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Making Italy: Afro-Italian entrepreneurs and the racial boundaries of citizenship

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Making Italy: Afro-Italian entrepreneurs and the racial boundaries of

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ABSTRACT

This article, based on 16 months of in-depth interviews and participant observation conducted over five years, explores the participation of young Afro-Italian women entrepreneurs in new initiatives related to Black beauty, style, and (natural) hair care. While based primarily in northern Italy, these projects draw on economic and cultural connections to the broader Black diaspora. I argue that entrepreneurship has emerged as an important strategy for Afro-Italian women seeking to advance new narratives about Blackness (and specifically, Black womanhood) and its inclusion within the material and symbolic boundaries of Italy. At the same time, Afro-Italian entrepreneurship is transforming Italian material culture, and, by extension, the meanings of Italianness itself. Entrepreneurship is thus a key terrain of struggle through which Afro-Italians have begun to assert claims to Italian citizenship and belonging in the context of both economic stagnation and a refugee 'emergency'. It is one example of a nascent Black spatial politics in Italy that is conditioned by, but also pushes back against, dominant regimes of racist exclusion and neoliberal racial capitalism.

Prelude

On 4 July 2016, a group of about forty fashion designers, stylists, models, photographers, and journalists gathered in a modernist event space in southwest Milan for a preview event organized by the AFRO Fashion Association. The association was founded in 2015 by journalist and activist Michelle Ngonmo and obstetrician and fashion designer Ruth Maccarthy (Whitney, 2017). Michelle, an Italian-Cameroonian raised in Ferrara, and Ruth, an Italian-Ghanaian raised in Seregno, would go on to launch the first Afro Fashion Week in Milan – the world's fashion capital – in 2017.

Ruth opened the preview event that day by welcoming the audience and explaining her philosophy of Afro fashion. Through the AFRO Fashion Association, she and Michelle hoped to create a platform for emerging Black designers and cutting-edge fashion showcasing the beauty of African fabrics. Despite her petite frame, Ruth dominated the room in a chic uniform of towering black heels, red sheath dress made from a star-speckled West African wax print, colourful turban, and black glasses.

Our goal is to promote a new culture, something we call 'Afro'. We are in a disastrous cultural and political situation right now, with immigration and the plight of the extracomunitari [non–European Union immigrants]. This is the right time for this project, because fashion is not just a dress that you wear, a bag you carry, or a shoe you put on. Through fashion, we can show Italy the beauty of a new culture, 'Afro': a marriage of colours, scents, and patterns that are African, with the style and elegance that are the special touch of Italian culture.

Ruth's impassioned introduction represented an attempt to reframe Italian imaginaries of Africa and Blackness in direct response to the on-going southern European refugee 'crisis'. That summer, the Italian news cycle was inundated with sensationalistic images of rickety boats capsizing in the Mediterranean, politicians making inflammatory declarations about 'African invasions' and 'ethnic replacement' in Italy, and acts of outright racist violence against African refugees. In fact, just three days after Michelle and Ruth's event, a Nigerian asylum seeker named Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi was murdered in the Italian seaside town of Fermo by a fascist agitator (Scammell, 2016). African refugees were also being scapegoated as the primary cause of Italian economic stagnation, by supposedly taking jobs and diverting scarce welfare resources that should have been the sole entitlement of 'native' (i.e., white) Italians.

For Michelle and Ruth, narratives of African cultural creativity constituted a potent strategy for countering this racist 'single story' (Adichie, 2009) of Black life in Italy. In Ruth's introductory remarks, she rejected the idea of an undifferentiated Blackness, one characterized in the popular Italian geographical imagination by poverty, abjection, passivity, and non-productivity. The alternative imaginary invoked by the AFRO Fashion Association that day was characterized by a colourful and happy hybridity that, as a collateral benefit, could also awaken a moribund Italian economy from its slumber. Instead of drowning refugees, Ruth conjured a continent full of brightly patterned fabrics and rich creative traditions – a continent whose European-raised children could marshal their spatially extended 'Afropolitan' (Mbembe, 2007; Selasi, 2005) networks to revitalize the storied tradition of 'Made in Italy'.

Introduction

Michelle and Ruth's AFRO Fashion initiative is one example of a broader trend of Afro-Italian[1] women's cultural entrepreneurship in Italy, varied projects that have gained significant momentum and visibility during the last five years. These entrepreneurial activities have enabled many women to achieve a relative degree of economic inde-pendence, which has in turn afforded them the possibility of engaging in a wide range of political causes related to the rights of immigrants and their families. Entrepreneurship has therefore provided a limited opening for many Afro-Italian women to articulate claims to citizenship and belonging in Italy at a time marked by rampant economic stagnation, xenophobia, and virulent anti-Black racism.

This article explores the multiple meanings Afro-Italian women ascribe to their entrepreneurial activities in Italy. Extensive research has been conducted on the mobilizations of African refugees in Italy. However, an engagement with the entrepreneurial activities of Afro-Italian women born and raised in Italy can shed light on a different, yet concurrent, set of negotiations with the boundaries of Italianness. Rather than approach these initiatives as matters of bare

economic survival or as examples of 'selling out', I analyse entrepreneurship as a complex terrain of contestation through which Afro-Italian women seek to advance new representations of Black life in Italy and transform the meanings of Italianness. In doing so, I argue that Afro-Italian women's entrepreneurial activities constitute spatial projects. They are examples of a nascent Black politics in Italy that is conditioned by, but also pushes back against, dominant regimes of racist exclusion and neoliberal racial capitalism. This story builds on the path-breaking interventions of Black Geographies, looking beyond North America to the capacious diasporic spatialities of Black European women's everyday practices of survival and resistance (McKittrick, 2006, 2011).

I first situate my research in the context of literatures on both diasporic entrepreneurship and racial capitalism. I then provide background about the specific conditions in Italy that have shaped the experiences of my Afro-Italian interlocutors. After a discussion of my research methods, I turn to an in-depth engagement with a group of Afro-Italian entrepreneurs. I focus on the ways they narrate their businesses in relation to (1) the global Black diaspora, (2) the cultural politics of 'Made in Italy', and (3) notions of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism. In the conclusion, I consider the political limits of entrepreneurship as a strategy for claiming citizenship, and discuss the significance of this Italian story for debates about the boundaries of Europe today.

Theoretical frameworks: diaspora entrepreneurship and racial capitalism

Scholars from a range of disciplines have investigated the entrepreneurial activities of immigrants and their descendants, with a particular focus on the transnational dimensions of these economic practices (Carter, 1997; Elo, 2016; Kyle, 1999; MacGaffey & Bazenguissa-Ganga, 2000; Ojo, 2012; Riddle & Brinkerhoff, 2011; Riddle, Hrivnak, & Nielsen, 2010; Sanya, 2016). The vast literature on 'ethnic', 'immigrant', and 'diaspora entrepreneurship' explores the ways minority groups leverage economic activity to benefit their co-ethnic communities in the 'host' country, and also to promote economic development in their 'home' country through remittance income or reinvestment (Dana, 2007; Merz, Chen, & Geithner, 2007; Newland & Tanaka, 2010; Plaza & Ratha, 2011; Sahoo & Pattanaik, 2013). Scholars have also used intersectional feminist frameworks to investigate how race, class, and gender shape participation in these entrepreneurial practices (Harvey, 2005; Romero & Zulema, 2016).

Social and cultural geographers of immigration have contributed to this scholarship by analysing diaspora entrepreneurship as a strategy for resisting or surviving within conditions of exclusion, marginalization, or segregation (Bauder, 2005; Berg, 2007; Dunn, 2003; Round, Williams, & Rodgers, 2008). Geographers of migration specifically have directed scholarly attention to practices of both national and transnational belonging in the face of restrictive citizenship regimes and ethnonationalism (Gilmartin, 2008; Merrill, 2015; Pred, 2004). This literature has emphasized the overlapping spatialities of ethnic, immigrant, or diasporic businesses and their ambiguous intersections with national borders – from their physical locations within specific immigrant enclaves; to their transnational networks of financing and production (Stodolska & Santos, 2006); to the spatial practices and imaginaries of the 'ethnicity fetish' and 'ethnic packaging' in the marketing and consumption of products sold in immigrant businesses (Everts, 2010). This scholarship challenges a false binary between the supposedly 'immaterial' politics of

representation and the 'material' politics of 'welfare, inequality, and power' (Dunn, 2003, p. 153; Keith & Pile, 1993).

An engagement with questions of neoliberalism and racial capitalism can deepen the study of diasporic entrepreneurship. This work allows us to understand the political preconditions of entrepreneurship – specifically, why notions of economic productivity are so intertwined with debates over national membership. Aihwa Ong, for instance, argues that one facet of neoliberal governance is the production of hierarchies of citizenship that derive from the relationship of different groups to global markets and transnational investment flows (Ong, 1999, 2006). In Italy, several scholars (Carter & Merrill, 2007; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013; Muehlebach, 2012; Oliveri, 2015) have elaborated on the concept of neoliberal citizenship to show that access to transnational mobility, citizenship, and the Arendtian 'right to have rights' is increasingly predicated upon the economistic logics of individual merit and entrepreneurialism.

The scholarship on neoliberal citizenship reveals the production of stratified and exclusionary regimes of national membership (Oliveri, 2015, p. 494); however, this literature typically also approaches race as a mere epiphenomenon. The concept of racial capitalism, as articulated by Cedric Robinson (Robinson, 2005), suggests instead that racism is fundamental to the operations of capitalism. The basic categories of the capitalist economy (class, labour, value) cannot be understood separately from the intertwined histories of 'race' and nationalism, which developed alongside capitalism to produce what Ruth Wilson Gilmore evocatively calls 'group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death' (Gilmore, 2007, p. 5). A growing body of scholarship has explored the ambiguous ways communities of colour negotiate racial capitalism to carve out spaces of survival and resistance. Some indicative examples include Arlene Dávila, who explores the way Puerto Rican and Latinx residents of East Harlem attempt to market 'ethnicity' to preserve their place in a rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood (Dávila, 2004); Jovan Scott Lewis, who describes 'sufferation' as a narrative used by Black craft vendors in Jamaica to make sense of their precarious economic position (Lewis, 2015); and Jordanna Matlon, who shows that underemployed Black men in postcolonial Côte d'Ivoire engage in practices of 'complicit masculinity' that emphasize their participation in the market as entrepreneurial figures (Matlon, 2016). These varied interventions allow us to understand why and how cultural entrepreneurship emerged as such an important site of struggle over race and national membership in Italy today.

Background

There are approximately 1 million children of immigrants living in Italy without Italian citizenship. The children of immigrants make up approximately fifteen per cent of new births in Italy (Papavero, 2015), or ten per cent of the country's youth population (Tailmoun, Valeri, & Tesfaye, 2014) – and a significant proportion of these young people are Afro-Italians ("I 'nuovi italiani' nella riforma della cittadinanza," 2017).[2] At the same time, between January and December of 2017 over 119,000 refugees arrived to Italy by sea, the majority originating from countries in sub-Saharan Africa (UNCHR, 2018). Against this backdrop of large-scale social transformation, tensions about who can truly 'belong' in the Italian nation have reached a fever pitch. In response, the children of immigrants have mobilized tirelessly for a reform of Italian citizenship law toward a moderate form of jus soli (right of birthplace) citizenship.[3]

Economic activity in general and entrepreneurship in the so-called 'creative industries' in particular are today key sites where ideas about Blackness, citizenship, and belonging are being articulated and contested by young Afro-Italians. It is important to note that conversations about who 'counts' as an Italian do not always occur within the sphere of more traditional, collective forms of political action. Italian social and political commentators often lament this development as evidence of a de-politicisation and individualisation of youth tied to rampant consumerism and systematic attacks on trade unions since the 1970s (Brogi, 2011; Papadogiannis, 2015; Pirni, 2012). But the gradual turn away from political parties or labour unions as privileged sites of activism for youth should also be understood as an expression of frustration with the racism, paternalism, and neoliberal compromises of the contemporary Italian left.

There is in fact a deep history in Italy of entrepreneurship being leveraged in struggles over the rights of migrants and people of colour. In the 1990s, as immigration became a major point of public concern (the country's first comprehensive immigration law, the Legge Martelli, was enacted in 1990), migrants were being stratified into racialized and gendered forms of labour such as care work, domestic work, and sex work (Andall, 2000; Parrenas, 2008). In this context, interethnic feminist organizations in Italy often sought to create meaningful and dignifying spaces for migrant women through entrepreneurship. As Merrill (2006) has noted, while classic Marxist theory might portray the entrepreneur as an emblematic figure of the petit-bourgeoisie, entrepreneurship in Italy is also tied to a genealogy of workerism and work cooperatives in which the radicalization of working classes occurred through cooperatives.[4]

For many Italian-born children of African and Afro-Latinx immigrants today, entrepreneurial activity is closely tied to the articulation of citizenship claims at a time when Blackness is represented by politicians and mainstream media alike as a drain on scarce state resources. This is indicative of a much broader tendency to link the 'integration' of immigrants (and their children) in Italy to the value brought by their economic producivity. The differential inclusion or exclusion of immigrants based on their perceived 'value' as potential economic resources is even reflected in Italian immigration law: The 2002 Bossi Fini Law stipulates that Italian visas and residency permits for non-EU migrants are contingent upon employment (or alternatively, enrolment in higher education). For the Italian-born children of immigrant parents, who by law inherit their parents' citizenship at birth, this means that in the event that they are not able to successfully petition for Italian citizenship within one year of their eighteenth birthday, they risk deportation to their parents' home country if they are not able to obtain a formal job contract or enrol in an Italian university.[5]

Along similar lines, resistance to the legal and de-facto recognition of the children of immigrants is frequently framed in relation to Italian economic stagnation – in a telling statement, Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori lamented in 2013 that jus soli would be 'a disaster in a country with high unemployment' (Sartori, 2013). This phenomenon can be understood as a symptom of what David Theo Goldberg has characterized as 'racial neoliberalism' (Giroux, 2003; Goldberg, 2009; Omi & Winant, 2014). Under racial neoliberalism, Goldberg argues, the welfare state – understood to be no longer serving its 'intended' constituency of white citizens at a time when the demographic makeup of Western states is becoming increasingly diverse (Ward, 2009) – is gradually dismantled in favour of colour-blind social and economic policies (Lacy,

2014, p. 233). One consequence of this shift is that non-whites, regardless of citizenship status, are regarded as illegitimate recipients of public benefits.

On the other hand, rosy stories of immigrants' economic resourcefulness are used by liberal-left politicians to demonstrate the benefits of incorporating groups with foreign backgrounds into the national fold. When former President of the Italian Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini announced the 2016 MoneyGram Award for best immigrant entrepreneur in Italy, for instance, she also called upon the Italian parliament to expand citizenship rights to the children of immigrants born in Italy. She explained:

> The country should be grateful for the entrepreneurial contribution you make to our country. [. . .] The demographic crisis can be overcome with family policies and new arrivals, by providing the right to Italian citizenship (MoneyGram Award, 2016).

In this context, the promotion of Black style and beauty through cultural entrepreneurship has allowed young Afro-Italians to demonstrate their active contributions to the Italian creative industries and bring visibility to Afro-Italians as active participants in the increasingly diverse fabric of Italian social life.

Research methods

This article draws on 16 months of in-depth interviews and participant observation conducted over five years (2013–2017) with Afro-Italian entrepreneurs who have explicitly linked their business activities to the promotion of 'Afro-Italianness'. During this time, I examined the explosion of e-commerce[6] projects in northern Italy related to Black beauty, style, fashion, and (natural) hair care. I focused on Afro-Italians because the lack of juridical and everyday recognition facing the children of immigrants in Italy is especially pronounced and traumatic for the children of African and Afro-Latinx immigrants. As geographer Heather Merrill observes, '[African-Italos] signify a territory (Africa) that exists discursively outside and in hierarchical opposition to Europe' (Hawthorne, 2017; Merrill, 2014, p. 268). In addition, I chose to carry out fieldwork in northern Italian cities because entrepreneurial activity among immigrants and their Italian-born children is largely concentrated in the northern and central regions of Lombardy, Lazio, Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna, Veneto, and Piedmont (Centro Studie Ricerche IDOS, 2016). This can be explained by their historically higher levels of economic stability (Ambrosini & Panichella, 2016) and lower rates of unemployment, as well as the existence of extensive support networks for entrepreneurship (including 'immigrant' entrepreneurship), major urban centres, and large immigrant populations.

I conducted in-depth interviews with 15 female fashion designers, e-commerce entrepreneurs, hairstylists, cosmetics vendors, and professional beauty bloggers of African descent. With the exception of two interviews conducted over Skype, all were held in person. I also conducted supplementary interviews with five other Afro-Italian women who were not entrepreneurs, focusing on the various meanings they associate with hair and fashion. In addition to interviews, I carried out participant observation at events such as fashion shows, trade fairs, meet-ups, hair care workshops, and conferences about Afro-Italian entrepreneurship. Finally, the virtual ethnography (Alonso & Oiarzabal, 2010; Bernal, 2014; Boellstorff, Nardie, Pearce, & Taylor,

2012; Burrell, 2009; Reips & Buffardi, 2012) component of my research entailed analysis of images and videos posted to the professional Facebook pages of the entrepreneurs in my study, as well as discursive analysis of text posts, comments, and debates. My goal was to understand the ways Afro-Italian women framed their entrepreneurial projects, as well as their cultural and political reference points both within and beyond Italy.

The women in my study came from diverse national backgrounds spanning sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, but they were united around a shared embrace of 'Afro-Italian' or 'Black identity', which they actively promoted through their projects. I was able to meet these entrepreneurs through snowball sampling – I first contacted one prominent entrepreneur, who then put me in touch with her colleagues and acquaintances, and so on. As a self-identified Afro-Italian woman, albeit by a different set of diasporic routes and routes,[7] I conducted my research in a way that was necessarily reflexive, but also attentive to differentials of power. My questions and observations were grounded in a concern with Black diasporic connection and mutual learning, as well as an attentiveness to the geographically-distinct cultural politics of Blackness in Italy and the specific challenges my interlocutors faced (such as a lack of access to Italian citizenship). And guided by insights from feminist research praxis (S. N. Hesse-Biber, 2012, 2013; McDowell, 1992; Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002; Sharp, 2005), I was keenly aware of my own positionality as a Black woman studying the entanglements of race, nation, and citizenship in Italy at a moment of increasingly virulent ethnonationalism – often experiencing my research directly, on the surface of my skin (Fanon, 2008).

Afro-business in Italy: from foreign contamination to savvy (Afro) cosmopolitanisms

Natural hair care, beauty, and fashion have emerged as key sites of conversation among young Afro-Italians about the experiences of Black womanhood in contemporary Italy. During the last five years, there has been a proliferation of blogs, Facebook pages, YouTube channels, and traveling workshops encouraging Black women to embrace their natural features and hair textures, and reject racist and Eurocentric standards of beauty. Many young Afro-Italians pursue entrepreneurship because without Italian citizenship, they are limited in their ability to apply for many jobs through the Italian system of concorsi pubblici.[8] In addition, the economic precarity of many immigrant families makes it financially burdensome for young people to pursue higher education (Andall, 2002, p. 398). The children of African and Afro-Latinx immigrants are thus constrained to finding alternative avenues of employment and basic livelihood.

At the same time, Afro-Italian entrepreneurs also see aesthetics and cultural creativity as potent forms of spatial politics tied to struggles for recognition and citizenship in Italy. They are using entrepreneurship in the creative industries to build a new, diasporic sense of Italianness that unites traditional Italian aesthetic sensibilities and practices with cultural influences drawn from transnational Black cultures. As I will show in this section, entrepreneurship allows Afro-Italian women to connect with Black diasporic political resources, intervene in the world-famous 'Made in Italy' brand, and advance more cosmopolitan, 'Mediterranean' visions of Italian national identity.

Hair and diasporic connection

In January of 2014, Italian-Ghanaian Evelyne Afaawua (who immigrated to Italy from France with her parents shortly after her first birthday) founded the first Facebook page in Italian about the care and valorisation of natural Black hair. Originally called 'Afro Italian Nappy Girls' and based in Milan, the community now goes by the name Nappytalia and features a robust multi-platform social media presence, a blog, an e-commerce site, and offline meet-ups around Italy (Frisina & Hawthorne, 2018). Since Nappytalia's founding, Evelyne has gone on to win Italian and European entrepreneurship awards, acquire local investors, and connect to product manufacturers abroad (Frisina & Hawthorne, 2017). In 2018, after several years of planning and fundraising, she also launched a line of organic natural hair products called 'Nappytalia Eco Bio Cosmetics'. Evelyne described her decision to focus on hair during our first meeting in Milan in the summer of 2014, shortly after the founding of Nappytalia:

Once you've developed your ideas, you have to externalize the clarity that is inside. For me, for instance, I tried using skin-lightening creams. This was a period when I wanted to become lighter. There are all of these phases, which make you understand where your place is. And once you understand where your place is, you say, 'Va bene, to be in that place I have to reflect it, right?' And for a girl, what does she think? Most likely, the first thing is hair. [. . .] You want the clarity inside to be visible outside. And so hair. [. . .] For me, it could be a question of money, but I have more to demonstrate than just money. Yes, we're Afro Italians, and we are showing who we are, but we also want to show it on paper, to show off.

The inspiration for this clarity came, in large part, from the broader Black diaspora. As Lori Tharps argues, the Internet has played an important role in the twenty-first century Black natural hair movement (Byrd & Tharps, 2014). Social media has helped Black women learn new hairstyles and hair care tips that do not involve chemical straighteners, and connect with others who have also embarked on the journey of 'going natural'. Evelyne, for instance, spent almost a year researching Facebook pages and YouTube channels from Black hairstylists in the United States and France before settling on the importance of developing similar resources for Black women in Italy, in Italian. Especially in the early days of Nappytalia, Evelyne would share images and videos of Black hairstylists and celebrities from across the Black diaspora to the group's Facebook page. These diasporic resources (Brown, 2005; Small, 2018) were intended to serve as aspirational models for young Afro-Italian women, who rarely saw themselves positively represented in the Italian media landscape. Nappytalia's website similarly features articles about traditional African hair care practices, the history of Black hair, and the transatlantic slave trade. These resources are intended to show Afro-Italian women that although they may experience social and political marginalization in Italy, they are not alone and are in fact part of a proud, international Black community.

Writing about 'African American beauty culturalists' (Gill, 2014) during the civil rights movement in the United States, multiple scholars have pointed to the tensions that arose in the 1960s between Black pride and capitalism. For instance, while many Black women salon owners did not see a contradiction between making money and promoting social causes, other activists contested what they saw as the gradual 'commercialization' of natural hair (Craig, 1997; Ford, 2015; Gill, 2010; Kelley, 1997; Walker, 2000). In interviews, however, Evelyne unambiguously

characterizes herself as an 'entrepreneur with social ethics' (Bodian, 2016). For Evelyne, natural hair is a powerful diasporic resource that also enables her to mobilize for the rights and dignity of Black women in living Italy. As one of the most visible young Afro-Italians active in Italy today (she has been the subject of a documentary and countless magazine features), she has used her platform to bring visibility to other Afro-Italians, call attention to anti-racism demonstrations, and mobilize support for citizenship reform. The Nappytalia Facebook page, moderated by Evelyne and her partners, remains a rich site of conversation and debate about identity, racism, and the obstacles faced by 'second generation' youth without Italian citizenship. As Evelyne explained:

> I want to achieve my goals and dreams and become something. To create a position for myself in the society, regardless of whether I am white or Black. I want to be myself, with all of my characteristics, whether you accept them or not. [. . .] Whereas before I didn't acknowledge my Ghanaian side, now I try to show both. If you accept me, you have to accept me because I am Ghanaian, because I am Italian, basta. We have to. . .let people understand that we exist. I think that what could help would be to make them understand the utility that we have, the utility that we can give to the society.

Evelyne's ground-breaking work in Italy has galvanized many other aspiring Afro-Italian entrepreneurs. The natural hair movement in Italy now includes stylists such as 'NaturAngi' (Angela Haisha Adamou) and 'Afro-On' (Belysa Shabani), product vendors and manufacturers such as AfroRicci and Vanity Case Cosmetics, and beauty bloggers and vloggers such as the women behind the site Afro-Italian Souls. These women often import hair products from vendors across the Black diaspora (typically the United States or the United Kingdom) to sell online to other Afro-Italians, filling a gap in the Italian market for beauty products tailored to the needs of Black women (Ganz, 2016; Grace, 2016). But increasingly, these women are looking not only to connect with Black diasporic networks abroad, but to refashion 'Made in Italy' at home.

New geographies of 'Made in Italy'

'Made in Italy', a merchandise mark used since the 1980s to designate the uniqueness of Italian production in the 'Four As' of abbigliamento (clothing), agroalimentare (food), arredamento (furniture), and automobili (cars and other forms of mechanical engineering) and protected by Italian law since 1999, is frequently used as shorthand for the skilled craftsmanship associated with 'traditional' Italian industries. More recently, however, policymakers, journalists, and manufacturers' associations in Italy have begun to express concern that this label (in its various iterations as luxury brands, quality manufacturing, and small-scale artisanship) is at risk. While the decline of 'Made in Italy' manufacturing has not been fully supported by available economic data (Rociola, 2013; Sanderson, 2011), various culprits have been named: the increasing availability of cheaper products from abroad (cinese, or 'Chinese', is also a racially-charged colloquialism in Italian that refers derisively to low-quality, mass-produced consumer goods); foreign counterfeiters; the lack of interest among young Italians in traditional industries ("Made in Italy?," 2013); the 2008 economic crisis; the stagnating effects of that peculiar Italian blend of bureaucracy and organized crime; or the internationalization of supply chains ("Italian manufacturing," 2013).[9]

This question of how to 'produce' Italy is also intimately linked with fears about the social reproduction of the nation (Butler, 1998; Federici, 2004; Yanagisako, 2002) – from declining Italian birth rates (Papavero, 2015), to the comparatively high birth-rates of immigrants (Carter, 2013; Merrill, 2014), to the 'brain drain'[10] of highly educated and skilled young Italians (Balduzzi & Rosina, 2011). In other words, preoccupations about the state of traditional Italian industries and crafts are closely linked to nationalist fears about the impacts of porous borders, uncontrollable transnational flows, and growing racial or ethnic pluralism. In the context of this profound uncertainty about the future of Italy – Who will (re)produce the nation? – economic activity has emerged as a key cultural and political touchstone. In this sense, 'Made in Italy' is more than just a national brand – instead, it signals a set of interrelated questions about who and what is made in Italy, and by extension who is making Italy today and who will make Italy in the future. This is why it is so meaningful for many Afro-Italian entrepreneurs to affix the 'Made in Italy' label to their Black natural hair care products and African textile–inspired fashion designs.

Countless news features published within the last half-decade have celebrated these Afro-Italian entrepreneurs for their creative contributions to the Italian economy.[11] Indeed, it is important to recognize that for many Afro-Italian businesswomen, their projects have two audiences – an internal audience of other Afro-Italians who can come together around a particular theme (hair, fashion, beauty) to discuss their shared experiences and struggles, and an external audience of Italians who can learn more about the lives and contributions of the children of African and Afro-Latinx immigrants (Frisina & Hawthorne, 2015). These counter-narratives are intended to challenge the idea that Black people in Italian territory are an invasion, a threat, or a drain on resources – that they are perpetually 'bodies out of place' (Puwar, 2004). By producing a product that is 'Made in Italy,' they are in turn producing themselves as 'Italian.'

In 2011, Nigerian-Russian-Italian entrepreneur and singer Alice Edun opened the first e-shop with products for Black hair in Italy. Several years later, along with her business partner Dominican-Italian stylist Reina Gomez, her company AfroRicci [AfroCurls] launched the first 'Made in Italy' line of products designed for curly or Afro-textured hair. Alice and Reina now boast a successful line of shampoos, conditioners, styling creams, and oils that were painstakingly developed in collaboration with an Italian cosmetics laboratory. The home base for AfroRicci is Alice's airy home in southwest Milan, where candy-coloured bottles of AfroRicci hair cream are stacked alongside Alice's music recording equipment and her two children's playthings.

Like Evelyne, Alice and Reina's trajectory to the world of natural hair care involved tangled, multi-sited journeys of self-discovery. Alice was born in Russia to a Black Nigerian father and a white Russian mother, grew up in Nigeria, and came to Italy as a young woman. She met Reina in 2014, when she was searching for a hairdresser with whom to collaborate. Reina's father is a white Venezuelan and her mother is of mixed/ Afro-Dominican heritage; she was born in Venezuela, spent her early childhood years in Santo Domingo, and then came to Italy around elementary school. Reina explained that cutting off her straightened hair and letting her natural curls grow back in (the so-called 'big chop') was part of a broader attempt to connect with the African roots of her Latin American identity. This process also involved close study of the Haitian Revolution. Indeed, both Alice and Reina understand their hair as an embodied way to assert pride in their African heritage:

Alice: Hair is part of your identity, so when you talk about Afro hair, already the word 'Afro' comes from 'Africa'. You are describing your hair, which comes from a place, a people. You are identifying with them, even if you were born here, or you were both there, or adopted, or are multiracial. When you describe Afro curls, you are saying that you are part of that category of people. And so identity is part of that, in knowing where you come from, maybe a culture that you don't know well but that you want to get to know better.

In addition to their hair products, Alice and Reina also organize hair-care workshops around Italy. These workshops are typically catered to women of mixed white/Black backgrounds, or to young African adoptees and their Italian parents – their particular niche in the rapidly growing Afro-Italian natural hair community. But a significant source of pride for both women is still their ability to claim the 'Made in Italy' label:

Alice: We are proud to say 'Made in Italy'. It is important to show the whole world that even in Italy we are here. We're here, AfroRicci, and we have our own 'Made in Italy' products.

Reina: It's also a responsibility. 'Made in Italy' is known all over the world as a sign of quality. It is a cultural thing, tied to a history of small artisans. . .

Alice: From Italian shoes, stylists, fashion, to food, the finishing on our houses, furniture...'Made in Italy' is synonymous with quality. So the first cream for Afro hair in Italy has to be that way. It has to be a quality product.

Camilla: It seems important to be able to say 'Made in Italy' during this [economic] crisis, too.

Alice: The crisis, of course! I would like it if there were more support from the Italian state for 'Made in Italy'. . .especially for innovative things. [. . .] Yes, it's a beauty product, but it's a niche product, for a particular group of people who are part of the Italian culture. Afro-Italians are part of the Italian culture. There needs to be support for 'Made in Italy' products for Afro-Italians, too.

As Alice elaborated in a recent interview, AfroRicci 'demonstrates that even I contribute at the social, economic, and cultural levels in this country [. . .] It is important that Italy recognize the multi-ethnic woman' (Ferrario, 2017). Her comments reveal that the meanings attached to entrepreneurship are deeply gendered, as Afro-Italian businesswomen seek to challenge both their invisibility (as non-recognized 'citizens in waiting') and their hyper-visibility (as sex objects or docile care workers) (Frisina & Hawthorne, 2017; Puwar, 2004). As geographers of migration have argued, the bodies of those perceived as 'foreign' – but especially those of women – are systematically instrumentalised to mark the cultural boundaries of citizenship in European liberal democracies (Ehrkamp, 2010; Yngvesson, 2015). For Alice and Reina, producing 'Made in Italy' products for Black women allows them to claim legitimacy as Italians while also asserting pride in their African heritage. Their suggestion that 'Italian' and 'African'

are not incompatible in fact represents a new understanding of Italianness – or even a rekindling of older notions of Italy as a cosmopolitan Mediterranean nation.

The Afro-Mediterranean renaissance in Italy

In 2011, then–Italian president Giorgio Napolitano delivered a highly publicized address to a group of newly naturalized Italians who grew up in Italy as the children of immigrants. In the most widely quoted sentence of the speech, he declared:

> It is important to realize that young people of immigrant origins in our schools and in our society are not just an obstacle to be overcome; they are also a fruitful source of stimulation because they come from diverse cultures (Napolitano, 2011).

At the gathering, timed to coincide with the 150th anniversary of Italian national unification, Napolitano proceeded to extoll the ways in which the 'new Italian citizens' assembled that day would contribute to the collective well-being of Italy by sharing 'languages, constitutional values, civic duties, and laws', citing as examples young Italian-Chinese entrepreneurs and the Italian-Somali writer Igiaba Scego. For many activists (Scego, 2012; Tailmoun et al., 2014), Napolitano's speech was an important moment of institutional recognition for the Italian citizenship reform movement.

At a time of economic crisis and declining Italian birth-rates, Napolitano's speech implied, it is simply good business to bring the children of immigrants into the Italian fold. 'Without their future contribution to our society and our economy', he declared, 'the burden of national debt would be even more difficult to sustain'. The marking of Italy's 150th 'birthday' was widely derided for being lacklustre and sombre, marred by shameful political scandals and persistent regional divisions (Fallows, 2011; Poggioli, 2011). Napolitano's response to these declensionist narratives was to uphold the children of immigrants as symbols of a new, economically revitalized Italy.

Yet Afro-Italian women's entrepreneurship is compelling because while these projects often make use of the 'Made in Italy' label, they cannot be fully subsumed within the realm of 'traditional' Italian craft. Instead, designers, stylists, and other cultural entrepreneurs describe their products as 'hybrids' of Italian and African influences – for instance, by combining West African wax prints with Italian sartorial techniques, or African ingredients such as cocoa and shea butters with the practices of Italian organic cosmetics laboratories. These enactments of hybridity and cultural fluency (Carter, 2013), which position Afro-Italian women entrepreneurs as 'cultural mediators' (Panzarella, 2017), are often cited by outside observers as evidence that 'Africa' and 'Italy' are not mutually exclusive categories. In other words, instead of constituting a threat (i.e., of insufficient loyalty to the Italian nation), the diasporic networks of Afro-Italians have the potential to revitalize a stagnant Italian nation that has been insular and insufficiently cosmopolitan for much of its recent history.

At a panel discussion composed of prominent citizenship reform activists at a 2017 cultural festival in Giavera (just outside the north-eastern Italian city of Treviso), a lively conversation erupted among the panellists about this sort of international outlook among the children of

immigrants in Italy. The discussion took place mere steps away from the festival's Afro Beauty and Fashion Expo, which featured booths for nine Afro-Italian fashion designers, hair product vendors, and stylists. Bruno, the white Italian journalist moderating the panel, opened the discussion by noting that the 'new generation of Italians' seated before him (and, it was implied, present at the Expo) represented the resources of the world, something that Italy needed desperately at this moment: 'This country is getting older, and is in need of a younger world that has capacities not just in terms of work but also in terms of creativity'. Later in the conversation, a Moroccan activist noted that these 'new generations' could act as a cultural bridge by engaging in international projects that linked Italy to the rest of the world. A Moroccan educator took the microphone and joked that white Italians are often monolingual. An Ecuadorian organizer concurred, observing that multilingualism (a skill that most children of immigrants in Italy share) is good for business.

These arguments take on a unique valence in Italy. Since national unification at the end of the nineteenth century, efforts to define Italian national-racial identity have had to contend with Italy's proximity to the African continent (Giuliani, 2014). The extent to which Italians could be considered truly 'white' due to centuries of Mediterranean mixing was subject to heated debate (Guglielmo & Salerno, 2012). Yet this Italo-Mediterranean 'hybridity' has not always been understood as a problem of racial impurity; at times, it has also been vaunted as the country's unique strength (De Donno, 2006), a legitimation for colonial expansion (Fuller, 2007), or a rationale for postcolonial economic cooperation between Italy and specific African countries (Giglioli, 2017). In a sense, the entrepreneurs and activists at Giavera were making claims to a particular understanding of Italianness – one that sees the current insularity of Italians as a deviation from a much longer history of Mediterranean mixing and exchange. Many Afro-Italian entrepreneurs in fact assert that their connections to a transnational Black diaspora can restore Italy to its true status as a cosmopolitan nation.

Conclusion

The case of Afro-Italian women's entrepreneurship provides a unique window into contestations over the racial and gendered boundaries of Europe. The explosion of gendered Afro-business in Italy cannot be understood separately from unfolding debates about citizenship, migration, and the symbolic and material boundaries of European nations. After all, the resurgence of ethnic absolutism (Gilroy, 1993) in Europe affects not just migrants but also their Europe-born children: Regardless of how many generations they are removed from the initial act of migration, these so-called 'new generations' are perpetually regarded as Europe's outsiders according to the legacies of colonialism, enslavement, and imperialism (Mains et al., 2013; Raeymaekers, 2014). As such, they are implicated in wider struggles over the differentiation between 'legitimate' European citizens suffering in the aftermath of austerity, and 'illegitimate' non-European bodies who constitute a threat to national integrity and economic prosperity.

But what does it mean when economic activity becomes a cipher for the tentative inclusion of young Afro-Italians within the Italian nation? Is the precarious inclusion of Black subjects now predicated on the extent to which they can serve as labouring bodies for the good of an Italian 'common culture' (Keaton, 2006)? Many activists are now troubled by what they perceive as a new form of colonial extraction, wherein Black women's bodies and labour are conscripted as

the raw materials from which European nations can be (re)built or (re)produced. At a time of widespread national pessimism, young Afro-Italian entrepreneurs are marshalled by politicians and journalists as a constituency that could potentially 'save' or 'revitalize' a stagnant Italy.

Nonetheless, Afro-Italian participation in entrepreneurial ventures cannot be dismissed as mere 'selling out', nor can it be fully explained by the totalizing logics of 'neoliberal citizenship'. Any engagement with this phenomenon must attend to negotiations and limited openings, while also maintaining a structural critique that does not immediately look to the market (or national inclusion) for liberation. This is what Stuart Hall in the inaugural issue of the New Left Review called 'imaginative resistances of people who have to live within capitalism' (Hall, 1960). Afro-Italian women are not 'dupes' (Tate, 2016, p. 12), nor are they victims of false consciousness. Rather, they are taking advantage of fissures in the current political order, combining their strategies of economic survival with practices of Black diasporic connection, claims to Italian citizenship via the 'Made in Italy' label, and creative reconfigurations of Italianness.

In Demonic Grounds, Katherine McKittrick writes that 'black lives are necessarily geographic, but also struggle with discourses that erase and despatialize their sense of place' (McKittrick, 2006, p. xiii). In Italy, the children of African and Afro-Latinx immigrants who were born in Italy are frequently characterized as nè carne nè pesce, tragically caught between two worlds with no place to call home. In this article, I have sought to trouble these sedentarist logics (Malkki, 1992) by showing how Afro-Italian women remake 'Italian' national space as their own, while also linking it up to a broader set of transnational Black diasporic interconnections. Yet the conditions of possibility for Black spatial politics are not identical across all contexts. Black geographies has been predominantly concerned with North American 'plantation futures' (McKittrick, 2013), where Afrodescendants in the afterlife of slavery experience various forms of 'second-class citizenship'. In Italy, where Afrodescendants are not recognized as citizens at all, Afro-Italians have markedly different relationships to the nation and the 'promise' of national membership. Globalizing Black geographies and provincializing North America thus means contending with diverse entanglements of race and nation, as well as a plurality of Black spatial praxes and forms of contestation.

Notes

1. I use the term 'Afro-Italian' in this article to refer to people of African descent who were born, raised, or spent a significant portion of their lives in Italy (including the children of African and Afro-Latinx migrants, and individuals of mixed backgrounds).
2. On the methodological challenges of estimating the size of the Afro-Italian population, (see Hawthorne, 2017, 161).
3. Due to a national citizenship law that confers Italian citizenship on the basis of the principle of jus sanguinis (right of blood), the children of immigrants who are born in Italy are not automatically granted Italian citizenship at birth. Instead, according to Law no. 91 of 1992, the children of immigrants must wait until their eighteenth birthday to apply for Italian citizenship, at which point they have a one-year window to assemble documentary proof of continuous residence in Italy from birth (Marchetti, 2010; Zincone, 2006).

4. I thank Heather Merrill for sharing these important insights regarding the relationship between entrepreneurship and labour organising in Italy.

5. Rising tuition fees at Italian public universities, another example of the neoliberalisation of the Italian public sector, renders higher education an inaccessible route to the permesso di soggiorno for many adult children of immigrants in Italy (Olssen & Peters, 2005; Scacchi, Benozzo, Carbone, & Monaci, 2017).

6. YoungAfro-Italianwomenentrepreneurshaveplayedanimportantroleinthedevelopment of e-commerce and social media content production in Italy. The Internet allows them to save money on material overhead costs, and also helps them to overcome the geographical dispersion that characterizes the Black presence in Italy. The tech savvyness of many Afro-Italians is significant considering that Internet penetration rates in Italy have lagged behind other European countries; in Italy, immigrant communities often lead 'native' Italians in certain digital communication practices (Premazzi, 2010).

7. My father is African American and my mother is a white Italian who grew up near Milan. As a result, I have Italian citizenship by virtue of the same citizenship law that disenfranchises many of my Afro-Italian interlocutors in Italy.

8. Competitions for state positions based on public exams.

9. Sylvia Yanagisako (2013, 67) and Lisa Rofel have explored the ways in which Italian textile
and clothing firms attempt to 'transfer the prestige and value of 'Made in Italy' to 'Designed in Italy' as they increasingly turn to joint ventures with Chinese entrepreneurs to export manufacturing to China.

10. It is important to note that discussions about the Italian brain drain typically include only 'ethnic' Italians, despite the fact that large numbers of children of immigrants have also left Italy in the wake of the economic crisis for countries such as the United Kingdom. One exception to this trend can be found in the short documentary series 'The Expats', created by Italian-Haitian Johanne Affricot. Each episode of 'The Expats' tells the story of an Afro-Italian creative who has moved abroad in search of greater opportunities. See http:// theexpats.griotmag.com/en/about/.

11. In one notable example, the young Burkinabe Madi Sakande was celebrated on the national television program 'Mi Manda Rai Tre' for saving a failing Italian refrigeration company. Like Evelyne Afaawua, Sakande was also a winner of a MoneyGram Award for immigrant entrepreneurship in Italy. See https://www.facebook.com/mimandarai3/videos/10158673134395252/.

Acknowledgments

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