerful semiotic realm precisely because bourgeois culture constructed its self-identity by rejecting it. The 'poetics' of transgression reveals the disgust, fear and desire which inform the dramatic self-representation of that culture through the 'scene of its low Other'" (1986: 202). Stallybrass and White thus make the point that what is marked as dirty and disreputable, and is excluded from high culture, is precisely crucial to the self-constitution of that culture. Laporte (2000) later extends this theoretical thread in illustrating that as human beings evolved and developed they increasingly sought to distance themselves from their own waste. In Laporte's reading of a 1539 French edict which decreed that human waste be conserved in the home (rather than thrown in the streets), he considers the emergence of an olfactory economy which consequently formed the basis of ideas of private property and bourgeois manners. Here, the elimination of excrement and filth was similarly regarded as constitutive of civilization as the bourgeoisie. Excrement was defined as a filthy, shameful, and private affair in Laporte's reading, and as Cohen (see 2005: xiv) later points out, ideas of human waste according to Laporte are at the heart of the modern institution of a public/private divide.

The idea of abjection has thus been illustrated as central to processes of class division, however it appears to have received little attention in relation to concepts of class reproduction, in analysing how abject social positions, once constituted, tend to be reproduced generation after generation. Such an analysis is somewhat lacking within

existing theories of social reproduction, and within Part 1 of this thesis, I consider existing social reproduction theories in light of the concept of abjection, and theoretically link the two in relation to my ethnographic material, where they have previously largely been considered on separate terms.

Abjection and Social Reproduction

Within this thesis, I shall apply ideas of the constitution and social reproduction of the abject in terms of Bourdieu's notion of class habitus (1984). Whilst Bourdieu delves into issues of class distinction, he fails to locate processes of abjection within his theory of class reproduction. My own research addresses this gap, considering ways in which states of abjection are socially reproduced amongst individuals within the same social space, and exploring how they are subsequently contested and resisted. Bourdieu's argument (1977) emphasizes the importance of objective conditions in the genesis of the person, but stresses that this is not done at the expense of social consciousness and subjective agency. Rather, Bourdieu's habitus postulates a dialectical relation between the two, the habitus in itself a dynamic concept referring to a set of dispositions acquired (and subsequently changing) according to one's changing position within the social field. The habitus constitutes as much as is it constituted, transforming and being transformed by objective structures and subjective agency, the two concepts it holds to mediate between. Objective conditions come to be internalized within the habitus, which in turn forms the basis of personal relationships and individual histories, and holds its own constitutive power in affecting change within social conditions. Bourdieu himself occasionally appears to oscillate between subjectivist and objectivist stances, and particularly when leaning towards the latter, makes the case for social alliances being far more likely amongst individuals in close proximity within the social space. Within this understanding, spatial proximity is regarded as likely to render similar experiences of objective conditions, thus potentially giving rise to a class habitus, which in turn grants value and meaning to certain objects or practices in a field over others. Individuals sharing similar class positions and occupation of the same social space are thus more

likely, according to Bourdieu, to possess a similar set of dispositions and world view, and adopt similar stances whilst attributing value to the same practices.

My own ethnographic material builds upon Bourdieu's original idea, by suggesting that this similarity might often implicitly be taken as given, and objective conditions held to infer deductions on the set of dispositions which a person possesses. For this reason, it became all the more important to my informants that they employ the notion of the abject, in order to make the distinction which is otherwise not afforded to them as a result of their spatial proximity. The scope for such cultural resistance has come across as somewhat limited within Bourdieu's theory, and this in fact encapsulates many existing criticisms of his theory as it stands, as he is largely accused of treating class reproduction as a mechanical inevitability, as opposed to something which is produced through struggle by means of active human agents engaged in contesting objective structures (see Willis 1983). I shall detail these criticisms and respond to them accordingly in succeeding chapters in relation to my ethnographic material, however suffice to note for the time being that my application of Bourdieu's theory shall demonstrate how abjection may be utilized as an exponent of cultural resistance, which is in itself framed by the internalized objective (and abjective) conditions which constitute the habitus. Thus, I shall illustrate how an application of Bourdieu's notion of the habitus does not necessarily preclude instances of cultural resistance. I argue that the social construction of people in Marsa as the abject leads to the internalization of affective states and emotions, which many make reference to within the context of a discourse on 'class.' The idea of class is thus an imported analytical term within this context, brought in to address internalized states of abjection incorporated within a class habitus, from which subsequent ideas of social hierarchy arise. In order to endure and contest this, informants in Marsa must find and reach consensus on a new abject in order to constitute a new oppositional identity for themselves. Since it is not possible for them to constitute themselves in terms of a middle class view, it becomes necessary for those in Marsa to define themselves in relation to a different group, more abject than them. The way in which they do so, as previously mentioned, is by employing ideas of dirt and pollution and drawing upon the social boundaries which the concepts invoke.

The African immigrants and Maltese families in Marsa participated in similar practices and shared the same space, regarded by the upper classes in Malta to be a socially marginal and abject space. As a result of this, the importance of reaffirming the aforementioned social hierarchy whereby the migrants were socially abject to them appeared to be felt by my Maltese informants with greater urgency. My Maltese informants thus made a subconscious effort to communicate that despite living in close spatial proximity to one another, their set of dispositions was in fact not shared. Given that many other (mostly 'upper class') individuals in Malta appeared to consider Marsa as what I term an abject space, and therefore those living within its boundaries as the abject, people in Marsa must find a new way and define a new abject in order to maintain pride and superiority in their social status. They are simultaneously constructed as the abject, and constructing others as abject to themselves. The relationship which Maltese people in Marsa hold with the abject, and with forms of dirt, is an ambivalent one in this respect. Embracing and embodying dirt is essential to some degree, in identifying themselves as grounded and humble individuals (and thus the antithesis to members of the snooty and pretentious upper classes). On the other hand, defining the abject as something 'other' to themselves and subsequently rejecting it allows another oppositional identity to be constructed, whereby the Maltese disassociate themselves from everything which they consider the abject to embody, and constitute themselves as precisely all that the abject is *not*. Thus, abjection is crucial within processes of self-constitution.

This thesis also briefly explores not only the performative construction of the abject in Marsa, but as already indicated, prior to this it delves in to the way in which states of abjection tend to be socially reproduced amongst some individuals within this social space, primarily by means of a lack of engagement with schooling and thus a denial of the social and cultural capital which schooling claims to bestow upon its most active and obedient participants. Furthermore, by nature of the *'inkwiet'* (worry/trouble), *'taħwid'* (confusion of the social order), low levels of education, high unemployment, prostitution and illicit activities persistent in the area, Marsa has garnered a reputation as an area with

some elements of social pollution, and which authorities have referred to as a 'depressed area.' Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977) aims to account for the cultural reproduction of social disadvantages. He suggests that the school is an institutionalized form of the dominant habitus, and thus indirectly grants an advantage to those whose habitus most closely matches that of the dominant (and thus most valued) group, transforming this into a form of cultural capital. This, Bourdieu claims, occurs despite the stated aims of the education system to provide equal opportunities for all. Thus taken-for-granted social advantages come to be transformed into educational advantages (which are later rewarded with institutionalized capital such as academic qualifications), and social inequalities translate into inequalities at school. The working class subsequently become dispossessed through lack of an appropriate habitus, and existing social hierarchies are subsequently reproduced.

As I have already noted earlier in this Introduction, Bourdieu has been heavily criticized for what is felt by some to be an overly deterministic reproductionist approach, his critics claiming that Bourdieu fails to acknowledge individual aspirations, agency, or the transformative potential of schooling. Followers of Bourdieu's theories are quick to remind critics of the mediating concept of the habitus (Harker 1990), which they feel saves the approach from an objectivist stance. Rather than considering academic success to be available only to those in possession of the relevant cultural capital, I shall argue (based on the ethnographic material to follow) that such capital does indeed bestow individuals with significant advantage towards success in schooling. However, this does not presuppose that all those in possession of cultural capital shall succeed in schooling, and that those lacking it shall fail. Rather, I hold that the advantages or disadvantages afforded to an individual by nature of their position in the field (and subsequent habitus) may serve to either facilitate or discourage success in schooling respectively, but they do not *determine* the outcome. The trajectory, or pathway, of an individual based on their position in the field should not be considered a mechanical inevitability, but rather a likelihood which may still be steered away from, albeit with much greater difficulty. In lacking appropriate social and cultural capital to support them based on their position in the field, education may appear to be a rather discouraging enterprise to some, and may

thus fall by the wayside in favour of other (at times illegal) activities which match the children's habitus more closely, and which potentially go against the aims of what schooling is meant to achieve. These shall be explored in further detail in Chapter 5.

Bourdieu's occasional lack of consistency in his work should not be regarded as cause to dismiss him entirely, as he provides a very useful framework for thinking about why some children do not succeed in formal schooling (and why their class position is thus often reproduced). In the case of individuals whose lack of capital places them at a disadvantage, as in the case of many of my informants in Marsa, Bourdieu makes the case that their success in schooling is predicated on their acquisition of the appropriate cultural capital, which in turn holds consequences for the habitus. Indeed, my ethnographic material later demonstrates that whilst the concept of education in itself was highly praised and encouraged in Marsa, any change in dispositions which came along with the acquisition of this cultural capital were likely to be sneered at. A great deal of pride is openly asserted amongst informants in Marsa, particularly at their ability to be friendly, down to earth and genuine people, this partly generated by the humble nature of their objective conditions (tying in with what Bourdieu deems 'the choice of the necessary'). The set of dispositions associated with the acquisition of social and cultural capital is often considered a conscious departure from the aforementioned qualities of humility and being down to earth in Marsa, involving turning one's back on ideas of working class pride which are grounded in their history and crucial to their survival. Therefore, attempts towards success in education are occasionally met with a sense of ambivalence.

Whilst education was deemed important, it was only important insofar as it was practical, and involved learning skills which would prove useful in finding work in the future. It was conversely disparaged by some when it was felt to be undertaken as an exercise in attempted social mobility, this in itself taken as an implicit rejection of a working class habitus and a subsequent alignment with a falsely superior middle class. Success in schooling is thus seen to be either facilitated by capital which many children in Marsa

might not possess (thus placing them at a disadvantage), or involving at least a partial abandonment of existing dispositions in favour of others which are more closely aligned to those of the educational institution. As Froerer correctly notes, “to assume that education is invariably accompanied by social mobility is to ignore the important constraints that the current economic and social conditions and practices continue to have upon the lives of those for whom schooling is meant to be a liberating force” (2012: 355).

All of these processes invariably lead to significant difficulties in the attainment of success in education, effectively meaning that although all children are granted equal access to education in accordance with national legislation on the issue, this does not presuppose that they all stand equal chance of doing well, particularly when support in the form of social and cultural capital within the family (what Bourdieu considers to be one of the main sites for the acquisition of capital) is lacking. This subsequently tends to translate into educational disadvantages, which often eventually lead to limited opportunities within employment, making predominantly low wage jobs manual labour jobs available to them once they leave school (in the absence of formal qualifications). Some choose alternative means of making a living, relying on the provision of social benefits, involvement in the black market, and off-the-books employment – all options which their habitus has conditioned them to view as a viable way of being in the world. The aforementioned practices, coupled with the fact that they are situated in what middle class outsiders deem to be (what I refer to analytically as) an abject space, all serve the purpose of reaffirming a middle class view of Marsa as such. The inhabitants of the town are consequently presumed to embody a set of dispositions which correlate to the objective conditions of this space.

In contesting these states of abjection and creating mechanisms of distinction between them and their own abject, there are obvious limitations in the ability of those in Marsa to physically banish their own abject, given their own marginal status and internalized feelings of abjection. The relative lack of power and social capital in this regard leads

many in Marsa to unwittingly share their social space with those they would otherwise actively banish, as the failure to do so gives rise to the assumption of a shared set of dispositions, largely inferred by nature of their proximity to one another within the social space and thus similar objective conditions. Banishing the abject then, borrowing from Navaro-Yashin (2012), comes to take on a performative aspect, whereby the idea of the abject is relegated to particular beings in particular spaces, as opposed to being everywhere and about everything. In this way, Maltese informants in Marsa may pretend that the abject is solely about African immigrants and situated within the area of the Marsa open centre, as opposed to being everywhere in their objective surroundings and about everything, internalized within the self and the landscape. Through Butler's (1993) notion of performativity, the abject is constructed as that which it was already purported to be, brought in to being by the expressions which are claimed to result from it. The banishment of the abject is therefore largely symbolic. Within my research, this is undertaken by means of children's storytelling in Marsa, in which children construct African migrants as abject villains in opposition to themselves. The repetitive acts of discourse in themselves are what make the abject so, following from J.L. Austin's speech-act theory (1976). Repetitively speaking about African migrants as the abject and casting them within this role in their stories effectively transforms them into the abject, and the abject is thus socially constituted as what those in Marsa already claim that it is. Within their stories, as Chapter 7 demonstrates, children then come to define their own identities in relation to the migrants, and constitute themselves as all that the migrants are not, maintaining a social hierarchy of the migrants as submissive and deferential to them.

In employing such strategies, it becomes possible for the children of Marsa to locate themselves within existing power relationships and ideas of social hierarchy, and challenge the marginal status ascribed to them. This marginal status is not reversed, but is rather shifted in another direction in deflecting any focus on marginality and abjection from themselves. Other practices also serve to reinforce these aims, as the Maltese in Marsa engage in processes of socially demarcating a unique place for themselves within existing hierarchical relationships. Other practices further underscore the ways in which

people in Marsa imagine themselves and imagine Marsa as a place worthy of collective pride, thus contesting the view of Marsa as a marginal space. Chapter 8 draws upon a particular ethnographic example of one of the two local village feasts, in which Marsa is celebrated as a place, and where the social space is transformed as residents put on a cultural performance to outsiders of the town in order to communicate a collective and imagined Marsa identity. Ironically, competition in terms of the levels of contribution towards the realization of the social imaginary tends to spur on rivalries amongst different groups, as they effectively argue over which of them is the most capable in performing this imagined identity to outsiders, whereby Marsa is displayed in an image of wealth, extravagance, and solidarity.

In summary, my research demonstrates the ambivalent relationship which people of Marsa hold with the abject. They must simultaneously embrace it and isolate it, according to whom they are defining themselves in relation to at any given moment. Many people from Marsa possess pride at being humble enough to engage with filth, something which members of the condescending middle class cannot. At the same time, they bring another abject into being and subsequently banish it through performative and symbolic acts, when in actual fact the abject is internalized everywhere around them and embedded in the social landscape, often (though not deterministically) being socially reproduced across generations. For the purposes of constituting themselves in a particular manner, the abject is employed as a social boundary which must be treated as far more impermeable than it actually is, its inherent fragility concealed in order to protect the integrity of the self which the Maltese in Marsa are engaged in trying to create and subsequently perform to others. It is through performative acts that the abject may give the impression of an impenetrable border, and in defining, locating, and banishing it, social demarcations of distinction may thus come into play, and the self as socially desirable and meaningful (in relation to undesirable others) is thus constituted.

Thesis Structure

This thesis is divided into two parts. Part I of the thesis, comprising Chapters 2-5, focuses on the social reproduction of the abject in Marsa, in considering how states of abjection have endured amongst some families within this marginal space over time, being reproduced from one generation to the next. Chapter 2 contextualizes the ethnographic research which shall follow, by historically situating my ethnography in relation to my chosen fieldwork site. The chapter also details my research methodology, and provides a reflexive account of the challenges and obstacles faced in entering my chosen fieldwork site and undertaking participant observation, including the ethical issues necessarily faced in undertaking research with vulnerable participants such as children and socially marginalized individuals. Chapter 3 goes on to consider ideas of social class in Marsa, specifically how notions of abjection come to be embedded within certain class positions. These in turn are reproduced, in spite of measures aimed to reduce social inequalities and increase access to social mobility. One such measure is that of education and schooling, and this is explored within Chapter 4. Ideas of education formed a significant aspect of my research both in terms of providing a primary setting for my research, as well as addressing the question of why a number of my informants did not appear to do well in school, and thus often remained entrenched within their socially marginal positions. Chapter 5 probes this question even further, linking the children's schooling to their aspirations for their future. The children's cultural capacity to navigate their own futures was duly informed by socially situated learning which extended beyond the school, and whereby some children came to be aware of potential life trajectories which not only did not fit within the school's idea and framework of the 'educated person', but also directly opposed it. The four chapters in Part I build upon one another, amalgamating in order to illustrate how and why the abject has historically been constituted within Marsa, in a process whereby certain individuals have come to be devalued and symbolically cast off, their position at the margins often being reproduced by generations to follow.

Part II of this thesis ethnographically illustrates the cultural resistance to this process, in which the abjection historically conferred upon my informants was shifted in another direction, by means of rhetorical and performative acts which claimed that 'the abject' was located elsewhere, and embodied within socially undesirable 'others'. Chapter 6 explores the anthropological concepts of dirt and pollution, illustrating how oppositional relationships were brought into being by means of this imagined border. It demonstrates how the symbolic boundary implicit within ideas of filth comes to be appropriated, allowing my informants to situate themselves on either side of the boundary according to the oppositional relationship they were constructing at any given time. Such relationships were constituted with the Maltese upper classes and the sub-Saharan African migrants respectively (although only the latter were socially constructed as abject to my informants). This idea is carried over into Chapter 7, which illustrates how my child informants performatively constituted the sub-Saharan African migrants as abject to them, through the medium of their storytelling and narratives. Chapter 8, as the final ethnographic chapter, delves in to how my informants in Marsa constructed a vision of their own alterity through the medium of the village feast, having deflected their own abjection onto others in moments of cultural resistance. Within this last chapter, Marsa is celebrated as a pride-worthy and superior place, this idea projected to an outside audience in an extravagant display of their town and their ideas of the collective social imaginary.

Part I - The Social Reproduction of the Abject

Chapter 2: Background to Fieldwork & Methodology

In order to understand the construction of ideas of the abject within my fieldwork site, it is first necessary to situate the forthcoming ethnographic material within a historical context, particularly in grasping the way in which class structures and attitudes to foreigners have evolved over time. An appreciation of the shared and collective history of Malta, particularly its vast experience of being colonized by various rulers throughout the centuries, is a prerequisite in understanding the reticence of some Maltese to the influence of outsiders, particularly if this is felt as any form of threat to their relatively recently acquired independence, sovereignty and control over local matters. This chapter shall outline major historical events which have taken place on the islands, and which have played a part in shaping and giving rise to present ideas and world views in some way, particularly those of my informants in Marsa. The information which follows shall thus allow descriptions of my fieldwork site, and the interactions which occurred within it, to be appropriately and necessarily contextualized.

An Introduction to Malta

Malta is a country that covers a mere 316 square kilometres in land area, and its population of 416,055² people makes it one of the smallest and most densely populated countries in the world. Malta consists of three main islands – Malta is 246 square kilometres with a population of 384,912, Gozo is 67 square kilometres and has a population of 31,143 people, whilst Comino covers a mere 2.7 square kilometres of land area and has a population of approximately 4 people (generally included within the same district and population statistics of Gozo). The longest distance to travel in Malta, from the North West to the South East of the island, is approximately 27 km, while travelling from East to West is approximately 14.5 km.

² Census of Population and Housing 2011: Preliminary Report; National Statistics Office Malta. Published 3rd October 2012.



Fig 1 – Map of the Maltese islands

Malta is located at the heart of the Mediterranean, with Sicily (and the closest point to mainland Europe) 93 km to the north, and Libya located approximately 357km to the South. Tunisia lies 288km away to the South-West. Such a strategic position within the Mediterranean has led to the islands being sought after as a naval base in the past, and as a result the islands have been under the control of a number of colonizing powers over the years, all of whom arguably left their mark and shaped Maltese perceptions on foreigners.

A Brief History of the Islands

Settlers were present in Malta from as early as 5200 B.C., and since then Malta has been colonized by the Phoenicians (approx. 1000 BC), the Carthaginians (approx. 262 BC), the Romans (approx. 218 BC), the Byzantine Empire (395 AD), the Vandals (454 AD), the Arabs (870 AD), and the Normans (1091 AD). After the last Norman king passed away, Malta (along with the Kingdom of Sicily) passed in to the hands of the Swabian Dynasty, the Angevins, the Aragonese, and the Castilians respectively (Boissevain 1993). By the early 15th century, a ruling class had moved in to the islands from Sicily and Aragon. The family names of the elite were Italian or Spanish, as opposed to the majority of the population who had Arabic family names. At the time, the majority of the population spoke in an Arabic dialect, laced with Latin, Spanish, and Italian words (Blouet 2007). Most town and village names in Malta to this day also have Arabic roots. This is a throwback to the earlier Arabic period, which some historians claim briefly converted the Maltese into Muslims and interrupted a long standing tradition of devout Christianity on the islands³ (dating back to St Paul's Shipwreck on the islands in 60 AD), which was later restored (Mitchell 2002). The elite used a romance language in communication amongst themselves and with the outside world, and this language division was to later form the basis of a class and political controversy in the 1900s with regards to the language which should be used in the law courts and the education system (Hull 1993).

In 1524 Charles V (a descendant from the Aragons and the Castilians) offered the Maltese islands (and the fortress of Tripoli) to the Order of the Knights of St John in fief, in order for the Knights to defend the islands. Members of the elite and Maltese nobility felt betrayed by this move, and retained their loyalty to Aragon and Sicily. The Order were a group of hospitallers, who had evolved into a crusading military order. They were of noble birth, belonging to 'langues' corresponding to the area they came from (such as Aragon, Auvergne, Castile, Provence, England, France, Germany, Italy). The knights settled around

³ The suggestion that the Maltese had converted to Islam during the Arab period led to controversy in the late 1980s, as many countered this claim and held that Maltese Christianity was strong enough to withstand Arabic influence (Mitchell 2002).

the Grand harbour, and improved fortifications in the area, defending the islands from a number of attacks, particularly at the hands of Muslim pirates. None of these attacks were more notorious than the Great Siege of 1565, in which the Ottoman Empire sought to penetrate Western Europe from the south, with the aim of capturing Malta before moving on to mainland Europe. The Knight's success in defending Malta in the Great Siege paved the way for the next two and a half centuries, whereby the Knights remained on the islands and built the new capital city of Valletta. The time marked a period of economic growth and prosperity for the Maltese population, and strengthened links with Europe as new trades, industries, towns, and palaces were developed (Blouet 2007).

For two and a half centuries, the Maltese maintained higher living standards as a result of the Knight's rule. However, by the end of the 18th century and the start of the French revolution in 1789, the role of the aristocratic and religious Order was diminishing in light of the increasing power of European states. The Maltese felt that the Knights were becoming increasingly arrogant, and when French troops came ashore in 1798, the Grandmaster and his ruling clique were ultimately pushed out. The Maltese sought assurances that their religion and privileges would be protected under the French, and yet in Napoleon's short time on the island, he did much to interfere with the Catholic values which lay at the heart of Maltese society, attempting to reduce the influence of the Church on the islands. The Maltese people were riled by a series of events to this effect, such as stealing church treasures and closing down convents, and two years later the French surrendered to British forces, which had come to assist the Maltese upon being requested to do so (Boissevain 1993).

Under British rule, Malta ceased to be ruled by a religious order, and evolved into a self-governing colony which took an active interest in its own politics (Boissevain 1993). The Royal Navy established a base in Malta, having already acquired the use of Gibraltar as a naval base from the beginning of the 18th century, with further acquisitions to follow in the years following their establishment in Malta. The opening of the Suez Canal was to later give Malta a prime location in a newly established strategic passage way to the Far

East (Blouet 2007). Hull (1993: 3) noted for the beginning of British occupation on the islands, that:

“...the established culture of the islands was not uniquely Maltese (and hence assimilable or eradicable like those of Ireland and Cornwall) but indistinguishable from that of an Italian cultural sphere heading towards political unity and enjoying a certain international prestige.”

Hull (1993: 209) went on to state that:

“...the established Italian language and culture, the continental orientation of the Maltese Church, the disaffection of the upper classes and the poverty and illiteracy of the lower orders all conspired to perpetuate the status quo before 1849.”

The ‘disaffection of the upper classes’, as Hull refers to it, hints at a historically enduring practice of constituting and distancing oneself from the abject in Malta, clearly evident at the beginning of the British occupation of the islands. Furthermore, the alignment of the elite with the Italian culture and language at the time further served to demarcate ideas of distinction and differentiate the upper classes from the Maltese-speaking uneducated masses, with the Italian language being used as an instrument of class domination. This, I hold, partly gave rise to present day ideas of what it means to be ‘pure Maltese’ (*Malti pur*). The idea of the ‘pure Maltese’ has roots in the historical usage of the Maltese language (initially a spoken language for which there were no books) as this was the language of the illiterate working class proletariat. Members of the educated upper classes, on the other hand, embraced the Italian language (a marker of distinction which the working classes did not share access to). Italian was thus a class symbol, and was the language of the law courts, the clergy, and the University. The working classes, conversely, often used the Maltese language amongst one another as an outlet against foreign oppression from colonizers (Zammit 1984). The term ‘pure Maltese’ is commonly used to this day, and remains subjective and open to debate. It is often evoked by residents of working class towns, in order to imply a more profound historical connection to the Maltese land and language (and thus the ‘genuine’ Maltese culture, if one can be

said to exist), than that which they consider to be held by members of the disaffected upper classes, particularly those who prefer to emphasize their cultural links with Europe.

Ideas of language and class remain closely intertwined in Malta, and minor differences in articulation still serve as powerful indicators of class and status (Sciriha 1994). Chapter 3 shall explore this in further detail. The issue of language similarly fed in to an intense political debate in Malta at the beginning of the 20th century, and it is partly on this basis that the two major modern political parties emerged. The political divide on the issue of language hinted at the underlying implications of class differentiation, which were later brought to the fore more explicitly, as I shall demonstrate.

The Socio-Political Language Issue

Although a few schools existed on the islands at the beginning of the British period, there was no formal education system to speak of. Steps were taken to introduce an education programme in Malta, however an obstacle lay in deciding the language of instruction. The majority of the Maltese spoke a Semitic language (descended from a Siculo-Arabic dialect) for which there were no books, and instruction was initially given in Italian by default, given that the most educated Maltese (and those most likely to be teachers) spoke and wrote in Italian rather than English. The use of English in Malta increased rapidly between 1851 and 1871, given that opportunities for advancement within the British military facilities were greater for those with knowledge of English (Blouet 2007). Compulsory education for all was not to be introduced until 1946. By the time a 'Report upon the Educational system in Malta' (also known as the Keenan report) was drawn up in 1879, it was recommended that Maltese be the basis of instruction, and that English be taught through Maltese. Italian was to be an optional subject (Blouet 2007).

This language issue led to a major political question, which ultimately formed the basis of the formation of the two main political parties in Malta today (the Nationalist Party, and

the Labour Party). A group formed in favour of the recommendations of the Keenan report, and an anti-reform group also emerged, with the intention of reasserting the dominance of Italian on the islands and opposing measures to anglicise the educational and judicial systems. The present day Nationalist party has origins in the anti-reform group of 1880, and was officially established in 1926 when two other parties⁴ merged to form the current Nationalist Party. The Party promoted pro-Italian policies, however this particular stance later became increasingly problematic in the advent of Mussolini's fascism, and slowly began to fade. The Malta Labour Party, on the other hand, began as an Anglo-Maltese Party, and drew the basis of their support from the dockyard workers, unionised in 1916. At the time, the naval dockyard was the largest employer on the islands. This party merged with the Maltese Constitutional Party to form the Constitutional Party, led by Lord Gerald Strickland⁵, however this party disbanded after World War II, and the Labour Party was re-founded in 1949 (Blouet 2007).

In the 1920s, at the time of the emergence of both major modern political parties, educational standards were poor outside of the elite, and access to schooling very limited, perpetuating the status quo of existing class divisions. With the rise of fascism and the ousting of Italian as an official language of administration, English and Maltese were named official languages of Malta, the latter given the title of the national language. The language issue, which had characterised Maltese politics and been the source of bitter and intense tension⁶ for the better part of a century, was ultimately put to rest after World War II. However, the implicit use of language and articulation as an indicator of status and class are still apparent, as Chapter 3 will later demonstrate.

⁴ Unione Politica and the Partito Nazionalista Democratico

⁵ In the run up to the 1930 election, Lord Strickland (then Prime Minister) made statements which put him in conflict with the church, and the Archbishop of Malta and Bishop of Gozo declared it a mortal sin to vote for Strickland or any of his candidates. Colonial authorities promptly suspended the election and the constitution, which in itself went through a number of suspensions and reforms during the British period.

⁶ The language issue escalated in the 1930s, almost to the point of full-scale civil violence. Lord Strickland was targeted with an assassination attempt, whilst Enrico Mizzi (Nationalist Party) was arrested and deported to Uganda in the wake of World War II.

The Mintoff Years

In the aftermath of the Second World War, in which Malta was the most bombed place in the world at the time, emphasis was placed on the post-war reconstruction of Malta at a time of widespread war-induced poverty. Self-government returned to Malta in 1947 (having been suspended by the British Governor since 1933 as a result of instability arising from the language issue), and the Malta Labour Party was voted in to power. A split in the party soon occurred when the young Dom Mintoff ousted Labour Leader Paul Boffa over disagreements pertaining to the running of the dockyards in the difficult economic conditions following the war (Blouet 2007). Dom Mintoff assumed leadership of the party, and was to become the champion of the working classes, and the most controversial political figure in modern Maltese history, dominating the Maltese political scene for decades. Up until his death in 2012, and to this day, he is hailed by the working classes as the saviour of Malta, but often dubbed a ruthless tyrant by the professional and middle classes who support the Nationalist Party.

In 1955, Dom Mintoff became Prime Minister of Malta, and set out to achieve full integration of Malta with the United Kingdom. When talks with Britain on the issue fell apart, independence looked likely. Mintoff's first term in Government was marked by an ongoing dispute with the Catholic Church, particularly Archbishop Gonzi⁷, who accused Mintoff of presenting the church as an enemy of the workers, and attempting to reduce the influence of the Catholic Church amongst the people. Mintoff in turn stated that the Church did not wish to lose privileges which it had enjoyed under the British Government, and he worked towards separation of Church and State. The Catholic Church was incredibly powerful in Malta at the time, and the Church held the fear that Mintoff's socialist Government would be a stepping stone towards communism, which was advancing in other countries. Insults were levelled at Archbishop Gonzi in the leading Labour newspapers, and in April 1961, Archbishop Gonzi interdicted the Malta Labour Party, declaring it a mortal sin to read Labour newspapers or vote for a Labour party

⁷ Prior to being ordained as the Bishop of Gozo, Archbishop Gonzi served as a Labour Senator in the Malta Legislative Assembly, playing an important role in the foundation of the Labour Party.

candidate in the general elections. Holy sacraments such as Holy Communion would not be administered to Labour Party supporters, those entering church for Confession would be asked who they gave their vote to, and those who openly supported the Labour Party in this time and passed away were buried in an unconsecrated section of the Addolorata cemetery known as *'il-mizbla'* (the rubbish dump). The dispute with the church led to the Labour Party losing the next two general elections, and Independence was ultimately achieved under the Nationalist Party, who nonetheless retained ties with Britain and the Commonwealth. The Queen served as Head of State, and a defence agreement with the United Kingdom came into force.

In 1971, with the church dispute resolved and the interdiction having been lifted in 1964⁸, the Malta Labour Party won the election once again, and Dom Mintoff set out to renegotiate the mutual defence and agreement with the British. By his efforts, Malta became a Republic in 1974, and a Maltese President was appointed Head of State. In the years which followed, Mintoff became the most simultaneously loved and hated politician in Malta, this division of intense emotion carrying over into the present day, and becoming particularly manifest upon his death in August 2012. Mintoff was considered the champion of the working classes – a charismatic and energetic, yet tough, authoritarian figure who was affectionately referred to by his followers (the most hard core known as *Mintoffjani*, i.e. Mintoffians) as *'Il-Perit'* (the architect). He possessed great oratory skills, and became something of a cult object (Boissevain 1994), winning much admiration amongst the working classes and demanding unquestioning loyalty which they duly gave him. Mintoff worked to raise the standards of living of the poor by means of a number of social reforms, such as the introduction of social welfare services, the removal of slums to be replaced with Government housing, and the introduction of social benefits such as pensions, children's allowance, a national health service, and a comfortable minimum wage. He also boosted the tourism sector, and created a number of jobs. Shipbuilding facilities were introduced to Marsa in the form of a modern steel fabrication production facility. Due to Mintoff's zeal in bolstering the worker's movement, many

⁸ Nonetheless, a certain degree of tension with the Church persisted throughout Mintoff's time in Government.

working class Maltese (particularly those from the harbour towns) possessed an enduring fondness and admiration of him.

Amongst the middle and professional classes with Nationalist sympathies however, Mintoff was portrayed as a dictator determined to get his own way at all costs. Whilst he implemented a number of positive measures, the way in which he did so was often forceful and excessive, reasoning that the end justified the means. Strict controls were imposed on imports in an effort to kick start the Maltese economy, doctors were locked out of public hospitals⁹, the Blue Sister's church hospital was closed down and the nuns expelled from the islands, various sectors were brought under government control (including the National Bank¹⁰), fee-charging church and private schools were suppressed and briefly closed¹¹, and a worker-student scheme¹² was imposed at the University, amongst other measures. Those opposed to Dom Mintoff's socialist reforms dared not speak, for fear of retribution at the hands of his violent supporters. The period was marked by a culture of violence, as a group commonly known as the 'thugs' intimidated and terrorized those who challenged Mintoff's policies in some way. Although the extent to which these 'thugs' were directly linked to Mintoff was debated, none of them were controlled or ultimately brought to justice (indeed, a few police officers were themselves guilty of this behaviour). Doctors who defied the strike and continued to see patients were targeted¹³, Nationalist voters queuing for the voting booth would be threatened and have their votes stolen, and in an incident known as 'Black Monday', the thugs burnt

⁹ Mintoff imposed medical reforms whereby doctors who had received a free University education in Malta were obliged to work in Government hospitals for free for a few years. The doctors went on strike, and private hospitals were closed. Many doctors emigrated in order to work, and foreign doctors were brought in (not having been properly vetted by the Medical Council due to the fact that it was effectively incapacitated).

¹⁰ This is an issue which remains unresolved to this day. Shareholders were threatened, and were forced to sign over their shares (which served as pensions for some of the shareholders).

¹¹ This was based on Mintoff's insistence that education be free for all.

¹² Through this scheme, young people would study for six months and then be made to work for the rest of the year in a field unrelated to their subjects of study.

¹³ The most notable case was a letter bomb sent to Dr Edwin Grech, which was opened by his 15 year old daughter Karin, who was killed immediately. Although no forensic evidence linked the letter bomb to the doctor's strike, the incident is largely believed to be linked with the fact that Dr Edwin Grech was a strike breaker.

down the premises of the Times of Malta (a local newspaper), with apparent immunity from the police force who stood by.

In the 1981 election, by means of a complex representational voting system, Mintoff won a majority of seats in Parliament, but did not win the majority of votes cast in the election. Mintoff formed a Government nonetheless and stressed that Malta is and remains behind the worker's movement, intensifying already existing political divisions in the country. Eventually, the Nationalist Party came back in to power in 1987, and worked to restore links with Europe which had become shaky under Mintoff's Government. The wheels were set in motion for Malta to join the European Union, and begin a new chapter in Malta's history. The Malta Labour Party strongly opposed accession into the European Union, favouring a partnership with the EU instead whilst remaining neutral.

Malta on the Fringes of Europe and Africa

Upon becoming an independent Republic, Malta maintained links with foreign countries, particularly in seeking investment to strengthen the national economy. Following the breakdown of integration talks with Britain, Mintoff sought investment for Malta from other foreign sources, such as Europe, Libya, the USA, the USSR, North Korea, and China, stressing Malta's position of independence and neutrality in the process. A great friendship was fostered between Dom Mintoff and Muammar Gaddafi, with the former referring to them as 'blood brothers.' As Boissevain (1991: 88) noted, "...the Labour government broke off relations with NATO and sought links with the Arab world. After 900 years of being linked to Europe, Malta began to look southward. Muslims, still remembered in Maltese folklore for savage pirate attacks, were redefined as blood brothers." For a while, Arabic was taught as a compulsory subject in Maltese secondary schools, Libyan cultural centres were built in Malta, and a mosque and Libyan school were also established on the island. Maltese workers found jobs in Libya and vice versa, and a great deal of investment was secured from the country. The intensity of this friendship died down after an incident in 1980 whereby Gaddafi sent an armed gunboat in order to

prevent the Maltese Government from drilling for oil in what was considered disputed territory. Relations between the two countries were eventually restored and ultimately continue to be positive, although they did not return to what they were prior to this incident (Manduca 2008). A number of Maltese remained sceptical of Malta's links with Libya throughout Mintoff's leadership (a scepticism which was indeed applied to a number of Mintoff's policies), and looked upon the relationship with reluctance and disdain. Mintoff ultimately stepped down as leader of the Labour Party in 1984 after handpicking his successor, and remained a parliamentary backbencher until his retirement at the age of 81 in 1998¹⁴.

In the 1990s and at the turn of the century, attention turned towards accession into the European Union, and this became a topic of intense debate. The Nationalist Party was passionately in favour of accession, whilst the Labour Party was euro-sceptic, fearing that EU accession could jeopardize the independence and neutrality which they had worked hard to achieve. Jon Mitchell (2002) explored this debate, and argued that Malta's position on the margins of Europe, as well as its history of external influence, led to a form of ambivalence amongst the Maltese regarding their own national identity, particularly in relation to their position as relative to the rest of Europe. He goes into detail about the "awkward relationship Maltese have had with their own history and identity" (2002 :31), particularly by means of a polarized way of thinking about Maltese national identity (especially in the 1990s), in which Malta is seen as the 'traditional' (characterised by Catholic morality, nostalgia, but at the same time backwardness) whilst Europe was seen to encompass 'modernity' (associated on the one hand with progress, educational opportunities and material wealth, and on the other hand with a degradation of traditional values and morals). These ambivalences fuelled discussions and tensions about what it meant to be Maltese, and were particularly pervasive at the time of European accession.

¹⁴ In this year, Mintoff brought down the Labour Party (then in Government) over disputes with Dr Alfred Sant, the Prime Minister and Labour Leader at the time.

A key element of these ambivalences, as described by Mitchell, was Malta's geographically liminal position in the Mediterranean, between Europe and Africa, with historical roots anchored in the two. Within the national rhetoric, whilst political alignment with Europe is considered to encompass progress, associations with Africa conversely seem to imply a sense of backwardness, thus leading the Maltese to often emphasize the European aspects of their history over others. An ENAR Shadow Report on racism in Europe (2011/12) noted that "centuries of Euro-centric Christian domination, the importance of St Paul and Malta's role in Christendom (read also Europe) is deeply embedded within the national consciousness. Indeed, in spite of documented evidence suggesting otherwise, Malta's Islamic period between the 9th and 12th century has essentially been eradicated from the national narrative." Many Maltese thus choose to emphasize and defend their 'European' identity and biblical links to Christianity accordingly, partly because "when alienated from [...] their European identity, the Maltese [are] left to opt for the only other source of cultural identity – the Semitic Mediterranean" (Mitchell 2002: 31).

The New "Invaders"

In the midst of these discussions began new migration trends which occurred precisely due to Malta's position on the fringes of Europe, and unbeknownst to the Maltese at the time, they were to continue to the present day. Sub-Saharan African migrants in search of humanitarian protection, also referred to as 'boat people' by nature of the way in which they arrived on the islands, fled countries such as Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Sudan (amongst others), and began arriving in Malta in significant numbers as of 2002¹⁵. Prior to this year, the number of individuals seeking refuge in Malta, although steadily consistent, were far less, whilst the people themselves originated from different countries. It was around that time that legislation was put in place in order to establish official procedures

¹⁵ Many asylum seekers aimed to reach Sicily, and a number were unaware of the existence of Malta prior to their arrival there. Although a number of non-nationals from other continents (particularly Europe) also take up residence in Malta, public discourse on the topic of immigration places significant emphasis on migrants arriving from countries south of Malta.

with regards to receiving individuals who arrived in Malta seeking asylum¹⁶. For the most part, the number of asylum seekers who have landed in Malta has remained consistently high since 2002 (averaging around 1500 arrivals per year). It is difficult to pinpoint the precise reason as to why this has been so, although some speculation is present. Manduca (2008) for example, suggests “It is understood that the Libyans had informed the new government that its application for full membership of the European Union was considered ‘a hostile act’, and there was in later years a lack of cooperation over the illegal ‘immigrants’¹⁷ most of whom were ‘taking off’ from Libya” (2008: 67). Gaddafi’s involvement in the phenomenon was further suggested later on, in an Al Jazeera report (dated 12th December 2011) which stated that Gaddafi’s military had taken over the old fishing port in the town of Zuwarah, Western Libya, during the country’s uprising, and set up smuggling operations to send hundreds of African migrants to Europe in an attempt to sidetrack and frustrate European governments.¹⁸ A significant number of African migrants remain in hiding in Libya, living in fear and searching for means to escape. Meanwhile, in Malta (as well as a few other European countries), the issue often tends to be referred to within the context of national security. Whilst many local NGOs try to emphasize the phenomenon as a humanitarian issue, a great deal of public discourse on the topic labels irregular immigration as an unsustainable and overwhelming threat to the security and control of the islands.

Reception conditions in Malta were improvised for asylum seekers in somewhat of a rush, in response to the large number of individuals who began arriving by boat as of 2002. One such example is the Marsa open centre, which was opened in 2005 as a residence for single sub-Saharan African men. The open centre is one of around ten centres set up for

¹⁶ The Refugees Act of 2001 was the first asylum-specific legislation enacted in Malta, and it also made provisions for the establishment of a Refugee Commissioner. Prior to this, Malta was a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and is also a signatory to its 1967 Protocol. In 2001, Malta lifted its geographical reservations to both the Convention and its Protocol. These were done when it seemed likely that Malta would soon be joining the European Union.

¹⁷ The use of the term ‘illegal immigrants,’ though commonly adopted in Malta, is one which is problematic and misleading, given that many refugees fleeing persecution in their home country have little choice but to do so without official documentation. Throughout this thesis, I replace this term with ‘irregular immigrants,’ acknowledging the irregular means by which they arrived in Malta.

¹⁸ Gaddafi’s Secret ‘Weapon’ Uncovered; Al Jazeera English 12th December 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PTScvxH5KHM>

the purpose of providing a transitory residence for the migrants. The term 'open centre' is used in opposition to the idea of a closed centre, more commonly known as detention centres, where immigrants are imprisoned upon arrival for up to a maximum of 18 months (though generally far less) as they await the outcome of their application for asylum. An open centre, by contrast, allows those staying there to move freely in and out of the building, and the official purpose of the centre is to facilitate the transition of migrants from the closed centres into the community. A number of obstacles exist for African migrants in undertaking this¹⁹, and the open centre often becomes a permanently liminal space which its residents are expected, but unable, to move on from.

The Marsa open centre was improvised and set up within a dilapidated trade school, which had closed down just a few years prior. News articles from 2003 and 2004²⁰ drew attention to protests from teachers and the Teacher's Union at the time, objecting to the conditions at the school and insisting upon its immediate closure. Amongst other poor conditions, the articles highlighted the school as an 'unsafe dump' which was infested with rats, and which posed hazardous threats by means of asbestos in the ceiling and other dangerous smells and substances emanating from the abattoir, power station, and drainage mains nearby. The school was ultimately closed, and in January 2005 it was announced that funding from the European Union had been secured in order for the school to be transformed into an open centre for refugees²¹. Similar complaints about the building have been put forward in its time as an open centre for migrants – the purpose which the building continues to serve to this day. Whilst a number of improvements and developments to the premises have been carried out, criticisms of the area still persist.

¹⁹ Employment opportunities for migrants tend to be few and far between, and are often limited to occasional one-off manual labour jobs which do not provide a steady income (and which may often be 'off the books'). Furthermore, they are more likely to encounter discrimination in attempting to access housing and other basic services.

²⁰ 'Marsa teachers ask for alternative school,' Tuesday 21st October 2003, Times of Malta online.

'Teacher's union insists on Marsa school closure,' Wednesday 21st January 2004, Times of Malta online.

'AD calls for action on Marsa school,' Thursday 5th February 2004, Times of Malta online.

²¹ 'Government policy document on irregular immigration, refugees, and integration published,' Saturday 8th January 2004, The Malta Independent Online.

The shared occupation of this building publicly declared as an unfit and abject space, albeit at slightly different points in history, hints at shared historical experiences of abjection, and the subsequent potential internalization of the abject. The construction of the building, and indeed the surrounding town, in terms of the abject was nothing new. The residents of Southern Harbour towns such as Marsa have been depicted within a context of powerlessness over the centuries, suffering poverty and oppression at the hands of colonial invaders (Zammit 1984). In order to illustrate this point, I shall finally turn to a brief history of the development of Marsa as a town, and highlight the role which it has played within a wider national and historical context.

A Brief History of Marsa

Marsa, the site in which I conducted my fieldwork, is located on the East side of Malta, in the innermost part of the harbour which surrounds the peninsular Maltese capital city of Valletta.



Fig 2 – Map of the Maltese islands indicating the geographical position of Marsa, with a close up of the harbour area in the inset

Groups of towns were established around the Grand Harbour in the time of the Order of St John, however it was not until the British period that a number of suburbs around the harbour were established, from Marsa up until St Julians. Some Maltese moved from the harbour towns to the suburbs, which consistently developed as urban areas over the years. Blouet (2007: 184) notes that “the suburbs which grew up around Sliema were inhabited predominantly by the professional and commercial classes but the suburbs of Ħamrun, Paola, and Marsa housed working-class families and grew at a faster pace. In 1871, there were 3,200 people living in the Ħamrun, Marsa, Santa Venera area. Now there are more than ten times as many, although Marsa and Ħamrun have been affected by the inner harbour tendency to lose population.”

Trade grew in Malta from the 1850s, and the number of ships calling at the Grand Harbour increased rapidly following the opening of the Suez Canal. In response to growing need, a new port was built in Marsa, completely transforming the landscape of the area. The land had previously been a tranquil and scenic place, which was fertile ground for agriculture, fauna and wildlife, with nearby cliffs and rock pools. This now made way for an extension of the port facilities of the Grand Harbour, which required more shelter for grand ships. The area also contained many marshes, with stagnant water which led to malaria. The new port was opened in 1866, and was lined with merchant tents, warehouses, and factories. Some people moved to the area once the work on the port put an end to the risk of malaria lurking in the stagnant waters. Marsa had always been used as a natural port (indeed, the town name in itself means ‘port’ in Arabic) ever since the time of the Phoenicians, as witnessed by the existence of megalithic buildings nearby. In 1869, the British built a track for horse races in the area of Marsa which is presently known as Racecourse Street, but which also goes by the name of ‘*Marsa ta’ L-Ingliżi*’ (Marsa of the English). Here, the street names bear witness to the importance of horse racing in the area, with street names such as *Tiġrija* (race), *Stalal* (stables), *Ħaddied* (blacksmith), *Serkin* (sulky) and *Ġerrejja* (jockeys). The British also built a country club in the area, which has since become the Marsa Sports club, a members-only recreational

club which tends to attract members from the middle and upper classes residing north of the harbour.

In 1875, two traders felt the need to build a small town intended to serve as residences for port workers. They chose a part of Marsa known as *'Ta' Ċejlu'* in which to build this town, in the hope of fostering a skilled and prosperous working community there. Upon laying the foundation stone for the town, the Governor of Malta declared "I lay this stone, hoping that the future town may contain a prosperous worthy and contented community and prove remunerative to its spirited projectors" (Guillaumier 2002: 397). The town was named Albert Town, after Prince Albert, and the motto of the town was *'L-aħħar li sirt,'* roughly translated into 'What I have become.' The ambitious plans for Albert Town never quite came to fruition – the town remained empty for a number of years, with a few people going to live there in 1890 (with 620 people and 200 homes there at the time). A small church had been built in the area in the hopes that the town would become established as a parish in its own right²², however the number of families residing there to this day remain few. It is presently considered a part of the town of Marsa, albeit one which is somewhat cut off from the town centre, and it is considered by many to be a place unfit for people to live in, due to the heavy industrialization and prostitution in the area. This is also the space where the Marsa open centre for Sub-Saharan African migrants was eventually to be located.

Within Marsa, as with most Maltese villages, the parish church lies at the heart of Maltese village life. Religious activities occupy great importance in the social calendar of the inhabitants of the village, and parish priests were previously considered to play crucial roles as village leaders (although their role as such has diminished somewhat in recent years). Marsa is home to two Parish churches, each of which is intended to act as a spiritual guide for those who reside within areas of the village falling under her jurisdiction. It is important to note that the boundaries of towns and villages were historically often determined by the Parish churches, which differ from other churches in

²² The boundaries of towns and villages were largely determined by the Parish churches.

that they act as the local administrative arm of the Catholic church in Malta and oversee the spiritual development of local communities. The Trinita' Qaddisa parish church was the first parish church in Marsa. Prior to its establishment, the jurisdiction of Marsa formed part of the parish church of the nearby village of Qormi. When another nearby town of Ħamrun also eventually became a parish church, the territory of Marsa was split between the parish churches of the nearby towns of Ħamrun and Qormi, until 1913 when Trinita' Qaddisa rendered Marsa a parish in its own right, reunifying land which had previously been split between two neighbouring towns. This major church-building project was seen as greatly needed within the community. It was decided that the church would be dedicated to the Holy Trinity, and that it would establish the limits of its territory in relation to Ħamrun, Qormi, and Raġal Ġdid.

Many years later, the parish priest (*kappillan*) of Marsa was particularly moved by a miracle which was claimed to have taken place in Siracusa, Italy. The story goes that on the 29th August 1953, a woman by the name Antonietta Giusto was severely ill and bed-ridden, and she saw tears fall from the eyes of a ceramic likeness of the Madonna which was hanging by her bed. The woman was cured, and her communist husband converted to Christianity. After hearing of these events, the parish priest decided to build a church dedicated to this Madonna, who was called "*Madonna tad-Dmugħ*" (Our Lady of Tears). The church was blessed and opened in 1961, and was a welcome addition for the congregation living on the outskirts of Marsa. The congregation in this part of Marsa collected a great deal of money for the church, and those who resided in the area of the church petitioned for it to become a parish. This was granted in 1966, and Marsa thus became home to two parish churches. In later years, the parish council requested for the church to be re-named to something more fitting of the jovial atmosphere prevalent amongst the congregation at the time, and in 1968 the church authorities accepted that the church be dedicated to *Marija Reġina*, the Queenship of our Lady (this was partly due to the fact that the Vatican had yet to approve the events of Siracusa as a miracle). To this day, the two parish churches within Marsa assume the responsibility of different territories within the village.

The events outlined earlier in the chapter regarding the socio-political language issue, as well as the political developments following the Second World War, highlight issues which are pertinent to an understanding of Marsa today. As previously outlined, the beginning of the British period was marked by significant class distinctions. Italian was utilized as an instrument of class domination, in distinguishing the educated elite who boasted cultural ties with Europe from the illiterate and uneducated masses (a great deal of whom would have resided in Marsa and worked in manual labour jobs around the port area). Hull (1993: 165) makes reference to the pro-Italian Dr. Enrico Zammit, who “[described] the Maltese dialect as a diseased, putrid organism which would have died out had it not been for the salutary, assimilatory injections it had gratefully received from Italian.” The Maltese dialect thus stamped its speaker with an abject status which was carefully cultivated, as Hull (1993: 170) claims: “By ‘elevating’ the Maltese dialect, that badge of social and cultural inferiority, the British were in fact working to degrade the Maltese.” The Maltese-speaking proletariat in particular were thus oppressed by colonial powers over the centuries, leading to an internalization of ‘powerlessness,’ as Zammit (1984) terms it. Zammit, a Maltese sociologist, expands upon this idea by suggesting that “...the Maltese experience of national powerlessness can be understood in terms of alienation precisely because of the way in which the physical needs for subsistence, work and security have enabled the colonial power holders to promote an ideology of natural dependence upon them” (1984: 32)

Within this context, it becomes possible to appreciate the extent to which Dom Mintoff was ultimately to be hailed as the champion of the working classes, kick starting the Maltese economy in difficult economic circumstances following the Second World War, and fostering a sense of working class pride amongst those historically construed as the abject. The achievement of independence for Malta, following centuries of colonial rule and domination, ushered in a new era of self-respect and dignity amongst the working classes, particularly under the leadership of Dom Mintoff who strove to raise the esteem of all kinds of work, and erase class distinctions which had pervaded for centuries

(Zammit 1984). He is often considered the saviour of Malta amongst the working classes, though retains a status of being a dictator amongst his opponents for the forceful methods in which he worked to achieve his aims. The following chapter on class shall explore these points in far greater detail, however suffice to make the point for the time being that Mintoff's efforts radically transformed the lives of residents in towns such as Marsa for the better. The poor gained access to schooling, slums in Marsa were replaced with proper housing, and a number of social services were introduced in raising the esteem and status of those who had previously been constituted as the abject. Mintoff wished to obliterate states of abjection in a sense, stating on one occasion "if there is one thing which must stop once and for all, it is this – that when a worker passes by a rich man, this one says 'yuq – what a smell!'" (Valletta Mass Meeting, L-Orizzont, 22nd July 1976)²³. So passionate and loyal were his supporters that a certain fanaticism arose, and his followers deemed '*Mintoffjani*' (Mintoffians). Their zealous support of their hero gave rise to a culture of intimidation and violence amongst a select few (referred to as the 'thugs' in local media), who directed this at opponents of Mintoff's aims and ideologies. These opponents protested and retaliated in turn. This status quo prevailed during the 1970s and 1980s, before ultimately fading away.

Although this culture of violence died down over the decades, political disagreements are still known to prompt instances of violence to this day. A certain sense of 'roughness' and machismo is still prevalent amongst the people in Marsa, who take pride in being tough and strong-willed. However, this is not to preclude the collective qualities of humility and friendliness which they regularly displayed amongst one another, and which they held as important traits which identified them as down-to-earth people of Marsa, free from false illusions of superiority or grandeur which they often considered members of the upper classes to possess. The fieldwork experience to which I shall now turn shall demonstrate these points accordingly.

²³ Quoted in Zammit, E. (1984: 63) *A colonial inheritance: Maltese perceptions of work, power, and class structure with reference to the Labour Movement*
Malta: Malta University Press

Fieldwork and Methodology

In February 2011, I undertook a four month pilot study at the only state primary school in Marsa, Malta. The existence of the Marsa open centre was what initially triggered my interest in the town as a potential fieldwork site, given that I was interested in understanding what the children made of the presence of immigrants, and whether any tensions were evident between locals and migrants. Apprehension of the presence of African migrants, particularly amongst the children in Marsa, was something I had already suspected based on a few chance encounters with one or two children from Marsa in the years prior to my fieldwork, and I felt a pressing need to understand the phenomenon from the perspective of children, based on ethnographic research. I found much of the present discourse on the topic to be dominated by adults, with little attention given to the perspective of the child, possibly due to mistaken assumptions that children unquestioningly absorb the ideas of adults around them. This presumption is inherently flawed, and fails to give credence to children's ideas in their own right, with many making the argument for a more child-centred approach to anthropology (La Fontaine 1986; James et al 1998). I thus initially sought to make an original contribution to knowledge in this manner, in filling a void which I felt there to be present.

Marsa is home to a number of sub-Saharan African immigrants who have been granted humanitarian protection by the Maltese Authorities. The open centre in Marsa houses around 600 sub-Saharan African men. Many remain at the open centre for a while, due to the numerous obstacles which they encounter in securing steady employment, and residence within the community. The actual number of immigrants living at the centre is hard to pin down, even by the staff themselves. The Director of the open centre (a Ghanaian man who has resided in Malta for over 10 years and now considers himself to be Maltese) informed me that (as in April 2012) he has 625 residents on record, but that some men had tried to leave the country (legally and illegally) in order to try their luck in Europe. He said that they currently had a bed count of 485 people, although it was difficult to determine the number of residents at the centre at any given time, since

residents of other open centres in Malta often tried to sneak in to the Marsa open centre in order to sleep there, since the living conditions at other open centres were rather poor. This is not to say that the conditions at the Marsa open centre were not poor. Trash was regularly dumped in the area while the shallow ditch water delivered foul and putrid smells to the centre. A couple of ripped out car seats and one or two mobile toilets flanked the entrance, where a number of migrants regularly congregated. Despite this, of the open centres in Malta for its purpose, the Marsa open centre was amongst the most desirable, especially when compared to other centres such as the nearby Hal Far centre, which is situated in a converted aircraft hangar. The staff had made increased efforts to keep track of their residents in the past few years, by installing gates and security, and imposing visiting hours, with the aim of making the open centre less of an 'African ghetto,' in the Director's words. In addition to the open centre in Marsa, a number of African immigrants live within the community of Marsa itself, joining forces with one another to take advantage of cheap rent in the area.

The total population of Marsa is 6407 inhabitants, of which 5178 are Maltese.²⁴ Marsa itself is conceptually split up into four areas. There is the old part of Marsa, which is built around the port and was officially established as a town with the building of the Trinita Qaddisa (Holy Trinity) parish church in 1913. In this area, there is also the local Council, two primary schools (one Church school and one State school), and the police station. Then there is the newer part of Marsa, built over the last 60 years and built farther away from the port, also established with the building of the second parish church – Marija Regina (the Queenship of our Lady). There is also Albert Town, which is seen by the Marsa residents as being somewhat cut off. The Marsa Open Centre lies precisely on the periphery of Albert Town, bordering with the older part of Marsa. A lot of prostitution goes on in the area of Albert Town, and a small number of families reside in the midst of the factories, abattoir, and power station within this industrial zone. Lastly, there is Racecourse street, an area of Marsa which is similarly cut off due to the arterial roads which dissect the town, and which is home to the race track, and a number of stables,

²⁴ As at 31st December 2009. Statistics drawn from *Demographic Review 2010, Valletta: National Statistics Office*

bars, and families. The streets in this area attest to the residents' enthusiasm for horse racing – sulkies line the side of the road, stained glass windows and metal frames depict horses, and the names of the bars and streets all follow along the same equestrian theme (some horse owners do keep their horses in other parts of Marsa and in nearby towns and villages, utilizing other spaces such as garages in order to house their animals).

All four areas form part of Marsa, and yet the residents whom I spoke to shared different views on these areas and the relative risk and danger which they felt the areas pose. The fact that main roads cut through them means that hundreds, if not thousands, of commuters make their way through Marsa every day, and do so without needing to enter the town itself as such. It also means that residents of Marsa may become segregated from one another to a degree, getting by quite easily without needing to cross over to another area in Marsa, as they choose to frequent the grocery shops and bars in their vicinity. In fact, some residents living in the centre of Marsa have rarely gone to Racecourse street or Albert Town, believing both of those areas to be unsafe.

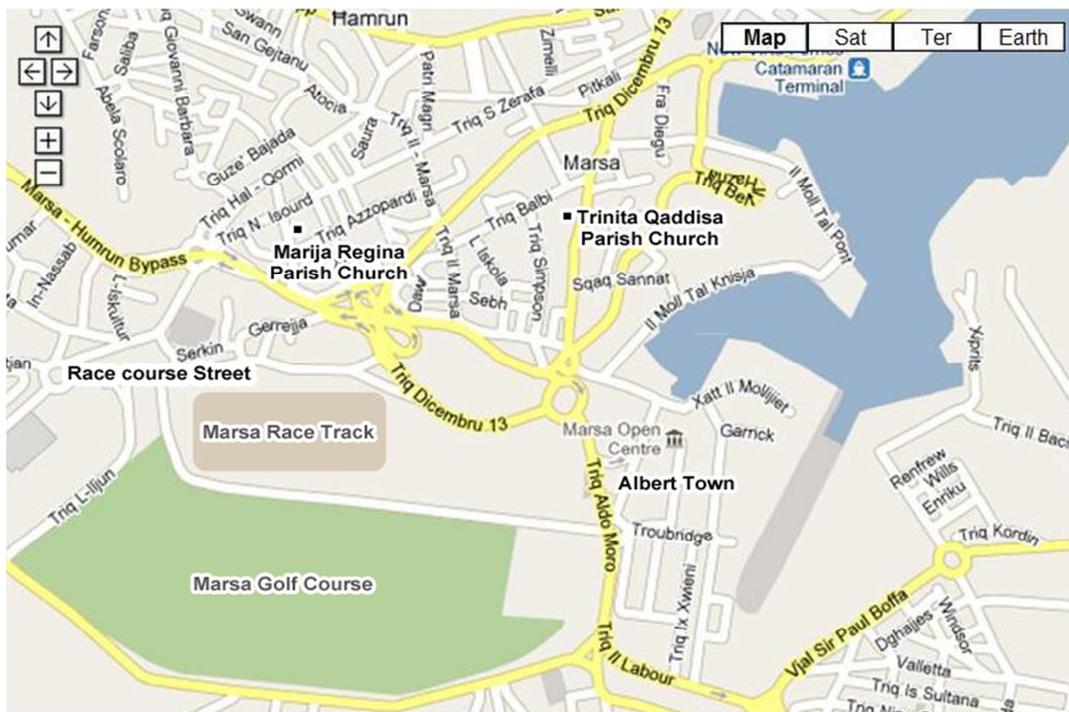


Fig. 3 – Map of Marsa

The initial aim of my research was to undertake school-based ethnography in the only Government primary school in Marsa, in order to explore the sense which children made of the immigrants living in their town. Ultimately, I adopted an open-ended approach, in that whilst I entered the school with that particular issue in mind, I aimed towards “ethnographic openness” (Okely 1994: 22) and refrained from restricting my analytical focus from the outset, allowing previously unthought-of themes to emerge in their own right. During my pilot study from February 2011 until June 2011, I did not reside in Marsa. My fieldwork focused on the primary school itself, and I regularly observed three classes - the Year 4 class (1 class of 25 students, aged 8-9) and the Year 5 classes (2 classes with 11 children per class, ages 9-10). In my time at the school, I observed these children through the latter part of the 2010/2011 academic year, and the entire 2011/2012 academic year²⁵. The children came from predominantly working class backgrounds, and resided in various parts of Marsa, and some in a few neighbouring towns.

The primary school itself was built to completion in 1925, initially operating as two separate schools for boys and girls respectively, but eventually amalgamated into one primary school. A State secondary school for girls was also previously located on the top floor of the building, but this school was phased out in the few years prior to my fieldwork. As with most State primary schools, Marsa primary school placed emphasis on the personal and spiritual development of children within its timetable. Catholic feasts were celebrated, monthly masses attended, and the parish priest of the nearby Trinita' Qaddisa church regularly invited to hear confession and give sermons to the children during Lent. Children whose parents did not belong to the Catholic faith (of which there were few) were often excused during these activities. Religious icons adorned many a corridor and classroom wall, and Catholic values underpinned many aspects of teaching in the school. Lessons were conducted in Maltese, and many children at the school had a very limited knowledge of English, although it was also included as part of their school

²⁵ Within the 2011/2012 academic year, the previous Year 4 class were split into two separate classes once they reached Year 5 – a development many teachers and parents considered necessary in order for the children to be taught more effectively.

syllabus. The school had a total of 198 children when I began fieldwork in 2011, although this number fluctuated in the months of fieldwork that followed. A kindergarten for pre-school age children also formed part of the school. The primary school in itself had 6 Year groups, with one or two classes in each Year. Teachers remained with their class for the majority of the school day, in giving lessons and keeping a watchful eye on them during break time respectively.

In the beginning, my entire research was based within the primary school itself. Although I came to know some parents through my involvement with the school, research undertaken in the rest of Marsa was a little limited. I began to fear that my association with the school would restrict me a little too much, for a number of reasons. The town of Marsa is, what the staff at the primary school would term, 'a depressed area with many social problems.' As the School development Plan 2011-2012 acknowledged, "the catchment area of Marsa Primary consists mostly of the lower classes of the town. Almost all students come from the poorer families with very low income because of poorly paid jobs or because of dependence on state social assistance. Besides, there are a big number of families that have social problems (in addition to poverty) often associated with single parent families, broken families and so on²⁶." In my conversations with them, what the staff generally understood to constitute 'social problems' were generally single parent families, families where the children have different fathers, or families where one or both parents are regularly inebriated or involved in illegal activity, or are somehow negligent of their children. This fell under the general notion of what was called '*taħwid*' (a mess/confusion/to be mixed up), which referred to a lack of social order in general. The term '*taħwid*' was regularly used by the staff to describe families in Marsa, insinuating that families in Marsa often tend to depart from what the staff considered to be appropriate social behaviour. Similarly, they would say that a person '*iħawwad*' – this literally means 'to mix up' or 'to confuse', but in this context may be used to refer to a broad range of things. It is a term which is used in order to relate that a person takes or deals drugs, cheats on their partner, or is involved in some illegal activity, amongst other things. This concept will be explored in further detail in Chapter 5.

²⁶ Marsa Primary School Development Plan 2011-2012, p. 5

Quite a number of children were regularly absent from school, and it was not uncommon to see a child walking around in the street when they were meant to be in school. The school social services within San Gorg Preca College²⁷ (a college which comprises 8 state primary schools including that in Marsa, 4 secondary schools, 2 resource centres, and a learning support centre²⁸), whilst responsible for investigating such regular cases of absenteeism, appeared to have difficulty in following them regularly due to their heavy workload. Whenever the teachers would learn about yet another child missing a day of school, they rolled their eyes in frustration and passed it off as something which they had come to expect in Marsa, because of all of the “*taħwid*.” Teachers also expressed frustration at having a large number of ‘*batuti*’ (weak students) in their class, as they felt that having a class with both strong and weak students made it difficult for them to do their job as effectively as they otherwise could.²⁹ It’s important to briefly take note of Darmanin’s (1991) argument here, in comparing state schooling and private schooling in Malta, that “[private schooling] has symbolic values which attracts able or middle class children into its schools, creates an ideology which represents state schooling as inadequate and consumes an inordinate amount of resources” (1991: 256). Issues pertaining to education and schooling will be explored in more detail in Chapter 4.

After learning a little more about these issues, as well as others which persist in the area, I began to feel very limited as an anthropologist, and concerned about how I was being perceived by the parents in the area. I felt that as long as I was primarily associated with

²⁷ State schools are divided between ten different colleges, including San Gorg Preca College, and each college serves a different region of the country in providing free compulsory education to all children. They differ from church schools (run by the Catholic church), and independent/private schools (which generally require payment of tuition fees).

²⁸ This centre had a total of 1-2 students during my fieldwork, and 6 members of staff, and was a separate organization which was housed on the top floor of the same building as the Marsa primary school. The students who attended were considered to have severe socio-behavioural difficulties, and they came to the centre instead of attending mainstream education.

²⁹ Up until a few years ago, streaming was practised in government schools, and children would be split into different classes according to their abilities. This practice was phased out by the Government, since it was widely felt that it damaged the children’s self-esteem too much, and children are now placed in mixed-ability classes. A number of teachers were unhappy with this change, as they felt as though they were unable to teach the students effectively within this new system, and that they lacked the necessary resources to simultaneously teach children across such a wide spectrum of academic ability.

the school, I ran the risk of having a large number of parents be very wary of me, presuming that I was a social worker or a similar official who would report them to the Education authorities. In fact, a parent later admitted to me that she had thought that I was an inspector when she first saw me at school. Although I had come to know some of the parents during my pilot study, these were mainly parents who formed part of the school council, and were thus more involved with the school in general than other parents were. I felt that it was crucial that other parents did not feel alienated from me, and I also felt that it was important for me to gain a better understanding about why some families in Marsa seemed to be so disengaged with the education of their children. I strongly felt that my research would benefit immensely if I were to go and live in Marsa, so that I would become a neighbour and a friend in addition to being a regular presence at school. Nonetheless, I was very apprehensive about the prospect of it. Having been raised in Sliema and Swieqi, primarily residential areas where families mainly speak in English and are middle class, I was raised to be somewhat cautious of the inner harbour areas (Marsa included) and of those who lived there. The area was often portrayed to me in a negative light, and even in the press, Marsa has been referred to as a 'no-go area' in the past³⁰. Similarly, I had a sense that potential informants in Marsa would also be taken aback by my presence there, presuming me to be '*tal-pepè*' (an upper class snob, by nature of my accent which betrays my fluency in English, and the towns which I grew up in). When I finally took the decision to go and live in Marsa for the second phase of my fieldwork, a number of friends and relatives simultaneously expressed admiration and grave concern, fearing that it was potentially dangerous and that I would be out of my depth, knowing nobody from the area. They also held the opinion that the area was full of '*ħamalli*' (the opposite of '*tal-pepè*,' the term '*ħamalli*' is used to describe people who are of a primarily Maltese speaking lower class, and who are extremely rough and vulgar in their language and manner).

Despite these concerns, I began searching for accommodation in Marsa, and when I attempted to do so through estate and letting agents, many of them also tried to steer me away from the area, telling me that there were other localities I could live in which

³⁰ ' "Migrants turning parts of Marsa into no-go areas", ' Times of Malta, Wednesday 4th July 2007

would be far more suitable for me. Searching for rental properties in Marsa by means of these official channels ultimately proved futile. I began asking around, and I spoke to my friend Robert one day, telling him of my plans to move there for some months. Robert told me of a friend of his who owned a small property in Marsa, and who had had problems with the previous tenant there. According to Robert, after around two months of residency, the landlord of this property discovered that his tenant had previously been imprisoned for murder. Upon learning of this, the landlord attempted to get the tenant to move out of the property. The tenant blackmailed the landlord, asking for two months' worth of rent in order for him to do so, and the landlord, after seeking legal advice, eventually gave in to these demands out of fear. I asked Robert if he could put me in touch with the landlord to see if he would be interested in renting the property again. After a few telephone conversations, I arranged for my father to go and have a look at the property, as I was out of the country and unable to go myself.

My father arrived in Marsa a little earlier than the landlord, and he entered the bar which was directly beneath the property. The vibrant conversations in the bar apparently came to an abrupt halt when he entered, and remained that way for the entire duration that he was in the bar. Copies of *L-Orizzont* (a daily Labour Party newspaper³¹) were strewn on the tables, the bar was full of wary men, and my father drank a glass of tea in the bar in complete silence. Once he finished and went back outside for a cigarette, he heard a number of hushed whispers coming from inside the bar. He described the whole situation to me as being a very uncomfortable one, and again expressed his concern at having me go and live there. (Later on in my fieldwork, when I had gained the trust of my informants, I was told that they had been apprehensive of my father because they presumed that he was with the Criminal Investigations Department, or 'C.I.D').

I returned to Malta in mid-September, in order to begin the second phase of my fieldwork. During the following scholastic year (September 2011 until June 2012), I continued observing the same classes of children as they progressed to Year 5 and Year 6

³¹ Partisan politics remains very strong in Malta, and often led to heated arguments in bars.

respectively³². The staff and the students were already very familiar with me due to the four months which I had spent at the school during the previous scholastic year. When they learnt of my plans to move to the area, they also commented that I was brave to move there (including the few members of staff who lived in Marsa themselves). I moved into the property, a stone's throw away from the school, a week or so after the scholastic year started. The sight of movers haphazardly trying to get furniture in through the balcony drew a considerable audience at another bar on the other side of the road, and I took the opportunity to go and introduce myself to those who had assembled. Once I told them that I would be moving in, and that I was doing research at the school, they were very welcoming, and they offered me tea and biscuits. They offered some information about my neighbours, and told me that I would soon come to see how nice the people of Marsa are. They told me "we are one family here." They warned me that there are many heated arguments which occur in the bar underneath my flat, especially about football, telling me that people either side with the Italians or the English³³. Once everything was settled with the movers, I went back to the bar and had a drink with those present. My father joined me there after a while, as he was on his way home from work. He was welcomed in to this bar, a stark contrast to his first visit to the area. He began to speak to a few of the people there about the race course in Marsa. His father, my grandfather, used to own a number of horses in Marsa, and they used to compete regularly at the Marsa race track while my grandfather was alive. My grandfather's reputation preceded him – he was known amongst some people in racecourse street as a kind and generous man who regularly drank with them, and was in a sense respected for his ability to get along with '*sinjuri*' (higher classes) and '*il-fqar*' (poor people) alike. Although a number of my informants had not known him personally, I believe that the fact that my family had had previous positive connections with Marsa led to their further acceptance of me. I soon garnered a reputation as a '*dħulija*' (a nice and sociable/friendly person), and a few of my neighbours soon began to take me under their wing, although some others also

³² Year 6 is the last year of primary school, following which the children prepare to go to secondary school outside of Marsa, since both the boys and girls secondary schools in Marsa were phased out in recent years.

³³ A throwback to the language issue in Malta which characterized political debate at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century.

warned me not to have *'kunfidenza żejjeđ'*³⁴, especially with the men in the bar. A few mothers at school also told me to be careful at the bar, telling me *"minn subajk jieħu idejk"*³⁵. A few patrons later admitted to me that when they had heard from their neighbours that someone from Swieqi was going to come and live in Marsa, they regarded me with disdain and wondered why on earth a person from Swieqi would be coming to live in Marsa. I was occasionally teased by some of my informants because of my accent and occasional mistakes in the Maltese language, as well as my lack of knowledge on issues in Marsa at the time. However, this always seemed to be done in jest.

My first flat in Marsa was very central, and given that my front door was clearly visible to two of the neighbourhood bars, my comings and goings were evident to the patrons of each. At the very beginning, some people remained curious about me, and would ring my doorbell and run away. When this happened, I would go downstairs to the bar and ask if anyone had rung for me, and when others in the bar would point out who it was, I would go up to them and introduce myself. This appeared to garner their respect, given that I did not appear to be intimidated by their actions. The two bars in the area were local neighbourhood bars, catering for the everyday drinking of the locals. They opened very early in the morning, at around 7:30am, and would serve a number of teas and coffees in glass tumblers, making them difficult to hold. This was a regular characteristic of village bars of this nature. The one I frequented most, which I shall name *Ta' Ċikku*, was rather grubby at the best of times. Light fixtures dangled on wires from the ceiling, and cigarette ashes and cigarette butts covered the cracked tiled floors, despite the 'No smoking' signs up on the wall. A framed picture of Jesus of the Divine Mercy also hung on the wall, adjacent to a cracked mirror which occupied an entire wall space. The bar was a predominantly male domain, although some women did enter the bar on occasion. Those who did were often accompanying their husbands, or were friends with Rita, a burly and stout woman in her 40s who ran the bar and who went about her work all day with a

³⁴ The term implies overfamiliarity with somebody, to the point where your behaviour with a person exceeds the perceived level of friendship.

³⁵ This is the Maltese equivalent of the English expression "give an inch and they will take a mile." It literally translates into "give a finger and they will take a hand."

cigarette in her mouth and worn out clothes. The bar used to have a kitchen in the back, where Rita would cook hot food to serve to people, however this was eventually done away with as gas and electricity prices rose. The kitchen was eventually replaced by tables for people to play cards and gamble on, and a few patrons availed themselves of the small toilet in the yard to snort a line of cocaine in private (this practice was particularly rampant on Sunday evenings, when the bar would have been full of people drinking all day).

It is important to stress here that this bar was the domain of the locals, and that 'outsiders' rarely frequented the bar. Local bars of this kind in Malta, as well as the patrons who frequent them, have been discussed elsewhere in ethnography:

Malta has always been full of foreigners. Its history is one of cross-currents and successive colonizations that in recent years have turned from explicit political hegemony to the more haphazard, though no less significant, invasion of hundreds of thousands of tourists each year. This has led to a situation in which the demarcation of inside and outside, and the establishment of a 'buffer zone' of tolerant accommodation, have become significant. The demarcation of inside and outside has become possible through local associationism that marks off certain spaces – certain bars – as the province of the local. Here, outsiders are neither expected nor particularly welcome. Such places can be contrasted with more cosmopolitan bars, which are aimed at accommodating outsiders in a tolerable – and tolerant – environment.

(Mitchell & Armstrong 2005: 180)

Although the location of the bar was not conducive to passing tourists, there were a number of African immigrants in the area who were 'outsiders' to this particular situation. The majority of African immigrants did not choose to enter these bars, preferring instead to go to bars around the Marsa Open Centre where they could socialize with other Africans. I did not visit those bars, particularly because I felt unsafe doing so. The area was occasionally patrolled by the Armed Forces of Malta, and I was told that the patrons of this bar were predominantly male immigrants, drug dealers, and prostitutes (although I

have no direct evidence of this). I was strongly warned against going there, even by my informants in Marsa. There were a few Africans who did choose to enter *Ta' Ċikku*, and I took the opportunity to befriend a few of them. I got the sense that they worked hard to involve themselves in community life and be accepted by the locals. Although they were not sent away from the bar, they were not particularly welcomed either. All of the African immigrants in the area were mostly referred to as '*is-suwed*' (the blacks) or occasionally as '*l-immigranti*' (the immigrants), the two terms adopted synonymously. They mostly socialized amongst their own, and frequented the places where other immigrants were. They often drank in the general area of the Marsa Open Centre (indeed, other immigrants from open centres all over Malta would frequently meet at this social hub), and they also visited an internet cafe in the centre of Marsa at all hours in the evening, in order to keep in touch with their family³⁶.

At the beginning of fieldwork, I made it a point to visit *Ta' Ċikku* regularly, in order for the locals to get more accustomed to me, and I to them. I had been living at my flat for around two weeks, when I began having a few problems with my accommodation. The narrow pipes on the roof meant that the rain water collecting on the roof did not drain quickly, and after a light rain shower one night, a large puddle of water appeared in my kitchen upstairs. When I informed my landlord about this, he accused me of being a kitten afraid of water. He said that he would fix the problem, but dragged his heels on it. Twanny, a regular at *Ta' Ċikku*, suggested that I deceive the landlord by tipping a bucket of water in the room, in order to make the problem appear to be more pressing than it was, so that it would consequently be treated with more urgency. I answered that I would prefer not to. About a week later, there was the first heavy rainfall of the year. I was out for most of the evening and I headed back home to Marsa after midnight. The heavy rainfall had prompted the bars in the area to close early that night (they would generally have closed rather late on the weekends, at around 4am). I entered my flat and found the entire place flooded, and the soffit ceiling falling down in clumps around me. I no longer felt safe, and I grabbed a few of my belongings and left. As I was leaving, I slipped and fell down a flight of stairs, and I was soon collected by my concerned parents who took me to

³⁶ African men seemed to be the sole patrons of this particular internet café.

hospital and back to their home. The next day, I was in a lot of pain, and I couldn't walk very well. It was clear that I could not go on living at that flat, and on that day my father passed by there to collect a few more of my belongings. He went in to *Ta' Ċikku* and shared what had happened with those who were present. Twanny went up to the flat with my father to look at the damage and was shocked by what he saw, saying that the situation was "*tal-misthija*" (shameful). He also suggested bringing the ceiling down a little more in order to make the damage appear worse, but my father declined. While they were at the flat, Rita (the bar owner) phoned up her landlord. She was planning on leaving her one bedroom flat with her family within a few weeks, and she called her landlord to arrange for me to take her flat once she left. When my father returned to the bar, Rita left her 15 year old son to look after the bar³⁷, and she took my father to go and see her flat. While they were gone, the landlord of my first flat turned up, and Twanny warned him that he should settle things as soon as possible, otherwise he was likely to get sued as revenge. In the end, the contract which I held with my first landlord was soon declared null and void, and I prepared myself to move in to Rita's old flat located a few minutes away. The flat was on the top floor of a block of three flats, all being rented out. The other two flats were rented by a single man, a 19 year old mother and her two young children, and a group of immigrants who rented and lived within the garage.

This particular incident, as well as a few other events which followed, immediately put me face to face with some of the predominant issues which I was to confront in the rest of my fieldwork. Interpersonal relationships and informal conversations were the most effective means of accessing services and information within a town with such intensely social relationships, as I came to learn in finding a flat. Although suspicion towards outsiders is rife, mainly due to a lack of knowledge of a person's intentions, it is capable of being dissipated once these intentions are known and accepted, and upon display of certain dispositions (such as friendliness and joviality) which people of Marsa hold dearly and associate with themselves. Indeed, the stark contrast behind my father's first and second visit demonstrated this quite effectively. Once I appeared to be granted honorary insider status, as it were, I was overwhelmed by the extent to which everybody rallied

³⁷ He worked at the bar regularly, having unofficially left school a year or two earlier.

around me, particularly when I became injured in my first Marsa home. The various deception tactics which they attempted to steer me towards were a means of encouraging me to capitalize upon the incident, and satisfy any thirst for revenge which they may have presumed me to have following the event. This was not uncommon in Marsa, as occasions such as the one I described above would generally be cause for a person to seek '*vendikazzjoni*,' or revenge, and gain what they could from an adverse situation. This concept was ultimately to make itself more apparent in the course of my fieldwork.

The whole incident involving my accident also led to a strong friendship with Rita during my fieldwork, and with the rest of her family. I discovered that her son went to the State primary school as well (although he did not form part of the classes that I was observing), and I soon got in to the routine of helping her son with his homework after school. I expected to be able to move into her flat relatively soon after my accident, however this wait frustratingly dragged on for a month and a half, with Rita telling me each day that she should be moving out in a few days. Eventually she admitted that the reason that she was dragging her heels on the matter was because she was having trouble collecting money for the down payment on her new flat, and her partner was supposed to have given her the money for this, but failed to. She insisted on showing me her contract to show me that she wasn't lying, even though I had not asked her or challenged her in any way. Her determination in actually proving her situation to me as genuine was one which underlined the risk of falsity which was characteristic of many interactions in Marsa, particularly when individuals sought to protect their honour and pride. It was thus not always easy to take a person's statement at face value. (Eventually, Rita moved in to her new place with her family, but did so by using the rent money for her bar. When the landlord of the bar turned up for the rent money a few months later, he found the bar closed. Rita had told her teenage daughter, who also worked at the bar, to close the bar in the middle of the day and come home. For the next few weeks, Rita pretended that she had been sent to a mental health hospital, and that that was the reason why the bar wasn't open. I was the only non-family member who knew the truth at the time, and I would bring in groceries for the family and take her son to school, since he had missed

quite a bit of school as a result of the whole charade). The family eventually moved in to their new flat, allowing me to move into the residence in Marsa where I was to stay for the next seven months.

As I settled in to my new flat in Marsa, I was rather surprised at the level of information people seemed to have of me, whilst I knew very little about them. I would walk in the street and have random people ask me how my injuries were, and tell me that the behaviour of my previous landlord was shameful, and that I was far better off in the flat where I was living. While they seemed to have all of this information about me, they were far less forthcoming with information about themselves, even regarding their names. I was soon told that the people in Marsa often stick their noses into other people's business, and want to know what everyone else is up to. I always co-operated whenever I was asked questions about myself and about what I was doing in Marsa (even though this information wasn't always very clearly understood,) in an effort to make my presence there less threatening, and to transform me into a more accepted 'insider.'

During my time in Marsa, aside from the children I was observing at school, I developed close relationships with around four families in Marsa, one of whom was Rita's family who ultimately treated me as one of their own. I also cultivated a good rapport with around 8 regulars at *Ta' Ċikku*. At the same time, I was friendly with a large number of other acquaintances who I met on my daily rounds and walkabouts. Although I describe Marsa as a working class industrial town, it is important to note that it is not my intention for this to be taken as an all-encompassing and homogenous term, as class divisions within Marsa itself were also evident. A number of professionals lived and worked in Marsa, and were employed in a number of fields such as law, education, nursing, and medicine, to name but a few. The informants I happened to build relationships with during fieldwork, however, belonged to families where the breadwinners in the family worked as builders, cleaners, drivers, petrol station attendants, bar keepers, dishwashers, shopkeepers, garbage collectors, clerks, and factory workers. They were often the sole breadwinners in relatively large families of three or more children. A number of them

were in gainful employment, some were inactive and/or retired, whilst others did not declare their work to the State, and were registered as unemployed³⁸ in order to receive social benefits in addition to their off-the-books employment. Some of my informants also earned money through gambling, and participation in the black market. A few of my informants also confessed to me that they (or a member of their immediate family) regularly struggled with mental health problems such as depression, for which they had been prescribed medication.

It is thus important to stress that my observations should not be considered to encompass all children and adults living in Marsa as one static and homogeneous group. The analyses put forward have been done following reflection upon fieldwork material which was gathered at a particular time, and under particular circumstances with particular informants. It is upon that fieldwork material that this thesis is based, drawing my understanding from the specific relationships which I fostered in this time. By nature of the phenomena which I was seeking to understand, I turned my attention more readily to informants who were actively engaged in activities that were alien and concerning to me, and which I wished to better comprehend. I do not wish to imply that such practices (particularly the illegal activities I describe in Chapter 5) were the norm throughout Marsa or were exclusive to Marsa in any way, but rather that they were a key element to answering some of the questions I put forward. Although involvement in these and other practices was not widespread, a degree of familiarization to their occurrence in the neighbourhood often was, inevitably shaping children's understanding of their social world. When I began fieldwork, I was largely oblivious to the circumstances which shaped the lives of a number of my informants. During the course of my research, these circumstances gave rise to a few interesting and at times slightly compromising situations, which I have attempted to write about as fairly as possible. These situations could not have been anticipated prior to my research, and within the context in which they

³⁸ According to data from the annual 2012 LF dataset (provided by the National Statistics Office), 8.8% of the labour force in the Southern Harbour district was registered as unemployed. This district registered the highest rate of unemployment in the country, followed by the South Eastern district which registered an unemployment rate of 7% of its labour force. This offers a stark contrast to the unemployment rate in the Northern Harbour district in that same period, which was noted as 0.1%.

occurred I found it crucial not to turn a blind eye to the social realities which presented themselves.

In writing this thesis, and particularly in drawing upon theories of abjection, I found myself concerned with the same issues which troubled Philippe Bourgois (2003) in his ethnographic account of crack dealers in Harlem, New York. I worried that the narratives and descriptions shared in my writing, as well as the subsequent analysis of them, would be misread as negative stereotypes and stigma – a prospect which I remain keen to avoid as an ethnographer who cares for and is protective of her informants. At the same time, I feared that omitting or sanitizing these same narratives would give a flawed and misleading picture of the social context which framed my informants' lives, rendering futile any attempt towards understanding why social inequalities across social groups occurred, and how they persistently manifested themselves. To avoid this discussion would have been to do my informants a disservice, and to be complicit in doing nothing to ultimately challenge these social inequalities. For this reason, I attempted to give an accurate depiction of conversations and events as they occurred, within the inevitable limitations which I experienced as an ethnographer. However, like Bourgois, I also share the problem and social responsibility of the construal of this text with the reader.

In collecting ethnographic material towards my thesis, I protected my informants and strove to conduct my research in a manner which was ethically sound. During my time at school, I continued to undertake participant observation in the classes as I had done during my pilot study, quietly observing for the most part and occasionally stepping in to offer my assistance in the classroom for minor tasks, where it was needed or solicited from me. Consent forms had been disseminated to, and collected from, the parents prior to my arrival at school, and during the second phase of my fieldwork I also sought permission to be able to interview the children about the town which they lived in. A second set of consent forms were collected for this purpose, in which it was made clear that the children would not be missing school lessons for the purposes of my interviews, and the questions which I would be asking were also made clear. The interviews were

conducted while a class teacher was absent, and the children would be split into different classes for that time, often drawing, reading books, chatting amongst themselves quietly, or doing a little extra work. Interviews were conducted with a minimum of two children at a time, so that the children would feel more comfortable and less intimidated, and the interviews were also recorded (a fact which was also made explicit in the second set of consent forms distributed). During these interviews, I asked the children what they liked about Marsa, what they didn't like about Marsa, and what they would change about Marsa if they could. An informal conversation then unfolded, where I allowed the children to elaborate and speak about whatever aspect of Marsa they wished. It's important to note that, although consent was secured from the parents, I also made it a point to request consent from the children themselves prior to conducting any interview. I explained to them that I was seeking to ask them about Marsa and record our conversation, but I always stressed that they had the option at any point to refuse to speak to me, or to be recorded. None of the children objected to speaking with me, however one child did not wish to have our conversation recorded, and his wishes were respected. All of my informants, adults and children alike, were given alternative names within this thesis, and some details have been modified accordingly in order to render specific people and places as unidentifiable.

At the outset of my research, I entered my fieldwork site with the intention of also anonymizing the name of the town. However, in time it became evident that it would not be possible to disguise the place effectively, without distorting my data to the point of compromising scholarly accuracy and integrity. The very specific features of my research setting, such as its position as a harbour town, the presence of an open centre and an industrial zone, as well as the popular local affinity for horses and horse racing, were central to my analytical discussion, and also rendered any attempt to disguise the location as virtually impossible, particularly within a country the size of Malta. Under these circumstances, I was granted permission by the relevant authorities and by my informants to state that my research was conducted in Marsa, however additional measures were subsequently taken in order to anonymize and protect the identity of my informants by other means.

My transition from a predominantly school-based anthropologist to one who located herself within the wider socio-cultural context of Marsa was not an entirely smooth one. Although my fieldwork opened up significantly by becoming their neighbour, and allowed me to explore areas which would previously not have been open to me, I still felt as though there were limitations in certain aspects of my research by nature of my status as a single white female who, whilst Maltese, was not considered to be “pure Maltese.” This placed me in the position of not quite being a part of the Maltese people in Marsa, and being unable to properly socialize with the African men as well. I was often referred to as ‘*L-Ingliża*’ (the English girl), as that was where I was often presumed to be from. Although my friendships with my informants opened up quite a few doors for my fieldwork, it also became emotionally draining at times, and occasionally traumatic. The regular emotionally charged abuse and violence which had become so commonplace amongst a few of them affected me greatly, and threatened to pull me into a very dark place as well. I regularly needed to distance myself from the situations I found myself in for my own wellbeing, and I eventually moved out of Marsa in July 2012.

In August 2012, Dom Mintoff passed away at the age of 96. This triggered divided reactions of jubilation and devastation in people, assuring that Mintoff was to remain a controversial figure even in death. Although I did not live in Marsa at this time, I had made a point of visiting my informants every once in a while. On the day of Mintoff’s state funeral, a cortege was scheduled to pay tribute to his past and pass through the towns which were landmarks of his working life. These primarily consisted of the harbour towns, and Marsa was one of the scheduled stops along the route. Marsa residents lined the streets of the route, following the funeral service on television and anticipating the precise moment of his arrival. I was not prepared for the intense outpouring of emotion which I witnessed from my informants that day. Tears flowed steadily, and every person I observed appeared distraught and inconsolable, mourning the loss of a person who to them was akin to a father figure (and who has in fact been dubbed ‘the father of modern Malta’ by supporters of the Labour Party). Once the hearse arrived, the crowd flocked

around the car, pressing the windows to try and be as close as possible to him, and screaming "*Grazzi Perit!*" ["Thank you, Perit"]. The driver of the car stopped, and went to open the back of the hearse for a short while, allowing some of the crowd to get even closer and kiss the coffin. When the procession eventually resumed, Mintoff was met with great applause by all along the route, in a show of appreciation and gratitude for the man who had so vehemently fought for their cause, and worked to alleviate the plight of the poor. Although many in Malta did not share this sentiment, the dignity of the event was ultimately respected for the most part.

The children of Marsa, although having no direct recollection or experience of Mintoff's policies (nor did I, for that matter), also spoke of Mintoff fondly, as indeed they did the present Labour Leader Joseph Muscat. They did not attempt to hide their contempt for members of the governing Nationalist Party at the time, and they occasionally asked me who I chose to give my vote to, in attempting to ascertain whether I was loyal to one political party over another³⁹. It is not uncommon for Maltese children to become heavily involved in politics from a young age, attending mass meetings with their parents and showering praise over the leaders of what they consider to be 'their' party, whilst speaking with disdain of their political opponents. In Marsa, the vast majority of residents were staunch Labour supporters, a following which many of the children also came to embrace as another facet of shared experience. It is one which indirectly united them as children coming from working class families, and thus forming part of a shared history and idea of what it is to be working class. I further explore this idea in the next chapter.

³⁹ Although I remained non-committal in my response, my informants largely presumed me to possess Nationalist sympathies, given my association with a locality which was a Nationalist stronghold.

Chapter 3: Ideas of Social Class

“The people in Marsa are workers, there are many families and they really love the family... that is the culture of people here. Many of them earn money to eat. There aren’t many rich people. They’re very busy and they love the family [...] Sometimes I see that they have a certain inferiority complex compared to other places.”

Marsa Mayor, 12th June 2012

The previous chapter provided a brief outline of the socio-historical context in which the following ethnographic account in this thesis is to be situated. A firm grounding in the social and political history of class structures is a necessary prerequisite in understanding everyday notions of class in Malta as they are manifested today. Ideas of class are necessarily socially constructed, arising through historical structures and power relations, and invested with meaning in intersubjective relations with one another. In this chapter, I aim to explore states of affect and abjection as they are manifested in ideas of class within my particular ethnographic context. I also found myself concerned at how class positions often come to be reproduced to some degree, in spite of measures to reduce social inequalities and increase access to opportunities for social mobility. A sense of belonging to a particular social class is often held to possess different repercussions for the aspirations which individuals consider realistically achievable for them (Kusserow 2004; Froerer 2012), in a manner which, although not deterministic, hold a strong potential of steering individuals towards a particular set of outcomes over others. This shall be discussed in further detail later in the chapter. First, a firmer grasp of the socio-historical context is needed.

The Worker’s Movement

Over the years, as the previous chapter demonstrated, Marsa emerged as a natural extension to the Grand harbour, being exploited as an industrial area largely by virtue of

its geographical location as a natural port. Under British rule, manual labourers settled in the harbour towns, and having limited access to free education, were mostly illiterate and Maltese-speaking. The professional and commercial classes, on the other hand, largely moved away from the industrial areas, and settled in suburbs north of the Grand Harbour. Once Dom Mintoff emerged as a political leader in the 1950s, dominating the Maltese political scene for decades to come, he sought to address many of the structural inequalities which he felt placed the working classes at a disadvantage. His political party declared themselves to represent the 'Worker's Movement,' and worked to serve the interests of the working classes. Workers at the dockyards, many of whom lived within the harbour towns, formed the backbone of this movement, officially manifesting itself in the formation and partnership of the modern Malta Labour Party and the General Workers Union. The geographical area in itself has been referred to as the "cradle of the Maltese Worker's Movement" (Zammit 1984). Zammit (1984: 7), a Maltese sociologist, makes reference to a "fatalistic feeling of powerlessness" which dominated Maltese sentiment following years of colonial rule, and which he claims ultimately gave rise to a working class movement borne out of years of exploitation and alienation, and led by a charismatic leader. Zammit goes on to make reference to the drydocks, in which he claimed that "nowhere else in Malta had the local condition of powerlessness been more evident than in this leading industry where, under the admiralty, no Maltese could ever occupy any post above that of local supervisor, regardless of ability" (1984: 42). From this statement, Zammit presumably excludes the pro-English middle class of educated Maltese he refers to earlier in his text, who were predominantly English-speaking, and had mostly settled into the suburbs north of the harbour. This newly emerged middle class is described as having been socialized in the British style of government whilst developing pro-British loyalties, leading to them being successful in claiming higher administrative posts under the British.

Language, having become the source of much political tension over the years, also became a distinguishing factor of social class⁴⁰, and contributed to rival political interests.

⁴⁰ For further works on the relationship between language and class, see Lawton 1968; Macaulay 1976; Collins 1988; Sciriha 1994; Spencer, Clegg & Stackhouse 2013.

Whilst the English language granted access to social mobility under the British, the Maltese language (largely functioning as the language of the uneducated masses in the past and looked down upon by the upper classes as such), amongst its speakers became a “positive national rallying symbol through which what is typically Maltese can find its expression⁴¹” (Zammit 1984: 13). Another aspect of note is the networks of patronage, long established in Malta, and arguably still in place today. Systems of patronage emerged as a response to limited economic resources, and often worked to benefit a privileged minority whose capital enabled them to secure necessary resources for themselves. Such a system, predicated on ideas of status and prestige further tended to place workers at a disadvantage, having limited means with which to compete for necessary economic resources for themselves.

Dom Mintoff, himself emerging from humble beginnings in the harbour area and whose own father worked as a cook in the Royal Navy, sought to eradicate these inequalities, and place Maltese workers (largely exemplified in the industrial workers at the dockyards) on equal footing. He took measures to narrow differences in income and raise the esteem of humble manual work which he felt had long been exploited, providing equal opportunities for all whilst removing privileges previously held by the elite and middle classes. These included boosting local production whilst imposing stricter controls on imports, on which a number of local commercial businesses were based, and lowering the wages of executive and managerial class workers to match those in the public sector, whilst granting a flat rate for annual cost of living increases (Cutajar 2009). These measures (amongst others) ensured that Mintoff’s reign was marked by a great divide and a significant amount of social and political upheaval, in which polarized parties held decidedly different interests. By virtue of Mintoff’s efforts, drydock workers transformed into the protagonists and leaders of the Worker’s Movement, who in turn felt empowered by their charismatic leader and rallied behind him, granting him unquestioning loyalty. In working towards economic independence, Mintoff stressed that Malta would be a republic that was based on work – the only European nation built by

⁴¹ This provides a potential explanation to what it means to be a ‘pure Maltese’ – an idea connoting a greater connection to the land than those with foreign/colonial ties.

the working class - whilst others were founded by the bourgeoisie⁴². The Maltese workers, following centuries of subservience to colonial powers, emerged as (occasionally militant) political activists who demonstrated national pride in their status as workers. Resort to violence was sanctioned as a viable form of protest, particularly in objection to working conditions and wages at the drydocks⁴³, and were regarded a necessary recourse in order to secure rights which were otherwise denied to them, seizing power which had eluded them for centuries. Mintoff underlined that where necessary, workers may need to resort to “violent action to secure their rights... the time had come when the [Malta Labour Party] needed not only to fight but to throw its own martyrs into the arena, as other nations had done, who would be prepared to die for their ideals.”⁴⁴

Much of Mintoff’s discourse indirectly highlighted a polarization between the bourgeoisie and the working class, which his socialist policies attempted to obliterate, but which in effect were contradictorily emphasized and made self-evident. His role as champion for the poor and the hard-pressed earned him uncompromising devotion from his followers, whose living conditions flourished under his form of Government, at the expense of the privileges which many of the elite and middle classes had come to enjoy. A division between the strata in Maltese society, and the assumption of accompanying inferiority or superiority respectively, was often alluded to in Mintoff’s rhetoric, as Zammit (1984: 63) further highlighted:

“...there is one aspect of class differences which Mintoff is especially determined to eradicate, namely, that of snobbishness and similar forms of social exclusiveness which are still noticeable in Malta. On these matters he uses very strong language as they seem to carry for him an added

⁴² Speech on 28/4/1979, Blata l-Bajda Mass Meeting, *L-Orizzont* (Leading Labour Party newspaper), cited in Zammit, E. (1984) *A colonial inheritance: Maltese perceptions of work, power, and class structure with reference to the Labour Movement*. Malta: Malta University Press

⁴³ E. Zammit recounts one extreme example when the British Government announced its decision to hand over the dockyards to a shipbuilding firm from South Wales. On the 28th April 1958, violent confrontations arose between the workers behind the MLP and GWU, and the police who worked under the instructions of the British Governor of Malta. Fires were started everywhere, and tear gas was subsequently administered in a vain attempt to control the rioting workers who were devastating the offices.

⁴⁴ Mintoff’s address to the MLP conference on the 11th May 1952.

emotional significance. In fact, these aspects seem to lie at the root of his simple division of Maltese society into the rich and the workers.”

The polarization of two distinct social classes underlay much of Mintoff’s political discourse in the latter half of the 20th century, despite his stated aim of working towards national social cohesion grounded in ideas of work. Social divisions consequently emerged in which individuals were either considered amongst the rich ‘*sinjuri*’ or the Maltese workers, often made evident in their political faction leanings. Such ‘us and them’ understandings of social class, whilst abating somewhat in recent decades, remain present to a degree today. Although arguably, Mintoff was unsuccessful in completely eradicating class differences (if such can even be said to be possible), he was certainly successful in narrowing the gap between existing social inequalities prevalent at the time, by increasing access to education and introducing numerous social services. As the social status of the workers increased, many residents of the harbour towns came to proudly identify themselves as part of a down-to earth, humble, yet tough and resilient working class, in contrast to what they considered to be a snobbish upper class which possessed false assumptions of superiority. These ideas are to some extent driven by social and political memory, and persist in the generation of popular notions of social hierarchy to this day.

Remaining firmly and historically contextualized, particular ideas of social class have thus surfaced which are specific to Malta. Sultana (1994) and Baldacchino (1993) posit that the Maltese islands have their own pattern of structured inequalities, owing largely to their small size, past colonial relations, systems of patronage, and geographic location, amongst other aspects. These qualities are held to dub Maltese stratification systems with particular nuances that are not to be found elsewhere (although Sultana holds that there remains no general consensus as to whether class relations prevail at all in Malta, claiming a response either way to be subjective).

Marsa, in its geographical location as the innermost harbour town was ultimately drawn in to the overall industrialization (and subsequent degeneration) of the area, and a number of its residents, gave strong political backing to the Worker's Movement. Some worked at the dockyards⁴⁵, whilst others engaged in other forms of manual and non-manual work. The illiteracy, lack of education, and limited opportunities for social mobility persistent in the area, along with the poverty and slums which characterized the social space, drew many of the people of Marsa into Mintoff's audience in the years following the Second World War (the town remaining a Labour stronghold to this day), where they were socially mobilized and rallied into anger at the inequalities which had culminated in their years of alienation at the hands of colonial rulers and a privileged minority. Such structural inequalities, inasmuch as they sought to eradicate them, also provided the drive and basis upon which the workers largely identified themselves as forming part of this movement. It arguably united them in a similar world-view, in which the professional middle classes were assumed to impose a status of inferiority upon the workers, particularly those engaged in manual waged labour.

Some Theoretical Approaches to Class

Before proceeding any further, it is useful to ask what is meant by the often taken-for-granted idea of 'class' in itself, and to unpack the implications of this loaded concept. The theoretical concept of class in itself is one that is particularly problematic to define, referring in part to symbolic hierarchical systems in which social inequalities manifest themselves. Class is often taken to refer to a form of social stratification (Marx & Engels 1848; Weber 1947), although postmodernist approaches in Anthropology would hold that class either does not exist (see Alaine Touraine 1995), or is loaded with too much cultural bias to be capable of making a valid contribution (see Layton 1997). Arguably, if ideas of social class were rendered invalid, it would be impossible to refer to concepts such as poverty, prosperity, and social mobility. Insofar as the latter persist, structural inequalities

⁴⁵ The dockyards became privatised in 2010 and the shipyards handed over to an Italian operator, with many Maltese workers emotionally leaving what had been their workplace for decades, and being transferred to other forms of Government employment.

and notions of social hierarchy still persevere and should be deemed worthy of exploration.

Amongst the social theorists who have engaged with ideas of class and formulated analyses of the concept, the Marxist tradition places emphasis on the political functions of these symbolic systems of hierarchy, particularly in terms of how they perpetuate in order to serve the economic interests of the dominant classes. This is accomplished by means of an exploitative relationship with the proletariat, in whose interest it is to struggle together against the capitalist class (see Marx & Engels 1848). It is tempting to lean towards a Marxist analysis in a consideration of Malta's socio-political history, as Mintoff's rhetoric is held by many to lend itself to a Marxist approach, particularly his aim to eradicate class differences. The Catholic Church indeed held fears at the time that Mintoff's socialism would be a stepping stone to communism. Sultana (1994) however, finds himself in agreement with the conclusions of Zammit (1984), Vassallo (1985) and Vella (1989), all of whom deny the presence of a radical class consciousness in Malta and "conclude that class struggle in the Marxist sense is either absent or incorporated within a welfare state approach" (1994: 38). Sultana cites Vella's (1989) argument that due to the relatively late development of industry in Malta and lack of opportunity to create a 'class-for-itself' in the Marxist sense, feudal relations of production persisted, whereby rich landowners (including the Church) extracted feudal rent from peasants.

Whilst a Marxist analysis provides a useful framework with which to think about ethnographic material, it remains focused on the role of economic modes of production in the formation of social classes, and has been accused of deterministic evolutionism whereby class consciousness and struggle is seen as an inevitable outcome of phases of capitalist oppression. It has become necessary to move beyond a sole focus on modes of production and economic relationships to one another in a consideration of social class. A Weberian analysis (see Weber 1947) extends beyond a focus on modes of production, speaking of economic position as just one inevitable aspect of social stratification, not to supersede ideas of social status, power and prestige. Power relations in the Weberian

sense are thus played out on various levels, and are not exclusive to the economic realm. Class struggle is thus seen as another version of an inevitable struggle for power, whereby occupational groups develop similar lifestyles and compete with one another for better life chances.

Both the approaches of Marx and Weber (amongst others) intellectually influenced the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and it is with the work of Bourdieu that I shall primarily engage in formulating an understanding of social class as I believe it to apply in Marsa. I do this principally due to Bourdieu's consideration of a broad range of class practices, regarding class in itself as a social practice and activity in which categorisation, objective structures, dispositions, and social choice combine, in addition to the more familiar notions of economy and occupation. Bourdieu's view moves beyond Marx's focus on economism, and expands on Weber's ideas (without reducing class to an account of lifestyles), all the while incorporating important influences from the two. I hold that, whilst not entirely unproblematic, his theory of practice is a useful way of thinking about class, without reducing the concept to the sum of its parts.

Bourdieu and Class Reproduction

In attempting to construct a theory of practice, Bourdieu (1977) emphasizes a dialectical relationship between structure and agency, underlining a fundamental need to move beyond an artificial binary opposition between objective structures and subjective representations. Bourdieu introduces the notion of habitus as a means of mediating between the two, the notion in itself referring to a set of dispositions, which come about in the constant interplay between individual practice and external social structures. Dispositions are acquired according to one's social position within a field and subsequent adjustment to it. The habitus is put across as a dynamic and flexible concept, modifying itself as one's social position within the field changes. Bourdieu claims that the habitus in turn is also constitutive, capable of transforming and being transformed by the two concepts it holds to mediate between (that is, structure and agency). It is by means of the

habitus that a person is said to generate an understanding of the world and form relationships with one another, potentially forming the basis of a shared class consciousness based on occupying similar positions within the field. In Bourdieu's theory of practice, objective structures become embodied within the habitus, which in turn provides the ground for social action within a somewhat limited range of potential choice for action. Such limitations, along with Bourdieu's claim that the practices generated often tend to reproduce the original objective conditions, has led to Bourdieu being charged with an overly deterministic approach (Jenkins 1992; Giroux 1982; Willis 1983; amongst others). This is refuted by Bourdieu's followers, who emphasize that habitus is intended as a mediating construct, rather than a determining one. Furthermore, they hold that an understanding of Bourdieu's concept of 'strategy' within the field overcomes any attempt to reduce Bourdieu's work to a simplistic reproductionist approach (Mahar et. al. 1990).

In addition to the concept of habitus, Bourdieu also makes reference to the 'field,' which is the other main conceptual tool utilized in his theory of practice, as the site in which individuals struggle for various forms of capital in improving their position within their particular field. Bourdieu (1997) claims that "capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, on certain conditions, into economic capital and can be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations ('connections'), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized on the form of a title of nobility" (Bourdieu 1997: 47). As Mahar et. Al (1990: 11) note, Bourdieu "likens the field to a game (as a site of struggle and strategy) with the trump cards being habitus [...] and capital. Both of these concepts define for the participants the possibilities inherent in the field." Habitus and capital thus come to define for the individual person the realm of opportunities which they consider to be realistically available to them, regardless of far-ranging access to services presumed to grant individuals with the tools for accumulating more capital (and becoming socially mobile). There is a direct relationship between habitus, field, and

capital. Dominant groups often set the agenda for the kinds of capital which are to be valued, and possession of the wrong forms of capital, or of limited capital in the first place, subsequently plays a part in the reproduction of social disadvantages. Status and prestige is accordingly conferred on those who possess the appropriate capital and, continuing with the argument of Mahar et. al (1990: 13):

To be seen as a person or class of status and prestige, is to be accepted as legitimate and sometimes as a legitimate authority. Such a position carries with it a power to name (activities, groups) the power to represent commonsense and above all the power to create the 'official version of the social world.'

The power to create the official version of the world, as it is put forward here, also grants with it a power to constitute the social boundary which is the object, significantly protecting and distancing the individual and collective self from it and delineating the social world accordingly. This is only possible inasmuch as a person's capital is accepted as legitimate. Within this chapter, capital is regarded in its broadest sense, as Bourdieu intended, incorporating both its objectified, embodied, and institutionalized forms. A person's demeanour, eloquence, bodily dispositions, education qualifications, money, property, and forms of language constitute various forms of capital, all of which in turn become incorporated within the habitus and contribute towards improving an individual's position within the field. The lack of appropriate capital however, particularly as legitimized by the dominant group, is held by Bourdieu to contribute to the reproduction of existing social disadvantages, given that capital possesses a transmissive quality, which allows certain forms of it to be inherited and provide advantages to some over others. In this respect, children may often come to occupy similar positions within the field as that held by their parents.

Bourdieu's contribution to ideas of class reproduction (specifically with regards to Education) shall be explored in further detail in the next chapter, along with other contributors to the social reproduction debate (such as Willis 1977; MacLeod 1987; Evans

2007). For the time being, it is useful to engage with Bourdieu's theory of practice, as well as forms of capital and strategy, in order to better understand ideas of social stratification in Malta, and how this relates to my fieldwork site in particular. Bourdieu holds that coalitions and social groups tend to be formed by people who occupy similar positions in social space, ultimately being united by virtue of their shared experience of similar objective conditions. That said, class is neither to be considered as hinging entirely on objective conditions, nor does it exist solely in the form of subjective consciousness. For Bourdieu, class exists in a dialectic between the two (a balance which his works do not always adequately reflect, as he occasionally appears to veer from one extreme to another). His idea of 'class habitus' effectively mediates between the two extremes, attributing similar value towards practices and objects in the field. It is fair to assume that, in attributing these values and forming social groups, certain ideas of 'us and them' begin to emerge (as indeed was made evident in the Mintoffian era). That is, by nature of their proximity and similar objective conditions within the social world, individuals come to assume shared experience and possession of a similar set of dispositions, to the exclusion (to some degree) of those perceived to occupy a more distant position within the external social world, who are thus conferred a status of (potentially abject) 'otherness.'

Social Demarcations of Distinction in Malta

Despite the small size of the country, some Maltese towns and villages located only a few kilometres apart are held to be very different from one another, and this was certainly the case with regards to the town in which I grew up (Swieqi) and the town in which I conducted my fieldwork (Marsa).

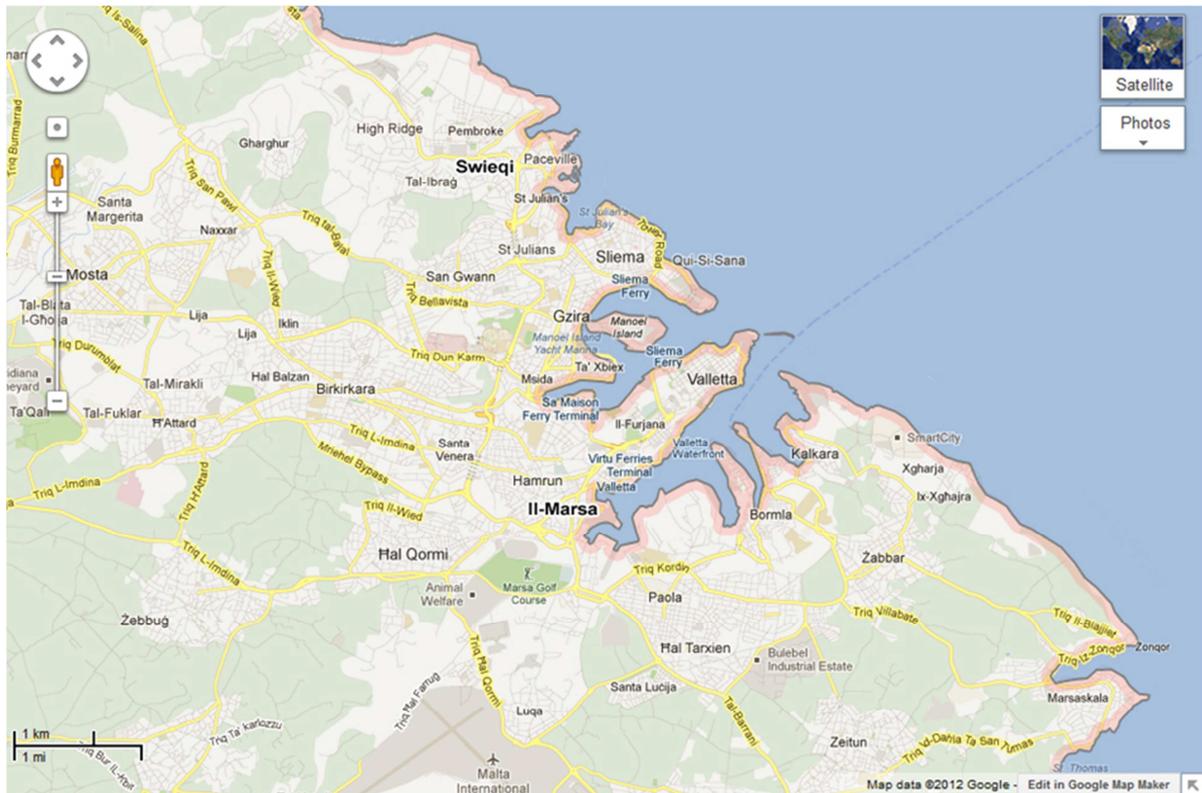


Fig 4 – Map indicating the towns surrounding the harbour area

As this chapter and the preceding one have already outlined, over the years a certain divide has developed between the northern and southern sides of the harbour in terms of socio-economic status, with more affluent and professional middle and upper class families residing in towns by the northern side of the harbour, whilst the southern part of the harbour is made up of predominantly working class families (see Chapter 2). Arguably, Valletta acts as the divider between the north and south of Malta, as those who describe themselves as coming from ‘the south’ generally come from towns or villages which are south of Valletta. Coming from the south is generally linked with ideas of great national and working class pride (being fostered to a great degree during Mintoff’s Labour movement) and being somewhat ‘rough’⁴⁶, given the industrial role which the south of Malta has played over the years as a location for the dockyards, industrial estates, and factories. People coming from the south are far more likely to speak in Maltese and consider themselves ‘pure Maltese’, in the way that the preceding chapter already

⁴⁶ The term ‘rough’ is indigenous, my usage of it throughout this thesis directly reflecting the way in which it was adopted in Marsa.

explained. Those hailing from towns and villages in the North may be more likely to speak in English (particularly the towns which are just north of the harbour, such as Sliema, Swieqi, St Julians, and Ta' L-Ibragg), and they would also be more likely to stress their identity as Europeans, rather than as Maltese⁴⁷. An individual's choice of language in Malta has significant repercussions in their relationships with others, and this has been noted elsewhere:

In a bilingual country where English has hierarchical connotations and Maltese egalitarian ones, choosing to speak English rather than Maltese, sprinkling one's Maltese with English words, or insisting on speaking Maltese when English would be more conventional, affects personal and social relationships.

[Fsadni 1993: 337]

The present educational system in Malta is one that allows schools flexibility in terms of their language of instruction. Very often however, private schools (frequented by children from fee-paying middle and upper class families) conduct lessons in English, whilst State schools (providing free education and thus more likely to be frequented by children of working class families) adopt the Maltese language in the classroom. Church schools, on the other hand, tend to vary in terms of their language of instruction and the class position of its students, often according to their socio-geographical location. My own entry into Marsa was initially marked by recognition of the fact that Maltese was not my first language, having been raised to speak English exclusively, both in the home and at the Church primary and secondary school I attended. Once my lack of fluency and accuracy in the Maltese language was picked up on, it became easy for my informants to deduce other aspects of my socio-economic background:

The mothers asked me whether I was Maltese, and they asked whether at least my grandparents were English, since I looked and sounded very English to them by way of my complexion and accent. One of the women then asked me "Do you come from Sliema?" and I answered "Close to

⁴⁷ *'Maltese more 'European' than the continentals,'* Times of Malta, Friday 7th September 2012. <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20120907/local/Maltese-more-European-than-the-continentals.435927>

it.” When I said that, she looked happy and proud that she had figured me out, telling the other women “Listen to her accent!” She added “You’re *tal-pepè* then! I noticed straight away.” She was laughing all the while.

[Fieldnotes, Thursday 3rd March 2011]

The term ‘*tal-pepè*’ conveys a degree of snobbery, with the presumption that those who are ‘*tal-pepè*’⁴⁸ automatically look down at those who are not. They are also at times referred to as ‘*puliti*’ (polite people), ‘*sinjuri*’ (rich people), and ‘*kesħin*’ (show offs), depending on the situational context. They are far more likely to have been raised in the elite suburbs north of the harbour, predominantly speak in English or pepper their Maltese with English words, and have received a church or private school education. I was guilty of all three. Knowledge of these jarring notes, triggered by the tell-tale sign of my accent, led to assumptions of the set of dispositions I might possess, having occupied a very different position in the social field to them, and having arrived by means of a different route – what Bourdieu terms as ‘trajectory’ (Bourdieu 1984). With the understanding that objective structures do indeed become embodied within the habitus, the social conditions of my upbringing were presumed to have endowed me with a fair degree of snobbery and a false sense of superiority, as demonstrated here:

Ms Aquilina thought that I was English, and she asked me where I am from. She then guessed that I was from Sliema, and I answered that I was from St Julians. Polly said teasingly “*imnieħerha mxammar*” (her nose is stuck in the air).

[Fieldnotes, Thursday 17th November 2011]

⁴⁸ Defined as “a.inv. word used in certain idioms with a pejorative sense meaning ‘dandyism, affectation,’ snobbism.” Aquilina, J. (2006). Armstrong & Mitchell (2001: 146) offer other connotations of the term, whereby in addition to meaning ‘snooty’ and ‘stuck up,’ ‘*tal-pepè*’ also has phallic connotations, but also derives from ‘*tal-Papa*’, meaning ‘of the Pope’. Armstrong & Mitchell (2001: 146) go on to explain that the term is popularly applied to the Sliema bourgeoisie, in expressing that the Sliemese “are both too closely associated with religious authority, and therefore somewhat unworldly and naïve, and sexually and morally suspect” (implying that they are depraved behind the veneer of their respectability).

Similarly, the positions which many in Marsa occupied in the social field (relative to my own) often led to a presumption that the conditions of their social and material world precluded a higher position in the social hierarchy:

I was having tea at Rita's bar in the morning, on my way to school. A man soon passed by, and he asked Rita for a glass of tea, calling her "*sinjura*". Rita answered "My name is Rita. If I were a '*sinjura*' I wouldn't be working here!" The man joked and answered back "Maybe you'll win the Super 5 lottery."

[Fieldnotes, Friday 13th April 2012]

During my fieldwork, I came to establish a number of friendships in Marsa, and any allusion to my snobbery was always done in jest. This was not so much the case at the beginning of fieldwork, when some of my informants were reluctant to speak to me. When I confessed to Shania (Rita's daughter) that I had been nervous about moving to Marsa, fearing that many would simply think of me as '*tal-pepè*,' Shania admitted that her first reaction upon hearing of my impending move was to ask why on earth a person from Swieqi would be interested in coming to live in a place like Marsa. The worldview that I was presumed to have was initially considered incompatible with those adopted by people in Marsa, whose social positions in the field lie in greater proximity to one another. This gives rise to a sense of shared experiences and similar dispositions amongst those occupying the same social space, as well as the presumption that many of these would have eluded me in my status of 'otherness,' granted to me by way of my trajectory and the adjustments I was assumed to have made to my social position north of the harbour. Aside from a presumption of snobbery, a person who is '*tal-pepè*' is also presumed to be more composed, dress impeccably, and possess greater status, prestige, and knowledge of formal etiquette and mannerisms (all of which would fall into what Bourdieu refers to as symbolic or cultural capital, and entail dispositions which are derided in Marsa). This is demonstrated clearly in the following extract:

At this point Joey came in, and he was dressed quite smartly in formal trousers, along with a shirt and vest. I asked Joey if he had been to work, and he told me no, telling me that he had stopped working ages ago. I said that that was also the impression that I was under, adding that he was

dressed “pulit” today. At that, some of the people in the bar began teasing him and telling him that he was like someone who came from ‘tas-Sliema.’ I laughed along and jokingly pretended to get offended at the insinuation of that as an insult. Rita said “Aahh I forgot, that’s where you’re from!” Joey told me that they had an expression for those who came from there – “pipi irqiqa” (thin urine). I asked Joey to explain it to me, and he said that when people from Sliema urinate, it is done very discreetly and delicately, with barely a sound. Rita laughed and said that by contrast, when they did it, it was “whoooosh!” (She mimed a violent waterfall).

[Fieldnotes, Wednesday 23rd November 2011]

This vignette serves to highlight a number of presumptions of what it is to be ‘*tal-pepè*,’ and subsequently what it means to be the opposite of that, a ‘*ħamallu*’⁴⁹. The latter is a term which is often used by those who are ‘*tal-pepè*’ to refer to people who come from the south, and who solely speak in Maltese and come from a working class background. Moreover, the term ‘*ħamalli*’ is generally used to refer to people who speak and/or conduct themselves in a vulgar and crass way, expounding a complete lack of social graces. People in Marsa often used it to speak about themselves, or to insult others when they were being particularly rude. In the above extract, patrons of the bar clearly associated dressing smartly with coming from Sliema, and this in itself was a fact worthy of derision. Joey continued speaking with me in a spirit of jest, and told me that people who were ‘*tal-pepè*’ had thin urine. This expression was utilized to imply that those who were ‘*tal-pepè*’ placed greater importance on having control and restraint of their bodies, in being able to disguise the unpalatable sound of bodily functions and thus cultivate an air of respectability. Rita, on the other hand, emphasized that those in Marsa did not place any importance on such things, and were very open with their bodies by contrast. Excessive composure and control of one’s body was mainly considered to belong to the realm of the pretentious upper class, as Shania’s telling comment reveals here:

When Ronald began eating his sandwich in the bar, he began to make a mess. Shania told him to watch how he ate, telling him “I know that we’re in Marsa, but still...” Peppi mumbled something in the corner, and Shania told him “Sharon is from there.” Shania then added that the people from

⁴⁹Defined as “1. a.m. (*f. ħamalla, pl. ħamalli*) low class, vulgar. 2. N.m. (*pl. ħamalli*) vulgarian (A person who lacks good taste and sophistication). *ħammallaġni* n.f. vulgar low class behaviour, words, etc.” Aquilina, J. (2006).

Sliema “say that those who come from Marsa are ignorant and savages.” Peppi then said “there are genuine people here.”

[Fieldnotes; Friday 19th October 2012]

My informants, particularly those who frequented *Ta' Ċikku*, demonstrated acute awareness of ways in which they were referred to in abject terms, and hinted at their states of internalized affect, as the above vignette also illustrates. They also became confident that I would not apply such terms to them, which subsequently further gained their trust. The way that I joked with my informants, as well as my willingness to be friendly and socialize with them on a regular basis, thus led to me being somewhat of an exception to the idea of snobbery attributed to those with a similar socio-economic background to mine, who were thought to inflict abjectness upon people in the South. The latter in turn developed appropriate strategies to appear unperturbed by this and to shift the abject in another direction, as later chapters shall demonstrate.

Valued 'Roughness'

My informants in Marsa conversely tended to place value upon different forms of capital, some of which were embodied in a friendly and open disposition. Such qualities were integral to being considered a good person in Marsa. However, they were also coupled with a need to develop a certain ‘roughness’⁵⁰, valued as a form of embodied cultural capital which signalled an individual’s ability to endure potential difficulties which may arise from living within a harsh masculine environment. A sense of masculinity and toughness pervaded the social conditions in Marsa, and children were both implicitly and explicitly made to internalize these objective structures accordingly, hardening the self because of, and in response to, potentially harsh social conditions. Kusserow (2004) would claim that individuals in Marsa were unconsciously and informally socialized into a protective hard style of individualism, going through life with a sense of tough resilience,

⁵⁰ A reputation for being rough (and for placing value on qualities of toughness) was also evident in other Maltese harbour towns, particularly those considered to be somewhat ‘low status’. Mitchell (1998a) illustrates this in relation to Valletta’s ‘low-town’ in the 1990s, specifically in relation to an area known as *L-Arcipierku*, the centre of which had been demolished just a few decades prior.

these qualities being elements of class habitus which are mistakenly recognized as individual character traits. Rita, a significantly burly woman who showed much kindness and yet joked vulgarly with patrons and swore profusely in almost every discussion and argument, frequently showed me her built and muscular arms and hands, proudly telling me that they looked as though they belonged to a man. Her harsh upbringing and the demanding physical labour required of her was inscribed on her body and incorporated within her habitus, as she further internalized and embodied masculine dispositions which were necessary in order for her to continue working in such a male-dominated environment. Tea was served in glass tumblers, both a cheap and humble option for local working class bars such as *Ta' Ćikku*, and an option which excluded the possibility of being grasped by hands which were overly delicate or sensitive to heat. A hardening of the self was a necessary prerequisite in living within such a boisterous and macho climate, and these objective conditions were often subsequently embodied within the habitus, which in turn influenced and reinforced existing external structures. In this respect, "bodies would have every likelihood of receiving a value strictly corresponding to the positions of their owners in the distribution of the other fundamental properties" (Bourdieu 1984: 191).

Rita frequently shared her concern with me that her 8 year old son Ronald was not 'rough,' and this was translated into a fear of him being bullied and pushed around by other children more capable of asserting their dominance than him, due to their effective generation of the required dispositions for living in Marsa. Rita (as well as most of the mothers I met during fieldwork) instructed their children not to hit or punch anyone, but added that upon receiving a punch themselves, they should then reciprocate and deal ten blows for every one hit they would have received. Children in Marsa lived in a social world where the *potential* for physical and emotional violence permeated the social sphere, in an environment which was highly charged with masculine features and where discussions were quick to become heated and incendiary. Possession of a quick wit and a sharp tongue, coupled with a general demeanour of toughness was highly prized. The internalized ability to effectively address this potential for danger and ward off possible attacks or counter-attacks with an effective rebuttal was a coveted quality which

commanded respect, although it jarred with the dispositions of comportment and self-discipline which the children were expected to possess at school. It was embodied in internalized dispositions of 'roughness', which implicitly communicated that a person was more than capable of defending themselves against the harsh realities of their social world.

Whilst the objective conditions surrounding a person's position in the social field was understood to be more likely to generate a certain set of dispositions over others, these were not considered to be fixed, but rather seen as the most likely possibility out of a range of others. Furthermore, despite being further inclined to some actions over others, my informants emphasized the importance of adjusting to circumstances, and tailoring your response to the dispositions you presume others to have based on their social position. Rita proudly professed to me that whilst she was a *hamalla* in her everyday life, she was also capable of speaking with politeness ('*bil-pulit*') when the occasion so called for it. Her daughter Shania expressed the same thing to me:

Shania and I began speaking about her job in Sliema⁵¹ and the '*puliti*' who used to go to her. Shania told me that there were people over there who were like her, and who she could speak to and so on, and there were others who were very friendly. However, Shania gave me an example of this one woman who came to order an ice cream, and when Shania asked her which flavour she wanted, the woman got a phone call and held her finger up for Shania to wait. In the meantime a little boy (who Shania described as being "one of us") came up to her, and Shania asked him "what would you like, handsome?" She served him and spoke to him, and the other woman seemed annoyed by this. Shania spoke of the distinction in the way in which you have to speak to the '*puliti*' and the way that you speak to "people like us."

[Fieldnotes, Tuesday 6th December 2011]

The aforementioned terms, whilst linked to a person's objective conditions within the social world, are also subjective, and may be directed to someone by way of criticism over

⁵¹ At the beginning of fieldwork, Shania worked at an ice cream van parked in the middle of Sliema. She later began working at her mother's bar in the winter months, once the weather turned colder.

some aspect of their behaviour. They hold implicit hierarchical connotations, with members of the upper classes referred to as *'għoli'* (high in status and prestige) whilst a person conducting himself in the most obscene and vulgar manner would be referred to as a *'ħamallu baxx'* (*'baxx'* meaning 'low').

Ideas of Social Mobility

The hierarchical connotations lying at the heart of these terms makes it worthwhile to consider ideas of social mobility and aspiration (though the latter will be explored more thoroughly in the following two chapters), and the possibility of moving up or down in the perceived social hierarchy. Within my closest family of informants, Rita and her daughter Shania both worked at a shabby and somewhat rough bar in the centre of Marsa, both having been raised for the most part on Racecourse Street. Rita's sister and Shania's aunt (who was only a few years older than Shania herself), Brittney, was raised in the same house, but conducted herself in a very different manner. She worked as a cashier in a café slightly north of the harbour, and was taking evening classes in order to gain a few qualifications and possibly a promotion at work. Whilst her efforts in furthering her education and work opportunities were commended, the haughty dispositions which she was accused of having developed in the process of accumulating these forms of cultural capital were very much derided, and taken to be marred with a degree of falsity:

Shania: [My aunt] shows off too much. She was raised [in racecourse street] with mum... My mum shouts at me and calls me a show off. I am more rough and savage than [my aunt] is, and then mum asks me what I have against my aunt. I have nothing against her, but she shows off too much. She wants her own glass which is hers, and her own teaspoon. Even when she speaks, you notice it! But then mum will call *me* a show off in front of other people. Even to come in to the bar, she will say "my sister is coming." Is she a sister? She should say "*għejja oħti*"⁵² and not "my sister is coming." I don't have anything against those who speak in English, but my mum tries to be *'pulita'* when she is with her sister. And I can't stand that about my mum, and that's why I don't get along with her very well. My aunt is like that, and when my mum is with her she changes and throws in some English words and so on. And I don't know my mum that way, I want her to be normal...

⁵² "My sister is coming" in Maltese.

Anyway, mum expects me to be like her and to show off in this way, with all this extra *nejk*⁵³. If someone speaks to me in English I will speak to them in English – like if someone who is *'pulit'* comes. Not you, but in the beginning I was *'pulita'* with you.

Sharon: With me?

Shania: Not *'pulita,'* but I would be careful about how I spoke. Now I'm used to you though. But you're not like my aunt, who was raised like us amongst the horse shit, and you don't come with all of this extra *'nejk,'* and she doesn't want me to continue joking with her. You've gotten used to me and my character now. People like that bother me though.

[Interview with Shania, 25th April 2012]

Shania often expressed frustration at what she felt to be her aunt putting on airs and graces, which she claimed were unjustified given that she had been raised near the “horse shit” in similar circumstances as the rest of their family. Brittney clearly aspired towards further accomplishments educationally and professionally, however the bone of contention appeared to revolve around her simultaneous adoption of mannerisms and dispositions considered to belong to those who were *'tal-pepè.'* In a later conversation with Rita, I mentioned in passing that I was surprised that Shania resented her aunt so much, telling Rita that I would have presumed Shania to be more likely to feel that way about me, a relative outsider, than about a member of her own family⁵⁴. Rita replied “although you came from that kind of background, you've come down to our level, whereas my sister comes from a rough background and is trying to lift herself up to being *tal-pepè.* My sister works in a different kind of shop in Msida, with people who aren't rough.”

Whilst the pursuit of education in itself was acknowledged as a positive thing (indeed, Shania occasionally lamented that she might like to study for a few O' levels⁵⁵ herself one day), the dispositions which Brittney acquired due to her changing position in the field, in

⁵³ The word *'nejk'* literally means 'fuck', but in this context is used to refer to pretentiousness.

⁵⁴ It's worthwhile to note that this was not the only source of tension in Shania's relationship with her aunt. Shania's severely strained and abusive relationship with her own mother was highlighted when compared to how Rita doted on her younger sister, and Shania once told me that in screaming at her, Rita openly admitted her preference for her sister and yelled “You're the equivalent of Brittney's pubic hair!” [March 2012]

⁵⁵ The academic equivalent of GCSEs.

accumulating what Bourdieu would refer to as 'cultural capital', riled Shania, as it was taken to be a statement of assumed superiority on the part of her aunt. Brittney's attempt to be upwardly socially mobile, in this instance, necessitated a partial rejection (or suppression) of dispositions and qualities she is expected to have embodied given her far more humble and rough upbringing. In my own case, as I was seen to be coming "down to their level," it was understood that I had suspended any form of cultural capital I presumed myself to have (along with any undesirable dispositions it may bring about), in order to place myself in close proximity with my informants in the social field and adjust to this position (further constituting my habitus in the process). Social mobility amongst my informants in this regard did not appear to be problematic provided that the struggle for capital did not entail a radical change in the habitus, embracing the dispositions of being down-to-earth, friendly, rough, and unpretentious as indeed many in Marsa prided themselves on being. Twanny had a similar issue with his sister, who had moved to a town north of the harbour some years ago:

Twanny began telling me about his sister who lives in Pembroke. He seems to regard her as a bit of a sell-out. They were raised together in Luqa, but she now lives in Pembroke, and he says that she has become *tal-pepè*. She tells him not to visit her if he is unshaven, and if he is wearing his scruffy clothes and arrives at her house in his van. Twanny was insulted that his own sister would not welcome a visit from her brother. Rita then said that she didn't think she could ever become *tal-pepè*, no matter where she lived.

[Fieldnotes, Wednesday 4th January 2012]

Rita's statement is significant here, as it would appear to deny the flexible nature of the habitus and claim instead that Rita's habitus is fixed to some degree, and that her agency is capable of rejecting the embodiment of some aspects of the social and material world if she were to live in a place where the majority of the residents were what she considered to be *tal-pepè*. Lacking certain forms of capital, whilst considered to relegate individuals towards the lower end of a social hierarchy, was also felt amongst the people in Marsa to generate dispositions which were far more desirable than those of the *tal-pepè*. The latter's acquisition and accumulation of capital (and its subsequent transformation into different forms of capital) was considered as more likely to preclude them from having a

similar worldview. A few children at the school made a similar point to Rita's, in a long conversation about social class:

S: Do you think that people outside of Marsa know a lot about it?

D: Some say that Marsa is ok, some say no, but you can't pay attention to what people say because...

S: Are there people who say that it isn't nice?

D: Yes, but you can't pay attention to them, because people say many things.

S: What do they say?

D: They'll say for example that that is a rich person, and they'll say that person is like this, and that person is like this, and they'll go on about it.

S: Are there any *sinjuri* who live in Marsa?

M: No, no...

D: It depends... in front of us there is someone who has a really nice house. And near the bridge there is a garage on the downhill and the man has a nice and big house, so I think he is a *sinjur*.

M: It depends what type of people they are, but you find people who don't care about anything as long as they have a place to live, and even if they don't have a nice view, the important thing is that they have a place to live... The rich people, because they have money, I don't agree with it. They can buy many things that they would be content with, rather than just seeing something, buying it, and throwing it away when you're⁵⁶ fed up with it.

D: Miss, if I was rich, the first thing I would do is that I would say look at that poor boy, for example, and I would go and give him some money to buy what to eat, a house, and so on, and then if he spends all that money I would tell him to come and live with me. Even if I'm married. Anything, as long as there are no more poor children. Why waste? To throw away? If I bought an apple and I didn't like it I'd say let me remove the bit I ate and go and give it to the poor... I would give it to him anyway. He can throw it away if he wants, but I won't because I just bought it.

M: Yes, like you said, it's good to help. If you don't have anything, you should still help because you will have a good heart. Whatever you do, you need to help. For example, let's say he's poor – he's

⁵⁶ The children regularly switched pronouns in their speech, and alternated between speaking in the first, second or third person. A pattern often emerged in that first person was often used in speaking about positive actions and behaviours (with the children thus aligning themselves with this behaviour), the second person would be used in speaking about bad/undesirable behaviour (often in the form of a cold and inconsiderate rich person), and the third person would be used in speaking of a stranger or a poor and unfortunate 'other' (such as a person suffering from poverty).

not rich anymore. Once you had money, and you spent it on what you wanted. One time or other the money will finish, and you'll feel annoyed that you bought these things and you ended up with no money and it's just for the rubbish to be thrown away. Yes you would have used the things, but go and give them to the poor. Even if they are used or a little torn, they will make someone else happy because someone gave them charity.

[...]

D: If I had just bought something and given it to my mother – I would say that this person is poor, and so on. And if my mother were a rich person... I would phone my mother and tell her “Mum, I bought you something, I am going to give it to this poor boy” and she would say “Alright.” It would be good, because if I see someone poor it really hurts my heart. I saw someone in a wheelchair almost asleep, and there was a car, and I went to wake him up. [...] I told him he was going to get hurt, and I moved him myself and pushed him up on to the pavement. I really felt my heart hurting and I couldn't take it anymore, so I said let me go and tell him, because I couldn't take it anymore.

S: You told me that there aren't really *sinjuri* in Marsa, right?

D: That's what I think, but I don't know how true or not that is.

S: Do you think that there are poor people?

D: I don't think so.

M: In the middle. They have money but not a *lot* of money.

D: There are very few poor people here. Medium.

M: In the middle.

D: I have some money and you have some money, we're poor and rich like that. People get by. The important thing is that you have enough to buy what to eat and to pay for water and electricity.

[Interview with Daniel and Martina [10 years old]; 12th January 2012]

This extract highlights a number of points pertinent to this discussion. Like Rita, the children are adamant that their world view would not change if they were to obtain greater economic capital, insisting that their habitus would withstand any external threat to their dispositions of generosity (further implying that some others have not been as successful at this, and have become excessive and wasteful with their material gains). They make rather grand claims about what they would do to help the poor if they had the means to do so. Their idea of poverty is also noteworthy. By nature of the fact that poverty in Malta is not visible on the streets, the children do not tend to acknowledge

other forms of poverty around them, the primary identifying criteria being whether they have food to eat, a roof over their heads, and paid bills. Using these criteria as a measure of poverty, it is not surprising that children place themselves somewhere “in the middle” on an income scale⁵⁷.

Children demonstrated an awareness of groups with greater or lesser economic capital than them, and spoke of class in those terms, coupled with the concepts of *pepè/ħamallu* highlighted earlier in the chapter. Traces of Mintoff’s discourse in terms of his determination to eliminate poverty and raise the status of the workers still resonate in Marsa, and might well play a part in children in Marsa considering themselves to be somewhere “in the middle.” From this vantage point, their rhetoric regarding others they would consider to be ‘below’ them in the social hierarchy becomes somewhat condescending, implicitly painting the latter as the weak and downtrodden who have been constructed as abject by others, and themselves as overwhelmingly generous benefactors (albeit hypothetical ones). It also becomes a necessary protective response towards any direct or indirect accusations of them as the abject (according to my own analytical term), which may partly come about in being labelled *ħamalli* – an accusation they were more likely to have levelled at them in hailing from a village in the south. As Shania and Shazney told me:

Every time that I say that I’m from Marsa they tell you “ugh, what a mess” and they’re right because you find a lot of murder and drugs in the south, which you don’t find in the north these days. It’s everywhere, because everyone is like that. It shows more in the South, and in the North it’s more hidden. Everyone who I told that I was from Marsa... if they’re from my end they like it, and they’ll tell me where they’re from. Then there are annoying people who will tell you what a mess it is and they’ll call you a *ħamalla* and things like that.

[Interview with Shania, 17 years old, 25th April 2012]

We’re cut off with the people from the South. I remember I met a friend from the North, she was from Sliema and I told her that I am from Santa Venera but I live in Marsa. For her... I think they

⁵⁷ Despite this, many parents (and children alike) would express concern and speak of their struggle in trying to make ends meet, attempting to access social benefits and keep expenses low as much as possible.

look at us like the people of Marsa are less than them... At school and at work I had people from Sliema there and it's like I'm a *ħamalla* because I'm not from Sliema. Maybe they said it as a joke, but they still said it. Some of them, even on television, they'll say because you are from Marsa and from the South, then you're a *ħamalla*.

[Interview with Shazney (36 year old mother of three); 17th March 2012]

Although adults regularly shared these experiences with me, the children themselves did not confess any occasions to me where they were directly accused of being *ħamalli* (though that is not to say that none occurred); however the regular and real *possibility* of being charged with the term very much appeared to permeate their objective conditions, a remnant of a long-standing historical relationship with abjectness as conferred upon them by those residing north of the harbour. Furthermore, when the children were being told off for unruly behaviour at school, they were often told to behave themselves and not act like *ħamalli*, implying that their behaviour was veering dangerously close. The children also regularly directed the term to one another in the form of an insult, in accusing one another of being rude and vulgar. However, as previously highlighted, the term in itself possesses hierarchical connotations.

It is interesting to note then, that children often adopted a similar rhetoric in speaking about the sub-Saharan African immigrants living on the margins of Marsa, establishing a hierarchical relationship in which the migrants were placed in an abject position to them. The dynamics of the children's relationship with the migrants will be explored in more detail in Chapters 6 and 7, however it is first necessary to continue to lay an empirical foundation in the next few chapters, in understanding the way in which the social world of the children in Marsa is constructed, and how it is given meaning. The points put forward in this chapter are crucial in appreciating the way in which ideas of social hierarchy are constituted and given meaning in Marsa, in order to later understand the way in which children contest existing structural relationships by redefining and banishing the abject (Navaro-Yashin 2012). In following Bourdieu's theoretical premise that "classes are sets of agents who occupy similar positions and who, being placed in similar conditions and subjected to similar conditionings, have every likelihood of having similar dispositions and interests and therefore of producing similar practices and adopting

similar stances”⁵⁸ (1985: 725), the children of Marsa begin to adopt strategies in order to distinguish themselves from others occupying the same socially marginal space, doing so in a manner perhaps similar to that which has been done to them.

With the emergence of what Bourdieu terms ‘class habitus’, meanings are actively created in a way that allows individuals within a social class to know the value of certain practices and objects within the field. The next chapter shall explore issues that arise within the school, particularly when the value of practices and objects in the field conflict with the school’s idea of what constitutes the ‘educated person.’ Given that certain forms of capital (as they are accumulated within the middle and upper classes) appear to be acquired with greater difficulty in Marsa, if indeed they are sought or acquired at all, value is placed elsewhere, and meaning is created in other ways. Although my ethnography puts forward examples of individuals who sought to rise above their class position (and occasionally did succeed in doing so), efforts to do so were not always unproblematic. As mentioned at the beginning of the chapter, critics of Bourdieu would hold that individuals have little meaningful agency within the context of his theory of practice (Jenkins 1992; Giroux 1982; Willis 1983), implying an inevitable reproduction of class position. Rather than an inevitable outcome, however, I hold that Bourdieu’s analysis allows for a consideration of the *tendency* or *proneness* towards a particular outcome, which is not to say that said outcome is a foregone conclusion. Rather, working towards a different outcome, although not impossible, entails a greater struggle (due to the lack of appropriate habitus and capital) than it would for others whose habitus more closely matches that of the legitimized dominant group. In knowing the value of certain objects and practices within a class habitus, participants of a social class are thus able to act “towards a reproduction of the habitus of class, or its transgression. Agents are thus capable of knowing the implications of their class cultural practices, and of being able to modify them and struggle to change their value” (Wilkes 1990: 123). Given the increased hardship implicit in undertaking such a struggle and transgression, many may become disillusioned in the process and adopt an overwhelming yet unspoken sensation that

⁵⁸ It is important to remember that Bourdieu himself at times appears to oscillate between ideas of class at the level of subjective agency, and class at the level of objective conditions. He stresses that both in isolation are flawed, and that there is a need to embrace the ambiguity of both in a dialectical relationship with one another.

certain aspirations are realistically out of their reach. They may even convince themselves that they never truly desired that which they feel evades them (Bourdieu 1984: 380), and lean instead towards objects and practices for which they have already developed the appropriate dispositions. Where there is a conflict between the institutions of school and family in terms of the attribution of value granted to certain practices over others, schooling may begin to appear less relevant to some children. This in effect may have the consequence of reproducing their abject positions on the margins of society, as the next two chapters shall show.

Chapter 4: Education & Schooling

“What do I care [about the exams]? I often don’t pass them anyway.”

Felicia (10 yrs old), 27th January 2012

When I initially looked into conducting fieldwork at state primary school in Marsa, the first stumbling block that I encountered was in formulating consent forms for the parents. I was informed by the school administration that a number of parents were illiterate, and would thus have trouble reading the form. This particular issue was eventually tackled by having the contents of the forms explained to the parents who had trouble reading in person. This was my first insight into the general relationship that a number of individuals in Marsa held with schooling and education. The situation is one that the school seemed to be well aware of, stating the following within the School Development Plan 2012 in describing their “Pupil’s Profile”:

“As a rule most parents are quite willing to help their children in their educational needs, especially homework, but feel unable to do so because they are illiterate. Unfortunately, illiteracy is unbelievably widespread among parents and also students. On the other hand, in most instances parents seek to co-operate with the school as far as possible.”

[School Development Plan 2011-2012]

The extent to which parents co-operate with the school shall be explored later within this chapter. With regards to the collection of consent forms, there was to be another obstacle. Whilst the majority of the forms had been signed and returned in the weeks prior to my commencement of fieldwork, there were a handful which had yet to be returned, and I was informed that I would have a bit of a wait in store for the final few consent forms. I learnt that the last few forms that were due to be returned were held by children who were regularly absent from school, and I was warned that I shouldn’t hold

my breath to receive them any time soon. Indeed, it was a few weeks and a couple of reprints before all of my consent forms were in order. These two hurdles, whilst eventually being overcome, immediately put me face to face with some of the most predominant issues that were faced by the school during fieldwork, in attempting to educate the members of its student population. I would soon learn of the rest of them.

These particular issues were couched in a wider question that regularly preoccupied me during fieldwork, namely, the question of why so many of the children I observed did not do well at school, and why they seemed to be so disengaged with the process of schooling from such a young age. Rita, a close friend and key informant already introduced in earlier chapters, seemed similarly preoccupied with this question, on one occasion asking me: “Have you ever noticed that children here are... how can I explain... that they are not very intelligent?” [Monday 30th January 2012]. Although disagreeing with her framing of the question, which reduces a lack of success at school down to individual intelligence (a mistaken assumption I discuss in further detail later in this chapter and the next in relation to anthropological literature on education), Rita shared my concern, and at the time seemed equally at a loss in accounting for the children’s poor performance in school. This was further expounded by her belief that, as the School Development Plan above also notes, parents are often willing to co-operate with the school and do what they can to help their children succeed. Coupled with the fact that access to education and schooling had improved significantly under Mintoff and in the decades following his leadership, with the practical constraints and obstacles that previous generations would have faced in their own education largely considered to have been alleviated, Rita is all the more unable to identify any valid reason as to why so many children in the area should not do particularly well in school.

Such disengagement in schooling often plays a significant role in reproducing social positions from one generation to the next, to some extent ensuring the continued abject status of individuals who are often regarded as failing to take advantage of the opportunities for social mobility that education is meant to afford them. This failure to do

well in school is often put down to a lack of impetus on the part of the individual (a view commonly held by my informants), in light of education commonly being thought to act as a great equalizer of opportunity, which ensures that all children begin their race for the most desirable social positions at the same starting line, so to speak. Indeed, Rita's comments above certainly suggest that she too subscribes to this perspective. Such a perspective, whilst placing the responsibility of socially reproduced states of abjection squarely on the individual, fails to take adequate note of the structural forces and potential inequalities at play. Such objective forces indeed make their own contribution towards the social reproduction of abjection across generations, particularly as it applies to ideas of class and social hierarchies⁵⁹. Some theorists (as mentioned earlier) further suggest that processes of social reproduction are exacerbated by the process of schooling in itself, which simultaneously and effectively conceals its fulfilment of this function under the guise of neutrality, thus misleadingly convincing individuals of a sole responsibility for their own academic failures (see Bourdieu & Passeron 1977).

The issue is a complex one, and before delving further into it, it is first necessary to ask precisely what the education system in Malta formally sets out to accomplish amongst its students. A very brief account of the education system in Malta was provided in Chapter 2, and it is only by building upon this initial understanding with an appreciation of what it is that schools in Malta actually set out to do, that we may later probe as to why some children are unsuccessful at it. A consideration of the aims of education in Malta will be followed by detailed ethnography, contextualizing what has been outlined thus far in this chapter before a theoretical discussion is undertaken.

⁵⁹ As I have already indicated, existing literature has illustrated processes of abjection as being constitutive of class hierarchies, particularly with respect to the bourgeoisie socially demarcating themselves from the working classes (See Alain Corbin 1986; Stallybrass & White 1986). My research goes beyond existing literature in considering how these states of abjection are socially reproduced, and how politicized processes of abjection are simultaneously contested and later utilized by the abjected working classes themselves, in the process of subconsciously constructing their own abject.

What are the Aims of Education in Malta?

Schools have long been held as “sites for the production of educated persons across cultural and social space” (Levinson & Holland 1996: 3). Indeed, it was arguably Durkheim (1956) who first identified the propensity of schools to be underpinned by the ideology of the nation-state, interjecting the skills and dispositions amongst their subjects considered to be amongst the most desired and valuable for citizens to possess. As such, schools are made consistent with, and play a crucial role in, ‘the imaginings of the political community’ (see Anderson 2006). State discourses and local practices undoubtedly come to bear upon the process of constituting ideas of the ‘educated person,’ which schools are ultimately tasked with producing⁶⁰. As noted within the introduction, the concept of the ‘educated person’ refers to “a fully ‘knowledgeable’ person, a person endowed with maximum ‘cultural capital’” (Levinson and Holland 1996: 21) as legitimized by the school. I shall later argue that tensions may arise between the different kinds of cultural capital, and thus habitus, which are valued within the school and the community respectively, although this tension is seldom recognized or articulated.

Much work from educational scholars in the 1970s and 1980s emerged with critical views of schooling, forming the basis of what was to be termed ‘reproduction theory,’ in which schools were argued to operate as institutions which further entrenched existing class structures within a capitalist economy (Althusser 1971; Bowles & Gintis 1976; Bourdieu & Passeron 1977). These approaches called the transformative potential of educational institutions into question, taking the predominant idea of the school as a levelling mechanism to task. Although rightly met with criticisms that hold that the arguments are overly objectivist and economically deterministic, it is useful as an exercise in questioning the purpose of mass schooling within each ethnographic context⁶¹, and asking what it is

⁶⁰ It is crucial to note that education and schooling should not be treated synonymously, given that schools are not exclusive sites of learning (as indeed the next chapter shall go on to illustrate). Nonetheless, given my undertaking of school ethnography, much of the ethnographic detail to follow in this chapter shall hone in on the school in its perceived role as a primary site of learning.

⁶¹ See Boli & Ramirez (1992) and Anderson-Levitt (1996) for a more in depth discussion on the idea and spread of western-based mass schooling.

that schooling aims to achieve. This must indeed be the starting point if we are to understand precisely what occurs when students fall short of these aims.

The aims of education, particularly as it applies to Malta, have been stated as follows within the document *A National Curriculum Framework for All*, launched by the Ministry of Education and Employment in 2012:

The Aims of education [...] seek to prepare all children to become lifelong learners, who are confident, successful, creative, connected and engaged in the community and the world around them and who are able to secure social justice. Their education should enable them to acquire the knowledge, skills, values and attitudes that make them capable of sustaining their life chances in the changing world of employment, and to become actively engaged citizens.

The National Curriculum Framework further clarifies what is meant by a number of these terms:

Learners who are capable of successfully developing their full potential as lifelong learners

This will require the development of: personal and social skills; moral and spiritual development; literacy, numeracy and digital literacy; bilingualism and multilingualism; science and technology competence; critical and innovative thinking; aesthetic appreciation and creative expression.

Learners who are capable of sustaining their chances in the world of work

This will lead to gainful employment and capacity-building sustained by: the ability to communicate effectively and confidently; competence in using new information and communication technologies; the ability to train, re-train and develop new skills; economic stability and independence; innovation and entrepreneurship; the ability to readily embrace mobility and change; a systems view of reality that facilitates engagement in the promotion of sustainable development; active involvement in the sustainable development issues.

Learners who are engaged citizens who are able to secure social justice in constantly changing local, regional and global realities

They will: respect diversity and value difference; respect and promote Maltese culture and heritage; develop intercultural competence and appreciate their heritage within the Mediterranean, European and global contexts; work towards strengthening social cohesion and ensuring social justice; uphold social justice and democratic principles.

A National Curriculum Framework for All (pp.32-33);
Ministry of Education & Employment; December 2012

The National Curriculum Framework (NCF) was launched by the Maltese Ministry of Education and Employment in 2012, for implementation across all schools in Malta and Gozo. Amongst its aims, the document seeks to ensure the provision of a quality education for *all* learners, reduce the percentage of early school leavers, and increase enrolment in further and higher education. Although launched in 2012, the document is based on values and principles long held to lie at the core of the Education system in Malta.

In light of this, it becomes necessary to ask why some children do not succeed in Education, if success in the eyes of the Education authorities in Malta is to be measured by the fulfilment of the aims outlined above. What is it that impedes a number of children from working class backgrounds from doing well in school, in accordance with these aims? Is the children's disinterest in schooling to some degree an inevitable outcome of the working class conditions within their surrounding socio-cultural environment, or an active choice which children willingly pursue as social agents in their own right? The question is by no means a straightforward one to answer. I shall engage in a discussion of these questions at length later in this chapter, with reference to a range of prominent social reproduction theories which explore the links between educational failure and class. However, prior to this, further ethnographic data yielded by means of 13 months of participant observation is required.

Absenteeism

During fieldwork, a number of children tended to attend school in a rather sporadic manner. Teachers were aware of which students were more likely to attend class, and those which were not. Occasionally, these same children would simply turn up to school hours late, offering little explanation for their tardiness and, more often than not, having failed to do their homework. The teachers were often frustrated by this behaviour, as it made it increasingly difficult for them to effectively cover the school syllabus with all of the students. Due to the fact that the old system of streaming classes had been done away with a few years prior, many teachers were already expressing difficulty in addressing a class of students who they felt were at completely different levels of ability and achievement, and this problem was further expounded when a number of students (generally those who the teachers considered to be *batuti*, or weaker) did not turn up, as it further enhanced the gap between the *batuti* (the weak students) and the *bravi* (the clever students). The teachers came to expect this degree of attendance from particular students, at times even making a joke of it since there seemed to be very little else to do about the exasperating situation:

In assembly, a member of staff mentioned that Gerry had not come to school today. Miss Pulis replied “it’s still too early for Gerry.”

[Fieldnotes; Thursday 3rd March 2011]

As I walked in to class, I made my way to the first empty chair I found, which happened to belong to Robert. He was not in school today. As a joke, Miss Annabelle immediately told me not to sit there, because I would then miss school. She told me that if I sat in that particular chair, then I would come to school for one or two days, and then be sick for 100 days (making a joke of Robert’s regular absenteeism). At that, a few of the children in class asked if they could sit in that seat.

[Fieldnotes; Wednesday 4th May 2011]

The school recorded the attendance of each child every day, with attendance records forwarded on to the higher administration at San Gorg Preca College⁶². I learnt that the attendance of children was marked with the following codes: A – Absent without justification; E – Excused absence; F – Family holiday; H – Absent due to hospitalization; L – exempted; M – Absent on medical grounds; T – Truancy; X – Absent due to exclusion. Cases of regular and unjustified absenteeism were left in the hands of the College administration, for the attention of the school social workers, and fines were often administered to parents who regularly failed to send their children to school. When children did eventually attend school again, after a long leave of absence, the teachers at times quizzed them as to why they had not been in school for a while. It became clear that many a time, the children did not have any justifiable reason for their absence.

I sat in a chair next to Martina, who told me hello. I told her that I hadn't seen her in a while, and I asked her whether she had been ill. She told me that she hadn't been ill, and that she hadn't come because her father's car was at the mechanic. Ms Degiorgio later asked Martina the same question, and Martina provided the same answer that she had given me. Ms Degiorgio told her "So what? You could have walked it to school." Martina replied that it was far, and Ms Degiorgio told her that there were children in the class who walked further than that to get to school every day. Ms Degiorgio told Martina that if she did not go to school, then the police would come for her.

The following week, Ms Degiorgio asked Martina if she had a note or medical certificate in order to cover her absence from school. I did not hear Martina's reply, but Ms Degiorgio then told her "Your father can enjoy paying the fine, then."

[Fieldnotes; Thursday 19th May 2011 & Tuesday 24th May 2011 respectively]

Teachers did not seem to hold much faith in the formal procedures for tackling absenteeism, and when I asked if there was likely to be any follow up in the cases of children who were regularly absent, I was told that the course of action would probably be "just another fine." Whilst fines imposed for regular absenteeism were intended as a

⁶² All state schools in Malta are separated into ten colleges, according to geographic region. Marsa Primary school forms part of San Gorg Preca College, itself made up of eight primary schools, four secondary schools, a resource centre, and two learning centres within the towns of Marsa, Valletta, Floriana, Hamrun, Blata I-Bajda, Paola, and Pieta'.

deterrent, in order to ensure that parents sent their children to school, in reality teachers considered the fines to have no real tangible effect on the problem of absenteeism.

Of the children who attended school regularly, a large number of them were nonetheless still prone to skipping school every once in a while, particularly on specific occasions or due to specific events. Turnout at the school would be particularly low on weekdays which were sandwiched between a public holiday and the weekend, and the school would be practically empty on the day of the '*xalata*⁶³,' the day following the Marsa village *fešta* of the Holy Trinity, itself the culmination of a week of activities - both solemn activities within the church of Trinita' Qaddisa, and loud and jovial celebrations on the streets of Marsa continuing late into the night⁶⁴. On this day, parents take their children to the beach, or generally relax at home, and most shops and bars in Marsa remain closed – a stark contrast to the lively activities which would have taken place on the very same streets just a few hours earlier. On the day of the '*xalata*' in June 2011, a total of 8 children turned up from Years 4, 5 and 6. Approximately 20 children had come to school on that day, out of a school population of approximately 200 students.

On occasions where children did not go to school, it was not uncommon to see them out and about on the streets of Marsa, on days where they were supposedly ill and at home. Teachers related stories of seeing children ride their horses past the school on days when they were absent, and I myself also tended to bump into children in the street on my way in to school. On one day, a Year 5 student named Casey was hanging around his parent's grocery store, located directly opposite the school. He alternated between watching workmen digging up the street, as they happened to be doing that day, and helping his parents within the store. When I asked him why he hadn't gone to school today, he told me that he was not interested in participating in the excursion that was planned for that day⁶⁵, and that he was going to help his parents in the shop instead. On a separate

⁶³ A day out to the sea or the countryside, filled with recreational activities and merriment.

⁶⁴ Chapter 8 in this thesis shall discuss the village *fešta* in further detail.

⁶⁵ The children were due to visit the ancient city of Birgu.

occasion as I was walking in to school, I ran into another Year 5 student, Mario, who was dressed in his home clothes and carrying a bag of groceries. He was also on his way to the tailor to pick up some mended clothes. I asked Mario why he wasn't in school today, and Mario told me that he had a stomach ache.

The school was located right in the heart of Marsa, and lay in the path of a number of errand destinations. This seemed to deter neither the parents nor the children from going outside and going about their day if they needed to, as the children were at times left free to roam the streets of Marsa as nonchalantly as they would do outside of school hours. They made very little pretence of being genuinely ill, save for the obligatory provision of a note or a medical certificate once they returned to school⁶⁶, which is immediately requested by the teachers upon their arrival. This provided an interesting contrast with the children's behaviour when they were in school and were attempting to be excused early on the grounds of feeling unwell, as a certain degree of performance was necessary in such circumstances, in convincing the school authorities of their illness in order to secure permission to go home.

Aside from the regularity with which children were absent from school, I found myself impressed with the triviality of their real reasons for being absent, as well as the ease with which they seemed to be allowed to do so by their parents. Moira failed to turn up at school on prize day, telling the other children that she was embarrassed to sing with the school choir in their performance for the parents. Rita thought nothing of keeping her son Ronald at home with her for the entire day when they had simply overslept for an hour or so, and she also kept Ronald home on the day of the *xalata*, reasoning that no other children would be at school on the day anyway, and thus there would be no point in sending him.

⁶⁶ False medical certificates are not uncommon, as families would approach a doctor who they are familiar with, and ask him or her to fill out a medical certificate for them, without the doctor examining the child. The child would then hand this over to the teacher upon returning to school.

Evidently, although some parents insisted that their children attend school regularly and study hard to achieve high marks in their exams, a large number of parents seemed to somehow facilitate (or at the very least, not create a major obstacle to) their children's lack of presence in school, on occasion neglecting to send them to school if it posed an inconvenience to their schedule for the day in some way, reasoning that one day would not make a grand difference. Children themselves also demonstrated a significant degree of agency within this decision-making process of school attendance. Some confidently stated the dates where they would not be turning up at school in advance, as one Learning Support Assistant related to me, when a boy in class told her: "Hey, you! I won't be here on Monday, I have a barbecue to go to." A number of children tended to miss school on days where they would have a test scheduled, and teachers took note of this and structured their plans for tests accordingly, at times purposely neglecting to directly inform children when a test was coming up, knowing that some of the children would otherwise choose to skip school. On a separate occasion, one child decided to run away from school, allegedly fearing his teacher's reaction to him having forgotten to do his homework yet again:

While I was in the office, Polly came in to tell the Head that Chris (Year 5) had come to school and run away. Apparently, his father had dropped him off at the school gates and had left him to go in by himself, and after his father left, Chris ran away. Polly told the Head to make sure that he called Chris' parents right away, so that they would know immediately that he was not in school.

Later in the day, Chris' teacher asked the Head for an update on what had become of Chris that day. It turned out that Chris was afraid to face his teacher, since he had not done his homework. His parents had returned home and found him at home. The Headmaster told the parents that they were welcome to send Chris back to school, since it was still quite early in the day. However, Chris ultimately ended up spending the day away from school.

[Fieldnotes; Wednesday 28th September 2011]

Children thus at times took it upon themselves to decide whether or not they would turn up at school, and on these occasions their decisions appeared to be met with minimal resistance from their parents, who claimed that the choice belonged to their children. The

children were here granted a notable degree of agency, and were largely seen by the adults around them as influencing and directing the course of their own lives⁶⁷. Even where parents expressed disagreement with their children's behaviour or lack of engagement with school, this was often done with a sense of resignation, insinuating that there was very little that they could do if their children chose to behave that way. This apparent nonchalance was not exclusive to the children's education, as I often felt that the children in Marsa were put in a position to make rather heavy decisions about their lives which they were ill prepared to make by nature of their young age⁶⁸. Admittedly, an element of ethnocentric bias was indeed present, as I inadvertently fell back on my own taken-for-granted notions. I found that I made conceptual links between chronological age and my own corresponding presumptions of how this age should be experienced and embodied by the children, according to the abilities or competences which I considered appropriate for them to have acquired, or not acquired as yet (see Anderson-Levitt 1996). Notwithstanding this, I soon learnt that many parents in Marsa granted their children a considerable degree of liberty, more so than I was accustomed to within my own childhood, which was grounded in middle-class values whereby parents exercised greater control over the schedules of their children, and the choices which they allowed their children to make. Some parents in Marsa, by contrast, appeared to hold the view that their children would continue to behave the way that they did, regardless of what the parents did or said. Whilst they did attempt to guide their children's behaviour and steer them in one direction rather than another, the final choice about what kind of behaviour would be adopted ultimately seemed to fall on the child.

⁶⁷ In recent years, child-centred anthropological research has argued for greater recognition of the social agency held by children, underlining the importance of considering children's lived experiences in their own right, incorporating an understanding of the influence children come to bring upon their own lives as social actors (see James and Prout 1995; Morrow 1995). This approach ran contrary to predominant socialization models, which held a tendency to depict children as passive recipients of their own culture and of adult teaching (such as in Ochs & Schieffelin 1984). This structure-agency divide, implicit within this debate as well as within the social reproduction theories discussed in this chapter, is one of many dichotomies that Montgomery (2009) claims an anthropology of childhood should transcend. She argues that "it is not necessary to understand children as either beings or becomings, active or passive, agentic or helpless, informants or the spoken for, the complete or the lacking. They, like adults, can be all of these things" (2009: 238). In my application and reading of Bourdieu within these chapters, I similarly attempt to move beyond this dichotomy.

⁶⁸ A prime example of this presented itself when I learnt that Rita had fully explained to her 8 year old son Ronald that his biological father did not acknowledge Ronald as his own, and the decision of whether or not to go through with a paternity test was ultimately left in Ronald's hands.

On days where the staff felt that the children's attendance was particularly important, they would drop hints in the classroom for weeks in advance, attempting to underline how crucial it was for the children to be at school on a particular day. In a sense, the staff seemed to be appealing to the children for their co-operation in recognizing the importance of attending school, acknowledging to some extent the agency they feel the children to have in formulating a decision about their attendance and subsequent participation. During the second scholastic year of my fieldwork, the day of the '*xalata*' happened to coincide with a day of exams for the Year 6 students. These were benchmarking exams which were taking place on a national level, and which were put in place with the aim of easing the transition of students from primary to secondary school, by ascertaining student's abilities within particular subjects beforehand. The school authorities regarded these exams as imperative, and teachers stressed their importance for weeks prior to the date itself. At a point, some teachers approached the Head of School and asked him to intervene, fearing a low turnout given that the exam was to be held the day after *fiesta* celebrations, on the day of the *xalata*. Indeed, a number of children bragged for weeks beforehand, asserting that they would not be present at school on the day, stating that they would go to the *xalata* instead. The Head of School wrote a letter to the parents, in which he highlighted the importance of the coming exams, and in the end, all of the Year 6 students were present on the day (although the attendance of the rest of the school population remained staggeringly low, as has come to be expected on the day of the *xalata*). Ms Callus informed me that she had told the children in her class that exams only come around once a year, whilst they would have the opportunity to go to the beach all summer if they wished. On the day of the exam, Shay repeated this argument back to Ms Callus as a conclusion which he had reached himself, adding that his grandmother (who was entrusted with his care) also felt the same way.

I was often confused by what I took to be a very contradictory approach to schooling by the parents and carers. They often told their children that they wanted them to do well at

school and study hard, and they regularly expressed their full support of the school's aim of creating 'educated persons'. Yet simultaneously, their actions did not always seem to reflect this. As a friend of Rita, I spent many afternoons and evenings at her home, and I helped her son Ronald with his homework on a daily basis. As exams approached, I formulated revision exercises for Ronald to complete with my assistance. Ronald was one of the weaker students in class, and received the support of an LSA (Learning Support Assistant) within the classroom. I built a strong bond with Ronald during fieldwork, and invested a lot of time and effort in helping him get a better handle on his school work. My efforts were greatly appreciated by Rita, who expressed willingness to help her son, and frustration at not knowing how, partly since she self-admittedly grew impatient rather easily, and would often yell at Ronald for getting the answers wrong, insulting him or threatening to send him to a residential institution⁶⁹ if he did not begin to apply himself in his schoolwork. Ronald was diagnosed with a mild case of autism and with dyslexia after two separate assessments. Rita did not understand what either of those meant, and sought my help in understanding them. I explained both as best I could, and in explaining dyslexia, I feebly mentioned that people who suffer from dyslexia may have difficulty in reading letters and putting words and sentences together when they read, adding that people with severe dyslexia might even see letters as out of place or moving. Rita promptly opened a book, pointed to a sentence, and asked Ronald whether the letters were moving. When Ronald answered no, Rita concluded that he did not have dyslexia, and that his difficulty in school was down to his own laziness.

Rita instructed Ronald to listen to me and to co-operate within our study sessions, insisting that it was important for him to understand the material which we were revising, and for him to do well in his exams. Nonetheless, on more than one occasion, and only a few days before the exams were due to commence, Rita and her mother would regularly take Ronald on outings to the beach and to the cinema, thus forfeiting what I considered to be valuable studying time. Rita's partner Twanny informed me that Rita would plan these outings because she would be keen to spend a day at the beach herself, and would

⁶⁹ A common threat that I heard parents direct towards their children, in attempting to coerce the children to obey.

be unable to do so if she had to remain home and supervise Ronald while he was studying. When Ronald did not want to concentrate the following day, and asked to go on another outing, he was reprimanded for being selfish, and was told that he had been treated to lovely outings, and yet he did not choose to return the favour by pleasing his mother and concentrating on his school revision.

The irritation and astonishment I felt on these occasions was not a one off, and was regularly repeated when I voluntarily gave English private lessons to the children of another of my key informants. Lessons were cancelled at the last minute for what I took to be trivial reasons, and at times simply depended on whether the child felt like coming to the lesson or not. When I attempted to confirm whether her children would be turning up for the lesson a few hours beforehand, Polly would often tell me that she would let me know once she had asked her children, again nodding to the agency she considered her own children to possess. My frustration in understanding the particular dynamics of these parent-child relationships was shared by some of the teachers:

Ms Callus told me that Nathaniel, who is in her class, can't read. However, once the school day ends at 2:30pm every day, he goes to the stables with his father from 3:00pm until 10:00pm, in which time they clean the stables, horses, and so on. Ms Callus then said that Nathaniel does his homework from 10:30pm until 11:30pm, and doesn't do any of the extra work assigned to him, and he then comes to school exhausted the following morning. Ms Callus found out from Nathaniel's sister that he is afraid to come to class on days when he would not have completed his work. Ms Callus told me that she had spoken to Nathaniel's mother about this during parent's day. Ms Callus had tried to convince her to only allow Nathaniel to go to the stables on alternative days, or after 6:00pm in the evening, telling her that school has to come first. When Ms Callus made those suggestions, his mother initially transferred blame on to the child's father and replied "yes... go and tell his dad that!" She later said "... [Nathaniel] enjoys it though, you know."

[Fieldnotes; Friday 25th May 2012]

In conversations with them, parents appeared to hold the notion that children would ultimately have to experience the consequences of their actions, and they thus seemed more inclined to allow their children to choose their own course of action themselves,

intervening at times on occasions when this action impinged on other children's ability to do the very same thing (such as when there were children who wished to concentrate and learn during lessons but could not because they were distracted by the disruptions of others, or when their children 'tattled' [*jigżaw*] on the misdemeanours of others).

This apparent social agency and free will that the children were able to exercise was often made evident in cases where children were absent from school. However, the children's involvement and/or participation (or otherwise) in school was predicated on far more than their daily attendance, as we shall come to see. A small number of children regularly appeared to reject the classroom paradigm and forfeit their attention within class, defying the teachers and the rest of the school staff in doing so. This too was also met with the same form of reaction from parents.

Challenging the School Authorities

Classrooms at Marsa Primary school tended to be prone to a number of disruptions on any given day, many of which were caused by children who were seen to break the ideal social order of the classroom in which the children are expected to be obedient and submissive to the teachers, and act under the instruction of members of staff. Some classes would generally hold a small handful of children who, in the eyes of the staff and parents, did not want to learn. These children not only refused to participate in the lessons and give their attention to the teacher, as is expected within a classroom paradigm, but they made it increasingly difficult for other children to do so, as they purposely tried to show off (*jitkessħu*), answer back (*arditi*), and generally misbehave (*jkunu mqarbin*).

Charise walked out of the classroom, and Martina brought this to the teacher's attention, telling her that she had left to go and find her brother (her brother was with the Head of School because he had not wanted to be in class, and insisted that he wanted to leave). I offered to go and look for

her, since the teachers could not leave the children in the classroom unsupervised. I went downstairs and found Charise speaking with her brother outside the Headmaster's office, but she ran to hide under a nearby table when she saw me approaching. I pretended not to have seen her, and I walked in to the Headmaster's office and informed him of what was going on. He came out in to the corridor, but by this time Charise had made her way back upstairs. The Headmaster asked me to pass a message on to the classroom teacher and learning support assistants, telling them to simply ignore her and go on with the lesson.

I went back upstairs and noticed Ms Giglio struggling with Charise outside of the classroom. Ms Giglio was trying to get Charise to walk, but Charise went limp and fell to the floor on purpose. I passed on the Headmaster's message, and the teachers and learning support assistants decided to heed his advice. Back in the classroom, the children were also told to ignore Charise if she was out of her seat. Once Charise entered the classroom again, she began crawling on the floor, and then pretended to swim on the ground. The teacher told the children that there were some children who they would have to ignore, in order for these children to learn their lesson. Charise continued 'swimming' on the floor, and then she began walking around the classroom in between the rows of desks, throwing things up in to the air.

[Fieldnotes; Friday 8th April 2011]

This battle of wits and struggle for the control and submission of children's bodies (to some degree) occasionally extended to a broader struggle for the control of the classroom⁷⁰. The victor was often decided by the other 'neutral' children, in their choice to either follow the teacher's instructions and behave, thus restoring order in the classroom, or align themselves with their misbehaving peers and potentially descend further into classroom chaos. Some teachers were more able to secure control than others, and children quickly picked up on this and used it to their advantage with specific teachers, attempting to achieve supremacy within the situation and project a particular tough and hard image of themselves to an available audience.

⁷⁰ This particular topic has been explored in a number of anthropological texts, in considering how bodies are manipulated in such a way as to evoke submission and obedience to authority. Foucault (1977) highlighted the necessity of 'docile bodies' within the management of institutions such as schools, and other studies have since also considered ideas of children's embodiment and the control and management of children's bodies (See Shilling 1993; Simpson 2000).

Ms Giglio brought back a few students who had run out to the bathroom. Once they returned, Ben began swearing in class, and the children started being quite loud. The Assistant Head walked in to the room to tell the children off, and this started a war of words between Ben and the Assistant Head. Ben hurled insults at the Assistant Head, telling her to leave and yelling that he didn't care about what she was saying. The Assistant Head told Ben not to speak to her in that manner, and Ben replied that he could speak to her in any way that he liked.

The Head of School soon walked in, in order to take over and attempt to handle the situation. Ben continued swearing at the Head of School, who initially ignored him but then told him to collect his things and prepare to go to the office downstairs. The Head took Ben by the arm and led him away, and Ben began pulling faces in order to make the other children laugh.

[Fieldnotes; Friday 27th January 2012]

Felicia had been answering back all morning, and she had her sweater over her head in trying to make other children in class laugh. The teacher phoned the Head in his office, and the Head told the teacher to send Felicia downstairs. Martina, another child in the class, was entrusted with taking Felicia downstairs to the office. Felicia did not want to go, and the teacher said that the rest of the class would not begin their lunch break until she left. The other children urged Felicia to leave, telling her that she would get into more trouble if she didn't go, but she just laughed and said that she didn't want to. Eventually she left, and her peers cheered at her departure. When both Felicia and Martina arrived downstairs, Felicia avoided the Head's office entirely, and escaped out on to the playground instead. Martina eventually had to drag Felicia back to class, quite literally. I followed the girls in to class, and when I walked in I found Felicia threatening the teacher, pointing her finger inches away from his face and shouting "I'm talking to YOU!" She was being very rough, and was hitting some of the other children as well. During break, the classroom was rather chaotic, and a few other children joined Felicia in messing about. Later in the day, the teacher told me that Felicia had approached him and told him that her father would soon find him in the street, and run him over with his car, and give him a black eye. She turned violent after that, and began to hit him. Felicia was eventually excluded from school for one day the following week as a punishment, however many teachers felt as though this was not an appropriate punishment for her, since she was likely to treat it as a vacation from school.⁷¹

[Fieldnotes, Tuesday 25th October 2011]

⁷¹ Interestingly enough, when the school attempted to call Felicia's parents in on a separate occasion in order to discuss Felicia's behaviour in class, her teenage sister (who had stopped attending school well before the compulsory school leaving age) turned up in their place. The school insisted upon speaking with Felicia's parents instead. [Fieldnotes; Friday 8th April 2011]

Many classes in the school had a handful of children who were prone to acting up, in the same way that Ben and Felicia did within the above ethnographic illustration. Although these children would be few, by no means forming a majority within the classroom, their collaboration or rebellion within the lesson structure greatly affected the outcome of lessons due to the level of classroom disruption incurred. The majority of children within the classroom, who hold varying degrees of interest and attention in the lesson which the teacher attempts to deliver to the class, must often come up with their own strategies for dealing with whatever goes on in class, whether it be pleading with their peers for co-operation (as in the above illustration where the rest of the class encouraged and advised Felicia to obey and go down to the Head's office), remaining quiet until a particular episode blows over or is resolved, or joining in and being equally dismissive of the authoritative figures in the classroom.

As in the case of absenteeism, parents appeared to respond to these incidents in a rather particular way. Many complained quite regularly to the Head of School about episodes of classroom disruption, at times escalating their complaints further to the Department of Education. Yet, for the most part, they were preoccupied with these scenarios insofar as they impinged on the ability of other children within the class to pay attention. Children were seen to actively choose their own course of behaviour, and in situations where they chose to defy authority, they would essentially remove themselves from the reciprocal classroom paradigm in which knowledge is exchanged in return for obedience and attention from the children. Josette, mother of Daniela, one of the Year 5 girls who was regularly responsible for classroom disruptions, had particular words of advice for teachers in dealing with students such as her daughter:

The classroom assistant told me that she has four naughty children in her class, and that she could not cope with them. Josette, who at this point was sweeping the hallway, told the assistant that those who wanted to learn should be taught in class, and the others should just be left alone to do what they wanted to. She told the assistant that she should only teach the children who wanted to learn.

[Fieldnotes; Friday 6th May 2011]

Josette was a regular presence at school, as a parent who also sat on the School Council, and who regularly spearheaded school activities. Although she was very strict with her daughter and demanded that her daughter worked in class and did all of her homework, she also believed tall stories which her daughter would tell her a little too readily. She also occasionally allowed her daughter to remain out of the classroom as she wished, and in a different room of the school with her (particularly when Josette was organizing a school activity), justifying it by saying that her daughter would otherwise disrupt the lesson (she hid her daughter from the Head of School behind a curtain on one occasion, in doing so).

The impetus for children to succeed in education was thus largely expected to come from the children themselves in their capacity as social agents, and where this was not present, it was advised that teachers focus their energies on children who are indeed eager to learn, or at the very least are willing to co-operate by not disrupting the class. This is indeed the strategy which teachers often followed (although it was rarely successful), and children became sympathetic to this, and to the occasional plight of teachers within the classroom.

Sharon: What about the children in school?

Martina: Some of them are alright, and others aren't,

Sharon: Are the children in your class alright?

Daniel: No, because everyone... one shouts from here, and the other one shouts from there. Nicki shouts from the back, and...

Martina: Liam

Daniel: No

Martina: Liam

Daniel: No... it's someone... it's a girl in my head. Rachel shouts from the front...

Sharon: Is it difficult to follow the lesson?

Daniel: When there's Felicia and Daniela the lesson is noisy. And sometimes it ends badly because the teacher doesn't explain to anyone. Isn't that right, Mar?

Martina: Mmm hmm...

Sharon: He doesn't explain?

Daniel: They show off and they bother him.

Martina: And you don't really blame him.

Daniel: It's true... and he gets fed up and tells us that he is not going to manage to explain it to us because of them.

[Interview with Martina and Daniel; 12th January 2012]

Other children thus come to learn and somewhat accept, reluctantly or otherwise, that the classroom space may be subject to a number of disruptions. Within this space, they come to negotiate who they are, fully engaging themselves with their surrounding environment and locating themselves within this space, using their encounters with others to do so. Failing to occupy the specific space of the classroom at the time designated by the institution, and in the manner which the institution deems proper, is communicated as a rejection of the educational institution in itself, thus allowing the child to place him or herself in direct opposition to the aims of the educational process. Their appropriation of this space therefore allows them to construct themselves as a specific kind of person in relation to the expectations of the educational institution. More specifically, it allows them to construct themselves as individuals who both recognize and understand the concept of the 'educated person' which the school is attempting to produce (in accordance with the stated aims of Education in Malta as outlined above), and who consequently position themselves in relation to this kind of person – something which they are only able to accomplish with a sound understanding of it.

I spoke to Daniela, one of the girls who often initiated classroom disruptions in Year 5, as she explained her choice to rebel within the classroom:

Daniela: When I was 5 my mum would walk with me in the pushchair. I still remember it. My memory is good, but I am mean because I don't want to work at school, but my brain works.

Sharon: Why do you think that you are mean?

Daniela: I don't want to learn, but I go to private lessons at one woman in a square which is around the corner.

Sharon: Why don't you want to learn?

Daniela: Because the teacher tells me to sit next to this one or that one, and not to fight... I tell him that I want a place there or there or there. He tells me no, and he lets the other children do it, and that's why I rebel.

Theresa: But Dan, he gives you a chance, and then he looks at how you behave.

[Interview with Daniela and Theresa; 12th January 2012]

In her explanation, Daniela expresses resentment and feels that the teacher impedes the degree of freedom which she thinks she should be granted within the classroom, and which as we have seen, many children in Marsa may have grown accustomed to as a taken-for-granted element of their social world. This exemplifies one such way in which the children's habitus may clash with the dominant habitus embodied in the school, an argument which I shall further delve into below. Daniela also seems to recognize that her decision to reject the primary activity associated with the classroom, i.e. learning and the transfer of knowledge from teacher to students, is one that ascribes to her the status of being 'mean' (*kattiva*) in actively choosing not to fulfil her end of the implicit reciprocal agreement. Daniela has not only demonstrated her understanding of what constitutes appropriate classroom participation, but she has located herself within that understanding in referring to herself as mean for failing to abide by it. Daniela also chooses to emphasize that although she does not want to learn in class, her mind still works. In other words, her decision to refrain from concentrating in class should not be taken as a sign of her inability to do so. Rather, she communicates that it is a conscious choice and exercise of free will, in spite of her inherent capacity to follow the lesson in the manner that is expected of her by the school authorities. One is completely independent from the other, as Daniela negotiates who she is, partly in relation to the person that the school would like her to be and become.

Having a 'Good Brain'

Teachers express particular frustration where seemingly bright children are considered to be squandering their intelligence. As Miss Degiorgio told Rachel, when Rachel handed in untidy work, "Aren't you embarrassed to hand in your work like this? Is this what you are going to do in the exam? Your brain is good, what a shame!"

Having a 'good brain' is something that seemed to be measured differently by all my informants. Rita and her teenage daughter Shania often told me that they had good brains, based on the fact that when they were in primary school, they both managed to attain high enough marks in order to be sent to a Lyceum for their secondary education, as opposed to an area secondary school⁷², despite not studying very hard for their exams or paying attention in class. Regardless of what they took to be this academic achievement, both of them quit school once they were 12 and 13 respectively, well below the compulsory school leaving age of 16, in order to join the world of paid labour. Rita and her partner Twanny, despite not having done any differently themselves, often expressed their disappointment in Shania leaving school at such a young age, telling me:

Twanny: Both of them are '*bravi*⁷³' and yet Richard is not studying for his exams and Shania is working behind the bar!

Rita: Her brain was good, you know!

Twanny: She went to a government school, and yet she still managed to get into the Lyceum. My own daughter went to a church school, but she still isn't as clever as Shania is⁷⁴.

[Fieldnotes; Monday 30th April 2012]

⁷² When the system of streaming was firmly in place within Government State schools, exams would determine children's abilities, and those on the higher (and thus taken for granted as more intelligent) scale were sent to Lyceums, whilst those who fared poorly were sent to Area Secondary schools.

⁷³ Clever

⁷⁴ Government schools are considered by many informants to be of a somewhat lower calibre than church schools.

My informants in Marsa, whilst acknowledging a certain capacity within themselves to achieve a great deal academically, rarely went down the route of academic success, instead taking the decision to leave school early and to begin earning money, and emphasizing their choice in doing so at the time. When Rita yelled at her son in the middle of the bar for his poor performance in an exam, Tony (who was inebriated as usual) told Rita to relax, adding “oh come on, what did we learn from school anyway?” Rita told Tony “your brain reaches whatever point that you want it to reach, it doesn’t only reach a certain point! There are certain things in life which you need to know from school!” She was equally and visibly upset on a separate occasion when her own father insinuated that perhaps “[Ronald’s] brain only reaches up till that point,” and needed to be comforted thereafter. Rita then went on to say that her other two children didn’t continue with school, not because they were *‘inoranti,’* (ignorant and stupid) but because they hadn’t wanted to. Twanny again said that he was so sorry for them, and disappointed.

The idea of ‘having a good brain’ was to some extent also held by a few teachers who visited Marsa Primary School for one-off activities, as they appeared to hold ‘natural’ ideas of intelligence, removing the concept from the social processes in which it is embedded. This notion exemplifies what Bêteille (1983: 2) referred to as “the idea of natural inequality,” a durable concept in which he claims that people like to believe that some (though not all) inequalities are simply in the nature of things, as opposed to being culturally constructed. Arguing along parallel lines, Valencia (1997: 1) outlined the evolution of the notion of “deficit thinking” in which students are held to fail in school because of internal deficits or deficiencies. Similarly, within my own ethnography, one visiting teacher described the area of Marsa as one with ‘low IQ,’ approaching her lesson there with correspondingly low expectations of the children. Furthermore, such evaluations were occasionally extended to the parents of children in class, with some teachers attributing children’s low levels of academic achievement to their parents. Indeed, many of my informants who were parents expressed difficulty to me in helping their children out with school work. Once Ronald began Year 5, Rita informed him that she would not be able to help him with school work as much anymore, since the material

was becoming a little too difficult for her and she could not remember it all (Ronald also spent a significant amount of time living with his maternal grandmother, who was also unable to help him with his school work since she was unable to read or write). Casey, another child at school, in telling me about his mother, told me “my mother is [as stupid as] a chicken. She tells me so herself – because she doesn’t know anything.”

Many parents seemed to feel ill-equipped in helping their children with the formal methods of learning required of them at school. Parents are less able to support their children in becoming the kind of person that the school is engaged in trying to produce, particularly since living within their particular social world has thus far required very different things from them, things which education seems to bear very little value in helping them to achieve. Tension occasionally arose between the kinds of cultural capital expected by the school and which the school aimed to maximize (as outlined in the aims of Education above), and the kinds of cultural capital which some children were accumulating in becoming valued persons Marsa. This implicit tension shall be considered in further detail here and more so in the following chapter, locating them within prominent theories of social reproduction.

Ideas of Social Reproduction

The ethnographic material outlined thus far begs the question of why so many of my informants were as disengaged with schooling as they were. Is their disengagement from school really an active choice which they make freely, or is it an inevitable outcome of a class structure which heavily conditions the experiences and dispositions of their social world? What is it that makes the prospect of leaving school at an early age seem so attractive to children in Marsa, despite having the ‘good brains’ to continue should they have wished to? Why do some children position themselves in opposition to what the school asks of them, and why do so many of them become so disinterested in school from such a young age?

These questions are addressed by a number of social reproduction theorists, each of whom attempt to understand precisely why there is a strong tendency for children from working class families to grow up and work in working class jobs. MacLeod (2009) regards the approaches of social reproduction theorists to fall within a spectrum, in which the structurally determinist theories of Bowles and Gintis (1976) fall on one end, moving on to the works of theorists such as Bourdieu (1974, 1977, 1977 in collaboration with J.C Passeron, 1984) and Bernstein (1977), until reaching the other end of the continuum where theorists such as Paul Willis (1977, 1983) and Henry Giroux (1983) lay their focus upon cultural production and resistance. Bowles and Gintis, following a determinedly Marxist approach, argue that the social relations of the school reflect those of the capitalist mode of production, training the wealthy to occupy positions at the top of the social hierarchy, whilst the lesser privileged are steered towards a lower status in the social structure. Such a highly objectivist stance, whilst very clearly accounting for the structural forces that come to bear on individuals in reinforcing relations of domination and inequality, precludes a consideration of individual autonomy and agency of the cultural actors who play a significant role in producing culture. Willis, on the other end of the spectrum and despite also leaning towards a Marxist approach, emphasizes a need for a focus on resistance, claiming that “with no sense of structure being a contested medium as well as an outcome of social process, ‘reproduction’ becomes a mechanical inevitability” (1983: 116). Thus, in Willis’ opposing view, “essential structures of capitalism are not *given*, or simply *externally* imposed, with perhaps some marginal resistance. They are produced *through* struggle, and in the collective self formation of subjects and the working class” (1983: 133; original emphasis). Although Willis’ work serves well to remind structuralists that objective forces are mediated by real human subjects within a cultural sphere, he may also be considered to devote too little attention to the way in which objective forces ultimately shape and come to bear upon human experiences and relationships. Whilst providing a deeper insight into the very social fabric of human experience, and moving away from a theoretically reductionist stance, culturalist theories run the risk of moving to the other extreme of failing to contextualize attitudes and behaviours as responses towards particular objective structures. Willis

himself appears to acknowledge this at times, by stating that “neither structure nor agency is understandable alone – they *need* each other in order to be comprehensible at all” (1983: 134; original emphasis). Willis stresses that a dialectical relation is required, and in agreement with this statement, I have thus far veered towards Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus as the most adequate and original theory regarding how a dialectical relationship between structure and agency might function. Willis (1983) has disagreed that Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus achieves this, citing Bourdieu’s approach as one laced with far too many deterministic elements. Indeed, as I have signalled in an earlier chapter, Willis is not alone in arguing this, and in holding that Bourdieu’s theory does not allow enough capacity for reflexive thought and collective action (Jenkins 1992; Giroux 1982; Willis 1983; amongst others).

I contend, as I did in the previous chapter, that Bourdieu’s theory of practice continues to be useful in understanding how certain ways of being come to persist from one generation to the next. Although not entirely unproblematic, not least due to the fact that Bourdieu himself appears to shift his stance towards either more subjectivist or objectivist leanings as his theory of practice is developed through the years, his concept of the habitus remains a useful tool in understanding how structure and agency come to be effectively mediated and act upon one another. Structural properties are incorporated within the habitus, and are thus embedded in subconscious everyday taken-for-granted practices, whilst the habitus in turn has a constitutive power that acts upon the social world of which it is part. The process is a dynamic one in which various potentialities exist within the social field, and where social agents struggle for positions within it, this struggle being conducive to either a conservation or a transformation of the field of forces in itself (Bourdieu 1983: 312). The habitus and forms of capital that an individual comes to possess over others ultimately determines that individual’s position within the field, effectively accounting for social inequalities which exist within it. In applying these ideas towards understanding education and schooling, a consideration of Bourdieu’s writings on education alone does not suffice, and must be regarded alongside later developments of Bourdieu’s theory.

In considering the role of schools in social reproduction, an understanding of Bourdieu's notion of different forms of capital is crucial. As outlined within the previous chapter, Bourdieu (1997) writes of three fundamental forms of capital, namely economic capital (converted into money), cultural capital (institutionalized by educational qualifications and thus potentially convertible to economic capital upon securing a well-paid job), and social capital (comprising a system of social obligations and 'connections' and also potentially convertible to economic capital under certain conditions). Within my argument, I am primarily concerned with the idea of cultural capital, acquired quite unconsciously and, Bourdieu holds, a theory by which it is possible to explain the unequal scholastic achievement of children from different social classes (1997: 47). Cultural capital is related as "the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment" (1997: 48), and it may exist in an embodied state in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body, in an objectified state in the form of cultural goods (such as pictures, books, or instruments), or in an institutionalized state in the form of educational qualifications.

Bourdieu essentially argues that educational institutions embody the habitus of the dominant group, which in turn serves to favour students whose habitus most accurately reflects that of the dominant group. Thus, students in possession of the forms of capital which the dominant group deem valuable are rewarded with due recognition, and their social advantages in the form of the possession of the right capital comes to be rewarded and granted legitimacy, and transformed into educational advantages. Conversely, existing social disadvantages similarly come to bestow their possessors with educational disadvantages. The required cultural capital necessitated by the school, which may include having fostered from one's parents (often based on their own historical relationship with schooling) a willingness to learn and an early engagement with the skills required by the school (such as reading and writing), serves to grant an advantage to those in possession of this cultural capital, thus developing the appropriate habitus that is required to do well in school. Children whose families possess the required cultural

capital thus come to internalize dispositions of being polite, composed, obedient, attentive, and analytical, all of which hold them in good stead and bode well for their future relationship with school. The dominant habitus, in effect, becomes an important form of cultural capital, and is passed off as natural gifts, merits, or skills which are held by some children and not others, as literature outlined earlier in this chapter regarding the propensity towards ideas of “natural inequality” (Béteille 1983) and “deficit thinking” (Valencia 1997) also suggested.

As this and the previous chapter have already indicated, qualities of toughness and masculinity pervade the social sphere in Marsa, and come to be internalized by individuals who take much pride in being regarded as hard and rough, and able to assert themselves, thus being worthy of respect and regarded as inferior to nobody. A tough person is one who is not easily intimidated, holds an authoritative stance, and embodies a hard masculinity whilst being able to respond to jibes with a quick, crude, and sharp wit. Individuals were largely left to their own devices in terms of how to behave, their own individual choice in their behaviour emphasized, whilst it was crucial for others to turn a blind eye in allowing others the freedom to do as they wished. Being loud and vulgar in speech, and occasionally harsh yet immensely affable with one another were also common traits within the class habitus of Marsa, and formed part of the external social conditions which many children subsequently came to internalize and integrate within their own set of natural and taken-for-granted dispositions. This cultural capital, in the form of internalized roughness, whilst valued amongst many in Marsa, gave rise to dispositions that were not valued at the school, and that were reprimanded. Therefore, tension occasionally arose in the different forms of cultural capital valued within the school and within the wider community of Marsa, with children largely expected to manifest the dispositions inherent in both. Some children were more successful than others in negotiating these conflicting demands according to which dispositions were called for by the situational context, whilst those who struggled in this endeavour seemed more likely to turn to the values and dispositions which were most familiar to them. One such illustration of these conflicting demands is that teachers regularly informed children that upon the eruption of an intense argument or scuffle, the parties involved should

report directly to them to resolve the matter, and certainly not take the matter in to their own hands for risk of the argument escalating. Children, on the other hand, were often taught by their parents that if they are hit or insulted in any way, then they must respond with ten times the force of the original blow, in asserting their dominance within the frame of the confrontation and averting the risk of being bullied in the future. Within this context, it becomes possible to understand how children come to value dispositions of assertiveness over meekness and obedience, and how they might regularly come to challenge or attempt to overthrow the authority of the teacher within a traditional classroom paradigm, unwilling to forfeit the qualities of resistance that they have come to internalize.

Children thus come to interact with the school and build a relationship with schooling in terms of the set of dispositions that they have come to internalize as a taken-for-granted way of being in the world – attitudes and behaviours considered to be so natural, they are rarely (if ever) questioned, and are internalized in accordance with the cultural capital they have accumulated within the field, which in turn determines their positioning in relation to other social agents. This often (though not determinedly) has the tendency to reflect the relationship that their own parents have historically had with schooling, considering that their parent's lack of the appropriate cultural capital (as legitimized by the dominant group) in turn rendered them ill-equipped to do well in school. However it is important to note that some of my child informants, whilst coming from working class families in which the parents were employed in humble occupations, nonetheless did do very well in school. With respect to these cases, I noticed that their parents had often had a more positive relationship with schooling overall, and thus were more knowledgeable in their own social investment of their children's schooling. These parents were more likely to foster a love of education in their children, and instil a sense of urgency and necessity to do well in school (in order for their children to eventually find good jobs), this in turn giving rise to the necessary dispositions required for their children to succeed. Although the need to do well in school was often stressed by most parents, it was not always accompanied by the necessary cultural capital, nor was it supported by internalized knowledge of navigating through the education system (knowledge which is largely taken

for granted and which I further explore in the next chapter). The habitus of children in possession of such advantages thus came to match the habitus embodied within the school more closely, their respective position in the field influenced by cultural capital in the form of intense and knowledgeable support and encouragement within the family.

The negative experiences that many other parents have had with schooling similarly forms part of the children's objective world which comes to be subsequently internalized, and therefore also constitutive of the habitus (in itself very dynamic and flexible) in generating a particular set of dispositions in relation to schooling over others. In lacking the specific cultural capital that schools take for granted, and in thus being unable to bestow this capital upon their children, social disadvantages oftentimes come to be perpetuated. Cultural capital arising from doing well in school thus cannot be transformed into economic capital, and families continue to rely on the same low status jobs. Thus, quite often, states of abjection and positions within a perceived social hierarchy (which have partly come about as a result of a failed relationship with schooling, and which consequently limit opportunities for social mobility) may have a tendency to be reproduced from one generation to the next. Despite their best intentions in attempting to encourage their children to accomplish that which they were unable to accomplish themselves, it becomes difficult for parents to unlock doors of opportunity for their children outside of the doors which they have already walked through themselves.

My informants were largely accepting of what MacLeod (2009: 114) refers to as the "achievement ideology", in that the distribution of success and rewards are considered to rely solely on individual merit, therefore a lack of success in schooling was always largely put down to being lazy, or not being intelligent enough (a way, MacLeod holds, in which inequality thus comes to be legitimated). A child's tendency to be disruptive, inattentive, or involved in confrontations with other children, was often labelled as individual character traits, as opposed to typical behaviour generated by a particular class habitus, one which often came about within the context of being raised in a protective style of

hard individualism⁷⁵ as described by Kusserow (2004). Adult informants thus often absorbed the blame for their own lack of success in school, and for the extent of ‘showing off’ and resistance which they displayed while they were in school, putting their lack of success in school down to their own ineptitude or unwillingness to co-operate. Thus, in applying the above ethnographic material to Bourdieu (1974) once again, his argument may become illustrated:

By awarding allegedly impartial qualifications (which are also largely accepted as such) for socially conditioned aptitudes which it treats as unequal ‘gifts’, it transforms *de facto* inequalities into *de jure* ones, and *economic and social* differences into *distinctions of quality*, and legitimates the transmission of the cultural heritage. In doing so, it is performing a confidence trick. Apart from enabling the elite to justify being what it is, the *ideology of giftedness*, the cornerstone of the whole educational and social system, helps to enclose the underprivileged classes in the roles which society has given them by making them see as natural inability things which are only a result of an inferior social status, and by persuading them that they owe their social fate (which is increasingly tied to their educational fate as society becomes more rationalized) to their individual nature and their lack of gifts.

(Bourdieu 1974: 42)

Of course, this does not presuppose that counter-school culture or resistance is absent. Indeed, as in Willis’ (1977) narrative of the ‘lads,’ some children in Marsa displayed resistance to school from a very early age, and appeared to produce an oppositional identity for themselves in relation to that which the school asked of them. What is essentially lacking from Willis’ account, which I hope to have addressed here in relation to Bourdieu’s work, is the extent to which the resistance to school in itself is couched within wider objective structures, which in turn come to be internalized within the habitus. Therefore, whilst children are indeed creative in their responses, and are active in producing culture, this process in itself is always situated within wider external forces that

⁷⁵ Kusserow (2004: v) refers to ‘hard individualism’ as emphasizing a tough, resilient self that was hardy enough either to protect itself from violence, poverty, and misfortune (as with her informants in Queenston) or to project itself into a higher social class (as with her informants in Kelley). Kusserow observed the way in which children were socialized into what she termed as either ‘hard’ or ‘soft’ styles of individualism, the idea of ‘individualism’ in itself forming part of child rearing practices and common-sense discourse whereby the kind of trajectories which parents envisioned for their children made themselves evident.

come to bear on individuals – not in a straightforward and deterministic manner - but in diverse and dynamic ways.

From the theoretical argument put forward thus far, it follows that a number of middle class children appear to be better equipped to do well in school, particularly given that their habitus is often the one which is embodied within the school. Thus, their habitus (as generated partly by the conditions of their social world) comes to match that of the school far more closely than that of their working class peers (see Evans 2006). As a result, the set of dispositions required of them at home do not divert all that much from those which are required of them at school. Conversely, children whose habitus differs greatly from that embodied in the school appear to have a much harder time of it – not only is there a divergence in the value which is attributed to certain attitudes and behaviours, but these dispositions may occasionally be actively contested and deemed undesirable, given that they are situated in opposition to what the school is trying to accomplish. Growing up in Marsa and participation in school may thus come to require very different things from the children, on a very subconscious level. It should be reiterated here that whilst some children in Marsa did belong to middle class families, the group of child informants within my ethnography came from predominantly working class backgrounds, and all attended the local state primary school. Although some of my child informants did do well in school, a significant number of them appeared to struggle with what schooling seemed to require of them. My attention was largely focused on the latter group, their early and apparent disengagement causing me great concern during fieldwork, and in my view being key to understanding the various nuances of abjection as they were manifested in Marsa.

A child growing up in Marsa will very likely come to learn that it is very important to be kind-hearted and friendly to your neighbours, and to be intensely sociably and down to earth. They will learn that they will often be granted the freedom to choose their own course of action, but that the responsibility for doing so is theirs. At the same time, a child must know how to be rough and how to stand up for themselves where necessary,

particularly if relationships turn sour and transform into vindictive rivalries. In order to avoid the latter, individuals must learn to turn a blind eye to transgressions or illegal activities they are likely to see occur at some point, permeating areas of their social world. They learn to keep things hidden in order to preserve the sociable status quo required of them, knowing that accusations or reporting of offences is likely to spark bitter rivalries that place their participants in precarious situations. Furthermore, in receiving any threats or in being placed in an intimidating situation, children must often learn to respond with amplified violence, asserting their dominance over whomever they take to be the original source of the threat. Although creatively produced cultural responses, they are contextualized within a potentially hard environment, which demands quite particular things from children, and for which children develop particular (though not identical) dispositions. Such dispositions may often run contrary to those required by the school, thus having a propensity (though not a fixed one) to perpetuate a 'counter-school culture', as termed by Willis (1977). For children whose resistance is not so overt, their differing habitus may still lead to internal conflict, finding a greater challenge in the notion of school than other children better prepared for the journey and equipped with the necessary habitus and cultural capital to do well.

These points shall be more clearly illustrated in the following chapter, in considering some of the illegal activities that the children were exposed to or were knowledgeable of as significant features of their objective world. These in turn were absorbed within their habitus in a way that often came to affect the children's participation in school, by contesting class-based values lying at the heart of the educational structure. I analyse how these illicit activities contributed towards children's formation of aspirations for their future, further considering the ways in which the children's habitus may often come to jar with that embodied in the school. Many children in Marsa eventually come to learn that school is not the only option that grants children independence and employment, and it is certainly not the most immediate solution for those who wish to begin earning money right away. Living in Marsa unlocks other doors for some children – doors that more promptly satisfy their desire for money. The other options that are made available to the children may, I later suggest, speak more soundly to the children's habitus, given that

they are able to make more meaning of them since they are grounded in ideas that children have come to take for granted as natural within their social world. Children come to learn about alternatives to schooling that equally enable them to earn money, and they learn about them in a socially situated manner, in the process of developing close and intimate relationships with others who are located within the same social world. Given that (possibly also due to a lack of options arising from a failure in schooling) some of these activities include low status jobs and an involvement in the black market, and thus a relegation to a form of 'underclass,' states of abjectness may often come to be reproduced.

Chapter 5: Opposing the ‘Educated Person’

“With the black market, life moves along more smoothly.”

Rita, 23rd January 2012

The message that many teachers attempted to drive home to the students was that their active participation in education and schooling was a prerequisite in allowing them to eventually find good jobs once they were older. This is the implicit promise that is given to children on condition that they do everything that is asked of them at school: the more active their participation in school, the better the job which they will be able to secure as adults. Yet many children in Marsa often come to learn that there are many ways of generating financial income, some of which not only fall outside of what they are taught at school, but are directly opposed to what the school authorities are aiming to achieve. These alternative ways of being in the world, which their surrounding social conditions communicate as equally viable, come to be internalized within their habitus, generating a set of dispositions which come to bear upon many aspects of their life, including aspirations for their future, which Appadurai (2004) refers to as a “navigational cultural capacity.” Specifically, Appadurai (2004: 69) argues that “the more privileged in any society simply have used the map of its norms to explore the future more frequently and more realistically” whilst the poorer members have less opportunity to “practice the use of this navigational capacity (in turn because their situations permit fewer experiments and less easy archiving of alternative futures).” Thus, according to Appadurai, the poorer members of society come to have a more brittle horizon of aspirations.

Although a very relevant approach, a consideration of aspirations and trajectory to the future must, in my view, take greater account of situated learning and Bourdieu’s concept of the habitus. Bourdieu’s attempts at understanding cultural orientations to the future have, as I have already indicated, opened him to criticisms of occupying an overly deterministic position. Yet, given that the habitus refers to a set of *dispositions*,

continuously created and modified in accordance with an individual's personal and collective history and interaction with the field, whilst being similarly constitutive in itself, the habitus plays an inevitable role in steering (though not determining) future-oriented action. Thus, Bourdieu's (1984) later notions of strategy and life trajectory all presuppose a continuous relationship with the past, present, and future, approached in terms of the set of dispositions at our disposal at any given time. When the habitus, as a generative principle, jars with the dominant habitus as embodied within the school and within other formal institutions, children may thus find themselves ill-prepared to tread pathways outside of the ones which their social worlds have already demonstrated as viable and achievable, and they thus gravitate towards these pathways (for which they already possess the appropriate set of dispositions). As the ethnographic material in this chapter shall demonstrate, this may regrettably have a further effect of reproducing social states of abjection, as they thus come to be internalized.

Earning cash, Learning Concealment

As a working class town, Marsa is a relatively poor area.⁷⁶ My informants confided that they at times struggled to keep up with their gas and electricity bills, and my family of key informants went into hiding in their flat (unbeknownst to anyone but me) when they fell behind on the rent for their bar for a couple of weeks. Three of the shops I frequented stopped serving hot food because they could not afford to keep their heating appliances going all day (and yet they saved face with one another by pretending that the appliances were broken). Families had considerable knowledge on how to access social benefits, and some frequently manipulated the system in order for them to receive benefits to which they were not necessarily entitled, in order to get by financially. They regularly took jobs that were 'off the books' so that they would not pay taxes and National Insurance, and so that they could simultaneously register for unemployment benefits, or "relief", as it was often referred to. Some also received children's allowance, and social benefits "*tal-mard*" ("of illness", such as when they had poor mental health) amongst others. Individuals in

⁷⁶ Although as Chapter 2 already indicated, various class divisions and gradations exist within Marsa itself.

Marsa were quite proficient in securing money by such means, taking what they felt was owed to them by the state but often denied, and they expressed little guilt in doing so, telling me that they would otherwise be unable to get by. Polly praised me when she felt as though I was doing the same:

As I caught up with Polly, I mentioned that I was working quite a lot lately, and feeling quite exhausted. At this, Polly could barely contain her laughter, and she told me “I’m laughing because I always see you so relaxed and happy go lucky, chatting to everyone. You screw around with the Government’s money – and you do well to do so!”

[Fieldnotes; Wednesday 7th March 2012]

Polly was aware that my work (and thus my presence in Marsa) was partly financed by EU funds administered by the Government of Malta, but she failed to fully appreciate that the participant observation that I was undertaking, and the informal conversations that I had with people in Marsa, was actually work. Thus she lauded what she took to be justifiable exploitation of Government funds on my part. Within such cases, there were unspoken agreements amongst individuals, where they would turn a blind eye to what one another were doing, and cover up for one another on occasion by pretending not to know what is going on (this was a frequent practice whenever the police passed by to investigate something). The way in which money was accessed was coupled with an implicit obligation on the part of observers not to tell on anybody else’s transgressions, particularly so as not to invite any *‘inkwiet’* (worry/trouble) or *‘vendikazzjoni’* (act of revenge). Individuals expected to be left to do as they wished, and to handle their own affairs without any outside interference or betrayal. Any such intrusion tended to place the interferer at risk of getting into trouble or into a worrying and dangerous situation of conflict (*‘inkwiet’*) and ultimately suffering some form of personal revenge (*‘vendikazzjoni’*) – sinister acts which individuals often took upon themselves and placed in their own hands. *‘Inkwiet’* was further used to refer to individuals getting into trouble with the law. Learning skills of feigning ignorance thus came to take on prominence in avoiding situations of *‘inkwiet’*, as Rita illustrates here:

I asked Rita how she came to know 'it-Turu⁷⁷,' a very dodgy character who she described as a Mafioso, apparently responsible for murdering a man but keeping out of prison for it because he "knows the right people." Rita told me that a few years ago, she was working with a cleaning company, and they told her that there was a place in Marsa which no one else in their staff wanted to go to and clean. It was a bar in Albert town, known for the drug deals and prostitution which went on in there. They approached Rita with this job, knowing that she had been raised in Marsa, and Rita said that it was fine. She wasn't fussed about what went on, telling me that she lived by the philosophy of "*rajt ma rajtx, smajt ma smajtx*" (I saw but I didn't see, I heard but I didn't hear).

[Fieldnotes; Thursday 12th January 2012]

Once Rita began working there, Turu asked Rita how much the cleaning company was paying her. Rita said that clients paid the company Lm5 (approx. £9.50) an hour, and out of that she would earn Lm2.50 (approx. £4.75) an hour. Turu told Rita to go and work for him directly instead, and he would give her Lm3.75 (approx. £7) an hour and keep the remaining Lm1.25 (approx. £2.35) for himself. Rita agreed and left the cleaning company, and Turu began finding her other cleaning jobs. The fact that Rita kept quiet about all that she saw at the bar earned the family's respect. Rita told me that she also used to cover up for Turu if, for example, his wife came by and he was upstairs with a prostitute. Rita would lie, and tell his wife that he had just left. Whilst Rita was fond of Turu, she was also very wary of him, and keen not to get on his bad side for fear of the revenge ('*vendikazzjoni*') which Turu was capable of inflicting. She told me that aside from killing someone a while back, his son had also shot at someone at the bar across the street some time ago. Rita told me that she tends to close early in the evenings, so as not to invite any unnecessary trouble over at her bar, adding that if Turu were to pass by and see her bar open, he would come in and stay there until 4am, and she would have no choice but to allow it.

⁷⁷ "...in the villages of Malta and Gozo people are much better known by their nicknames than by their Christian names or surnames, which are only used for registration purposes." Cassar Pullicino, J. (1992 [1976]) 'Social aspects of Maltese Nicknames' in *Studies in Maltese Folklore*. Malta: Malta University Press

Rita thus continued to do what she could to access as much money as she could, and to conceal the illicit means in which she occasionally did so, whilst also rendering invisible other people's attempts to go about their own business and do the same. Rita often used to tell me that before her children came to live with her, she lived like a rich woman and earned approximately Lm800 a month (approx. 1500 sterling) working at her brother's bar where men would gamble with large sums of money and leave large tips. All the while, Rita continued to receive social benefits. She paid her mother a small sum every week to keep her youngest son, and had very few financial obligations outside of that, asking me "What more could I want?" It was this kind of quick money which eventually lured her eldest child Shania (who was 17 years old at the time of fieldwork) to abandon school early and begin working behind a bar.

Why do some children leave formal schooling early?

The previous chapter explored why some children come to be so disengaged with school from such a young age. Although limited in my ability to address the question of early school leavers with regards to my child informants at the primary school, by means of my friendships with 17 year old Shania and her 15 year old brother Richard (both of whom had stopped attending school when they were around 13) I gained considerable insight into what may lead some children to depart from formal schooling early. Their own personal histories provide a good starting point for this discussion. Shania often described her childhood to me as one that was marked by a lot of verbal and physical abuse from her mother, whilst her father, a Tunisian Arab, was very strict with her and placed a lot of emphasis on his children getting a good Education. Shania's parents were forced to marry when her mother got pregnant with her, since Rita's parents refused to support her and her baby. The marriage was ill-fated, and Rita abandoned her (allegedly abusive) husband and children after a few years in order to live with her lover. Shania's emotionally turbulent childhood rendered her relationship with her own mother very strained. Their relationship was characterised by a lot of violence and abuse, whilst she conversely spoke of her father with a great deal of fondness, telling me that he almost acted as her

husband at times. Shania spent her childhood being ferried between her two parents along with her younger brother, each of them going to live with one of their parents when they had had enough of the other (and occasionally crossing paths and overlapping with their sibling in terms of which parent they resided with). Shania was living with her mother Rita at the time when she dropped out of school⁷⁸, whilst Rita was working at her brother's bar in Racecourse Street. Rita told me that she would wake Shania up for school, but would then need to leave the flat at 5am to go to work at the bar, and Shania would often go back to sleep and skip school. Shania left school at 13, although she was made to return to school very briefly when she went back to live with her father. The shame involved in being placed within the same class as a younger cohort of students (since she had missed so much school) soon caused her to act up and cause trouble in the school. She got excluded from school on a regular basis again, until she eventually quit altogether. Shania explained to me how she came to the decision to quit school in the first place:

Shania told me that she was "very clever" at school, and used to go to the Lyceum in Pembroke. She admitted that she had become a bit of a show off, and used to constantly get excluded from school. When she lived with her mother and had gotten excluded from school for three weeks, she would go down to the bar in Racecourse Street where her mother worked. She said that over there, "in-nies jithawdu" (the people mess around), telling me that they have a lot of money to throw around. A lot of drugs would exchange hands over there, and patrons would often take drugs in the bathroom. Men would buy a round of drinks worth around €30, pay with a €50 note, and tell Shania to keep the change. Shania told me that suddenly, she had money for manicures and blow dries and things like that. Once her exclusion period was over, Shania went back to school and started being a 'show off' again, dropping balloons filled with water from the roof of the school amongst other things. She got excluded for another two weeks, and then she went back to the bar again. Shania seemed to have gotten a taste of this other life where money was quickly acquired, and she didn't want to give it up.

[Fieldnotes; Tuesday 6th December 2011]

⁷⁸ Although Shania resided with her mother at this point, it was her father who had legal custody of her in this period of time.

In a later interview, Shania also added that her mother had been struggling financially and was unable to cope on her own. Therefore, she partly took the decision to leave school early in order to help her mother run the household and make ends meet (despite her mother's insistence that Shania stay in school). It is safe to assume that eventually, some children in Marsa similarly and indirectly come to learn that their schooling is not the only avenue which allows them access to money in the future, and it is certainly not the quickest route to earning much-needed cash. Indeed, some children already appeared to see little relevance in what they learnt at school, reasoning that they could still find forms of employment without it in much the same way as the adults around them had. Teachers often tried to stress the importance of paying attention in class by linking this to the children's future employment, telling them that their education was vital in allowing them to secure a job in the future. Furthermore, they stressed that children should know how to be compliant and obedient in school, emphasizing that their failure to do so would cause problems in their future work as they would be unable to show the necessary respect to their superiors, and consequently risk losing their jobs as a result. In Marsa, children became aware of means by which they could eventually access money with more immediacy, and without all of the skills that formal schooling was said to impart, to the point where in the eyes of some children, there seemed to be little reason or incentive to pay attention in school given that the ultimate end result of earning money could still be reached, whilst the means did not particularly matter. As in Willis' (1977) ethnography, "most work...is equilibrated by the overwhelming need for instant money, the assumption that all work is unpleasant and that what really matters is the potential particular work situations hold for self and particularly masculine expression, diversions and 'laffs' as learnt creatively in the counter-school culture" (Willis 1977: 100). Given that money could be obtained in both the normal economy and the black economy, some children may lean more readily towards forms of work for which they already possess the necessary dispositions and social capital, having internalized their specific objective conditions in which the black economy potentially thrives as a more immediate and effective way of earning money. This shall be illustrated in further detail later in this chapter. Furthermore, the children's dispossession of an appropriate habitus in school often comes to carry itself over into the workplace, whereby well-paying jobs within the normal economy may subsequently evade them due to their lack of alignment with the dominant habitus. Just

as their lack of an appropriate habitus and cultural capital does not bode well for their performance in school (as argued in the previous chapter), so too may it jar with the habitus required of them in certain forms of work, and become further expounded by the lack of cultural capital in the form of educational qualifications.

Shania occasionally spoke to me with a sense of regret about her decision to leave formal education early, and she expressed her wish to study for a few O levels⁷⁹, learn the Spanish language, or begin a course on catering at the Institute for Tourism Studies. I encouraged her to pursue these options in our conversations, however none of these ideas ever came to fruition, despite providing Shania with the necessary information which she requested from me. Shania seemed keen for her younger brothers not to follow in her same footsteps. She was very harsh with her brothers when it appeared as though they weren't taking their school work seriously, and were similarly going down the path which she had already (in her opinion, irreversibly) taken, lined with the risks and downfalls which she already knew it to have. Shania's brother Richard, who was 15 years old at the time of fieldwork, had also dropped out of school at a young age, and he worked in his mother Rita's bar along with Shania (although he took opportunities to skive off whenever he could, telling me that his real job was skiving off work). When tensions ran high at home, Richard decided to leave his mother's house and move back in with his father, who sent him back to school for the last four months of compulsory education after an absence of over a year (adding that his success and participation in school was a prerequisite in allowing him to move in). Rita did not seem to hold high hopes of her son succeeding in his O levels, telling me "since he's started working with companies, all he wants is money in his pocket. He can't do anything with just his O levels." When I pointed out that there were a few courses that Richard could pursue with a few O' levels, Rita told me that it was useless and that nothing would come of it, just as nothing had come of it when I had provided Shania with similar information. In the end, Richard began to cut school again in order to take on odd jobs to make some extra cash, and he did not pass his O levels. He was distraught and inconsolable over this, particularly as a result of being taunted and berated by Shania for his failure. Shania was infuriated at

⁷⁹ Equivalent to GCSE's.

the thought that their father's time and money in sending Richard back to school had been wasted, and she told Richard that he was ungrateful⁸⁰. Richard was kicked out of his father's home and had moved back in with Rita before the end of my fieldwork.

Although I had hoped, for Richard's sake, that he would do well in his exams, I was unfortunately not particularly surprised at the outcome. The requirements of formal schooling were even more alien to him once he returned to school after such a long absence, and he regularly skived off school in order to take on odd jobs for money here and there. The skills that he had mastered in Marsa in his time working at the bar served him very little at a school desk, and the promise of quick money remained as attractive as ever. Thus it was of little surprise to me that Richard eventually returned to the path in life which was most familiar to him – the one that his parents had also gone down, and that they had unknowingly also made available to him despite emphasizing the importance of schooling in their rhetoric. Richard had acquired a particular set of dispositions in adjusting to particular positions within his social field in the course of his own personal history, granting him a particular knowledge and understanding of the world which lent itself to the mastery of some skills over others (see Evans 2006).

Despite this, failure to succeed in school continued to be treated as a personal choice (in line with MacLeod's 2009 notion of 'achievement ideology') which, once taken, was largely considered amongst my informants to be irreversible for the most part, an individual being too firmly entrenched along their particular path to be able to turn back without significant difficulty, and furthermore holding little incentive to do so. There are similarities with Willis' 'lads' in this, whereby "once the working class boy begins to differentiate himself from school authority there is a powerful cultural charge behind him to complete the process" (1977: 74). In discussing the concept of trajectory with specific

⁸⁰ Even though her own experience of going to school had been no different, Shania taunted her brother Richard on this particular occasion, and she was also regularly harsh on her younger brother Ronald while he was studying, calling him an *iblah* [idiot] and a donkey whenever he made careless mistakes in his school work, and telling him that if he did badly at school then he would not find a job, and he would have nobody to love him or take care of him and would be forced to live on the street with no money for a house or food.

reference to Bourdieu, Reed-Danahey (2005:23) observes that “the life trajectory comes about not as a result of some inherent unity or identity of the individual who follows a particular path but, rather, as an outcome of the various social fields and their attendant value in the overall economy of symbolic exchanges, in which the person operated.” Reed-Danahey goes on to refer to the way in which Bourdieu’s theory of the habitus “both determines social trajectories and presents possibilities that a social agent can manipulate or take advantage of in various social fields.” The habitus thus plays a significant role in steering both present strategy as well as future-oriented action, communicating the range of possibilities which a social actor may act upon and come to regard as realistically viable.

With regards to the constitution of the habitus, which in itself is never static and constantly readjusts to new positions that the actor takes up in the social field, it is important not to presume a circular loop between the structural determinants and individual agency, and not to assume an overly simplistic relationship between opportunity and aspiration, particularly in terms of social class. As MacLeod (2009: 140) correctly observes, “although Bourdieu gives an adequate sense of the internal structure of the habitus, his varied empirical work suggests that, although habitus is primarily a function of social class, other factors can be incorporated into it. [...] On my readings, habitus is constituted at the level of the family, and factors such as ethnicity, educational history, peer associations, neighbourhood social ecology, and demographic characteristics (e.g., geographical mobility, duration of tenancy in public housing, sibling order, and family size) are all constitutive of the habitus.” This observation further testifies to the flexibility of the habitus, and indeed goes some way towards explaining the divergences that existed in Marsa whereby a number of children did indeed do well in school and hold high aspirations for their future. However, further to that, MacLeod’s view indirectly emphasizes the need to take into account the wider factors that are constitutive of the habitus. In undertaking this, Lave and Wenger’s (1991) concept of legitimate peripheral participation also proves useful, placing emphasis on the whole person and viewing agent, activity and world as mutually constitutive. Their approach further emphasizes the distinctly social character in which children become part of a community of practice,

stressing the need to move away from an idea of the school as an exclusive site of learning.

Lave & Wenger (1991) explore the situated character of human learning and understanding. Rather than regard learning as a formal acquisition of knowledge within an individual mind, they consider it in light of forms of social co-participation, in which a child acquires skills through meaningful social engagement. In this respect, learning takes place within a participant framework, in which the wider process is a precondition for the transformation of the individual learner. The idea of legitimate peripheral participation denotes a very particular mode of social engagement. William F. Hanks in the foreword describes it as follows: “This central concept denotes the particular mode of engagement of a learner who participates in the actual practice of an expert, but only to a limited degree and with limited responsibility for the ultimate product as a whole. There is no necessary implication that a learner acquired mental representations that remain fixed thereafter, nor that the ‘lesson’ taught consists itself in a set of abstract representations” (1991: 14-15). By means of situated learning, a wider community of practice often comes to be reproduced in tacitly transforming its younger practitioners into skilled social participants, whilst maintaining the forms of social co-participation in which the process is embedded. In tying this in to Bourdieu’s model of the habitus, the learning undertaken by means of legitimate peripheral participation serves to gradually alter the positions of the social actors within the field, allowing the actors to make appropriate adjustments to their positions and generate an appropriate set of dispositions in response. It is important to further illustrate precisely what some children in Marsa come to learn about in such a socially situated manner, as they alter their positions in the field and incorporate these adjustments within their habitus. This chapter has already highlighted a few skills which some children in Marsa come to learn – the importance of pretending not to know, means of accessing money, and avoiding *‘inkwiet’* and *‘vendikazzjoni,’* amongst others. It shall continue to illustrate other skills that also present themselves as pressing to be learnt within processes of social co-participation, and which may ultimately have the effect of generating a set of dispositions that situate the individual in opposition to the ‘educated person’ that the school is engaged in trying to produce.

Engaging with Risk

As already illustrated, Shania seemed to accept that her future lay in working within local bars, and she did so with a sad sense of resignation, implying that it was an inescapable fate for her, and too late to change the course of her life. She also accepted that her work came with a degree of risk, an inevitability that simply had to be tolerated and dealt with, as she illustrates here:

Shania told me that she was getting annoyed working Sundays at the bar (Sundays were very busy, as patrons would stay late, drink heavily, be quite rowdy, and take cocaine in the bathroom of the bar). Shania told me that she went out clubbing at 2.30am a few nights ago after finishing work, because a group of people who had been drinking at the bar encouraged her to go with them. Shania told me that she went because she wanted to maintain good relationships with them. I asked Shania if she was ever worried that she was going to get herself into "*inkwiet*" (worry/trouble). She told me that she was used to it now, and that she knew that this was going to be how she would be spending the rest of her life. I asked what she would do if she got herself into "*inkwiet*" and she said "*heqq, pačenzja hux*" ("Oh well... patience, I suppose.") She seems to know and accept that she regularly takes this risk. She spoke of being in a car with the bar's patrons where there would be a lot of cocaine and "junk" in the car, and where there would often be the possibility of a road block. I told Shania that she could always do something else with her life, and Shania answered "I'm used to these bars now."

[Fieldnotes, Tuesday 6th March 2012]

Shania was the more cautious member of her family in terms of her calculation of risk, attempting to ensure that circumstances were approached in such a way that her family could not be implicated for any of the illicit activities they were engaged in. Nonetheless risk was an ever present aspect of her life which she reluctantly accepted. As existing literature on the anthropology of risk already posits, dangers are in a sense culturally selected. People with similar forms of social and cultural organization evaluate danger (and thus perceive and manage risk) in similar ways. This is the argument put across by Douglas & Wildavsky (1982), in stating that "risk taking and risk aversion, shared

confidence and shared fears, are part of the dialogue on how best to organize social relations” (1982: 8).

The regular practice in Marsa of covering up other people’s illicit activities, rendering practices invisible, and pretending not to know anything about what was going on, mitigated risks to some degree, to the point where many risks seemed worth taking. Thus the knowledge of the future, a crucial aspect in determining the risks which are taken in the present, incorporated a presumption of an unspoken moral code whereby people in Marsa do not tell on one another to the authorities, and actively conceal what is going on – particularly if they wished to avoid suffering some form of revenge. This implicit understanding is one that also comes to be peripherally learnt by children. It was certainly learnt by Shania, who tended to be careful in her dealings with others in Marsa, and avoided getting herself into trouble that might prompt others in Marsa to seek revenge. Children at the primary school also seemed to be aware of the need to cover up certain things, and some precociously took measures to ensure that their parents did not get themselves into any trouble or suffer acts of revenge themselves, doing so by calling upon their own ability to keep quiet and fake ignorance when the occasion called for it, as this vignette shows:

[In this conversation, Luka had just shared a story with me about a man who chased him in the street.]

Sharon: Did your mum do anything?

Luka: I didn’t tell her.

Sharon: Why?

[...]

Luka: I’d be afraid to tell her. She would go and beat him up... Then she’d have to go to court and so on...

Ġanni: They’d arrest her and then there would be all this trouble [*’inkwiet’*] with the police and the law courts and so on...

Luka: I wouldn't even tell my dad...my dad even more so... He bought a car and after a week they slashed the car and gave him a puncture as well... if I knew who it was I wouldn't tell him, because he would go after him [*'vendikazzjoni'*].

Ġanni: He'd beat him up.

Luka: My dad said that, he said if I see him I'll kill him... he would get up and go and kill him.

Ġanni: My grand dad would do that too.

[Interview with Luka and Ġanni (both 10 years old), Thursday 24th November 2011]

Feigning ignorance towards the actions of others is thus a central concept in avoiding trouble, and it is also a crucial skill in dealing with "*taħwid*" – a concept that was often evoked in speaking about Marsa, and which I shall now turn to and describe in more detail. The term "*taħwid*" is a broad one, and literally translates into confusion or "a mix up." It is frequently used to refer to a general departure from social order, such as in the case of somebody cheating or leaving a family, being corrupt, abusing drugs, being involved in prostitution and engaging in illegal activities, amongst others. The term implies that things are not as they 'should' be. It was by no means applicable to all families in Marsa (nor exclusive to Marsa alone), however those who did not "mix up," so to speak, were still to some extent reluctantly forced to accept the presence of a degree of "*taħwid*" as a feature of local life. Many people during fieldwork informed me that in Marsa, "*in-nies jithawdu/ in-nies mħawdin*" (people mix up/ people are mixed up). Strategies for dealing with "*taħwid*," such as rendering the visible invisible, surfaced indirectly in this manner as essential skills to be learnt.

Involvement with 'Taħwid'

'*Taħwid*' as it is referred to in Marsa encompasses (but is not limited to) a number of illegal activities, implying that a person is messing around in a way that they should not be. It presupposes that there is some form of an expected social order which has been disturbed in some way, by a person who has 'mixed things up' and is 'mixed up.' Inside the bar *Ta' Ċikku*, Rita sold contraband cigarettes which she hid under the counter, and she had plans to set up tables in the back for people to use for gambling, as well as a shelf

in the bathroom for patrons to snort cocaine from. Shania was vehemently against this, as the police already had their eye on them given that they had anonymously been reported for selling cigarettes to minors (something which Rita was certain had come about as an act of revenge, or '*vendikazzjoni.*') Within the school, and during my interviews with them, some of the children demonstrated their intimate knowledge of illegal activities which went on in Marsa. During one interview, Ġanni explained to his schoolmate Jason and I how dog fights and cock fights were conducted, and how the animals were riled up and trained in preparation for their fights. He had a working knowledge of the money which was earned during fights, as well as the value of each animal:

Ġ: My grandpa, when the time comes for the fight, he would remain up all night listening to the dog growling. He would inject them, everything he would do, he would inject them, cut off a piece of their flesh, throw them some panadols, so that they are ready...

S: Who wins in the fight?

Ġ: The one that doesn't die. One time there was a Chihuahua, he was really small... he was good, he could go and bite from underneath.

S: Who organized the fights?

Ġ: I don't know, I was 5.

S: Who did you go with?

Ġ: With my uncle and my grandpa. We sold the dog later.

[Ġanni then proceeded to tell me about a threat which his grandfather had received, in the form of an anonymous call threatening to kill his dogs and his horses.]

Ġ: He said "Come here because I'm going to kill all of the dogs that you have in the garage!" My grandpa ran there, because he had just won four thousand on the Chihuahua.

J: If they had killed him you would just have bought another one.

Ġ: Do you know what you're saying?

J: How much are they, each?

Ġ: Depending on which one you buy, one of them was three thousand.

S: Because they are fighting dogs?

Ġ: Even racing dogs. Those are more expensive.

S: Where do you buy them from?

Ġ: We'll see that someone has a dog – not a fighting one, a normal one – and we'll get him to [fight] ourselves. For example, if he's hungry for meat then he is going to bite. And he'll eat.

S: How do you train the dog?

Ġ: We buy a machine and he walks on it.

S: That's a racing dog though, not a fighting dog.

Ġ: For the fighting dogs you stay with them.

S: What do you do? Do you hit them?

Ġ: No no, we won't hit them... we might cut a bit of their flesh, or inject them. And then I used to see a bit of cotton wool.

S: A bit of their flesh?

Ġ: They get a knife and cut like this, where he has fat, he'd feel it... then we have to run because otherwise he'll attack us.... We'd go for him with the leash and try to handle him... you can imagine, there would be seven people with him.

S: How do you make sure you're not bitten?

Ġ: A leash from the front and a leash from the back, so that if he tries to attack from the front they would pull at the back... the fight is at 7 o'clock in the morning, and at 10 o'clock in the evening from the night before, we stay with him until 5 o'clock in the morning, and then we put him in a cage for two hours. Then they take them. We used to have eight dogs – five racing dogs and three fighting ones. I'd go and watch the races with my uncle and my grandpa would go to see the fights.

[Interview with Ġanni and Jason (both 10 years old), 28th October 2011]

Ġanni also told me about trophies that they had won for these activities – activities in which he engaged in legitimate peripheral participation, and which evidently provided a social context in which he further formed and deepened his relationship with his uncle and grandfather. Evans (2006) also draws attention to this form of situated learning, in illustrating an example of a boy who learns carpentry with his father: “The boy's social relationship with the father involves a particular form of practical learning: they do carpentry together. Learning a particular skill and learning how to relate to others socially are, therefore, inseparable processes and learning is always socially situated. [...] The more the child learns about making things with wood, the more he learns about the social skill of building a relationship with his father. Via these particular practical and social skills the boy is, then, also simultaneously bringing his understanding of himself into being: the question of who he can be is inseparable from the question of who he is expected, by significant others, to become” (Evans 2006: 5).

The above ethnographic extract draws attention towards an example of situated learning, which in this instance also frames the child's relationship with their immediate family,

and allows the child to explore his or her social position in relation to other members of their family. It draws attention to the need for a consideration of wider social learning environments that extend beyond the primary school and reflect upon an 'on-site' formation of person (Marchand 2008). As some children in Marsa eventually discover, their wider social learning environment may at times conflict with what and how they are expected to learn at school, within an education system that is essentially top-down, and that expects its students to actively and continually engage with its particular forms of learning throughout their lifetime, in order to secure particular forms of work deemed legitimate by the school. Two members of staff came to learn of Ġanni's involvement with cock fights and dog fights, and they furiously reprimanded him and demanded that he never participate and speak of such activities again, indirectly and ironically reinforcing the importance of concealment and pretending not to know. The socially situated learning that is undertaken by children in the broader context of Marsa thus potentially provides an arena for oppositional culture, meaning that some children may be very ill-prepared for the formal participation that is required of them at school. Furthermore, the school itself occasionally grapples with precisely how to deal with elements of this oppositional culture, particularly the notion of "*taħwid*," which is proficiently learnt by some children and often precedes their entry into formal schooling. Conflicting skills are thus required of children at different times, and children are consequently expected (by the adults who structure their world) to navigate these opposing requirements equally and effectively, and to do so having constituted a habitus which prepares them more adequately for some requirements over others.

The socially situated learning that is undertaken by some children in the broader context of Marsa may arguably not be conducive to being successful in education (as it is put across in the form of schooling,) indirectly contesting the forms of capital that the school legitimizes (as an institution that embodies the dominant habitus). The legitimate peripheral participation involved in learning about '*taħwid*,' and in learning how to handle it or participate in it, entails adjustments to social positions in the field that potentially draw children further away from generating the dispositions they are expected to possess in order to perform well in school. As I have thus far illustrated, '*taħwid*' encompasses

(but is not limited to) activities such as dog fights and cock fights, cheating on a partner, gambling, dealing and using drugs, financial exploitation, and so on. The term implies that a person is 'screwed up,' or is messing around in some way. It presupposes that there is some form of social order that has been disturbed in some way, by a person who has 'mixed things up' and is 'mixed up.' At its core, the concept goes against the idea of the 'educated person' that the school is trying to produce, and in a way proposes an alternative moral code to be lived by. Involvement in forms of *'taħwid'* comes to be regarded by some as a viable way of being in the world and possibly of making money, and covering up for other people in terms of their involvement with *'taħwid'* becomes an important practice. I was often told that in Marsa, people were likely to treat you relative to the way that you treated them. Those who looked for trouble (*'inkwiet'*) by doing something such as telling on another person were likely to land themselves in trouble, since the wronged party would seek *'vendikazzjoni.'* However those who minded their own business and allowed people to get on with whatever they were doing, would similarly be left alone.

Being 'Rough'

As the last chapter already indicated, the importance of having children who were 'rough' was often stressed, and it was an integral aspect in being the kind of person that some of my informants in Marsa wished their children to become. Those who were 'rough' would be down to earth and would not make a fuss over little trivialities. They would implicitly communicate a message that they should not (and could not easily) be messed with. It was important for children to know how to conduct themselves in this manner and defend themselves where the need arose, particularly if they ever got themselves into any *'inkwiet,'* or needed to instigate or defend themselves in an act of *'vendikazzjoni.'* However, being 'rough' was not solely performed as a reaction to an affront. It also referred to a general way of carrying yourself, demonstrating a lack of fear, as well as displaying qualities of being down to earth and lacking in airs and graces. Some parents informed me of their decision to send their children to judo lessons, so that their children would know how to deal with their own matters if they ever found themselves to be the

victims of bullying. Rita constantly worried that her 9 year old son wasn't rough enough, telling me that he was sure to be bullied once he reached secondary school, if not sooner. Being 'rough' was one of the characteristics which Rita described as contributing greatly to a collective Marsa identity⁸¹, in a way separating the people of Marsa from other towns and villages which may be plagued by airs and graces which prevent them from being rough, and thus down to earth. Rita often told me that she taught her son Ronald never to start fights or hit anyone, but she stressed that if someone were to tease or hit him, then he should take his revenge immediately and pay the culprits back.

Rita: Ronald told a child "I'm going to tell my mummy!" I told Ronald "and what am I going to do to them?" I told him that if someone calls him a '*pufta*'⁸² then he should answer back and say "your father is a *pufta*!"

[Fieldnotes, Tuesday 17th January 2012]

Rita was also concerned that her son often asked permission for everything, instead of taking whatever he pleased – even the most basic of things, such as a drink of water. She often told him that she wanted him to be a man. She was concerned that Ronald was not 'rough' like the rest of their family, describing him as somewhat of a wimp who made an unnecessary fuss over little things like catching a ball or having a fly on his food. Richard, Ronald's older brother, interpreted this apparent lack of masculinity to mean that Ronald would grow up to be a homosexual. Richard emphasized his own school experience to me, telling me that he would often begin fighting at the slightest hint of provocation. Any insults would often swiftly and effectively be avenged by worse insults which outdid the original insult of their 'opponent', and insults which were aimed at a person's family (especially any family members who may have died) were considered the gravest insults of all, calling for appropriate and corresponding retaliation. The necessity of outdoing an opponent was illustrated to me by a number of children in their interactions with one another, and Felicia here explained the process to me in more detail:

F: Those who tease me, I always tell them "it's obvious that it's you..." If they call me, for example, a sausage, I'll say "it shows that *you're* a sausage!"

⁸¹ Rita often told me that she loved living in Marsa because the people over here were 'rough' like her.

⁸² A derogatory term referring to a homosexual (equivalent to the term 'fag').

S: You do that when they tease you?

F: ... and when they hit me, I'll hit them back ten times.

S: Why?

F: Before, I didn't know anything, and everyone used to hit me. Before I was almost mute, now I've come into my own.⁸³

[Interview with Felicia and Narissa (both 10 years old); 12th January 2012]

Although many children often responded along these lines, it must be highlighted that there were some children who chose to avoid such situations as much as possible, stressing that it was more important to steer clear of getting into '*inkwiet*' unnecessarily:

Terence told me that there had been some fights around this issue (of the church rivalry)⁸⁴ around three years ago, which had scared him. Dylan said that when it came to those fights "they get you into *inkwiet*, so it's better to just not tell them anything."

[Interview with Terence and Dylan (both 10 years old); Monday 5th March 2012]

M: Even for example at school, I wouldn't do anything and then they would start something with me and get on my nerves. I don't tell them anything, I keep it all inside, but then when I go home...

S: What gets on your nerves?

M: I don't do anything to them, but they tease me about my family and call me a pest, and I get really mad when they insult my family. I don't tell them anything so that I don't make the fight worse, but I'll be boiling inside.

[Interview with Martina (9 years old); Thursday 12th January 2012]

Celia: My friend's father, he's killed so many people...

Sharon: What?

⁸³ An expression which often invoked in demonstrating that somebody became braver and started to defend themselves.

⁸⁴ There were two main parish churches within Marsa, and an ongoing rivalry between some members of the congregation of one parish and some members of the congregation of another, as they would argue about which church was better. Within one of the parishes, there was yet another rivalry within it, between the *Każin tal-Banda* (Band Club) and the *Għaqda tal-Armar* (the organisation responsible for decorating the village in preparation for the *festa*). This rivalry reached its peak around the time of the village *festa*, and was often acted out by the children as well as the adults. Chapter 8 will explore the village *festa* in more detail.

Celia: I've stopped talking to her, because my mum said.... When they were young, my mum used to play with them, and she knows what kind of people they are. It's not her father's father.... It's her father! I don't speak to them anymore... it's scary.

[Interview with Celia and Roberta (10 & 9 years old respectively); Friday 28th October 2011]

The predominant objective conditions in Marsa, permeated with instances of '*taħwid*,' qualities of intense sociability with one another, and highly charged (and occasionally dangerous) masculinity and toughness, structured the children's experiences in such a way that they internalized these conditions accordingly, whilst generating appropriate cultural responses to them. Children were largely expected to be independent in handling their own affairs with one another, with excessive adult interference to an extent communicating that they were incapable of standing up for themselves, and thus diminishing their qualities of toughness. The skills involved in dealing with such matters were learnt in a socially situated manner, and led to the acquisition of forms of capital which as such were incongruous with what the school demanded of them, in requesting them to be docile and submissive to the authority of the school staff. In addition to possessing a habitus that may come to clash with that embodied in the powerful institution of the school, many children lacked the cultural dispositions which grant advantages for success in school, namely in the form of parent's cultural capital legitimized by school qualifications (and later transformed into economic capital). Although not a determining factor nor a prerequisite to doing well, children whose parents had acquired cultural capital through their own schooling often held a significant advantage, approaching schooling having constituted a habitus that more closely matched that of the school. Parents whose habitus clashed with the school, although well-meaning and regularly highlighting the importance of schooling in their discourse, were often at a loss in terms of opening pathways of opportunity for their children different to those that they experienced themselves, and that came to shape the dispositions with which they navigate their own social world. In this respect, the ability to access education and schooling in itself is not enough. As Froerer (2011: 697) indicates, "marginalised people's successful engagement with the 'substantive benefits' associated with education are mediated by their access to powerful forms of...capital."

As the previous chapter argues, the existing clash in different kinds of habitus may eventually come to be more pronounced, as existing inequalities may be expounded in the process of schooling, with social disadvantages coming to be transformed into educational ones. Such a process may thus give rise to elements of counter-school culture, with the effect of children placing themselves in opposition to that which the school is aiming to achieve (as outlined in the previous chapter). How does this, therefore, come to bear upon children's aspirations and future-oriented actions, and how is this responded to within the school? What forms of work do parents and children come to regard as being realistically viable, despite unanimously agreeing in principle on the value of schooling?

“What will you be when you grow up?”

I occasionally asked the children what forms of work they hoped to take on in the future, in order to understand the aspirations that they held for themselves. Many did not have an answer to my question, although the vast majority of girls at the school who did provide an answer expressed their wish to become beauticians and nail technicians (a wish that was met with annoyance by a few members of staff, who told the children that the streets of Marsa could not be lined with beauty parlours alone). Some children came to view gambling, horse racing, and similar activities that they came to learn of through legitimate peripheral participation as viable future work, as the ethnographic illustration below demonstrates:

S: What do you want to do when you leave school?

Ġ: Race horses, miss.

S: Will you make a lot of money doing that?

Ġ: Of course!

S: How much?

Ġ: It depends... around a thousand every month. I have a horse... he doesn't belong to anyone else, he's mine. If you come and race my horse, and my horse comes first, I win one thousand.

S: You need to come first in order to win, though.

Ġ: [Begins to outline his racing strategy] You don't lock them in, for example there are three of them, and I am third, the last one. I come like this, and this one comes first and that one comes second. Then if I nudge the horse to go faster, he will pass that one. We'll lock him in, and he cannot come in from here or from here. Mine will pass that one and come to the turn. The other one will get stuck, and if he comes first then it won't count.

S: Do you only win money if you win the race?

Ġ: It depends on whether you would have bet any money.

S: How do you decide who to bet money on?

Ġ: On my horse.

S: What if there is a horse that is better than yours?

Ġ: If he is better than mine then I'll bet on him, yes...

[Interview with Ġanni and Jason (both 10 years old), 28th October 2011]

Within Marsa, children come to be aware of forms of work that are not necessarily legitimized by the school, and for which they have already achieved a degree of mastery by means of constant social co-participation. Skilled identities are thus brought into being by means of these social engagements, and a particular set of dispositions generated. Yet the legitimacy and relevance of these skills often come to be heavily contested within the school environment, where such activities are not seen to lead to viable future careers (or are clearly illegal), and where the constant participation in them is considered to detract from the attention which children should predominantly be giving to their school work. Children often have to juggle what each particular adult-structured social setting requires of them. Given that the school embodies the habitus of the dominant group – that which is arguably predominantly middle class – a number of staff members attempted to cultivate aspirations towards middle class jobs amongst the students. The vignette below demonstrates this clearly:

The Assistant Head told Felicia, 8, that she was still very young, and that she was still in time to catch up and to get something out of school. She stressed to Felicia that it was not too late for her. Felicia told the Assistant Head “doesn't my father work in a factory?” The Assistant Head

responded by telling Felicia “don’t you want to do better than your father?” After a while, Felicia opened her book and asked the Assistant Head for help on how to do a particular exercise.

[Fieldnotes; Friday 15th April 2011]

This ethnographic illustration indirectly expresses disparagement for working class forms of labour, implying that students should wish to rise above forms of work largely considered to be low status, and acquire greater cultural capital than that which their parents currently possessed. This particular member of staff was new to Marsa primary school, and confided that she felt out of her depth in working with the students there (indeed, after one academic year she requested a transfer to another school). She wanted the children in school to reach greater heights in their formal education than their own parents had managed to secure, in order for them to eventually move on to forms of occupation with greater prestige than those currently held by their parents. Such aspirations are put forward as obvious in the wider educational system, with limited recognition of ways in which such aspirations may go against the grain for these children. Although well meaning, an approach such as that illustrated above indirectly highlights the perceived abject social position of the child’s parents, in implying that children should rise above occupations considered to be socially undesirable (occupations held by members of the children’s close family, whom they dearly love).

A few teachers on the other hand appeared to lean in another direction and expect a little less from some of their students, exasperated and dejected by the student’s failure to pay attention in class and keep up with the lessons. Some of the children were considered to be incredibly behind in their school work (some achieving 0/100 in a few exams, particularly children who were regularly and consistently absent from school). For these children, the teachers appeared to adjust their expectations of them accordingly, and were keen to ensure that at the very least, the children would leave the school with basic reading and writing skills, and able to do basic sums and mathematics. This was undertaken in order to ensure that children would ultimately leave school with skills considered to be integral to their independence and survival, reasoning that it was more beneficial to ensure that children grasped this basic knowledge, than to unrealistically

attempt to cover the whole syllabus which was at that point regarded as out of their reach (given their oftentimes poor reading and writing skills). Very rarely, the teacher's attempts to accommodate their students appeared to go to the opposite extreme of the previous vignette, in the form of an overly sympathetic and fatalistic approach:

I went downstairs to watch rehearsals for the Christmas concert. The children were standing on the stage, practising the songs which they were going to sing at the concert. After a while, Ġanni said "I'm tired." The teacher told him "Well then what are you going to do when you grow up and go to work? Leave after 15 minutes? I don't think you'll find work sitting down."

[Fieldnotes; Thursday 15th December 2011]

Some teachers thus already presumed that at least some of their students would find future work in the form of manual labour (given the assumption that they would be required to stand up for much of the time), and not at a 'desk job' (which presumably would require a greater amount of 'mental' work), so to speak. Within the school, teachers at times appeared disheartened, and held the presumption that a few of the children in their class were not likely to achieve this level of academic success. These presumptions seemed to be borne from a degree of jadedness – teachers put a great deal of effort in to their work in the classroom, and on the regular occasions where this was met by a lack of interest, or even disrespect and back talking, it led to feelings of frustration, anger, and weariness on the part of the teachers, who tried very hard indeed to meet the diverse needs of the 'mixed ability' children within the same classroom. Teachers often felt as though they could only go so far in helping their students to succeed academically, particularly if a child's home was marked by a presence of '*taħwid*,' in turn giving rise to dispositions characteristic of a counter-school culture.

The perceived presence of '*taħwid*' in a child's home often appeared to be an insurmountable obstacle to the staff, and was considered to give rise to dispositions that not only did not bode well for their success in schooling, but ran contrary to the aims of schooling in itself. A conceptual boundary was occasionally drawn, marking off the school from the wider social world in stating that teachers should only concern themselves with what goes on within its borders. Although the school operated with an 'open door policy',

meaning that parents were welcome to come to school and discuss matters with the school administration where they felt the need to, teachers were careful not to be seen to interfere too much with a child's home life. Parents similarly expressed annoyance to me when they felt as though such boundaries were being crossed – one parent complained to me that her teenage daughter's school had encouraged her to speak to her children more in English when they were at home. This clearly annoyed her, and she told me that what happened in her home was none of the school's business.

Children's own ideas about the world and their relative position within it, as well as what they will consequently do once they leave school, is constantly being brought to the fore as children make meaning out of the experiences which they have lived and embodied within their known social world thus far. These experiences encompass far more than what goes on within the school walls. Philippe Bourgois (1996) stresses the need for school ethnographies to move outside the school, highlighting the weakness of such ethnographies by choosing to retain their focus solely within the classroom. In speaking of his own research in the inner city, Bourgois claims that with regards to his informants, "their aborted school experiences play a central role in shaping their future careers in the underground economy." He goes on to say that "precocious participants in street culture are able to hone, at the expense of their classmates, the crucial survival skills they need to excel on the street." (1996: 251)

Although Bourgois never set foot inside a classroom as part of his research, he nonetheless considers his crack dealer conversations to be a school ethnography. Similarly, I found that in order to take stock of what the children in Marsa are learning, I had to extend my focus beyond the school and the teaching paradigms within it, and consider children's learning and formation of the person in a far broader context which, as I have previously explained, also gives due recognition to legitimate peripheral participation and Bourdieu's concept of the habitus. Within this framework, and looking at the broader picture of what makes up the children's objective social conditions which come to be internalized within the habitus, it becomes possible to better understand

what goes on in the school, and why so many children do not particularly excel at school in its own terms. Children's relationship to the past, present, and future is inevitably guided by their set of dispositions relative to their position in the social field at any given moment. When the habitus, as a set of dispositions, is generated in objective social conditions incorporating elements of what is considered to be *'taħwid,'* learning about *'taħwid'* and *'inkwiet'* and becoming skilled in developing strategies for coping with its associated risks may thus come to clash with, and overshadow, the dispositions required for being an 'educated person.' The cultural capital that children acquire (such as being rough), in learning social co-participation in Marsa, does not always enjoy legitimacy from the school, as an institution that embodies the habitus of the dominant group. An oppositional relationship to the 'educated person' thus often comes to be constructed, setting the children on a powerful trajectory that is not easily reversed, and where there is a compelling charge for them to proceed along the social trajectory.

'Taħwid' as a Form of Social Pollution

The concept of *'taħwid'* in itself evidently has associations with ideas of moral conduct, its presence denoting a lack thereof. The application of the term in indicating that things are 'mixed up,' or are not as they should be, in a sense leads to *'taħwid'* being conceptualized as a form of social pollution, thus firmly grounding such practices in ideas of abjection, and bestowing its participants with abject qualities. It is partly through regular social co-participation in forms of *'taħwid,'* and in subsequently constituting oppositional relationships to the dominant habitus as embodied in the school, that abject social positions often come to be reproduced in Marsa, often leading to the conceptualization of Marsa as what might be called an abject and marginal space. Concepts of social disorder and abjection shall be further explored in the next chapter, with reference to predominant ideas on dirt and pollution.

This chapter concludes Part I of this thesis, in illustrating ways in which abject social positions have come to be reproduced in Marsa over the years. Part II of the thesis shall argue for recognition of the performativity of the abject, in which the concept is culturally appropriated in order to designate what those in Marsa perceive to be abject, and how they subsequently construct themselves as everything which this 'new' abject is not. The social boundary implicit in the concept of the abject is thus evoked, in order to demarcate social distinction for themselves in relation to that which they socially construct as the undesirable abject.

Part II – Banishing the Abject

Chapter 6: Dirt & Pollution

“Everything that is dirty, they dump in Marsa. All kinds of dirt and junk.”

Pawlu, 1st October 2011

In conversations I held with my informants – both individuals who lived within Marsa, and those who did not - Marsa was often likened to a dumping ground. It was frequently portrayed as a marginal space, housing the ‘undesirables’ and the socially abjected, whilst others who made something of themselves (often by means of doing well in their schooling and securing what are considered to be good jobs) often looked to leave Marsa and live elsewhere. As one football instructor related, “...here in Marsa, everyone gets married and leaves, and we end up with all the rubbish.” Many openly acknowledge that their roots and loyalties ultimately remain in Marsa, yet the aspirations which propel some individuals to become upwardly and socially mobile (particularly those whose immediate surroundings lent themselves to the constitution of a habitus which more closely matched the dominant habitus) transform Marsa into a transitional space for some individuals, from which they should ideally move on.

This chapter explores the concept of the abject more explicitly, particularly the way in which it is appropriated both within and speaking of the cultural context of Marsa. The concept of the abject in itself has bearing on ideas of social exclusion and symbolic banishment. As Kristeva (1982: 1) notes, “what is abject is not my correlative [...] The abject has only one quality of the object – that of being opposed to *I*.” A symbolic border is thus called into play in containing and separating the perceived abject from the self, as such preserving the integrity of the self and warding off that which offends against order, and which allures and yet repulses. That which is abject thus comes to be socially excluded and cast off – a state which some of my informants in Marsa came to experience by means of their socially reproduced marginalization and their resignation toward low status and underclass forms of employment, amongst other aspects.

'Taħwid' and Disorder

Engagement in forms of *'taħwid'* as described in the previous chapter, along with the social transgressions and moral pollution which such engagement implies, inferred upon individuals an abject status in which they stood accused of disrupting and offending (or 'mixing up') the social order. Such an accusation is not necessarily explicit, and on many occasions came from my informants themselves, in much the same way as Rollason (2010) relates in terms of his ethnography in Panapompom, whereby evaluations are based on a perspective from the vantage point of an imagined other, and Panapompom people thus come to imagine ways in which white people must see and value them in their own terms. Similarly, people in Marsa so occasionally perceived their *'taħwid'* and abjectness from the vantage point of the *'tal-pepè'* and the middle class Maltese, as Chapter 3 indicated. In this respect, a number of individuals in Marsa also appear as the "detritus of someone else's project of power or value," what Rollason (2010: 151) terms as 'abject' in following Judith Butler (see Butler 1993, 1997). *'Taħwid'* in terms of 'mixing up' and polluting the social order can only make sense in relation to the 'ideal' social order which it threatens and from which it strays, for which some degree of consensus must exist in giving recognition to dominant values over others, and recognizing *'taħwid'* as a transgression of those values. As Kristeva (1982: 2) then continues in her essay on abjection, a significant threat to social order is in a sense imposed by the abject whereby "what is abject [...] is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain 'ego' that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter's rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master."

In evoking cultural concepts of dirt, and considering the way in which people in Marsa in turn come to define it and engage with it, Part II of this thesis (beginning with this chapter) will illustrate how my informants came to challenge the abjectness which has

been socially reproduced and continually conferred upon them. They do so by shifting the boundaries and social divisions which the concept of dirt and the abject calls to the fore. In this respect, banishing the abject comes to be illustrated as an ideological or performative move, one which essentially brings the abject into being and constitutes it as that which it is already purported to be. Existing ideas of social hierarchy also come to be reconfigured, in shifting the boundaries of that which constitutes the abject, and establishing new dimensions with which to conceptualize abjection.

During the village feast, I befriended a young couple, Darren and Sarah, who insisted on buying round after round of drinks⁸⁵, and explained the ins and outs of the village feast to me, having actively participated in it for years. I asked Darren what he thought of Marsa and whether he would want to continue living here, having grown up and lived here his whole life. His answer was an ambivalent one. He expressed comfort in the familiar, telling me that he was used to Marsa and its culture, and that he loves the fact that he can simply walk down to the football ground and find people that he knows over there. At the same time, he admitted that he needed a change. He then told me “the children here aren’t right,” explaining that they cursed and fought like adults, and reference was again made to the “*taħwid*” which is prevalent in Marsa (see Chapter 5). Given that “*taħwid*” implies a social mess and a deviation from a taken-for-granted social order communicating the way that things are ‘meant to be’, it becomes possible to further conceive of the social transgressions which constitute “*taħwid*” in terms of Douglas’ definition of dirt, specifically, as “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966: 44). This particular definition “implies two conditions: a set of ordered relations and a contravention of that order. Dirt then, is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is system” (Douglas 1966: 44). ‘*Taħwid*’, then, is to be understood as a form of social pollution, whereby the set of ordered relations as referred to by Douglas comes to be considered as tarnished by individuals who are ‘mixed up.’ The concept was thus often utilized in identifying many individuals in Marsa as socially abject, and belonging to a lower social class (or underclass).

⁸⁵ Darren told me that he had been saving up specifically for the *fešta* for a long while.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to further unpack the concept of 'dirt,' particularly the way in which it was utilized in Marsa. Informants spoke of dirt in referring to the absence of hygiene, and the physical dust, grime, and muck which pervaded their environment and the persons within it, and yet they also extended the term in speaking of perceived corruption amongst them, and in acting in a crude and vulgar manner, amongst other things. A broad understanding of what may be considered as constituting dirt serves useful in this chapter, particularly in considering the inherently flexible boundaries of ideas of filth. Mary Douglas' (1966) pioneering work on the subject provides a useful framework with which to work, but in doing so it should be pointed out that her theory has been highlighted as irreversible, in that whilst dirt may be considered as matter out of place, not all matter out of place is dirt (Fardon 1999). Furthermore, an individual's relationship to dirt may be rather ambivalent, as this chapter shall illustrate in relation to Marsa – dirt is often regarded as an instigator of disgust which must be excluded and expelled, and yet in many ways it is simultaneously crucial for survival. Notwithstanding this, the framework which I adopt is to conceptualize dirt as a social boundary – one which is in constant flux and is shifted accordingly as a performative or rhetorical move, in demarcating social distinction and division. No definition of what constitutes dirt may be absolute, and I might suggest that a universal definition to that effect is in many ways inconsequential – the crucial thing to consider is the way in which the concepts of dirt and disgust are appropriated and employed (and for what purpose), along with the relational dimension of the social and individual responses which it evokes.

Living with Rubbish

As I've already illustrated, Marsa was often described to me in terms of the "*taħwid*" which was perceived as persistent over there. In addition to this, it was often spoken of as a particularly polluted and unsanitary place, mostly due to the fact that industrial and residential areas lay in very close proximity to one another. When my informants learned of the fact that I would soon be coming to live in Marsa, one of the boys in class made a

point of telling me that I wouldn't like living in Marsa, specifically because of the amount of pollution in the area. An old power station regularly emitted black fumes⁸⁶ which my informants often complained about, and indeed it made keeping my own flat clean quite a task. In asking the children to draw pictures inspired by the title 'my Marsa', in addition to drawings depicting the churches, playground, horse races, school, and football grounds, a few drawings portrayed the power station and nearby factories, standing out for many informants as major culprits in generating Marsa's filth.



Fig. 5 - Two entries for the drawing competition entitled 'My Marsa' (Left – Entry from a 9 year old boy depicting the power station; Right – Entry from an 8 year old boy depicting the power station, port, horse races, school, and sports ground)

There was the occasional problem of overflowing sewage in times of heavy rainfall⁸⁷, and a local abattoir featured in the press on more than one occasion, for emitting foul smells which bothered residents⁸⁸, and for being responsible for animal blood flowing out on to

⁸⁶ 'At last, Mepa identifies Marsa power station as likely source of 'black dust'', Times of Malta online, 19th September 2011 [Accessed 2nd September 2013] <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20110919/local/at-last-mepa-identifies-marsa-power-station-as-source-of-black-dust.385487>

⁸⁷ 'Council threatens action over leaking sewage in the streets,' Times of Malta online, 26th October 2012 [Accessed 2nd September 2013] <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20121026/local/Council-threatens-action-over-leaking-sewage-in-the-streets.442679>

⁸⁸ 'Terrible stench bothering Marsa residents,' Times of Malta online, 21st July 2010 [Accessed 2nd September 2013] <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20100721/local/terrible-stench-bothering-marsa-residents.318864>

the streets of Albert Town on a separate occasion⁸⁹. Animal faeces were often strewn along Racecourse Street, where a large number of horses and other animals were stabled, and the heavy arterial roads which passed through Marsa contributed to a great deal of car fumes which were emitted in the area daily. Public spaces were occasionally vandalized, with broken equipment occupying space in the public playground, and litter (which at times included discarded syringes) scattering the surrounding grounds. The amalgamation of all these factors led to Marsa occasionally being used as an illegal dumping ground. The area appeared to be regarded by many as a suitable location for discarded elements, or elements which should be separated from others possessing symbolic value, as I shall argue in relation to my ethnography. In this respect, the idea of dirt as a social boundary starts to come in to play, as individuals come to classify particular spaces over others as a domain for the suitable banishment and containment of filth. The classification of Marsa as what might be called an abject space, I argue, may subsequently lead its inhabitants to internalize this view of themselves, in discriminating against themselves as others might discriminate against them.

Marsa Open Centre

Along the general lines of this argument, many informants expressed their opinion that the African immigrants in the area were in a sense 'dumped' in Marsa. Immigrants who came from Sub-Saharan Africa were often dubbed unwanted individuals, whose rightful place was not in Malta. Their arrival by boat in Malta was often likened to a cultural invasion in various online fora, as they stood accused of posing a dangerous threat to the island's resources and an imagined Maltese national identity. Malta was often treated as a lifeboat within the national rhetoric – whilst saving lives and providing refuge to a number of African immigrants attempting a dangerous Mediterranean crossing, it risked capsizing and sinking under the volume of immigrants reaching its shores. In this respect, sub-Saharan African immigrants seeking asylum in Malta were portrayed in a great deal of

⁸⁹ 'Blood still on the street as investigation begins,' Times of Malta online, 13th November 2009 [Accessed 2nd September 2013] <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20091113/local/blood-still-on-the-street-as-investigation-begins.281507>

public discourse as an unmitigated risk, one which would ultimately prove responsible for the gradual ruination of the State. This sentiment appeared to run throughout Malta regardless of issues relating to social class, contributing to an on-going heated and divided debate which continues to this day. As Chapter 2 explained, hundreds of immigrants resided in the Marsa Open centre, whilst a few others pooled their funds together in order to split the cost of renting cheap accommodation in Marsa and other nearby towns. The Marsa Open Centre was established in a dilapidated building which was once a local trade school, and it is located quite close to the power station and abattoir in Albert Town. It is a stone's throw away from a local shipyard, with ships floating in very shallow water which was often a very murky pale blue colour due to the amount of pollution in the waters of the port and the nearby canal. Some ripped out car seats and discarded sofas lay by the side of the road, with a few of the centre's residents regularly sitting on them and chatting to one another. This area of Marsa was a social hub and a meeting place for African immigrants, as those who resided within other open centres would often travel to this area in search of work. Migrants would wait by the side of the main road to be picked up by individuals for temporary off-the-books labour jobs, having no guarantee that they would be paid once the work was completed. As soon as a car in the area stopped, there would be fierce competition amongst the men there to get to the car first and bang on the window, securing their work for the day. African immigrants gathered in this same area in the evenings, in order to get drunk with one another and occasionally pick up prostitutes who roamed the area.



Fig. 6 - Opposite the entrance to the Marsa Open Centre



Fig. 7 - The entrance to the Marsa Open Centre

The choice to locate an open centre within an abandoned building in Marsa does not seem to be coincidental. Other open centres which have been established in Malta in response to the arrival of undocumented African migrants were similarly set up in somewhat of a rush, mostly in working class towns in the south of Malta⁹⁰. Migrants often remain in isolation within these centres, which are intended to serve as transitional residences, bridging their time spent in a detention centre⁹¹ with their ultimate integration within the community. Often, there is very little chance of real and meaningful integration with the Maltese communities surrounding them, and many migrants thus continue to reside in centres which are for the most part “invisible.” They are placed within, or in close proximity to, towns which may be considered to house other individuals who are also socially marginalized, albeit not to the same degree. One close friend⁹² in conversation shared his belief that the move to house migrants in towns such as Marsa was politically motivated, telling me “...the Nationalist Party isn’t going to go and open an immigrant camp in Sliema⁹³. They can’t. They would lose too much support

⁹⁰ For example, an Open Centre in Ħal Far is situated within a converted aircraft hangar.

⁹¹ This period of time cannot exceed 18 months.

⁹² He was raised in one of the more socially prestigious residential areas in Malta, north of the harbour.

⁹³ A particularly affluent area in Malta, whose population predominantly vote for the Nationalist Party (in Government at the time of fieldwork). By contrast, Marsa is primarily a stronghold of the Labour party (in opposition at the time of fieldwork) and has never produced any MPs in the Maltese Parliament, meaning that its residents were deprived of social capital in the form of a representative in Government.

from the core.” This argument presupposes that an open centre would be largely out of place within the more affluent town of Sliema, and that moreover, a great deal of political support would be lost for the governing party in undertaking such a move, and that the preferred option would be to keep the migrants “hidden” as such, and as out of sight within these areas as possible. Placing migrants in socially marginalized areas, or areas where there is already a degree of perceived *‘taħwid’* and disorder, and thus abjectness, may in some ways be regarded as attempts to organize the environment and impose a degree of order whereby space is re-organized in order to conform to an idea and express a general view of the social order (see Douglas 1966). Ideas of dirt and pollution as they relate to class hierarchies and symbolic systems have been considered elsewhere (see Appadurai 2004, Barbosa 2007, Laporte 2000), particularly in terms of how space is socially organized. Many scholars who have explored the idea of abjected matter similarly consider the organization of this matter to be a practice which brings about order, and whereby “social class and the bourgeois public sphere (including law and the state) have been constituted by defining, identifying, and banishing the abject” (Navaro-Yashin 2012).

Class and Dirt

In this instance, space is organized in order to conform to ideas of class hierarchy. Different social classes are often conceptually and physically situated in terms of varying degrees of proximity to dirt and impurities, in a way which mirrors existing class and power relations. It is interesting to note that individuals in Marsa were expected to hold a particular relationship with dirt. Whilst a person who kept themselves, their children, and their homes clean was a ‘good person,’ the class habitus of my informants in Marsa necessitated that individuals were not overly repulsed by dirt, and knew how to put up with being dirty every once in a while, since it was an obvious consequence of being working class, and of having spent the day engaged in various forms of manual labour, as this extract illustrates:

A few men in the bar were teasing Ronald, 8, for clearing away their glasses when there was still a small amount of tea in them. One man (who was covered in dust from a day of working on a building site) joked and told Ronald that he should now buy them some more drinks. Rita wanted Ronald to learn to argue back and be tough in these situations, and she told Ronald to tell him “those who are ‘pulit’⁹⁴ always leave a little in the glass.” The man then replied: “What, I am ‘pulit’? Look at me! Dirt everywhere!”

[Extract from fieldnotes; Wednesday 19th October 2011]

Thus, some degree of proximity to dirt was inevitable, partly as an inescapable feature of working class life and the forms of labour which it comprised, eventually to be internalized within a shared class habitus which in turn valued this very ability to internalize dirt where necessary. A certain degree of accommodation to, and internalization of, surrounding filth was necessary in order for a person in Marsa to be considered ‘down to earth,’ as this was one of the elements which distinguished people from the ‘qzież’⁹⁵ and pretentiousness which came along with belonging to the middle and upper classes, who supposedly are disgusted and repulsed by filth far too easily.

“She has too much ‘qzież’... she wants her own glass, and to let it be known that it is her glass, and her own teaspoon as well... You aren’t like her, she was raised next to horse shit like us, and then she comes with all this ‘nejk’⁹⁶.”

[Shania speaking to me about her aunt, who was making efforts to become upwardly socially mobile; Wednesday 25th April 2012]

Being ‘rough’ (as explained in the previous chapter) similarly came into play here, as somebody who was rough could not be too bothered by the idea of dirt and contamination. The ability to occasionally internalize the filth which permeated the objective conditions revealed itself as crucial within the field, and subsequently

⁹⁴ Belonging to the upper classes; prim and proper.

⁹⁵ ‘Qzież’ refers to a person’s pretentiousness, but it is also a word used to describe someone who fusses too much, or who is too easily disgusted by something.

⁹⁶ The word ‘nejk’ literally means ‘fuck’, but in this context is used to refer to pretentiousness.

incorporated itself within a shared class habitus which valued qualities of being genuine, down to earth, and tough. Dirt is once again employed as a social boundary in this respect, distinguishing the rough masculinity of informants in Marsa from the weak and fragile members of the middle class who are too easily repulsed by dirt, and whose feebleness renders them unable to relate to dirt in the same way. The ability to internalize dirt in this respect serves as a prerequisite for being rough, as the following vignette illustrates:

Ronald's *nanna*⁹⁷ opened up a tub of yoghurt as a snack for Ronald, but Ronald replied that he did not feel like eating it yet. His *nanna* then covered the tub of yoghurt with a napkin "because of the germs." Once Rita heard this, she began swearing profusely at her mother, to which her mother replied "what a *pastaza*⁹⁸ you are!" Rita told her mother "I want him to be tough, not an *iblah*⁹⁹, because then the other children in school will take the piss out of him!" A guy in the bar then laughed, and told Rita that she is "*maħmuġa*."¹⁰⁰

[Extract from fieldnotes; Friday 23rd March 2012]

In the above extract, this particular episode seemed to have been the last straw for Rita. Ronald had only come to live with her recently, having been fostered by his grandmother for the majority of his life. Rita was generally frustrated that her mother was overprotective of Ronald, and had led him to become what she considered to be an overly cautious child. He feared running on the playground in case he fell and hurt himself, he didn't like drinking cold water because he was afraid that he would catch a cold, and he was nervous about germs which might lead him to become sick. Rita was concerned that Ronald was turning out to be a bit of a wimp because his grandmother remained overbearing and still insisted on treating him like a baby, and she was doing whatever she could to counteract particular habits which she felt that he had learnt from his grandmother. It was interesting that Rita chose this particular occasion to take a

⁹⁷ Grandmother

⁹⁸ Somebody who is crude and vulgar and swears heavily.

⁹⁹ A weak and gullible idiot.

¹⁰⁰ This literally means 'dirty', but in this social context it is be used as a way of describing somebody who swears and blasphemes too much.

stand, hinting at the importance of not being overly repulsed by dirt and contamination if one is to be tough. At the same time, Rita cleaned her flat meticulously every couple of days, and would complain of it being dirty even though it appeared to have recently been cleaned. A delicate and particular balance was thus required. An individual's relationship with dirt is an inherently ambivalent one, at once a central aspect to their existence, whilst simultaneously a potential source of risk and danger. The appropriate degree of interaction with dirt (and indeed, consideration of what dirt actually is) is clearly socially constructed, thus calling for dirt to be engaged with in different ways. It was as important to not be overly repulsed by filth, as it was to not be overly familiar with it. A dialogical relationship thus existed between people and their environment, whereby some degree of a relationship with dirt was rendered not only possible, but necessary if they were to thrive within that environment. This potentially poses a challenge to structuralist understandings of dirt as championed by Douglas, however I would here reiterate that for the purposes of my argument, the definitions of what constitutes dirt are to some extent inconsequential in relation to the divisions which come about in the flexible application of it as a social boundary. Understood in this respect, individuals may thus choose to position themselves on either side of the shifting social boundary (whilst banishing others to the opposite side), defining themselves in terms of these oppositional relationships, and in terms of an imagined other who does not possess the same abilities as they do. Thus, people in Marsa ultimately show that they can be dirty in a way that they feel middle class people cannot, whilst showing that they can be clean in a way that African migrants cannot (the latter point of the two shall be argued in greater detail later in this chapter).

A Clean Person is a Good Person

Informants in Marsa thus attempted to strike a very specific and delicate balance in terms of their relationship with dirt. A degree of accommodation to dirt was required in order for somebody to remain tough, down to earth, and essentially working class and free from middle class affectations. On the other hand it was important to keep yourself and

your surrounding environment clean, since an individual who is clean is a “good person.” In this respect, ‘clean’ is often applied in a literal sense, to refer to an absence of physical dust and grime, both within the home and on the persons who lived there. My informants always made a point of keeping their homes in immaculate condition, regularly waking up before the crack of dawn in order to thoroughly clean their homes from top to bottom. The smog and pollution in the area at times made this difficult. I was often frustrated at the thin layer of black dust which covered my belongings very quickly after I had cleaned my flat, appearing within a matter of hours if my windows were open (as they often were when the temperatures began to rise in the spring time). In order to ensure that homes remained clean, this meant that my informants cleaned their homes quite frequently, and they expressed a great deal of frustration to me when they felt that they were unable to keep up with their housework. The importance of managing this was quite crucial, as the failure to do so perhaps threatened to break down the symbolic border which separated them from their own abject, as socially constructed by them.

Maintaining a clean home was a necessary and redeeming quality when it came to parenting – success in keeping dirt out of the home and away from the children occasionally detracted from what would generally be considered as poor parenting practices and *‘taħwid’*, particularly by the authorities at the school, but also by the parents. Polly regularly complained of how dirty another mother named Marisa was at times, expressing disgust at how grimy her children often appeared. She added that her 9 year old daughter (in the same class as Polly’s son) occasionally came to school carrying a pungent odour of horses, to the point where the school apparently had to intervene and speak to her about it. Similarly, an older child had recently come to school carrying a stench of animal urine. This child, Chris, was the son of a local prostitute, and the school often encountered difficulties with the family. Chris was made to take medication in order to control his behaviour, and he occasionally administered this to himself and brought himself to school when his mother remained asleep in the mornings. Within my same conversation with Polly, she made the point that Chris’ mother was not usually dirty herself, but that she should not have left her son to come to school in that state. In a separate conversation, Rita made reference to another mother, who was also seemingly

redeemed from her negative parenting habits by nature of keeping herself and her home clean, as this extract demonstrates:

I asked Rita about a particular family in Racecourse Street. One of the children in this family (Nathaniel, who was 10 years old) was having a particularly tough time with his school work, according to his teacher, since his time after school was spent in the family stables rather than focusing on his homework, and he was also often absent from school. Rita told me “The children are always running around outside with their father – even in the summer, they go with him on the building trucks. Their mother is clean, and she wants to keep the place clean, and so she leaves them run around outside... She’s a good woman.”

[Extract from field notes; Friday 25th May 2012]

Seemingly, the amount of dirt on the children and within the home (or the maintained absence thereof) spoke volumes about whether or not somebody was considered to be a good parent. This in a sense was considered a greater virtue, and of more immediate importance, than practices such as ensuring that children eat healthy food, and are sent to school regularly. Therefore, whilst a degree of internalization of dirt was expected, this could not traverse the social boundary which separated them from those whom they in turn constructed as socially abject. It is in this regard that a person was expected to keep themselves clean and free from dust and dirt, lest the performative boundary constituting their oppositional relationships were to deteriorate. Within Marsa, individuals who did not adopt their position on either side of the social boundary in an appropriate manner were vulnerable to gossip. The way that a person interacted with (and responded to) dirt thus provided a keen insight into the kind of person that they were, hinting at the personal qualities which they would thus be presumed to hold.

School Ideas on Dirt

To some degree, this was also true of the staff at the school. The absence of dirt and grime on a child, and the lack of any kind of foul smell, was considered a positive indicator

that a child was not being neglected, and was actively taken care of at home. Great attention was paid to whether or not the children were being presented to the school in a clean state, with the comportment and physical appearance of the children often providing keen insight into what may be going on within the child's home, and in a sense crossing over the conceptual boundaries which exist between home and school.

Sharon: His mother does care for him and look after him.

Teaching Assistant: Yes, you can tell – he is always sent to school clean.

[Later]

Teacher: The family was accused of neglect, because they sent the boy to school with noodles every day for lunch. But they always sent him to school clean!

[Fieldnotes; Monday 7th May 2012]

Teachers at the school employed the social boundary of dirt in a somewhat different manner. They held a similar stance of encouraging children not to be too fussy, nor too messy. However, they shifted the social boundary of what constitutes mess and disorder to be somewhat broader, incorporating the parent's ideas of dirt as dust and grime, but also expanding to include scruffy uniforms and make up on the children, both of which did not seem to particularly bother the parents. The ordered appearance of the children was often the battleground on which the teachers strove to instil a sense of discipline amongst the children, insisting that shirts were always tucked in and ties were worn correctly. Aside from being one of the platforms for teachers to exercise authority and control within the school, it was also a way for teachers to effectively portray an image of ordered and disciplined bodies on formal occasions such as prize day and ministerial visits. Given that the habitus of teachers and staff corresponded more closely with the dominant habitus, as indeed it was embodied within the institution of the school, their application of the social boundary of dirt was legitimized as the official version of the social world. As in their schooling therefore, children were often expected to switch registers and move from one boundary positioning of dirt to another, as they moved between home and school. Teachers were keenly aware of the potential for the presence or absence of filth and disorder on a person to provide insight into their personal qualities

and characteristics, and teachers thus took the opportunity on these occasions to communicate their attempted production of the 'ordered, educated person.' Dirt on a person, as well as the way and degree to which a person engaged with dirt, thus gave scope for allowing people to read and evaluate others, whether rightly or wrongly, accurately or not. In this respect, teachers were anxious to ensure that ideas of disorder were not projected through the children's clothing.

Thus far, the shifting social boundary of dirt has been demonstrated in constituting a collective Marsa identity in relation to members of the Maltese middle class, whereby individuals in Marsa situate themselves in opposition to the haughty pretentiousness embodied within the middle class '*tal-pepè*'. It has also been demonstrated in relation to how teachers widened the boundary in their aim to display ordered and disciplined children's bodies. The rest of the chapter shall consider the way in which the social boundary of dirt is employed in order to constitute an oppositional relationship with the African migrants, effectively shifting the notion of the abject on to them. Having been historically constituted as abject themselves, this position being socially reproduced as outlined in Part 1 of this thesis, the notion of dirt as a social boundary is thus mobilized in order to transfer abjectness on to sub-Saharan African migrants. In this respect, I follow Navaro-Yashin's (2012: 151) argument, whereby "the banishing of the abject might be an ideological, performative, or rhetorical move: We will act as if the abject is only 'there' (or about 'that') and not elsewhere, everywhere, and about everything." Navaro-Yashin applies this to her ethnography of Nicosia and the Green Line which cuts through it (the border separating Northern Cyprus from the south), illustrating how the border area in particular is performatively constructed as an abject space, deflecting from the ruination and affective states which permeated the surrounding buildings, objects, and debris of war. I would argue that Navaro-Yashin's theory is similarly illustrated in Marsa, whereby the abject is made to be about African migrants and the open centre, as opposed to potentially permeating much of the objective social conditions in Marsa and charging them with affect. In this respect, my understanding of affect is taken from Brennan (2004: 3) whereby "the origin of transmitted affects is social in that these affects do not only arise within a particular person but also come from without. They come via an interaction

with other people and an environment.” The transmission of affect thus comes about when the ‘atmosphere,’ so to speak – perhaps permeated with a sense of wretchedness and desperation - literally gets inside the individual. In identifying the abject as only being about African migrants within their particular social spaces, it becomes possible to momentarily escape the abject as it may be imbued within the social landscape. Furthermore, it has the effect of performatively constituting the abject as that which it is already claimed to be.

The states of affect which come to be deeply internalized within a class habitus in Marsa give rise to a set of dispositions which form the grounds for social action from a range of understood potentialities, including scope for ‘cultural resistance’. In this, we briefly return to Bourdieu’s framework for understanding social reproduction, discussed in greater detail throughout Part 1 of this thesis. Specifically, I return to Willis’ (1983) critique of Bourdieu being overly deterministic in his approach, and failing to take account of ‘cultural resistance’, without which he claims that any theory of social reproduction is overtly mechanistic. As I argued in Chapter 4, what is potentially lacking in Willis’ account is a greater consideration of how instances of cultural resistance (and the next chapter shall illustrate how this includes the performative banishment of the abject) are framed by wider objective conditions. It is appropriate here to briefly return to Bourdieu, in highlighting this particular aspect of his argument:

It tends to be forgotten that the specific logic of cultural domination means that the fullest recognition of cultural legitimacy can and often does coexist with the most radical challenging of political legitimacy. Furthermore, the awakening of political consciousness is often bound up with a whole process of rehabilitating and rebuilding self-esteem, which, because it involves a reaffirmation of cultural dignity that is experienced as (and indeed always is) liberatory, implies a submission to the dominant values and to some of the principles on which the dominant class bases its domination, such as recognition of the hierarchies linked to educational qualifications or to the capacities they are supposed to guarantee.

(Bourdieu 1984: 396-397)

In this respect, despite a degree of acknowledgement of the dominant group's 'official version of the world' and a submission to some dominant values and principles, resistance is nonetheless present, and is often tied up with a rehabilitation of the self-esteem which has been altered by social affect. The internalization of affect, and of historically being constituted as abject, comes to inform cultural resistance by generating a particular set of dispositions which guide social action. In giving recognition to the cultural legitimacy of dominant values and practices which propagate the symbolic containment and banishment of the socially abject, which in turn contributed towards their own cultural subordination for many years, informants in Marsa could thus apply this practice and mobilize it as a form of cultural resistance, applying it to the only individuals they are able to construct as abject to them within their limited range of possibilities. They did so by shifting the social boundary of dirt, and performatively banishing the abject in such a way as to indirectly declare that the abject was never about them, but about African migrants. The rest of this chapter addresses this in further detail.

"The Blacks Smell"

Most of the African immigrants residing in Marsa lived within the open centre, itself located in the area of Albert Town on the periphery of Marsa. A few ventured out in order to reside within the centre of Marsa and other nearby towns, splitting the cost of rental accommodation between a small group of people. Leaving the open centre was not an easy decision, as it meant forfeiting a living allowance from the Government (under the presumption that those able to rent accommodation now also have the financial means to sustain themselves)¹⁰¹, and permanently giving up your bed at the centre and being unable to return. In my months of living in Marsa, I resided on the top floor of a block of three flats. A garage also formed part of this block, and a number of African immigrants rented this garage and used it for residential purposes. The occupants¹⁰² seemed to prefer keeping to themselves, and I never had direct contact with them during

¹⁰¹ In reality, many African immigrants only managed to secure one-off manual labour jobs, and were rarely able to rely on a steady income.

¹⁰² It was unclear how many individuals lived within this garage at any given time, since a number of people regularly seemed to come and go.

fieldwork.¹⁰³ The same was true of many African immigrants living in Marsa. For the most part, they seemed to prefer the company of one another, as they socialized in the spaces around the open centre (a popular social hub for many African immigrants residing in Malta), and in open public spaces such as the local playground and the footbridge. Their occupancy of spaces which were designated for children, such as the playground, was viewed as problematic, and was often cited as a primary reason for choosing to avoid these spaces, their mere presence seemingly taking on a form of social pollution and contamination. Children regularly complained of not being able to go to the playground because groups of African immigrants regularly congregated there, and drank in these spaces in one another's company. Their presence was considered to be so prominent in these areas that they were often used as a landmark – when I first tried making my way to the open centre by car and stopped to ask for directions, I was told “just turn around that corner and you'll see a lot of blacks. You can't miss it.” When I asked the opinion of my informants in terms of where I should move to in Marsa, I was similarly told to avoid the area around the church and playground, and to avoid Albert Town altogether, “because there are a lot of blacks there.”

Whilst the Africans resided in areas which were largely considered to be dirty and contaminated (particularly the open centre), they were largely regarded by the children of Marsa to be the source of contamination themselves. In other words, African immigrants did not reside in dirty places – the places were dirty because the immigrants resided there. The following ethnographic extracts illustrate precisely that:

Jason: You see so much dirt miss, next to the blacks the sea is really dirty.

Sharon: Why is it dirty over there?

Jason: Because there are the blacks.

[Interview with Jason and Gary [both 10 years old]; Friday 28th October 2011]

¹⁰³ The same could not be said of my downstairs neighbour, who had a violent confrontation with them on one occasion, threatening one of them with a knife when he discovered that they had complained to the landlady about noise coming from his apartment. I heard about this incident from the landlady who was present with her 3 year old grandson at the time, and she got my neighbour to calm down, telling him that she didn't want any “*inkwiet*.” She then told the occupants of the garage that if they had any more problems with the place, then they should find somewhere else to live.

[I explained to Celia and Roberta that I visit the open centre regularly in order to volunteer and provide English lessons to residents]

Celia: Yuck! You could stand the smell?!

Roberta: Did you go there with some air freshener?

Sharon: I paid no attention. The smell comes from the area though, because over there...

Celia: [interrupting] Nooo, that comes from them, from their skin!

[Interview with Celia and Roberta [10 & 9 years old respectively]; Friday 28th October 2011]

I found that a few staff members occasionally and unwittingly contributed to the children's derogatory views on immigrants, ironically at points where they were trying to negate them. On one occasion, Terence began speaking with disgust at the bad smell which immigrants often have, and he was interrupted by one of the teachers who told him that immigrants do not have a house like we do in order to clean themselves. Furthermore, she added that they are first sent to a detention centre "so that we can be safe." This same teacher later helped to organize a school activity in conjunction with the Jesuit Refugee Service, aimed at increasing the children's awareness on the plight of refugees. In relation to the presence of African migrants in Marsa, the messages which the school communicated, both through their members of staff and a few external activities which were organised, occasionally and inadvertently conflicted with one another in a subtle manner (as in the above example), in a sense reflective of the ongoing national debate and rhetoric on the topic of immigration.¹⁰⁴ Within Marsa in general, children were challenged in their perceptions of African migrants on some occasions, and on others a few accusations which were levelled at the immigrants were not denied or met with any resistance, and were thus indirectly validated. To varying degrees, these views were even substantiated by the adults who structured the everyday living environment of the children in Marsa.

By nature of the dirt which was claimed to surround and emanate from them, Sub-Saharan African immigrants were regularly alluded to as polluting agents, responsible for

¹⁰⁴ Malta's detention policy was often a hot topic of debate, along with intense debates on how Malta should tackle the immigration issue overall.

the further degradation of Marsa as an “abjected space” (according to my own analytical term) which should be avoided. This especially applied to the part of Marsa known as Albert town, where even other residents of Marsa often refused to venture (also citing the presence of Africans as a reason)¹⁰⁵, unless they lived there.¹⁰⁶ The Director of the Open Centre explained his continued efforts to me, in attempting to increase the levels of social interaction between the residents of the centre and the people of Marsa, telling me that the people of Marsa did not want to visit the centre as they consider it “dirty.” A few initiatives were set up between the Marsa local council and the open centre in order to encourage more interaction between the Africans and the Maltese, although they seem to have born little fruit, if any. Ironically, the initiatives which were described to me as being the most successful were those which involved community clean ups, in which immigrants were visibly seen to clean the streets of Marsa¹⁰⁷. However, these were short lived and quickly forgotten. Although conditions at the open centre have improved over the years, and indeed it is considered as one of the better open centres in Malta, the standards of living are still generally considered to be quite poor, and not conducive to good hygiene, as some officials have admitted. In a conversation with the Mayor of Marsa¹⁰⁸, he asked me “How can the place hold that amount of people? It is not an adequate place. It literally isn’t. If I have a room like this [indicated his small office around us], and if six people stay here and live in it, tell me what sort of hygiene you can have. Those are all bunk beds, or whatever. Tell me what hygiene you can have.” The mayor added that individuals should not reside in Albert Town at all, as it was an industrial area which was unfit for residential purposes.

¹⁰⁵ Marsa has been referred to as a ‘no-go’ area in the past for this reason. See ‘A stroll through Malta’s ‘no-go zone,’ Malta Today, Sunday 26th August 2007 [Accessed online – 12th September 2013 <http://www.maltatoday.com.mt/2007/08/26/02.html>]

¹⁰⁶ Many residents who lived there resided in properties which had been left to them by earlier generations, most likely having been purchased when the area was projected to develop into an economically vibrant town, and when it was not regarded with the disdain it is often met with today.

¹⁰⁷ ‘Immigrants volunteer in Marsa clean-up, 27th August 2009, [Accessed 9th September 2013 <http://www.timesofmalta.com/articles/view/20090827/local/immigrants-cleaning-up-marsa-roads.271136>]

¹⁰⁸ The mayor of Marsa and the Director of the open centre built a good friendship over the years, based on a great deal of mutual respect. Both seemed to be sympathetic to the professional challenges which the other faced.



Fig. 8 - Inside the Marsa Open Centre

Rooms at the Marsa open centre tended to be cramped, with a number of bunk beds in each room. Up until a few years ago, the area was frequently referred to as an African ghetto, and the centre's Director has since put a great deal of effort into moving the open centre away from that image, partly by attempting to make aesthetic changes to parts of the building. It is hard to detract from the filth in the area, but as the above extracts illustrate, many children merely regard that as symptomatic of the presence of the 'blacks' in the area. As the earlier ethnographic illustrations in this chapter have already alluded, dirt and filth are often held to be indicative of the moral and personal characteristics an individual is deemed to hold. The foul smells which African immigrants were accused of carrying, as well as the poor practices in hygiene which they were also regularly blamed for¹⁰⁹, were often used in order to vilify them, and to locate them as personifications of the abject, whilst simultaneously cushioning their statements with disclaimers of not being racist. They were often spoken of as objects of disgust, whose rightful place was elsewhere.¹¹⁰ Interestingly, many of the children stressed that the

¹⁰⁹ Informants living in Marsa regularly complained that Africans frequently relieved themselves in public, regardless of whether there were children about. The mayor of Marsa and the Director of the open centre also made reference to this in my interviews with them, with the former treating it as inevitable and stressing the need for education on these matters, and the latter similarly explaining to me that the residents have yet to fully learn the possible public health repercussions of relieving themselves in areas which are cemented, rather than in fields.

¹¹⁰ Some children did mention knowing a few African families in the area personally, however they were generally described as the exception to the rule. Such instances were not openly acknowledged to challenge predominant perceptions of sub-Saharan African migrants. Rather, a few individuals were selected as exceptions to the implicit view of migrants as embodied forms of dirt and social pollution.

immigrants who worked as street cleaners were nice, and that they alone should be able to stay in Marsa, as this dialogue demonstrates:

Celia: The blacks are cruel. Cruel.

Sharon: Cruel?

Roberta: Except for those who collect the rubbish.

Sharon: All of them? Except the ones who collect the rubbish?

Celia: Mm hmm.

Sharon: Why aren't those cruel, then?

Celia: Because those say "Good day."

[Interview with Celia and Roberta (10 & 9 years old respectively); Friday 28th October 2011]

[Ġanni had just told me about an African family living in Marsa, who his family happened to know and help, and have over for dinner on occasion]

Sharon: So you're not scared.

Ġanni: It depends which blacks you're talking about... and whether we know them. Excuse the word, but there is the black man of the skips. He's alright. We speak and we say hello. He's ok. But if I see one in the street I'd be scared. It's like they all have the same face.

[Interview with Ġanni and Jason (both 10 years old); Friday 28th October 2011]

Such exemptions only appeared to apply to migrants working as street cleaners, or migrant families who the children knew personally. On other occasions, an African immigrant greeting a child with 'hello' would provide a preface for horror stories of the 'black man' which children would later narrate to one another, as the next chapter shall discuss in further detail. For this reason, I was not entirely convinced by Celia and Ġanni's cited reasons for choosing to like the Africans who worked as street cleaners, whilst vilifying others. Indeed, many children were loaded with contradictory statements insofar as their discussions on the immigrants living in Marsa were concerned. I do not deny that they considered friendliness to be an important character trait, particularly in Marsa where individuals prided themselves on being intensely sociable and hospitable to one another¹¹¹. Similarly, I do not doubt that the children's lack of confidence in being able to distinguish the Africans who they met from one another posed a problem for them, given

¹¹¹ Although Africans were occasionally also held at fault by my informants for trying to be a little too friendly and overfamiliar.

their social history of living in a town where networks and friendships are primarily and strongly formed through regular face-to-face interactions.

Rhetoric such as that highlighted above would normally be taken at face value as racism. However, as my argument thus far has already indicated, there appear to be deeper forces at work. This is not necessarily racism as it is commonly understood, namely as practices of domination and structural abuse at the hands of a dominant group. With respect to my ethnography, I would argue that a form of anxiety manifests itself within some individuals who possess no real way of structurally dominating others, and whose own anxieties of being potentially forgotten or discarded as a 'social mess' subsequently come to be projected on to the African migrants. Recall in Chapter 2, ex-Prime Minister of Malta and hero of the working classes Dom Mintoff, addressing a political mass meeting proclaiming the following: "if there is one thing which must stop once and for all, it is this – that when a worker passes by a rich man, this one says 'yuq¹¹² – what a smell!" (Valletta Mass Meeting, L-Orizzont, 22nd July 1976¹¹³). The statement is highly indicative of Maltese workers in the past (and to some degree today) being treated in much the same way as they in turn (and certainly a number of my child informants) spoke of African migrants and their relationship with dirt during my fieldwork. In many ways, the performative construction of African migrants as the abject arguably absolved the State (however briefly) of its responsibility in alleviating abject social conditions in Marsa, as responsibility for the social degradation of the area was made to lie with the abject itself. This was illustrated on one occasion, on a follow-up field visit in 2013, where Rita told me that 'the blacks' were responsible for raising the cost of living in Malta. I looked at Rita perplexedly, and she explained that her 17 year old son was earning less money in illegal employment, since contractors were unwilling to hire Maltese men and pay a fair wage to them when they are able to exploit African migrants to do the work for half the price (rationale which Rita did not appear to contest on the part of the contractor, who she considered as equally attempting to make a living). Richard was offered a wage of €3.50

¹¹² Yuck.

¹¹³ Quoted in Zammit, E. (1984: 63) *A colonial inheritance: Maltese perceptions of work, power, and class structure with reference to the Labour Movement*
Malta: Malta University Press

(approx. £2.95) an hour to work *'fil-ġebel'* (as a stone mason), and when he protested that the money was pittance for such a physically demanding and strenuous job, he was told that a 'black' would accept the offer immediately. Rita thus considered 'the blacks' to be driving individuals in Marsa who were competing for the same illegal employment (one of the limited possibilities they considered to be available to them at that point) further into poverty¹¹⁴. The Government is not held to account here for the structural inequalities which led to individuals seeking underclass employment and being exploited within it in the first place – rather, the African migrants are taken to task for their own perceived role in bringing about social degradation and abject living conditions. This further illustrates Stallybrass & White's (1986: 53) notion of displaced abjection, whereby "low' social groups turn their figurative and actual power, *not* against those in authority, but against those who are even 'lower'".

The historicity of Marsa people's own victimization arguably gave rise to historical feelings of powerlessness in many respects, which in turn occasionally took on the *form* of racism as a vehicle with which to challenge their own subordination. In employing dirt as a social boundary, and deflecting their own abjection upon the migrants, Kristeva's notion of the abject as "that which is opposed to I" (1982: 1) comes in to play. In identifying sub-Saharan African migrants as abject, children are thus able to socially construct an oppositional relationship for themselves, whereby they constitute themselves as far removed from that which is abject. This is made possible in mobilizing the concept of dirt as a social boundary which, whilst flexible and constantly shifting, nonetheless distinguished the abject from the non-abject. In this respect, considering the boundary of dirt with which metaphorical social divisions were put in to place, it was perhaps harder for children to employ this boundary in relation to sub-Saharan African migrants who worked as street cleaners, effectively working to sanitize the streets of Marsa. Street cleaners were thus in a sense exempt from vilification, since their practices counteracted the polluting effect which they were naturally deemed to have as "blacks." Conversely,

¹¹⁴ Within this conversation, Rita also referred to landlords raising their rent, particularly upon discovering that a number of immigrants were splitting the cost of rent to reside within the same property. The rent would thus be raised, and would remain so even for the Maltese family who would rent the property next, according to Rita.

sub-Saharan African migrants who did *not* work as cleaners were not only identified as a source of contamination, but they were accused of using their contaminating potential viciously, polluting Marsa and its inhabitants in a spiteful and calculated way, as the following ethnographic extracts demonstrate:

Mario, 8, put his hand up, and shared a story of when he was with a friend of his in Marsa, and a black person came up to him to ask him to shake his hand. Mario told us that he had said no. The teacher then went up to Mario to ask him to shake her hand, and when he did, she asked him what the difference was between her and them, adding that shaking hands was meant to be a friendly gesture. Mario answered "because they usually bother me." Rachel added "because they have infections in their hand," and Mario then said that they touch dead mice and rats "so that they can give you an illness on purpose."

Later on, as we left class, I decided to ask Mario to elaborate on what he had said. I asked Mario whether he gets sick from black people, and I asked him "what is it about them?" Mario again answered that they hold mice and rats, and he also added "and they take drugs."

[Fieldnotes; Tuesday 5th April 2011]

Otis, 9, then put up his hand and said "I went out to the shops, and there was a black man..." He said that when he passed by two of them, they offered him a euro. The teacher told him "isn't that a good thing?" Shay, also 9, said that they could pretend to give you one euro, and then kidnap you. The teacher asked Otis whether he had felt safe when that had happened to him, and Otis answered yes. He then said that after he had been given the euro, he went to clean it. Someone else in the class asked whether he had washed his hands afterwards as well, and Otis answered "Nooooo..." very sarcastically, indicating that to do otherwise would have been unthinkable.

[Fieldnotes; Tuesday 12th April 2011]

Although the extent of conviction which the children held in what they were saying might be questioned, it must be noted that these narratives nonetheless formed part of a discourse with social effect – that of transforming individuals into the abject beings they are already claimed to be. To this regard, dirt could also be considered in terms of its transformative potential, as it is performatively utilized within the children's discourse in order to dehumanize and transform black Africans into villains. They are almost looked to as the embodiment of dirt, which the children must consequently distance themselves

from in order to establish themselves as the antithesis to the social degradation and disorder which they consider the 'blacks' to personify. In the classroom, Robert demonstrated this succinctly by saying "I'm not like them. They're totally black. Yuck!" Some children and residents of Marsa thus established themselves in relation to that which they claimed they were not – they were not black, they were not dirty, and they were not cruel. Those qualities belonged to the abject. In performatively constructing the migrants as abject, they demarcate a conceptual space which is theirs, and which effectively distances them from the objects of their distaste. Ironically, my ethnographic material strongly seemed to suggest that the Maltese often adopted practices which were not radically different to those which they berated African immigrants for. During fieldwork, I encountered instances of Maltese men spending their days inebriated in local bars, being involved in a few fights, making crude advances towards younger women, relieving themselves in public, relying on State hand-outs, abusing drugs, and behaving with what would be termed as too much '*kunfidenza*' (a degree of overfamiliarity) – all charges which were frequently levelled at 'the blacks.' In a sense, this underlined the importance of creating a marked distinction between them through other means, banishing and relegating them to a conceptual and abject space in the moral order. Chapter 3 already highlighted how individuals may often be presumed to possess a similar set of dispositions as others living in close proximity within the social space. For this reason, the symbolic banishment of the abject comes to play an important role in practices of social demarcation, rehabilitating social esteem and distinguishing my informants in Marsa from those who they socially construct to be the true abject.

The people of Marsa were limited in their power to physically banish the abject, and had little choice but to live with the Government's decision to transform an old trade school into an open centre a few years back.¹¹⁵ As related in the beginning of this chapter, a close friend who resided within a more affluent area in Malta strongly felt as though the decision to relocate hundreds of migrants to Marsa was at least in part due to the

¹¹⁵ The only state secondary school for boys in the centre of Marsa was phased out during my period of fieldwork, and my informants similarly expressed their concern to me that the newly abandoned building would be transformed into another open centre for migrants, if rumours were to be believed.

severely limited social and cultural capital (and thus symbolic power) of a number of Maltese who resided in the area (given his insinuation that affluent areas whose residents possessed a great deal of social and cultural capital would inevitably be spared from such measures). Nonetheless, the children in school found alternative means to conceptually separate the African immigrants from themselves in their discourse, symbolically banishing them into abjection. Through employing dirt as a social boundary and thus constituting oppositional relationships, the children ultimately transformed and socially constructed the immigrants as villainous characters within their narratives, and integrated them within stories which they would relate to one another, in their various tales of how they battled the 'blacks.'

The stories which the children told were intended to serve the purpose of highlighting the bravery of the children, who were naturally the heroes and protagonists of their own stories, and doing so by establishing themselves as morally upstanding individuals and the antithesis to the villains in their stories, the "blacks." Bad odours in myths and storytelling have previously been considered by Bubandt (1998), who explored smell as a means of making sense of the world in Buli. He makes the argument that "foul smells are simultaneously the cloud-like stuff of myths and a fog-like menace to social life itself. This moral duality of bad smells represents a challenge to a sociology of knowledge and order" (1998: 49). The attribution of stench to the migrants similarly imbued the latter with the menace-like and literary quality of evil mythical beings, which thus challenged the very foundations of the social order (and detracted from the idea that 'social mess' was indeed already present).

Dirt thus possessed a transformative potential within the children's storytelling, transforming African immigrants into villains within their rhetoric, whilst serving as the point of departure in telling stories where the motives and moral characteristics of African immigrants is called into question, and where they are portrayed as disordered individuals responsible for the deterioration of Marsa. Within their discourse, the children shifted the social boundary of dirt delineating the abject, making the abject primarily

about the contaminated and contaminating individuals they constructed as opposite to them, rather than about something which could potentially be found throughout Marsa. Thus, children's strategies for banishing the abject partly lay within the stories which they told one another – stories which served a dual purpose of demonstrating their bravado, and keeping the abject at a firm distance. The next chapter shall delve in to these strategies in further detail.

I take children's strategies for symbolically banishing the abject as a form of cultural resistance, whereby children displace their own affective sense of social mess, uncleanliness and social marginalization on to a different source. In doing so, they challenge the very class structure which posits working class and underclass people from Marsa as social filth. However, they do so in such a way that they socially reproduce the very mechanisms of social demarcation that have worked to marginalize them, indirectly confirming the legitimacy of practices which socially marginalize others and which have historically banished them to the realm of the abject.

Chapter 7: Instances of Cultural Resistance

“If, God forbid, you’re at the swings alone and there are a lot of blacks, they can kidnap you, take you in their car and throw you somewhere.”

Luke (10 years old), 12th January 2012

The symbolic banishment of the abject was often undertaken in Marsa, in an exercise which not only postulated the abject, but also performatively constructed it as that which it was already claimed to be, in doing so deflecting from nuances of abjection which persisted within the objective conditions in this socially marginal space. The previous chapter delved into how the symbolic boundary of dirt is shifted accordingly within this practice, in constructing a new socially undesirable abject in the form of sub-Saharan African migrants. Thus, my child informants socially distinguished and demarcated themselves from the migrants, in symbolically relegating them to a site of abject ‘otherness.’ In doing so, my informants constituted themselves in terms of an oppositional relationship whereby they embodied everything which the abject did not. This chapter shall further explore the children’s strategies for doing precisely that, in delving into the stories which they narrated to one another relating their various encounters with the ‘black man.’

The stories which unfolded amongst my child informants in many an interview or classroom discussion may partially be conceptualized as instances of cultural resistance, in which children’s own sense of the abjection which persisted within their social conditions came to be projected on to the ‘blacks’ within their stories. In undertaking this, children thus come to resist and challenge their own socially marginal positions, inferring that ‘the abject’ (and the socially undesirable qualities embedded in the term) was never really about them at all. Again, in referring to the abject, I employ and consider the analytical term broadly in order to encompass that which comes to be socially cast off and

devalued according to the symbolic classification system of those in possession of the dominant habitus. Thus, symbolic class structures which may posit some individuals in Marsa as occupying a lower class (or underclass) position whereby they are considered instigators of a social mess are thereby taken to task. This is not to insinuate that such practices of symbolic banishment were undertaken by my child informants in a calculated manner – rather, they appeared to be subconscious for the most part, and yet they inevitably contributed towards a wider discourse producing social effect. This discourse called upon social demarcations of distinction (which the boundary of dirt certainly worked to delineate) – demarcations which have also certainly worked to marginalize people of Marsa and banish them to the realm of the abject in the past, as illustrated in previous chapters. Thus, inasmuch as existing social hierarchies came to meet with cultural resistance in Marsa, they were simultaneously and indirectly granted legitimacy due to my informants utilizing similar socially demarcating practices in order to reproduce notions of hierarchy in another direction, as this chapter shall illustrate.

The Arrival of sub-Saharan African Immigrants

The presence of sub-Saharan Africans in Marsa is a relatively recent one, as Chapter 2 already detailed. ‘Boat people’¹¹⁶ began arriving in Malta in significant numbers in 2002¹¹⁷, and it was around that time that legislation was put in place in order to establish official procedures with regards to receiving individuals who arrived in Malta seeking asylum. Reception conditions were quickly improvised for asylum seekers in response to the large number of individuals who began arriving by boat. Under these circumstances, the Marsa Open centre opened in 2005, making use of an old and unused building which had served as a local trade school just a few years prior, and which was shut down following numerous protests with regards to the dilapidated state of the building. The open centre was ultimately established with little to no discussion with the residents of

¹¹⁶ This is the official term which was adopted to refer to asylum seekers arriving in Malta by boat in an “irregular manner” (i.e. without official documentation) in search of humanitarian protection, the majority of whom are Sub-Saharan African immigrants.

¹¹⁷ In that year alone, 21 boats arrived, with 1682 individuals on board (UNHCR Malta).

http://www.unhcr.org.mt/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=240&Itemid=110

Marsa, who in turn experienced quite a radical shift in the demographics of their town. Marsa was (and is) marked by the intensely social relationships of its Maltese residents amongst one another, having long known one another as neighbours and conversing with one another regularly. Conversely, many informants in Marsa spoke about African immigrants as strangers who had “*wiċċ wieħed*” (one face), more so testifying to their own difficulty in identifying them from one another and telling them apart, in a sense immediately rendering similarly intimate social relationships with them as highly unlikely.

The children who formed part of my research have always known sub-Saharan African immigrants to be present in Malta to some degree, and are scarcely able to remember a time where they were not present (in contrast with their parents). When I began my research in February 2011, the eldest child within my group of informants was 10 years old, having been born around the same time that large numbers of asylum seekers began to arrive. My informants most commonly referred to the immigrants as “the blacks,”¹¹⁸ and they regularly adopted this term in distinguishing between themselves and their unknown neighbours. This term was often adopted in the social construction of oppositional identities, the boundaries of which constantly shift in terms of who is being spoken of at any given time, and in relation to whom.

The previous chapters illustrated how my informants in Marsa constructed oppositional relationships, both with middle class Maltese and with sub-Saharan African migrants, mainly by shifting the social boundary of dirt and positioning themselves on alternating sides of this boundary accordingly in order to infer social difference. This thesis also considers (and has considered) the construction of social divisions in relation to concepts of both social class and race (as imported terms) amongst others, however it does not conflate the two concepts. Rather, class and race are treated as belonging to separate spheres of experience (Gilroy 1987) within this discussion, despite the prevalence of studies which hold and illustrate that the two are not easily disentangled, nor should they entirely be so (Franklin 1991, Kelley 1994, Weis 1988, Cousins 1999). Others still, regard

¹¹⁸ They occasionally also referred to them as “*klandestini*,” meaning “the clandestines.”

the dissolution of race into class as a desirable step (Miles 1984). Certainly, clear inter-relations exist between ideas of race and class – however, for the purposes of this discussion, the two concepts are considered in terms of how they feed in to a broader argument regarding the way in which social divisions are rhetorically constructed in the constitution of oppositional relationships and ‘otherness’. The social boundaries which are mobilized in constructing these divisions are highly flexible, and may be shifted accordingly in relation to which ‘other’ is being spoken of at any given point. My own reflexive position within the field demonstrated this. Upon my arrival in Marsa, I was not initially considered by the people of Marsa to be “one of us” from their perspective (although my position naturally evolved as fieldwork progressed). Although I was Maltese, I was not from Marsa itself, and I had come from a relatively middle class background, having been raised in one of the more affluent and predominantly English-speaking residential areas in Malta. Thus within discussions on class, my initial status was that of an outsider and of being the ‘other’ or ‘one of them’ (as opposed to ‘one of us’) – I did not come from a working class background, and I was to some extent initially considered to be a product of a ‘pretentious middle class’. However, once the focus became somewhat broader and talk extended to mention of the “blacks,” the boundaries shifted and I thus became “one of us” given that I was white and Maltese, as opposed to black and foreign. The borders between who is to be considered “us” and “them” are thus malleable and fluid, and as the previous chapter illustrated, are partly (if not largely) constructed in relation to symbolic concepts of dirt.

Informants in Marsa demonstrate how dirty (and thus down to earth and genuine) they are capable of being in relation to the Maltese middle classes, and simultaneously how clean (and thus good) they are in relation to the sub-Saharan Africans in their midst. The degree to which informants in Marsa seemed to consider “the blacks” to have internalized and embodied dirt into their very being was appropriated in order to more permanently relegate sub-Saharan African immigrants to a realm of “otherness,” precluded from the possibility of being considered “one of us,” and conceptually banished to an abject space. (The need to do so, as I have argued and shall continue to argue within this chapter, may arise precisely from their shared dispositions generated in close

proximity to one another in the social field, thus necessitating that social distinctions are put in to place by other means, namely through the ideological construction of the abject). Aside from utilizing the concept of dirt in culturally constructing the otherness of Sub-Saharan Africans, it was also appropriated in such a way as to transform the “blacks” into villains within local narratives, and this was the role which was often ascribed to sub-Saharan African immigrants in the stories which children would tell. In this respect, the narratives are less concerned about race, and more so about the construction of a discourse of the threatening and abject ‘other’ (rooted in the narratives of both children and adults in Marsa), the abject ‘other’ in these particular circumstances being the black immigrants living in the area. Their relative proximity on the margins of society, along with their dark complexion and perceived overfamiliarity with dirt, rendered the migrants prime candidates upon whom existing abjection could be projected, in turn further entrenching their respective positioning on the margins of society. It should be noted that ‘white’ foreigners in Malta did not appear to receive the same treatment, making it all the more tempting for the following discussion to be considered solely in terms of race. However, as I shall also discuss in further detail later, I approach the notion of race as a predominantly social construction, and consider it only in terms of what it is able to contribute to a broader discussion on the application of social boundaries and demarcations of distinction. These boundaries, as I hope to have illustrated, are not solely reliant on ideas of race and ethnicity, which in themselves run the risk of hijacking existing discourses of ‘otherness’.

“The Black Man ran after me”

Although my informants did not frequently make reference to African immigrants within their daily conversations, they were often alluded to within my interviews with them, and within broader classroom discussions in which they were asked about what they liked and disliked about Marsa. These passing comments often expanded into elaborate stories

recounting their confrontations with “the black man.”¹¹⁹ The stories were intricately weaved together in such a way as to form a unified rhetoric in which the malicious intentions of the black man were always highlighted. Children were more likely to share these stories within their Personal and Social Development (PSD) lessons¹²⁰ at school than in any other lesson, given that the PSD lessons were demarcated as a space in which children were free to share their views and experiences, and where teachers in turn would attempt to challenge the children’s perceptions where it was deemed necessary, and foster ideas of tolerance and acceptance amongst the students. The following occurred within the first few weeks of having begun fieldwork:

The Year 4 PSD lesson today was about ‘Managing Conflict and Channelling Anger’, and the teacher asked the children to work on a list about things which make them angry in their community. She encouraged the children to speak about the wider community, and not just the things which angered them at home and at school. After the children had some time to work on their lists, the teacher kicked off the discussion with Ben. Ben spoke about problems with his mum, and that he often hit her. He then moved to the next item on his list which was “when a black grabs you in the street.” When the teacher registered surprise at this, Ben said “it’s true, I’m not joking!” Daniela supported Ben’s statement and said “he’ll do something to you.” Ben went on to explain that a black man had run after him, and that they often put children in bags. Daniela interjected once again and said “Last time he came in between us, he was going to take us!” Ben added “because he had a bag, I saw it!” Ben also spoke about a place nearby with a white door, which he was afraid of because the “blacks” live there.

Initially the teacher allowed the children to continue reciting their list of things which made them angry, and this included noise, fighting, the darkness, and people calling them names. She then returned to what Ben had said during the lesson, and she asked whether there were any other children who also felt like Ben, or who maybe disagreed with him. Theresa put her hand up and said “the blacks bother me. They take young children. The news says so.” The teacher asked Theresa “do they say that at home?” and Theresa answered yes. Narissa then put her hand up and said “they bother me very very very very much!” Narissa said that she had been walking down the street with a ball, and the ball got away from her, and a black man then picked it up. Narissa said

¹¹⁹ Occasionally, teachers who were aware of my research interests assisted me by asking the children to elaborate upon a passing comment which they may have made, and this then evolved into rich narratives.

¹²⁰ The PSD syllabus states the following as its mission statement: “Personal and Social Development aims at empowering individuals to develop skills that enhance their wellbeing, by identifying and developing their potential, thus enabling them to participate effectively in their social environment.” [Accessed 19th September 2013: <http://psd.skola.edu.mt/primary-sector/>]

that she had asked for her ball back, and the black man answered “No, it’s mine.” Narissa said that she then went back home and her mother called the police. She added “the black man told me that he was going to get revenge. I remain careful, because one time he was going to kidnap me.”

Daniela spoke next, and also said that the “blacks” bother her. She said that she had a doll which her mother had bought her, and a black man told her how ugly her doll was. Daniela said that he took the doll from her, and she then argued with him. He then told her that she could have it, and Daniela said that the police later arrested the man, telling him “you have no right to take children’s things.” Martina then spoke, and said that whilst all people are capable of doing these things, “I hate [the blacks] a little bit.” The teacher told Martina that that was quite a strong statement, and Daniel said “but they scare you on purpose!” Many children chimed in with similar protestations. Marjes told the children “they come after the young ones to kill us,” adding to the teacher that she was big, while the rest of them were small (implying that they thus had more reason to be afraid).

Marchita then spoke and said “I saw a black man when I went to the bank with my *nanna* (grandmother). He had come, and he was going to run after me. I heard him say “come, let’s kidnap this girl.” At this, the teacher turned to me and said “do you see how they imagine things?” Narissa then shared another story of hers, and said that she was next to a black person, and he told her that he would take her to a place where there is a lot of money. Narissa said that she followed him, and then proclaimed “there’s nothing here!” Narissa then concluded “he was going to grab me with some rope.” I interjected and asked Narissa where her parents were at the time, and she told me that they were at home, and that she had gone out to buy water.

Daniela began speaking again, and said that there was one black man who told her “I’m going to take off your clothes.” Daniela explained that she was behind her mother’s front door, and she said that she was scared that he was going to do something to her. Daniela said “he began running after me.” Daniela said that she then ran to her aunt’s house nearby, and her aunt called her mother, and her mother called the police, and the police “gave him a smack.” Francesca added that these policemen were English, and they had come to Malta to find work. The teacher challenged various aspects of Daniela’s story, and indeed of many of the children’s stories, and she told the children that it bothered her to hear them saying such things, adding that the colour of a person’s skin did not determine the character of an individual.

[PSD Lesson with Year 4 Class (8-9 year olds); Tuesday 5th April 2011]

The above extract is characteristic of the conversations which would arise whenever the topic of the “blacks” came up. Within the children’s narratives, there were a number of consistent elements which featured quite regularly. At some point within their stories,

children would often relate that the black man began running after them. Similarly, they detailed how they were intelligently privy to the malicious underlying intentions of the black man, and were thus able to outsmart their potential attackers and escape using their own cunning tactics. Their stories would increasingly become stretched and exaggerated as children attempted to outdo one another in their stories, heightening the danger which they claim to have faced, and the subsequent level of shrewdness which was required of them in order for them to emerge victorious from the related incident, despite being fearful of their claimed attackers. The children thus projected themselves as local heroes who successfully escaped the victimization which the villains (i.e., the “*suwed*”) attempted to enforce upon them, illustrating how they then overpowered them to become the dominant heroic protagonists of their stories. The following ethnographic extracts illustrate this clearly:

Gary, 9, then told the teacher that he had gone in to a shop one time, when a black man had stolen something. Gary said that the shopkeeper asked the man whether he had stolen anything, and the man answered no, before exiting the shop and laughing. Gary then said that he ran out after the man, and jumped on him and brought him down to the ground.

[Tuesday 12th April 2011]

Robert, 9, told the class that he was walking at night, and there was a man who was “dark”, and Robert then said “I threw him over.” The children laughed, and the teacher became angry and shouted “From where?! The bridge?! Don’t exaggerate!”

[Tuesday 12th April 2011]

Jason: In the evenings you get scared of [the blacks] because they don’t show... it’s very dark because we go to *Muzeum*¹²¹ at 6:30pm and we leave at 7:30pm and it will be very dark then.

Sharon: And you’re afraid of them?

¹²¹ Catholic Catechism classes, whereby children prepare for their Holy Communion and Confirmation.

Jason: Well I'm not really scared of them now because I take a billiards stick with me, and if they run after me I give them a huge whack with it, because I play with it at *Mużew*. Then I'll hit them from here downwards, and not on top, because otherwise he will not hurt.

[Interview with Ġanni and Jason [both 10 years old]; 28th October 2011]

The children's stories thus became quite grand, and whilst many of them were clearly stretched or completely fabricated, they nonetheless contributed to a dominant rhetoric with social effect, in which the image of the villainous black man was constantly reiterated and imbued with meaning. The victimization which the children attributed to themselves within the stories may to some extent be considered as reminiscent of their own internalized sense of abjection, given their astute awareness of ways in which they are looked down upon by the higher classes, and by those who disparage Marsa for its persistent relationship with dirt and '*taħwid*' as exemplified in the preceding chapters. I had a sense of the children's own implicit and unspoken recognition of this, often couched in concerted attempts to rehabilitate self-esteem and assert pride at hailing from Marsa. During a student council meeting, in an attempt to stress the importance of not jumping to conclusions and tarring everybody with the same brush, Miss Janet responded to Rudy's allegations of the 'blacks' putting children into bags by asking him "What would you do if you similarly heard children from Birkirkara saying that all children from Marsa are *ġellidin*¹²²?" Rudy, 8, angrily and defensively answered that if he ever heard anybody saying that about children from Marsa, then he would run after them. This exchange hinted at an already existing knowledge of ways in which residents of Marsa may have been spoken of in a derogatory manner, quite possibly having directly been faced with such accusations before, given Rudy's rough and protective reaction along with his quick resort to anger at the insinuation. It similarly suggested that residents from Marsa occasionally were the subjects of essentializing and marginalizing discourses in much the same way as 'the blacks' within their own rhetoric.

¹²² People who are confrontational and prone to violence, always looking to pick an argument or a fight.

Any adults who came to hear of these stories which the children would tell of the 'black man' often passed them off as ideas which children would have gained from their parents, implying a straightforward transmission of ideas from adult to child. Many adults in Marsa claimed that other parents would probably attempt to instil fear of black people in their children, mostly as an instrument of control in regulating their children's behaviour, in much the same way as when parents would threaten to send their children to an institute on occasions where they misbehaved. Indeed, this very practice of storytelling in order to coerce children's behaviour is noted in studies of Maltese folklore, whereby sayings of "*If you go out, you will meet the black man*" and "*If you do not stay quiet, the black man will come out of the wooden chest*" were apparently invoked¹²³ as "coercive means...to inculcate proper behaviour in children" (Zarb 1998: 88-91). Zarb (1998: 91) notes a link between black and evil in these expressions, linking them to a religious dichotomy whereby Catholics were historically viewed as good, and Muslims as evil. These sayings of the "black man" also draw parallels with stories of the mythical creature *il-Babaw*, an imaginary monster (equivalent to the bogeyman) who took to harassing small children, and whose imminent arrival was threatened in the expression "*the babaw will come for you wearing his hooded cloak ['faldetta'], and he will take you with him*" (Zarb 1998: 118). In addition to these sayings and expressions which were said to serve as forms of coercive discipline for children, a number of folktales and legends existed which told of savage pirate attacks in which the Maltese were periodically kidnapped by Barbary corsairs from North Africa (tales which had a historical basis serving as a throwback to the time of the Great Siege and the Ottoman Empire). Arguably the most well-known Maltese legend in this regard is 'The Bride of Mosta,' which tells the story of a young bride from the noble Cumbo family who was kidnapped into slavery on her wedding day, in a raid led by a former Muslim slave to the family. The legend has a historical basis, as Barbary pirates did indeed raid the village of Mosta in 1526, taking 400 people (including a bride and her guests) into captivity (Manduca & Berry 2005).

¹²³ Zarb (1998) does not provide a historical timeframe indicating when these expressions were (or indeed are) in use. However, his work is largely based on the first-hand recollections of a number of elderly informants (over the age of 70), whom he interviewed extensively.

Although it seemed that the warnings embedded in such tales may have been occasionally administered to some of the children within my own ethnography¹²⁴, it does not stand to reason that such ideas were duly and unquestioningly absorbed by them. Indeed, this approach is problematic for many reasons. It does not account for the children in Marsa who contributed to this discourse despite the fact that their parents stressed to them that they had no reason to be afraid of black people, and who also emphasized that black people were also human beings. Furthermore, it fails to consider the ways in which children make their own sense of their (albeit adult-structured) surroundings. In this respect, the stories which children tell one another, along with the pseudo-imaginary figures which they invoke within their narratives, should be conceptualized as a way in which children address the various aspects of their world. Piaget (1962), in a study considering the imaginary friends of his daughter (an “aseau” described as a bird-like creature who could also turn into a dog, insect, or other animal; an invisible dwarf; and a black woman who was first named ‘Cadile’ and then ‘Marécage’) was interested in the function of these imaginary companions, regarding them as an intriguing mix of varying degrees of imitation and distorting assimilation. Despite criticisms of and limitations in his work, including the effects of sociocultural contexts largely being disregarded (Schwartzman 1978), and imaginary companions being considered as evidence of immature thought (Taylor & Mannering 2007), Piaget makes the valid argument that by engaging in such deliberate symbolic constructions, “the child is exercising his present life” (1962: 130). He goes on to claim that “‘imaginative’ play reproduces what [the child] has lived through, but by means of symbolic representation” (1962: 131). The characters with whom children engage in their narratives, and the subsequent relationships which they hold with them, reveal how children’s stories may serve as a medium for addressing predominant features in their social world.

Interesting parallels can be drawn with Argenti’s (2010) work on folktales in the Cameroon Grassfields. Oku adults rationalized that folktales served a cautionary purpose, telling tales of the child-eating monster Kōngaangu in order to warn children and prevent them from straying too far from their parents’ house. However, a contradiction arose in

¹²⁴ I have no ethnographic material to confirm this, save for the speculation of a few parents.

the fact that folktales are most often shared by children amongst one another, with no adult involvement. Argenti considers the potential for these folktales to address the personal anxieties, concerns, values, and aspirations of the children who share and listen to them (2010: 228), going beyond the idea of storytelling as child-structured play which exists for its own sake, and exploring Oku children's storytelling as an articulation of the dilemmas which children face in growing up in the Grassfields. Similarly, Lanclos (2003) explored how children are aware of and demonstrate resistance to their own marginalization implicit within the socio-political circumstances of their lives in Belfast amidst 'the Troubles'. By means of children's folklore, Lanclos uncovered how children's everyday play practices point towards and confront concerns which are characteristic of life there, particularly the ways in which violence permeates their everyday life.

In this regard, children's narratives must necessarily be regarded as situated within wider objective and adult-structured conditions of existence, in which children call upon their own position as active social agents in order to make their own sense of the conditions of the social world in which they are inextricably a part. Furthermore, children's actions further serve the purpose of *acting upon* their social world, as other narratives performatively banishing 'the black man' shall later illustrate in greater detail. In addition to stories of 'the black man', it is useful to note that children's narratives also served to address other characteristics of their world, being utilized in order to project certain ideas of themselves according to the values intrinsic within their habitus. Previous chapters have illustrated stories whereby children were concerned with involvement in '*tañwid*,' and in appearing rough. Further to this, they also demonstrated how the children portrayed themselves as possessing positive values which were so revered in Marsa. In Chapter 3, Daniel shared the following story:

If I see somebody poor, it really hurts my heart. There was one man, I saw him in a wheelchair almost asleep, and there was a car, and I went to wake him up. God forbid anything happened. I told him he was going to get hurt, and I moved him myself and pushed him up on to the pavement. I really felt my heart hurting and I couldn't take it anymore, so I said let me go and tell him, because I couldn't take it anymore.

[Interview with Daniel and Martina (10 years old); 12th January 2012]

Daniel's story attested to the importance which informants in Marsa attributed towards being down to earth and kind-hearted, helping one another wherever possible. Such measures bolstered the idea of residents coming together as "one family" (*'familja waħda'*) as highlighted in Chapter 2, in itself a sentiment of the warmth and friendliness which my informants in Marsa so valued and prided themselves on. Through the medium of storytelling, Daniel thus successfully projected himself as the kind of person he knows to be valued in Marsa in accordance with the predominant class habitus. As already suggested, stories were also shared in addressing the children's matters of concern, potentially regarding the abject conditions which surrounded them. These concerns were not exclusive to the sub-Saharan African immigrants, as the following extract makes evident:

Daniela: Over there, there are some drug addicts... where my *nanna* lives, do you know how many drugs there are? Near Maria Regina I think there are around 12. One time at school in Year 4 I found a syringe and the teacher told me "No, it's not true that it went in." But my shoe, the bottom of it was small and the syringe got in. They took me to a doctor and my father continued to worry. They took lots of blood and eventually they said that I have nothing. He lifted me [with happiness] and started twirling around with me.¹²⁵

[Interview with Daniela, Casey, and Daniel (Ages 9, 9 and 10 respectively); 6th March 2012]

Within her story, Daniela drew attention to the abjection which permeated her surroundings and to which she almost fell victim, in a sense expressing concern over how these conditions may come to penetrate and threaten her integrity of self, piercing her external boundary to then enter her and become internalized quite literally. As Kristeva (1982) noted, the abject both repulses and lures, as the object of both our fascination as well as our disdain. The victims of the abject become "its fascinated victims – if not its

¹²⁵ I was present at the actual event which Daniela narrated here, it having occurred during the previous scholastic year. In guiding the Year 4 class back to school following a brief outing, a number of children spotted a syringe in the middle of the road and tried to veer closer to it, whilst the staff held them back. Daniela claimed that the needle was pointing vertically upwards (a clear fabrication given that it was located on a steep incline) and pierced her shoe sole, pricking her foot in the process. The staff found Daniela's tall tale to be implausible; however Daniela was promptly removed from school early that day and whisked off to hospital by her concerned parents.

submissive and willing ones” (1982:9). The children were equally drawn to the discarded object of abjection (the syringe), inasmuch as they distanced themselves from it as a dangerous and threatening object. Narratives involving ‘the black man’ demonstrated a similar fascination with the abject – at once a threat and a source of intrigue. The ‘black man’ was socially constructed as an object of distaste and implicit danger, one which should be cast off and distanced from the self, in order to protect the integrity of the self against any form of threat to its imaginary border. In doing so, the children were able to project the abject qualities of their internalized environment on to the sub-Saharan African immigrants, effectively denying any sense of abjection within themselves and their affective environment. The necessity in doing so, as I have highlighted in previous chapters, may arise from deeply rooted similarities and living in close proximity within the social field.

Occupying similar positions within the field is often presumed to generate a similar set of dispositions, and thus a similar relationship with abjection. As I illustrated in the previous chapter, many complaints which were voiced about the migrants involved transgressions which a number of Maltese people I observed also appeared to have been accused or guilty of (including but not limited to public drunkenness and roughness, exploitation of social benefits, and spirited flirtation). Shazney, a mother in her 30s, revealed to me that whilst a number of people complained about not being able to visit the local playground due to the ‘blacks’ in the area, she herself has regularly had to leave the playground with her children due to the loutish behaviour of groups of young Maltese men, who would curse loudly and vandalize the area. Harrison (2006: 1) draws attention to Simmel (1955: 42-45) and Coser (1956: 67-72) who both noted that antagonistic relationships often tend to arise amongst those who have the most in common, and Harrison later develops this theory in relation to an idea of difference as denied resemblance. He notes that a group’s “representations of outsiders tend to reflect and serve to emphasise its own cultural values by making non-members appear to embody those specific qualities which it denies and disparages in itself” (2006:54). In this respect, the perceptions of the ‘other’ which Harrison terms “difference as inferiority” appear not to be about difference at all, but rather appear as distorted and suppressed forms of perceived resemblance.

These degrees of similarity, and of being mutually situated within the same marginal space, in turn necessitated a symbolic banishment of the abject in Marsa, in making the abject about one specific thing in order to feign that the abject was not in fact potentially everywhere, and about everything (Navaro-Yashin 2012). This is a performative act, which serves to constitute the abject as that which it was already claimed to be. Vast similarities can be drawn here with Leone (1981: 84) and his study of the Mormon church in the United States, which is also referred to by Harrison:

By excluding blacks, Mormons recapitulated and internalized their own subordinate, inferior position. They did unto others what was being done to them, and, when they did it to others, they masked the locus of reality, namely, their own true condition. Further, the doing was the becoming; by making others inferior, unacceptable, and unworthy, they acted out on others what they themselves were and so modelled their own condition.

This performative move thus arguably takes on the form of cultural resistance, borne out of a denied resemblance at the margins of society. These actions were in themselves framed by the objective conditions of the children's own existence, as children subconsciously resisted and responded to their own marginalization, exercising aspects of their potentially dangerous social world. In doing so, they contributed to a discourse with social effect which not only constructed the migrants as abject, but also deflected any sense of abjection from themselves entirely, in constituting themselves as socially valued and desirable individuals by comparison. This practice highlighted children's status as social agents in their own right, acting upon their social world rather than being mere passive recipients to it. The performative banishment of the abject, evident in children's storytelling, involved creative strategies in which children appeared to take illicit pleasure in imagining the transgressions of the abject of which they would be the victims. In this respect, stories of the black men in Marsa were often narrated by children to one another, occasionally in a somewhat collaborative manner as children tried to fill in gaps in one another's stories and inadvertently suggest other routes for the stories to take:

[Roberta mentions the name of a shop by the church]

Celia: Ahhhh, yes! My goodness over there there'll be so many blaaaaacks!

Roberta: I went inside to buy with my mum, and there was the car. Mum went in, and I had the car door open. There was a black and he grabbed me. Then I got back in.

Celia: Why did he grab you? So that you can stay near him?

Roberta: I don't know, how would I know!

Sharon: So what happened then?

Roberta: Then...

Celia: Did you shout for your mum, or did he hold your mouth shut?

Roberta: Nooo, then... he left us and I went back in to the car and...

Celia: ...and you locked.

Roberta: ...and we left.

Celia: If your mum hadn't come back yet? Or did she get back just in time?

Roberta: No, because mum managed to get in to the car, and she closed the door, and I was coming out of the shop, I opened the door and got in to the car, I left the door open and he grabbed me.

Celia: And then you got in?

Roberta: Yes, then I got in.

Sharon: Did your mum do anything?

Celia: I suppose she must have rushed...

Roberta: No.

Sharon: Didn't she try to tell him anything?

Celia: Yeah right, so he can grab her as well!

[Interview with Celia and Roberta [10 & 9 years old respectively]; 28th October 2011]

Stories were occasionally co-authored in this collective manner, and were woven in to a wider rhetoric regarding the presence of sub-Saharan African immigrants in Marsa, and indeed in Malta. On occasions such as that illustrated above, there appeared to be a tacit agreement whereby storytelling became a joint exercise and a story-in-the-making, whereby another child helped the other with the next line and offered alternative routes for the story. Such a strategy necessitated an implicit degree of suspension of disbelief, in order for the story to achieve its aims of bringing a new abject into being. In projecting internalized states of abjection onto the 'other' (i.e. that which is opposed to 'I'), the new abject come to assume responsibility for being the source of social ills, as opposed to the socially marginalized Maltese who would previously have occupied this role.

A few narratives were extracted from classroom observations, and a number of them were shared in separate informal interviews within the school with 2-4 children at a time. It's important to note here that there most likely were elements of children's storytelling which I would not have had access to during fieldwork, given practical and ethical limitations in accessing an exclusively children's culture. Nonetheless, the exchanges which I did have occasion to observe merit further consideration here. If we are to go beyond (or reject entirely) the idea of story-telling as a manifestation of play which exists purely for its own sake (Norbeck 1974), it becomes necessary to probe the wider issues which are being addressed within the children's stories. In doing so, I must clarify that within this thesis, I have only considered Marsa children's storytelling inasmuch as it is able to shed light upon their relationship with the abject, and how they come to make sense of it and address it (often in their subsequent banishment of it). In this manner, by means of the children's stories, it becomes possible to consider the way in which children make sense of and act upon their social world, which is in itself marked by nuances of abjection.

In returning to the idea of stories of the black man being used as cautionary tales aimed at evincing social control on the children in Marsa, it is pertinent to note that other similar warnings (such as threatening to send children away to an institute if they fail to behave themselves) have occasionally come to fruition amongst children in Marsa. Children who are claimed to be defiant (*'arditi'*) and vulgar (*'pastazi'*) are often threatened with being sent away from home and to an institute if they do not behave, and some parents in Marsa do indeed act upon this threat once they reach a point where they feel unable to withstand or control their children's behaviour.¹²⁶ Thus, such threats come to take on particular meanings amongst the children, as very real and potential outcomes which

¹²⁶ Such cases are often regarded by the relevant authorities as being marked by deeper social and psychological problems lying at the heart of the family. Nonetheless, parents tend to place blame directly on the children themselves, stating that the children either lack knowledge on how to behave properly, or that they themselves lack knowledge on how to parent them.

they must address in their own way, either by taking heed of them, rebelling against them, or simply projecting indifference to them.

As children attempt to make meaning out of the circumstances of their adult-structured world, which in itself is often peppered with conflicting narratives where the presence of sub-Saharan African immigrants are concerned, they live out their experiences of the world in constant dialogue and communication with one another, as partly attested to by their stories. I had come to hear from a small group of children that around two years prior to the beginning of my fieldwork, one of my informants (Keith, who would have been 7 years old at the time) was crossing the street, when a car driven by a 'black man' ran over his foot. This caused a big commotion amongst adults who rushed to the scene, screaming and shouting that a drunk man who did not have his car headlights on had run over "Ġuġu's son." People in the nearby shops and band club at the time mistook this uproar for '*inkwiet*' and arguments which were common at that time of year in the lead up to the village feast.¹²⁷ Keith told me about the tyre burns which he had on his leg as a result of the incident, which he explains that he still has to this day, and the teachers also recollect Keith coming to school in a wheelchair for a few months following the incident. Keith mentioned that the Marsa police station was unmanned at the time, and they had needed to seek assistance at the police station in the next town.

This incident, along with a small handful of others, means that when adults in Marsa voice concern over social ills which they claim have befallen Marsa due to the black migrants, these concerns also make sense to the children. It was not uncommon for the children to pass by groups of African immigrants in public places, who would have congregated together in order to drink alcohol and speak amongst themselves. The exploitation of public space in this manner was considered largely inappropriate, particularly in the presence of children, and bolstered existing views of the immigrants as "matter out of place" (Douglas 1966:44), further allowing them to be constructed as social filth.

¹²⁷ Due to the rivalry between the *Każin tal-Banda* and *Tal-Kantina*, two organizations affiliated with the Church of the Holy Trinity. This rivalry will be considered in greater detail in Chapter 8.

According to staff at the Open Centre, such situations of public inebriation partly arose as a result of the migrants having little to do and feeling down due to their limited prospects in Malta, not to mention any untreated trauma and mental health difficulties which they may have experienced in the process of escaping their country and making their harrowing journey to Europe.¹²⁸ Thus, the stories which children ultimately shared about the “blacks” in the area partially drew upon a few elements which they knew to be true (such as references to their public consumption of alcohol), and these relative truths were then taken as the starting points for the children’s narratives. Even so, it is important to note that children’s stories were not necessarily always based on their own direct experiences, nor were they executed in a premeditated manner. Although these narratives elicited participation from other children, and were highly engaged with once they began, they nonetheless appeared to unfold in a largely subconscious manner, and the children’s contradictory statements which I later discuss further attest to this. Regardless of this, their stories contributed to an overarching and symbolic discourse which consistently entrenched the migrants in their abject and socially marginal positions, and which simultaneously constituted the children as separate and distinct from the abjection which the migrants embodied.

As I have already indicated, a common feature of the children’s stories was the victim status of the children, which they attributed to themselves and emphasized as having been (often unsuccessfully) ascribed to them by the villains in their stories, “the blacks.” This was stressed in their stories, along with a degree of vulnerability due to their status as children, partly in order to ensure that the subsequent scale of their victory in the story becomes further pronounced and impressive, having been accomplished against the odds in a triumph of good over evil. In highlighting their perceived weaknesses in the face of the strength of their foe, their respective feat in escaping or securing victory thus became that much greater. Their initial role of victim is thus eventually portrayed to have been

¹²⁸ It is important to note that Maltese men were similarly known to drink in their local bars just as regularly, although they occupied spaces which were considered to be more fitting for such consumption. The sub-Saharan African immigrants, on the other hand, regularly chose to occupy public spaces and exclusive children’s spaces (effectively strengthening existing perceptions of them as dirt in Douglas’ (1966) terms, as ‘matter out of place’).

one which was either misleading in the first place, or which severely underestimated the children's ingenuity and skills. There was often a gendered difference with regards to the stories which children told, as the earlier ethnographic extracts illustrate – boys often told stories in which they portrayed themselves as rough and masculine figures, whilst girls portrayed themselves within their stories as objects of sexual desire and victims of attempted rape. Children demonstrated anxiety and disgust, along with a general awareness of sexual promiscuity and violence in their narratives¹²⁹, allowing them to refer to some of the nuances of their social world in an abstract manner. These gendered differences in the conflicts they related often appeared to reflect dispositions which were valued within their class habitus, thus enabling children to convey their own possession of a habitus they knew to be desired and valued within their stories. Therefore in sharing these symbolic narratives, children are not only performatively constructing the abject, but they also constitute themselves as socially desirable in terms of an oppositional relationship with their transgressors. In most of their stories, the children emerged victorious from encounters with the threatening 'other'. In other stories, children simply relished in their victim status (what Kristeva referred to as 'fascinated victims'), in emphasizing their needless suffering and their (as well as their parent's) position as the 'goodies' in their story, in stark contrast to the intrinsically evil nature of those who they have cast in the 'baddie' role:

Daniela: They were in the kitchen, we have a very big window and he came to the outside from the back of the house. He began hitting at the glass but the glass was heavy and he couldn't open it, and he got in from the window of the bathroom and my mother was watching television. I wasn't born yet because she was still single. And she was watching television with my dad but my dad went in to sleep. He came and grabbed her hand and told her do you have any gold.

Sharon: Who grabbed her hand?

¹²⁹ It should be noted that a number of my child informants were precocious on sexual matters. Many grew up in an environment where sex was no secret, and bodily openness amongst members of the same family was not entirely taboo. It was nothing out of the ordinary for me to hear of adults and children within the same household showering together or sharing the same bed, continuing even once the child had reached adulthood. Teenage pregnancies were also not vastly uncommon in the area, and a small number of children also belonged to families in which a family member had suffered some form of sexual violence.

Daniela: The black man! He said do you have gold. She told him “no I don’t have, because we are poor.” It’s not true that we are poor, we are in the middle. And when he found the money and radios and so on, he took everything, the diamante from the chandelier... she had to start from scratch with my father. My father came out with his gun because he is a hunter, and he told them “leave her alone, take everything as long as you don’t do anything to us.” They called the police, but the police couldn’t come and they took long, and the blacks had already gone. We didn’t recognise them because they had masks but you could see from here that they were black. They took everything, but there were fingerprints everywhere and afterwards they caught them. They were in a broken place, and there was somebody living there. Ġelika, her name was.

[Interview with Theresa & Daniela[both 9 years old]; 12th January 2012]

Children thus occasionally extended the victim role to incorporate other ‘goodie’ characters, such as their parents and other people they cared about. I argue that the way in which children appropriated the role of ‘victim’ within their stories to some extent addressed their wider sentiments regarding their relative social position which they are deemed to have as children in Marsa. Children seemed implicitly aware that they may be regarded in a condescending manner by individuals who locate themselves within a higher social class (see Chapter 3), and they thus utilized their stories in such a way as to respond to their respective positioning on the margins of society, whereby they are considered in abject and devalued terms by means of their varying involvement with ‘*taħwid*’ and social mess, and where they are surrounded by potentially dangerous and abject conditions and discarded social elements (as illustrated in the previous chapter). Thus, through their narratives, the children appeared to challenge existing power relations and value systems (which symbolically located the children at the bottom of an existing social hierarchy), conveying these symbolic structures as flawed in the process. In a sense, the children encouraged this persona of ‘victimness’ to some extent, putting it across as a misconception which they have successfully tricked people into believing. Just as their skills and cunning have been underestimated by the black men in their stories, so too do the children implicitly communicate (through the medium of their stories) that they have been underestimated by the wider Maltese society, who might readily dismiss them due to their relationship with “*taħwid*.” By means of their narratives, the children in Marsa thus address and occasionally challenge existing power relations, and the

symbolically inferior positions they hold therein by residing in what I call an 'abject space' as it is deemed by middle class outsiders. The children partially do this by means of their appropriation of the black men as their villains and polar opposites, creating oppositional relationships with individuals who are in effect not entirely dissimilar, and who are also structurally located within the same socially marginal space.

The way in which children applied the concept of 'race' within Marsa, as stated earlier, strongly suggests that race is to be better understood as a social construction, as opposed to a natural disposition underpinning the propensity to categorize the social world in socially meaningful ways, as Hirschfeld (1988) holds. In contrast to this latter view, Faye Harrison (1995) argues that racial meanings are in a sense unstable, although this instability is still constrained by two polarities signifying white supremacy and black subordination. Thus the various constructions and reconstructions of race often take place betwixt and between these two extremes, and new immigrants in particular are often engaged in a process of attempting to reposition themselves within this conceptual space. Wade (1993) further highlights an existing tendency of academic writing to naturalize concepts of race. He states that whilst race is largely accepted as an entirely social or cultural construction, it is constructed in relation to a nature/culture dichotomy which is also socially constituted in itself, and which takes for granted as 'natural' the idea of 'phenotypical variation'.

In relation to the ethnography illustrated thus far, the concepts of race and dirt may be considered as analogically akin to one another, in that both ultimately concern symbolic systems, and are socially constructed and applied in order to infer social difference. The black man's perceived propensity towards dirt is also naturalized, forming part of an essentializing discourse whereby claims and counter-claims to status may be made. This practice constituted the African migrants as a collective scapegoat - an unclean and defiling presence responsible for generating abject social conditions in Marsa. As with danger-beliefs aiming to guard the ideal order of society, "the laws of nature are dragged in to sanction the moral code" (Douglas 1966: 4), thus making such danger-beliefs appear

natural. Douglas goes on to state that “ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (1966: 5). Similarly, in denying any resemblance with the sub-Saharan African immigrants and ‘tidying up’ social experience, so to speak, the children created narratives in which perceived differences were discernably exaggerated and fabricated in order to construct oppositional relationships with the migrants, projecting a semblance of social order and constituting themselves as socially desirable individuals within that order.

Conflicting Discourses

In the process of implicitly addressing predominant concerns within their story telling, children’s narratives were often marked by conflicted and self-contradictory discourses, attesting to the fact that children were not participating within these narratives in a calculated way. On the one hand, their discourses served to symbolically banish the abject as a way of deflecting abjection from themselves. On the other, the people of Marsa prided themselves on being intensely warm and friendly people, and did not wish to compromise that image. Thus, their move to performatively banish the abject was occasionally at odds with elements of their class habitus, whereby they were proud to consider themselves as down-to-earth, loving and generous people, as I myself regularly had opportunity to witness. This led to elements of their discourse conflicting with one another, although this did not appear entirely problematic to the children, as this ethnographic extract demonstrates:

Sharon: Do you think you have reason to be afraid of black people?

Daniel: Yes we do, because for example... There was a black next to a white, and I go to help the white. I say leave him. He answers in English and I don’t understand English, but that at night he will know where I live. In the evening he will come and kidnap me.

Sharon: Is that something which happened, or is it an example?

Daniel: No, because for me to... I need to have a lot of courage. If I see that he's come out with a knife or something I will run away. Even if I'm in the car, I mean I don't know how to drive. Whatever the situation is, I'll drive into the wall, just as long as he doesn't kill me.

Martina: You'll die anyway if you smash into the wall.

Daniel: Yes, but as long as they're not the ones to kill me...

[A few minutes later]

Daniel: Once the children said that [the blacks] are wicked and we told them... isn't it true Martina, we told them... that those are people like us, and even if they have dark skin we will still love them because they are people just like us...

Martina: Because one time we were speaking about people in Marsa... and Janika said that the only thing that bothers me is the black people. I told her "Why, they don't even have a shower to clean themselves in, poor things." She said "Yes, they're cheap and they don't wash so that they don't waste water." I told her "How do you know what they have or don't have?" and she said "How do you know that they have no shower?" I said "Because you can tell." I mean, they all stink, otherwise they would wash themselves once in a while."

[Later]

Daniel: They started talking about them, and they didn't side with us. They said that they're cruel and so on...

Sharon: But they seem to bother you as well.

[...]

Daniel: The bad things which they do bother me.

Martina: Practically, they don't bother me because they are in Marsa. The thing that bothers me... well not bothers me... they scare me. But I am content that they came to live in Marsa, because as I

told you before, they came to live in Marsa and they see that the hearts of the people in Marsa are good. Because we accepted somebody of a different colour.

[Interview with Daniel and Martina [both 10 years old]; 12th January 2012]

These contradictions were similarly prevalent amongst adults in Marsa. They occasionally admonished their children for saying things which they considered to be racist, before eventually contributing to this discourse themselves (either directly or indirectly). Polly was the mother of a child I observed at school, and she was my most vocal informant in terms of sharing her profound dislike of the immigrants in the area. She readily complained about their drunkenness, and warned me not to get too close to them or to venture into the areas which they occupied. She also shared a tall story with me at the beginning of my fieldwork, which was not entirely different to the narratives which I heard the children share, and indeed appeared to be motivated by similar concerns. She told me that whilst a number of adults had been chatting amongst themselves on a pavement with their children running around close by, a few young children had been behind the columns of a building across the street, along with an African man who was trying to take off the children's clothes. Polly concluded her story by telling me "*those* are the immigrants," attempting to correct any naïve ideas which she presumed me to have where black immigrants were concerned. Notwithstanding her constant protestations to their presence, she then shared the following with me when we later sat down for a recorded interview:

Polly: They say that you can't even walk down there¹³⁰... It's true, but it's not because... I have nothing to complain about with them because I've never seen anything bad from them, it depends on how you act with them. Yesterday one of them came to the shop. We're used to the ones that are our clients now.¹³¹ He came without money but he showed me a cheque. I trusted him and gave him what he wanted, and in the evening he came with the money because he had gone to cash the cheque. You understand? But over here there is a certain stamp because there are these kinds of people in Marsa. You find the good and the bad, it doesn't have to be because the person is black or white. It can be the same, but that's how I see it. [...] I get afraid because they tell me

¹³⁰ Polly was referring to Albert Town, where the Marsa open centre is located.

¹³¹ In the course of my fieldwork, Polly had opened up a small grocery store.

that in my street, where there is the secondary school, they're saying that either the blacks are going to come here, or it's going to become an old people's home. It doesn't bother me, but I don't want them coming near me. With all due respect, they have nothing less than me because I am like them, but no.

[Interview with Polly; 7th March 2012]

In considering the stories illustrated thus far, it is crucial to view these narratives as symbolic. There is obvious fabrication in many of the stories, which demands truth recognition on a different level, and an appreciation of the symbolic significance behind many of the stories (occasionally including those of the adults). The contradictions inherent within the discourses are evidence of the narrators addressing different concerns, and living out different aspects of their lives. In internalizing the abjection which has charged much of their social environment with affect, some informants subconsciously come to project this internalized abjection on to a new socially constructed abject, in a bid to rehabilitate and bolster social esteem. This occasionally conflicted with elements of a class habitus in which the people of Marsa took pride in being warm and genuine people. This conflict also existed on a subconscious level and thus did not appear to trouble the storytellers greatly, however it did account for the contradictions which occasionally peppered their discourses insofar as the African migrants are concerned. Once a new abject is brought into being, it must be kept somewhat at a distance, thus explaining Polly's apprehension at having a new residence for migrants located on her street (a rumour which had been doing the rounds at that point). At the same time, such practices of constituting social demarcation were obviously characteristic of the snobby '*tal-pepè*' (illustrated in greater detail in Chapter 3), with whom informants in Marsa had also constructed an oppositional relationship which needed to be maintained. Therefore many of the narratives reflected somewhat of a precarious position amongst informants, whereby they had to equally accommodate the values associated with being tough and with having "good hearts," retaining qualities of being 'down-to-earth' throughout. Simultaneously, they needed to create a clear distinction between them and their own abject, in order to convey that they were never really abject in themselves.

In truth, the people of Marsa were precluded from having any say in whether or not immigrants were to come and live in the area, lacking the social and cultural capital with which to contest such a decision from the State. However, discursive practices occasionally attempted to deflect from this, and as Martina's earlier narrative illustrates, attention was drawn to the kind and accepting nature of the people of Marsa, highlighting their generous acceptance and choice in a matter which they in reality were not keen on but had little choice over. This in a sense illustrated Bourdieu's concept of the choice of the necessary, whereby "necessity imposes a taste for necessity which implies a form of adaptation to and consequently acceptance of the necessary, a resignation to the inevitable" (1984: 373). Thus within their narratives, they similarly attempted to address inequalities of power (through lack of appropriate capital) by occasionally putting themselves forward as social agents who mapped out their own social environment, and who chose for themselves that which was in effect already chosen for them. In addition, there was an increasing awareness of a growing institutional rhetoric – partly from the school and also from higher Government – which proclaimed that it is wrong to discriminate against people on the grounds of skin colour. Although the rhetoric at this higher institutional level occasionally also conflicted on this issue in theory and in practice, it was one which the people of Marsa increasingly attempted to accommodate to some extent within their discourse, failing to recognize the inherent contradictions in their speech when they did so.

Discursive practices amongst the children in Marsa, therefore, were a key social medium through which children used pseudo-imaginary constructs in order to address predominant features within their social world, and indirectly contest and challenge aspects of it. Their storytelling was a social vehicle through which the children attempted to negotiate and occasionally challenge their perceived social position in the world, in an ongoing and dynamic process of constituting themselves over time (Toren 1993).

“The Black Man ran after Sharon”

One evening in April 2012, I was heading back home after a long afternoon of helping Ronald with his homework. I was in a rush to get home as I had made plans for the evening, but nonetheless I passed by the bar in order to briefly tell Shania goodnight. As I was leaving, and doing so in a bit of a hurry as I was late, I passed by Ashish. Ashish was an Eritrean man whom I had recently met and spoken to at this bar along with Suleiman, and both of them had accepted to have me interview them at a later date. They were two out of very few African immigrants who used to enter ‘*Ta’ Ćikku*’ bar, as the majority of sub-Saharan Africans preferred to frequent bars in the vicinity of the open centre. Ashish was having a drink in the doorway of the bar, and he asked me how I had been. I answered that I had been well, and I asked the same of him. I explained that I was in somewhat of a rush to get home, but that I would hopefully be able to speak with him in more depth very soon. I began walking away from the bar and back home, when Ashish shouted something after me which I didn’t quite understand. I turned around and noticed that he had abandoned his drink at the bar, and was running towards me. I stopped walking, and I noticed Shania looking in our direction from the bar. Once Ashish reached me, he continued running past me until he disappeared out of sight, and Shania called me over.

Once I reached the bar again, Shania asked me what all that had been about, and I answered that I wasn’t quite sure. In fact, I was rather confused by the whole incident. Shania then turned to the other patrons of the bar, and exclaimed “He started running after her!” She insisted that I wait inside the bar for a few minutes, before getting one of the men at the bar to walk me back to my flat as a precaution, telling me that Ashish could be lying in wait for me somewhere. Marju walked me back home, and he waited to see me walk in to my front door before leaving. That night, I was puzzled as I went over the sequence of events in my head. I had not felt threatened during the incident, nor had I felt as though I was in any kind of danger, however my confusion regarding Ashish’s

actions, coupled with the level of concern which everybody else seemed to have for my safety, caused me to wonder whether or not I was being naïve.

Ultimately, Ashish's motivations remained unclear to me, even to this day, and I continued to be unsure of what had actually happened. However, his actual motivation became largely inconsequential and irrelevant in comparison to what the incident was turned into in the days which followed. The next day, when I spoke to Rita, she told me that Shania had told her about what had happened the previous night. She told me that she had thought that Ashish was different from the other immigrants, and would not behave that way.¹³² I tried to brush the whole incident off, telling Rita that it was nothing and that I didn't think he had meant any harm. In the days that followed, I learnt that Rita had admonished Ashish harshly, yelling at him and telling him that he had scared me. Ashish told Rita that at the time, he had suddenly remembered an errand which he needed to run in the next town, however Rita wouldn't hear of it. I was mortified upon learning about this exchange from Rita, and given that I never saw Ashish again, I was never able to assure him that he had not in fact scared me. Despite my protestations with Rita, she continued cursing Ashish and his family in Eritrea whenever he came up in conversation, continually repeating that he should not have scared me.

The narrative which I was unknowingly and unwittingly drawn into ultimately contributed to an overarching discourse, imbued with social effect. The truth of what happened was ultimately insignificant in comparison to the symbolic significance of what the story became, and this is where attention shall be directed. Right before the incident with Ashish had occurred, I would often think about the stories which the children would tell me about the "black man," and they frequently puzzled me as I would try to make light of them. I never expected to be a protagonist within a similar story, and to some extent I felt as though this signalled one of the final stages of my acceptance in Marsa as "one of us." Following my exchange with Ashish, I sensed that a very particular social process was in

¹³² When I initially told Rita that I would like to interview Suleiman, she told me that she had a "much better immigrant" for me to interview, and she had at the time been referring to Ashish.

motion. The story began to depart from me and to be re-told amongst other informants in Marsa, until the point where I eventually realised that I no longer had ownership of the story. It no longer belonged to me, and indeed, it never belonged to me exclusively. Rather, it was socially mobilized and became part of a much wider Marsa story, whereby the people of Marsa claimed it as their own. It became interwoven within a greater fabric of Marsa stories, which were used in such a way as to address and communicate their daily lived experiences and frustrations. The tale was ultimately re-told and loaded with symbolic significance, whereby my informants took issue with their abject and dangerous surroundings as it came to be embodied within the sub-Saharan African migrants.

A few weeks later, I met Suleiman (Ashish's friend) at the bar, and I asked him whether he would have any objection to my interviewing him there and then. He agreed, and we went in to the back room of the bar in order to speak with a little more privacy and silence. In the midst of our interview, the topic of what had gone on with Ashish was brought up by Suleiman, and I discovered that Suleiman had been present when Rita had scolded Ashish:

Suleiman: Down here there is the open centre, they go with women who aren't, how shall I say... they don't go with good people, and a woman will not want...

Sharon: They will insist?

Suleiman: Like Ashish did – he did wrong, he doesn't know how to stop. He says nothing and he sees a pretty woman and runs after her...

Sharon: I didn't tell him anything though, but I know that Rita shouted at him, and then I felt guilty because...

Suleiman: I would say that he is an "*injorant*."¹³³ He doesn't know you, he can be normal, because in the world there are different people, you need to do things slowly and talk to her [...] He did wrong to come and start running after you. Be quiet and the Maltese will not be offended.

Sharon: Why do you think that happens?

¹³³ An ignorant man.

Suleiman: I don't know, I don't do that. You need to live with people, they need to learn that they don't want to fight with the Maltese.

Sharon: The Eritreans and Ethiopians?

Suleiman: They have the same culture, they are rough... not all of them, but it breaks your heart because they see people like that and then they look at me as being the same.

Sharon: They think that you're all like that?

Suleiman: Exactly, so when Ashish did wrong it broke my heart, because yesterday I came and told him "Why did you do that? Don't do that!" and Rita was shouting at him. They speak to her and think she's a whore or whatever she is. If they show off, it's not alright.

[Interview with Suleiman; 21st April 2012]

Suleiman was one of the few African regulars in Rita's bar, along with Ashish. Although he did get into quite a few heated arguments and swearing matches with other Maltese people inside the bar, for the most part I noticed him regularly make a concerted effort to fit in and be accepted amongst the local Maltese people (and admittedly, being able to swear and argue was one such way). He was often a go-to person who attempted to mediate between the Maltese and the Africans living in the area. He lived in the centre of Marsa, in a house which he rented along with a group of other immigrants who used to reside within the open centre. He participated in life in Marsa as best he could – celebrating the village feast, and sitting around in local bars with a drink and a cigarette. He appeared to make an active effort to insert himself within the social imaginary (Taylor 2004), projecting himself as an individual who could equally be valued within this social space. I initially feared that Suleiman would not want to speak with me following my incident with Ashish, and so his admonishment of what Ashish had done was highly unexpected on my part. He equally had no interest in my suggestion of Ashish's innocence, being far more concerned about the wider repercussions set in motion by the incident, feeling shame and wishing to disassociate himself from them. Suleiman seemed equally knowledgeable about the overarching discourse of symbolic banishment in Marsa, and he was careful not to do anything which may spur on that social process, disassociating himself from any behaviour which was appropriated by the Maltese as a

social boundary in order to infer social difference. At the same time, any transgressions on the part of the other black men were taken to be his transgressions, and similarly his own offences were also theirs, forming part of the same wider discourse in Marsa.

Contesting Hierarchical Relationships

Through the medium of their stories, the children (and occasionally also adults) of Marsa took stock of their experiences of living in a socially marginal space, amongst other marginalized individuals who were, for the most part, deemed as unwanted and “dirty” by the wider Maltese society. By means of their narratives, my informants located themselves within predominant power relationships, challenging their own marginal positioning as abject and reversing their status as victims. Preceding chapters (particularly in Part 1 of this thesis) illustrated the way in which some people in Marsa have been historically constituted as abject, this status often being socially reproduced over time (partly by means of continued engagement with ‘*taħwid*’ and social mess, a pathway which few manage to divert from once it is learnt in a socially situated manner and internalized within the habitus accordingly). These nuances of abjection arguably permeated the social landscape, and were capable of instilling a particular atmosphere and a sense of wretchedness amongst informants which every now and then became palpable, the social affect also entering and overwhelming me on occasion. These occasions necessitated a rescuing and rehabilitation of social esteem, enabling residents to feel genuine pride in living within this space which was repeatedly spoken of in abject terms by Maltese outsiders. In accomplishing this, my informants shifted the abject in another direction, employing social boundaries of dirt and social filth in order to communicate that they were never abject, and that the migrants were the primary source of abjection within their environment.

Within their narratives, my informants symbolically banished the abject, a performative act of cultural resistance which was in turn framed by their own wider objective conditions. They largely accomplished this by means of their narratives which contributed

to an overarching discourse, underlining the importance of the “reiterative power of discourse to produce the phenomena that it regulates and constrains” (Butler 1993: 2). In this respect, the migrants were transformed into that which they were always claimed to be. In continuing to follow Butler, “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate ‘act,’ but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (1993: 2). Thus, in the narratives which children repeatedly shared, sub-Saharan African migrants were thus constructed as socially abject, a polluting presence responsible for the degradation of the social environment. In symbolically distancing themselves from the abject within their narratives (being largely unable to distance themselves physically), an oppositional relationship with the migrants is thus brought in to play. In constituting themselves as oppositional to the abject, the children in Marsa projected themselves as socially desirable and heroic figures, protecting their community from the *real* social undesirables, and thus resisting the socially marginal positions historically bestowed upon them. At the same time, however, my informants also largely maintained an oppositional relationship with middle and upper class ‘*tal-pepè*,’ thus enabling them to maintain qualities of being genuine and down to earth. In deflecting notions of themselves as abject, and in being unable and unwilling to construct themselves as middle class, informants in Marsa must think of alternative ways in which to imagine themselves and project themselves to outsiders. The next chapter shall consider ways in which this is accomplished, particularly in relation to the village feast.

Chapter 8: A Celebration of Place

“Our parish is better. We work harder”

Carmen, 28th May 2012

The preceding chapters in this thesis have largely been concerned with notions of abjection, both the social reproduction of it within a socially marginal space, along with a deflection of it as a form of cultural resistance. In acting upon their social world, my informants in Marsa often projected their own identity in relational and oppositional terms – they were not socially abject like the sub-Saharan African immigrants, nor were they pompous or pretentious like upper class Maltese snobs. This left a conceptual space open for the people of Marsa to construct a vision of their own alterity, and explore alternative ways in which to imagine themselves and the space which they lived in, projecting this to others outside Marsa. This process is grounded in ideas of the social imaginary, whereby people imagine their social existence and place in the world in relation to others, communicating shared and underlying images of their collective social positioning. Within this mutual understanding, individuals may undertake common practices and hold a shared sense of belonging to the same place¹³⁴.

This chapter explores the way in which people in Marsa imagine their social existence, particularly in relation to the village feast (hereafter referred to as *‘festa,’* or *‘festi’* in the plural) and the faction politics embroiled within the organization of it. I shall argue that the rivalries and arguments implicit within the latter are essentially grounded in claims of superiority over which church or organization is most successful in portraying Marsa in a

¹³⁴ The social imaginary refers specifically to the “ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations” (Taylor 2004: 23). Taylor goes on to explain that “the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy” (2004: 23).

celebratory light in accordance with a collective understanding of the social imaginary, revering Marsa as a socially meaningful place which should rightfully elicit great pride and esteem from those who reside within it. The *festa* is just one part of how people in Marsa may come to define themselves in relation to other places and mark themselves as superior, and it is this perspective that this chapter explores.¹³⁵

The Role of the Parish Churches

The parish church lies at the heart of Maltese village life, with religious activities occupying great importance in the social calendar of the inhabitants of the village. Marsa is no different, and it is home to two parish churches, each of which is intended to act as a spiritual guide for those who reside within areas of the village falling under her jurisdiction. Chapter 2 provided a brief history on the establishment of the two main parish churches in Marsa – Trinita' Qaddisa (Holy Trinity Church), and Marija Regina (Queenship of Mary Church). To this day, the two parish churches within Marsa assume the responsibility of different territories within the village. The older part of Marsa which is nearest to the Port, as well as the area of Albert Town, falls under the jurisdiction of Holy Trinity. The newer and more recently developed part of Marsa, as well as the area of Racecourse street, form part of the Queenship of Mary. A person's affiliation with one parish church over another is thus primarily determined by residence, and it is expected that spiritual rites of passage (baptisms, catechism classes, weddings, funerals, etc) are undertaken at one's own parish church. Should a person wish to undertake these events at another church, they must request permission from the parish priest of their own parish church in order to do so. Parish churches differ from other churches¹³⁶, as they

¹³⁵ Various aspects of Maltese *festi* have already been written about in rich ethnographic detail (See Boissevain 1964, 1977, 1992, 1993, 1996, 2013; Mitchell 1998b, 2002, 2004, 2010). Within this chapter, I have restricted my own analysis of the *festa* to the question of how it lends itself to the celebration of Marsa as a place, remaining aware of the depth of rich ethnography which already exists in terms of analysing other aspects of the *festa*.

¹³⁶ Indeed, a few other churches and chapels existed in Marsa, however they did not share the prominence and administrative importance of the two main parish churches, and they also fell under the jurisdiction of one of the two main parish churches.

specifically serve as a local administrative arm of the Catholic Church in Malta, responsible for administering the aforementioned spiritual rites of passage.



Fig 9 – The interior of Holy Trinity church

In many ways, Marsa as a place in itself was formed around the construction of these two parish churches, the completion of the first church marking Marsa off as a village in its own right in 1913 (where its parishioners were previously split between the jurisdictions of Ħamrun and Qormi). Further to this, as Boissevain (1964: 1283) noted, aside from serving as a place of worship, the parish church in Malta is often the repository of the village's collective wealth, with huge sums spent to decorate it and show it off to visitors with pride. The parish churches are thus central to the way in which Marsa is imagined as a place, and projected to outsiders. Boissevain (1993: 31) went on to note that “as the parish church towers over the village, so it dominates it socially, for the church is in every sense the centre around which the life of the village revolves.”



Fig. 10 - The exterior of Holy Trinity church, elaborately decorated in celebration of the 100 year anniversary of the church

The spiritual authority which the parish church is meant to hold over parishioners is one which is not lost on the children – in a religion lesson at school, a teacher asked her students “who tells people what to do?” A child in class swiftly answered with “*Il-Kappillan*” (the parish priest). Many villagers demonstrate great devotion to their particular parish church, and particularly to the titular saint associated with it (in Marsa, these are the Holy Trinity and the Queenship of Mary respectively). The loyalty and devotion to the titular saints of one’s own parish has been dubbed a “cult of saints” (Boissevain 1993: 74), and is regularly undertaken with such fervour and fanaticism that tensions often arise between the congregations of parish churches within the same (or a neighbouring) village. These are known as *piki* (sing. *pika*), a term denoting small-scale rivalries and competition marked with some hostility amongst similar groups¹³⁷.

These rivalries, which centre around local parish churches, are by no means exclusive to Marsa. Aside from being relatively widespread in villages across Malta and Gozo, they have been documented by Boissevain (1993) and Mitchell (2002) respectively, both of whom note that these factions compete with one another in escalating demonstrations of

¹³⁷ The term *pika* is not easily applied to all rivalries or disagreements. It presupposes a degree of acknowledged familiarity and intimacy amongst the groups involved, as a form of feud which is relatively constant. For this reason, for example, it would not be correct to say that a *pika* existed between the Maltese and the sub-Saharan African migrants in the area.

superiority aimed primarily at the 'other.' Mitchell (2002) noted that these antagonisms within his own fieldwork site of Valletta (and in other parts of Malta) were informed not only by concerns relating to the parish, but also by loyalty to one's political party (although the latter did not seem to be true in the case of Marsa). He further noted that in many respects, "*fešta* is also rooted in popular antagonism towards the social institution of the church and contests between clergy and laity over ritual form" (2004: 57). Boissevain (1993: 75) traces the origins of such divisions back to sometime between the 1850s and the turn of the 20th century, quoting Robert Mifsud Bonnici (1954)¹³⁸. Boissevain (1993) claims that the origins of these divisions, where they can be traced, are very much alike, arising out of disputes regarding the celebration of the titular saint in each respective parish. Within such disputes, concerned parties would compete for new privileges within the celebration, and argue over matters of precedence or of their ability to display devotion to their saints. Boissevain's work focuses upon divisions in the *festi* inasmuch as they concerned the celebration of two different titular saints (and thus two different parish churches) within the same (or a neighbouring) village, but he does not explore divisions within the organization of the same *fešta* in the same parish church. Both types of division were present in Marsa, and both are illustrated within this chapter. I shall later explore what these rivalries may have meant for my particular child informants there, and how they contributed to the way these children imagined Marsa as a place. First, some more explanation on the nature of *fešta* celebrations is required.

Festa Celebrations

The titular saint of a parish church was celebrated by its parishioners (and by some outsiders and visitors to the village) with particular zeal in the annual *fešta* of that church, unquestionably the most important day of the year for the devotees of that parish.¹³⁹

¹³⁸ In his work, Mifsud Bonnici suggested that these factions originally developed out of a dispute between persons who wanted to play sacred music by the Maltese composer Vincenzo Bugeja, and those who preferred the music of his rival, Paolo Nani.

¹³⁹ The date of the feast follows the church's liturgical calendar. The Holy Trinity church will generally celebrate their *fešta* in May/June, whilst the Queenship of Mary church generally celebrate their *fešta* in August.

Great importance was placed on creating a spectacular celebration for the occasion. During the week leading up to the actual feast day, religious and solemn festivities organized by the clergy would take place within the church (known as the *festa ta' ġewwa* – internal feast), whilst loud and jovial street celebrations organized by the laity take place on the streets of Marsa (known as the *festa ta' barra* – external feast). Whilst the internal church activities tended to be frequented by members of the parish, the outside activities were far more open, and attracted visitors who lived outside of Marsa (many of whom were linked to Marsa in some way through kinship ties). It is the latter external activities which this chapter shall focus on, these encompassing the festivities which are offered by the laity for public consumption. Many residents prepared their houses to receive guests during this period, and some exhibited likenesses of the titular saint of their parish church in display niches in the windows of their homes, for passers-by to admire. A great amount of work is undertaken throughout the year in order for money to be collected for the external feast, so that street decorations may be purchased, pyrotechnics and firework displays organized, and lively brass bands booked to accompany the street marches. A number of celebrations take place in the days leading up to the *festa*, and they culminate in a euphoric and ludic atmosphere on the actual day of the *festa* itself.

In the days leading up to *festa* day proper, the *vara* (a monumental statue of the titular saint, seen as the embodiment of the religious figure) is taken out of a niche which it occupies within the church during the rest of the year. On the day of the *festa*, the *vara* emerges from the church amidst cheers from the crowd who come dressed smartly for the occasion. The *vara* is then carried by a group of men (*reffiegħa*, a role which was highly coveted and respected) on a procession around the streets of Marsa which fall within the limits of the parish. As such, this procession reaffirms the patronage of the titular saint over a particular territory, and is the pinnacle of the whole feast. The *reffiegħa* carry the *vara* along the procession route, in what is an intensely physical and emotional experience for them, before ultimately returning to the church amidst energetic cheers and celebrations.

Boissevain, having conducted fieldwork from 1960 and charted the development of the Maltese *fešta* over the years in a range of publications (1964, 1977, 1992, 1993, 1996, 2013 amongst others), unsuccessfully predicted in 1977 that parish rituals in Malta would decline, as part of a general wave of secularization throughout Europe, along with heavy emigration and increasing involvement in politics on a national level. On the contrary, the village *festi* significantly increased in celebration and exuberance, and Boissevain accounted for this unexpected revitalization as a “manifestation of a desire to celebrate the community,” whereby people who “have grown up together in poverty and are now separated by prosperity wish to achieve, for a few moments, the feeling of what Turner¹⁴⁰ has called ‘*communitas*’” (2013: 265). Emphasis was thus placed upon people wanting to feel connected to one other and have a sense of belonging again.

The intense sense of belonging and attachment which devout parishioners hold to their titular saint is evidently manifested in *fešta* celebrations. Yet it is partly in relation to this intense and fanatic devotion that divisions arise. Within Marsa, there was such a division (*pika*) between those devoted to the Holy Trinity church and those devoted to the Queenship of Mary, and worshippers would regularly dispute whose church or *fešta* was the better one. Furthermore, there was yet another *pika* present within the Holy Trinity church in itself – this existed between the band club (referring to themselves as *Tal-Każin*) and the organization responsible for acquiring and setting up decorations, banners, statues, and fireworks, amongst other items, for the street celebrations (*Tal-Kantina*). These divisions shall each be considered in turn, however suffice to say that during fieldwork, and in conversations of religious activities with the children, many of them either expressed themselves as belonging to *Marija Reġina* (Queenship of Mary), *Tal-Każin*, or *Tal-Kantina* (the latter two belonging to Holy Trinity). A few children were less involved in these rivalries, and remained neutral in such disputes. I shall begin by

¹⁴⁰ Turner (1974: 16) describes ‘*communitas*’ as “the direct, immediate, and total confrontation of human identities which tends to make those experiencing it think of mankind as a homogenous, unstructured and free community.”

illustrating the *pika* which existed between devoted parishioners of the two parish churches.

Rivalries Borne out of a Sense of Belonging

Whilst residence often ties inhabitants to one parish church rather than another, it is pertinent to note that many individuals were likely to develop a personal affection for their own parish church and its titular saint of their own accord, having been raised in an environment which fosters a sense of belonging and a particular disposition towards devotion to one particular parish church. Having noted this, it is also not uncommon for ties to one's childhood parish to remain strong, with emotional links to a parish persisting long after an individual may have moved to another town or village. Similarly, individuals may develop a fondness for the parish of their husband or wife, having moved to the area after marriage. This was certainly the case for Polly, whose husband was raised in the area of Marsa which was close to the church of the Queenship of Mary. Much to Polly's disappointment, she and her husband were unable to find a suitable residence in the vicinity of this church, and were eventually made to buy a house which was located within the jurisdiction of the Holy Trinity parish (albeit only a 5 minute walk away). The circumstances of their residence did not deter either of them however, and they made a point of telling me that they associate themselves with the Queenship of Mary parish, refusing to involve themselves in celebrations which are tied to the Holy Trinity parish.

Sharon: I know that you're fond of the Queenship of Mary Church...

Polly: Of course. I wouldn't change it for anything. I don't go down here¹⁴¹ at all. Everything up there.¹⁴²

[Interview with Polly; Wednesday 7th March 2012]

¹⁴¹ To Holy Trinity church.

¹⁴² At the Queenship of Mary church.

Her association with the Queenship of Mary parish church means that Polly demonstrates particular fondness for its titular saint. The titular saint of the parish was considered to be embodied within its *vara* (monumental statue), often referred to as an actual person.

After the funeral ended, I made my way back to school. I bumped in to Polly on the way, who knew where I had been, and she asked if she could see the '*santa*' which I had been given during the Mass. I handed it to her, and she turned it around and told me "look where she is," smiling and gazing fondly at the picture of the Queenship of Mary on the back of the '*santa*.'

Wednesday 8th February 2012

A *santa* is a commemorative item in the shape of a bookmark. On the front, it shows a picture of the person who has passed away, along with their respective dates of birth and death. A prayer is printed on the front and back of the *santa*, offering words of spiritual comfort to those who are grieving. On the back of the *santa*, it is quite common for a picture of the *vara* from the deceased person's parish to be printed, especially when the person who had passed away was an avid devotee of their parish church. They are distributed to mourners on the day of the funeral itself, or in the weeks following the funeral. The presence of the *vara* on the *santa* is significant. Jon Mitchell (2002; 2010) has argued that the *vara* goes beyond a mere representation of the saint. Rather, it is an embodiment of the saint itself, which increases the significance of the *fiesta* in that it allows parishioners to directly engage with the saint in a way which they are less able to during the rest of the year. During my period of fieldwork, the *vara* of the Queenship of Mary happened to be away from the church in order for some restorative work to be undertaken. This work had not been completed by the time of the *fiesta* in 2012, and in this year it was the previous *vara* which was led on a procession around the streets of this part of Marsa. Many informants who formed part of the Queenship of Mary parish commented to me that they had never seen (or could barely remember) the old *vara* emerge from the church, as the new *vara* has reigned over the church for a number of decades already. Although they remained excited about the *fiesta*, they stressed to me that it would not be the same this year. On the day of the *fiesta* itself, as I captured a few photos of the event, individuals were quick to come up to me to point out that I was

taking pictures of the “old” *vara*, ensuring that I was aware that this particular *vara* was not the Queenship of Mary herself. That title had since passed on to the succeeding *vara*.



Fig 11 - The predecessor of the Queenship of Mary *vara* emerges from the parish church during the 2012 *festa*

The relationship which the people of Marsa build with the titular saint of the parish was both a personal and collective one. Parishioners displayed genuine affection for the saint who offered spiritual protection over their particular domain of Marsa. The enthusiasm and passion with which they did so occasionally translated into competition (*pika*) between the two parish churches, a phenomenon which was common in a number of villages, particularly those which celebrated more than one saint. As Boissevain (1993:75) noted, “many villages celebrate two large *festas*: one for the titular saint of the parish, and the other for a secondary saint who has assumed almost equal social importance. Where this occurs, a village is divided into two *partiti* (factions), each of which has its own band club and celebrates one of the saints.”

Whenever I asked whether a *pika* was present between the parish churches in Marsa, I tended to receive varying responses. Some claimed that there wasn't really a *pika*, and others claimed that there was one, and that it was quite intense. Although I never witnessed any violent exchanges in this regard, on occasion I did witness arguments

taking place, in which one individual would tease another about their affiliation with one church over another. Those who considered the Holy Trinity to be their parish church praised the history and tradition of this church, celebrating its older 'antique' architectural style. Meanwhile, those who formed part of the Queenship of Mary Parish church expressed pride that their church was more modern by contrast. The old/new and antique/modern dichotomies were adapted and manipulated into a positive or negative thing, based on the affiliations of those who would be participating in the argument. These dichotomies would regularly be adopted in their strategies for teasing one another.

Salvina boasted about the fact that she teases those who come from the Queenship of Mary. I asked Salvina how she does that, and she responded that she reminds them that when the electricity goes, they have no bells and no rosary, because everything which they do at the church is done with a tape recorder.

[Friday 20th April 2012]

In practising English with Casey, a 9 year old boy from school, I asked him to write a few words about his favourite church. Casey wrote that he is an altar boy with the Queenship of Mary church, and he wrote that it is better than the other church, and that they have a number of committees and organize a really nice *fiesta*. He said that the church of the Queenship of Mary uses tape recordings since the church has no bells, and he made this out to be a good thing, saying that he does not even manage to hear the bells of the Holy Trinity church from where he lives [because the sound of their bells is supposedly inferior.]

[Monday 6th February 2012]

Elements of competition between the congregations of the two parish churches rarely seemed to escalate beyond this form of teasing and mockery during the everyday, and this could well explain why some individuals seemed to brush off any claims to the existence of a serious *pika*. Within the school, I was told by the administration that there was no such *pika*. However Polly, who was Casey's mother and member of the school council, often attempted to encourage the Head of School to make contact with the parish priest of the Queenship of Mary church when planning spiritual activities within

the school, in order to retain a neutral relationship with the two churches. (The school had a tendency to contact the parish priest of Holy Trinity for such activities, since the church was conveniently located a little further along the same street as the school).

A number of children at the school appeared to be indifferent on the issue of a *pika*, displaying no explicit connection with one church over another (even though their residence and regular attendance of catechism classes did link them to one particular church rather than another). However, others were far more passionate about their affiliation – mostly children who also tended to be more vociferous and involved in the *fešta* celebrations of their parish. This chapter argues that where elements of a *pika* manifested themselves amongst children, these disputes were driven by an underlying argument regarding which group was the most successful in presenting Marsa to outsiders according to the collective social imaginary, thus fostering a sense of pride and a vision of alterity which successfully mediated and indirectly situated itself in relation to the oppositional relationships which the children had constructed, both with the middle class Maltese and the sub-Saharan African immigrants. Thus, in arguing about which group was better, the children were ultimately making the case (albeit implicitly) for which group did the better job of celebrating Marsa as a place, eliciting pride from the people of Marsa and projecting this to outsiders of the village accordingly. The following illustrates one such dispute between two of the children at school:

Sharon: Let me change subject... The churches in Marsa. I already know what Casey is going to say...

Daniel: [Shouting] Trinita', not Marija Regina!

Casey: No way Trinita'... Marija Regina!

Daniel: Trinita' Trinita'!

Casey: Marija Regina!

[They both continue yelling over one another]

Casey: At least we have some colour, and you have none!

Daniel: What do I care? Black and white is better, so that it is antique and not modern. Boo!

Casey: Ours was the first *vara* in Marsa!¹⁴³ You don't even have a garage...

Daniel: You'd better look at your own, it's just a small space like this...

Sharon: Don't fight...

Casey: The boat, what is it called? Trinita' or Marija Regina?

Daniel: I don't care!

Casey: Marija Regina!

Sharon: What boat?

Casey: The boat that they race with.

Sharon: Which one?

Casey: Of the Regatta¹⁴⁴ ... it doesn't have the name of Trinita'. It's called Marija Regina.

[The boys continue shouting and pointing their fingers in each other's faces, invading one another's personal space. Daniel then grabbed Casey's finger.]

Sharon: Stop!

Casey: Don't grab my finger, I'm right and not you!

Daniel: No you're not!

Casey: Yuck you pressed my finger...

Daniel: Isn't it your fault?

Sharon: Stop it both of you!

Daniel: [To Casey] You started it!

Casey: ...and you continued it!

[Interview with Daniel and Casey (Aged 10 & 9 respectively); Tuesday 6th March 2012]

As this extract illustrates, children vehemently defended the church with which they associated themselves, and sought means of turning an insult into an attribute of their church, and vice versa when it came to diminishing the significance of their rival church. Such arguments momentarily suspended friendships amongst the children, causing temporary divisions within peer groups. The above dispute concerned various aspects of

¹⁴³ The Church authorities in Rome initially denied permission for a *vara* of the Holy Trinity, leading to disagreements and considerations as to whether to change the titular of the parish church. Permission for a *vara* was later granted, and the matter was resolved.

¹⁴⁴ The Regatta is held every year on the 8th September (Victory Day) in commemoration of Malta's victory in the 1565 Great Siege and the Second World War. Competitive mile long rowing races are held in the Grand Harbour, with the participation of the Regatta clubs from towns and villages in the Grand Harbour: Birgu (Vittoriosa), Bormla (Cospicua), Isla (Senglea), Kalkara, Marsa, and Marsamxett (Valletta). In recent years, Birżebbuġia has also started to compete. Unfortunately I did not delve into Marsa's involvement with the Regatta during fieldwork, mainly due to the fact that none of my informants were particularly involved in the Regatta at the time. Given Marsa's recent joint victory with Cospicua of the Regatta in 2013, as well as the jubilant celebrations which followed, the event is another potential avenue for future fieldwork exploration, with respect to how Marsa comes to be celebrated as a place.

the two parish churches, pitting the antique style of one church (Holy Trinity) against the more modern architecture and design features of the other (Queenship of Mary). The space of a garage, also mentioned above, attested to the volume of elaborate street decorations which could be stored, thus signalling the extent to which each church was able to adorn and beautify the streets of Marsa during their respective *fiesta*, displaying it to the outside world. Casey's arguments regarding the first *vara* in Marsa, and the naming of one of Marsa's boats in the Regatta after his titular saint are also noteworthy. The *vara* is in many ways the central and most profound presence within any village feast, with many activities organized in such a way as to frame and give glory to this most pivotal figure. In being able to display their devotion to their saint in this manner at a time when the other parish church in Marsa was unable to, Casey assumes superiority on behalf of his church in being able to demonstrate devotion to his titular saint in a way that parishioners from their rival church could not for a while. Similarly, having a boat competing in the Regatta and bearing the name of his titular saint was regarded as a privilege which devotees of the Holy Trinity were not afforded, and this fuelled his conviction in the ability of his church and its titular saint to represent and celebrate Marsa in a superior way to others.

By means of their respective *pika* between groups, children contest who is capable of throwing a better *fiesta* and a better celebration of Marsa as a place, thus temporarily achieving superiority in relation to other places. As already noted, the *fiesta* is just one part of how people in Marsa may come to consider themselves in relation to others, and negotiate the best way to project themselves to others outside of Marsa, thus providing an alternative to the abject status which they have performatively banished. The rest of the chapter focuses mainly on the existing *pika* between the two main organizations within the Holy Trinity church, including the origins of their *pika* as I came to understand it, as well as the clashes which both organizations have encountered in competing for privileges within the celebration of the same *fiesta*.

A Rift in Festa Celebrations

Tensions presently lie in the organization of the *festa ta' barra*, that is, the external feast celebrations which take place on the streets of Marsa. This squabble takes place between the two major *għaqdiet* (organizations; sing. *għaqda*) which coordinate and participate in different elements of the *festa*. One organization is the *Għaqda Muzikali Trinita' Qaddisa*, which is known as the *Kazin*¹⁴⁵ *tal-Banda* (band club), and is located in premises across the road from the church (having evolved from humble beginnings within a local barber shop). This *Kazin* has assumed different interests and responsibilities in the years following the Second World War, however it is presently (and predominantly known for being) home to the band club of the parish. They play a major role in the musical celebrations accompanying a march, and have done so since the first time that they played at the Holy Trinity feast in 1949. The other organization is the *Għaqda Festi Esterni Sma. Trinita'*, also known as the *Għaqda ta' l-Armar*,¹⁴⁶ and most commonly referred to as *Tal-Kantina*¹⁴⁷ due to the location of their premises in the basement of the church. This organization assumes the main responsibility in acquiring decorations, banners, statues, and fireworks (amongst other items) for the street celebrations, and they work towards this end throughout the year, collecting money and throwing fundraisers in attempting to make the celebrations more elaborate and majestic with each passing year. This organization began when various street committees (who had taken the decoration of their own streets for the *festa* upon themselves) came together in order to make the external feast grander in scale. Whilst these embellishment tasks had been undertaken since the very beginning of the Holy Trinity parish church, it was not until 1975 that the organization was officially formed. For ease of reference, I will hereafter refer to the former organization as the *Kazin*, and to the latter organization as *Tal-Kantina*, reflecting the way in which both are most commonly referred to in Marsa.

¹⁴⁵ A *Kazin* is a social club predominantly frequented by men, and generally associated with belonging to a particular faction or group along the lines of politics, sports, or *festa* organization. Mitchell & Armstrong (2005) refer to the establishment of these clubs as "The emergence of 'Associational Culture'" in their chapter 'Cheers and Booze: Football and *Festa* Drinking in Malta' in Wilson, T. (ed.) *Drinking Cultures*. New York: Berg

¹⁴⁶ Loosely translated into "Organization of setting up street decorations."

¹⁴⁷ A *Kantina* is a basement or a cellar, which in this particular case acted as the premises for the social club.

For the most part, both organizations seem to have worked in parallel for a number of years, taking care of their respectively separate aspects of the *fešta*. However, upon beginning fieldwork, I found both my adult and child informants in the throes of a *pika* which had been in place for a number of years, many of whom participated in it and nurtured it without being aware of its origins. It's important to note that during fieldwork, I gained access to many of the activities thrown by *Tal-Kantina*, since a number of my informants associated themselves with this group, and this in a sense precluded me from any significant and meaningful participation in the activities held by the *Każin tal-Banda*. Thus my field notes on the *pika* at the Holy Trinity *fešta* must necessarily be considered as limited, and potentially biased. When I asked my informants about the origins of the *pika*, very few offered explanations for it, and yet they upheld it quite vociferously. The few responses which I did receive were quite similar. I was told by members of *Tal-Kantina* that the two organizations had happily co-existed, until the day when *Tal-Każin* wished for one of its members to be included amongst the *reffiegħa*, entrusted with carrying the *vara* during the procession. This was an honoured and prestigious task,¹⁴⁸ which had historically always been assumed by members of *Tal-Kantina*. Moreover, a man was not considered to be automatically entitled to it, despite belonging to *Tal-Kantina*. Rather, it was a privilege which one was expected to earn through activities which were undertaken throughout the year, mainly relating to the work a man had done in preparing for the *fešta*. This request was therefore taken quite badly, as members of *Tal-Kantina* felt that it lacked respect and appreciation for the personal sacrifices which they had made throughout the year in preparing for the *fešta*. *Tal-Każin*, on the other hand, seem to have resented the monopoly and control which they considered members of *Tal-Kantina* to exert over the *fešta ta' barra*. I was told that *Tal-Każin* retaliated by demanding payment for playing at the feast, in the same way that *Tal-Kantina* would pay the band clubs of other villages to perform (the latter is a common practice within village feasts, however the former was not, as band clubs do not generally request payment for celebrating their

¹⁴⁸ The significance of this role amongst the Maltese has been detailed by Mitchell (1998b). Although not all men aspire to be *reffiegħa* (those of a 'higher' social class tend to be ambivalent and/or indifferent to the role), it is a practice which produces prestige within a particular 'lower' status group, as the men who are selected are consequently respected for their strength and competence in assuming such a great responsibility.

own titular saint). In one year, these tensions rose to such a degree that the parish priest decided to cancel the *fešta* for that year. The incident and resulting conflict is ambiguously referred to by *Tal-Kantina*, in a short written history of their organization:

“The organization also passed through some difficult and trying times, where the titular *fešta* had to be cancelled due to a lack of understanding, however with the help of the Holy Trinity the organization continued moving forward, until after many meetings and discussions, a written agreement was established for the forthcoming *festi*. This took place between the *Għaqda Festi Esterni Ssma. Trinita’ A.D 1975...* and the parish of Holy Trinity. [...] This contract binds parties to the agreement which took place between the *Kappillan*, the *Għaqda Festi Esterni Ssma. Trinita’* and the *Każin tal-Banda Trinita’ Qaddisa* in front of the notary Philip Said on the 2nd May 2002.”¹⁴⁹

As a result of this agreement, both organizations now take it in turn to celebrate in marches at the *fešta*, and the present schedule reflects this. *Tal-Każin* organize and participate in their own marches on Wednesday evening, Friday evening, and then on Sunday morning/early afternoon, whilst *Tal-Kantina* celebrate and participate in the marches (with hired bands from other towns and villages) on Thursday night, and Saturday afternoon and evening. On Sunday (the day of the *fešta* proper), both organizations participate at different points in the day, and according to one 10 year old boy Keith [associated with *Tal-Każin*], “we are then united in the procession.” Keith explained to me, “one day it will be *tal-Każin*, and the other day *tal-Kantina*, because we are against each other. We tease them, and we sing ‘Stay there on the pavement.¹⁵⁰” He also told me that they [*Tal-Każin*] sang ‘This is my, my, my, my beautiful Sunday’ to *Tal-Kantina* on a day when the weather had thwarted the latter’s plans for a march, thus affecting their ability to throw a good celebration. However, Keith insisted to me that the members of both organizations are still friends, and that the member of one club is still free to walk into another. This claim is contested by other informants, who told me that they steer clear of one another’s clubs for fear of sparking up any trouble and rousing violence.

¹⁴⁹ My own translation. Original Maltese text taken from Dimech, P. (2006) ‘L-Għaqda Festi Esterni Ssma. Trinita’ in *Il-Marsa Matul iż-Żminijiet* [Parroċċa Trinita’ Qaddisa, Marsa]

¹⁵⁰ To the tune of ‘Take me out to the ball game.’

During the marches, members of both organizations wear t-shirts depicting where their loyalties lie, and they take the opportunity to hurl insults at one another by means of the songs which they sing, many of which tie in accusations from previous run-ins. The lyrics of one of the songs of *Tal-Kantina*, which I had been given by my informants and ordered to learn prior to the *festa*, go as follows:

Be ashamed, if you know how to be ashamed. How you've wasted time over nothing! You've spent a long time asleep, you have no tradition. You always discarded the festa, and only paid attention to it now. Now everything is in our hands, we dominate. You go and report us, try and humiliate us. That's what you've done over the years, coming and going to the police station. That is what you are known for amongst the people of Marsa.

There's no point in trying to hide, everybody knows that, it is engrained in history... you should really be ashamed of yourselves, for what you've done to the people of Marsa. Now we have stopped you, you are good for nothing.

The lyrics of this song (similar in tone to a number of other songs which were sung during the *festa*) are telling. In singing it, members of *Tal-Kantina* affirm their own ability to create a positive image of Marsa, in a sense rescuing the place from the supposedly negative image perpetuated by their rivals, whose petty actions they claim have brought shame upon the people of Marsa. In a sense, they accuse the other group of almost having been detrimental to the social imaginary, were it not for their own intervention which rescued it from tarnish. These songs are sung during the lively band marches, and crowds of *festa* enthusiasts drink copiously, visiting bars along the route of the march and progressing at the same pace, collecting more drinks along the way and becoming increasingly loud and boisterous. Children are placed on the shoulders of adults, and join in with waving flags and singing songs to taunt their rivals. Mitchell & Armstrong (2005) correctly observe that this general atmosphere is probably more akin to what one may find at a rock concert or a football match (each cheering their respective 'team'), than a religious celebration. In one of our interviews, a few children at school described the *festa* atmosphere to me:

Andrea: They fight and stuff...

Mario: They get drunk.

Sharon: They fight?

Andrea: *Tal-Kantina* and *Tal-Każin*

Sharon: Why?

Andrea: Don't know.

Mario: After the *festa*, near us and next to the fishmonger, everyone goes there and shouts, and my dad lifts me up on to this thing so that I can dance. And then my cousin's girlfriend has a sister, and we play together and she's more scared than I am, because one guy was drunk and she started crying and I had to stay with her because I couldn't go in and I couldn't leave her alone.

Sharon: Do people often fight at the *festa*?

Mario: I don't know, because I didn't do anything aside from jump around with people!

Sharon: Is there a *pika*?

Mario: They tease and they say that *Tal-Każin* is better, and they fight...

Sharon: What do they say?

Marchita: They sing, but they will be teasing and insulting when they sing...

Sharon: What would they sing?

Marchita: I'm embarrassed to sing it.

Mario: I think they call them idiots and so on...

[Interview with Marchita, Andrea, Mario, and Luka; Thursday 9th February 2012]

The scene is incredibly familiar to the children. Even if their family does not particularly associate themselves with one social club or the other, everyday life in Marsa is still somewhat suspended during *festa*, having been taken over by this extraordinary event which draws some degree of participation from all who reside in the vicinity (even if it is simply to the extent of going out on to their balconies to watch the brass band march by, and occasionally throwing down confetti on passing band members). The occasionally raucous atmosphere led some of the children to worry about the onset of *inkwiet* (worry/trouble) during the *festa*. This concept was explained in greater detail in Chapter 5, and similarly operated during the *festa* celebrations by nature of its *pika*. As always, *inkwiet* brought with it the potential for *vendikazzjoni* (revenge). Thus when one club would begin mocking the other, it is done in such a way as to push the boundaries and flirt with, but not cross over to, *inkwiet*. Although both clubs would often insult one another in song, this was not without its limits. During one *Tal-Kantina* march, a man who

got swept up in the excitement heavily cursed and blasphemed against members of *Tal-Kažin*, and he was swiftly reprimanded by the President of *Tal-Kantina* for his vulgar comments, as it had the potential to turn the proceedings violent. Terence, a 10 year old boy from school, was well aware of the potential for *inkwiet* (having learnt it in a socially situated manner), telling me “they will make trouble for you, it’s better to tell them nothing.” Terence explained to me that “they try to one-up each other, using their words.” They do so while passing precariously close to one another’s premises as they sing, seeing how far they can take their ‘playful’ insults whilst playing with the boundaries of social transgression. Whilst some fully participate in this practice, others prefer to be cautious and stay back, fearing the consequences of taking things too far.



Fig. 12 – Members of *Tal-Kantina* sing and celebrate during their march

In many respects, the carnivalesque atmosphere of the external feast allows for the boundaries of social transgression to be pushed with some legitimacy, as a creative life form in a sense suspended in space and time, and yet simultaneously projecting a certain idea of Marsa for outsiders to take away with them. Cohen (1993) regards such events as a domain of contest in his ethnography of the Notting Hill Carnival, where he considers the cultural and artistic spectacle in terms of its political function. In a similar manner, Sutton (1996) explores the throwing of dynamite bombs on the island of Kalymnos, arguing that the conflicting arguments regarding this practice lend themselves to a

process whereby the Kalymnians attempt to define their identity and 'distinctiveness' in relation to what they regard as homogenizing forces of modernity.

I would argue that disputes regarding the *festta*, and battling for group privileges within it, also provides scope for the people of Marsa to indirectly debate their own identity and social character, particularly as they communicate it to the outside world and express the way they see themselves and make sense of their place. Within the context of the *festta*, revellers similarly try to put across a sense of their own distinctiveness over other places temporarily, by constituting their own celebrations as uniquely superior. One such illustration of this made itself evident during the last *festta* celebrations I attended in Marsa in 2012. Dedicated members of *Tal-Kantina* (many of whom also had the role of *reffiegħa* during the procession) had worked throughout the night in order to set up a few surprises for the *festta* revellers, in the form of beautifully elaborate and new street decorations, which were unveiled with great pomp and crescendo. Amongst them was a statue which had been especially commissioned for the *festta* that year, depicting a scene from the life of Dun Ġorġ Preca, the first Maltese Saint (canonized in June 2007), which occurred on the streets of Marsa around 1910. The story goes that one morning, Dun Ġorġ was passing in the vicinity of the Marsa Cross when he suddenly saw a twelve-year old boy pushing a low cart with a bag full of manure. The boy summoned Dun Ġorġ to help him. The moment Dun Ġorġ put his hand on the cart he felt spiritually overwhelmed and overcome with a sense of 'sweetness', following which the young boy and cart disappeared. Dun Ġorġ took this to be an extraordinary vision of the child Jesus, and he took this intercession as a confirmation and sign from God for him to continue working towards spreading Catholic doctrine in Malta.



Fig. 13 – Statue depicting a pivotal scene from Dun Gorg Preca’s life which unfolded in Marsa

A great deal of ornate additions to street decorations were introduced during this specific *festa*, however my attention turned towards this addition as particularly distinctive, laying claim and a sense of belonging towards a special setting in which a divine event in the life of a saint occurred, in a way which other places could not. The nature of the scene lent itself greatly to the way in which the people of Marsa imagined themselves as humble and down to earth, yet privileged and blessed. The statue was revealed to great cheers, particularly amongst adults and children belonging to *Tal-Kantina*, who collectively claimed this great tribute to Marsa as their own, in the celebration of Marsa as a place which is superior to other places in its relations of otherness.

The element of one-upmanship was central to this social process, as respective groups consistently worked harder and pushed themselves in order to outdo the efforts undertaken by other groups in this manner. Neighbouring towns were also brought in to this process, often being severely put down in claims of their comparative inferiority, as with my informant Darren telling me that he was raised to curse the churches of Ħamrun (the next town) and the Queenship of Mary respectively (although he is often spurred on by other family members to project an image of neutrality in relation to the *Tal-Każin/Tal-Kantina pika* so as to avoid *'inkwiet'*). Whilst my informants revelled in a degree of anti-

social behaviour within their *festa*, they were simultaneously against it and expressed regret at not being united in this regard. This ambivalence was also reflected in the position of the authorities, as in the case of Sutton's ethnography. Whilst being united in celebrations of Marsa would be highly positive, the presence of '*pika*' also denoted an element of healthy competition in the eyes of a few officials, whereby each group constantly pushed themselves to new heights of achievement in their celebrations. The mayor in fact expressed the following to me:

"I think it's a good thing that there is a bit of competition over who embellishes the place more. I don't agree if it passes a certain limit. The two are friends of mine, and they make big sacrifices during the year. They collect money, they set up, they practice in rehearsals... As long as we get to where we have to go, I see nothing [wrong]."

[Interview with Marsa Mayor; 12th June 2012]

Indeed, during the last *festa*, a comment from a friend of mine, who was an outsider to Marsa, attested to this notion of competition as positive. I ran into him in the streets of Marsa quite unexpectedly, his interest in Maltese artistic and cultural events drawing him to the street celebrations. He exclaimed to me that he hadn't expected the festivities to be quite so grand and impressive, and once I mentioned the *pika* in passing, my friend immediately concluded that that must have been the reason that the proceedings and street adornments were so striking and remarkable. In this respect, my friend confirmed that it is precisely through *pika* that those involved in the organization of *festa* push themselves to perform better in portraying Marsa as a spectacular place, this outcome in itself being highly supported by existing authorities in Marsa, who have a vested interest in the positive depiction of Marsa to outsiders. In this respect, my ethnography occasionally demonstrated *piki* as a positive phenomenon, contrary to Boissevain's (1993: 74) observation that they "disrupt the harmony of the community and make it more difficult to project the ideal image of village unity to the outside world." In Marsa, the *piki* conversely appeared to spur on more intense efforts towards a positive depiction of Marsa, one which is often expressed to an outside audience. Thus in the absence of such divisions, motivations in working towards this portrayal may arguably lack the same degree of intensity. In illustrating a similar event occurring in a Maltese village which he names *Hal-Harrub*, Zammit (1994: 68) notes that the event may be seen "as a strategic

manipulation of Hal-Harrub's primordial image... attracting outsiders to the village, thus raising the self-esteem of the villagers and providing a flow of clientele to the local bars." In Marsa, the scope of attracting outsiders to the village remains the same, the anti-social behaviour explicit in the *pika* to some extent adding to the spectacle they are able to offer for export and consumption. In contributing towards this celebration, the groups involved in the organization of the *fiesta* champion and project a non-abject vision of Marsa, indirectly competing over which group is the most successful in portraying this image.

A Brief Transcendence of Conflict

Elements of *pika* in the form of the exchange of insults and one-upmanship was most common in the days leading up to the *fiesta*, however on the day of the feast itself (i.e. the Sunday), there was a collective effort to maintain a united front, if only temporarily¹⁵¹. T-shirts which would have been worn in marches during the week, which displayed a person's association with *Tal-Banda* or *Tal-Kantina*, were put aside in favour of smart clothes, particularly at the point where the *vara* exited the church. Thus, in coming together to celebrate the Holy Trinity, paraphernalia expressing membership to one group over another is momentarily shed on the day of the *fiesta* proper, particularly during the procession which is overseen by the powerful presence of the *vara*. In a sense, the emergence of the sacred entails a temporary suspension and subjugation of the profane. For a brief moment, all parishioners of the Holy Trinity church are united in a socially cohesive ritual, giving rise to what Turner (1974: 169) termed as 'communitas.' Both groups are briefly united in the collective devotion and adoration of the Holy Trinity through their intimate engagement with the *vara*, which for them so closely ties in with their pride and celebration of Marsa as a place. Daniel, a 10 year old boy, revealed the following during an informal interview:

¹⁵¹ It is important to note that on occasion, many of my informants (both adults and children) who were active members of the organizations involved in the rivalry sincerely expressed to me that they felt the *pika* to be a shame, and they expressed a wish for unity in the celebration of the *fiesta*. Regardless of this, many of them joined in the songs at the marches which were intended to tease and insult the other group, thus contributing to the existing divisive rhetoric, and putting the blame for the lack of unity squarely on their rivals.

“Miss, if I get married, I’ll get married at Holy Trinity and if I die and God gives me the glory of heaven they will have to have my funeral in Marsa. Definitely, because Marsa is too beautiful like that. You have very little ‘*inkwiet*¹⁵².”

[Interview with Daniel and Martina (10 years old); 12th January 2012]

Thus the Holy Trinity church, for Daniel, indirectly plays a central role in the celebration of Marsa, and in countering implicit claims of abjection, this particular extract considering one form of abjection in the form of *inkwiet*. Daniel denies any rife presence of *inkwiet* in Marsa, and he does this by invoking the Holy Trinity church, the image it encapsulates being so central to the way in which he imagines his own social existence within this space.

When the *vara* re-enters the church after the procession, it is a time of heartfelt emotion for the *reffiegħa*, who feel overwhelmed with honour and pride at what they have once again experienced. At this point during the 2012 *festa*, the parish priest shared a few reflections with those present. He thanked everyone who had helped in the *festa ta’ ġewwa* and the *festa ta’ barra*, and he told everyone “God enjoys seeing all of us come together as we are today.” He added that this should be the case in the days leading up to the main *festa* as well. He told the congregation “the *festa* needs to start from the inside, going to the outside.” In this, the parish priest wished to place the religious message of the feast at the heart of the festivities, ensuring that the rivalry between the two clubs did not eclipse the celebration of the Holy Trinity. Rather, the parish priest appeared to be making the case for the celebration of the Holy Trinity to eclipse the rivalry, and for the moment of ‘*communitas*’ to extend beyond the procession with the *vara*.

Nonetheless, members of *Tal-Kantina* still had the last word on the matter. Following the parish priest’s message within the church, they left to don their *Tal-Kantina* t-shirts once again, and another *Tal-Kantina* march was organized in the street, where songs berating

¹⁵² Worry/trouble – a term previously explained in greater detail in Chapter 5.

the *Kažin tal-Banda* were once again sung, in clear defiance of the message which the parish priest had just delivered. The sacred moment of 'communitas' now over, revellers made a radical shift to the profane, again claiming superiority in their own efforts towards depicting Marsa as an unobject place worthy of being celebrated. Where the church had tried to lift these divisions, club members had put them firmly back in place by the end of the *fešta*, ending the festivities on a divisive note and asserting supremacy in their own ability to project the social imaginary (and implicitly counter the abject). In this respect, by means of relations of otherness (either in terms of rivalries with other towns, or within Marsa itself), Marsa is more effectively constituted as a better place in relation to other places.

As the previous vignettes have illustrated thus far, children were actively engaged in debating the superiority of their group over other groups, specifically in terms of the grandeur of their tribute to and celebration of Marsa. A few months after moving to Marsa, the following conversation unfolded between myself and a 10 year old boy in class:

Harry turned in his seat to face me, and he asked if I am from Marsa. I answered that I only recently moved to Marsa. He then asked me "Who do you side with?" and he did not elaborate upon his question any further. Given that his question related to the space of Marsa, I presumed that he was speaking of the *pika* between the churches, and I answered that my parish church (decided by nature of my place of residence at the time) was further down the road (i.e. Holy Trinity Church). Harry told me "but do you side with *il-Kažin* or *tal-Kantina*?" I answered that I did not get involved, and I asked him the same question about himself. He raised his fist and proudly told me "*I am 'tal-Kažin.'*" I asked him "Don't they belong to the same parish though?" He answered "So what?"

[Wednesday 11th January 2012]

Children often explained that their affiliation to one club or the other came about through their parents. Indeed children such as Harry, whose parents are staunchly

dedicated to one club over another, would have participated in the fundraising activities of that club for years, being taken along to children's parties and fundraising barbecues and the like from birth. In the above extract, Harry is certainly aware that I did not share this level of participation with him, and appears to have asked me the question in terms of my relative outsider status to Marsa. Although I was evidently not raised in Marsa, and was in this respect an outsider, I had also acquired enough knowledge of the place in my time there to have become aware of the principle rivalries pervasive within it. I was also new enough to the place that I had not relinquished my outsider status completely, and this appeared to be the perspective which Harry was interested in probing. In asking me who I side with, Harry was invariably asking me "Who do you think is better?" In other words, he wished to know who I felt had done a better job of glorifying Marsa, and depicting it in a positive light to me, a relative outsider. Many of the activities and celebrations of the *festa* imply an engagement with an outside audience, whereby the social imaginary can be performed and projected outwards, in addition to its status as a form of collective expression. This shall be discussed in greater detail within this concluding section.

Festa as a Cultural Performance

Within the context of the *festa*, locals go to great lengths to display images of wealth and extravagance. Smart clothes are worn for the pivotal moment in which the *vara* emerges from the church. A previous resident of Marsa fondly recollected to me how many women in the village would rent expensive pieces of jewellery for the day¹⁵³, complementing their elegant clothing which would have been obtained specifically for the occasion. Residences would be displayed at their very best, ready to receive visitors and close family from outside of Marsa. Many Maltese houses possess a main front door, with another small glass door (known as an *anteporta*) just behind it. During the *festa*, many houses leave their main doors open, allowing outsiders to peer in to their immaculately decorated homes through the *anteporta*, and for guests to enter briefly for

¹⁵³ I am unsure as to whether this is also the current practice, however suffice to say that a great deal of effort was put into individual appearances on the day of the *festa* proper.

refreshments along the procession route. Objects expressing wealth and extravagance were strategically displayed just beyond the *anteporta*, for outsiders and passers-by to visually consume. In arriving at the *festa* during the 2012 festivities, members of *Tal-Kantina* chose to make an entrance by arriving at the celebrations in a luxurious limousine rented for the occasion. Such images of abundance and wealth were important counterclaims to charges of abjection, projecting possession of valuable objects and defying any sense of material poverty or social marginalization which may posit them as another person's abject. Through the context of the *festa*, people in Marsa are thus able to form an identity based on collective activity and expression, contesting which group expresses this collective identity most effectively. They elicit enthusiastic participation in this public image through a sensory feast which is viscerally experienced, through grand fireworks, pyrotechnics and collective jubilation. Their projected image to an outside audience in a sense encompasses what belonging to Marsa means for them – they demonstrate hard work, dedication and enthusiasm, which in turn indicates superiority and sets them apart in relation to other places. In this respect, following Turner (1986), the meaning of cultural performances is to be found in the union of a script with its actors and audience, at a given moment within the group's ongoing social process. Turner underlines that "cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be active agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt or interesting 'designs for living'" (1986: 24). In this respect, the cultural performance evident in the *festa* should not merely be considered as a reflector of culture – rather it communicates the way in which the people of Marsa imagine and celebrate their own social existence, and compete amongst one another to champion this idea of the social imaginary. They are thus neither abject like the migrants, nor distant and standoffish like the elite.

Amidst the celebrations and merriment during the last *festa*, a particular scene caught my eye. I spotted Suleiman, an Eritrean immigrant introduced in the last chapter by way of his condemnation of his friend Ashish's actions in 'running after me.' Suleiman was standing in the midst of the jubilant singing and cheering crowd, who were

enthusiastically jumping in excitement and waving diverse flags. The flags being waved were rather large and heavy. Despite individuals being keen to wave the flags for a while, they grew exhausted of this exercise quite quickly, promptly searching for another individual to take over. To abandon one of the flags by the wayside was not an option, as it would have detracted from the spectacle of the *festà*. I glanced over and watched Suleiman wave a heavy flag, which would have been passed along a number of exhausted individuals before making it into his temporary possession. He seemed delighted, and continued waving the flag, adding to the unfolding cultural performance. A few other sub-Saharan African immigrants were also present at the *festà*, however they were simply present as bystanders, looking on from the margins of the festivities. They neither belonged to the space, nor were they removed from it, remaining in the precarious position of looking on from the margins (in many ways symbolic of their wider position in Malta).

Suleiman, in appropriating the flag and waving it fervently on this occasion, attempted to include himself in the way the people of Marsa imagined themselves, trying as he always did to insert himself within a collective social existence within this space. His brief participation was not met with explicit disapproval, as he assumed a task which others were beginning to tire from (but which nonetheless required continuation). In this respect, I draw a parallel here between Suleiman's participation in the *festà* celebrations in this manner, and the exception granted to black street cleaners in Chapter 6. Within that chapter, children disparaged most black people in Marsa, with the specific exception of street cleaners and rubbish collectors. There, I suggested that they were exempt from vilification largely due to the fact that their cleaning practices countered the polluting effect which they were deemed to possess as black migrants. Thus, their efforts to lift abjection from the streets of Marsa separated them from the blacks who had come to be regarded as social filth in themselves. Similarly, in the case of Suleiman, his participation in the *festà* in this particular manner, and his contribution towards the celebration of Marsa as a superior place, in a sense momentarily neutralized the abjection which he was implicitly accused of having wrought upon it. *Festà* celebrations were in this respect crucial and instrumental in the social process of imagining a social existence which both

further refuted the idea of Marsa as an abject space, and proposed suitable alternative ways of imagining themselves which rehabilitated self-esteem and elicited great pride at being friendly, down-to-earth working class people from Marsa. Boissevain (1992: 151) made a similar observation with respect to the celebration of the *festa*:

The sixteen years of socialist government favoured the development of popular culture. Village celebrations, of which the chief activists are largely working-class, were given increased prominence by the Labour-controlled media. Television in particular began to transmit programmes on parish activities. Popular, working-class culture, which had been denigrated by the urbanized middle classes, slowly came to be regarded as an important part of Malta's heritage, a component of the new nation's cultural identity that could both focus nationalist sentiments and be exported for gain.

Boissevain here highlights the potential and achievement of working-class culture (in the form of village celebrations such as the *festa*) in surmounting the denigration and abjection inflicted upon it by the urbanized middle classes. Considering this idea in relation to Bakhtin (1984) and his close examination of the novels of Rabelais, comparisons may be drawn with his notion of the carnivalesque whereby "in this play with negation, the opposition to the official world and all its prohibitions and limitations is obviously revealed. It also expresses the recreative, festive suspension of these restrictions. It is a carnival game of negation" (1984: 412). The opposition to the official world, particularly in repudiating the stamp of abjectness which has been conferred upon them, is indeed evident within the *festa*, as an event which is both suspended from the everyday, and yet very much a part of it and a response to it. However, Armstrong & Mitchell (2006) argue that the elements of carnivalesque irreverence and vulgarity in the Bakhtinian sense are not contained within the Maltese *festa*. They go on to argue that these elements are presently located within contemporary football celebrations in Malta, these replacing the modern-day carnival as a cultural form in which social antagonisms are made manifest. Indeed, the creative inversion of norms and ideologies associated with Bakhtin's notion of carnival are not entirely present within the *festa*, despite its moments of brazen celebratory excess. Nonetheless, as I have illustrated above, *festa* celebrations still provide scope and opportunity for challenging the official world and

pushing the boundaries of social transgression with some legitimacy, allowing my informants to negate the conditions of their own abjection and propose an alternative and socially imagined way of being in the world.

Once these nuances of abjection are negated and shifted in another direction (as opposed to inverted), onto the sub-Saharan African immigrants living in close proximity within the social space, they must then be replaced by a sense of collective pride and a rehabilitation of esteem. Being largely unable and unwilling to construct themselves as middle class, they turn to valued elements of their own working class culture. The village *festa* provides a prime opportunity for the rehabilitation of esteem, valued in terms of its status as a cultural performance, and also as a commodity which outsiders to the village (as a critical part of the audience) may take away with them. Regaining and nurturing their pride comes to be extremely crucial and necessary, and it is undertaken in the social process of celebrating Marsa as a place in accordance with the social imaginary. Within this contextual time and space, in a sense suspended from the realm of the everyday, the social landscape is momentarily infused with jubilant affect.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

My primary concern in this thesis has been to illustrate how abjection manifested itself in the lives of some of my informants in Marsa, both in terms of how it was socially reproduced from one generation to the next (largely through class reproduction), as well as how it was contested in moments of cultural resistance (primarily through the children's storytelling narratives and their appropriation of the symbolic boundary of dirt). My ethnography brings together theories of social reproduction and abjection, where they have previously been considered in largely separate terms. I also set out to contribute to a growing body of literature in child-focused anthropology, and anthropology of education and schooling, by using a predominantly child-focused approach within an educational setting (though not exclusively so) in understanding how abjection and social reproduction are intimately intertwined. At the young ages of 9 and 10, long before the legal school leaving age of 16, a few of my informants were already on powerful and compelling pathways which did not bode well for their future completion of compulsory schooling, thus from an early age deviating from the socially desirable 'educated person' who possesses the forms of capital which are valued within the social imaginings of the nation-state. By opposing the dispositions and cultural capital as embodied within the 'educated person,' my informants indirectly situated themselves in opposition to that which was socially desirable, and which was therefore socially abject. Their early failure and disengagement from school further set them on a powerful (yet not inevitable) trajectory which realistically leaves few avenues open for the children in the future, aside from those which their social world has already demonstrated as viable, and which the Maltese middle and upper classes have largely rendered as abject and socially undesirable.

The bleak conditions surrounding some of my informants took the form of (amongst other things) threats of violence and revenge, limited means of accessing money, an ominous risk of worry or trouble in the form of '*inkwiet*', necessarily learning to cope with various forms of '*taħwid*', poor mental health within the family, and low scholastic

achievement amongst parents (which in turn granted children with limited cultural capital and navigational capacity with which to explore their own futures). Given that the objective conditions framing the social experiences of some of my informants were potentially quite rough and harsh, they subsequently internalized the surrounding affect of roughness in adjusting to their respective positions in the field. Their respective habitus subsequently comes to embody and generate the rough dispositions necessary for living within a potentially dangerous environment, in the process acquiring and valuing cultural capital in the forms of masculine toughness, learnt concealment, and the affability to ward off trouble and give others no cause for seeking revenge. In some circumstances, the extent of the harsh surroundings permeating the social fabric also contributed towards setting a few informants on a life trajectory which included criminal underclass activities and various engagements with risk. These included (but were not limited to) drug trafficking and drug use, gambling, prostitution, selling contraband items, and abusing social benefits. Although these activities were by no means widespread, my informants' familiarity with their occurrence often was. It is largely an association with all of the social transgressions highlighted above, along with qualities of abrasiveness (as incorporated within a class habitus), and a lack of appropriate cultural capital (as held by the 'educated person'), which rendered my informants as abject and low 'others,' according to the Maltese middle and upper classes. The latter in turn often took their own habitus and forms of cultural capital for granted as natural skills or merits, in the process holding individuals such as my informants responsible for their own socially abject circumstances.

Despite this, the last chapter illustrates the sense of pride and *joie de vivre* with which my informants often counter this denigration, rehabilitating social esteem whilst embracing the socially imagined vision of their alterity. In many ways, the deprecation of my informants (largely by middle class outsiders, but at times also self-inflicted) was inherently implied by means of associating them with various forms of '*taħwid*.' The term insinuated that a person or situation had become jumbled up or confused and corrupted, and had thus departed from the dominant social order and the imaginings of the political community, straying away from the 'official version of the world.' This denigration was in

many ways constitutive of elite culture and power, knowledge of which my informants embodied and tacitly protested. In a similar vein, Stallybrass & White identified a pattern within their own analysis of the middle class cultural imaginary within post-Renaissance European culture, whereby “the ‘top’ attempts to reject and eliminate the ‘bottom’ for reasons of prestige and status, only to discover... that it is in some way frequently dependent on that low-Other” (1986: 5). In this respect, “the low-Other is despised and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture” (1986: 5-6).

Earlier in the first chapter of this thesis, an analysis of existing literature on abjection and its relationship to class distinction (Corbin 1986; Stallybrass & White 1986; Appadurai 2004) demonstrated how the constitution and subsequent banishment of the abject is in many ways vital to the formation of the social classes, perpetuating a symbolic classification system whereby some people come to be valued more than others. My thesis has largely tackled two predominant aspects of this politicized process, in Part I and Part II of this work respectively. Firstly, it has explored how states of abjection often come to be socially reproduced from one generation to the next, fundamentally bringing together existing theories on social reproduction and abjection and going beyond what is currently contained in each body of literature in turn. It does so by considering how the children of individuals occupying abject class positions walk down similar pathways as those treaded by their parents, and it approaches this question predominantly by examining children’s early disengagement with schooling. Secondly, this thesis has investigated how the socially marginalized themselves engage with processes of abjection, largely in response to their own historical constitution as the abject. This is approached from a child-focused perspective, through an exploration of children’s symbolic banishment of the abject by means of their storytelling narratives and creative appropriation of symbolic boundaries of dirt. In doing so, this thesis has tried to address a lacuna in the field of anthropological literature on abjection, by considering how abjection is undertaken by those who have been socially abjected themselves, and who in turn utilize processes of abjection in such a way as to deflect from the socially peripheral positions in which they find themselves.

The way in which social disadvantages come to be reproduced from one generation to the next, which I examined through critical engagement with Bourdieu's notion of the habitus in Part I of this thesis, often meant that my informants accepted the responsibility for their own lacking social opportunities. Their academic failure, and their subsequent engagement in activities which opposed the idea of the 'educated person,' were frequently attributed to a lazy or defiant disinterest in education (both by my informants themselves, as well as middle class outsiders), rather than to a clash in the set of taken-for-granted dispositions with which a number of children in Marsa approached schooling. Given that schooling is widely held to possess an inherently transformative potential, the responsibility for educational failure was often assumed by my informants themselves (and indirectly confirmed by those in possession of the dominant habitus). Indeed, my adult informants often blamed themselves for having failed to fully engage with the opportunities which schooling provided. Their subsequent relegation to low status jobs (or indeed underclass employment) as a result of their academic failure was therefore widely regarded as an outcome which many indirectly chose or brought upon themselves. Under the circumstances, such widespread acceptance of this rationale served to justify the privileged positions of those with greater symbolic power and capital, in turn granting them legitimacy with which to scorn those whose habitus and lack of appropriate capital did not match their own. This also produced the effect of blaming the victims of structural inequality themselves, rendering the latter largely responsible for their own socially marginal positions and opening them up to further disparagement and abjection.

Given that the above "achievement ideology" (MacLeod 2009:114) was also overwhelmingly accepted by my marginalized informants themselves, it increased the necessity of finding alternative strategies with which to cope with their socially abject circumstances, and generate pride and esteem. The potentially harsh objective conditions which framed my informants' set of dispositions and knowledge of the world rendered other forms of cultural capital as valuable, such as roughness, humility, and embodied knowledge of coping with '*taħwid*' and '*inkwiet*'. Some children sought to maximize their

acquisition of these forms of cultural capital, the value of which more closely matched their own internalized taken-for-granted notions of the world, though it was often accumulated at the expense of other forms of cultural capital capable of facilitating their success in school. Acquiring cultural capital in the form of hard masculinity and intense sociability allowed children to become the kind of individuals who were greatly valued in Marsa, granting them the feelings of self-worth which were otherwise denied to them according to the dominant symbolic system of classification which posited them as socially abject.

The silent rebellion at the official version of the world (as embodied within the dominant habitus) served to further entrench some of my informants within their perceived abject status, necessitating the development of alternative strategies with which to cope with (and deflect from) their own abjection. My informants thus generated esteem and pride at possessing a class habitus which incorporated dispositions which evaded the Maltese upper classes, such as being down to earth, and a unique ability to experience dirt in a way that the latter, who they considered to be pretentious, could not. They therefore constructed a vision of their own alterity, partly by means of constituting an oppositional relationship within the Maltese upper classes, whereby they embraced and developed an affinity and preference for the humble conditions which encompassed them nonetheless (Bourdieu 1984: 373). The symbolic boundary which allowed my informants to constitute an oppositional relationship with the Maltese upper classes and '*sinjuri*' (rich people) further allowed them to constitute an oppositional relationship with the migrants, upon situating themselves on the other side of the symbolic border. In this respect, my informants embodied knowledge of how to be dirty and down-to-earth in relation to the upper classes, and knew how to be clean and non-abject in relation to the migrants, who were in turn constituted as the *real* abject. My research thus demonstrates the largely ambivalent relationship which people of Marsa hold with the abject - they must simultaneously embrace it and reject it, according to whom they are defining themselves in relation to at any given moment. This is accomplished by means of the creative appropriation of the symbolic border delineating the abject from the non-abject.

An ability to embrace and revel in the abject was crucial to embodying working class pride, which set my informants apart from the affectation of the Maltese upper classes. However, in constituting an oppositional relationship with the sub-Saharan African migrants, the symbolic border delineating the abject was moved accordingly, and the abject subsequently and unequivocally rejected. The states of abjection as historically conferred upon residents of Marsa, by means of living in a space which has been perceived as containing undesirable elements of social pollution, were in such cases displaced and shifted by my informants on to the sub-Saharan African migrants, as the latter thus came to be held as the true source of social ills within the area. Rather than potentially being dispersed throughout the social landscape, the socially undesirable abject was made to be about particular individuals within a particular abjected space. However, this process went beyond merely postulating the sub-Saharan African migrants as abject. Rather, through powerful and reiterative discourse and practice, it socially and performatively produced the effects which it named (Butler 1993: 2). The abject was therefore brought in to being, partially through the children's symbolic narratives which socially constructed the abject as that which it was already claimed to be. Within their narratives, the children were able to project themselves as particular kinds of individuals in relation to their abject, encapsulating everything that the abject did not, given Kristeva's argument of the abject as "being opposed to *I*" (1982: 1). They therefore constituted themselves as individuals who possessed cultural capital in the forms of courage, bravery, and desirability, heralding their own social value as individuals who were non-abject.

My research illustrates that the performative act whereby my informants constituted and symbolically banished their own abject was very much framed by their wider objective conditions, imbued with nuances of their own abjection. These conditions came to be internalized within the habitus of my informants, generating a set of dispositions with which my informants came to address predominant aspects of their social world. In coping with the conditions of their own abjection and being symbolically cast off

according to dominant classifications of value and power, my informants redirected the social gaze towards the sub-Saharan African migrants in making the social abject about them. In this respect my ethnography has argued against theories put forward by Willis (1983) and Giroux (1983), who hold that ideas of cultural production and resistance may not be contained within Bourdieu's (1974, 1977) notion of the habitus, dubbing Bourdieu's argument overly deterministic. My ethnography illustrated that practices of cultural resistance may indeed be present, however they are nonetheless framed by wider objective conditions which are constitutive of the habitus, internalized and incorporated within the set of dispositions with which my informants acted upon the world as social agents. The instances of cultural resistance as embodied within the children's narratives thus simultaneously illustrated notions of cultural production and resistance, whereby their repetitive discourse produced very real social effects, whilst also demonstrating how these practices of cultural production are framed in wider terms, undertaken according to the set of dispositions and taken-for-granted ideas of the world embodied within their habitus.

Just as the dominant culture was dependent on their low-other in the form of those embroiled in '*taħwid*', the latter constitutive of the power and culture held by the elite, so too were residents of Marsa (and particularly my child informants) dependent upon those they denied and disparaged. My informants constituted themselves in opposition to their own abject in much the same way that the upper classes had done with them, by protecting the symbolic border which separated them from their banished abject, and thus projecting themselves as everything that their own abject was not. Effectively, in shifting the abject in another direction and symbolically discarding the sub-Saharan African migrants as embodiments of social filth, my informants could further project themselves as persons of great symbolic value by contrast. This is possible inasmuch as their own abject is rejected and banished to the other side of the symbolic border entirely, these social divisions upheld and closely monitored lest the symbolic boundary break down and threaten the integrity of the self as it is socially constructed. In the midst of this process, my informants necessarily treated the symbolic boundary as far more impenetrable and inflexible than it actually was. It is crucial to note that in engaging with

processes of abjection in this way (as a means of resisting their own abjection), my informants indirectly came to legitimize the very same practices which historically rendered them abject, undertaking them for the purposes of producing a new abject which distinctly did not include them.

Summary of Chapters

Within this section, I intend to summarize and draw out the main analytical themes which were raised within this thesis, the structure of it into two parts largely reflecting my aim to examine the social reproduction of abjection (Part I) and the cultural resistance to abjection (Part II). Part I of this thesis collectively put forward the argument of how nuances of abjection came to be socially reproduced generation after generation, often persisting and manifesting themselves in ideas of class. Within my thesis, class is an imported analytical term, applied in order to address internalized states of abjection as incorporated within a class habitus. Chapter 2 provided a historical context towards understanding existing class structures in Malta, as well as Maltese attitudes towards foreigners, by outlining major historical events in Malta and particularly within the Harbour region. The birth of the working class movement within the Southern Harbour towns, having grown partly in response to centuries of colonial rule, fostered a deeply internalized and affective sentiment of pride and esteem in the status of being a worker. The main political parties which emerged at the beginning of the 20th century were largely rooted in existing class divisions, these divisions politically manifesting themselves with respect to the question of which language was to form the administrative basis of life on the islands. Dom Mintoff, the ever-controversial and charismatic leader of the Labour Party, was determined to stamp out existing class divisions whereby the working classes suffered denigration and disparagement at the hands of the bourgeoisie. A sense of internalized abjection thus in many ways propelled the workers' movement forward with significant impetus, as the workers in the harbour towns rallied behind their political champion, whose legacy remains palpable within southern harbour towns such as Marsa to this day. The extent to which Mintoff achieved his aims is disputable, however the

spirit and social affect cultivated through Mintoff's movement remains profoundly inscribed within the social landscape. In this respect, my particular fieldwork site of Marsa was historically imbued with internalized abjection, in turn contested and countered with sentiments of working class pride, central to the continued perseverance and survival of the working classes. Within this chapter, I also outlined the obstacles I encountered upon entering my fieldwork site, particularly due to my own contrasting socio-cultural background. I discussed the ethical issues and concerns which arose during the course of fieldwork and in the phase of writing up. I also related key events which took place when I moved to my fieldwork site, and which highlighted predominant issues which were to persistently present themselves during fieldwork.

Chapter 3 built upon the foundations laid within the preceding chapter, in continuing the discussion on ideas of social class as they are manifested in Malta, and in Marsa more specifically. The chapter considered how ideas of class are constructed locally, and how these concepts are invested with social meaning through intersubjective relations with one another. It further explored how states of affect and abjection came to be manifested in ideas of class, and embedded within them. As a result, these internalized states of abjection were often reproduced in the process of class reproduction. My argument with regard to the social reproduction of abjection was thus introduced here, by means of a preliminary discussion on Bourdieu's notion of the habitus and the field in which individuals struggle for various forms of capital. The opportunities available to an individual, or rather, the opportunities which are regarded as *realistically viable*, are largely shaped by a person's position in the field, this in turn influenced by the habitus and the respective accumulation of capital. These forces ultimately come to bear upon future success in a way which is compelling and powerful, though not determining. In this respect, class reproduction may often occur regardless of widespread access to schooling, despite wide presumptions of the latter acting as a great equalizer of opportunity which allows individuals the chance to accumulate more capital and thus become socially mobile. Such assumptions fail to consider how social disadvantages might come to be transformed into educational disadvantages in the process of schooling, and significantly

ignore wider social and economic constraints on the lives of those for whom education is meant to open vast doors of opportunity (Froerer 2012).

Ideas of class were clearly tied in with notions of status, prestige, and social stratification, all of which were explored in the chapter alongside an analysis of the bodily dispositions associated with being “*ħamallu/a*” (vulgar and low) and “*tal-pepè*” (an upper class snob). Masculinity and toughness came to be highly valued in Marsa, particularly as a necessary response in dealing with potentially harsh objective conditions. These bodily dispositions came to be incorporated within a class habitus, in which according to Bourdieu, people in close proximity to one another were likely to assume shared experiences and a similar set of dispositions as one another. My analysis extended Bourdieu’s idea, in arguing that this very presumption of similarity on the basis of spatial proximity occasionally and partially gave rise to performative acts of abjection, as my informants attempted to create social demarcations of distinction which separated them from their abject, symbolically banishing them from the social space where they were unable to banish them physically.

As the next chapter illustrated, the class habitus which rendered rough masculinity and tough resilience as valuable forms of cultural capital at times came to clash with the dominant habitus as embodied within the institution of the school. Indeed, to some degree, success in school necessitated relinquishing some dispositions which children took as natural and taken-for-granted aspects of their social world. Whilst success in education was lauded as a worthwhile endeavour, the cultural capital and social mobility which at times accompanied it was considered to generate a set of dispositions which were unfavourable, and which implied a rejection of the dispositions generated through working class pride. Following Bourdieu, I argued that children whose habitus does not match that embodied within the school are at a disadvantage. Clashes occur in terms of the forms of cultural capital which are valued, and this leads to a conflict in schooling as illustrated within Chapter 4. Given that the aims of schooling are largely based on the social imaginings of the political community and nation-state, the corresponding notion of the ‘educated person’ thus encompasses the maximum accumulation of cultural capital as

valued by the state and as incorporated within the dominant habitus. Conversely, the cultural capital acquired by the children in Marsa, often done in a largely subconscious manner and prior to their entry into schooling, conflicted with that expected of them by the school and which the school aimed to expand upon. This ultimately led to tensions between the different kinds of cultural capital, and contributed significantly to understanding why some children came to be so disillusioned with the process of schooling. The hard roughness which some children had come to internalize due to their potentially harsh external conditions, along with the widely held community expectation that children hold extensive freedom and responsibility with regards to their own choices, was significantly at odds with the school's expectations that students submit to their authority and be attentive, polite and soft-spoken. In the case of children who did possess the required cultural capital, this was often put down to the natural skills and merits of the individual child, rather than being understood as dispositions which were socially situated and generated within very particular objective conditions. This capital thus afforded some children significant advantages in their schooling, whilst others who approached schooling without it often experienced their social disadvantages being transformed into educational disadvantages, which would later be manifested and institutionally legitimized in the absence of formal educational qualifications.

Chapter 5 expanded upon the previous chapter in considering not only how some children's dispositions (as embodied within their habitus) were valued less, but also how they vehemently opposed and went contrary to the idea of the 'educated person' as valued and legitimized by the State. In doing so, this chapter significantly extended its focus beyond the school, and illustrated the extent of the harsh conditions which surrounded some children, particularly in the form of the ever-present threat of '*inkwiet*' (worry/trouble), '*vendikazzjoni*' (revenge), and '*taħwid*' (being mixed up). These elements permeated the wider objective conditions of many children in Marsa and subsequently came to be internalized by them, generating a set of dispositions whereby the children developed proficient skills and strategies in acting upon and coping with their potentially harsh surroundings in turn. The chapter illustrated how the children learnt these skills in a socially situated manner, in negotiating and dealing with risks which formed part of the

very social fabric of their existence. The habitus generated within these conditions, constituted and modified according to an individual's interactions within the field (whilst possessing a constitutive power in itself), came to affect the children's aspirations for their own future by means of a "navigational cultural capacity" (Appadurai 2004). This cultural capacity gives meaning and substance towards present strategy and future-oriented action, in such a way that children come to be more likely to gravitate towards some life pathways and trajectories over others. These pathways are often those which their surrounding social world has already demonstrated as viable and realistic, and for which the children already possessed the necessary set of dispositions. Thus, being ill-prepared to tread pathways outside of those they already possess embodied knowledge of, their horizon of aspirations comes to be weaker and may often lead them to the same low status jobs and black market underclass activities they already know to be achievable. This inadvertently gives rise to an oppositional and counter-school culture which challenges the 'educated person' that the school is engaged in trying to produce. My thesis illustrated how through this process, an individual's position on the margins of society often came to be reproduced, whereby they were symbolically cast aside and devalued according to the dominant group's view of what constitutes a valuable person.

Part I of this thesis thus illustrated and argued that my informants in Marsa suffered abjection by virtue of their socially reproduced positions at the margins of society, a process which, whilst not determining future outcomes, was nonetheless powerful and compelling in detaining them within their symbolically devalued and socially marginal existence. The arguments put forward in Part I provide a crucial context for the chapters to follow. Part II of the thesis argued that the symbolic banishment of the abject is a performative act, a process which cannot fully be grasped unless it is contextualized within the history and circumstances of my informants' own abjection. As stated earlier in this chapter, in ethnographically illustrating this argument, my thesis demonstrated that cultural resistance may indeed be interjected within an understanding of the habitus, the latter holding a constitutive power with which children acted upon their social world. Willis criticized Bourdieu's notion of the habitus as a means of explaining class reproduction, stating that "with no sense of structure being a contested medium as well

as an outcome of social process, ‘reproduction’ becomes a mechanical inevitability” (1983: 116). Willis considers instances of resistance and struggle to be absent in Bourdieu’s theory, and strongly holds that they must be present in the collective self-formation of the working class. Conversely, within Part II, my ethnography illustrated that struggle and resistance of abjection were indeed present within an understanding of habitus, though they were framed by the wider objective conditions explored in Part I.

Chapter 6 explored the concept of the abject more explicitly, focusing upon the symbolic border which constitutes it, and which separates the socially undesirable abject from the self. It did so by considering ideas of dirt and pollution, broadly incorporating elements which challenged and offended against the dominant social order. It argued that dirt and pollution should not be considered in absolute terms, but must rather be conceptualized as a symbolic boundary which was flexibly appropriated for the purposes of creating social distinction and division. In this respect, *‘taħwid’* (understood as a ‘mixing up’ and departure from the social order) was often employed as a term denoting social and moral pollution, postulating a number of my informants who frequently engaged in it as the abject. Indeed, given that various forms of *‘taħwid’* were claimed to permeate the social landscape to some degree, I illustrated how this contributed towards an idea of Marsa as an ‘abject space’ (a term I applied within my own analysis in considering how Marsa was often symbolically discarded by outsiders as a socially inferior place). By appropriating the symbolic boundary which constituted dirt, and placing themselves on either side of the boundary accordingly, my informants constituted oppositional relationships with the Maltese upper classes and with the sub-Saharan African migrants in turn, by stressing their simultaneous abilities to either internalize or reject dirt accordingly. Within this process, my informants challenged the abjection conferred upon them, by shifting the symbolic border which delineated the abject from the non-abject in another direction, constructing the integrity of their own selves in opposition to their own abject in the process. In shifting abjection on to the migrants, it thus became possible for my informants to sustain that the abject was never really about them to begin with, and that the source of the surrounding social pollution lay elsewhere.

Chapter 7 continued to build upon the argument put forward in the preceding chapter, analysing how the abject was performatively constructed as that which it was already claimed to be. This was accomplished by means of the children's narratives, in which the children related stories of their encounters with the wicked and villainous 'black man' to one another. Through these symbolic narratives, the children performatively constructed and symbolically banished the abject, projecting their own sense of the abjection in their surrounding environment on to the migrants living in their midst. In doing so, they challenged their own socially marginal positions, through performative acts which I argue are to be conceptualized as moments of cultural resistance whereby the children implicitly challenged existing power relations and value systems which posited them as the abject. Although these acts were not undertaken in a vindictive or calculated manner (but rather involved a subconscious level of participation), the children's stories nonetheless contributed towards an overarching discourse which produced social effect. This chapter argued that it was crucial to view the children's narratives as symbolic, demanding a different level of truth recognition, and rather considering how the children's stories served as a medium for addressing predominant features within the children's social world. Nonetheless, these narratives produced the effect of relegating the migrants to a realm of abject 'otherness,' and creating social demarcations of distinction. In performatively constructing the abject, the children simultaneously constructed themselves as particular kinds of people who were opposed to the abject, embodying a set of dispositions which were valued within their own class habitus (such as being brave, tough, and cunning). The children thus constituted themselves as the antithesis of their abject, in projecting themselves as individuals who were socially desirable, valuable, and in no way abject.

The final chapter focused on the aspect of cultural performance, particularly in the form of the village feast, as another medium through which individuals constructed a vision of their own alterity and projected themselves as socially valuable beings. Whilst preceding chapters largely considered how my informants projected their own identity in

oppositional terms, according to that which they were *not*, Chapter 8 examined how my informants imagined themselves and their own social existence, performing a particular idea of the social imaginary to outsiders. By means of the village feast, Marsa was portrayed in a celebratory light, with efforts towards this being spurred on by rivalries known as '*piki*'. Such rivalries introduced an element of one-upmanship to the festivities, as individuals indirectly argued over which respective group had been more successful in the task of communicating an idea of Marsa as a distinctive and superior (and therefore unobject) space. Moreover, a degree of competition was implicitly regarded as central to the proceedings, in encouraging maximum effort for the cultural performance to be as grand and spectacular as possible. Through this collective celebration, Marsa was constituted as a socially meaningful place which elicited great pride from those who belonged to it. The festivities provided an opportunity for my informants to project their distinctiveness and superiority in relation to other places, the celebrations significantly raising the esteem of the villagers. The splendour and majesty of the respective churches in Marsa, along with the abundance and wealth displayed along the procession route, provided important counterclaims to ideas of Marsa as an object space. Through the cultural performance of the village feast, competing groups worked to champion a collective idea of the social imaginary, tacitly refuting any notion of Marsa as an object space, and asserting pride in the social space to which they belong.

Final Remarks

This thesis has demonstrated how performative acts of abjection may be framed by wider object conditions, giving rise to the symbolic banishment of a new object in order for pride and esteem to be restored and abjection to be contested. The social world which surrounded my informants was one which they greatly cherished and celebrated on the one hand, providing the context in which their socially meaningful relationships with one another were carried out. They possessed genuine pride at being unassuming, friendly, and down-to-earth people, surrounded by others who also shared these dispositions within the context of a collective class habitus. On the other hand, a history of being constituted as the socially undesirable object, coupled with immersion in a potentially

harsh environment which incorporated social and economic constraints, ensnared some informants within powerful conditions of poverty, whilst imbuing the surrounding social landscape with a palpable sense of despondency. The sad resignation with which some of my informants faced their future, and the limited opportunities they felt realistically able to navigate their lives towards, were largely put across by my informants as inevitable or misguided decisions which they had made themselves, and which they had little realistic chance of undoing.

The arrival of sub-Saharan African immigrants in Marsa saw the introduction of a number of individuals who similarly shared a sense of despondency, and who were widely referred to as a social burden throughout the country. The choice of the authorities to situate a group of migrants within an open centre in Marsa (amongst other places) was hardly seen as coincidental by the Maltese who treated Marsa as an abject space, the presence of the immigrants subsequently being included within the social anxieties which were expressed in the children's rhetoric (as well as that of adults). However, in sharing their narratives with one another, the children did more than simply express their social anxieties. Rather, they subconsciously conferred their own tacit sense of their surrounding abjection upon a new abject, constituting themselves as socially valuable beings in opposition to this new abject in the process. The symbolic banishment of the abject as a performative act allowed the children to undertake the following, as highlighted by Navaro-Yashin (2012: 151): "We will act as if the abject is only 'there' (or about 'that') and not elsewhere, everywhere, and about everything." In doing so, their discourse produced the effects which it named, further entrenching the migrants within their own socially abject positions and allowing the children to constitute themselves as distinct from their own abject. In shifting processes of abjection in another direction, the children absolved themselves from any involvement with the abject, indirectly granting legitimacy to the very processes of abjection which they have also fallen victim to at the hands of others. Future comparative research into how the socially and historically marginalized come to engage with processes of abjection is merited here, addressing a lacuna in anthropological literature which appears to have been little acknowledged, and towards which this thesis has tried to make an original contribution.

Within symbolic processes of abjection, State authorities were in some ways absolved of their own responsibilities in alleviating the bleak conditions in which some of my informants found themselves. These conditions were in turn claimed to originate from the real abject, who were widely deemed a socially undesirable and heavy burden. In this respect, Stallybrass and White's (1986: 53) concept of "displaced abjection" is clearly illustrated within my ethnography, as the socially marginalized themselves come to turn against those who are socially constructed as 'lower' to them, rather than the dominant group in authority. In the midst of this process, there is a failure to address an overarching symbolic classification system which unequally values people, and which in many respects holds the victims of poverty responsible for their own failures. The compelling reproduction forces and life trajectories which keep individuals mired in the circumstances of their own abjection often remain unaddressed, and are thus left to go on uninterrupted. With limited means with which to lift themselves out of the conditions of their own poverty and physically escape the circumstances of their own abjection, they struggle and provide resistance towards their abjection through the means which are available to them – these include shifting abjection elsewhere, and establishing pride and esteem through a unique vision of their own alterity whereby they constitute themselves as socially valuable individuals.

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