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Author

Hawthorne, Camilla

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Toward a relational theorization of racisms

Camilla Hawthorne

SYMPOSIUM: ANN MORNING AND MARCELLO MANERI'S AN UGLY WORD

Abstract

As the title of Ann Morning and Marcello Maneri's new book implies, in Italy razza *is commonly regarded as an "ugly word". And while much has certainly shifted in the last decade – particularly in the realms of scholarship and cultural politics, and largely thanks to the steadfast efforts of Black Italian scholars, activists and culture workers – everyday white Italians still commonly express reservation about explicit discussions of race, even in the midst of an undeniable resurgence of racial nationalism and racist violence across Italy. As such, Morning and Maneri's book makes a much-needed intervention into the ongoing dilemma of "race-talk" in the Italian context.*

This is a story I've told elsewhere, but it is worth repeating here. When I was a graduate student, and just beginning to embark on my research about the experiences and political mobilizations of young Black Italians, I had an informational meeting with a postdoctoral scholar at a prestigious Italian university. During our conversation, which took place wholly in Italian, I mentioned that I was interested in studying the politics of racism, race and Blackness in Italy for my dissertation project – and I used the Italian word for race, *razza*. Upon hearing that word, the postdoc's expression of curiosity suddenly hardened, and she scolded me that *razza* was not a word that people used in Italy; it was reminiscent of fascism, and really, she said, ethnicity (*etnia*) was a more accurate way to describe human groupings. This would not be the last time I encountered such suspicion and hostility toward my research – but, at the time, I made the error of interpreting her words as an indictment of my own ignorance rather than a valuable piece of ethnographic data about the very politics of racism and race I had sought to study.

When I was starting the research that would eventually become my 2022 monograph Contesting Race and Citizenship, the field of Italian race-critical studies was still in its infancy. Those few scholars who bucked the status quo by insisting on the analytical centrality of "race" as a modality through which social, economic, and political life is organized in Italy were often constrained to use the English word "race" (in scare quotes) in their Italian-language research publications. This was precisely because, as the title of Ann Morning and Marcello Maneri's book implies, *razza* was still commonly regarded as an "ugly word". And while much has certainly shifted in the intervening ten years – particularly in the realms of scholarship and cultural politics, and largely thanks to the steadfast efforts of Black Italian scholars, activists and culture workers – everyday white Italians continue to express reservation about explicit discussions of race, even in the midst of an undeniable resurgence of racial nationalism and racist violence across Italy.

Ann Morning and Marcello Maneri's new book, An Ugly Word, makes a much-needed intervention into the ongoing dilemma of "race-talk" in the Italian context. On the one hand, scholars and activists alike need to acknowledge what is unique – in other words, what is geographically and historically situated – about racism in Italy. On the other hand, it is equally important to avoid the trap of Italian exceptionalism, wherein racism is understood to be a problem affecting other countries but not Italy (Morning and Maneri 2022, 5) – perhaps, it was theorized, because Italy was a supposedly "weak" or "ineffectual" colonial power, or because it was poorer than its northern Euro- pean counterparts, or because it was a country of immigration for its first century as a nation-state, or because racial categories were more fluid in the Mediterranean region. Racism in Italy is popularly understood as operating either at the banal level of prejudice or *chiusura* (close-mindedness) or at the extreme scale of the Holocaust, slavery, and Jim Crow or apartheid-style segregation. It is temporally bounded to World War II, geographically externalized to countries such as Germany, South Africa and the United States, or explained away as the "natural" reaction of white Italians to the arrival of large numbers of non-EU migrants beginning in the 1980s and 1990s (Morning and Maneri 2022, 95).

As Black radical and postcolonial theorists have long argued, the concept of race itself emerged from within Europe, and the Holocaust represented the re-internalization of strategies that had previously been applied to colonized and enslaved subjects. Yet after World War II, scholars of Black Europe argue, European nation-states actively silenced explicit discussions of race (Gold-berg 2006; Lentin 2004). In the wake of the horrific violence of fascist eugenics, and in line with the guidance of the midcentury UNESCO Statements on Race, "race" was increasingly approached as a dangerous concept that, when applied to the study of human society and human difference, could once again open up the doors to genocide. The problem with this strategy, however, was that racism, as that which is ontologically before and produces the supposed objective reality of "race" in the world, was left entirely untouched (Visweswaran 2010). By simply removing the word "race" from popular and political lexica without addressing its underlying conditions of production (Visweswaran 2010) – Morning and Maneri summarize this reasoning as, "To not be racist, all you have to do is never say the word 'race'" (2022, 87) – other categories and markers of difference (culture, religion, national origin, etc.) simply came to perform the work of race in every- day discursive practice.

The fields of Black, race-critical, and postcolonial studies in Europe have developed sophisticated and finely-grained tools for identifying the repro- duction of racisms in the post-World War II period, racisms that did not necessarily rest on claims of biological difference but nonetheless employed essentializing and hierarchical logics. This literature employs concepts such as cultural racism (Fanon 1964), new racisms (Barker 1981; Sivanandan 1989), neo-racism (Balibar and Wallerstein 1991), differential racism (Taguieff 1988) and cultural fundamentalism (Stolcke 1995) to argue that race did not disappear from Europe after World War II and the Holocaust. Rather, it merely "evaporated" (Goldberg 2006, 334) and became a ghostly, invisible presence (Morning and Maneri 2022, 31) that continued to structure everyday life. In the evocative words of Italian postcolonial studies scholar Caterina Romeo, "The presence of race, like the presence of steam, saturates the air, rendering it heavy, unbreathable" (2012, 222).

An Ugly Word expands on this well-known story, but also complicates it in important ways. As Morning and Maneri point out, in practice "cultural racism" is often posited as the binary

opposite of "biological racism". Additionally, "cultural" and "biological" racisms are mapped geo-historically – biological racism is the domain of North America; cultural racism is the domain of Europe. Biological racism is crude and archaic; cultural racism is a more nuanced and "evolved" form of racism. But this is a vast oversimplification, one that obfuscates the complexity of racisms in both the United States and Europe. After all, as Stuart Hall (2000, 223) reminds us, culture and biology are not polar opposites but rather are "racism's two registers" (see also De la Cadena 2005). Indeed, Morning and Maneri find, through inter- views with students in Italy and the United States, that although the ways people in these countries speak about race may differ facially, they nonetheless share very similar underlying meanings (Morning and Maneri 2022, 18- 19).[1] And indeed, in some cases, Italian respondents were more likely to link race to biology, while their American counterparts emphasized culture (Morning and Maneri 2022, 110–11). This was particularly evident in Chapter 4 of An Ugly Word. Here, Morning and Maneri demonstrate that young Italians still employ notions of biological difference to explain the sports performance of Black people, even when they had previously asserted the primacy of culture rather than biology for understanding human difference (2002, 145). By pointing to the commonalities in understandings of race across their research sites, Morning and Maneri's findings challenge the idea that a preoccupation with race is a distinctly American phenomenon (2002, 87–8), or alternatively, that racism is more severe in the United States compared to Italy.

Key here is Morning and Maneri's insistence on looking at distinct framings of racism rather than at "racism" in general (2022, 6), heeding Stuart Hall's famous call in "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity" for scholars to "operate at a more concrete, historicized level of abstraction (i.e., not racism in general but racisms)" (1986, 435). Methodologically, this allows Morning and Maneri to understand the distinct ways racism may "take place" (Lipsitz 2011) from the ground up, rather than attempting to measure and evaluate Italian racial discourse against an abstracted, ideal type that in practice is usually represented by the United States.

In complicating our understanding of racisms, An Ugly Word also intervenes into a set of broader debates about the politics of anti-racism in Europe. As I noted earlier, "race" today is framed as a problem that is largely external to Europe, and there is little readily-available language for grappling with the reproductions of racism and race in the post-World War II period. In practice, this means that no European countries besides the UK and Ireland collect race-based data on national censuses (despite the ongoing mobilizations of people of color, who argue that this data would lend greater authority to their charges of structural racism – see Morning and Maneri 2022, 33), and others have removed or are debating the removal of the word "race" from their national constitutions (Morning and Maneri 2022, 1–3). This is particularly ironic in Italy, where the move to have razza removed from the Italian constitution is spearheaded by the physical anthropologists and geneticists of the Italian Institute of Anthropology, a research institute founded by Mediterraneanist racial theorist Giuseppe Sergi in the nineteenth century and which continues to research Italian ethnic, linguistic, and genetic diversity.[2]

Against this backdrop, Morning and Maneri's work shows the importance of scholarly research focused on tracking racism, rather than attempting to stabilize the definition of race. After all, the way that culture has come to perform the work of biology in contemporary racist discourse in

Italy shows that "race" as a floating signifier (Hall 1997) is constantly shifting, and any attempt to approach race as an objective social fact will inevitably fail to account for Islamophobia, anti-Roma violence, or even the fact that at some moments Eastern Europeans have been treated with greater hostility than Africans in Italy (Morning and Maneri 2022, 56, 73). Indeed, as I have written elsewhere, "race can be...understood as a power-laden, floating signifier that is made meaningful through religion, culture, geography, mobility, bodily practice, and social associations for the purpose of calcifying difference and arranging groups into hierarchies" (Hawthorne 2022, 43).

The need for more complicated understandings of racism and race is especially urgent in this moment when it at times feels as though the fine- tooth combs developed for studying the subtleties of post-World War II racisms in Europe (in all of their culturalist, colorblind, liberal varieties) are beginning to outlive their previous analytical usefulness. How do we make sense of a resurgence of explicit, violent racist rhetoric in Italy – racism that often deploys the biocentric, biopolitical language of the population, reproduction, and ethnic replacement? It is no longer enough to simply assert that race is a social construction; we must also attempt to understand how the construction of "race" shifts, or even how the well-documented postwar racial evaporations created the conditions of possibility for our current fascist resurgence. In that sense, Morning and Maneri's arguments about the differences between antibiological and constructivist arguments about race are deeply politically consequential (2022, 102, 172).

The problem of how to speak of race and racism in Europe also has direct implications for the lives of people of color in Europe, including postcolonial immigrants and their European-born children, because the same logic that externalizes racism as a problem outside of Europe also brackets "difference" itself as external to Europe. Barnor Hesse and S. Sayyid (2008) explain this as the legacy of a colonial sleight-of-hand trick that effectively demarcated the metropole as a space of whiteness and liberal humanism, and the colonies as spaces of Otherness and racist dehumanization. This is why, for instance, Morning and Maneri note a tendency among white Italian youth to refer to Black Italians as *afroamericani* (2022, 96) – the existence of Italians who are also Black is unthinkable, despite the deep connections suturing Europe and Africa. The irony, of course, is that just as white Italians cannot imagine the possibility of Black Italianness, they also cannot conjure a coherent picture of Italianness itself. Morning and Maneri's findings resonate with my research on the racial politics of citizenship in Italy, where the category of italianità – far from being a stable referent – is a site of contestation that is actively reproduced, reworked, and remade through citizenship law and efforts to reform it (Hawthorne 2022; see also Morning and Maneri 2022, 60-61). We see this, for instance, in the equivocal responses from Morning and Maneri's Italian interview subjects when asked what it would take for someone to become Italian, or to fully integrate into Italianness. Integration into what, exactly?

An important sign of pathbreaking scholarship is that, rather than attempting to foreclose future inquiry, it invites additional questions and generates possibilities for new avenues of study. And so, to conclude, I would like to outline two areas where I see opportunities for further inquiry. First, Morning and Maneri's comparative study of the understandings of race in Italy and the United States opens up an avenue for a relational analysis of "race." According to geographer Gillian Hart, relational comparison, instead of "comparing pre-existing objects, events, places, or identities," focuses instead on "how they are constituted in relation to one another through

power-laden practices in the multiple, interconnected arenas of everyday life" (Hart 2006, 996). This would mean taking up the question of what it means to engage with Italy and the broader Black Mediterranean not just as the site of bounded comparison with the United States and the Black Atlantic, but also as a starting point for a relational theorization of global racisms that focuses on the mutual constitution of understandings of race and racism across these different sites.

Italy does not exist in a vacuum – since the unification of Italy at the end of the nineteenth century, the Italian nation-state has been part of the transnational circulation of ideas about race through, for instance, scientific knowledge exchanges (such as international eugenics conferences), practices of colonialism, and diasporic networks. The works of criminologist and racial theorist Cesare Lombroso and his students about the racial distinctions between southern and northern Italians, for instance, influenced U.S. laws that restricted immigration from southern European countries and shaped the racialization of Italians in the United States (on the racial hierarchization of southern Italy and the Mediterranean, see Cazzato 2017; D'Agostino 2002; Guglielmo and Salerno 2012). Today, both racial nationalist discourse (for instance, the far-right language of ethnic replacement) as well as anti-racist resistance (such as the abolitionist language of the Black Lives Matter movement) travel back and forth across the Atlantic. Indeed, it is worth reflecting on the fact that the U.S. Civil War and Reconstruction and the Risorgimento project of Italian national unification took place simultaneously. During this time, both the United States and Italy were embroiled in contestations over "the relationship between an agricultural South and industrial North, the place of Blackness within the nation, and the potential citizenship rights of long-subjugated, racialized, and economically exploited groups" (Hawthorne 2022, 34). Debates about Italianness unfolded in relation to struggles over race and citizenship in the United States, with supporters of Italian unification comparing the subjugation of Italians to the plight of Black Americans (Dal Lago 2013; Moe 2002; Wong 2006).

Morning and Maneri's work signals the possibility of this sort of relational comparison when they note that ideas about racial difference in the United States and Western Europe share historic roots: "How could it be otherwise when the nascent United States was a cultural heir to – and eager participant in – eighteenth century European intellectuals' construction of a racial hierarchy, not to mention a major site for the European imperial project of white supremacy?" (2022, 11). The connections between the United States and Italy also open up important questions about the politics of translation. In my work, drawing on Brent Hayes Edwards (2009), I approach translation both through the more literal lens of linguistic translation, and more broadly as a way to think about the translation of political visions, rhetorical tactics, and social movements across different historical and geographic con- texts. Language, after all, emerges from concrete histories and experiences and in turn marks our shared political horizons. For the field of comparative race studies, then, the question of how certain terms and concepts travel – and, as such, the limits of translation – can be an important window into the ways interconnected histories of racism settle in particular contexts. For instance, while the term "people of color" in the United States can signal political solidarity among racially oppressed groups in North America, in Italy the equivalent *di colore* is a race-neutral euphemism for Black and, as such, has been largely rejected by Black Italian activists. Relatedly, the acronyms BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) in North America and BAME (Black, Asian and Minority

Ethnic) in the UK are tied to specific geographic histories of colonialism and racialized dispossession.

Second, I am encouraged by Morning and Maneri's efforts to denaturalize race by exploring the various meanings respondents attach to decent-based difference (2022, 7). Rather than starting from the assumption that race objectively signals biological or cultural difference, they consider the ways conceptualizations of psychology, society, gender and class are mobilized to "make meaningful" the category of race as a way of organizing and classifying people (Morning and Maneri 2022, 156–161). Building on these insights, I would be interested in what else we might learn if the floating signifier of "race" were further delinked from a necessary correspondence to descent. Such a move could open room for research into the ways ideas of geography, spatial differentiation, bodily habitus and social relations (which were also central to the history of the concept of race at various moments) are marshalled in everyday understandings of human difference and the construction of racial hierarchies. In our global moment of renewed, explicitly racist and xenophobic nationalisms, scholars must continue developing and refining analytics for tracking the insidious reproduction and rearrangements of race and racism.

Notes

1. Here, it should be noted that Morning and Maneri explicitly draw on Paola Tabet's La Pelle Giusta (1997), a groundbreaking work in the field of Italian race-critical studies that drew on interviews with young schoolchildren to study the reproduction of racist attitudes in Italian society (see Morning and Maneri 2022, 26). This text is woefully under-cited in the growing literature on Italian racism, and it was wonderful to see it featured so prominently in An Ugly Word.
2. The word "race" appears in the first section of Article 3 of the Italian constitution: "All citizens have equal social dignity and are equal before the law, without distinction of sex, race, language, religion, political opinion, personal and social conditions" (see Milcia and Giuliani 2016).

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