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Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8s6894j7>

Journal

Gender Place & Culture, 30(3)

ISSN

0966-369X

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Publication Date

2023-03-04

DOI

10.1080/0966369x.2022.2064836

Peer reviewed

Black Mediterranean geographies: translation and the mattering of Black Life in Italy

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I weave together insights from Black and postcolonial feminist theory and Black geographies to think through the theoretical and political provocations offered by the concept of the Black Mediterranean. First, I discuss the notion of the Black Mediterranean, and how it both draws upon and extends Paul Gilroy's Black Atlantic. Then, I turn to consider how the Black Mediterranean complicates universalizing narratives that read Blackness solely through the geographies of racial slavery and the plantation. From there, I reflect on the fraught but necessary work of translating Blackness across distinct yet interconnected global geographies and histories of racial formation. Finally, I conclude with lessons the Black Mediterranean offers for abolitionist, antiracist, anticolonial, and no-border struggles unfolding across the world in this political moment. The experiences of Black Italians (who are racialized subjects, former colonial subjects, and have direct connections to migration and border regimes) demonstrate the importance of developing more capacious political formations that are not oriented on descent-based, identitarian claims but rather on shared political visions, intertwined histories of struggle and resistance, and nonlinear diasporic entanglements that disrupt state systems of categorization.

In the wake of the 2015 Mediterranean refugee crisis, a growing number of scholars across a broad swath of disciplines has increasingly turned to the Black Mediterranean as an analytical framework for understanding the historical and geographical specificities of Blackness in the Mediterranean region. This work draws upon and extends Robert Farris Thompson and Paul Gilroy's powerful theorizations of the Black Atlantic by asking how Blackness is constructed, lived, and transformed in a region that has been alternatively understood as a cultural and economic crossroads at the heart of European civilization, a source of dangerous racial contamination, and—more recently—as the deadliest border crossing in the world (Gilroy 1993; Hawthorne 2022; Thompson [1984] 2010). At the same time, the Black Mediterranean is not the basis for bounded comparison with the racial

regimes of North America or the Black Atlantic—in other words, it does not represent a claim to Mediterranean incommensurability or exceptionalism.¹ Instead, in my work I argue that the Mediterranean—which currently occupies a relatively marginal position in global theorizations of racisms that are typically oriented on North America or the North Atlantic—is in fact a deeply relational space that offers powerful and urgent insights about the organization of the modern world. And indeed, it is urgent that we begin to consciously provincialize the North Atlantic (and the United States in particular) when we talk about global histories of racisms, as well as Black subjectivity, resistance, and livingness.

In this paper, I weave together insights from Black and postcolonial feminist theory and Black geographies to think through the theoretical and political provocations offered by the concept of the Black Mediterranean. I am especially interested in the relationships between nation and citizenship, Italianness and Blackness, and Italian national culture and transnational Blackness—all as contested terrains of struggle in which discourses of kinship, descent, and birthright are always at stake.² I argue that new solidaristic political formations in the Black Mediterranean (which are, in many cases, led by Black women working outside of the formal academy) can challenge heteropatriarchal, arborescent constructions of national citizenship as ‘racial family’ (Malkki 1992; see also Bosniak 2008; Shachar 2009; Stevens 2011). Their mobilizations should also prompt all of us to take more seriously the insidious entanglements of anti-Black racism, (post)coloniality, and border fortification on a global (rather than purely regional or methodologically nationalist) scale.

When I specify feminist theories and approaches, I do not only refer to the study of women and women’s activism, but also more broadly to the ways that gendered discursive practices suffuse normative understandings of nation and racial kinship. In other words, in my work I understand gender as a powerful ‘analytic category’ (Scott 1986), which can help us understand relationships of power as articulated through the entanglements and mutual constitutions of race, gender, citizenship, and nation. In addition, my work is grounded in feminist praxis. This approach derives from feminist epistemology and research ethics (McKittrick 2020; Collins 2002; Haraway 1988; Harding 2004); specifically, the insight that not only are we always ‘knowing’ from somewhere, but that the spatiality of knowing itself can be a generative starting point from which to theorize. I am the daughter of a white Italian woman from Trescore (about one hour from Milan) and a Black American man who was born in rural Virginia and grew up in Oakland. My parents met in Italy, where my father was stationed after being drafted into the U.S. army. They married in Italy in 1976 and eventually moved to California, where I was born. Our household was bilingual (in fact, I spoke Italian before I spoke English), and I grew up spending my summers (and often winters) with my mother’s family in northern Italy. In other words, I came to this

research because my own lived experiences have been shaped by multiple intersections of diasporic Blackness and Italianness—in fact, the roots and routes of my family tie me both to the trans-Atlantic slave trade and, because my white Italian grandfather fought in the Italian colonial wars in Libya, the history of Italian colonialism on the African continent.

However, while my Black Italian interlocutors and I shared many experiences of everyday racism (for instance, the all-too-common questions ‘But where are you really from?’ and ‘How did you learn to speak Italian so well?’), I was careful to design my research in a way that was closely attuned to questions of diasporic difference. Indeed, the divergences between our Italian Blacknesses also spoke to the uneven distribution of power, resources, and mobility across the global Black diaspora. I have an American passport and an U.S. academic affiliation, both of which condition my ability to cross geopolitical borders and move between different sorts of institutional spaces in Italy with comparative ease. In addition, the same nationality law that has disenfranchised so many Black Italians is precisely what allowed me have automatic Italian citizenship at birth despite the fact that I was born in California. I am an Italian citizen simply because my mother is also an Italian citizen—yet another example of the mutual imbrication of race, gender, kinship, and citizenship. These resonances and dissonances between my experiences of Black Italianness and those of my interlocutors became the experiential basis for a number of collaborative projects we developed in Italy, both within and outside academia.

This article is organized in four parts. First, I discuss the notion of the Black Mediterranean, and how it both draws upon and extends Gilroy’s Black Atlantic. Then, I move on to consider how the Black Mediterranean complicates universalizing narratives that read Blackness solely through the geographies of racial slavery and the plantation. From there, I reflect on the fraught but necessary work of translating Blackness across distinct yet interconnected global geographies and histories of racial formation. Finally, I conclude with some lessons that the Black Mediterranean offers for abolitionist, antiracist, anticolonial, and no-border struggles unfolding across the world in this political moment.

The Black Mediterranean

As an analytic, the Black Mediterranean draws on the works of Thompson and Gilroy to ask how we can think of the Mediterranean as another oceanic route through which Black subjectivities are forged, lived, and contested (Gilroy 1993; Thompson [1984] 2010). What does it mean to de-center the Atlantic as singularly generative of the Black diaspora? The Black Mediterranean, as I understand it, provides us with a way to attend to the historical and geographical specificities of multifarious forms of Black life, to think about alternative genealogies and technologies of racisms (and resistance), and work out alternative political horizons beyond the nation-state.

It is important to remember that in Black Marxism, Cedric Robinson actually begins his global history of racial capitalism squarely in the Mediterranean basin—from the influential trade and financial centers of the Italian Peninsula’s maritime republics, to the systems of plantation cultivation and slave labor in the islands of the Mediterranean Sea ([1983] 2000). Indeed, as Robin D.G. Kelley wrote in his foreword to the 2000 edition of Black Marxism, ‘Robinson... developed a conception of the Black Mediterranean as a precondition to the Black Atlantic and the making of Europe itself’ (2000, xix). Contemporary literature on the Black Mediterranean now intervenes by building upon Robinson to show that the Black Mediterranean is no longer simply a defunct precondition that has been supplanted by North Atlantic regimes of racial capitalism, but is in fact an ongoing, living site of the reproduction of racisms, Black subjectivities, and resistance.

And foregrounding these multiple historic and ongoing connections between sub-Saharan Africa and Italy via the Mediterranean has the potential to reorient our understanding of European modernity itself. As Kelley writes, ‘the exorcising of the Black Mediterranean is about the fabrication of Europe as a discrete, racially pure entity solely responsible for modernity, on the one hand, and the fabrication of the Negro, on the other’ (2000, xiv) The work of historians of Black Europe, such as Olivette Otele (2021), has demonstrated that re-inserting Blackness and Black life into the story of Euro-Mediterranean modernity is not reducible to a mere liberal politics of representation; rather, following Kelley, it also undermines the dangerous historical assumptions that undergird European racial nationalisms. A critical and geographically relational re-reading of the Mediterranean matters precisely because the Mediterranean has been primarily framed in Eurocentric philosophy and historiography as the cradle of a presumably ‘white,’ ‘Christian,’ and ‘Western’ European civilization.

The research collective of which I am a member, the Black Mediterranean Collective, came into being after the 2015–2016 migrant ‘crisis’ in the Mediterranean. As an interdisciplinary group of scholars studying racism, colonialism, Blackness, and the politics of migration and citizenship in Italy, we noticed that most academic and journalistic commentary on the migrant crisis addressed the multiple violence of European border regimes as violations of an abstract, shared, universal humanism. These same reports hardly ever remarked upon the fact that the majority of the people arriving to Italy via the Central Mediterranean route were Black immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa (and, in many cases, with direct post/colonial ties to Italy)—or if they did, this was noted in passing, rather than as an essential part of the story. Of the largely U.S.-based commentary that did focus on the Blackness of the refugees and asylum-seekers, there was often an unsettling tendency to uncritically impose the geographies of the Middle Passage upon what was happening in the Mediterranean. Dissatisfied with both approaches, we began to ask how an analysis of the refugee ‘crisis’ might shift if we started

our stories from the Mediterranean as an historical and ongoing site for the reproduction of racial capitalism and Black diasporic subjectivities.

Most of the work being done explicitly under the banner of the Black Mediterranean thus far has been focused on Italy. This does not mean taking for granted Italy as a bounded national space (which the Mediterranean framing itself would analytically preclude [Chambers 2008]). Rather, it entails foregrounding the ways that notions of citizenship and difference in Italy have been worked out in relation to its perceived, liminal racial position in the Mediterranean basin since the time of Italian national unification at the end of the nineteenth century to the present Mediterranean refugee ‘emergency’ (Brambilla 2014). Still, it is important to note that Italy by no means exhausts the geographies of the Black Mediterranean. There is fascinating, emerging scholarship that touches on the Black Mediterranean geographies of Spain, Greece, and Portugal (Sánchez-Pardo 2011; Murray 2021). And as anthropologist Ampson Hagan reminds us, inquiry into the Black Mediterranean must also include the other side of the Mediterranean Sea as well (2017). His own work, for instance, addresses the racial violence faced by Black migrants as they cross the Sahel and Sahara en route to the southern shores of the Mediterranean. In doing so, he raises challenging questions about the reproduction of anti-Black racisms on the African continent, legacies of European colonialism, and the telescoping of EU border regimes beyond the Schengen Zone (see also Carney 2021). So, in short, there are many more of these Black Mediterranean stories to tell.

The afterlives of slavery and plantation futures

A central line of inquiry in Black Studies broadly, and Black Geographies specifically, addresses the ways that plantation-based racial chattel slavery shape ongoing racial-spatial arrangements in the present. This work is vast, varied, and multidisciplinary, and considers:

1. Sedimentations of plantation slavery in present-day physical landscapes and in contemporary modes of socio-political organization, for instance in the regimes of discipline and punishment encompassed by the intertwined systems of policing, surveillance, and mass incarceration;
2. The mutual imbrication of slavery with the production of modern ontological systems of categorization and hierarchization that continue to determine value and access to full ‘humanness’;
3. The ways modern understandings of gender, gender difference, and related social systems such as kinship and the heteropatriarchal family were articulated through slavery and the ungendering of Black flesh during the Middle Passage (Spillers 1987);

4. The connections between racial disparities in the present—in health, education, incarceration, to name just a few areas—and the violence of slavery and the other ‘peculiar institutions’ that descended from it (e.g., Black Codes, convict leasing, Jim Crow, segregation, mass incarceration [Wacquant 2000]);

5. The contextualization of slavery in the formation of Black subjectivities, resistance, and rebellion;

6. The question of repair—namely, what is owed for the world-historical violence of slavery, and how and to whom the debt of racial capitalist violence should be repaid.

Within this wide-ranging scholarship, there are a range of approaches for thinking about the ways that racial slavery and the plantation continue to shape our present world. Saidiya Hartman famously theorized the afterlives of slavery as a ‘racial calculus and political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago,’ one which continues to imperil Black lives through ‘skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment’ (2008, 6). What is key for Hartman is that slavery did not end in freedom, but instead in the rearrangement and reconfiguration of Black servitude in other forms. By disrupting a simplistic, liberal teleological narrative of historical progression from captivity and bondage to freedom, Hartman’s work teaches us how to contend with the ways that slavery’s legacies continue to shape the ‘unmattering of Black life’ in the present (Crenshaw 2020).

Yet a reckoning with the afterlives of slavery does not only have to take the form of an accounting of Black death and dying—indeed, it is also possible to place an emphasis on the life in afterlife. In her conceptualization of ‘plantation futures,’ McKittrick acknowledges the continued salience of plantocratic logics in ‘the operation of both contemporary capital [and] the ever-present reality of anti-Blackness’ (Lewis 2020, 42), while also working to escape an autopoietic system of meaning that endlessly recapitulates and reproduces Black death (McKittrick 2011, 2013). The plantation is such a central analytic in Black Geographies scholarship precisely because it illuminates the spatial dynamics of racial capitalism in its many post-1492 configurations (Lewis 2020, 42–43), as well as the ongoing struggles of Black communities to craft freedom as a place through changing relationships with land and labor (Gilmore 2017). Indeed, for McKittrick, the work of scholars like Hartman can also reveal the ways that Black objectification—as instantiated and materialized through the geographies of the Middle Passage and plantation slavery—also ‘provided the conditions through which Blackness is rearticulated as rebelliously diasporic’ (2016, 2020, 13). In other words, the plantation is not only a socio-spatial disciplinary apparatus, but it is also a political technology of subjectivation. I thus understand McKittrick as making a set of arguments about what happens when we continue to write and

re-write the history of slavery and the plantation only as inaugural of Black death, Black oppression, the destruction of the Black body:

The intellectual work of honoring complex racial narratives that name struggles against death can be, paradoxically, undermined by the analytical framing that dwells on and concretizes racial violence. The conceptual difficulty lies in the ways in which descriptions of racial violence actually contribute to the ongoing fragmentation of human relationships (2016, 15).

This leads her to assert that ‘black life—not just black survival—informs modernity’ (McKittrick 2016, 13, 2020). This is a fundamentally relational analysis that—drawing on Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s own orientation toward human relationality for understanding both prison expansion and abolitionist activism (McKittrick 2011, 959)—resists ontological claims about Blackness and Black geographies as the constitutive ‘outside’ to racialized modernity.

Geography—and a Black feminist geographic praxis specifically that is oriented on collaboration, relationality, and a fierce love for Black life—is central to the way McKittrick articulates plantation futures. And yet, as she explained in a recent dialogue with Nick Mitchell, we must also be careful to not conflate every contemporary phenomenon or institution (for instance, the university) with the plantation, but rather to speak about the ways that modern systems may contain within them expressions of plantocratic ideas (McKittrick and Mitchell 2021). This move seems subtle, but it is enormously theoretically and politically consequential. As she explains in ‘On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place’:

... as the plantation provides the future through which contemporary racial geographies and violences make themselves known, it is precisely within our collective plantation futures that fractured and multiple (black and non-black) perspectives on place and belonging are fostered and debated (2011, 950).

The fact that systems of domination are never totalizing, that geographies are always contested and alterable, and that Black life always remain in excess of racial violence, is deeply politically consequential because it means that these fissures can become meaningful terrains of struggle.

The majority of this work has unfolded in the context of North America, which raises important questions about the extent to which these insights can be stretched (in the Fanonian sense [(1961) 2007, 5]) to the Black Mediterranean. Even within the study of plantation slavery and its afterlives or futures, there are important distinctions to be drawn between, for instance, the southeastern United States, the Caribbean, or Brazil—they cannot all be subsumed within one another. If we are to take seriously the multiplicity and plurality of Black geographies, as they are both shaped by and simultaneously in excess of plantocratic ideas and spatialities (Bledsoe and Wright 2018; Henderson 2022), what happens when we shift our analytical gaze to

a part of the world where most Black people are not in fact the descendants of the enslaved?

This is true of much, if not most, of the Black diaspora in Europe today, and so this question has become a central concern in my work. Even in the UK, where the Black population once primarily comprised Caribbean migrants who were postcolonial British subjects and descendants of the enslaved, today Afro-Caribbeans have been far surpassed by immigrants from the African continent and their children ('Afro-Caribbeans/Black British' 2015). In terms of physical landscapes, European countries do not have the same architectures and modes of material socio-spatial arrangement that are tied to 'settlement-plantation' geographies (King 2015). This is, of course, due to the international division of racialized labor characterized by the trans-Atlantic slave trade—which in turn enabled a geographical sleight of hand that has allowed Europe to spatially silo slavery as something that happened 'out there,' in the Americas.

Over the past decade, I have watched as the children of African immigrants in Italy have increasingly begun to organize and mobilize around a distinct political subjectivity as 'Black Italians.' And in this process, many have articulated a complicated relationship to the history of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the plantation. For most Black Italians, plantation slavery does not form a direct part of their immediate histories (although, this is a different story for the children of Afro-Latinx immigrants in Italy [García Peña 2016]). Rather, they orient their community narratives on specific African countries, experiences of (post/neo)-colonial domination and resistance, and family histories of trans-Mediterranean migration. The following three brief anecdotes reveal the range of ways in which I have witnessed Black Italians position themselves in relation to the history the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the plantation.

1. Descent: When I began my research in Italy in the early 2010s, the Black Italian movement was still relatively nascent and, as such, there was still a great deal of discussion and debate among Black youth who were born and raised in Italy about the proper terms of collective identification (e.g. Black Italians, Afro-Italians, etc.). At that time, some of my friends asserted that prefixes such as 'Black' or 'Afro' were not appropriate for the Italian context because Afro-descendants in Italy had actual countries of origin on the African continent. 'Black' and 'Afro,' they continued, only made sense in the United States, where Black Americans could not trace their ancestry back to specific African countries or ethnic groups.

2. Rhizomes: At the same time, many other Black Italians I spoke to were less invested in drawing sharp distinctions between Black American and Black Italian experiences based on biological kinship. Instead, they

were increasingly thinking beyond linear, gendered family trees to consider rhizomatic relationships and multifarious entry points into global diasporic community. For instance, the Italian-Ghanaian founder of Nappytalia (the first-ever Italian-language online resource for the care of natural Black hair) also made a point on her website to feature stories about the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the practices by which enslaved Black women cared for their hair and used hairstyles as tools of resistance (Hawthorne 2019). While she still emphasized the importance of crafting a specifically Italian language and lexicon for contending with Black Italian experiences of racism and misogynoir, she nonetheless saw the trans-Atlantic slave trade as also a part of her history because of the way it inaugurated the global spread of ideas about Blackness and gender embodiment (Frisina and Hawthorne 2018).

3. Entangled Space-Times: Finally, Black women's literature in Italy has also become a rich site through which Black Italians are engaging with the relationship between Atlantic and Mediterranean trajectories of Blackness. One notable example of this move can be found in Italian-Somali novelist Igiaba Scego's book *La linea del colore* (2020). *La Linea del colore* (The Color Line) weaves together the stories of Lanafu Brown—a Black American woman in the nineteenth century who is the daughter an Afro-Haitian father and a Chippewa mother, and eventually becomes a world-renowned painter in Rome—and Leila, a Somali-Italian art curator who is organizing an exhibition of Brown's paintings in the present ('La Linea Del Colore' 2020). The title of Scego's novel recalls W. E. B. Du Bois' assertion that 'the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line' ([1903] 2018, 5). Yet the story also hearkens to Du Bois' later articulation of diasporic connection as oriented not on biological kinship but instead on a shared social heritage of struggle ([1940] 2011). Scego's novel thus provides yet another approach for weaving together stories of trans-Atlantic and trans-Mediterranean voyages, histories and legacies of colonialism, and Black resistance without flattening or collapsing one into the other.

There are profound tensions that cut across these three modalities of descent, rhizomes, and entangled space-times. Black Italians are striving to assert the distinctiveness of their lived experiences, while also avoiding the pitfalls of an Italian exceptionalism that reifies the bounded Italian nation-state with statements such as 'We cannot be racist because we did not have slavery or Jim Crow.' How are we to acknowledge historical and geographical specificity without reproducing the same kinship-destroying systems of ungendering, discussed by Hortense Spillers (1987), that were central to the violence of the Middle Passage (e.g. 'You are not like us because you do not know where you came from')? How are we to recognize the global significance of trans-Atlantic slavery, while also acknowledging the narrations of Black Italians' own lived experiences—which usually do not foreground slavery?

Some recent scholarship has addressed these themes by situating the racism of European border and citizenship regimes within the legacies of slavery and the plantation—notably, Christina Sharpe’s reading of the Black Mediterranean through the wake of slavery and the semiotics of the slave ship (2016). Yet, there is still an opportunity to engage with the more affective or phenomenological dimensions of what it might actually mean to live in the wake of slavery for these differently-sited diasporic communities, or even what these afterlives look like in the context of particular (in this case) Italian histories, beyond a broader set of world-historical transformations. How can we move these conversations beyond the realm of theoretical abstraction? These were questions I asked myself during the 2015–2016 Mediterranean refugee ‘crisis,’ when a number of observers in the United States juxtaposed the famous diagram of the slave ship *Brookes* (Wood 2000; ‘Diagram of the “Brookes” Slave Ship’ n.d.)—which became an iconic image in the antislavery movements of the eighteenth century—with aerial shots of overcrowded migrant boats adrift in the vast blue of the Mediterranean. What work do these visual comparisons perform, and what sorts of analyses do they obscure or elide?

Beyond Italy, a number of scholars have attempted to contend with the broader range of relationships to the history and afterlives of plantation slavery across the global Black diaspora. Anthropologists Bayo Holsey and Paulla Ebron, for instance, have both traced the often-divergent ways that Black American roots tourists and West Africans relate to the history of slavery, as well as the physical sites of the slave trade along the West African coast (Holsey 2008; Ebron 2009). This kind of work is tied to a number of questions that animate Black diaspora studies, namely: what constitutes unity or connection across diaspora; how the particularities of place shape the realization of diverse diasporic relations; and how contradiction and tension manifest in diaspora just as often as (if not more than) harmony and accord.

These concerns have been taken up by scholars working in the Black feminist tradition as a mode of questioning the ways that dominant understandings of diaspora often implicitly gender the diasporic subject as male. Jacqueline Nassy Brown, for instance, argues that Paul Gilroy’s emphasis on seafaring and the metaphor of the ship in *The Black Atlantic* is an incitement to consider the gendered ideologies that undergird the production of diasporic space—for instance, the gendering of place or ‘the local’ as female (Brown 2005).” Other scholars have argued, relatedly, that Gilroy’s conception of diaspora does not always fully acknowledge the realities of unequally gendered access to diasporic mobility, and caution of a possible ‘androcentrism latent in Gilroy’s analyses’ (Helmreich 1992,245; see also Clifford 1994). It is important to think about diaspora in terms of difference precisely because, as Brown writes, ‘the association of diaspora with worldwide Black kinship, as it were, can actually render certain kinds of Black subjects, experiences, histories, and identities invisible’ (2009, 201).

It is for this reason that Michelle Wright argues against dominant narratives of Blackness that use a linear narrative of progress oriented on what she calls the ‘Middle Passage Epistemology,’ which ‘points to the Atlantic slave trade as the crucial moment that separated blacks in the West from their ancestral origins, and then locates all preceding and subsequent events, from the classical world to the modern day, in relation to the Middle Passage’ (2006, 139). In Europe, she argues, the Middle Passage begins to lose significance because the majority of Black Europeans did not arrive to Europe through the Middle Passage; instead, their varied histories are often more closely tied to colonialism and World War II. Drawing on insights from Black queer and feminist theory, Wright rejects the search for stable origins and the patriarchal, biocentric, and arborescent models of descent-based kinship that such a search inscribes. Like Brown, Wright is attempting to make space for ‘definitions of Blackness that do not exclude, isolate, or stigmatize’—a task that she argues is urgent because the ‘increasing proliferation of diverse Black communities and individuals whose histories and current status as “hyphenated” Black identities across the globe call for representation and inclusion’ (Wright 2015, 5).

So, with all this in mind, are the plantation and slavery productive ways to think about the politics of Blackness in Italy? This is connected to a second question: when we are talking about the afterlives of slavery or about plantation futures, are we seeking out immediate forms of connection (whether spatial or kin-based), or are we inquiring into the broader ways that the system of racialized, chattel plantation slavery shaped global processes of racial categorization and hierarchization? To put it another way, how can we conceptualize slavery and the plantation without either reducing their relevance to matters of bio-genealogical kinship or rendering them little more than vague metaphors for anti-Blackness in general? This also matters because in the European political context, comparisons to the trans-Atlantic slave trade are highly politically fraught. Right-wing European politicians and anti ‘modern-day slavery’ campaigners frequently draw superficial connections between the trans-Atlantic slave trade and modern-day migrations across the Mediterranean to justify the increasing fortification of the Mediterranean border on a supposedly humanitarian basis (Nimako 2015; Stierl 2019; Woods and Saucier 2015).

I am still thinking through these questions in my own work. However, I see two possible ways in which we can begin to answer them. The first is by thinking about the world system that was inaugurated by the trans-Atlantic trade—the ‘North Atlantic Universals’ that are actually grounded in specific, material histories of racialized dispossession, expropriation, and exploitation centered on the plantation economies that yoked together the Americas, Europe, and Africa in violent trans-continental intimacies (Lowe 2015; Saucier and Woods 2014; Trouillot 2002). After all, as Walter Rodney famously argued ([1972] 2018), the story of the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its afterlives or

futures is not solely an American one, even if this concept is used most often to talk about the United States. Slavery depopulated and ravaged the social, economic, cultural, and political systems of the African continent, and it was tied to the production of a system of racialized humanism that undergirds global modernity. In addition, a recent wave of Black feminist scholarship has insisted upon the importance of linking the study of Black fungibility to Indigenous dispossession in ways that move beyond the binary of labor/land used to distinguish between racial slavery and settler colonialism, via an engagement with the forms of bodily dispossession enacted against Black and Native women (Day 2021; King 2019).

When moved beyond the context of North America, these insights can also help us think about the connections between the legacies of slavery and colonialism on the African continent, and by extension, the political-economic dynamics that have created the conditions of possibility for African migrations across the Mediterranean to Italy from the mid-twentieth century onwards (Danewid 2017). This shift, by extension, also draws our attention to the profound significance of Black anticolonial struggles to the formation of Black European subjectivities. Indeed, Akwugo Emejulu and Francesa Sobande note that the universalization of a particular Black American experience can inadvertently erase ‘the long histories of anti-imperialist struggles of Black European feminists located across various European empires’ (2019, 5).

Second, there is the fact that the financial systems, political economic modalities, and technologies of power that characterize the plantation were tested in the Mediterranean before they were exported across the Atlantic. As Robinson argued, the Italian peninsula (especially Venice and Genoa) was a major hub in the Mediterranean commercial networks connecting the European, African, Arab, and Asian worlds between the thirteenth and sixteenth centuries ([1983] 2000). These networks included a lucrative Mediterranean slave trade that, while not limited to Black Africans (Bono 2016), provided an important source of unfree labor for agricultural outposts across the Mediterranean Sea (Robinson [1983] 2000, 4). This Mediterranean slave trade served as a template for the use of enslaved Black African labor in the colonies of the New World (Robinson [1983] 2000, 16). In addition, Genoese merchants provided the capital that ultimately ‘determined the direction and pace’ of Spanish and Portuguese expansion across the Mediterranean and Atlantic, and the emergence of the trans-Atlantic slave trade itself (Robinson [1983] 2000, 104–5; Saucier and Woods 2014).

This second approach actually represents a ‘flipping’ of the way the relationship between slavery and global Blackness is typically presented. Instead of asking whether we can reflect the racial dynamics of North America and the North Atlantic back onto the Mediterranean region (which, Fatimah El-Tayeb notes, can open up scholars of racism and race in continental Europe

to hyperbolic charges from hostile white European scholars that they are reproducing ‘U.S. cultural imperialism’ [2011, xv–xvi]), it instead asks us to re-insert Mediterranean geographies back into the stories we tell about the global history of racial capitalism. This is the approach taken up by P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon Woods when they argue that the actual, material history of anti-Blackness and slavery in the Mediterranean Basin has been obscured by modern ‘anti-slavery’ movements focused on the contemporary Mediterranean refugee crisis:

Antiblack violence in the Euro-Mediterranean Basin has its roots in the earliest fifteenth century African slave trade and the subsequent ‘voyages of discovery’ that further established European dominance of the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts. The Europeans were soon purchasing cotton and other commodities in India to exchange for slaves in Africa to mine gold in the Americas, swiftly yoking four continents into one global accumulation regime premised on racial violence (2015).

What both of these approaches share is a refusal of any singular, totalizing, or universalizing logics for theorizing the politics of Blackness on a global scale. They each point to the importance of attending to differently-sedimented histories, as well as their multiple global interconnections and articulations. Italy, for example, was part of a global system of race-thinking and racial science in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, embedded in transnational networks of scientific knowledge production that used the Black female body as the material ground for establishing and contesting the boundaries of racial-national identity and citizenship (Caglioti 2017). Cesare Lombroso, today considered the founder of modern criminology, and perhaps Italy’s most famous and prolific ‘home-grown’ racial theorist, had in his collection a painting of Sarah Baartman (Painting of the Venere Ottentota, n.d.)—even though she was never brought to Italy. Nonetheless, it was through his visual dissection of her body (and its comparison with the bodies of southern Italian sex workers) that he penned theories of atavism and criminality that mapped Italianness based on relative distance or proximity from a biocentrally-conceived Black female body (Sòrgoni 2003). Lombroso’s ideas reverberated across the Atlantic to the United States, where his arguments and those of his acolytes influenced the intertwined racialization of Italians and Black Americans and were used to justify restrictions on Italian immigration to the United States (Cazzato 2017; D’Agostino 2002; Guglielmo and Salerno 2012). The fundamental racism of Lombroso’s anthropological criminology thus also shaped the articulation of racial hierarchies and the racialization of crime in the United States.

Translation and the politics of diaspora

The Black Mediterranean is neither a precondition for a racial capitalist order centered on the North Atlantic, nor is it merely derivative of Black Atlantic afterlives of slavery. Instead, it is urgent to study the ongoing reproductions of the Black Mediterranean in the present, along with all of its ongoing,

nonlinear articulations with the Black Atlantic (as well as the Black Pacific, and the Black Indian Ocean). And this in turn raises important questions about the politics of diasporic translation across these diverse yet interrelated geo-historical contexts.

In those relatively rare instances when Black Italian cultural politics and mobilizations reach the attention of international media, this news coverage is frequently framed by an implicit narrative about the geopolitics of the Black diaspora—namely, that Black diasporic politics and mobilizations always begin in the United States (or more broadly, in North America), and then diffuse outwards to influence and inspire Black communities in Europe. These sorts of linear narratives have been subject to extensive critique in the field of Black European Studies, and in particular by Black European scholars, who consistently direct our attention to the uneven distribution of power and privilege across the Black diaspora.

For instance, the field of Black Studies is more institutionally established in the United States than it is in Europe, which has shaped the economies of knowledge production about the Black diaspora and contributed to a condition that some Black European scholars have come to controversially term ‘African American hegemony.’ This is undoubtedly an uncomfortable subject, one whose frictions were discussed and debated by Darlene Clarke Hine, Gloria Wekker, Michelle Wright, and Alexander Weheliye in the germinal edited volume *Black Europe and the African Diaspora* (Hine 2009; Weheliye 2009; Wekker 2009; Wright 2009; see also Hine, Keaton, and Small 2009). One classic and well-known example of this diasporic tension (explored in the same book) is the way that many Black Americans found refuge in France during the interwar years, while France was simultaneously brutally colonizing the African continent (Stovall 2009; Wright 2006). As a coordinator and faculty member of the Black Europe Summer School, a two-week intensive seminar on the Black diaspora in Europe held each summer in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, every year I meet at least one Black American student who is reeling from the bizarre and uncomfortable sensation of feeling ‘American’—and by extension, ‘privileged’—for the first time, upon setting foot in Europe.

Black Europe thus draws our attention to diaspora as both a process and as a relation that often unfolds on unequal footing. Tina Campt, for instance, has critiqued studies of Black Germans that contextualized them solely in relation to Black American history—as individuals at the beginning of a teleological journey toward a ‘real’ Black consciousness (2005). Along similar lines, Fatima El-Tayeb argues that the point is not to identify how Black Europeans have deviated from a ‘normative’ Black experience in North America, but rather to engage with the ways Black European communities productively complicate and pluralize our understandings of Blackness and global Black geographies (2011). It is for this reason that, drawing on Caribbean theories of creolization, El-Tayeb has called for a ‘queering of

ethnicity’ that questions ‘heteronormative, linear narratives of Black identity’ in favor of more international, complex, fractured, and dialogical subjectivities (2011, xlii).

A common theme I encountered among Black Italian activists was the importance of building a language that could attend to the specific contours of anti-Black racism and Black subjectivities in Italy. Many of my interlocutors first looked to the United States for inspiration, but soon found that these models did not map neatly onto their own lived experiences (Hawthorne 2017). At the same time, they struggled with a sense of disconnection from the rest of the global Black diaspora—both because of the invisibilization of Black Italy and Black Italians on a global scale, and because of the linguistic barriers that stymied the ready circulation of diasporic resources.

These challenges echo Brent Hayes Edwards’ observation that a key element in the rise of Black internationalism in the 1920s entailed the difficult task of translating ‘even a basic grammar of Blackness’—a process that was often shot through with ‘unavoidable misapprehensions and misreadings [and] persistent blindnesses and solipsisms’ (2009, 5).

In response to these challenges, Black Italians have embarked on a dual effort. The first involves projects to engage in diasporic translation and build this kind of basic grammar of Italian Blackness—a project in line with Black feminist theorist VèVè Clarke’s notion of diaspora literacy (2009). And the second entails articulating Black Italy to a wider Black diaspora in which they are not reduced to the status of mere ‘junior partners.’ This work is largely being done outside of Italian universities and academia, which remain mostly hostile to the project of Black Studies—a phenomenon that has actually made room for more creative imaginings and practices of Black Italianness that are unbounded by the disciplining demands of institutionalization.

And, importantly, this work has been championed overwhelmingly by Black Italian women who are not always academics but who are actively doing cultural politics—particularly artists, filmmakers, writers, performers, and activists. Indeed, I would argue that this work of diasporic translation—as it unfolds in the interstices of everyday life from living rooms, to anarchist squats, to transnational collaborations, to guerilla translation collectives—is a distinctly feminist praxis, one with diasporic connections to the kind of queer feminist praxis that has grounded the Black Lives Matter movement since its earliest days. It is a mode of Black feminist study and praxis oriented on the creation of communities of care grounded not in profit- or recognition-driven modes of exchange but on the sharing of concepts, languages, strategies, expertise, and diasporic resources as mutual aid (Summers, Hawthorne, and Fromille 2020).

Abolition and the mattering of Black Lives in Italy

After the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020, Black Lives Matter demonstrations quickly spread across the Atlantic Ocean to Europe. From my shelter-in-place in California, I watched as photos of massive Black Lives

Matter demonstrations in Milan circulated far and wide. However, at the same time, I was hesitant about the framework through which these mostly Black Italian-led actions were being reported in the United States. First, contrary to dominant media narratives at the time, this was not actually the first instance in which Black Lives Matter had ‘gone global’—indeed, I have previously written about the summer of 2016 as yet another moment when the language of Black Lives Matter was taken up by Black Italian activists (Hawthorne 2017). Even the seemingly straightforward framing of ‘Black Lives Matter going global’ seemed to elide the unrelenting work Black Italian organizers had been undertaking for over a decade—movement work that sometimes, but not always, was explicitly connected to Black American mobilizations.

Rather than rehearse diffusionist narratives of Black diasporic politics, I want to conclude by suggesting that we begin to shift our focus to understand Black Lives Matter itself as a diasporic resource that is shared back and forth across different diasporic sites—and specifically, in this case, across the Black Atlantic and Black Mediterranean. In the spirit of Doreen Massey’s work on relational place (1994), I see Black Lives Matter as a diasporic resource that unfolds relationally as it settles in diverse geographic contexts, and whose political and ethical demands are constantly being transformed and expanded in the process. For example, while immigrants and foreigners are overrepresented in prisons in Italy (Angel-Ajani 2014), policing and incarceration have not been the primary focus on Black Lives Matter mobilizations in Italy. Instead, conversations about what it means to make Black lives matter in Italy have focused on citizenship as a racial-gendered formation tied to specific histories of Italo-Mediterranean racial formation that structurally ‘dysselect’ the Italian-born children of African immigrants such that, from the perspective of the state, their lives literally do not matter as recognized members of the national community (Wynter 2003). Their mobilizations underscore the fact that citizenship is a profoundly feminist issue, one that is also tied to racist fears about the social reproduction of the Italian nation. Black Italian activists have also argued that Black Lives Matter in Italy must necessarily extend beyond the so-called ‘second-generation’ to include Black refugees and migrants, who face the violence of EU border regimes, racialized neglect in detention centers, and horrific labor exploitation in Italian agricultural camps (Hawthorne and Pesarini 2020; Pesarini 2020). In other words, they are seeking to prefigure a world that is based on the radical understanding that, as abolitionist geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore has stated so powerfully, ‘where life is precious, life is precious’ (Kushner 2019).

Black feminists in Italy have also drawn connections between the unmaterring of Black life in Italy today and the legacies of Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa. In dialogue with efforts to remove Confederate and Columbus statues in the United States, for instance, activists in Italy have staged feminist demonstrations at the statue of the revered Italian journalist

Indro Montanelli in Milan. It is important to note that Montanelli's statue is located in a park bearing his name that is adjacent to Milan's Eritrean Porta Venezia neighborhood, also a site of informal Eritrean refugee encampments in the wake of the 2015–2016 Mediterranean refugee crisis (Hawthorne 2022). Montanelli was a volunteer in the Second Italian-Ethiopian War of 1935–1936, and later wrote about the conflict for his column in the national Italian newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera*. In that column, he denied the Italians' deployment of poisonous gas (a war crime under the Geneva Protocol) during the 'pacification' of Libya and the Italian-Ethiopian war (Messina 2016). Montanelli is also notorious for purchasing a twelve-year-old Eritrean girl as a 'child bride' during his time in Ethiopia. Until his death, he used his public-facing media platforms to fiercely deny (and even mock) allegations that his actions constituted rape because, he claimed, 'European' norms pertaining to childhood and sexuality did not apply in Africa or, by extension, to Black girls (Achtner 2019; Bacha 2019; Coin 2019; *Quando Montanelli Comprò e Violentò Una Bambina Di 12 Anni* n.d.; Tamburri 2020).

The language of abolition has not yet been taken up explicitly as a framework for action in these Black Lives Matter mobilizations, but the activist practices of Black Italians undoubtedly are in that direction. Calls for the abolition of Frontex, the European Border Agency, have become increasingly common (Danewid 2021; Stierl 2020). Indeed, Angela Y. Davis has noted that the carcerality of EU border regimes and immigrant detention structures is connected to the expansion of the prison industrial complex in the United States and the infrastructures of Israeli settler colonialism in Palestine (Davis 2016). In addition, the challenging conversations that Black Italians are having about the possibilities and limits of national citizenship and state recognition as a means for addressing anti-Black racism raise provocative questions about the abolition of citizenship altogether.

The entanglements of racism, citizenship, borders, and colonialism are key to understanding the politics of racism and race in the Black Mediterranean, and they offer important lessons for abolitionist struggles as they are unfolding elsewhere in the world—including the Black Atlantic and North America. Black Italians are racialized subjects, former colonial subjects, and have direct connections to migration and border regimes; their multifaceted cultural politics and activism also intervene directly into feminist questions of nation, kinship, and citizenship. As such, their experiences demonstrate the importance of developing more capacious political formations that are not oriented on descent-based, identarian claims but rather on shared political visions, intertwined histories of struggle and resistance, and nonlinear diasporic entanglements that disrupt state systems of categorization.

Notes

1. I work with an expansive and relational understanding of the Mediterranean that includes not only the countries that immediately border the Mediterranean Sea,

but also the people and regions with historical, cultural, economic, and migratory connections to the Mediterranean (to give one example: postcolonial theorist Iain Chambers notes the centrality of sub-Saharan African gold in the Mediterranean trade networks of the fourteenth century [2008, 137]).

2. For other geographical perspectives on gender, citizenship, and cross-border mobilities in the Mediterranean, see Tamboukou 2021; Vaiou 2012.

3. It is also worth noting that even in the U.S. context, there is ongoing scholarly dialogue about the extent to which ‘the slave past provides a ready prism for apprehending the black political present,’ which, for Stephen Best, turns on the broader historiographical and ethical question of why we must ‘predicate having an ethical relation to the past on an assumed continuity between that past and our present and on the implicit consequence that to study the past is to somehow intervene in it’ (2012, 154).

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the Jan Monk Lecture Committee at the University of Arizona for inviting me to deliver the 2021 Jan Monk Lecture—especially Chris Lukinbeal and Lise Nelson for coordinating my virtual visit, as well as Philana Adora Jeremiah for organizing a lunch chat with graduate students in the Department of Geography at the University of Arizona. Many thanks also to Lena Grip for organizing my presentation of the Jan Monk Lecture at the 2020 American Association of Geographers Annual Meeting, and for giving me the opportunity to publish a revised version of my lecture as an article in *Gender, Place, and Culture*. I would like to thank Donald Moore for his generative comments on an early draft of this article. Conversations with Jovan Scott Lewis also deeply informed my thinking. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation for the faculty and graduate students in the Black Geographies Lab at UC Santa Cruz, with whom I have explored and workshopped many of the ideas that appear in this article.

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