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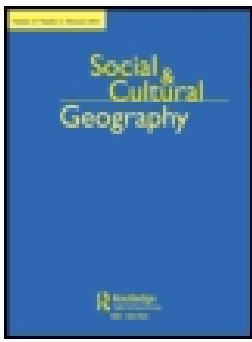
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Black spaces: African diaspora in Italy

by Heather Merrill, London, Routledge, 2018, 209 pp., \$156 (cloth), ISBN: 9781138043251; \$35.96 (paperback), ISBN: 9781138549371; \$29.22 (ebook), ISBN 9781351000758

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BOOK REVIEW

Black spaces: African diaspora in Italy, by Heather Merrill, London, Routledge, 2018, 209 pp., \$156 (cloth), ISBN: 9781138043251; \$35.96 (paperback), ISBN: 9781138549371; \$29.22 (ebook), ISBN 9781351000758

Black Spaces: African Diaspora in Italy makes visible what is invisible, that is, how space becomes racialized in the practice of everyday life in contemporary Italy. Heather Merrill's exploration of Black/black spaces departs from the vital question: how does one live as Black in an anti-black world?

Italy in the twenty-first century has struggled to come to terms with its transformation into a multicultural and multiracial society, in no area more so than race. Investigating epidermal racialization in Italy is new scholarly territory, and Merrill's book provides a critical guide for the emerging body of scholarship on Black Europe and the Black Mediterranean.

While there has been much written on the relationship between Italians and race, much of it has focused on early-twentieth century ideas of an 'Italian race' formulated by criminal anthropologists and fascists alike, as well as Italians being classified as not entirely 'white' upon arrival as emigrants in host countries. On the latter, DiAngelo (2018, p. 18) put it best, 'Although their internal identity may be different, if they "pass" as white, they will still have a white experience externally'. These experiences are not the same as those of Black people having to navigate a society predicated upon white supremacy, and with it, the violent oppression and erasure of Black personhood and identity – an essential point that Merrill makes crystal clear in *Black Spaces*.

One of the book's greatest strengths is how it brings to bear the theoretical vocabulary and frameworks on race developed in African American Studies and Black Studies in the Anglo-American context onto the current practices of racism in Italy. It models a reflexive and activist scholarship that positions social justice as both its fundamental premise as well as its ultimate aim. It expertly builds on Merrill's previous research on inter-ethnic alliances among migrant women in Turin and confirms her sustained, sensitive commitment to illuminating, and thus challenging, structural racism in Italy.

Central to this analysis is the notion of black/Black spaces. Black spaces, with the lowercase 'b', are invisible spaces (yet still constitutive to the modern West) where anti-black violence, racism, microaggression, and systemic social erasure against Black people occur. Black spaces, with the capital 'B', are generative spaces, where Black lived experiences are affirmed and where meaning is often made by those who identify as Black in the face of anti-blackness. Merrill's book traces a course through representative black and Black spaces in Italy, from bus stops to a former Olympic housing complex, showing how these relational spaces shape ways of knowing and being in the world.

Methodologically, *Black Spaces* anchors the aforementioned critical social theory on race with fieldwork in two northern Italian regions: Piedmont and Reggio Emilia. Racism is perhaps at its most transparently virulent in northern Italy, largely owing to the long-felt presence of the Lega Nord (Northern League), a political party of far-right populism, that, in the words of one of Merrill's informants, 'made people hate black people' (p. 86). Focusing on northern Italy is a productive start, and future studies could build on Merrill's research by exploring the lived experiences of people of African descent in Italy's southern regions where distinct constellations of criminality and internal colonization have informed historico-racial schema. Another


fruitful direction of research toward which Merrill gestures includes expanding the analysis of epidermal racism (p. 57) to include the violence and discrimination sustained by those who are also marked as Other in Italy; for instance, Roma, Sinti, and people of the Asian diaspora. In addition, the parallels that Merrill touches on between the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the Mediterranean crossing today (p. 158) beg for further contrapuntal analysis.

Black Spaces consists of an introduction, five chapters, and a conclusion. The introduction and first two chapters can be read as a triad, in which the former sketches out the broad historical and theoretical grounds of the book, and the latter two go into greater depth, respectively, on the historical relationship between Africa and Italy and the theorization of Black/black spaces.

The conclusion calls for the continued study of anti-black racism and blackness (p. 173) so that new geographical knowledges, philosophies, and social realities can together create a nonhierarchical sense of belonging for all people in all spaces.

Reference

DiAngelo, R. (2018). *White fragility: Why it's so hard for White people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.

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