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Response to commentaries from the Black Mediterranean Geographies interface

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Timothy Raeymaekers, Claske Dijkema, Anna Carastathis, and Vanessa E. Thompson are all thinkers whose work I deeply respect and admire and from whom I have learned so much. As such, it is an honor and a privilege to be in dialogue with such an illustrious group of scholars. I would like to structure my response to their commentaries according to four organizing themes: representation and aesthetic politics; racial capitalism and the racial state; the politics of hyphenation and the limits of citizenship; and global abolitionist movements.

1 Representation and aesthetic politics

I was deeply moved by Carastathis' (2022) careful attunement to the aesthetic politics at work in the production of a so-called Mediterranean refugee "crisis". Carastathis' intervention emphasizes the fact that vision is never neutral and that visual representation works to hail viewers through the bounding of a particular "we". I am reminded of Judith Butler's reflections on how the video of Rodney King being beaten by Los Angeles Police Department officers was used as evidence of King himself being a source of danger to police. This feat, Butler argues, was achieved not in spite of the video but rather through the reproduction of the video within a "racially saturated field of visibility" that structures what "can and cannot appear within the horizon of white perception". (Butler, 1993:15–16). Butler thus cautions that "the visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful" (Butler, 1993:17). This is an important reminder at a time when many still cling to the hope that *vision* – as an objective and transparent arbiter of truth – can eradicate the deep rot of structural racism with the disinfectant of sunlight, from body cameras for police to photojournalism in refugee camps.

Feminist philosophers have long issued prescient warnings about the dangers of this sort of epistemological over-investment in the power of the scopic (not to mention its implicit ableism); as Donna Haraway wrote, "Vision is *always* a question of the power to see – and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices. With whose blood were my eyes crafted?" (Haraway, 1988:585). Carastathis' commentary suggests that the blood that crafted the eyes of the white European spectator – of both the "empathetic" and the "hostile" varieties – is in fact the blood of the enslaved and the colonized. Structural anti-Black racism, in other words, is the condition of possibility for these visual economies of circulation. I thus appreciate the push from Carastathis for more precise language to describe what precisely was at stake in the widely circulated juxtaposition of the eighteenth-century diagram of the slave ship *Brookes* and Massimo Sestini's 2014 aerial photograph "Rescue Operation" around 2015 and 2016 (Sestini, 2014). She is correct in asserting that this was not a mere visual *comparison* but rather an entire system of perception and representation made possible through racial capitalist systems sedimented over centuries that deny Black spatiality through both forced movement and forced stasis:

> The comparison between these two images ... as inopportune and problematic as it may be for myriad other reasons, tells us something about how people on the move – in particular when they are Black Africans – are objectified by the various racialised gazes to which they are subject: the military–humanitarian gaze, the gaze of photographers, and the gaze of "empathetic" or "hostile" viewers of photographs of the refugee crisis, all of which embody white supremacy. (Carastathis, 2022:235).

2   Racial capitalism and the racial state

The intervention from my Black Mediterranean Collective comrade Raeymaekers (2022:127) emphasizes the historical and geographical connections between racial capitalism and the racial state as key to understanding the contested space of the Mediterranean Sea today:

> [T]he trajectories of African refugees ... 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.

For all the reasons Raeymaekers elaborates in his commentary, I find it generative to read Robinson's *Black Marxism* (2000) [1983] and Goldberg's *The Racial State* (2002) in dialogue with one another, as their arguments are strikingly parallel. Robinson (himself an early theorist of the Black Mediterranean) famously theorized racial capitalism as the historical character of *all* capitalism rather than the description of a specific form of capitalism that has been *inflected* by racism (such as apartheid South Africa) (Kelley, 2017). For Robinson, capitalism was racial from its emergence out of European feudalism, and as such racism enshrines the inequality capitalism requires to function (Gilmore, 2020). In *The Racial State*, Goldberg argues that race is central to the philosophical conceptualization and material emergence of the modern state – in essence, that *all* states are racial, and not simply those "extreme" cases such as Nazi Germany. The raison d'être of the modern state is to enforce homogeneity within its boundaries and expulse heterogeneity through "racially ordered terms" (Goldberg, 2002:9). The apparatus of national citizenship, Raeymaekers and I concur, is one such example of how the racial state exercises its power to include or exclude.

Raeymaekers' attention to the intertwined histories of racial capitalism and the racial state is also important as we grapple with a resurgence of far-right, ethnonationalist, and explicitly racist politics.[1] While I believe it is accurate to describe this global movement as a neo-fascist one (and in the case of leaders like Italy's Giorgia Meloni, the connections to fascist rhetoric and fascist political parties are quite explicit), I also worry about the dangers of a historical myopia that connects the politics of the last decade *only* to mid-century fascism. The works of Robinson and Goldberg help draw our attention to the reality that the connection between the modern nation-state, racism, and capitalist exploitation is also a

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[1]On this point, and particularly with regard to the centrality of "racialized, migratory, and sweated labour" to the creation and ongoing reproduction of the world capitalist system, see also Danewid (2021:152).

liberal problem and not merely a fascist aberration (this is, of course, also a claim Césaire (2000) [] famously articulated in his *Discourse on Colonialism* and is c1950entral to Black European Studies scholarship). These connections are central to the arguments I make in my 2022 monograph *Contesting Race and Citizenship:*

> Italy, as a post-Fascist country currently embroiled in the global resurgence of racial nationalisms, undoubtedly offers valuable historical insights about fascist entanglements of race, citizenship, and nation. But at the same time, a closer engagement with the linkages between liberal and fascist racisms in the Italian historical record – and their reverberations in the present – also encourages us to acknowledge racial nationalism not merely as an extremist, fascist aberration, but rather as foundational to the liberal nation-state itself. (Hawthorne, 2022:4)

3   The politics of hyphenation and the limits of citizenship

Both Dijkema (2022) and Thompson (2023) raise important questions about the language of collective identification and the framework of citizenship as a way of articulating Black European subjectivities. Dijkema notes that, in contrast to the Italian context I describe in my article, the term "Black French" is not used to the same extent among activists in France. As she correctly asserts, "Black political identities are context specific, with different histories in France and Italy" (Dijkema, 2022:500). Additionally, beyond the empirical question of whether Black activists in different European countries adopt hyphenated terms of community identification (e.g., Black/Afro-Italian, Black French, Black/Afro-German), Thompson (2023:100) also notes that the political potential of national representation and recognition inherent in such terms is inherently limited:

> I am wondering if conceptions discussed by Hawthorne such as "Black Italy" or "Black Italianness" rather limit the possibility of the Black Mediterranean as a radical and transnational opening, as they might again foreclose what the Black Mediterranean actually has to offer as a capacious opening and radical methodology that not only challenges but exposes national frames, not reforming (or diversifying) but despising the nation and the politics of recognition.

On this point, I am in complete agreement. In *Contesting Race and Citizenship*, I write extensively about the politics of naming and translation. I argue that the terms of collective political identification are never stable; rather, they should be understood as contested terrains upon which debates about

identity and belonging are worked out, as different terms articulate distinct sorts of political visions and commitments (Hawthorne, 2022:xvii).[2] Indeed, I first embarked on this research precisely because I was curious to understand why, in the early 2010s, a critical mass of Black activists who were born and raised in Italy had begun to publicly refer to themselves as Black Italians or Afro-Italians. In the earliest interviews I conducted, numerous activists asserted to me that they had only recently encountered the "Afro-Italian" or "Black Italian" labels and, in turn, applied these terms to describe themselves (see also Hawthorne, 2017). Black Italianness is a claim rather than a neutral, objective social fact, and so I sought to understand what was at stake politically in this discursive shift.

I also came to study the politics of citizenship for similar, ethnographically grounded reasons. Indeed, as I note in the introduction to *Contesting Race and Citizenship*, I did not originally set out to write about citizenship – in part because I worried that to focus on citizenship was to take the nation-state and its exclusionary practices for granted (Hawthorne, 2022:18). Yet, as I continued to conduct interviews with Black Italian activists about their experiences of racialization in Italy, I found that we always looped back to the entanglements of race and citizenship. Whether or not my interlocutors agreed that citizenship should be the focus of this new generation of Black activists and activism in Italy, citizenship nonetheless formed the backdrop of most conversations about the past, present, and future of Blackness in Italy. And yet, while my research began with the question of Black Italianness and citizenship, my work (and, by extension, the structure of my book) ultimately follows an arc of politics that stretches beyond citizenship and beyond the nation-state as a container for Black politics. The activists with whom I collaborated expressed concerns that while they were mobilizing for an expansion of citizenship rights, they had also been inadvertently conscripted into the nationalist project of re-bounding Italianness in ways that disarticulated the politics of Black Italians born and raised in Italy (as "assimilable" citizens-in-waiting) from those of Black refugees and other recent migrant arrivals. This echoes Thompson's (2023:100) observation that "black struggles of representation and recognition also reveal class stratifications of black politics in European countries, which are often concealed in scholarship on blackness in Europe rather than interrogated."

Over a decade of research in Italy, I saw that activists were beginning to explicitly articulate political visions that were less centrally oriented on the objective of nation-state recognition and more toward a critique of the racial state itself. They have not abandoned the goal of citizenship but have in-

creasingly displaced it as the apex of political struggle and instead approach it as a set of capabilities that can facilitate more capacious politics – for instance, when "second-generation" Eritrean-Italians organized to provide mutual aid with newly arrived Eritrean refugees in the Porta Venezia neighborhood of Milan based on shared ties of diaspora and anti-colonial politics and on an understanding that the restriction of citizenship and the violence of the EU border are both technologies of racial violence. Raeymaekers (2022:129–130) argues that because national territorial citizenship has always been inherently uneven and stratified, a

> more active interpretation of citizenship as the right to claim rights … 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.

Yet, following political theorist Mezzadra (2013:11; see also Ataç et al., 2016:533), I also wonder if the concept of citizenship – which is so deeply entangled with violence and exclusion – can actually be salvaged and reimagined in this way or if there are more radical possibilities *beyond* citizenship for articulating not only capacious belongings but our shared commitments to one another.

Like Dijkema and Thompson, I am also interested in transnational, intersecting forms of political identification and struggle. Writing about France, Dijkema (2022:503) for instance notes that

> the type of rhizomatic political identities racialized people turn to in France goes beyond the shared experience of being Black. The identification with "we the [formerly] colonized" fits with the French history of colonialism that spanned across the globe, and that of racialized indigenous populations in different ways.

It is for this reason that I have found great inspiration in Du Bois' (2011) [1940] vision of Blackness as a shared social heritage rather than bio-genealogical kinship, which he articulated in Chap. 5 of *Dusk of Dawn* ("The Concept of Race").[3] This shared heritage, Du Bois argued, ultimately connected the fates of Black people to those of other peoples around the world who had been exploited, oppressed, and dispossessed by the violent dynamics of racial capitalism. This framework, which I refer to elsewhere as a Du Boisian "diasporic ethics"

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[2]And this is not only the case in Europe – numerous scholars have written about the terminological shifts between "Negro," "colored," "African-American," and "Black" in the context of the United States. See Martin (1991), Mitchell (2023), and Smith (1992).

[3]Here I should note that I read Du Bois as a diasporic intellectual whose intellectual formation and political commitments were also shaped by his extensive travels through Europe and particularly his philosophical studies in Germany.

(Hawthorne, 2021), provides a way to move beyond invocations of Blackness that reproduce the biocentric logics of heteropatriarchal descent and pushes us to instead consider how transgressive solidarities are actively forged across lines such as citizenship, class, and immigration history. In the case of Italy, this also provides an analytical opening for thinking about the ways North African and Bangladeshi youth at different moments align their struggles and modes of self-identification with Blackness, as well as the historical connection between southern Italian racialization and anti-Black racism.[4]

4   Global abolitionist movements

Carastathis' commentary draws attention to decades-long anti-detention and anti-prison struggles in Europe, urging for an internationalist orientation in abolitionist studies that is not about comparison or diffusion but rather the "specificities of local struggle" and their "interconnection against globalized regimes of rule" (Carastathis, 2022:236). Similarly, Thompson (2023: 100) asks scholars

> how we can approach the politics of the Black Mediterranean if we depart from neither the (bourgeois state and liberal) analysis of the so-called refugee crisis nor mainly the recent debates around a concept but rather from the genealogies of radical black struggles and movements within and beyond Europe, their ties to the African continent and their class and abolitionist politics.

I agree wholeheartedly that scholars of Black Europe, and global Blackness more broadly, must decenter the United States as a point of reference, an ideal type, or a framework for comparison. In the case of Italy, as I have written elsewhere with my comrade Angelica Pesarini, radical Black politics long pre-date the global Black Lives Matter movement, which is often mistakenly (and rather offensively) credited with bringing "racial consciousness" to Black Europeans (Hawthorne and Pesarini, 2020). These genealogies of struggle include the history of anti-colonial resistance in the Horn of Africa, mobilizations by migrant workers against racialized labor exploitation, massive demonstrations against racist violence (which brought the likes of Tommie C. Smith and Miriam Makeba to Italy) in the 1990s and 2000s, and movements against detention and border fortification. I am writing this commentary one week after the International Refugee Day of 20 June 2023, on which the activist collective Abolish Frontex also called for a decentralized, international day of action against the violence and structural racism

of Fortress Europe's border regime (Abolish Frontex, 2023a, b). This mobilization came shortly after a fishing boat carrying approximately 750 asylum seekers sank off the coast of Greece on 14 July; at the time of writing, 104 asylum seekers have been rescued, 82 are confirmed dead, and as many as 500 are still missing but are presumed to have perished. This horrific disaster was largely overshadowed in the international media by the 18 June implosion of a deep-sea submersible carrying five ultra-rich passengers to the shipwreck of the *Titanic*, whose deaths were confirmed following a multimillion-dollar, high-tech search-and-rescue operation supported by personnel from the United States, Canada, France, and Britain (Attiah, 2023).

This is, I believe, the analytical and political potential of the Black Mediterranean. By locating the Mediterranean as another rhizomatic starting point for understanding racial capitalism, the Black Mediterranean points to the distinct histories and geographies of Black struggle against racism, borders, and coloniality, as well as to their global interconnections and articulations. Such an analysis necessarily resists bounded methodological nationalisms, instead examining the ways technologies of racism *and* practices of resistance unfold relationally across space. The Black Mediterranean is, following McKittrick (2016:13), an insistence on the "rebelliously diasporic" politics of Blackness against the classificatory regimes of the racial capitalist state.

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[4]On this point, I am reminded of Cedric Robinson's argument that the Irish and Irish Americans are "to a certain degree, opportunistic subjects" because they were also negatively racialized in the European imagination. As such, he writes, the Irish and their history can be understood as "our teachers as well as our compatriots" (Robinson and Robinson, 2017).

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