



From the Black Mediterranean to liberation

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1 Introduction

The massacre in June 2022 in the Spanish North African enclave of Melilla, in which at least 37 black people rendered refugees were killed and hundreds were severely injured (<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2022/12/morocco-spain-stalled-and-inadequate-inquiries-smack-of-cover-up>, last access: 15 February 2023), is a further expression of Europe's border–police regime, which is also a labor regime and regime of abandonment. How this multi-layered regime unfolds over time is a form of neo-imperialism (Walia, 2021) and an articulation of racial capitalism (Alexander, 1985; Robinson, 1983). The concept of the “Black Mediterranean” that Hawthorne explores in her inspiring and insightful lecture provides a powerful account of confronting these ongoing (but also changing) articulations of racial capitalism (Hawthorne, 2021, 2022). As she and other scholars on the Black Mediterranean argue (Di Maio, 2013; Danewid, 2017; Smythe, 2018), the criminalization and deadly restriction of migration of post-colonial, especially black, subjects is inextricably linked to the history (and present) of racial–colonial violence, racial–capitalist exploitation and dispossession, albeit structured by changing conjunctures. It is not an exception of the workings of Europe or European humanism (or humanitarianism) somehow gone awry, but rather part of the ongoing production of racial violence, super-exploitation, (neo-)colonial and imperial dispossession, and abandonment. As the black radical theorist and revolutionary Frantz Fanon (1963) famously argued, total violence was not only employed as the handmaiden of so-called primitive accumulation, but as an ongoing albeit shifting modality and method of colonial capitalism (see also da Silva, 2022).

Hawthorne states in her crucial and rigorous lecture, and with reference to the Black Mediterranean Collective (2021) of which she is a member, that it is necessary 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” (Hawthorne, 2021). Re-arranging the geographies of black struggles and world making, and thus de-centering the dominance of Black Atlantic geographies and the US context in particular in debates on blackness as well as in black political struggles, Hawthorne shows that the framework of the Black Mediterranean allows us to attend to the legacies of colonialism, (post-)colonial labor migration and resistances of black people in, between and beyond various contexts of Europe and Africa. This is something that black scholars and movements in Europe have been doing increasingly since the late 1970s, thereby organizing transnationally in the traditions of Pan-Africanism, for instance shown in the work of black feminist migrant collectives such as the *Coordination des Femmes Noires*, who were organizing in and beyond France in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Hawthorne's work stands in this tradition as she attends to “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” (Hawthorne, 2021) and engages with young black activists who were born or raised in Italy and their struggles against anti-black racism, practices of black transnational solidarity and forms of world making in a collaborative and committed spirit. Her focus on a context which is rather marginalized in scholarship and engagements with blackness across Europe, in which countries in western Europe are often centered, further provides an important contribution in terms of challenging intra-European dominance with regard to anti-racist and black struggles within Europe. Hawthorne's approach is grounded in black feminist geographic thought and practice (McKittrick, 2006), thereby also attending to the possibilities of black life and lifeworlds. Her approach reflects the related hierarchies of power and asymmetries (including the existing asymmetries within black scholarship and its US dominance related to the academic industrial complex, in which blackness in Europe

is often “researched” as material instead of horizontally engaging with theorizations of black people in as well as from Europe) and how they also unfold in research with activists and movements.

Her lecture makes crucial arguments about and towards transnational or global black studies and practices, in which methodological nationalism as well as methodological imperialism are challenged, linear spatio-historical narratives of black identity formation and black struggle are deconstructed, and where contextual black geographies can meet on relational and more horizontal grounds without diffusing (shifting) connections on the one hand as well as without over-glossing context-specific articulations of anti-black racism as a (structuring) expression of racial gendered capitalism on the other. In arguing that we cannot approach the Black Mediterranean as a “precondition for a racial capitalist order” and urging scholars “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)” (Hawthorne, 2021), she not only exposes the frameworks within migration studies which ignore or marginalize the role of race and racism and thereby also the shifting continuities of colonialism and their relation to migration, borders, technologies of surveillance, deportation and policing regimes. This important call further attends to the ongoing European neo-colonial extraction, accumulation, dispossession, war capitalism and brute violence in Africa and other parts of the so-called Global South as well as to various formulations of black resistances which continue to shape Europe. As Hawthorne argues in her insightful lecture, this does the important work of challenging the dominant “Middle Passage Epistemology” (Wright, 2006) in the study of black experiences, perspectives and critiques, while also interrogating the central role of Europe (as a geographic, juridico-economic, socio-political and epistemic formation, thinking with Stuart Hall) in the plunder, mass deportation, super-exploitation and expropriation of enslaved Africans. As C. L. R. James (2001 [1938]) reminds us, the European project of colonial enslavement is constitutive for the development and reproduction of the world market and system, and, as Hawthorne argues in reference to Walter Rodney, has severely shaped the African continent itself, thereby also de-centering the middle passage in a horizontal way that is multi-geographic and relational.

I read Hawthorne’s important argument on the politics of the Black Mediterranean, understood as an ongoing site of the production of anti-black violence as well as ground for black emancipatory struggles and projects of world making, as a powerful contribution to a broader archive, struggle and radical black imaginary. Further, it is a crucial contribution as well as an urgent contemporary articulation towards black internationalism (or global black struggles) and world making, as Hawthorne invites us to attend to blackness from the perspective of movement and against the confinements (method-

ological and (bio-) political) of the nation state. However, and in conversation inspired by the lecture, I am wondering if the radical methodological potential of the Black Mediterranean is fully mobilized here and if the politics of blackness in Italy, as well as in European and black diasporic contexts more broadly, are not more contested, especially in the current neo-liberal conjunctures of racial capitalism, in which liberal anti-racism, anti-discrimination and privilege discourse dominate (Elliott-Cooper, 2021), all not standing in opposition to capital but rather in alliance, and 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. In what follows, I will sketch out these two reflections further as I think they might be helpful, as collective consideration and in conversation with Hawthorne’s opening and offer, to mobilize Black Mediterranean politics as radical politics of liberation (thinking with Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor).

2 Translations and orientations within the Black Mediterranean

With regard to the first reflection, the radical potential of the framework of the Black Mediterranean, I think it is further important to ask 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. Considering the genealogies of black struggles and world making projects across and beyond post-war Europe, abolitionist struggles, as Anna Carastathis (2022) also points to in her commentary, were already present before the black global rebellions in 2020, as well as long before the call of #BlackLives-Matter in 2013. Movements against borders, detention centers (as slogans such as “abolish lagers!” show), the police and deportation apparatus as well as against neo-colonialism, (super-)exploitation and war capitalism, for legalization, decent wages, access to housing and healthcare, took the form of migrant and refugee rent and labor strikes, fighting isolation through the organization of often isolated and deadly camp structures, as well as against state-sanctioned gendered violence including within movements and migrant communities. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore reminds us, struggles and forms of imagining and creating worlds otherwise often practice abolition without its explicit reference.

Abolition is figuring out how to work with people to make something rather than figuring out how to erase something. Abolition is a theory of change, it’s a theory of social life (Gilmore, 2022:351).

From this perspective, the question at stake is not so much if “[t]he language of abolition has not yet been taken up

as a framework for action in these Black Lives Matter mobilizations” (Hawthorne, 2021), but rather what black and other racialized workers rendered refugees and migrants, as well as some of those who were born or grew up in European countries, have already been doing for decades with regard towards building life-affirming infrastructures and institutions. Two brief but powerful examples are of course the *sans papiers* movement, which dates back to the 1970s and went far beyond France, as well as migrant feminist collectives such as Women in Exile in Germany, consisting not only but also of many black refugees and migrants who were forced to migrate from the African continent. Politics against borders and for freedom of movement; struggles against (neo-)imperialism, war capitalism, carcerality and multi-layered violence; and struggles for decent wages, education, housing and healthcare have been at the center of many of these movements and present an abolitionist genealogy within and beyond Europe.

Two related thoughts are connected to the radical methodological potential of the Black Mediterranean. One is the crucial issue of translation, which Hawthorne discusses in her lecture and work by delving into the accounts of diasporic translation put forward by the activists, artists and movements she collaborates with and “as it unfolds in the interstices of everyday life from living rooms, to anarchist squats, to transnational collaborations, to guerilla translation collectives” (Hawthorne, 2021). Following Hawthorne’s argument, I would add that the framework of the Black Mediterranean also invites us to extend issues of translation to our politics of scholarship. Put differently, what happens when we shift our imaginations of readership to projects and audiences beyond the US and North America (where most black people do not employ the middle passage epistemology in that way and are sometimes not even that concerned with de-centering it, except when confronting European strategies of externalization of racism to the US)? How would this change the questions we ask and engagements we commit towards abolition and radical solidarity towards worlds otherwise? How can we attend further to the political translations *between* black movements within and beyond Europe without reproducing the US as a center point of reference? What political formations of blackness come into view if we detach from US dominance in our approaches and questions (and thereby also remind ourselves that radical black politics in the US were deeply international)?

These are questions I am also constantly working through in my own scholarly and collaborative political work on policing (as a method of racial capitalism and condition of un-breathing), blackness and abolitionist politics in and beyond Europe, as a black abolitionist scholar who was born and raised in Germany, where I lived for the longest parts of my life, and who has been organizing in Germany and other parts of Europe with and alongside black and multi-racial (post-migrant and migrant) abolitionist collectives as well as internationally for more than 2 decades. As con-

temporary abolitionist struggles against (urban and border) policing and towards worlds otherwise in and beyond Europe show, from the so-called *banlieues* in France to the streets in Frankfurt am Main, Dessau or Brussels, to the pop-up universities in the racialized working class districts in Lisbon; from solidarity actions with refugees in Libya in close connection to the struggles and protests of #RefugeesinLibya against EU-funded detention centers, neo-enslavement and (super-)exploitation and towards border abolition; from the transnational activism of Lampedusa in Hamburg to, across and between Hamburg, Lampedusa and Tripoli; abolitionist struggles in and beyond Europe are deeply transnational, consist of multi-racial formations and employ various modes of radical blackness¹. Further, and this relates to the radical potential of the framework of the Black Mediterranean that Hawthorne explores, as all of these places are part of the Black Mediterranean as a site of struggle, possibility and politics of life (and the framework is helpful here to bring these struggles within and beyond Europe into transnational conversations), most of these activisms and projects explode national boundaries, methodological nationalism *and* (hyphenated) national identifications. Against this background and considering the stark ambivalence around mobilizations of hyphenated identities, 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. As the long debates and politics (since the mid-1980s) around “Black Germany”, “Afro-Germans” and “Black-Germans” show, hyphenated politics have not only further played into a division of labor of black communities alongside citizenship questions (those with formal citizenship rather focus on questions of representation and recognition as “Black Germans” and as part of the nation, and people rendered migrants and refugees struggle against the larger system and deportations as well as necropolitics) but are further often shaped by liberal orientations in which critiques

¹This is not to say that black people are not simultaneously organizing in rather autonomous spaces; many do both. I am also not saying that racist stereotypes are not reproduced within radical multi-racial movements or that there is not crucial work to do regarding politics of gender relations. My point here is that engagements with different modes of political blackness, which were especially but not only put forward by black people outside of the US (ranging from the black radical formations during the Haitian revolution to black radical politics in the UK in the 20th century, to current modes of organizing in the French so-called *banlieues*) can be helpful (including working through their pitfalls with regard to racist stereotypes as well as gendered relations) to confront the current conjuncture of liberal anti-racism and move towards new formulations of radical political blackness.

against everyday racism, privilege discourse, white fragility as well as the diversification of the status quo, black excellence and calls for representation dominate over black working class and working poor (and so-called “surplus populations”) struggles. This is not to say that issues of recognition are not important, but as Frantz Fanon argued many years ago, they will change little for black poor masses if they are not grounded in materialist politics and orientations (Fanon, 1967).

3 Conjunctions of liberal anti-racism in Europe

This is connected to the point of contestation within black politics (also) in Europe, which is briefly addressed when Hawthorne asks at the very beginning of her lecture “[w]ho constitutes ‘Black Italy’, and whose interests are represented by the new politics mobilized around ‘Black Italianness’? What work does this category do, and who might be inadvertently left out?” (Hawthorne, 2021). This question also speaks to the relation between abolition and citizenship politics. It further points to the question of whether national categories and identifications (no matter how diversified), especially in our current time of climate catastrophe, war capitalism and the crisis of displacement, all rooted in the workings of racial capitalism, should not be challenged more fundamentally (as they will continue to reproduce the logics of separation and dehumanization, see Sharma, 2020; Loick, 2020). Although Hawthorne does not return to these important questions more in-depth in this lecture, I agree with her questions and think that they are part of the crucial conundrums that are at stake for black radical politics in and beyond Europe in our contemporary moment. Engaging with these questions and conundrums also shows the limits of struggles for (citizenship) recognition (without downplaying the material and often life-saving importance of legalization and rights, which are often called “citizenship rights”) and moreover hyphenated-national-identity struggles and how they are often bound to class politics as well as to projects of deradicalization by the racial capitalist state. In the current conjuncture of neoliberal racial capitalism, and the further rise of liberal anti-racism (Shafi and Nagdee, 2022), we also see further class stratifications of black politics unfolding in European countries, which need to also be addressed with regard to discussions of blackness in various contexts of Europe. The shift from struggles against policing and the carceral condition in the wake of the global black rebellion in 2020 (which of course have a longer history in Europe too) towards debates on hiring and representational practices in educational and cultural institutions, debates on everyday racism and privilege, talk of structural racism which is then reduced to the sum of individual positions, privilege and “un-learning”, a diversification of the literature, and media milieu (black integration into talk shows etc.) are striking examples of this (Thompson, 2022). Further, black feminism itself is

shaped by various class interests in Europe, too. In many parts of Europe, for instance, a new genre of black feminist autobiographies, panels, radio shows and podcasts has emerged in which black feminism is often celebrated without radical substance; discourses on black excellence and black magic are fostered, rather pointing to an idealist understanding of racism, according to which inclusion, representation and “un-learning” will solve the societal problems and conditions produced by racial gendered capitalism. At the same time, the carceral state continues to expand, and for many black refugees, black working class and working poor people in and beyond Europe, little has changed. This not only presents a crucial example of how neoliberal racial capitalism not only domesticates radical struggles (this is nothing new) but how sections of black communities in Europe also have different agendas and interests. Against this background it is clear that liberal anti-racism is not only about campaigns of global tech cooperations or national as well as supranational institutions (which will celebrate black culture and #BlackLivesMatter while repressing unionizing and continue to super-exploit especially racialized workers as well as actively produce premature deaths in the seas, the deserts, the detention centers and the prisons), but also, albeit on a different level and rather in terms of orientation, about different class interests within black communities, including the formation of a liberal black feminism (James, 2021; Thompson, 2022; Bergold-Caldwell et al., 2021).

The question of “interest” posed by Hawthorne is thus crucial with regard to black politics as freedom projects, and, as I would argue alongside her question, we need to consider them further and thoroughly in debates on blackness in Europe, especially with regard to the current political conjuncture.

4 Beyond recognition

Hawthorne argues that many of the black movements, often led by women (and I would add the tremendous work and vision of non-binary folks, who too often disappear from view and accountability), which mirrors black movements organizing (within more radical as well as liberal sectors) in various other European countries, that she collaborates with “have focused on citizenship as a racial gendered formation tied to specific histories of Italo-Mediterranean racial formation that structurally dysselected (Wynter, 2003) the Italian-born children of African immigrants such that, from the perspective of the state, their lives *literally* do not count as recognized members of the national community” (Hawthorne, 2021). She adds that this focus includes black refugees and migrants, who are rendered incarcerated and deportable surplus and/or super-exploited on the basis of racial capitalist bordering, police and labor regimes. Having contemporary formations and complexities of black struggles in various European countries in mind as well as the contemporary con-

juncture of liberal anti-racism, which focuses more on anti-discrimination, symbolic memory discourses and related unfoldings of the workings of recognition (most famously critiqued by Fanon in his discussion of Hegel's passage of lordship and bondage), and considering the violence of citizenship (Smythe, 2019; Walcott, 2021), reformed but not thoroughly challenged through hyphenated racial-national identities, I am wondering if the shared political visions that Hawthorne names at the end of her lecture are not also more at odds with the politics of hyphenated identities (as political projects). Difficult debates around "Afro-Germanness" within black communities in Germany are a good example that shows how attachments to national configurations rather reproduce the framework of the nation and thereby rather foster (easier) assimilation into, instead of disruptions and radical transformation of, the current system.

Recognition politics (ranging from memory struggles to struggles of recognition of collective identities) have been crucial articulations of reformist reforms (that do not threaten the existing structure as they rather modify/diversify the status quo) and black middle class politics (in terms of orientation), which have often profited from the struggles and rebellions of mainly black working class and working poor (and therefore "killable") subjects and have rushed to convert radical struggles into rhetorics of reform, assimilation and diversification of the system of racial capitalism than towards its abolition.² Put differently, being "recognized members of the national community" of Italy (or in that respect of other European countries) will not change much of the general operations of racial gendered capitalism and the role that the nation plays in these operations. Racial gendered capitalism will produce new and dependent on older variants racial divisions to extract and exploit as well as produce mass premature death. The call and struggle to be recognized as Black-German, Black-Italian or Black-Greek will not "leave" the nation (in the sense of Fanon's "leaving Europe" as leaving the liberal frameworks that are so deeply tied to genocidal,

²"Middle class and corporate class. I think that the attempt for so many generations to create something that we called in the sixties 'black unity', that effort towards black unity meant for many people, you would not look at divisions of class. To make an emphasis on class would cause a recognition that many leaders and organizations were not willing to deal with, a recognition that many of the goals of the Civil Rights Movement were essentially goals for easier assimilation for middle class people, and that working class people and poor people weren't going to get too much out of this" (Clever, 1997) says Kathleen Cleaver with regard to her reflections of black politics in the 1960s in the US. These were not only US issues, if we consider for instance Fanon's critique of the anti-colonial elites in Algeria, Ambalavaner Sivanandan's emphasis on the difference of two forms of racism (the racism that discriminates and the racism that kills) in post-colonial Britain, Fasia Jansen's working class organizing in Germany or recent critiques by certain local chapters in the BLM movements, often articulated by black poor, working class and migrant communities in various contexts (Thompson, 2022).

colonial, and imperialist exploitation and violence) but rather diversify its operations.

This is not to say that anti-discrimination, recognition and representation are not important or irrelevant. Moreover, struggles for citizenship, regularization and legalization as well as political participation continue to be important, crucial and necessary strategic (and practical, not identity-related) and especially life-saving objectives for anti-racist and black radical politics, especially of migrants and refugees. However, I am wondering if struggles with a dominant focus on citizenship and hyphenated identities do not rather reproduce liberal politics of participation and recognition as citizens of the racial-capitalist state or the "national community" instead of posing a real threat to the workings of racial gendered capitalism and thereby also going beyond citizenship and especially the nation (in its fascist as well as multicultural forms).

5 Abolition as (black) class struggle

Departing from, inspired by and engaging with Hawthorne's reflections and inspirations on the Black Mediterranean, the questions at stake are about how we can further attend to and ground our black struggles, in their political sense, as abolitionist class struggles and world making beyond borders, which also confronts the class character of black politics (also within Europe) and moves towards a politics of the Black Mediterranean as a project of global liberation that does not reproduce the colonial framework of the nation, but despises the nation as an operative mode of racial gendered capitalism and goes way beyond citizenship.

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