Transition

In Search of Black Italia

notes on race, belonging, and activism in the black Mediterranean

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All had to acknowledge that try as they may the children had become something many of them would never be, for better or worse, new Italians. An emergent Black Italia. That is, the Italian on the inside has become one of the most remarkable characteristics of a new generation living between two souls.

—Donald Martin Carter on Senegalese families in Turin, Italy, "Blackness over Europe: Meditations on Culture and Belonging"

When you live in a country and you get your education there, it's normal to feel a part of that country. If anyone asked me, "What are you?" I would feel like answering that I'm at least half, if not more, Italian.

—Dorkas (born in Italy to Sierra Leonean parents), quoted in the documentary *18 Ius Soli*

What am I? Who am I? I am black and Italian. But I am also Somali and black. So am I Afro-Italian? Italo-African? At the end of the day, I am just my story.

—Igiaba Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono*

Changes will occur that we cannot even begin to imagine, and the next generation will be both utterly familiar and wholly alien to their parents.

—Walidah Imarisha, *Octavia's Brood*

On July 5, 2016, a 36-year-old Nigerian asylum seeker named Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi was beaten to death by Amedeo Mancini, a 39-year-old Italian soccer *ultra* associated with a local chapter of the neo-fascist CasaPound Italy political movement. Emmanuel and his wife Chinyery had led the violence wreaked by the Boko Haram insurgency in Nigeria after losing their parents and a two-year-old daughter when their village church was set on ire. They undertook the dangerous journey through Libya and across the Mediterranean on a smuggler's boat, during which Chinyery suffered a miscarriage, finally arriving in Palermo. The harrowing story of Emmanuel and Chinyery is far from an isolated case, however. UNHCR estimates that in 2016, over 37,000 Nigerians arrived to Italy via the Mediterranean. That year, Nigerians made up approximately 21% of sea arrivals, followed by Eritreans at 11%.

Emmanuel and Chinyery had been living at the bishop's seminary in a small Italian seaside town, Fermo since the previous September, and were married in January. Six months later on the afternoon of July 5, the couple was going for a walk when two men began shouting insults at them. At one point, one of the men grabbed Chinyery and called her "*una scimmia africana* [an African monkey]." When Emmanuel intervened to defend his wife from this assault, Mancini attacked him with a street sign ripped out of the ground nearby. Emmanuel fell into an irreversible coma from the beating, and died the following day.

The murder of Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi rapidly, albeit fleetingly, brought together two groups in Italy who were normally not in direct dialogue, at least not at the level of formal political activism—that is, newly-arrived migrants and refugees from sub-Saharan Africa on the one hand, and the Italian-born or raised children of African immigrants on the other. This is because the brutal attack made shockingly apparent the precariousness of what Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) famously called the "fact of blackness" or "the lived experience of the black man" in Italy which, in many ways, transcends immigration and citizenship status—arguably, the primary ways in which questions of "difference" are framed institutionally in Italy.

And indeed, the outpouring of horror, grief, and anger that was expressed in the wake of Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi's murder over private text message exchanges and phone calls, and across public-facing social media postings and calls to action, always condensed to a single, nightmarish point: *This could have been any one of us*. Merely for committing the violation of being black in public, Nnamdi's name had been added to the ever-growing roll call of black victims of racist violence in Italy— one that stretches from Jerry Masslo (the South African political asylee murdered near Naples in 1989), to Abdul "Abba" Guibre (the 19-year-old Burkinabe who grew up in Italy and was beaten to death in Milan in 2008), to Samb Modou and Diop Mor (the two Senegalese migrants murdered in Florence in 2011 by another member of the CasaPound). This, in the land of *Italiani, brava gente* [good Italian people]: the perpetrators of a supposedly more "gentle" and "mild" form of colonialism in Africa, the "underdogs" of Europe who, thanks to their own national experience of large-scale emigration and history of being racialized as "Mediterranean," had less of an innate capacity for racism. Or so the story goes . . .

As anti-racism protests erupted in cities across Italy that hot and sticky summer, from Fermo to Milan to Rome, demonstrations under the banner of #BlackLivesMatter were also mushrooming across the United States and in European cities such as London, Paris, and Amsterdam in response to the state-sanctioned murders of black men and women at the hands of police officers.

Many young black Italians earnestly followed these global struggles against anti-black violence from the international window afforded to them by Facebook, noting to me the ways in which their struggles against everyday and institutional forms of racism in Italy seemed to be so clearly intertwined with the mobilizations of their sisters and brothers in other countries. The issues that interested activists in Italy may not have precisely mirrored the main violations that were mobilizing protesters in other corners of the black diaspora (instead of—or perhaps in addition to—police brutality, there are restrictive citizenship laws and the deaths of black migrants in the Mediterranean due to the violence of Fortress Europe's border regimes). Still, my friends and interlocutors in Italy expressed a shared sense of their very blackness being under siege in the context of both micro-level interactions and large-scale bureaucratic encounters.

In Milan, an anti-racism and anti-fascism protest was organized less than a week after Nnamdi's death with the help of the youth organization *Il comitato per non dimenticare Abba e per fermare il razzismo* [The Committee to Remember Abba and Stop Racism]. This group formed by a multiracial collective of young people in 2008 in response to the racially motivated murder of Abdul Guibre, still organizes language workshops and public events in Milan about the relationship between racism, xenophobia, militarism, border fortification, and capitalism. The Milan-based DJ Marvely Goma Perseverance expressed the continuities (and disjunctures) stretching from Abdul Guibre to Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi in a wrenching open letter addressed to the deceased Abba, published on July 9 in the Italian web magazine *GRIOT*:

> A lifetime spent with a finger pointed at us, condemned to excel so that we don't fall into the category of the "usual immigrants" or the "usual blacks," as if we had chosen to be born "black," as though we had chosen that label—which, among other things, I never understood… Goodbye Abba, I miss you so much and here nothing has changed. The other day they beat and killed Emmanuel. I didn't know him but unlike you, who was born Italian, he had a different story that was similar to that of our parents, a refugee in search of Christian charity and calm where he could nurture his own hopes.

On the day of the protest organized by the *Comitato* in Milan, I was walking with my friend Evelyne, who was that day clad in her trademark red dashiki and a fresh twist-out, as we headed to make handmade posters near the iconic Piazza Duomo. Evelyne, a plucky 29-year-old Italian-Ghanaian woman who grew up in nearby Brianza, is widely known in Italy as the creator of the first Italian-language Facebook page and blog addressing the care of natural Afro-textured hair, *Nappytalia*. Evelyne has, in the last two-and-a-half years, rocketed to mini stardom in Italy—she has been invited to give TEDx talks and speak at universities, she has won numerous entrepreneurship awards both nationally and internationally, and she is often recognized on the street as "*la ragazza di* Nappytalia [the girl from *Nappytalia*]."

As Evelyne and I commiserated about the social and logistic challenges of organizing political demonstrations in Italy, she proceeded to whip out her smartphone, open up the Facebook application, and proudly swipe through photos of a #BlackLivesMatter march that had taken place not long ago in London. We took refuge from the beating sun in the shade of a portico near an empty café, huddled over her phone near a teetering stack of chairs, while she explained to me that the black-clad activists posing solemnly with raised fists in the photos before us were

actually black Italians living, working, and studying in London. Several had met each other for the first time through their involvement in the U.K. demonstration.

Evelyne, like so many other young black Italians born or raised in Italy, had found some inspiration in the model of autonomous black political action represented by #BlackLivesMatter. She saw it as an incitement to build similar types of anti-racist movements in Italy, even if the specific contours of anti-blackness in Italy differed from the primary issues centered by activists in the United States and in the emerging U.K.-based offshoot of the #BlackLivesMatter movement. But for other black Italians, the connection between these struggles was far less self-evident. A prominent Ugandan-Sudanese blogger based in Milan, who over the last year has gained a substantial online following for her smart social commentary, slickly produced anti-racism videos, and curation of beauty tutorials for black women, posted an incitement to Facebook that brought to a head the unspoken tensions within a new generation that has only very recently (and very tentatively) begun to collectively refer to itself as *Afro*-or *black Italian*:

> Guys, we are not in America and we are not Americans #chill you're more concerned, shouting, and crying for the injustices suffered by African Americans than for things that are happening in the country where you live, your country of origin, and many other places where injustice and discrimination run rampant . . . #blacklivesmatter here blacklivesmatter there.

A heated debate quickly ensued under the blogger's aforementioned, indignant message, one I heard directly referenced in passionate conversation over countless aperitifs and coffees in the subsequent weeks. But on that sleepless summer night, I was affixed to my laptop screen as I tried desperately to piece together news reports of racist violence and black resistance from Minnesota, Louisiana, London, Amsterdam, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, and Fermo.

And with each new and increasingly irate addition to the discussion about black Italians and their connection to #BlackLivesMatter, my browser emitted an incongruously cheery two-tone notification alert. *BA-BING!* "I am half American, so I feel the injustices and hypocrisies of both countries," replied one woman from Reggio Emilia, the daughter of an African American father and an Italian mother. *BA-BING!* "Afro-Italians simply need to stop emulating African Americans…Afro-Italians can create something better, which hopefully won't be based on skin color and the stupid 'one-drop' rule," retorted another commenter. *BA-BING!* "This is why I don't agree with the use of the term 'Afro-Italian,'" responded an Italian-Afro-Brazilian student activist from Rome. "It refers to African Americans, but here in Italy and in Europe . . . there is no 'Afro' in common," she continued, arguing that Afrodescendants in Europe tend to identify with their or their parents' country of origin. A Ghanaian-Italian medical student from Verona with a keen interest in the black diaspora attempted to mediate between the various positions that had been expressed earlier: "It is true, yes, that we and black Americans swim in different waters. Just as it's true that we are able to take our first steps thanks to them. *They are different waters, but at the end of the day we are all drowning in the same sea.*"

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This debate about the relationship between black Italians and African Americans, while a small snapshot in time, actually encapsulates several fundamental questions about racial politics and blackness in contemporary Italy. Through new media, literature, and other forms of cultural production, a growing number of black Italians—and by this term I am referring to the children of African immigrants who were born or raised in Italy, as well as the children of mixed race unions—have in the last ive years begun to explore the possibilities of a new kind of hyphenated identity. This includes novels about the relationship between Italian colonial history and contemporary forms of racism, independent documentaries about the relationship between Eritrean and Italian histories, and blogs and e-commerce sites geared toward adherents of the black natural hair movement. As a matter of fact, black expressive cultures currently enjoy a rather prominent position among youth of color activism in Italy more broadly.

As the Facebook debate sketched earlier demonstrates, the Internet—and Facebook in particular—has become a haven for emerging conversations (and arguments) among a spatially dispersed generation of black Italians. Italy does not have *banlieue*-style peri-urban segregation to the same scale as countries such as France, which means that immigrants and their children are comparatively scattered throughout many neighborhoods, cities, and regions of Italy. Through an ever-growing number of Facebook pages, YouTube channels, and blogs, however, young black Italians have been able to connect, achieve new levels of visibility, and create relatively autonomous spaces for discussion, political organizing, and cultural production. In many cases, these platforms exist outside the normal channels favored by the increasingly moribund Italian Left (i.e., political parties, national labor unions, social associations, and community centers), which are frequently derided as patronizing and prone to tokenistic engagements with communities of color and other marginalized groups.

This hesitant transition toward a collective sense of black identity marks a notable shift away from the category of *immigrant*. Heather Merrill and Donald Carter, in their essay "Inside and Outside Political Culture: Diasporic Politics in Turin" (2002), note that during the early years of migrant settlement in Italy in the 1980s and 1990s, newcomers from across Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia banded together in interethnic activist and labor organizations. For these groups, *immigrant* as a form of collective identity performed important political, coalitional work. Increasingly, however, black youth in Italy are rejecting the intergenerational imposition of the category *immigrant* (as seen, for instance, in the ubiquitous label *second-generation immigrants*). Instead, they are moving toward new forms of self-identification that can capture the experience of racialization that stems from being born or raised in Italy. This shared condition is very much akin to what W. E. B. Du Bois called *double consciousness*, or what Fanon alternately described as dealing with "two systems of reference." The Italian-Nigerian rapper Tommy Kuti (who, like the famous black Italian footballer Mario "Super Mario" Balotelli, grew up in the northern Italian province of Brescia) described this experience in his 2017 single "#Afroitaliano": "I'm too African to be just Italian, and too Italian to be just African. [I'm] *Afroitaliano*, because the world has changed."

Over the course of my interviews with black Italians across Italy about their lives and preferred forms of self-identification, I was regularly told some version of the following after a moment of surprise followed by careful relection: "You know, I didn't even begin to *think* of the word 'Afro-Italian' until three, maybe two years ago." This is conirmed in a 2002 paper by Jacqueline

Andall, "Second Generation Attitude? African-Italians in Milan," one of the earlier studies focusing on the children of African immigrants in Italy. Andall observed that the young people she interviewed saw blackness and Italianness as mutually exclusive categories. Indeed, many of her interlocutors found it easier to identify with a general sense of Europeanness, African identity, or a wider black diasporic consciousness than with Italianness specifically. Yet she also predicted that the up-and-coming "younger second generation" of African Italians might not necessarily dismiss the possibility of being both black and Italian as many of the older, "involuntary pioneers" had done previously. Writing over ten years ago, Andall's hunch was absolutely correct. The children of African immigrants today are increasingly organizing themselves under the collective terms *Afro-* or *black Italian* (though, as the Facebook debate at the beginning of this essay showed, these labels are certainly not immune from contestation).

Now, changing demographics certainly play a part in this story: Italy became a locus of immigration in the 1980s and 1990s, so the children of the immigrants who arrived during those decades and settled primarily in the industrial cities of northern Italy and around Rome are now well into their twenties and even their thirties. In other words, they have lived through humiliating episodes of discrimination at the hands of their high school teachers; they have struggled, and often failed, to apply for Italian citizenship on their eighteenth birthdays (Italian citizenship is conferred through *jus sanguinis*, so the children of immigrants born on Italian soil are not automatically granted Italian citizenship at birth); they have dealt with racism when applying for jobs or renting apartments; and they are old enough to vividly remember the racist and misogynistic attacks in 2013 against Italy's first black cabinet member, former Minister of Integration Cécile Kashetu Kyenge.

Many of my friends in Italy have related to me some iteration of a story in which they grew up understanding themselves as Italian, but then experienced an episode during their teens that brought into sharp relief the reality that that this recognition did not run in both directions. One of the founders of the blog *Afroitalian Souls* told me the following one overcast afternoon in Milan, as we sipped coffees in the trendy canal neighborhood of Navigli:

> For me, I grew up seeing myself only as Italian. I knew that I was African, but I was Italian, period. Because the few Africans I saw outside of my family were not regarded well, so I grew up saying, "I am Italian, you are African; we are not the same." Then I went to Uganda, I fell in love with my country, and I thought, wow, I didn't realize that I was always missing something! . . . When I came back here, I thought to myself, geez, I am also Italian! Then when I had trouble getting Italian citizenship, I said, "Well who cares about those Italians, I am also African." And so I decided from that day, I was only African. I went from one extreme to another. Because I thought to myself, I was born and raised here. Why don't they consider me to be Italian? Why do I have to go through this whole hassle with citizenship? . . . Now, however, I'm finding a balance. The fact that Italians don't accept me doesn't mean that I have to stop seeing myself as Italian.

While most children of immigrants in Italy experience this same lack of recognition to some extent, it is unmistakably more pronounced and traumatic for black Italians. This is because, as geographer Heather Merrill writes in "In Other Wor(l)ds: Situated Intersectionality in Italy" (2015), blackness *specifically* functions as a symbol of non-belonging in Italy:

> African bodies are (re-) marked as iconic signifiers of illegitimate belonging, represented for instance in media images of packed fishing vessels entering the country clandestinely through southern maritime borders, and in tropes of itinerant street peddlers and prostitutes, suggesting that their very being in an Italian place threatens the moral purity of the nation state.

Increasingly, however, black youth are coming together to challenge the symbolic, racial boundaries of Italianness, and their growing voices are being amplified by new media. They are also doing so with a deep sense of responsibility to younger generations of black Italians.

Italy does not collect official ethno-racial statistics (with the exception of data on certain historical linguistic minorities). As Elena Ambrosetti and Eralba Cela note in their paper "Demography of Race and Ethnicity in Italy" (2015), this can be understood at least in part as a legacy of post-fascism reconstruction after World War II. The absence of ethno-racial statistics in Italy makes it especially challenging to estimate the number of self-identified black Italians. Still, it is possible to triangulate the numerical significance of this generation from the various official "proxy" numbers that are readily available. The *Istituto nazionale di statistica* (or Istat, the country's national statistics body) estimates that there are over 1 million Africans with non-Italian citizenship living in Italy, and that they make up roughly 20% of Italy's immigrant population. About 360,000 hail from sub-Saharan Africa (primarily Senegal, Nigeria, and Ghana). In addition, approximately 20% of children in Italy today have at least one immigrant parent, a number that demographers predict could grow in the coming years as "native" Italian birthrates continue to decline. (This, despite failed campaigns such as the Ministry of Health's sexist and racist national "Fertility Day" initiative for September 22, 2016. One memorable campaign poster contrasted a stock photo of a white, blond family with an image of a racially mixed group of young friends smoking an unidentified cigarette, all above the unmistakably eugenic caption, "Correct lifestyles for the prevention of sterility and infertility.")

But demographic momentum alone cannot explain the growing visibility of political and cultural activism under the banners of *black* or *Afro-Italianness*. It is also a deeply uncertain and precarious time in Italy, with the word "crisis" regularly invoked in the context of migration, the national economy, and fertility rates. Following the brilliant analysis written by Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies in *Policing the Crisis* (1978), one could say that discourses of crisis in Italy are continuously articulating debates about citizenship and the place of people of color within the Italian nation. This bleak socio-political backdrop frames the new attempts by black youth to challenge the inherent exclusions of "Italianness."

Black Italians have developed strategic ways of marshaling elements such as Afro-oriented entrepreneurship, the sedentarist logics of birthplace (i.e., the assumption that people's identities and attachments are naturally rooted in a specific place of origin), and local cultural knowledge to legitimate their presence in Italy and demonstrate their worthiness as productive citizens-in-waiting. This array of tactics must be situated in the context of an Italy where blackness is represented by politicians and mainstream media alike as a drain on welfare and state resources. This is an echo of what David Theo Goldberg has called *racial neoliberalism*, or alternatively what Aihwa Ong has referred to as *neoliberal citizenship*. Gaia Giuliani, drawing on the work of

Fatimah Tobing Rony, states this paradox yet another way in her essay "Gender, Race, and the Colonial Archive" (2016):

> A *digestive* model of racialized citizenship…transforms phenotypic differences into nutrients for the Italian body politic that assimilates them, neutralizing their cultural differences *and* their political subjectivities… a number of subjects can be *assimilated* insofar as they are considered absorbable.

What, then, are the new and sometimes contradictory meanings being ascribed to blackness in Italy at this moment? How do the emergent struggles of black Italians relate to, for instance, African American histories and mobilizations from the other end of the diaspora? What are the geographical and historical constituents of blackness in Italy—as a category of racial subjection, as a form of self-identification, and even as the basis of a radical politics of liberation? These are admittedly enormous questions, but here I simply want to begin a relection on the trials and travails of diasporic unity amid the specificities of different experiences of racialization, and about the possibilities of resistance to anti-Blackness in a violent and precarious European present. Because, as one activist from Castel Volturno—a town outside Naples known as "the little Africa in Italy," famous as the place where Miriam Makeba held her final concert in honor of six West African immigrants massacred by the mafia—told me this past September, "*Questi sono anni dificili ma importanti.*" These are difficult times, but they are important ones as well.

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I have been working with young black activists, artists, and entrepreneurs in Italy since 2013, though I have also spent significant portions of my life since childhood in Italy. These days I come to Italy as a researcher and activist/writer, but also as a black Italian by a different set of roots and routes who is attempting to piece together her own sense of self and community. I am the daughter of an African American father and an Italian mother; my parents, who recently celebrated their fortieth anniversary, were brought together in the mountains of northern Italy in the 1970s by a heady mix of love, disco, and Cold War geopolitics. My search for roots—or at least for comrades who experience a similar sense of liminality—resonates closely with the "Afropean Travel Narrative" Johnny Pitts shared with *Transition* in 2014. Like Pitts, I found my blackness in Europe through the children of immigrants, who, he writes, "have soaked up the paths of their parents as well as walked along a new route into contemporary Europe; those whose existence is itself a kind of portmanteau, built from separate pieces but forming something singular."

Over the past four years, I have noticed two broad themes in the nascent black Italian cultural politics. On the one hand, black Italian activists often look to the United States for inspiration in the form of what anthropologist Jacqueline Nassy Brown calls *diasporic resources*—this includes literature, like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, music, cultural icons, self-care practices, and political strategies. On the other hand, they also assert to me that there is something unique about the black experience in Italy—from limited access to citizenship, to their own personal and familial entanglement with immigration politics, to a direct sense of attachment to specific African countries. A friend in Milan, the son of a Gambian father and an Italian mother who grew up nearby in the posh town of Monza, explained it to me this way:

> I didn't have any cultural reference around me. There was no one else who was having the same feelings… And so, you know, that was when I started to look at black America, because it was the thing you could relate to more, you could find more, you know? And you could also relate more because it was closer to you, because it was the time of hip-hop; it was the time of b-boys… So yeah, I turned to America, and you know, I started like, reading Malcolm X, and all of those things…And my mom was getting worried. But my father was laughing—he said, "This has nothing to do with you, it's not your history!" . . . And so, in a way, my identity struggle and journey started there. And there were different episodes of growing up in the only country that you know, but that country did not recognize you as part of this country.

The insistence on *difference*, which in this anecdote was first articulated by my friend's father but later became something he himself would firmly assert to me, is an important reminder that diasporic unity is not automatically a given, and that blackness cannot be reduced to a single, universal condition. This is the second chapter of the "coming to consciousness" narrative that began with seeing oneself as solely Italian and having that mutual recognition denied: looking to the other side of the Atlantic for guidance, and eventually realizing that what used to serve as a mirror no longer offers a perfect reflection. My friend's story is reminiscent of African American studies scholar Michelle Wright's call in *Physics of Blackness* (2015) for a black studies that can attend to the complex catalog of histories by which African Americans and black Europeans and other diasporans intersect.

But the emphasis on difference is also complicated by the fact that claims to "Italian exceptionalism" are invoked by everyday Italians and politicians to *deny* the existence of racism. In other words, racism and racist violence are regarded simply as things that happen "out there" in the United States, with its burdensome legacy of slavery. While the murder of Jerry Masslo in 1989 shattered some of the dangerously naive assumptions about racism in Italy that proliferated during the immigration debates of the 1980s, these ideas continue to carry political weight today.

But such pernicious claims to innocence, as Gloria Wekker reminds us, conveniently neglect Europe's own complicity in enslavement—including the Mediterranean slave trade, and the Genoese bourgeoisie whose trade networks eventually paved the way for the transatlantic slave trade. As Robin D. G. Kelley writes in his introduction to Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism* (2000), the black Mediterranean was a precondition for the black Atlantic, and the purging of the black Mediterranean from European history was part of the construction of Europe as "discrete, racially pure entity." Still, in the wake of Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi's murder, I was confidently told by numerous white Italians in casual dinner conversation that Italy is not a racist country—and really, *how* could I dare to make such a brash claim when the police are gunning down my own people with impunity back home in the United States?

Alongside this denial of racism in Italy (which functions by way of bounded geographical comparisons and a methodological nationalism that presumes nations to be hermetically sealed units) are equally common assertions about Italy's status as a *meticcia*, or hybrid/mixed, Mediterranean nation—particularly among white leftists. What scholars Sabine Broeck and Katharyne Mitchell both characterize as the "hype of hybridity" is, in the Italian case, a subtle form of nationalism and colonial nostalgia. It is a Mediterraneanism that constructs Italy as a

crossroads of civilizations, a Hegelian center of World History that benefits from a more fluid and flexible approach to identity than the United States' infamous one-drop rule. For decades, in fact, apologist historians claimed (erroneously) that the frequent violations of fascist racial segregation laws in the colonies of Italian East Africa by Italian settlers could be interpreted as evidence of a widespread lack of racial prejudice on behalf of everyday Italians.

Even today, Italy's regional diversity, the history of internal North/ South differentiation, and new state-sponsored research on the country's genetic-ethnic-linguistic diversity are marshaled as evidence that racial categories are simply less calcified in "Mediterranean Italy" than they are in the United States. Sadly, however, these appeals to a sort of universal, transcendental hybridity have as their main consequence the preclusion of blackness in Italy. Even after the murder of Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi, a clear, explicit case of Italian anti-blackness if ever there was one, I saw signs at anti-racism protests that read, "We are all evolved apes" (remember that his wife was called an African monkey) and widely-circulated commentaries lamenting "not the death of a human being, but the death of the human within us all."

Given all this, how are young Afrodescendants to articulate their distinct black Italian subjectivities without neglecting the *global* scale of anti-blackness and racial formation, or alternatively without falling victim to a romanticized vision of Mediterranean mixing that minimizes the harsh realities of Italian racism? After all, in Italy, we have to take seriously the histories of racial boundary drawing that were caught up with the process of national unification, as well as Italy's own colonial history (which, significantly, began *before* the rise of fascism)—and the reverberations of these histories in the present. Indeed, drawing on Stuart Hall's own engagement with Antonio Gramsci, it forces us to acknowledge the existence of multiple, geographically and historically situated—yet deeply interconnected—racism*s*. And actually, I would argue that the link across time and space between Gramsci and Hall is one powerful example of how a rich body of scholarship on racism from Britain (and the United States) can be deployed transgressively to challenge what Fatima El-Tayeb calls the narrative of Europe as colorblind, while also recognizing the particular racial formations that have "settled" in Italy.

This is where, I believe, emerging work on the *black Mediterranean* can be instructive. Today, as scholars such as Alessandra di Maio argue, the black Mediterranean is no longer just a precondition for modern racial capitalism; it is being reproduced everyday at the nexus of anti-black violence (seen in immigration policy, citizenship law, and everyday racism) and black liberation struggles across the Mediterranean basin. New research in comparative literature, Italian studies, sociology, black studies, and geography has addressed the production of blackness and black identities in the Mediterranean; the distinct contours of black life in the Mediterranean; and the erasure of black histories and dense networks of cultural exchange linking Africa and Europe. This work also explores the practices by which African diasporas in Italy engage with the cultural politics of global blackness, and in turn contribute new resources and experiences to the repertoires of the black diaspora. But academia is by no means a privileged site of knowledge production on the black Mediterranean. Indeed, black Italian artists such as Igiaba Scego, Gabriella Ghermandi, Medhin Paolos, and Fred Kuwornu have all articulated sophisticated analyses of blackness through Mediterranean crosscurrents using media such as literature and film. Following the powerful exhortations of black activists in Italy, these contemporary engagements with the black Mediterranean provide a framework for

foregrounding the interconnections between Italy and Africa without privileging romantic images of unfettered mobility and conviviality, and for linking Italy to a wider black diaspora.

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As a generation of young black activists seeks to assert itself, gain national visibility, and acquire legitimacy as Italians by birth *who are also black*, how do their efforts in turn affect the newly-arrived in Italy, including those Nigerian and Eritrean refugees who are landing on Italian shores each day? In the process of broadening the dominant definitions of Italianness, after all, they must first define *what it means to be Italian* and hence, which forms of blackness can be incorporated into the nation. Even as they push the boundaries of who "counts" as an Italian, they may also be complicit in the stabilization of representations and practices of Italianness—something that will have significant consequences for the ongoing Mediterranean refugee crisis. This, of course, is the double bind of national citizenship and recognition.

But despite these uncertainties, I want to still capture a sense of possibility amidst chaos—to shine light on the small fissures that have been wrenched open by young black Italians at a moment when the future of Italy, and Europe more broadly, seems profoundly uncertain and some more than others are being rapidly thrust into a post-apocalyptic present. A profound sense of gloom permeates Italy today—from the withering welfare state to the explosion of virulent far-right racisms, from unemployment and the increasing flexibilization of labor to the horror of unrelenting migrant deaths at sea. There is a palpable sense of being in the midst of Gramsci's "time of monsters," when an old world is crumbling but a new one has yet to be realized. Although political commentators talk a great deal about Europe being on the brink of crisis, however, the reality is that certain groups—specifically, Black people—have been rendered expendable for centuries, as the foundations upon which Europe was literally built. But Europe is only now taking notice because the empire is striking back—or, as Aimé Césaire suggested in the *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950), what used to happen "out there" in the colonies is now happening "in here" within the boundaries of the former metropole, revealing the limits of European claims to universalism.

In this context, how can a multigenerational black community form and survive when the racially exclusionary logics of Fortress Europe would have one believe that it should not even exist in the first place? This is an urgent question because in Europe today, blackness is regarded as synonymous with death. As activists on the Left invoke ghastly images of boats of black refugees capsizing in the Mediterranean, far-Right xenophobes are claiming that an invading blackness heralds the death of a racially pure Europe that has never actually existed. To accept the equation that blackness signifies only death is to concede to the same chant that was hurled at Mario Balotelli, perhaps the most internationally famous Afro-Italian: "There are no black Italians." Yet, as Katherine McKittrick reminds us in "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place" (2011), "racial violences . . . shape, *but do not wholly define*, black worlds."

These grave circumstances require new acts of creativity, unexpected alliance, and social self-creation. This, I believe, is the only way to understand the attempts of young black Italians to construct a future for themselves in Italy, a future in which their existence will no longer be confined to the realm of *fantascienza,* of the unthinkable. It is a story of activists, entrepreneurs,

and artists caught between generations and categories and legal statuses and diasporas, in a country that is crumbling under the weight of its unresolved colonial history.