Contesting Race and Citizenship

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On February 3, 2020, I flew from California to New York for a presentation of the book *Future: Il domani narrato dalle voce di oggi* (Futures: Tomorrow Narrated by the Voices of Today) at the Calandra Institute of Italian American Studies at Queens College. Future, edited by Igiaba Scego, was the first-ever Italian-language collection of writing by Black Italian women; I had the honor of writing the book’s preface. I was met in New York by Angelica Pesarini and Marie Moïse, both of whom had flown to New York City from Italy to discuss the short stories they had contributed to the volume, and Candice Whitney, who had written an English-language review of the volume and was currently in the process of translating it into English.

The trip was a thrilling whirlwind, the four of us buoyed by the excitement of this cross-country and transnational reunion of beloved comrades. In addition to attending a successful (and over-capacity) public presentation of the book at the Calandra Institute—the volume’s official “launch” in the United States—we spent three days exploring the many confluences of Black and Italian cultures in New York City. We chatted up Italian waiters in the Financial District, debated the legacy of Cesare Lombroso over dinner with a group of Italian studies professors, devoured Cajun food in Tribeca, and paid our respects at the African Burial Ground National Monument.

At the end of the trip, I returned to Santa Cruz, and Angelica and Marie flew back to Italy. Just over two weeks later, Italy recorded its first COVID-19–related deaths. On March 9, 2020, Italian prime minister Giuseppe Conte announced a mandatory lockdown for the entire country. Supermarkets and pharmacies were
among the only businesses that could remain open; all residents were strictly required to remain at home, except to carry out essential activities such as grocery shopping. I watched from afar as the novel coronavirus tore through Italy, and it seemed as though those beautiful days in New York had taken place in an alternate reality, or a beautiful dream. I received regular dispatches over WhatsApp from Angelica, who—just weeks after her trip to the United States—was now trapped in her apartment in Florence, watching her neighbors fall ill to the virus. This disjuncture was even more striking because while the death toll in Italy continued to mount and the Italian government was adopting increasingly rigid quarantine measures, the United States had not yet fully come to terms with the deadliness of COVID-19. The devastation in Italy seemed to provide an ominous porthole view into the future—a terrifying glimpse of what was to come as the pandemic began to spread across the United States.

The sites in Italy where I conducted my research have been among the hardest hit by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the region of Lombardy, where most of my Italian family lives, over thirty-four thousand people have died from the virus at the time of my writing in October 2021 (the pandemic has claimed over one hundred and thirty thousand lives in Italy so far). The sound of ambulance sirens became a constant backdrop to daily life; army trucks were deployed to remove coffins from over-capacity morgues and crematoriums for storage in remote, refrigerated shipping containers; mayors turned into micro-celebrities on social media for berating constituents caught taking superfluous walks outside; and neighbors in lockdown performed music for each other from their socially distant balconies.

It is not surprising that Italy’s immigrant communities have been impacted by the pandemic on multiple levels. While a 2020 Fondazione ISMU report shows that some immigrant communities experienced higher COVID-19 infection rates than the general population (for instance, Peruvians and Ecuadorians in the Lombardy region), this data includes only cases that were reported to the Italian National Institute of Health, and for which nationality data was available. This suggests that we have not even begun to scratch the surface of the impact of COVID-19 on some of the most vulnerable communities in Italy—namely, undocumented immigrants, refugees, and asylum seekers. Indeed, migrants and those working in solidarity with them have raised alarms about the spread of COVID-19 in immigrant detention centers, as well as the quarantining of asylum seekers on offshore boats. These discussions parallel similar ones unfolding in the United States about the urgency of decarceration as a response to the deadly spread of COVID-19 in jails and prisons.

While northern Italy has borne the brunt of the COVID-19 pandemic, southern Italy has by no means been immune. In southern Italy, concerns about re-
strictions on mobility and the closure of borders in response to the pandemic prompted agricultural lobbies to demand the implementation of “green corridors” to facilitate the movement of migrant labor across the country—a disturbing appropriation of the language of “humanitarian corridors” popularized during the migrant crises to assist the movement of refugees across borders. These efforts ultimately culminated in the announcement of a six-month, partial amnesty for two hundred thousand undocumented immigrants working in the agricultural and fishing industries. This move was praised by many observers as a positive step, one that would curb some of the most egregious abuses committed against undocumented workers. Italy’s minister of agriculture, the former trade unionist Teresa Bellanova, declared that this move would make “the invisible . . . become less invisible.”

Migrants’ rights activists, however, raised concerns that this temporary amnesty would only subject precarious immigrant laborers to new forms of state surveillance and regulations on their mobility (this time, under the guise of containing COVID-19)—yet another example of the double-edged sword of state recognition and visibility. In addition, these activists have drawn attention to how the dynamics of racial capitalism have once again led to the determination of who “counts” as a worthy, rights-bearing subject based on racialized notions of economic productivity.

The COVID-19 pandemic in Italy also reignited racist fears of transnational contamination—the same xenophobic sentiments that have spurred such virulent backlashes against immigrants, refugees, and their children in Italy. What former US president Donald Trump derisively referred to as the “China virus” contributed to a spike in anti-Asian racism across Italy—even though one of the earliest recorded cases of COVID-19 in Italy was from a white Italian man who had traveled to Wuhan, China, and brought the virus back to Italy with him. In fact, while the Chinese community in Italy is disproportionately concentrated in Lombardy (Milan’s Chinatown, established in the 1920s, is the oldest and largest Chinese neighborhood in Italy), their rates of COVID-19 infection (0.3 cases per 1,000) were among the lowest of any national group in Italy—including Italian citizens.

Before the pandemic reached Italy, a new wave of anti-racist activism had swept the country in response to the explicit xenophobia of Matteo Salvini’s right-wing government. Calling themselves the sardine (Sardines) because of their strategy of packing as many protesters as possible into public spaces, thousands of Italians descended on the main square of Bologna, and later in additional towns across Italy, from the fall of 2020 through early 2021 to condemn racism and populism. While the movimento delle sardine (Sardines movement) received international attention, and even inspired similar protests in other countries, this movement was also rightfully criticized for its nonpartisan approach, undemocratic leadership structure (particularly for a group initially described as “grassroots”), and
general unwillingness to take clear, explicit stances on policies and laws criminalizing immigration to Italy.10

In response to the liberal anti-racism of the Sardines movement, another group soon emerged in Naples called the sardine nere (Black Sardines), composed of African migrants who had originally been denied the opportunity to speak at a Sardines demonstration in Naples. Through a productively agonistic relationship with the mainstream Sardines movement, the Black Sardines advanced an alternative analysis of racism as structural (rather than mere populist rhetoric), illuminating the reproduction of racisms through border fortification in their demands for the regularization of their immigration status and a repeal of the 2019 “security decree” that further criminalized undocumented migrants and asylum seekers.11 But because both of these movements were focused on physical proximity and the dense occupation of public spaces, the COVID-19 pandemic quickly caused them to lose momentum. Indeed, as Italians went into lockdown and everyday life was increasingly consumed with the “new normal” of the pandemic, the massive upwelling of protest surrounding Salvini seemed to fall into a lull.

On May 25, 2020, a Black American man, George Floyd, was murdered in broad daylight by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His death, along with the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Nina Pop, James Scurlock, Tony McDade, David McAtee, and many others, relit a spark in the United States—the flames of which quickly fanned out to Italy. And this upwelling of protests cannot be understood separately from the pandemic. It was a powerful response to the sense of atomization and social isolation of shelter-in-place orders, and it also reflected a general sense of Blackness being under siege from all angles, including from those institutions that are commonly understood as sources of safety and care—from the police to the medical establishment. The disproportionately high COVID-19 death rate among Black Americans, along with highly visible cases of murder by police (or, in the case of Arbery, by a former police officer), brought into sharp relief the necropolitical regimes that constitute liberal modernity.

As I discussed in chapter 2 of this book, the Black Lives Matter protests of the summer of 2020 were not the first time that the Black Lives Matter movement had “gone global.” Nonetheless, there was still something distinct about the way the banner of Black Lives Matter was taken up by Black activists in Italy in 2020. My comrades who participated in the demonstrations in Milan, where thousands of protesters descended into the streets, said that they had never before participated in or even witnessed an anti-racist action in Italy of that magnitude.12 While the demonstrations across Italy were frequently characterized in the Italian press as rallies for George Floyd in solidarity with Black Ameri-
cans, they were also about drawing attention to Italy’s many own “George Floyds.” Indeed, some protesters even carried signs that declared, “l’Italia non è innocente”—Italy is not innocent. The Black Lives Matter demonstrations that spread across Italy during the summer of 2020 also renewed conversations about the legacies of Italian colonialism in Africa. Just as Black Lives Matter in the United States re-energized efforts to remove Confederate monuments and statues of Columbus in the United States, the protests in Italy also helped to draw attention to the monumentalization of Indro Montanelli in Milan (discussed in chapter 5).13

At the same time, we should be careful not to assume that Black Lives Matter simply emanated outward from the United States in a sort of linear, transnational diffusion of diasporic resources—a perspective that implicitly, and mistakenly, assumes that Black Italians did not (or could not) reach proper Black political consciousness until they were given direction by Black Americans. While the diasporic circulation of culture, ideas, and political strategies has undoubtedly shaped the politicization of Black Italians, it is also the case that there have been many generations of Black struggle across Italy and the Black Mediterranean, including resistance to Italian colonialism in Africa. Black Italy is not an offshoot, nor is it derivative.

Yet, the ways that Black Italians have taken up the banner of Black Lives Matter raise the question of what this call means specifically in the Italian context. While immigrants (including African immigrants) are overrepresented in Italian prisons, police violence and incarceration have not been the primary focus of the movement in Italy.14 Instead, activists have drawn connections between Black Lives Matter and the citizenship reform movement, positing that racialized citizenship in Italy is a chief way that Black lives are structurally and systematically “unmattered.”15 At the same time, Angelica Pesarini warns that it is essential not to separate [the citizenship] struggle from the question of immigration—the militarization and racialization of the Mediterranean border, a neoliberal process that filters access based on the color of one’s passport. And sometimes, not even a passport with the “right” color can protect our bodies from racist violence. . . . It is necessary to be aware of our own positionality and privilege. When we say “Black Lives Matter” in Italy, we cannot only be thinking about those people who were born in this country, or who arrived as “documented” immigrants.16

While abolition, as both a political demand and framework for radical world-making, has become part of the mainstream lexicon in the United States since the summer of 2020, this concept has not yet been taken up to the same extent
in Italy. Yet, it is easy to image abolitionist demands from Black Italy that center on the abolition of the violent border regimes of Fortress Europe, the abolition of immigrant detention, and even the abolition of citizenship itself as a means of conferring rights, recognition, mobility, and personhood.\textsuperscript{17} This, I believe, is the greatest lesson Black Italy—and the wider Black Mediterranean—has to offer in this moment of global Black uprisings. Because most Black Italians are also postcolonial subjects who have intergenerational experiences with border violence and exploitative labor regimes, their mobilizations necessarily link together struggles against racism, borders, coloniality, and capitalism. The remarkable florescence of Black Lives Matter in Italy thus reminds us that any movement for substantive racial justice—one that seeks to build a world based on the radical understanding that, as Ruth Wilson Gilmore says, “Where life is precious, life is precious”—must also contend with, and seek to dismantle, the deadly entanglements of racial capitalism, border fortification, and coloniality.\textsuperscript{18}