On July 4, 2016, a group of about thirty fashion designers, stylists, photographers, and journalists gathered in a modern, minimalist event space in southwest Milan. It was a typically swelteringly hot and humid summer day, but the effortless chic of the crowd somehow remained unaffected. Inside the spotless space, dapper bartenders clad in shoulder straps served sparkling water, statuesque models practiced their walks, designers made last-minute adjustments to garments, and photographers lay in wait to snap photos (see figure 2.1). Dressed in a simple black sheath dress and disheveled from the heat and the crowded metro ride that had brought me to this far corner of the city, I was quite obviously unsuccessful in my attempt to blend in with this high-fashion crowd. After ordering a glass of ice water to calm my nerves, I located an inconspicuous seat toward the back of the room, pulled out my pen and notebook, and waited for the fashion show to begin.

This was a preview event organized by the AFRO Fashion Association, founded in 2015 by journalist and activist Michelle Francine Ngomno and obstetrician and fashion designer Ruth Akutu Maccarthy. The following year, in 2017, Michelle, an Italian-Cameroonian raised in Ferrara, and Ruth, an Italian-Ghanaian raised in Seregno, would use the momentum of this capsule show to launch the first-ever Afro Fashion Week in Milan, the world’s fashion capital. They have organized the AFRO Fashion Week every fall in Milan since, and continue to develop new initiatives showcasing the work of Black designers and entrepreneurs—from the 2019 FierAfric marketplace in Milan featuring Afrodescendant women designers, hair...
product vendors, and chefs to local events across Italy and a training program for fashion students in Cameroon.\(^3\)

Back at the AFRO Fashion preview event, the guests finished making their way indoors and Ruth took her place at the head of the impromptu catwalk. Despite her petite frame, she dominated the room in a uniform of towering heels, red sheath dress made from a star-speckled West African wax print fabric, turban, and dramatically oversized black glasses. As the low throb of techno music in the background died down, she greeted the crowd and proceeded to explain her philosophy of Afro fashion. The passion and urgency in her voice were palpable:

Our goal is to promote a new culture, something we call “Afro.” We are in a disastrous cultural and political situation right now, with immi-
gration and the plight of the extracomunitari [non–European Union immigrants]. This is the right time for this project, because fashion is not just a dress that you wear, a bag you carry, or a shoe you put on. Through fashion, we can show Italy the beauty of a new culture, “Afro”: a marriage of colors, scents, and patterns that are African, with the style and elegance that are the special touch of Italian culture.

Ruth’s emotional introduction to the fashion show represented one of many concurrent attempts to reframe Italian imaginations of Africa in direct response to the ongoing southern European refugee crisis. That summer, the Italian news cycle was inundated with sensationalistic images of rickety boats of African asylum seekers capsizing in the Mediterranean, politicians making inflammatory declarations about “African invasions” and “ethnic replacement” in Italy, and acts of racist violence against African migrants. In fact, just two days after Michelle and Ruth’s event, a Nigerian asylum seeker named Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi was murdered in the Italian seaside town of Fermo by a fascist agitator (a story I will discuss in further detail in chapter 4). African refugees and asylum seekers were also being scapegoated at this time as the primary cause of Italian economic stagnation, by supposedly taking jobs and draining scarce welfare resources that should have been the sole entitlement of “native” (i.e., white) Italians.

For Michelle and Ruth, narratives of African cultural creativity constituted a potent strategy for countering this racist “single story” of Black life in Italy.⁴ In her introductory remarks, Ruth explicitly rejected the idea of an undifferentiated Blackness, one that was characterized in the popular Italian geographical imagination solely by poverty, passivity, and unproductivity. Rather than desperation and abjection, the alternative vision of “Africanness” invoked by the AFRO Fashion Association that day was characterized by a colorful and happy cultural hybridity that, as a collateral benefit, could also awaken a moribund Italian economy from its prolonged slumber. Instead of showing images of drowning refugees, Ruth conjured a continent full of brightly patterned fabrics and rich creative traditions—a continent whose European-raised children could marshal their spatially extended “Afropolitan” networks and fluency in multiple languages as potent resources for revitalizing the storied tradition of “Made in Italy.”⁵

Michelle and Ruth’s AFRO Fashion initiative is but one example of a much broader trend of Black Italian women’s cultural entrepreneurship in Italy. These varied projects, which have gained significant momentum and visibility during the last five years, encompass sectors such as apparel and accessory design, hair care, and cosmetics; they specifically target Black Italian women, and draw on materials, ingredients, and stylistic references from across the Black diaspora.
These initiatives have helped to advance alternative images of Blackness, and specifically Black womanhood, in Italy—images that depart from the more ubiquitous tragic or sensationalized media narratives that Ruth rejected in her speech. They have also enabled many women to achieve a relative degree of economic independence, particularly because (as described in chapter 1) a broad range of employment sectors are inaccessible to Black Italians without Italian citizenship. Entrepreneurship has thus afforded them the possibility of engaging in a broad range of political causes related to the rights of immigrants and their families in Italy.

In this chapter, I consider the ways that entrepreneurship has provided an unexpected opening for many Black Italian women to articulate claims to citizenship in Italy at a time marked by economic stagnation, virulent xenophobia, and anti-Black racism. As I suggested in chapter 1, discourses of economic productivity in Italy are profoundly interwoven with debates about immigration and citizenship. I expand on this argument here by revealing the ways that concerns about Italian economic stagnation have been mapped onto the figure of the “unproductive” Black migrant—a contemporary reworking of much older racialized and gendered distinctions between “proper citizens” and the “undeserving poor.” Such distinctions are not only neoliberal in character, but constitutive of liberalism itself via the “boomerang effects” of European colonialism and imperialism. In the second part of the chapter, I show how Black women’s entrepreneurship has emerged as a strategy that is simultaneously conditioned by and resistant to these regimes of exclusion. I focus on the explosion of projects across northern Italy related to Black beauty and style, drawing on interviews with Black Italian businesswomen and participant observation at events related to Black cultural entrepreneurship in Italy.

Rather than dismiss outright the entrepreneurial activities of Black Italian women as mere “selling out”—by substituting the market for a more radical, anticapitalist agenda of Black politics—I argue that it is necessary to examine how the cultural politics of Blackness articulate with both structural conditions of precarity and creative practices of economic survival. After all, as Arlene Dávila (drawing on the work of Elizabeth Chin) argues, “the involvement of disenfranchised groups in consumer culture has long been pathologized as aberrant or apolitical, rendering any critique of consumption that is blinded of the structural forces that mediate such consumption largely misguided.” While Dávila’s argument here is focused on consumerism and consumption, her point can also be extended to include the entrepreneurial production and market-based activities of marginalized communities more broadly. Indeed, beyond the more formal political mobilizations for citizenship that I described in detail in chapter 1, entrepreneurship has unquestionably emerged as one of the most active infor-
mal sites for the negotiation of Black citizenship in Italy. Following the reasoning of Dávila and Chin, this is precisely because long-standing racialized and gendered ideas about economic productivity and citizenship have shaped the current terrain of struggle for Black Italian women. This is an important reminder that citizenship, in all of its complexities, always exceeds purely state-centric analyses; the boundaries of citizenship are produced and contested not just through legislation and statecraft, but within the realms of political economy and cultural politics as well.

The women I profile in this chapter have used their entrepreneurial projects to connect to the global Black diaspora, insert Blackness into the story of “Made in Italy,” and advocate for more cosmopolitan and open-ended understandings of Italianness. Many even explicitly ascribe a Black diasporic feminist politics to their work: they challenge constructions of the Black female body as a passive receptacle by demonstrating the agentive subjectivity of Black women through creative practices of bodily and sartorial transformation. And by remaking themselves in relation to the “Made in Italy” brand, they are in turn remaking what it means to be Italian today.

Yet entrepreneurship is also a deeply fraught and politically ambiguous strategy. This can be seen in the ways Black Italian women’s entrepreneurship is reinterpreted in the public sphere by Italian media and politicians as local symbols of a transnational, hypercapitalist, and business-friendly Black “cool”—an economically desirable and thoroughly “modern” Blackness that only becomes legible in contrast to the abject figure of the African refugee. In addition, this kind of entrepreneurship is most accessible to those highly educated Black Italians who are able to access specific forms of material and cultural capital in a decidedly classed politics of respectability. Given all of this, to what extent do efforts to decentralize the “refugee narrative” in favor of uplifting stories about Black entrepreneurs, as Ruth suggested in her AFRO Fashion speech, also inadvertently produce new sorts of racialized distinctions between “good/productive” Black citizens-in-waiting and “bad/unproductive” Black refugees? And by extension, what does it mean when the conditional inclusion of Black Italians (as creative cultural workers) becomes contingent on the marginalization of these refugees?

**Citizenship, Blackness, and the Underserving Poor**

Economic activity in general and entrepreneurship in the so-called creative industries in particular have emerged as key sites where ideas about Blackness, citizenship, and belonging are currently being articulated and contested by Black
Italians who were born or raised in Italy. It is important to note that conversations about who “counts” as an Italian do not always occur within the sphere of more traditional, collective forms of political activism. Italian social and political commentators often lament this development as evidence of a general depoliticization and individualization of youth, tied to rampant consumerism and systematic attacks on trade unions in Italy since the 1970s. But the gradual turn away from political parties, social centers, and trade unions as privileged sites of activism for young people should also be understood as an expression of their profound frustration with the racism, paternalism, and many neoliberal compromises of the contemporary Italian Left since the decline of the Italian Communist Party.

There is in fact a long history in Italy of entrepreneurship being leveraged in struggles over the rights of immigrants and people of color, particularly by women. In the 1990s, as immigration became a major point of public concern (as noted in chapter 1, the country’s first comprehensive immigration law was enacted in 1990), immigrant women were being stratified into racialized and gendered forms of labor such as care work, domestic work, and sex work. In this context, interethnic feminist organizations in Italy often sought to create meaningful and dignifying spaces for immigrant women through entrepreneurship. As Heather Merrill has noted, while classic Marxist theory might portray the entrepreneur as an emblematic figure of the petite bourgeoisie, entrepreneurship in Italy is also tied to a genealogy of workerism and work cooperatives in which the radicalization of the working classes occurred through cooperatives.

For many Italian-born and -raised children of African and Afro-Latinx immigrants, entrepreneurial activity today is closely tied to the articulation of claims for citizenship. This is a direct result of the way that the “integration” of immigrants and their children in Italy has been linked to the value created by their labor. As described in chapter 1, the differential inclusion or exclusion of immigrants based on their potential economic productivity was institutionalized in the 1990 Legge Martelli and has been reiterated in every subsequent Italian immigration law. The draconian 2002 Bossi-Fini Law, for instance, stipulates that Italian visas and residency permits for non-EU immigrants must be contingent on employment (or alternatively, enrollment in higher education). By the time of the 2009 Eurozone debt crisis, which set into motion an Italian “perma-recession” characterized by economic stagnation, austerity, and among the highest unemployment rates in Europe, legal and everyday scrutiny of the economic impact of immigration only intensified. Many immigrants—who bore the disproportionate burden of the crisis—found themselves at risk of becoming undocumented because their employment contracts had been terminated, exposing them either to deportation or to exploitative forms of lavoro nero, or informal black-market
labor. Although it is obvious, it is worth stating what is usually taken for granted: Italian citizens who were laid off as a result of the same structural economic conditions did not have their citizenship revoked or their status in Italy questioned.

But notions of economic productivity do not only suffice immigration law; they also filter access to citizenship. Resistance in Italy to the legal and de facto recognition of the children of immigrants who were born and raised in Italy is frequently framed in terms of economic drain. For this reason, the naturalization requirements for both immigrants and their Italian-born children include exorbitant processing fees and evidence of a minimum income level. In a telling statement, Italian political scientist Giovanni Sartori lamented in 2013 that jus soli citizenship would be “a disaster in a country with high unemployment.”13 In other words, migrants and their children are seen as diverting state resources and taking jobs that should be the sole entitlement of “native” (i.e., white) Italians.

This phenomenon can be understood as a symptom of what David Theo Goldberg has characterized as “racial neoliberalism.”14 Under racial neoliberalism, Goldberg argues, the welfare state is attacked and gradually dismantled because it is perceived to be no longer serving its “intended” constituency of white citizens at a time when the demographic makeup of Western states is becoming increasingly diverse.15 The Euro-American welfare state is seen as supporting only the undeserving—and the “undeserving” in this case are almost universally marked as Black and/or foreign.16 As Goldberg writes, “Fear of a black state is linked to worries about a black planet, of alien invasion and alienation, of a loss of the sort of local and global control and privilege long associated with whiteness.”17 But despite the many structural explanations for the comparatively weak Italian welfare state in relation to other European countries, “alien invasion” continues to serve as an all too convenient scapegoat.18 This is, of course, contradicted by all available economic data: numerous studies have shown that immigrants and other noncitizens in Italy contribute more to the country’s GDP than their actual share of the total Italian population; they open new businesses at a higher rate than Italian citizens; and their tax contributions help to rebalance an Italian pension system threatened by a graying population.19

In Italy, the “undeserving foreigner” is almost always embodied in the figure of the vampiric Black migrant who has come to Italy to take advantage of “free” welfare benefits without working. Blackness and foreignness are categories that are collapsed into each other and work to mutually reinforce one another—Blackness is fixed as geographically outside of Europe, and wholly external to European modernity. In one widely publicized case, a Lega Nord parliamentarian donned blackface on the floor of the Chamber of Deputies to protest government “handouts” that were supposedly being given to Black refugees while white Italian families suffered economic precarity.20 Another notable example
was the media-fueled national outrage over the alleged 35 euros per day allotted to refugees and asylum seekers in Italy (in reality, they are disbursed about 2.50 euros per day of “pocket money”—not enough to cover a round-trip public transportation ticket in most major Italian cities). Despite the volumes of ink spilled on the supposed “problem” of refugee laziness in Italy, asylum seekers are legally prohibited from entering the Italian labor market for six months, and are instead conscripted into various forms of volunteer work designed to inculcate them with “Italian values” and prepare them for “integration” into Italian society. And many have actually sought out employment in spite of these structural barriers, for instance by using falsified documents to work as bicycle couriers for various food-delivery mobile apps.

Another jaw-droppingly absurd moment illuminated precisely how such images of an undifferentiated Blackness are linked to moral panics about scarce state resources and the undeserving. In August 2017, a photo circulated on social media of Black American actor Samuel L. Jackson and Black American basketball player Magic Johnson resting on a bench after a day of shopping at luxury stores in Tuscany, surrounded by shopping bags (see figure 2.2). As the photo made the rounds on Facebook and Twitter, outraged Italian commentators mistook Jackson and Johnson for refugees who had spent their 35 euros on an extravagant shopping spree. To international observers, the bitter irony was that even the most powerful symbols of Black capitalism could be reduced to representations of undeserving poverty in the blink of an eye.

On the other hand, rosy stories of immigrants’ economic resourcefulness are also used by liberal-left politicians to demonstrate the benefits of incorporating groups with foreign backgrounds into the national fold. Indeed, the figure of the industrious “immigrant entrepreneur” regularly factors into debates about immigration across Western Europe and the United States. Discussions about immigrant entrepreneurship hinge on the question of whether the diasporic, “hybrid” subjectivities of international migrants represent a threat to the integrity of a country’s national culture, or whether they can instead function as a “smooth supplement to an ideology of free trade and markets.” For instance, when former president of the Italian Chamber of Deputies Laura Boldrini announced the 2016 MoneyGram Award for best immigrant entrepreneur in Italy, she also used the occasion to urge the Italian parliament to approve jus soli for the children of immigrants on the basis of their economic contributions: “The country should be grateful for the entrepreneurial contribution you make to our country. . . . The demographic crisis can be overcome with family policies and new arrivals, by providing the right to Italian citizenship.”

As these examples show, whether they are supposedly “gaming” the welfare state, stealing jobs from white Italians by voluntarily working for lower wages,
or kick-starting the economy through entrepreneurship, immigrants and their children—and Black subjects in particular—are systematically evaluated as legitimate or illegitimate members of the Italian national community based on their economic productivity. But this is not only a symptom of entrepreneurial self-making under neoliberal governance and its associated “enterprise culture.” It is important to note that preoccupations with the “problems” of poverty and unproductivity are constitutive of liberalism itself. From the English
Poor Laws to the influence of Thomas Malthus on responses to the Irish Great Famine of 1845–52 to the 1965 Moynihan Report, a range of technologies of liberal and colonial governance have worked in concert to produce the category of the “undeserving poor” as beyond the boundaries of citizenship—a process that has also been caught up with ideas of racial and gendered difference.

Postcolonial feminist scholars such as Ann Stoler, Anne McClintock, and Zine Magubane have demonstrated that the citizenship of the white working classes in nineteenth-century Europe was not a foregone conclusion. Indeed, the category of “whiteness” has always contained within it internal differentiation and hierarchy.26 Poor white women in particular were seen as threats to the racial integrity of European nations—unable to embody the upper- and middle-class values of domesticity central to the reproduction of whiteness, their economic status rendered them dangerously proximate to the racially “inferior” Black and Asian subjects in the colonies.27 After Italian unification, for example, southern Italians were considered to be outside the racial and civilizational boundaries of the nation, their extreme poverty naturalized as racial difference rather than the product of internal colonization.28 As a result, Italian politicians, colonial administrators, and scientists feared that any potential racial slippage between southern Italians and Africans in the new Italian territories in the Horn of Africa would undermine Italian colonial domination. This racialization of poverty was also deeply gendered, as seen in northern Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso’s preoccupation with the particular “cunning” of poor southern Italian women who engaged in prostitution and crime, and the racial traits they supposedly shared with Africans.29 This history effectively explodes the unitary category of “white Italian.” In addition, these examples suggest that class has never been an objective social phenomenon, but is instead constituted in and through the power-laden categories of race, gender, and nation.

By the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries, poor whites were being systematically incorporated into Euro-American nation-states through access to the political franchise, welfare assistance, and—if not actual economic security—the “psychological wage” of full inclusion within the family of whiteness.30 Colonized and enslaved subjects had long symbolized moral defects, laziness, and ungovernability that threatened to tarnish the racial status of poor whites.31 But increasingly, these poor whites were being approached not as potentially analogous to people of color, but rather as their foil: they constituted the hardworking, deserving poor whose survival was imperiled by the undeserving Black poor. Even in Italy, as southern Italian immigrants in the United States were being targeted as racially proximate to Black, the Italian Fascist state increasingly sought to incorporate and uplift poor southerners in order to harden the distinction between Italians and African colonial subjects.
In the context of the resurgence of racist nationalisms in the twenty-first century, the category of the “white working class” has been consistently mobilized to dramatize the threats posed to the national body by immigrants, Blacks, and people of color generally. In Italy, these fears have condensed media and political attention into the figure of the single, young, Black male migrant; however, Black women are also targeted in unique ways by this politics of “exclusion and scapegoating.” This is because Black women represent the condensation of Italy’s “triple crisis”: economic stagnation, immigration, and declining birthrates / rising emigration of white Italians. They are portrayed as undeserving foreigners, and also as reproductive time bombs who will bring about an ethnic “great replacement.” Italian politicians frequently warn that African women are arriving en masse to give birth on Italian soil—an iteration of the noxious “anchor babies” rhetoric used to stoke xenophobia in the United States.

From liberal colonialism, through fascism, and up to our current neoliberal and ethnonationalist moment, race, gender, and class have worked as articulated categories that continually reproduce one another and give each other meaning. In turn, these categories have collectively shaped and redefined the boundaries of national citizenship. Contrary to common characterizations of neoliberalism as a sharp historical break that has effectively “economized” all aspects of private and political life, the linking of racialized and gendered notions of productivity to citizenship has actually been integral to the constitution of the liberal state itself. And this has in turn established a unique terrain of struggle for Black women in Italy today.

**Black Businesses in Italy: From Foreign Contamination to Savvy (Afro) Cosmopolitanisms**

Black Italian women’s entrepreneurship seeks to disrupt the deeply entrenched teleology linking race, class, gender, and citizenship by refashioning Black womanhood as active, economically productive, creative, cosmopolitan—and quintessentially Italian. Since at least 2014, there has been a stunning proliferation of blogs, Facebook pages, YouTube channels, and traveling workshops encouraging Black women in Italy to embrace their natural features and hair textures, reject racist and Eurocentric standards of beauty, and assert themselves as legitimate members of Italian society. Natural hair care, beauty, and fashion are key sites of community building where Black Italian women can discuss the experiences of Black womanhood in contemporary Italy, and they also serve as powerful platforms for articulating citizenship claims.
When I first began this research in Italy in 2012, however, I did not expect entrepreneurship to be such an important hotbed of political activity—I imagined that I would spend most of my time marching in the streets at political demonstrations. Instead, over the course of months and years of fieldwork, I learned that there was a rapidly expanding microcosm of influential Black women entrepreneurs—women who were using their regional or national platforms to bring visibility to other Black Italians, serve as aspirational role models, advocate for citizenship, and mobilize against racism. I was surprised to find that many of the prominent Black activists I was meeting were also highly ambitious and driven businesswomen.

Yet, this unexpected development raised a number of questions that my Western Marxian political economic training (which, as Cedric Robinson argues, assumes a narrowly defined revolutionary working-class subject) proved insufficient to address. Could entrepreneurship ever be considered a political act? Would the dynamics of market-based competition inevitably thwart the possibilities of Black solidarity? Did these projects simply reflect uncritical consent to the logics of neoliberal citizenship? Or, following Stuart Hall’s analytical program from the inaugural issue of *New Left Review*, could Black women’s entrepreneurship be understood as one example of the “imaginative resistances of people who have to live within capitalism”?  

Black Italian women’s entrepreneurship is a geographically specific phenomenon, largely concentrated in the northern and central Italian regions of Lombardy, Lazio, Tuscany, Emilia-Romagna, Veneto, and Piedmont. This is due to the historically higher levels of economic prosperity and lower rates of unemployment in these regions, the existence of more extensive support networks for entrepreneurship (including “immigrant” entrepreneurship), and the presence of major urban centers and large immigrant populations. In addition, while most immigrant families were devastated by the aftershocks of the 2009 economic crisis, the children of immigrants in northern Italy nonetheless continue to enjoy marginally greater economic stability when compared to their counterparts in the South. This is because in many cases, their parents had settled in northern Italy in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to pursue university education, work in large factories, or open ethnic shops, grocery stores, and other small businesses.

Black Italian businesswomen approach entrepreneurship as a complex terrain of struggle through which they can advance new representations of Black life in Italy and transform the meanings and practices of Italianness. In doing so, they are challenging the aforementioned ideas of Black passivity and nonproductivity, and the ways these stereotypes cling to Black women in particular. Their projects draw on resources from across the Black diaspora, position Black women
in relation to the “Made in Italy” brand, and advance cosmopolitan, Mediter-
nanean understandings of Italian national identity. They are expanding the defi-
nition of who and what is made in Italy today by framing Blackness not as a
problem of racial contamination and economic degradation, but as a solution
to the problems of Italian productive (and reproductive) stagnation.

**Natural Hair and Diasporic Connection**

In January 2014, Italian-Ghanaian Evelyne Afaawua (who emigrated to Italy from
France with her parents shortly after her first birthday) founded the first Facebook
page in Italian about the care and valorization of natural, non–chemically straight-
ened Black hair. Originally called “Afro Italian Nappy Girls” and based in Milan,
the community now goes by the name “Nappyitalia” and includes a robust, multi-
platform social media presence (including a Facebook fan base of over sixteen
thousand individuals as of August 2019), a blog, an e-commerce site, and offline
meetups and workshops held in cities around Italy. In 2018, after several years of
planning and fundraising, Evelyne also launched a successful line of organic natu-
ral hair products called “Nappyitalia Eco Bio Cosmetics.” During our first meeting
in Milan in the summer of 2014, shortly after the founding of Nappyitalia, Evelyne
described her decision to focus on hair:

> Once you’ve developed your ideas, you have to externalize the clarity
> that is inside. For me, for instance, I tried using skin-lightening creams.
> This was a period when I wanted to become lighter. There are all of these
> phases, which make you understand where your place is. And once you
> understand where your place is, you say, “Va bene, to be in that place I
> have to reflect it, right?” And for a girl, what does she think? Most likely,
> the first thing is hair. . . . You want the clarity inside to be visible outside.
> And so hair. . . . For me, it could be a question of money, but I have more
to demonstrate than just money. Yes, we’re Afro-Italians, and we are
showing who we are, but we also want to show it on paper, to show off.

I had the chance to see just what this sort of “showing off” looked like when
I attended a Nappyitalia event in Milan two years later. The inaugural event of a
fifteen-city tour across Italy, the Milanese edition of #NappyOnTour2016 was
held in a room on the third floor of Gogol’Ostello, a mixed-use literary café
owned by the Italian-Eritrean Asli Haddas. Although it was a bitterly cold Jan-
uary evening, the room’s bright green carpet, white-and-pink striped wallpaper,
and colorful hanging lamps lent the space a cozy ambiance. At the front of the
room, a table with a pink tablecloth displayed an assortment of hair products
wrapped in sheer pink gift bags, jewelry, and African print shirts. Another table practically groaned under the weight of a buffet of Italian and pan-African dishes. At the other side of the room, a group of photographers had set up an informal photo studio. The workshop attendees gradually filtered into the space, a group that also included three Black men, a white woman, and a biracial seven-year-old girl. As they shed their winter coats, it became clear that everyone had purposefully dressed to the nines, many in outfits that featured African textiles. I came to a stunning realization: this was the first time I had ever experienced a space in Italy where I was surrounded almost entirely by other Black women.

And indeed, the space that Evelyne had curated that evening was intended to serve as a sort of refuge—and not just from the frigid winter air outside. As we took our seats in folding chairs, a member of the Nappytalia team distributed surveys with detailed questions about why we had decided to be “nappy,” what hair products we used, what types of ingredients we preferred, and what hairstyles we enjoyed. As she read through the survey, one woman lamented that her hair was classified as “4C,” the most tightly coiled curl according to the popular hair typing system developed by Oprah Winfrey’s stylist, Andre Walker. But Evelyne was quick to intervene, immediately swooping over in her wax print skirt, Afro-Italian Nappy Girls t-shirt, and dangling pink earrings that matched her bubblegum-pink lipstick. “I’m a 4C, too!” she responded cheerily. “It even says in the Bible: ‘The last will be first.’” Her words of encouragement recalled the justification for Evelyne’s use of the word “nappy”: she was inspired by the Black American cultural activists who had reappropriated the term from its association with unruliness, disorder, and incivility and given it a new meaning: “naturally happy.”

After defusing what she interpreted as a momentary outburst of internalized anti-Black racism, Evelyne moved to the front of the room and began to tell her story, and the story of the Nappytalia community. She described herself as part of a new generation in Italy that had a doubled identity, one that spoke multiple languages and regional Italian dialects and was distinguished by having dark skin and Afro hair. The goal of Nappytalia, she explained, was to showcase the realities of a rapidly changing Italy, and to create a space that supported the self-expression of Black Italian women. “We exist,” she said firmly. “If we are here,” she continued, gesturing at the rows and rows of Black women seated before her, “then we exist.” After Evelyne concluded her speech, she went on to provide tips about the care and maintenance of natural hair and demonstrated different hair-styling techniques on two volunteers from the audience.

When the scheduled program drew to a close, the workshop participants dispersed across the room to purchase hair products, treat themselves to snacks from the buffet, and pose for professional glamour shots. As I chatted with Evelyne,
the Nappytalia team, and the workshop participants, I overheard conversations about topics ranging from the indignity of white Italians touching Black women’s hair without permission to the challenges of obtaining Italian citizenship to the importance of showcasing all the ways Black women were contributing to Italian society. The topic of natural hair had created a rare space for Black Italian women to connect with each other and assert the beauty of bodily features that had been denigrated by Eurocentric standards of beauty and marked as foreign to Italian-ness. By engaging in communal acts of self-transformation (i.e., by making the decision to stop chemically altering their hair), these women had also begun to produce and express a collective Black Italian subjectivity.

The celebration of natural hair has also allowed Black women in Italy to articulate connections to a broader Black diaspora beyond Italy. Nappytalia builds on the momentum of an Internet-mediated Black natural hair movement that, since the mid-2000s, has linked together Black women across the globe. As Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps explain, social media has helped Black women learn new hairstyles and hair care practices that do not involve chemical straighteners and enabled them to connect with others who have also embarked on the journey of “going natural.” Evelyne, for instance, spent almost a year researching Facebook pages and YouTube channels from Black hairstylists in the United States and France before settling on the importance of developing similar resources for Black women in Italy, in Italian. Indeed, in the early days of Nappytalia, she would frequently share images and videos from Black hairstylists and celebrities across the Black diaspora to the group’s Facebook page. These diasporic resources were intended to serve as aspirational models for Black Italian women, who rarely saw themselves positively represented in the Italian media.

As one early member of the Nappytalia community explained to me in 2014, “Those of us who grew up in Italy, seeing only white people around us, thought that the only beautiful people were white. But with the Internet, we have seen that there are many places in the world where beauty doesn’t just mean straight hair or white skin.” Nappytalia’s website also features articles about traditional African hair care practices, the cultural politics of Black hair, and the history of the transatlantic slave trade. These resources are intended to show Black Italian women that although they may experience social and political marginalization in Italy, they are not alone—they are members of a global Black community.

Nappytalia facilitates not only transatlantic diasporic connections, but trans-European and Mediterranean ones as well. In 2016, Evelyne attended the Black Europe Summer School, a two-week program in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, that brings together scholars and activists from across the diaspora to learn about the history and ongoing mobilizations of Black communities in Europe. Evelyne is also one of many young Black Italian entrepreneurs and activists who is an
alumnus of the African Summer School, a program founded in 2013 by the Italian-Congolese journalist Fortuna Ekustu Mambulu and associated with REDANI (the Network of the Black African Diaspora in Italy), an influential network comprising mostly first-generation African immigrants in Italy. Held first in Verona and now based in Rome, the African Summer School is a one-week training program designed to prepare its participants to take advantage of the “African Renaissance” by developing microenterprises involving Africa or the transnational African diaspora. But over the years, the program has also come to serve a second, more informal function. Specifically, it has allowed many of its Black Italian participants the opportunity to develop connections with their parental homelands on the African continent, countries they might not have been able to visit physically due to financial limitations or the strict residency requirements for Italian naturalization. In addition to seminars about business plan design, the African Summer School features lectures on African philosophy, history, economics, and ethics that draw on the intellectual legacy of Senegalese historian Cheikh Anta Diop to challenge European stereotypes of African backwardness. For Black Italians who participate in the program, it is very often the first time they have been taught by African professors and heard the African continent described as having history, wealth, and culture.

But what does it mean when these sorts of meaningful diasporic spaces are also mediated by consumption and capitalist market exchange? Writing about “African American beauty culturalists” during the civil rights movement in the United States, multiple scholars have pointed to the tensions that arose in the 1960s between Black pride and capitalism. For instance, while many Black women salon owners did not see a contradiction between making money and promoting social causes, other activists contested what they saw as the gradual “commercialization” of natural hair. Much like the African American beauty shop owners in the US South during Jim Crow studied by historian Tiffany M. Gill, Evelyne unambiguously characterizes herself as an “entrepreneur with social ethics.” For Evelyne, natural hair is a diasporic resource that enables her to mobilize for the rights and dignity of Black women living in Italy. As one of the most visible Black Italians active in Italy today (she has been the subject of a documentary and countless magazine features and is regularly invited to speak at conferences about gender and the Black diaspora in Italy), she has used her platform to bring visibility to other Black Italians, call attention to anti-racism demonstrations in Italy, and mobilize support for citizenship reform. She mentors aspiring Black Italian entrepreneurs and takes part in body positivity campaigns in Italy. The Nappytalia Facebook page, moderated by Evelyne and her collaborators, remains a rich site of conversation and debate about identity, racism, sexism, and the many obstacles faced by Black Italians without citizenship.
Since Nappytalia’s founding, Evelyne has gone on to win Italian and European entrepreneurship awards, acquire local investors for her business, and connect to product manufacturers and distributors abroad. In 2015, she was awarded the MoneyGram Award for foreign entrepreneurship in Italy under the imprenditoria giovanile (youth entrepreneurship) category—the first Afrodescendent entrepreneur to receive this honor. Later that year, she was awarded “Best Blogger” for the Nappytalia website at the annual Africa-Italy Excellence Awards. In fact, Evelyne recounted that attending the Africa-Italy Excellence Awards the previous year had been an important turning point for her—it was when she first began to take note of the way systemic racism had left untapped the economic potential of Black folk in Italy:

Before the event, I had the idea that Africans were workers, street sweepers, *vu’ cumprà.* After that event, my idea of Africans was doctors, writers, bloggers, directors. Therefore, there was a possibility, an opportunity, to be African but to have the same occupations as many others without being limited by the color of your skin. But the problem is that for us young people, these examples are not as apparent. When I went to this event, I was like, wow . . . I started to dream: if there are people who at forty-five, sixty years old have been able to be doctors, gynecologists, bloggers, directors, then I say, well if the situation in Italy is like this, it’s because these people are not employed at their full capacity.

She continued:

I want to achieve my goals and dreams and become something. To create a position for myself in the society, regardless of whether I am white or Black. I want to be myself, with all of my characteristics, whether you accept them or not. . . . Whereas before I didn’t acknowledge my Ghanaian side, now I try to show both. If you accept me, you have to accept me because I am Ghanaian, because I am Italian, *basta.* We have to . . . let people understand that we exist. I think that what could help would be to make them understand the utility that we have, the utility that we can give to the society. . . . If we talk about an Italian, an Italian can speak Italian well, can speak English, but what would be his approach toward an American, a Latin American, an African? It is probably much easier for an Afro-Italian to work with a foreigner than an Italian. Italians have a closed mentality.

As she spoke, Evelyne implicitly marked the racialization of Italianness as white, while also refusing to succumb to the equation of Blackness with foreignness. Rather, she suggested, “Afro-Italians” are Italians, too—but they have diasporic
connections and an international outlook that make them more able to contribute to the economy than white Italians. At the same time, her emphasis on “creating a position . . . in the society” through employment reflected the ongoing salience of economic activity in debates about Italian citizenship.

In this spirit, Evelyne has sought to build on the success of her Nappytalia brand by mentoring aspiring Black Italian businesswomen and linking together other fledgling entrepreneurs. And thanks in part to the path blazed by Evelyne, Italy now boasts a robust natural hair movement of its own—from stylists like “NaturAngi” (Angela Haisha Adamou) and “Afro-On” (Belysa Shabani) to product vendors and manufacturers such as AfroRicci and Vanity Case Cosmetics to beauty bloggers and vloggers such as the women behind the multimedia site Afroitalian Souls. These women often import hair products from companies across the Black diaspora (typically the United States or the United Kingdom) to sell online to other Black Italians, filling a gap in the market in Italy for beauty products and cosmetics tailored to the specific needs of Black women. But increasingly, they are looking not only to connect with Black diasporic networks abroad, but also to refashion “Made in Italy” at home.

New Geographies of “Made in Italy”

Since at least the 2008 economic crisis, discussions in Italy surrounding the future of “Made in Italy” have been met with uncertainty. “Made in Italy,” a merchandise mark used since the 1980s to designate the uniqueness of Italian production in the “Four A’s” of abbigliamento (clothing), agroalimentare (food), arredamento (furniture), and automobili (cars and other forms of mechanical engineering) and protected by Italian law since 1999, is a shorthand for the skilled craftsmanship associated with “traditional” Italian industries. More recently, however, policymakers, journalists, and manufacturers’ associations in Italy have expressed concern that this label (in its various iterations associated with luxury brands, quality manufacturing, and small-scale artisanship) is at risk. While the decline in prestige of “Made in Italy” has not been fully substantiated by the available economic data, various culprits have still been named: the economic crisis; fast fashion; the increasing availability of cheaper products from abroad (cinese, or “Chinese,” is also a racially charged colloquialism in Italian that refers deservingly to low-quality, mass-produced consumer goods); foreign counterfeiters; young Italians’ lack of interest in traditional industries; the internationalization of product supply chains; and the stagnating effects of that peculiar Italian blend of bureaucracy and organized crime.
This question of how to “produce” Italy is also intimately linked with fears about the social reproduction of the nation—from declining white Italian birth rates to the comparatively high birth rates of immigrants to the “brain drain” of highly educated and skilled young white Italians. In other words, preoccupations about the state of traditional Italian industries and crafts are closely linked to nationalist fears about the impacts of porous borders, uncontrollable transnational flows, and growing racial or ethnic pluralism. In this sense, “Made in Italy” is more than just a national brand—instead, it signals a set of interrelated questions about who and what is made in Italy, and by extension, who is making Italy today and who will make Italy in the future. In the context of this uncertainty about the future of Italy—Who will (re)produce the nation?—economic activity has emerged as a key cultural and political touchstone. This is why immigrant-owned businesses are often singled out as the targets of protests and boycotts by Italian nativists, and also why the “Made in Italy” slogan is sometimes repurposed in campaign materials and sound bites for the Italian citizenship reform movement.

Anthropologists such as Lisa Rofel, Sylvia Yanagisako, and Elizabeth Krause have studied the transformations of “Made in Italy”—and, by extension, Italianness—brought about by the insertion of Chinese entrepreneurs into the manufacturing of “Italian” textiles and clothing. But any discussion of the “Made in Italy” brand must also be analyzed alongside the unfolding contestations about the place of Blackness within the symbolic and material boundaries of the modern Italian nation. Italian-Somali writer Igiaba Scego captured the layered racial meanings of “Made in Italy” in her award-winning 2003 short story “Salsicce” (Sausages). As the story’s Muslim / Roman / Somali protagonist debates whether or not eating pork sausages will make her truly “Italian” in a way that her burgundy-colored Italian passport cannot, she wonders to herself: “Perhaps, by eating a sausage, I might go from neutral fingertips to real ‘Made in Italy’ fingerprints, but is this what I really want?” Scego’s story helps us understand why it is so meaningful for Black Italian entrepreneurs to affix the “Made in Italy” label to their Black natural hair products and African textile–inspired fashion designs.

Countless news features published within the last half decade have celebrated these Black Italian entrepreneurs for what is characterized as their creative and technologically forward-thinking contributions to the Italian economy. Indeed, it is important to recognize that for many Black Italian businesswomen, their projects have two audiences in mind—an internal audience of other Black Italians who can come together around a particular theme (hair, fashion, beauty) to discuss their shared experiences and struggles, and an external audience of
Italians who can learn more about the lives and material contributions of the children of African and Afro-Latinx immigrants in Italy. These counternarratives are intended to challenge the idea that Black bodies in Italian territory constitute an invasion, a threat, or a drain on resources—in other words, that they are perpetually “bodies out of place.” After all, the reasoning goes, by producing products that are “Made in Italy,” you are in turn able to produce yourself as “Italian.”

In 2011, the Italian-Nigerian-Russian entrepreneur and singer Alice Edun opened the first e-shop with products for Black hair in Italy. Several years later, along with her then-collaborator, Italian-Dominican stylist Reina Gomez, Alice’s company AfroRicci (AfroCurls) launched the first “Made in Italy” line of products designed for curly or Afro-textured hair. AfroRicci products include a popular line of shampoos, conditioners, styling creams, and oils developed in painstaking collaboration with an Italian cosmetics laboratory. Today, the company boasts its own warehouse and office and exports to France, Canada, Spain, and the United Kingdom.

Like Evelyne’s, Alice’s and Reina’s trajectories toward the world of natural hair care involved tangled, multisited journeys of self-discovery. I first met Reina in Milan in 2014, when she was a boisterous beauty blogger with a passion for Black history. The daughter of a white Venezuelan father and a mixed / Afro-Dominican mother, Reina was born in Venezuela, spent her early childhood years in Santo Domingo, and then came to Italy for elementary school. Reina explained that cutting off her straightened hair and letting her natural curls grow back in (the “big chop”) was part of a broader attempt on her part to connect with the African roots of her Latin American identity—a process that had also involved careful study of the Haitian Revolution. She had been galvanized by her experiences of everyday gendered racism and nonrecognition in Italy to use hair as a platform for connecting other Black Italian women.

Reina and Alice met in 2014, when Alice was searching for a hairdresser with whom to collaborate for various AfroRicci-related initiatives. Alice was born in Russia to a Black Nigerian father and a white Russian mother, grew up in Nigeria, and came to Italy as a young woman. Like Reina, Alice described her hair as an embodied way to assert pride in her African heritage. As Alice explained to me in 2016, shortly after Reina had introduced us:

Hair is part of your identity, so when you talk about Afro hair, already the word “Afro” comes from “Africa.” You are describing your hair, which comes from a place, a people. You are identifying with them, even if you were born here, or you were born there, or adopted, or are multiracial. When you describe Afro curls, you are saying that you are part
of that category of people. And so identity is part of that, in knowing where you come from, maybe a culture that you don’t know well but that you want to get to know better.

Alice characterizes hair as the basis for a new form of Black Italian identity that refuses to subordinate “Afro” to “Italian” in the quest for broader social recognition. In addition to offering their hair products, Alice and Reina also organize workshops around Italy; often, they cater to young African adoptees and their white Italian parents. But a main source of pride for both women is the fact that they can claim the “Made in Italy” label as their own. Reina has since branched out to launch her own line of natural hair products in Italy, called “Authentic Afro Hair.” But when we met over coffee at Alice’s home in 2016, Alice and Reina shared their excitement at being able to promote the first “Made in Italy” product by, and for, Black women:

ALICE: We are proud to say “Made in Italy.” It is important to show the whole world that even in Italy, we are here. We’re here, AfroRicci, and we have our own “Made in Italy” products.

REINA: It’s also a responsibility. “Made in Italy” is known all over the world as a sign of quality. It is a cultural thing, tied to a history of small artisans. . . .

ALICE: From Italian shoes, stylists, fashion, to food, the finishing on our houses, furniture . . . “Made in Italy” is synonymous with quality. So the first cream for Afro hair in Italy has to be that way. It has to be a quality product.

CAMILLA: It seems important to be able to say “Made in Italy” during this [economic] crisis, too.

ALICE: The crisis, of course! I would like it if there were more support from the Italian state for “Made in Italy” . . . especially for innovative things. . . . Yes, it’s a beauty product, but it’s a niche product, for a particular group of people who are part of the Italian culture. Afro-Italians are part of the Italian culture. There needs to be support for “Made in Italy” products for Afro-Italians, too.

As Alice elaborated in a 2017 interview, AfroRicci “demonstrates that even I contribute at the social, economic, and cultural levels in this country. . . . It is important that Italy recognize the multiethnic woman.”61 Her comments imply that the meanings attached to entrepreneurship are deeply gendered, as Black Italian businesswomen seek to challenge both their invisibility (as unrecognized “citizens-in-waiting”) and their hypervisibility (as sex objects or docile care workers) in Italian spaces and in the Italian racial imaginary.62 Indeed, as geographers
of migration have argued, the bodies of those perceived as “foreign”—but especially those of women—are systematically instrumentalized to mark the cultural boundaries of citizenship and belonging in European liberal democracies. Through their work with AfroRicci, Alice and Reina were forced to contend with economic constructions of Italian citizenship and the pervasive model of the “useful” immigrant entrepreneur. Nonetheless, the act of producing “Made in Italy” conditioners and curl creams for Black women also allowed them to claim legitimacy as Italians while simultaneously asserting pride in their African heritage. But again, Alice and Reina are not simply advocating for their incorporation into “Made in Italy” (and, by extension, the Italian nation itself). They are challenging the perceived isomorphism of “Blackness” and “foreignness” by refashioning Italy as one nodal point of interconnection within a much broader, transnational Black diaspora. Their implication that “Italian” and “African” are not mutually exclusive categories represents a new understanding of Italianness—as well as a rekindling of much older notions of Italy as a cosmopolitan Mediterranean crossroads.

The Afro-Mediterranean Renaissance in Italy

In 2011, Italian president Giorgio Napolitano delivered a highly publicized and widely circulated address to a group of newly naturalized Italians who had grown up in Italy as the children of immigrants. In the most quoted sentence of the speech, he confidently asserted: “It is important to realize that young people of immigrant origins in our schools and in our society are not just an obstacle to be overcome; they are also a fruitful source of stimulation because they come from diverse cultures.” At the gathering, timed to coincide with the 150th anniversary of Italian national unification, Napolitano proceeded to extol the ways that the “new Italian citizens” assembled that day would contribute to the collective well-being of Italy by sharing “languages, constitutional values, civic duties, and laws,” citing as examples young Italian-Chinese entrepreneurs and the Italian-Somali writer Igiaba Scego (whose short story I mentioned earlier). For many activists, Napolitano’s speech represented an important, yet limited, moment of institutional recognition in the growing movement for a reform of Italian citizenship law. At a time of economic crisis, declining Italian birth rates, and renewed mass emigration, Napolitano’s speech implied, it was simply a matter of good business sense to bring the children of immigrants into the Italian fold: “Without their future contribution to our society and our economy,” he declared, “the burden of national debt would be even more difficult to sustain.” The marking of
Italy’s 150th “birthday” was widely derided that year for being lackluster and somber, marred by shameful political scandals and intractable regional divisions.66 Ironically, then, Napolitano seemed to be calling on the children of immigrants at a time of great national pessimism to stand in as the symbols for a new and economically revitalized Italy.

As the examples in this chapter have shown, however, the entrepreneurial projects of Black Italian businesswomen may make use of the “Made in Italy” label—but their products cannot be entirely subsumed within the staid realm of “traditional” Italian craft. Instead, these designers, stylists, and other cultural entrepreneurs frequently describe their products as “hybrids” of Italian and African influences—combining, for instance, West African wax prints with Italian sartorial techniques, or African raw ingredients like shea and cocoa butter with the quality standards of Italian cosmetics laboratories. These practices of cultural fluency, which position Black Italian women entrepreneurs as “cultural mediators,” are often cited by outside observers as evidence that “Africa” and “Italy” are not mutually exclusive categories.67

In right-wing political discourse, Africa and Africans are ritualistically held up as representations of the unstoppable transnational forces of globalization that threaten Italian cultural particularity and the stability of the white Italian working class. As Douglas Holmes argues, these “integralist” politicians diagnose a social condition of alienation as the (white, European) popular response to the secular, cosmopolitan, and fast-capitalist orientation of the European Union.68 This is a doubled form of alienation. “Alienation” indexes a condition of estrangement from a pre-existing wholeness or harmony, not only in the Marxian sense of socioeconomic stratification but also in terms of the loss of a mythical cultural and moral purity. But it can also be restyled as Goldberg’s “alienation”—the threat of a nation that no longer serves the needs of its citizens, understood to constitute an autochthonous and organic cultural unit.69

In 2017, for instance, protests broke out in Milan after a cluster of palm trees were installed near the Duomo di Milano, the largest cathedral in Italy. The palm trees had been funded by the Starbucks Corporation to set the stage for the nearby opening of the first Starbucks store in Italy (and the largest Starbucks in Europe). As they decried (and vandalized) the palm trees, protesters from the right-wing Lega party and the neofascist CasaPound deftly conflated the forces of transnational capitalism, the destruction of Italian cultural specificity, and “illegal” immigration from the African continent. Although palm trees are native to the Mediterranean region (specifically, Chamaerops, or the Mediterranean dwarf palm), and there were already palm trees in the Piazza del Duomo in the early nineteenth century, this flora came to stand in for the undesirable African contamination of pristine and bounded Italian national space: “NO to the
Africanization of the Piazza del Duomo!” the protesters’ signs read. The supposed insult was only amplified by the fact that the forty-two palm trees (and, eventually, fifty banana plants) were located steps away from a Catholic cathedral, an imposing “race-neutral” symbol of the unspoken whiteness of Italian national identity.

In response to such sedentarist and enclosed understandings of Italian national space, Black Italian entrepreneurs and their supporters have sought to resurrect an alternative geography of Italianness, one that is unabashedly oriented toward the Mediterranean and emphasizes cultural porosity rather than boundedness. In doing so, they suggest that rather than generating cultural dilution, the global diasporic networks of Black Italians can revitalize a stagnant Italian nation that has been insular and insufficiently cosmopolitan for much of its recent history.

This spatial strategy came to the fore in 2017, at a panel discussion composed of prominent citizenship reform activists during a cultural festival in Giavera (just outside the northeastern Italian city of Treviso). The discussion took place mere steps away from the festival’s Afro Beauty and Fashion Expo, which featured booths for nine Black Italian fashion designers, hair product vendors, and stylists—including several of the women introduced in this chapter (see figure 2.3). As such, the connection between Black business, citizenship, and the shifting definitions of Italianness loomed in the minds of the panelists and the predominantly white Italian audience.

Bruno Baratto, the white Italian president of the festival, opened the discussion by noting that the “new generation of Italians” seated before him (and, it was implied, present at the expo) represented the resources of the world, something that Italy needed desperately at this moment. “This country is getting older, and is in need of a younger world that has capacities not just in terms of work but also in terms of creativity,” he declared. Following his hopeful remarks, a lively conversation ensued among the panelists about just this sort of cosmopolitan outlook among the children of immigrants in Italy. An Italian-Moroccan activist noted that this “new generation” could act as a cultural bridge by engaging in international projects that linked Italy to the rest of the world. In a surprising historical parallel, his assertion also hearkened to the kinds of claims articulated by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian politicians about the potential economic and political benefits of Italian mass emigration (see chapter 1). As she finished, an Italian-Moroccan educator took the microphone and, nodding enthusiastically in agreement, joked that white Italians are typically monolingual. As the audience tittered along self-deprecatingly with the panelists, an Italian-Ecuadorian organizer concurred, observing that the abil-
Blacks Entrepreneurs and the “(Re)Making” of Italy

The ability to speak more than one language (a skill that many, if not most, children of immigrants in Italy share) is good for business.

But while it might seem like a new political move, one that has only recently emerged to challenge the racism and parochialism of the “integralists,” this strategy also aligns with a particular understanding of Italianness—one that sees the current insularity of Italians as a deviation from a much longer history of cross-Mediterranean mixing and exchange. Since Italian national unification at the end of the nineteenth century, politicians, scientists, and political theorists have debated the extent to which Italians were truly “white” due to centuries of Mediterranean mixing and their geographical proximity to Africa. But at various moments, this hybridity was not solely understood as a problem of racial impurity. It had also been heralded as the Italian nation’s unique strength—one that differentiated it from northern, “Aryan” Europe. According to this Mediterraneanist vision of Italian national identity, the xenophobic, antiglobalist, and regionalist/nationalist turn in Italian politics dating back to the 1990s is the real historical aberration, not transnational trade flows and mass migrations. This is because the Italian peninsula was geographically destined to serve as a cultural and civilizational crossroads.

What Black Italian entrepreneurs are seeking to accomplish, then, is a centering of Black trans-Mediterranean and transatlantic diasporic connections as the key to a reinvigorated Italo-Mediterranean cosmopolitanism. In this reinterpretation, Blackness is figured both as Italy’s past—as the multicultural Mediterranean utopia of classical antiquity, and the source of colonial resources during Liberal and Fascist Italy—and as the way toward a flexible, transnational...
future that will allow Italy to compete in a globalized economy. This could be seen, for instance, in a recent issue of *Vogue Italia*—a fashion magazine that is also notorious for its history of racist imagery and its erasure of Black models. Yet, in a move lauded by many as groundbreaking, the February 2020 cover featured the Italian-Senegalese model Maty Fall Diba holding a block-letter sign that reads “ITALIA,” next to the lowercase, cursive subheading “italian beauty.” The “Bellezza Italiana” (Italian Beauty) editorial in that issue also featured other Italian models with diverse national backgrounds including countries such as Morocco and Germany. Despite their various hyphenations, these models were extolled as exemplars of a uniquely Italian *bellezza* that is both new and, one could argue, emblematic of a much older and quintessentially “Mediterranean” cosmopolitanism. But while seductive, Mediterraneanism is also not an entirely “innocent” reworking of Italianness. After all, Italy’s position in the Mediterranean was vaunted by politicians and intellectuals as a legitimation for colonial expansion, and more recently has been used to promote advantageous Italian economic investments in Africa. As in past iterations, this southward-looking reframing of Italian national identity is capable of absorbing certain racialized subjects, while discarding others as mere surplus.

### “These Are Not the People I’m Talking About!”

If Black Italian entrepreneurs represent one possible vision for the future of Italy, what room is there in this future for the African refugees and asylum seekers arriving in Italy in the midst of the Mediterranean migration “crisis”? Sociologist Tamara Nopper has written about the ways that immigrants in the United States often articulate moral claims regarding their “character, productivity, and value” to the US economy, a strategy that echoes the assertions of many of my interlocutors in this chapter. Nopper argues that in the United States, these claims work to distinguish immigrants from Black Americans, who are cast as “lacking a work ethic, militant, xenophobic, and costly to society” and are seen as having squandered their right to American citizenship. Nopper’s argument about the racial and gendered character of claims for national inclusion via productivity is astute—but what would it mean to extend her analysis of the anti-Black racism in immigrants’ rights organizing to Italy, where anti-Black racism and xenophobia cannot be so easily disentangled from one another? These differences shed light on the distinct dynamics of racial formation at work in the United States versus Italy. In the United States, Black subjects are coded as the undeserving poor who are nonetheless presumed to be citizens, and al-
most always in relation to immigrants who might be “brown,” but are not Black.79 In the Italian context, however, a significant proportion of the refugees arriving in Italy via the Mediterranean are from sub-Saharan Africa, and Black Italians are almost never assumed to be citizens.80 Yet anti-Black racism is still present, perpetuated in this case through the production of racial essentialisms that distinguish between “assimilable” Black subjects (who are seen as able to marshal their diasporic networks for the benefit of the Italian economy) and “nonassimilable” Black refugees (who represent a drain on the economy).

This dynamic became visible during a highly publicized meeting of Milanese city officials in March 2016. This public event was organized by the Black Italian businessman Pascal, who is well known for promoting immigrant entrepreneurship in northern Italy based on the understanding that “immigrants are the true young labor force of this country.”81 Titled “Welfare Ambrosiano e Cittadini Globali” (Ambrosian Welfare and Global Citizens),82 the gathering was intended to reframe the question of “immigration” to one of “global citizens” (and “welfare” to “employment”), with an emphasis on valorizing the unrecognized economic contributions of immigrants in Milan specifically and Italy generally. While the event was not explicitly concerned with the children of immigrants, it is worth noting that Milan is also a hub for AFRO Fashion, Nappytalia, AfroRicci, and many other “second-generation” Black Italian initiatives. A far grittier and less romantic city than more touristic Italian destinations like Rome and Florence, Milan has instead identified its particular niche as being “a city founded on work/labor.”

The speakers at the Welfare Ambrosiano event represented an impressive swath of Milan’s political set, including Giulio Gallera (assessor of welfare for the region of Lombardy); Stefano Dambruoso (a representative for Lombardy in the Chamber of Deputies); Alessandro Aleotti (entrepreneur, think tank director, and political commentator); and Piero Bassetti (former president of the region of Lombardy). A second panel even featured a debate among Milan’s mayoral candidates about how the city should harness the talents of its substantial immigrant community—immigrants compose over 20 percent of Milan’s population, and the Lombardy region has the largest immigrant population in Italy.83 The caliber of the speakers pointed both to Pascal’s extensive professional networks and to the municipality’s investment in leveraging immigrants as resources to fuel Italy’s financial capital and economic powerhouse.

Pascal was dressed for the event in an impeccable three-piece suit, with his trademark pocket watch chain and spectacles that lent him a professorial air. He introduced the speakers and prepared the audience to “use new words, words that don’t create barriers . . . to develop a new perspective” on immigration. As the press release for the event announced, “Limiting ourselves to a discussion
only about refugees and mosques would be misleading. The reflection should start from the new frontiers of international cooperation for development.” To Pascal’s dismay, however, the presenters were not addressing the vision of “global citizens” that had been promised in the event’s press release. Rather, the speakers proceeded to focus their remarks on the way that the city of Milan had responded to the unprecedented influx of African refugees in 2015 and 2016. Finally, visibly frustrated, he intervened and seized the microphone, his great booming voice echoing off the vaulted walls of the former cloisters where we were gathered: “You are talking about refugees escaping from war—these are not the people I am talking about. We have to stop reflecting on the people who are arriving on the boats! How do we create a situation where we empower the immigrants, transform them into paragons of success? We need a true meritocracy. But if we don’t have a dialogical relationship, we will never get there. Because we have a shared destiny. We must live together in our differences. That is the challenge!”

Contrary to more common portrayals of a monolithic Blackness in Italy, Pascal’s interjection called attention to the multiplicity of lived Black experiences in Italy—and the different meanings attached to these multiple Blacknesses. As sociologist Jordanna Matlon argues, in the context of global political economy Blackness can function as a signifier that simultaneously represents the ravages of racial capitalism and capitalism’s global reach (through the aspirational figures of exceptional Black athletes and performing artists). Consider, for example, the case of white Anglo-Italian conceptual artist Vanessa Beecroft, a former collaborator of Black American recording artist and producer Kanye West. In an interview with The Cut, Beecroft explained that she felt such a profound affinity with Black people and Black artists that she took a genetic ancestry test hoping to confirm her hunch that she was not actually white. (The ravenous consumption of global Black popular culture by white Italians is often justified through similar references to Italian racial ambiguity via their geographical proximity to Africa.) Yet despite her professed adoration of all things Black, Beecroft then went on to dismiss Africans in Italy as merely “in the street selling gadgets.” While itinerant street vending is a form of economic activity (and one that has a long history in Italy that predates the arrival of large numbers of African immigrants), in Beecroft’s formulation this work did not carry the same dignity or creativity that she indexed as features of an authentic and desirable Blackness.

Similarly, at the Welfare Ambrosiano event, “the people arriving on the boats” were not those same immigrants who could be transformed into paragons of success and meritocracy. The differentiation between refugees on the one hand and Pascal’s “global citizens” on the other constructed a racialized hierarchy of geo-
graphical itineraries and forms of mobility. “Refugees escaping war” were not agentic subjects, but rather fungible bodies moving reflexively in response to external political stimuli who could be cast aside as excess. “Talented, deserving foreigners” (as described in this chapter’s epigraph), on the other hand, were sources of human capital whose transnational networks and global outlook held the key to Italy’s uncertain future.

The Racial Politics of Productivity

This chapter has looked to Black Italian women’s entrepreneurship to understand how the boundaries of Italian citizenship have been constructed and contested in terms of economic productivity. But rather than gloss this development as a symptom of what scholars have labeled “neoliberal citizenship”—the incursion of economistic logics into the realm of state politics—I situate these struggles against a longer historical backdrop. The connections among race, gender, and notions of economic productivity strike at the heart of liberalism itself, and its entanglement with colonial and imperial forms of governance. Just as Cedric Robinson argued that capitalism had inherited the racialism of the feudal system that preceded it, the liberal project was from its inception bound up with what Donna Haraway calls “productionist logics” that drew racialized distinctions between the rational and industrious subjects of natural rights and those incapable of transformative acts of self-making.

By challenging the presentism of the neoliberal framework, I am suggesting that the liberal state cannot be so easily redeemed: nation-state recognition might produce tentative inclusion (or even differential incorporation) for some, but always at the expense of outright exclusion for others. Yet, as the examples in this chapter have shown, these are also not clear-cut forms of racial differentiation wherein people of African descent are unilaterally precluded from Italian membership. This is because “race” is not just a matter of epidermalization—it is coded sartorially and geographically, through forms of bodily habitus and webs of social association, via notions of labor and economic productivity. So, the question becomes not whether Blackness can be included within the boundaries of Italianness, but rather what kinds of Blackness can be rendered assimilable, and how the boundaries of what it means to be Italian might continue to be transformed through these struggles.

In the contemporary moment, the shifting boundaries of Italy are once again being remapped. Accordingly, the possibility of making space for Black subjects deemed capable of (re)producing Italy at a time of economic and demographic “crisis” is a contentious topic of debate among politicians and activists alike.
Black Italian women’s entrepreneurship provides a unique window onto these contemporary contestations: their projects are directly implicated in wider struggles over the differentiation between “legitimate” European citizens suffering in the aftermath of austerity and economic contraction and “illegitimate” non-European bodies who constitute a threat to both national integrity and economic prosperity.

There is undoubtedly a risk that Black women are once again being conscripted (in a new form of colonial extraction) as the raw materials from which European nations can be rebuilt or reproduced at a time of stagnation, uncertainty, and political instability. Ananya Roy has argued that women are constructed in international poverty alleviation programs as ideal vehicles for economic development in the Global South—in contrast to their male counterparts, who are framed as anachronistic or abandoned by capital. A version of this story is also unfolding in Italy, where the figure of the Black Italian woman entrepreneur is implicitly situated against the Black, immigrant, and male itinerant street vendor. Still, while Black Italian women’s projects are frequently “domesticated” by politicians and journalists in the service of narrow nationalist political and economic interests, the capacious diasporic spatialities of their feminist politics continue to stretch far beyond the territorial boundaries of the Italian nation-state. Black Italian entrepreneurs are not “dupes,” nor are they victims of false consciousness. Rather, they are combining their strategies of economic survival with practices of Black diasporic interconnection, claims to Italian citizenship via the “Made in Italy” label, and creative reconfigurations of Italianness.

Valorizing immigrants (and their children) for “getting the job done” is undoubtedly a potent political strategy for countering far-right fantasies of a bounded and homogenous nation-state. And in the Italian context, where the whiteness of Italians has always been an open-ended question, Black activists have encountered an especially unique opportunity to wrest open the boundaries of citizenship—one that approaches the contemporary Black Italian diaspora as a moment in a much longer history of Mediterranean cultural and economic mixing. But, as I will suggest in chapter 3, when nationalist integralism is simply substituted for a “digestive” model of citizenship—one in which elements of Mediterranean diversity can be absorbed for the purpose of bolstering the Italian nation-state but not necessarily challenging it—Black liberation is still no guarantee.