ARTICLES / SAGGI

SILENCE AND RECKONING –
AFRICAN-ITALIANS IN POPULAR CULTURE

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Sommario
Questo articolo sostiene che la decolonizzazione degli studi di italianistica può avvenire attraverso l'identificazione e la critica di modi scontati di pensare al razzismo, al colonialismo e all'italianità. L'articolo discute inoltre il potere razziale moderno-coloniale nell'immaginario quotidiano e popolare e alcuni dei modi in cui viene contestato. L'articolo esamina le rappresentazioni dominanti dell'italianità e della negritudine e le auto-rappresentazioni degli italiani afrodiscendenti, ad esempio nella serie Netflix Zero. L'autore incoraggia gli studiosi d'italianistica a concentrarsi sulla relazionalità del luogo e sulla complessità di ciò che significa essere italiani. Il presente articolo afferma che la decolonizzazione comporta la necessità di fare i conti con il passato del paese e di interrogare le relazioni di potere.

Keywords: Everyday practices, representation, colonialism, immigration, Black Italians, belonging, White resentment, antiblack racism, racism, racial reckoning, decolonisation, White supremacy

> *For these innocent people have no other hope. They are, in effect, still trapped in a history which they do not understand; and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men.*
>
> James Baldwin, "My Dungeon Shook"

FRUTTAIDS

'Do you know what Gabri's mother says if someone tries to eat a piece of fruit without washing it first?

'Be careful! Don't you know that the negri who picked it all have AIDS?'   – Kossi Komla-Ebri, *EmbarRaceMents*

We, and by we *I mean [...] the human species, are all today in the colonial matrix of power. There is no outside of it, and there is no privileged location (ethical or sexual) from which to confront coloniality. For this reason, border dwelling, thinking, doing is the decolonial direction (we are) taking.*
                    – Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality*

In May 2021, PBS NewsHour ran a story about African migrants living in 'slave-like' conditions in Puglia, Southern Italy, a comparison that has become a common trope for African-origin farmworkers who cross the Mediterranean Sea and pick fruit and vegetables for Italian and Europe-wide kitchens. In this story, Nigerian, Ghanaian, Ivorian and Senegalese men and women describe their lived experiences in Italy before and during the pandemic, including being shut out of work, receiving paltry wages, living in inhuman conditions and being socially invisible. They toil in Italian farms and reside in primitive camps, out of sight and mind for most Italians (Raney, 2021). The way these African-origin farmworkers are rendered unseeable and unthinkable in the public mind signals modern-colonial racial taxonomies that are at once taken-for-granted, silenced, and persistent Black spaces (Merrill, 2018). In the Italian public imaginary, like most European public imaginaries, anti-Black colonial ideas that associate foreignness and inferiority with Africans have not been decolonised. There is instead a pervasive, habitual way of defining Italianness and the right to place, belonging and living with dignity – inherited from the European Enlightenment and the practices of slavery and imperialism it involved – as the antithesis of Blackness and life in Africa. With a renewed spirit of protest against racialised power, energised in part by a local sense of resonance with the public murder of George Floyd in the United States of America in May 2020, people of African descent are calling for a reckoning with Italy's racialised past and present. Several generations of people of African descent are challenging dominant images, ideas

and practices that dehumanise and render immigrants, refugees and African Italians invisible, yet denied and silenced (Carter, 2010). These anti-racist and human rights struggles involve efforts to decolonise the Italian mind by challenging dominant representations of Blackness and Italianness that inform public knowledge and encouraging attention to the Black lives currently lived in the shadows.

The women and men picking fruit and vegetables for Italian markets are integral participants in Italian society. They have formed a group called "Ghetto Out" in order to promote their right to live in dignity and the value of their contributions. Ghetto Out has created a canned tomato product called "R'accolto", a word that plays on the idea of 'accoglienza', which means welcome and hospitality and is used to describe the centres (Centro di accoglienza) in multiple Italian cities that receive migrants. 'R'accolto' also means harvest, an appeal to fair trade and labour practices. The new product features a Black hand holding up a tomato, a key ingredient in Italian cuisine and top export product, above the phrase "Land of Freedom". A principal purpose of the campaign is to counter dominant images and narratives of who farmworkers really are and oppose distorting stereotypes that circulate in mainstream media and daily life. Ghetto Out uses symbolic representation to compel Italy to confront its racism and injustice in the fields (Raney, 2021).

The fruit and vegetable pickers in Puglia are but one embodied example of a broad and profound existential crisis Italy has been undergoing since the Cold War ended, when the geopolitical axis shifted from West-East back to a North-South of imperial time and space (Silverstein, 2018). As Italy has transformed from a relatively poor country of out-migration, into a wealthy site of in-migration and growing diversity, its idea of what it means to be Italian is called into question. Can the country continue to proclaim itself as a place of relatively innocent and white, or white-adjacent, 'brava gente' (good people), who have often been treated like childlike siblings by much of the rest of Europe? If so, who and what part of this old Italian narrative are being erased and silenced?

There are now approximately one million African-Italians, born and/or raised in Italy, without Italian citizenship. Along with, or parallel to, farmworkers and others, these so-called 'seconda generazione' are building a vanguard of protest against their political and social

invisibility in Italy, classified as permanent outsiders and prohibited by law from even applying for Italian citizenship until they reach the age of 18 (Hawthorne, 2022). In order to truly transform the habitual racial taxonomies at the foundation of these institutionalised practices, they are urging the country to reckon with its colonial past and, crucially, also its afterlife. With counterparts throughout Europe, the USA and the Caribbean, these African-Italians call for a movement against anti-humanist government policies and for an end to the descent into violence and Fascism they have been experiencing and witnessing for years. How can we talk about decolonising Italian studies without working to advance insight into current internal racialising colonialism and without drawing the full breadth and complexity of Italianness into our teaching and scholarship? What does it really mean for us to decolonise Italian studies?

Decolonising Italian studies: Re-existing

The current movement to decolonise our theories and methods grows out of postcolonial and subaltern studies' questioning and critiquing the very bases of our taken-for-granted knowledge about personhood and society, progress and civilization, democracy and Fascism. This encompasses rigorous critique of modern colonial and racial hierarchies based on systems of social classification that enable claims to Euro-American and white supremacy. We must undertake a careful rethinking and remaking of notions of national identity, race, culture, knowledge and power in our approaches to the study of Italian culture and society, past and present. Decolonising suggests focus on the relationality of place in *Italy's colonial past and present* and re-evaluating the underlying Eurocentric structure that filters out many intertwined lived experiences and perspectives. As Walter Mignolo suggests in the epigraph quoted above, decolonising means delinking from the matrix of power that we are taught to operate within as part of our common sense. It means thinking relationally, not merely by including or incorporating practices and concepts from the "South of the world", but also by becoming aware of the integral relationships and interdependencies amongst all living beings and territories. As Mignolo argues, to decolonise is to unsettle singular authoritativeness, making connections and correlations across places and borders. It means

struggling against the modern colonial order, towards an otherwise' that is pluriversal and interversal instead of universal, disturbing the totality from which Eurocentric linear universals are most often perceived (Mignolo, 2018:3). Decolonising, which is akin to reckoning and involves a kind of *insurgent thought action*, does not mean to resist Western hegemonies but rather to 're-exist' and to redesign and redefine life in conditions of dignity. We may decolonise Italian studies by delinking ourselves from the colonial matrix of power, "constructing paths and praxis toward an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living" (4). What habits of mind and practice have modernity and coloniality embedded in all of us? Identifying these habits, we can learn how coloniality works "to negate, disavow, and deny knowledges, subjectivities, world senses, and life visions" (4). We cannot do this through abstractions alone. Decolonising requires asking about the power relations in who is doing what, where, when, why and how (Pred, 1995). Understanding the underlying epistemological structure of modern, colonial Western civilization and Eurocentrism engenders decoloniality. And this makes it possible for a genuine racial reckoning to take place.

Visual and discursive representations are ubiquitous, expressing and teaching social values and perceptions in social and print media, film and television. As Stuart Hall suggested, representations signal taken-for-granted, yet shared cultural meanings and practices; they signal our collective being (Hall, 2013). Representations teach us who we are and who we are not, who is socially valued and who is not, who is seen and treated as a legitimate member of the collective and who is not. As Hall wrote in his introduction to the second edition of *Representations*,

> In part, we give things meaning by how we *represent* them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualize them, the values we place on them.
> (Hall, Evans & Nixon, 2013:xix)

Building on Antonio Gramsci, Hall argued for the complexification of social theories and problems where Marx's theoretical work was thinnest or the most incomplete, by focusing on specific historical

conjunctures or the political cultural dimensions of social formations. Hegemony is a useful concept in this sort of approach that seeks to make sense of how racial hierarchies are produced and reproduced in a "war of position" in which there's a constant struggle to control the whole structure of society by winning popular consent (Hall, 1996). Hegemony is exercised not only in the domains of the economic and administrative (including military fields) but crucially also in the domains of what Gramsci called "common sense" practice, everyday consciousness or popular thought. Cultural beliefs and knowledge, our common sense, is formed in the grounded terrains of everyday practices and representations. As Italian studies are decolonised for the purpose of re-existing, a crucial question at this historical conjuncture is whether Blackness is represented in Italian society.

Common sense anti-Black representations

When I first began doing ethnographic research in Italy in the early 1990s, the country was grappling with its new status as a place of immigration and there were daily newspaper reports filled with images of what was described as a tsunami of immigrants, especially from Africa. Two dominant gendered images of immigrants took hold, that of the African "Vu Cumpra" and the "Prostitute".

Itinerant street peddlers, often associated with Senegalese and North African men, came to be named 'Vu Cumpra', a denigrating term mocking the trader's limited command of the Italian language. These merchants would set up blankets as makeshift stalls on urban streets and seaside towns, selling a variety of items made in Italy or parts of Africa. Some of these traders were artisans, who sold, for example, wood carvings and masks. Others were market traders in their countries of origin, and yet others engaged in the trade when and if they were out of contracted work in Italian factories or construction sites. Many sought to establish stalls in the local open-air markets, but the licences were hard to come by and required a great deal of local knowledge and inclusion in social networks. So, they would sell their wares along avenues and streets, picking them up rapidly if a carabinieri approached. If the carabinieri caught them, their goods would be seized and they might be jailed and or given expulsion orders (Carter, 1996;

Di Maio, 2005). Men of African origin in Italy came to be popularly associated with the appellation 'Vu Cumpra'.

The other prevalent that image that circulated in the media in the 1990s was of African women as prostitutes and the demand for their services. This representation of African women as sexually loose and/or sex traders became so pervasive that I did not meet a woman of African descent in the 1990s who had not been approached and/or touched while in Italian public places (Merrill, 2004; Ifekwunigwe, 2006). It was noteworthy that many African women who migrated to Italy in the late 1980s and early 1990s and who, like their male counterparts, were often searching for better ways to make a living and take care of their families. Preconceived colonial images connecting Black women with exoticism and sexuality informed the cultural perspectives with which Italians greeted them. A racially hierarchical system of classification informed by the transatlantic slave trade, slavery, travel books, paintings, racial science, Italian and other European colonialisms, colonial films and propaganda had paved the ground for these popular perceptions. This was the case, in spite of the fact that relatively few people of African descent had lived on Italian territory until that time.

Ethnocentric, colonial knowledge of Africa and Africans had circulated to remote European villages. To explain this phenomenon even in the 1950s, James Baldwin wrote about his experiences as the single Black person living in a small Swiss village, the first Black person the villagers had ever seen. Baldwin described the villagers' astonishment upon laying eyes on him, even after people knew his name; he had had friendly conversations with the bistro owner's wife and befriended their son. They could not accept that he was American, in spite of his self-description, believing that he had to be African. It troubled and perplexed Baldwin that he was still seen as a stranger, and he surmised that Europeans did not have the intimate, first-hand relationships with Africans that Americans did, and they therefore viewed Blackness as an abstraction associated with Africa, a place in need of saving by Europeans as part of their 'civilising mission', a sort of absent presence.

Baldwin tried to have compassion for the people who made assumptions and acted in ways they did not seem to understand, having inherited a history that controlled them, a history in which they were taught they were the conquerors and he was the conquered, they had

authority and he did not. These European villagers were unable, Baldwin reasoned, to see and like him as a fellow human being, one of the collective, for

> No one, after all, can be liked whose human weight and complexity cannot be, or has not been, admitted. My smile was simply another unheard-of phenomenon which allowed them to see my teeth – they did not, really, see my smile, and I began to think that, should I take to snarling, no one would notice any difference.
>
> (Baldwin, 2012:165-166)

These relatively isolated Swiss villagers had inherited ('however unconsciously') an understanding of the 'Negro' as not belonging to European society. And because Baldwin was seen as of another place and people, he was in a sense *not really even there to them* (see Merrill, 2018). Baldwin found that, in time, some of the Swiss villagers began to see him as less of a stranger and more of a human being, to wonder more about who he was than about the texture of his hair. They never, however, entirely let go of their ideas that he was *out of place* and a threat to their social order.

Baldwin also reflected on his own responses to the villagers and the impact this was all having on him, the pain it was causing him. He described a feeling of being controlled by the very culture that erased him as a social actor and agent, a human being in European society. He had long felt controlled by American culture, but these Swiss villagers had never set foot in America or even much of the rest of Europe, so why did he have the feeling of also being controlled by their culture? Europe had given birth to America as we know it, and in some ways the villagers had inherited a history they did not seem to question or understand. The villagers were not responsible for this history, wrote Baldwin, and yet they seemed to take for granted their place within and his nonexistence there. He described how they communicated their sense of ownership of place, of belonging there, and his out-of-placeness where he did not have historical claims. He wrote,

> […] They move with an authority which I shall never have; and they regard me, quite rightly, not only as a

> stranger in their village but as a suspect latecomer, bearing no credentials, to everything they have – however unconsciously – inherited. For this village, even were it incomparably more remote and incredibly more primitive, is the West, the West onto which I have been so strangely grafted.   (Baldwin, 2012:168-169)

From his own point of view, Baldwin was not a stranger in Europe. Nevertheless, the villagers perceived him at best with curiosity or suspicion and at worst with pity or the denial of his very being. Baldwin wrestled with what this all meant, how it affected him, and how it impacted other people like him (Baldwin, 2012). The very existence of the Black subject as part of modernity was suspect. Black subjects could enter history only as representations of a kind of a kind of anti, anachronistic time and space, having no forward movement in the development of the West.

At roughly the same time, Frantz Fanon wrote *Black Skins, White Masks*, addressing in his chapter five the experience of "the white gaze". Fanon had acquired a command of French language, literature and history as his own while growing up in French colonial territory, and he was astonished when, after arriving in France, he was regarded not as a fellow Frenchman but rather as an object of curiosity, outside of European history and culture. The same racial classifications were still circulating in the 1990s when Ken Bugul published *The Abandoned Baobab*. Bugul described in semi-autobiographical terms how in Senegal she had devoured French language, culture and history and dreamed of living and studying in Europe with her "ancestors, the Gauls". But when she arrived in Belgium on a scholarship, she was greeted as a servant or an exotic-erotic stranger. Feeling fixed by popular perceptions, she gradually and tragically succumbed to playing the role to which she was assigned (Bugul, 1991). Bugul wrote this story just when the presence of Africans and people from other areas colonised by European countries was wielding a great deal of attention, when immigration took centre place in European political discourse and policy.

Let us fast-forward a quarter of a decade to 2015, when *Adwa*, by Somalitalian writer Igiabo Scego, was published. *Adwa* portrays the parallel struggles of three generations of Somalis in their intertwined

relationships with Italy, from the period of colonialism and Fascism to the present. The main characters are traumatised by the deep structures of Italian colonialism and attendant racism in ways that the perpetrators and apparent beneficiaries seem blind and deaf to. Most of the female and male characters know the Italian language and are influenced by Italian culture, yet they are regarded, differently inflected by gender, by Italians as members of an inferior race to be dominated. Adwa, the main character, is envisioned as 'naturally' available for sexual exploitation, much like Bugul's character in *The Abandoned Baobab* and resonant with the prostitute trope for African or African descent women that began circulating in Italy in the 1990s. This trope has a far longer history, having become iconic in early 19th century Europe, with the spectacular display of Saartjie Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa, in London and Paris. Baartman represents the European exoticisation and commodification of African women in a type of representation widely reproduced in 20th century European colonial imaginaries.

While seeking to explain how he was perceived by Swiss villagers in the mid 20th century, Baldwin looked to cultural histories inherited by the participants, ideas that had nourished the perceptions and attitudes that the villagers never questioned or doubted. Where had they learned to perceive themselves as having intrinsic authority in the world and to consider him as the kind of outsider who was not really even human enough to engage with, to know? How had they learned to erase his presence and render him invisible? Unlike Baldwin, who was a writer and had read most of the books in the local public library when he was just a teenager, the Swiss villagers were generally not highly literate people, and the village did not have a movie house, theatre, bank or library and had few radios. Nevertheless, as he described, they moved with an authority that suggested they knew they could go anywhere in the world and be treated with respect and dignity.

As in other parts of Switzerland, these villagers had a custom of buying African natives in order to convert them to Christianity. They could insert money into a box decorated with a Black figurine at the church. During Carnival, the faces of two children were blackened; they wore horsehair wigs and solicited money for the missionaries in Africa. In one of the years of Baldwin's stay, they had raised enough money from the box and the blackened children to 'buy' six or eight African

natives in order to 'save their souls'. This custom provided Baldwin with a bit of insight into why the remote villagers seemed hold their bodies as if they were conquerors and perceive Baldwin with astonishment as *a stranger*. They also took for granted that they, not he, had inherited from Dante and Da Vinci, Shakespeare and Rembrandt, while Baldwin's ancestors had merely awaited European arrival.

Baldwin grappled with how to deal with his feelings of rage from his social historical invisibility and with the fact that in the USA, where Black and white had been in tension and intimacy for centuries, white subjects who know Black subjects reverted to representations of Blackness as evil, as symbolic of darkness and hell. Such imaginaries, inherited from slavery in the Americas, Jim Crow and apartheid, and the European colonialisation of "the heart of darkness" in Africa, must have informed residents in the Swiss village who already 'knew' Baldwin and their own role as conquerors in relation to him.

Italian identity in the 21st century

Today, many wrestle with their current reality as a country where Italian identity is malleable and shape shifting. Populist party leaders nourish *white resentment*, attempting to normalise the notion that the Black subject is unacceptable, for as a permanent 'community' of citizens they threaten the 'Italian way of life'. There is an ongoing struggle over who can claim belonging in Italy. Contestations over belonging are waged on many fronts, and they are often expressed in popular representations that circulate in the media, including fashion magazines, television series and social media posts.

In its 7 February issue, *Vogue Italia* featured a Senegalese-Italian model, Maty Fall Diba, on its cover[1]. The magazine published two cover photos in the same issue, the other featuring a white model. I happened to be in Reggio Emilia at this time, and when I asked the vendor at a local stall for the magazine, he handed me the one with the white woman on the cover. I asked for the other one, and he commented

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[1] *Vogue Italia* is actually notorious for its racist representations and advancement of colonial tropes. In 2018 for example, blonde, blue-eyed fashion model Gigi Hadid wore blackface on a cover. Italian fashion houses have also regularly adopted denigrating colonialist Black caricatures, for instance Gucci's blackface jumper, Prada's golliwog trinket and Dolce and Gabbana's pizza advert. Behind the scenes, there are no Black designers or merchandisers (Elan 2020).

that the issue I wanted signalled a 'tempesta' or storm, which I interpreted to mean that there was a lot of criticism of the cover I wanted. On the cover photo, Fall Diba wears a white Valentino dress, her hair is in Bantu style braided knots, and she looks directly at the consumer with a calm yet searching expression. She holds a sign across her chest at a diagonal angle that reads, "ITALIA". Next to her in English are the words "Italian Beauty".

For the first time in *Vogue Italia*'s history, the issue includes an insertion in English that represents a translation of articles for the stated purpose of reaching a wider international readership likely unfamiliar with Italian. The entire issue is dedicated to who and what Italy is today. Many of the photos were taken in Venice, for the issue is dedicated to this iconic Italian city where in 2019 flooding set off by rising temperatures damaged houses and forms of livelihood. In one photograph, a Black woman sits on a chair in a flooded Piazza San Marco, wearing rubber boots, her legs crossed and one calf in what appears to be six inches of water. The message seems to be not only that the city needs help, but that Blackness is Italianness.

The cover image of Fall Diba alone signals that the Italian fashion industry is at least in this instance engaging in a kind of initial counterhegemonic move to displace the common sense classification of Black Italians as strangers. They are also trying to appeal to a broad, transnational audience. And I think it important to point out that while the fashion industry is very much fair game for feminist and antiracist criticism, this issue of *Vogue Italia* has to have sent an affirming message to African-Italians, that they are accepted as part of Italian society. There are in fact few favourable representations of African descent people in popular media, as Fred Kuwornu suggests in his compelling documentary, *Blaxploitalian: 100 Years of Blackness in Italian Cinema*. The Black Italians in the film convey their frustration at being cast only in roles based on stereotypes of Africans and African refugees or immigrants, as for instance drug peddlers, people with special exotic powers, prostitutes and desperate poor. Second-generation Italian Africans need images of people like themselves as beautiful and in diverse forms of work and influence in order to develop a sense of their life's possibilities. This is especially relevant in a social and political environment where anti-immigrant and anti-Black words and images circulate continually.

The *Vogue Italia* issue also included editorials and photos of a variety of models of colour, rendering the issue more complex. In his "Letter from the Editor", titled "You don't speak Italian?", Emanuelle Farneti writes of the desire to confront racism and the rise of nationalist populism and to do so via an image of a beautiful woman ('la bellezza') who is Black *and* Italian. In this opening piece, Farneti suggests that Italian identity is transnational, stretching beyond Italian national frontiers. He describes 18-year-old Fall Diba as a young woman who comes from afar, holds in her arms the word "Italy" and represents a new generation of people for whom passports and borders are not limiting. The cover and internal photos include other stunning images of Fall Diba and Italians of diverse descent, depicting a broad and inclusive aesthetic. The images may send a message to young Italians of colour – in a country where appearance and 'la bellezza' are at a premium – that they are beautiful and esteemed, although their lived experiences do not back up these claims.

At the end of the *Vogue* issue is an interview with Fall Diba by Giovanni Montanaro, titled in the English language insert "One of Us: Maty Fall by Paolo Roversi", the latter being the photographer. Fall Diba paints a picture of her early life on the outskirts of Dakar, her young imagination captured by the Atlantic Ocean because her father lived in Italy[2]. As a child, she would model the clothing her mother made and sold. When eight years old, she joined her father in Chiampo, a town in the northeastern province of Vicenza. Fall Diba addresses the problem of citizenship in Italy with a hyphenated description of her identity as feeling part of both Italy and Senegal. She received Italian citizenship when she reached the age of 18. But this is not an easy process for most people.

When the application for citizenship process begins, there is usually a great deal of uncertainty, partly because the decisions, which can be stretched out for years, can be rendered at the discretion of local bureaucrats. This situation can create feelings of insecurity and alienation among young Italians with parents of non-Italian descent who identify as culturally Italian yet live with the absence of recognition by the Italian government and the rights and privileges accorded to people with citizenship. African-Italians are commonly

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[2]   This is reminiscent of the novel *The Belly of the Atlantic* by Fatou Diome, Serpents Tail (2008). I recommend you read it.

asked to explain why they are in Italy and, while in public places such as streets, piazza and especially on public transportation, asked for documents by officials. This absence of legitimacy accorded by the Italian state compels them to live in conditions of humiliation and shame. These youths are at high risk for depression, low self-esteem and other health problems that can make it even more difficult to face the challenges in daily life. The lack of citizenship underscores the relative weak positionality of the Black subject in Italy who is held in abeyance and therefore has difficulty claiming the right to belonging.

As part of the *Vogue Italia* issue, Jamaican-born journalist Jordan Anderson wrote an essay, "The Elephant in the Room" (Vogue Italia, 2020). In the English version, his article is titled "Slavery? No. But Racism? Yes". The elephant to which Anderson, who lives in Italy, refers is racism. Anderson cites growing nationalist populism in Italy and sometimes-fatal acts of aggression towards immigrants. On the same day the special issue of *Vogue* was published, a 29-year-old man of Eritrean descent was quietly seated and listening to music on a bus in Milan when two women pointed a gun at him and verbally attacked him with racist slurs. During the conflict, the bus driver stopped to let all passengers off, and the two women ran into the woods. Anderson expresses concern about this sort of violence in the current political climate, when public opinion polls indicate widespread belief that racist acts are justifiable or have no opinion about it. Anderson also argues that racism in Italy does not appear out of nowhere and that today's right-wing populism simply opened a 'Pandora's box' of racism germinating in Italy for centuries, about which there is silence. When one speaks about racism in Italy with 'white Italians' ('italiani bianchi'), writes Anderson, they usually meet with defensive pride in the fact that Italians do not have a history of slavery. Anderson responds, "What most of them don't understand is that this doesn't mean the absence of racism".

In 2020, persons of colour in Italy who are culturally and perhaps also legally Italian, regularly encounter people who assume and even insist they are foreigners, or strangers. Their cries of racism are denied and belittled by Italians. Soccer star Mario Balotelli has talked about the torture of hearing monkey chants while playing the game. Anderson urges Italians to face their history of colonialism and Fascism and how these inform current everyday expressions of racism:

> Racism persists as a toxic level of ignorance that generates great waves of both unintentional and intentional microaggressions against people of color. Regardless, racism isn't something that can be judged on the basis of its impacts or motives. It's not like a temperature that one can measure and assess based on how high it is. Any amount of racism, at any level – whether it be shackling bodies or throwing bananas at politicians – causes trauma.
>
> (Anderson, 2020)

He ends his article by stating that Italians must acknowledge that "the face of an Italian is not just the face of a white man, but has the faces of Africa, Asia and the Americas blended into it".

Italy's racial reckoning? *Nero a Metà* and *Zero*

When Black Italians saw the video of Floyd being murdered by an American police officer, it resonated with their experiences, and they organised demonstrations against system racism in Italy, throughout the country. In Torino's Piazza Castello, thousands of people sat in eight minutes of silence, the amount of time (they believed) it took for a police officer to choke Floyd to death while holding a knee on his neck. They shouted while holding up fists, "No Justice, No Peace" and held signs proclaiming, "Black Lives Matter", "No Freedom till we're Equal" and, notably, "Silence is Violence". In interviews with the local press, two African-Italian women and a man spoke about being emotionally moved upon observing so many people joining their protest against racism, something they had never seen before. They said they needed this support to be sustained in order for Italian society to confront and reckon with the racism they endure, alone (*Il Fatto Quotidano*, 6 giugno). A young woman whose parents are from Somalia disclosed that for the first time in her life, she felt as if Torino were *her city*, *her home*. Growing up as a 'Black girl', she always felt alone and, like many others, silenced. The solidarity demonstrated that day gave some African-Italians hope that in Italy, and throughout the world, anti-Black racism was finally understood as a social problem. What strikes me about their comments is that the young people spoke candidly,

without fear of being dismissed or punished, because they felt affirmed and supported by other Italians. Their perspectives derive from their lived experiences in Italy, which are essential for us to consider in any rethinking and decolonising of Italian studies.

In her introduction to a compelling book, *EmbarRaceMents,* by Togolese-Italian physician and writer Kossi Komla-Ebri[3], Graziela Parati describes as "a troubling and ever increasing racism in Italy". In the book's preface, former Italian Minister of Integration and member of the European Parliament Cecile Kyenge, who is Congolese-Italian, writes that "Every person of colour living in Italy' has their 'own rich repertoire of embar-*race*-ments'" which, like offensive faux pas, create uneasiness. They express "judgments and prejudices" that "wound their victims, because they occur daily and because they illustrate a common mentality that is packed with stereotypes" (Komla-Ebri, 2019:15).

Cumulatively, experiencing stereotypes in action, along with the dearth of positive images of Blackness in Italy, can have discouraging, even debilitating impacts on young Italians. It can be quite gruelling, for example, to deal with the experience of what Dienke Hondius (2009) in describing the Netherlands called "the repetition of surprise", a sense of astonishment when recognised (white) Italian subjects meet African-origin Italian subjects in Italian spaces. Such repetitive surprise is part of a monolithic worldview that 'innocently' reproduces anti-Blackness, energising deeply rooted modern, colonial beliefs about personhood, rights and belonging. This is facilitated by pervasive demeaning popular cultural, in this case media, misrepresentations that suggest a spectral presence, in which the actual human subjects are absent. They are there, in Italy, but not really seen or heard (Merrill, 2018; Carter, 2010).

Two recent television series offer seem to offer somewhat alternative viewpoints, the RaiUno/Netflix series *Nero a Metà* and the Netflix series *Zero*. Both explore issues of anti-Blackness and belonging in Italian society. *Nero a Metà*, created by Giampaolo Simi, is a rather conventional Italian crime drama set in Rome, co-starring Claudio Amendola and Miguel Gabbo Diaz. Diaz is an Italian actor of Dominican origin. The Netflix series *Zero*, which I would describe as Afrofuturist, is written by African-Italian novelist Antonio Dikele

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3   Translated into English by Marie Orton.

Distefano. Set in Milan, *Zero* is the first Italian series with a majority Black cast. How do these two series represent the complex, lived experiences of Black Italians as members of Italian society? And do they make any movement in advancing a racial reckoning?

The series *Nero a Metà* is translated for English-speaking audiences as *Carlo and Malik*, but its translation from Italian is 'Half Black'. Employing the term 'Black', which seems also to be emerging in Italy as a self-description, suggests an Italian fascination with Blackness expressed in films, which dates back to the Italian colonial period of the late 19th and first half of the 20th centuries. The direct title, whitewashed in the English translation, indicates that Blackness is a central feature of the storyline, but not necessarily from a Black Italian point of view. Our introduction to one of the two main characters, Malik Soprani, played by Diaz, is through a stereotype that has been circulating in Italy since at least the 19th century in Cesare Lombroso's depictions of Blackness as prone to pathological behaviour, including crime. We see Malik walking rapidly and with intensity on a graffiti-flanked urban street, wearing a black hoodie and jeans, which are not considered stylish in Italy and suggest he might be unemployed and/or a drug dealer. But there is something about Malik that indicates he is not what he appears to be, even when we see him interacting with other Black and brown men who appear idle and/or engaged in illegal drug transactions. While driving to his office, the other main character, police inspector Carlo Guerrieri (played by the well-known Italian actor Amendola), clearly perceives Malik as a drug dealer and runs to arrest him, but he initially gets away. While having a sketch of Malik made, Carlo comments that he cannot discern differences between 'neri', or Blacks, yet the detail of the likeness belies his claim. We next see Malik in an upscale, well-appointed apartment, his jeans and hoodie on the floor, as he opens a drawer full of tailored shirts that indicate an Italian insider status. When Malik and Carlo meet, Carlo is holding a pistol in his hand, and he tackles Malik to the ground and hits him in the face with the gun. Malik reveals that he, too, is a police inspector, Malik Soprani, and Carlo appears dumfounded. The case involves a murder, and the two inspectors are told they will work together to solve it. Carlo is unhappy about working with Malik, yet one of his three teammates, a young man, knows Malik as the top student in his police academy, and greets him warmly. Thus, we see here that while the middle-aged

Carlo has adopted stereotypical ideas about who can and cannot be an Italian inspector, a younger generation may be more accepting of the demographic and cultural transformations Italy has undergone over the past several decades.

The issue of belonging in Italian society is prominent in *Nero a Metà*, and the racist slights African-Italians endure are written into the series. After the younger police officer who knew Malik at the police academy calls Carlo out on his racism, Carlo accepts Malik so much that at one point he states that Malik is as Italian as, if not *more Italian than, he is*. Also notable is how Malik is represented as attractive and eligible to recognised Italian women, but in the end some of the same old colonial tropes persist. Carlo's daughter, Alba, and Malik are drawn to each other upon first sight. Alba (Rosa Diletta Rossi) leaves her white Italian lawyer boyfriend when she is unable to resist the attraction to Malik. But Malik is not really developed as a genuine Italian insider in this series, and he demonstrates his essential status as outsider when he does some spying on Carlo.

Malik's back story is built on the iconography of African refugees dying in the Mediterranean Sea as they try to reach the Italian shore, images that have come to dominate the popular media over the past 15 or so years. The writers resort to stereotypes that seem to fit the popular anti-immigrant appetite, instead of developing Malik as a substantial character with human depth. They represent Malik with a kind of contemporary origin myth of African subjects in Italy that echoes Baldwin's description of the Black subject in a Swiss village in the early 1950s, perceived in a fixed position as a permanent stranger who is present yet lacks human qualities. The Malik character, who appears to be in his 30s, was adopted by a white Italian woman, a white saviour mother figure who works with immigrants and refugees. Malik seems angry and to be without a full range of emotions, and the audience learns that this might be because of a past trauma that he has buried and forgotten. His memories come back to him, and it is revealed that watched his mother sacrifice her life for him and disappear forever into the sea. In the end, the series reproduces tropes of desperate, needy, traumatised and damaged Africans who need to be saved and who cannot be trusted as part of the Italian family.

The Netflix series *Zero* presents a considerable contrast to *Nero a Metà*. *Zero* begins to paint an interior of the Black subject, still bounded

by the 'barrio' walls. Set in a predominantly immigrant or Black Italian neighbourhood in Milan, the series breaks more new ground than *Nero a Metà*. Almost all the lead characters and cast are young Black Italians, educated in Italian schools. They speak in Italian, and Italian culture is their principal reference point. However, like the agricultural workers picking tomatoes in Puglia, and as the series title suggests, they are invisible in Italian society.

In his exploration of African diaspora, Donald Carter (2010:13) describes invisibility as a form of social erasure, "A way of making the seen disappear in plain sight". Writer Distefano, who is Italian of Angolan heritage, adopts a similar understanding in his depiction of the lived experiences of Black youth who have trouble communicating across cultures with their own parents yet are, as the main character states in an opening scene, 'invisible' in that nobody notices them or their neighbourhoods. The main character, Omar (Giuseppe Dave Seko), realises that he has the superpower to become, quite literally, invisible.

Omar, who has a passion for drawing Japanese Manga-style comic books with Black protagonists and dreams of becoming a cartoonist, also lost his mother and lives with his father and sister in an apartment that a developer wants to buy in order to build a shopping complex. In a telling scene, Omar is invited to dinner by a white Italian woman he met while delivering pizza to the home of a wealthy family. He expects an intimate dinner, but when the door opens, he finds instead a party packed with hundreds of recognised Italian teenagers, and upon seeing him one young man screams, "The Coke is here!" As Omar makes his way through the crowd, he is thinking, "Omar, the pusher, the street vendor, the thief, the waiter who serves your drinks. What's worse, to be mistaken for someone you're not, or not to be seen at all?" When Omar realises his extraordinary power of invisibility can enable him to take actions that address social justice for his friends and family, he adopts the name and role of a superhero, 'Zero', at once accepting and embracing his identity.

This is a story that, in the lexicon of Afrofuturism, envisions the shapeshifting abilities of Black Italians, the ability to transform social invisibility into strength, survival, social insights and vision. The series exemplifies the almost experimental presence of Black characters in Italian popular culture. They exist in their own worlds – in quarters that

are hidden from sight or as shape-shifting guests in largely 'Italian' locations.

To conclude, a Vice News video about Black Lives Matter in Italy and the country's need to reckon with anti-Black racism depicts a pre- and post-Floyd social-political consciousness among Italians. Sociologist Angelica Pesarini, in her interview by Camilla Hawthorne, has expressed scepticism about the alleged shift in consciousness, for while white Italians appear to have been horrified by the taped modern lynching of Floyd, they also routinely dismiss and express indifference towards anti-Black, racist acts of violence in contemporary Italy. Black social-political consciousness does seem to have been further energised by the global diasporic frustration with everyday violence. Yet, significant support and coalition partnerships with other counter-hegemonic movements in Italy seem to be forged more slowly.

If we wish to change deeply modern patterns of anti-Blackness, a renewed sense of urgency is required. We might begin by returning to Gramsci's guidance about how modern power works to structure social relations through common sense, unquestioned assumptions expressed in popular culture. Clearly, we are at an historical conjuncture, as Hall might suggest, when far-right forces are in a war of position for hegemony against what they perceive as the threat of decolonising Eurocentric thought and practice, including taken-for-granted modern, colonial racial taxonomies. It is incumbent upon Italian studies, a humanistic field of study, to interrogate and incorporate in our writing and teaching opposition to white supremacy and the knowledge power colonial nexus on which it is built. Western colonial discourses are as ubiquitous today as they were 100 years ago, when Fascism was ascending in Italy.

As Baldwin argued with extraordinary insight, Black subjects are treated in the West as if they do not meet the threshold of humanity. In Italy, they are regularly represented as strangers, extraneous and superfluous to the cultural world of Italians, their lives trivialised and or rendered invisible (Carter, 2010; Merrill, 2018). The quote from Komla-Ebri in the epigraph illustrates the routinisation of the stigmatisation of Black subjects as part of current society – not of the past or of some other country with a different history. There is a long tradition of Black radicalism that, like the histories of the Black Mediterranean scholars are now problematising and reworking and

activists and artists are building on in order to unearth the Black subject as in fact integral to the modern world. To decolonise Italian studies means to delink from common sense knowledge based on incomplete and distorted histories. And, to not just talk about this but to put our talk into action, making talking a verb.

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