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Mediterranean afterlives and the memory of Black presence

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Camilla Hawthorne has been an enormous source of inspiration for me for at least half a decade now. I came to know Camilla around 2016 through my nascent ponderings about the Black Mediterranean – a concept I spontaneously evoked during the initial stages of my research on migration infrastructures in Italy – but, as it goes, had been around for some time already[1]. In the years following the collapse of the Ghedaffi regime, and the subsequent NATO intervention, in Libya, the abjection of Black lives exploded literally on my doorstep as migrants – predominantly from sub-Saharan Africa – were losing their lives and trying to conceive a future across Mediterranean waters. As I was trying to figure out the consequences of, on the one hand, an increasingly repressive European border regime, and, on the other, the extending role of migrant labourers in important economic sectors, such as transport logistics and agri-food production in Italy and Europe more broadly, I camped out for a while in a temporarily occupied migrant squat in Bologna – a city that is known for its prominent alter-global and autonomous movements. The building, located in a former dental clinic, hosted several Eritrean and Somali families on separate floors. Towards 2015, the situation in the building became tense as evictions intensified in the city – next to the former dentist clinic, Bologna hosted over a dozen migrant occupations – and the relations between the migrant occupants and the Italian collective that acted as a go-between with the city government deteriorated. That is when I met Ahmed. A Somali man in his late twenties, Ahmed recalled his continuous push-backs and detentions across a long cross-continental journey between Somalia, Italy and various European countries, where he resided alternately between informal squats and state-managed detention centres. One of these formal detention sites was a former military station in Turin that was built during the Italian invasion of Somalia[2]. To me this correlation did not come as a surprise, as the trajectories of militarisation and carcerality tend to materially coincide in the context of contemporary migration control (as some geographers have already argued: Mountz, 2011; Mountz and Hiemstra, 2014; Gill et al., 2018). Listening to Ahmed's story – and the many more that I would listen to later – I became increasingly aware of the expanding liminal space that Mediterranean border politics were unlocking at the time and which – in my view – necessitated critical reflection. As our colleague and member of the Black Mediterranean Collective we later formed together said, the trajectories of African refugees like Ahmed show that the lives taking shape in the context of often deliberately silenced colonial histories of subjection and slavery form a past that is not past. Rather, they elucidate *a state of repetition* of subjection through apparatuses of surveillance, containment, captivity, forced displacement and labour, and dehumanization (Lombardi-Diop, 2021:4; my emphasis; see also Sharpe, 2016).

While I started to exchange with Camilla after reading a couple of her blog posts (with Pina Piccolo, both published on lamacchinasognante.com), she enabled me to move forward from the moment of excitement and disillusion I experienced during these initial encounters: excitement, because I knew I was onto something new, and disillusion, because – like Camilla – I often felt quite lonely and uncomprehended when sharing ideas among activists and academics about the

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[1]The first one to mention the term "Black Mediterranean" publicly was Cedric Robinson (1983).

[2]In a splendid video document, Gianluca and Massimiliano De Serio evoke the historical memory of this place with the collaboration of the Italo-Somali writer and actress Suad Omar. Through the voices of the Somali migrants who resided there in 2009, the authors offer a platform to re-evaluate its contested history while integrating it with the experiences of its uprooted inhabitants through the instrument of oral culture. In 2011 the video won the *Premio Italia Arte Contemporanea del MAXXI*, Rome.

Black Mediterranean. Particularly in Italy, where the debate as well as representations about migration tend to be extremely polarized, there is clearly a lack of space for diasporic voices to tell their part of the story from their point of view. The active containment, dehumanization, captivity, forced displacement and labour that many Black African migrants and immigrants with African roots continue to experience in their lives tend to be represented in the media and in activist discourse in rather oppositional terms: as either signs of abject victimhood or as acts of passive resistance. This tendency to crystallize experience in the present constellation of European refoulement and border repression, we both seemed to agree, forms both a sign of a persistent White, European cultural hegemony and a persistent neglect of European colonial histories into the present. Particularly in Italy, this tendency remains unfortunately very strong, as some (among very few) historians recently observed (for instance, Del Boca, 2020). The Black Mediterranean Collective gives me both the courage and strength to give new breath to these discussions and to echo discussions beyond our initial focus on Blackness and the Mediterranean.

While reading through Camilla's lecture, I figure her connection with Black Mediterranean scholarship has two main contributions to make to our understanding of racial capitalism and the racial stratification of citizenship more broadly.

A first important observation concerns the racial foundations of capitalism. Critical race scholars alert us to the fact that capitalism as a system has been built on racializing populations and environments from early modernity to the present and into the future: from its inception in early modern Europe, it has been a key driver of differentially positioning human beings in relation to not just the state, but also the profound geological and ecological transformations that are required for modern society to emerge and persist (see for instance Gilmore, 2002a, b, 2007; Pulido, 2015, 2016; Saldanha, 2019). As it goes – "standing on the shoulders of giants" – the terminology of the Black Mediterranean was not so new as I initially figured, of course. Black Marxist writers like Cedric Robinson (1983) and Robin D. G. Kelley (2017) use it to explain how regimes of racialization provided the basic preconditions for the emergence of modern capitalism. While historians continue to laud the dense networks of cross-cultural exchange, commerce, and mobility since the times of Greek antiquity, very few authors point to the often overlooked histories of racial violence, slavery and plantations in the Mediterranean[3]. It is in their contemporary

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[3]Historians acknowledge now that the Italian colonies of the Mediterranean during the late Middle Ages were the very models upon which the advanced plantation systems of the Iberian Atlantic colonies would later be based (Hunwick, 1992; Verlinden, 1977; Blackburn, 1997; Curtin, 1998). However, the dominant paradigm still disavows this history as a central pillar of racial capitalism. In his complete *oeuvre* on the Mediterranean, for example, Fernand Braudel indexes the term "slaves" in one page just to dismiss slavery in the western and eastern Mediterranean as "a curi-

reverberations that one needs to locate the rising interest in the Black Mediterranean as a scholarly, artistic and activist field of exchange.

Camilla not only offers scope to situate the Mediterranean as on ongoing locus of racial capitalism, but she also provides us with the elements to talk back to Black Atlantic scholarship and its insistence on the way Blackness has been articulated as radically diasporic. A pioneer of this scholarship has been Paul Gilroy, who observes how a diasporic temporality emerged from the experience of the transatlantic slave trade (the so-called "middle passage") that tries to grasp and narrate Black subjectivity in the interstices of modern capitalist development. Writers, particularly those closest to the slave experience, like William E. B. Dubois or Richard Wright, repudiated the heroic narrative of western civilization and used a philosophically informed approach to slavery in order to undermine the monumental time that supports it. They shared a sense that the modern world was fragmented along axes constituted by racial conflict, but they also thought that a re-reading of the middle passage could accommodate non-synchronous, hetero-cultural modes of social life in proximity. Not only were the conceptions of modernity of these intellectuals periodized differently, but they were also punctuated by the process of acculturation and terror among slaves and their descendants that profoundly destabilizes the Atlantic as a cultural and political system (Gilroy, 1993:197). According to Katherine McKittrick, a "plantation logic" continues to persist in contemporary American society, which produces differential modes of living and spaces of Otherness (McKittrick, 2013:3). In conversation with these intellectuals, Camilla gives us scope to think through the persistent but differentiated dispossession that continues to separate humanity into "worthy" citizens who may benefit from capital's gains and "unworthy" or "not yet" civilized subjects who remain simultaneously dispossessed and secluded by the means of capitalist production. However, she also invites us to think through those differences beyond the Atlantic (or American) centrism that has so far dominated this debate.

Another important point Camilla makes (and which – I noticed – may cause some disquiet in Germanophone academia) concerns the racial foundations of national territorial citizenship. The dominant tendency is still to see Fascism, and National Socialism, as an aberration of citizenship as "the right to have rights" – in Hannah Arendt's (1949) famous definition. However, that perspective is insufficient to address persistent issues of racial inequality. Instead, one must try to understand how racialization has been integral to functioning of the modern nation state all along. One of the main objectives of the modern state apparatus is indeed to construct homogeneity through the technologies of execu-

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ous attachment to the past" (Braudel, 1995:754). However, a few lines later, he writes that "slavery was a structural feature of the Mediterranean society" (Braudel, 1995:755, quoted in Lombardi-Diop, 2021, cited above).

tive government and bureaucratic intervention. Through the planned institution of territorial boundaries, citizenship laws, police, bureaucracy and the implementation of census categorizations, demographic registries and other governmental technologies and modern states, each in their own way, engrain their power to exclude and include, to categorize hierarchically, as well as to set aside, racially ordered populations.

In Italy, this process has become apparent through the recent public discussion about ius sanguinis, for example, the bloodline that prevents so-called "second- (and third-)generation" children from immigrant parents from acquiring citizenship rights (in contrast to emigrant Italians, who can prove their bloodline to the nation). Immigrant activists demand the inclusion of so-called "second-" and "third-"generation children of parents who do not have such an Italian bloodline. However, their demands are frequently contested and postponed in parliament and public discussions. The unwillingness of Italian legislators to consider other sources of citizenship reflects a racial stratification of "the right to have rights" that is not unique to Italy, however, but that has gathered prominence throughout Europe. David Theo Goldberg – on whose work Camilla draws – specifically evokes two racial ideologies that have been inherent to the conception of national citizenship in European nation states. The first, naturalism, fixes racially conceived populations as premodern, naturally incapable of progress. The second, historicism, elevates Europeans over primitive or underdeveloped others as a victory of progress (Goldberg, 2002:43). When reconsidering the history of nation-state expansion in some of Europe's rural "peripheries" (itself a naturalist conception quid Goldberg) and through colonialism, it becomes indeed apparent to what extent – in the Zeitgeist of 19th century liberalism and believe in rational progress – modern state legislators and planners have been in the business of racialization. Only recently have Italian historians been discovering the curious ways tropes of "backwardness", "uncivility" and "underdevelopment" run like a red thread through the state's attempts at conquering, pacifying and developing, first, the country's rural South and later the colonies in the African Horn (see for example Filippi, 2021). These tropes were not just functional to the expansion of capitalism[4], but they also introduced a hierarchy of belonging and of Italianness (or, for that matter, Frenchness and Britishness) that remains embedded in these liberal preconceptions.

It is no coincidence, I find, for example, that the same Fascist laws that prohibited Italians from rural areas from transferring their residence to the cities (the *Provvedimenti con-*

tro l'urbanesimo of 1939) continued to be applied by post-War governments until deep into the 1960s – thus pushing the many emigrants from Italy's south into a condition of informality while they were looking for jobs in the industrializing north. Although widely disregarded as a "curious attachment to the past" (to use Braudel's, 1995:754 words; see footnote 3), this stratification of citizenship rights in fact appears to provide evidence of the normal, routine, manners in which state government actively reproduces social and environmental inequalities in its quest for homogeneity and political superiority (see also Pulido, 2016). Some (but again very few) Italian scholars have started to argue that the Italian economic miracle of the 1960s and 1970s did not so much place Italy among the first of Europe's economic powers but that it rather reproduced the historical inequality between the north and south "in a different manner" (see for instance Alasia and Montaldi, 2010 [1960]). Similarly, one of our Black Mediterranean Collective colleagues writes that the condition of structural invisibility of first-generation migrants from the former Italian colonies of Ethiopia and Eritrea continued to characterize their institutional differentiation in terms of access to the welfare state until deep into the 1980s (Grimaldi, 2021)[5]. Like southern Italian immigrants, therefore, the phenomena of squatting or renting decrepit houses not only provided an immediate response to the ruined citizen status of these former colonial subjects, but they also reinforced the isomorphic relation between migration, citizenship status and social class that is indicative of the way the Italian nation state has expanded its authority since the mid-19th century. Expressions of Black Italianness like Camilla's help us to deconstruct this "national" authority while also radically tying its critique in a phenomenological and experiential narrative of the relation between territorial boundaries and the bodies they pretend to include and exclude.

The important thing to remember here is that national territorial citizenship has always been an uneven, stratified way to institutionalize membership of the political community called the modern nation state. Friedrich Kratochwil (1994:486) writes as much when he says that "[it] is perhaps best to conceive of citizenship as a space within a discourse on politics that institutionalizes identities and differences *by drawing boundaries*, both in terms of membership and in terms of the actual political practices that are connected with this membership." (my emphasis; see also Staeheli, 2010). This – in my view more active interpretation of citizenship as the right to claim rights (Isin and Nielsen,

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[4]In liberal thought, development translates into a linear process indicated by measuring the levels of deprivation with respect to this imposed ideal. The objective of the nation state is to apply rational and scientific thought to a series of standards established that simultaneously deprives people of different cultures of the opportunity to define the terms of their social life, Esteva (1987) writes.

[5]In 1978, only 10 %–15 % of Eritreans and Ethiopians could afford a private flat. The others shared rooms with compatriots or relied on boarding houses, religious communities, and public dormitories. A very widespread phenomenon was, furthermore, the irregular occupation of empty houses. In 1982, around 35 %–40 % of the Eritreans in Milan were squatters (for references and further details, see Grimaldi, 2021).

2008) – gives us scope to think through the boundaries of citizenship to consider how citizens are actively made and unmade, how categories of belonging and membership are imposed and negotiated in specific times and places, rather than presuming that all of us submit our identities, through social contract or by birth, to the Will of the Nation[6]. The ideologies and policies that underpin modern state citizenship are not only fundamentally misogynous and racist, but they also are transversal to the extent that they legitimate the active transformation of bodies into instruments moulded to the needs of the nation state. The Black Mediterranean offers us scope to consider ongoing negotiations within these instrumental confines while also showing us the path towards alternate futures. Next to flagging violent histories of exclusion, it offers us both analytical and practical scope to imagine different sources of citizenship that go beyond a national, territorial state of exception.

Data availability. No data sets were used in this article.

Competing interests. The contact author has declared that there are no competing interests.

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[6]"Nation-state means a state that makes nativity or birth [nascita] (that is, naked human life) the foundation of its own sovereignty" the Italian philosopher Agamben (2009:93) states. His observation is often used to argue the annihilation of the possibility of life beyond political life or a preclusion of humanity from the political life of the citizen. Indicatively, the philosopher refused to sign a petition for the application of ius soli (or right of birth) for immigrant children in Italy – because, in his own words, he does not underwrite the "very idea of citizenship" (Agamben, 2017).

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