

Research Article

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The Black Mediterranean: Liminality and the Reconfiguration of *Afroeuropeanness*

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Abstract: This article focuses on emerging forms of ethnic identification among Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins. In 2013, in parallel with the so-called refugees' crisis in Europe, children of immigrants engaged in the Milanese management of forced migrations in the diasporic neighbourhood of Milano Porta Venezia. They legitimated their actions by emphasising a shared Habesha ancestral ethnicity with the asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa. The article considers their ethnic identification in relation to the changes in the public discourse on the Mediterranean route. These ethnic identifications and mobilisations are interpreted as claims for social recognition as Italians rather than a form of the revivification of their ancestral ethnicity in the analysis. The Black Mediterranean represent a privileged analytical and physical space to work on the resignification of Afro-European subjectivities in contemporary Europe.

Keywords: liminality, Mediterranean route, second generations, Italianness, Eritrea, Ethiopia

Introduction

In present Europe, children of immigrants (the so-called second generations)¹ who trace back their ethnic origins to the African continent are undoubtedly exposed to powerful rhetoric linking their social experience to the African migrations in Europe, and, in the last years, to the forced migrations across the Mediterranean.² The process in question represents the consequence of a widespread assumption: the interconnection between children of immigrants' social experience in the places where they were born and/or raised (Europe) and their ancestral origins (Africa). This assumed natural connection represents nowadays the centre of the public and political debate on children of immigrants' "structural doubleness" (Silverstein 374). Furthermore, this assumption is misleadingly used in public discourse as a tool to question their membership as part of the national body (Riccio 117). This perspective is powerful enough to demarcate the self-representation strategies of the children of immigrants.

¹ Since its formulation in the early 90s as a marker aimed at describing a new social category arising from the opening of new mobility patterns in South-North relations (Portes and Zhou 74), the expression "second generations" has been widely criticized both as a descriptive and analytical tool. The term, however, is still present in public and the academic debate.

² The inscription of Europeans of African descents social experience out of the European social fabric strongly mirror in institutional as well as in public and medial differentiation structures. As the European agency for fundamental rights reports, people of African descent in the EU face widespread and entrenched prejudice and exclusion. The data collected in 12 EU member states about harassment and violence motivated by racism, police stops, discrimination and awareness of rights, education and employment, housing and social inclusion underline a dramatic raising of racism all over Europe. Italy has the highest rate of discrimination in almost all of the examined sectors. See Fra, Second European Union Minorities and Discrimination Survey. Being Black in the EU.

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While focusing on children of immigrants' ancestral identification patterns, this study takes a different stand. It analyses how Milanese of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins identify with refugees and asylum seekers crossing the Mediterranean in a specific part of Milan, in the neighbourhood of Porta Venezia, which is a point of reference for many diasporic Ethiopians and Eritreans. Specifically, I investigate how they make sense of the term *Habesha*, an ancient ethnonym related to the Horn of Africa,³ as a form of "ethnicactivism" headed for the refugees coming from Ethiopia and Eritrea. This process, I argue, cannot be framed as a mere representation of children of immigrants' in-betweenness or continuity with their ancestral land dynamics. This article, on the contrary, aims at demonstrating how, among children of immigrants, ancestral ethnicity can work as a source of social recognition in Italy, the place they were born and/or raised. It analyses the changing patterns of identifying as Habesha which run parallel with the changes of the practices, discourses, and management strategies that reproduce the Mediterranean Route in Italy (and in Europe). In social sciences, there is increasing attention towards the multiple meanings related to the Mediterranean human crossings. This attention can be crucial to explore the past and present asymmetrical relations between the African and the European social space. Drawing on Gilroy's Black Atlantic, scholars, as well as artists and activists, started to work with the concept of Black Mediterranean as a physical as well as an analytical space to make sense of the causes and effects of the Mediterranean Route in Europe.

Focusing on the Black Mediterranean, this article connects the redefinition of the ethnicity of Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins to the changes in the system regulating and controlling transnational forced mobility in Italy in the first period of the so-called European refugees' crisis. 4 This period begins from the Lampedusa shipwreck on 3rd October 2013, and continues to the dismissal of *Mare Nostrum* operation⁵ and to the exacerbation of the Italian debate on the refugees flow in fall 2014. My analysis draws on the causes and the effects of the redefinition of forced migration regimes on the identification patterns of the Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins.

In my analysis, I employ the perspective of liminality (Turner). I argue that the structural changes in framing the Mediterranean route in Italy, opened a space of possibility (Turner 98) for Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins: a space to redefine their social positioning in the Milanese social space. Their ethnic engagement turned out to be a tool for the enactment of a politics of difference (Grillo 227) in which political recognition (Taylor 39) takes place through a process of socio-cultural differentiation.

By Focusing on the relation between children of immigrants and national identity, this article contributes to the discussion on contemporary Afroeuropean subjectivities in the wake of the Black Mediterranean.

Methodological Note

This article draws on extensive ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in Milano between 2014 and 2017. I mainly worked on impregnation (Olivier de Sardan 76), a methodology where the ethnographic experience occurs independently from conscious research intents; a perspective that allows to reconfigure the research object and to abandon pre-comprehensions. Fieldwork experiences have guided my theoretical perspectives and data collection strategies. During the fieldwork and analysis, I gave particular attention to the implicit meanings connected to everyday life (such as outfits, slangs, gestures, etc.) as "markers"

³ The term *Habesha* is a slippery concept concerning the ethnic as well as the racial and the political sphere in the Horn of Africa. It has been used to name geographical pockets of territory and people extending from the Arabian Peninsula to the furthest limits of the Horn of Africa region. The analysis of the term and of its different social and political meanings (the term is very problematic both in Ethiopia and in Eritrea) is far beyond the scope of this work. For an analysis of the term and its conjugations, see Smidt, The Term Habš-An Ancient Ethnonym of the "Abyssinian" Highlanders and Its Interpretations and Connotation.

⁴ The terms "refuges crisis" as well as "refuges flow" have been critically addressed since the early 90s as Western hegemonic and de-historicized constructions. See Malkki, Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization. All along the work, I will use these terms within a Black Mediterranean perspective in order to make sense of their hegemonic value in the present European social configuration.

⁵ The Mare Nostrum operation (October 18th 2013-October 31st 2014) was a military and humanitarian operation aimed at tackling the humanitarian emergency all along the Sicilian channel.

of wider cultural meanings. The research methodology, therefore, draws on what Ginzburg (57) defined as a "clue paradigm." As the cultural meanings emerged from the fieldwork experience, I adopted mixed data collection strategies. Apart from participant observation, the data I report in this article draws on semi-structured interviews. While the interviews played an important role to analyse research subjects' engagement with asylum seekers through a perspective of *longue-durèe*, in this article, I will report only short extracts of the interviews I conducted with four Italian men and two Italian women of Ethiopian or Eritrean origins born and raised in Milano. I have combined their voices with other research materials to offer an ethnographic description of ethnic identification and identity politics among the research subjects of this study. In this perspective, even the virtual ethnography of their online social interactions concerning their engagement with asylum seekers entered the analytic process. Specifically, it informed about the role of media representations in the redefinition of their social positioning. The age of the people involved ranged from the late 20s to late 30s. To guarantee the anonymity of my interlocutors, I changed the names and the personal information of the people I interviewed.

The Black Mediterranean and the Refugee Crisis

Alessandra Di Maio (143) first coined the term Black Mediterranean in her research on migration across the two shores of the sea. She argued that just as deportation and enslavement related to the construction of the Western idea of progress, so present-day massive migrations relate to the circulation of financial assets and the exploitation of resources in the name of democracy and equal opportunities (Proglio 410). The contemporary refugees' Mediterranean crossings are part and parcel of Europe's constitutive history of empire, colonial conquest, and transatlantic slavery (Danewid 3). The so-called refugee crisis in Europe makes visible the nexus between racial violence and the emergence of European modernity as a discrete racial unit (2). The Mediterranean, first of all, represents a crucial frontier space in the present European configuration: its policies of control, in this perspective, are closely related to the production of a hegemonic European space and citizenship (Raeymaekers 168).

At the same time, however, the Mediterranean is continuously reproducing a fluid space of connection between different cultures, nations, continents, and subjectivities (Proglio 411). This connection is far from being symmetrical: on the contrary, it clearly shows the field of unequal relations producing the contemporary idea of Europe. In the ongoing Mediterranean crossings of people, as well as of social, economic and symbolic flows, it is possible to make sense of the colonial and postcolonial dynamics and their present reverberations. As Proglio suggested, in this perspective, the Mediterranean can be seen as an excess space of signification (411) transfiguring the historicized racial, social and symbolic processes of differentiation reproducing the present European hegemonic identity compared to a migrant otherness.

The Italian case, in this perspective, is very revealing: while the Italian colonial experience had been until recently largely regarded as an incidental aspect of Italy's past, it represented the touchstone of the production of the Italian identity. The colonial subject had been framed as the counterpart of the production of a racially connoted Italianness. Since the foundation of the Italian nation-state, structurally unequal relation of North-South produced a racial and social system of differentiation that paved the way for the *two Italies theory*, along with the developing paradigm of modernity in Europe. The hegemonic Italy of the north, self-assimilated to the modern northern European nation-state; the other one, the south, had been assimilated to an attributed savage space related to the African continent (see Giuliani, *l'Italiano Negro*).

The lack of public conscience and a proper state-revisionism about the Italian colonial past and postcolonial legacy crystallised the modes of the definition of Italianness in terms of unspoken whiteness (Giuliani 574). From the end of colonialism onwards, South-North transnational mobility patterns in Italy

⁶ On the Black Mediterranean as a racial construction, see among others Hawthorne, *In Search of Black Italia*, and Saucier, Woods, *Ex Aqua*.

⁷ On the North-South differential relation in the making of the Italian national paradigm see Gramsci, *La questione meridionale*. For a wider discussion on the making of an internal differentiation in the reproduction of Italianness see Patriarca, *Italianità*: la *costruzione del carattere nazionale*.

(postcolonial mobility, transnational labour migrations, the forced migrations of the new millennium) have been framed through the same perspective. The discourses and the practices of reproducing the Italian hegemonic national paradigm, therefore, produced second-class citizens (Balibar 191). This process, however, does not only happen from a legal point of view, with the structural limitations in the formal acquisition of citizenship in the Italian legislative system.⁸ Even those who gained Italian citizenship can be structurally differentiated if they do not meet the racialised cultural ideas of hegemonic Italianness. The Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins I worked with, despite their Italian citizenship, embody these historic, social and symbolic patterns of differentiation.

From In-Betweenness to Differential Italianness

A common perspective in the studies on children of immigrants (the so-called second-generation studies) considers their social experience as bound to a structural doubleness between their ancestral identification and the place they were born and/or raised in. Concepts like "shifting," "transition," and "hybridity," have long represented an analytical starting point in most of the analysis on children of immigrants' relation with the ancestral land. At the same time, these concepts have long served as the epistemological basis for research on ancestral identification patterns. The term second generation itself semantically underlines an intergenerational continuity with their parents' experience, and configure children of immigrants as subjects in-between: in between two national paradigms, two social contexts, two belongings and so on.

This analytical perspective then suggests that the Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins identification with refugees in Milano should be connected to their ancestral background. As Thomassen argued, however, the connection between children of immigrants' social experience and their ancestral land 'seems to be rhetorically produced by the society they were born and raised in, not an accurate description of their everyday social realities (35). This rhetoric aims at differentiating people within the national body according to a given social, legal, or racial status. It is also a hegemonic discourse that powerfully influences children of immigrants' social behaviour and patterns of self-representation.

The mobilisation of the Habesha ancestry as a form of identification, cannot be said to *naturally* follow from their supposed in-betweenness of the Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins. On the contrary, it seems necessary to set our sight on the social space they have been constantly confronted with (the Milanese setting) and its transformations concerning the refugees' flow. These transformations are part of a wider shift repositioning the Italian public and political discourse on the Mediterranean route.

The Re-signification of the Mediterranean Route in Italy

Forced migration and the relevance of the Mediterranean Route have been peripheral in both the European and the Italian public discourse, until recently. Cuttitta, in this respect, has referred to the island of Lampedusa in Southern Italy as the prototype of the European border. The process of "borderization" of the refugees' issue on a geographical as well as a symbolic level (188) produced a hyper-visibility of the Mediterranean route and at the same time a structural disconnectedness from the core of the European social space. In the Italian context, the Mediterranean route, until recently, laid between public hypervisibility at the borders of the national space and invisibility right after the boat arrivals.

Things started to change from February 2011, when the Italian government declared a state of emergency to face the rise of asylum seekers arriving on the Sicilian shores after the North-African crisis. Among the extraordinary procedures the Italian government took on, there was the release of humanitarian permits of

⁸ In this perspective, the failure of the citizenship reform in Italy, the so-called *Ius soli*, is very revealing: the reform aimed at overtaking the law 91, 1992, granting Italian citizenship on "Ius sanguinis," and contemplating the concession of Italian citizenship to children of immigrants (only if they were born and continuatively raised in Italy) at their 18th. The new citizenship reform would have allowed children of immigrants who are raised in Italy faster paths in their citizenship recognition. The draft law, presented in 2013, was stalled in Parliament for the duration of the whole legislature until its final sinking in December 2017.

six-months validity that allowed asylum seekers to move across the Schengen area.9

The state of emergency had been prolonged until the first of January 2013: in this period asylum seekers' transnational mobility, a process that had almost completely been inscribed in the domain of informality turned out to be permitted in Europe. One of the first effects of this phenomenon was how the Mediterranean route was made visible also beyond the European borders. The central squares, the railway stations, and the nodal points of the main European cities started to represent transition spaces for the asylum seekers trying to reach their destinations. This phenomenon, however, erupted with the end of the state of emergency in 2013, and the apparent normalisation of the previous system of migrant mobility control in Italy. The end of the state of emergency did not lead to a reprise of the practices of control and containment of the flow in Italy. In fact, differential treatment of the asylum seekers entered in force. Those nationalities who had high possibilities to receive forms of protection (such as Ethiopians and Especially Eritreans) were left free to cross the Italian borders. The second control of the state of the state of the second control of the second

In 2013, the Mediterranean route was reproduced through an idiosyncratic relation between public hyper-visibility and institutional invisibility. The opening of a transit space for asylum seekers trying to cross the Italian borders in order to reach North European countries brought the refugees' issue in the centre of the Italian social space.

From 2013 on, the diaspora neighbourhood of Porta Venezia turned out to be representing a crucial nodal point of the informal transit of the Ethiopian and especially Eritrean asylum seekers. Their institutional invisibility, therefore, was counterbalanced by their hyper-visibility in one of the most central neighbourhoods in Milano.

In summer 2013, the refugee issue exponentially grew in the Italian media representations as well as in the Milanese public space. In parallel, the ongoing shipwrecks in the Mediterranean Sea assumed growing importance in the Italian public representations. The salience of the flow in the public discourse draws attention to the European inactivity concerning the drownings in the Sicilian channel.¹¹ The defensive Frontex¹² approach aimed at controlling the European frontiers rather than rescuing people started to be contested in the public opinion.

The Italian framework that for decades kept the Mediterranean route out of the national interest, therefore, completely turned upside down in summer 2013. The refugees' flow became a constituent issue of the Italian public discourse. Therefore, rather than in the assumed *in-betweenness*, I argue that it is necessary to understand the reconfiguration of Ethiopian and Eritrean Italians' identification with refugees within the suspension of national and transnational system of regulation and control of the forced mobility in Europe.

Changing Identification Patterns in the Black Mediterranean

The redefinition of the Mediterranean route in Italy powerfully acted on the reconfiguration of the immigrants' offsprings' ancestral belonging. The resignification of a second-generation *Habeshaness*, therefore, can be read in parallel with the opening of a liminal stage in the ways the refugees' flow have been framed in Milano.

As Horvath, Thomassen and Wydra pointed out, liminality can be a leading paradigm for understanding transformation in a globalised world (1). The suspension of the hegemonic categories of regulation and the control of transnational forced migrations opened a space of possibility for children of immigrants: a space

⁹ See. Dpcm 5.4.2011, *misure di protezione temporanea per i cittadini stranieri affluiti dai Paesi nordafricani* (see http://goo.gl/acsjd2. Last visit. 24.08.2017). The Italian initiative, to some extent, overruled the European system of regulation and control of the forced migrations in the European social space.

¹⁰ See Grimaldi, In Search of Italianness.

¹¹ For a genealogy of the Italian institutional approach concerning the rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea until Mare Nostrum Operation, see Panebianco, *the Mediterranean migration crisis: border control versus humanitarian approaches*.

¹² Frontex is the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the European Union and operates since 2004 in patrolling the external European borders.

whence, following Turner, novel configurations of ideas and relations could arise (97). In this perspective, the mobilisation of their ancestral ethnicity can be considered as a source of political recognition in the Milanese public space.

The different ways in which Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins articulated their Habeshaness, therefore, can be symbolically analysed through the threefold distinction of the rites de passages (preliminal, liminal, and post-liminal) operated by Van Gennep in Le rites the passage. Such a distinction will show the direct interdependency between their changing identification patterns and the processes of the redefinition of the Mediterranean route in Italy.

Habeshaness out of the Habesha Social World

Besides its centrality as a social, economic, and symbolic space of reference in the city of Milano, Porta Venezia, since the 1970s, represents a central hub of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diasporic transnational networks (Arnone 20). The neighbourhood is represented first of all as one of the most important areas of residence fuelling postcolonial mobility patterns from the Horn of Africa to Italy. These mobility patterns mainly involved Ethiopians and Eritreans who worked for the Italians in the urban centres of the region. The political turmoils in the Horn, from the late '60s on, led to civil war in Eritrea and to the deposition of Emperor Haile Selassie and to the institution of a Marxist-Leninist military junta (the Derg) in Ethiopia. In this new setting, Italians progressively abandoned both Ethiopia and Eritrea together with their domestic workers. The main groups who enacted postcolonial mobility patterns were Christians of the highlands of the present Tigray region in Ethiopia and the *Kebessa* (Highland) Eritrea. ¹³

Furthermore, all along the 1980s' and the first 1990s' Porta Venezia became a central site in Europe in the long-distance nationalist struggle of the ethnic-based political movements of TPLF (Tigrayan people liberation front) and EPLF (Eritrean people liberation front).¹⁴ From the turn of the new millennium on, the neighbourhood turned to represent a central transit point in Europe of the so-called generation asylum (Hepner 184), people who fled Ethiopia and especially Eritrea¹⁵ after the 1998 Ethiopian-Eritrean border war. ¹⁶

The Habesha neighbourhood of Porta Venezia, therefore, represents what Brah defines as a diaspora space: a location where transnational politics intersect with politics of location (632) in the wider space of the city. A space fuelled by different migration waves, where generational, ethnic, political and national divisions are immersed in a social field made of shared transnational economic, social and symbolic networks.

The cultural meanings circulating in Porta Venezia, as well as the complex system of social relations marking the neighbourhood, however, had been, until recently, mainly external to the everyday life of the Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins who were born or raised in Milano.

The distance with the *Habesha* neighbourhood of Porta Venezia can be well expressed in the following extract. Miki, an Italian of Eritrean origin in his thirties talks about the 'distance between his social circles

¹³ For a wider account of the postcolonial mobility patterns from the Horn of Africa to Italy see Marchetti, *Le ragazze di Asmara*.

¹⁴ The analysis of the political developments of the longstanding war against the Derg concerning the positionalities of TPLF and EPLF goes far beyond the scopes of this work. For a preliminary overview see Young. For an account of its implications in present diasporic nationalist narratives see Bernal.

¹⁵ Particularly, Eritreans fled the country in order to avoid the permanent military service. All of the citizens between 18 and 50 years (40 for women) have been included in the Eritrean Defense Force and the National Service. They earn a very low salary (25\$ per month), and the dissents are punished by physical punishment, torture, death and detention. For a wider account on Eritrean forced mobility strategies see Costantini and Massa, So, now I am Eritrean.

¹⁶ The official cause of the war had been a border issue dispute concerning a small village (almost abandoned) on the Ethiopian Eritrean border, the town of Badme. Because of the low importance of the disputed territory, the international community defined the Ethio-Eritrean conflict as the most senseless ever. Actually, the processes that led to the war played a central role in the definition of an Eritrean and an Ethiopian national identification, and it was considered as the watershed of the contemporary history of the Horn of Africa. Despite all of these processes being central in the understanding of the present Ethiopian and Eritrean nationalist positions (from the tense relations between Ethiopians and Eritreans to the ethnic and political differences between old and new generations migrants), it is beyond the scopes of this work to deeply analyse them. For a detailed account of the social dynamics that led to the Ethio-Eritrean border conflict see Iyob and Negash, Tronvoll.

and the everyday dynamics of Porta Venezia'.

Porta Venezia has always been the place of our parents. It was impossible to do anything, even to smoke a cigarette. We used to come to Porta Venezia when we were kids, but as soon as I started to go out by myself, I stopped.¹⁷

Habesha as a Way to be a Black Italian

The ways Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins experienced the city of Milano produced a strong differentiation compared to their parents' patterns of identification (Portes, Rumbaut 160). Born and raised in Milano, they had to face the fact of being both black and Italians, two attributes that Andall defines as mutually exclusive in the Italian public space (400). The marginalised Milanese suburbs where they grew up as well as the racialization patterns they had to confront with, played a major role in the orientation of their social patterns within the city context. In this respect, the social and symbolic structures of the Ethiopian and Eritrean diasporic community in Milano, rather than serving as a way to reproduce their parents' patterns of identification, served as a basis for a new group-making project (Brubaker 19) in the Milanese social space. Specifically, they re-signified the term *Habesha* as a source of belonging and self-identification within the Milanese setting. Until recently this Habeshaness among children of immigrants represented a racial, cultural and symbolic marker they performed, to resist their attributed differential Italianness. The ethnonym, therefore, has long symbolised their condition of racialised Italians rather than the meanings related to the ancestral lands.

The distance between the ways people born in immigrant families used to refer to the term Habesha, and its social meaning in the wider Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora can be traced in the ways they had until recently dealt with forced migrations from the Horn of Africa to Milano.

Until recently there has been a strong differentiation between the social lives of Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins their same cohort of migrants of the so-called "generation asylum."

The incommensurability between the two social groups was well expressed by Sara, an Italian woman of Ethiopian origins in her late 20s, at the beginning of 2014: "We are different from immigrants. We speak a different language; we did different schools. I think that this association is pointless." The growing presence of migrants of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins in Milano from the turn of the new millennium on had often caused discomfort in children of immigrants' everyday life. This is clearly underlined in the words of Jay, a Milanese of Eritrean origin in his late 30s, who talked about the growing presence of black immigrants in the city:

I remember when I was young. It seemed like every African knew each other in the city. And they helped each other. Until some years ago, anytime a black met another black in the streets they used to greet each other. [...] Now it is not like that at all. Even if for the Italians we are all the same.¹⁹

The opposition between citizens and immigrants, one of the most powerful rhetoric reproducing hegemonic conceptions of the Italian national identity (Merrill 278), had long been a touchstone to distinguish a *second generation Habeshaness* from the migrants' social experience.

Furthermore, while the flow (both through formal channels and through the Mediterranean route), had been central for the older generations of their families, children of immigrants never felt the phenomenon of forced migrations as a central issue in their Milanese everyday life. This process is clearly expressed by Sami, an Italian of Ethiopian origin, whose familiar network is based between Italy, Ethiopia and Eritrea. He talked about his experience of cohabitation with one of his uncles from Eritrea when he was a teenager. His father decided to host Sami's uncle in the period between his arrival in Italy and his successive movements towards Europe. When I asked him about his cohabitation with his uncle Sami answer was very indicative:

¹⁷ Fieldnotes, 04.06.2015.

¹⁸ Fieldnotes, 04.03.2014.

¹⁹ Fieldnotes, 26.04.2014.

I did not understand him. He misbehaved a lot, and he had some problems with alcohol. My mother was not confident in leaving me and my sister alone with him. [...] My father told us that he would not have spent more than a few days in our house, but he stayed for more than one month.²⁰

In this extract, the activation of the diasporic structures sustaining the migration chains and the familiar transnational networks, far from being a significant part of his modes of social reproduction, represented, in Sami's perspective, nothing more than a discomfort disturbing his everyday life.

Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins have been confronted with transnational flows continuously: they got to know of the models, the tactics, and the networks. Nevertheless, until recently, their models of self-identification in the Milanese public space had been extremely distant from these processes. This configuration of the term Habesha as the marker of a racial, cultural and symbolic differentiation compared to the Italian context illuminates a key process fuelling Afro European subjectivities in the Black Mediterranean. Identification of people born in immigrants' families informs us about colonial and postcolonial structures reproducing a race-class- gender differentiation in Italy. At the same time, it sheds light on the processes of differential inclusion and marginalisation among racialised citizens in the nationstate. A theoretical perspective focused on their ancestral background, therefore, seems to be totally useless as an answer to explain why, from Summer 2013 on, they decided to make the refugee issue a central issue of self-identification.

We Are All on that Ship

"On the 12th of October, 2013, for the first time in Milano, Ethiopians and Eritreans marched together as brothers. We are all on that ship."

This sentence was the slogan of the Committee 3.0, a spontaneous group of Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins, who organised the demonstration "We are all on that ship" to commemorate the victims of the forced migrations in the Mediterranean Sea. The commemoration represented the first step of a process of engagement. Until the second half of 2014, immigrants' offspring volunteered to support the Ethiopian and Eritrean asylum seekers arriving in the neighbourhood of Porta Venezia. The march "We are all on that ship" had big participation of the Milanese citizenry, and it was considered as the Milanese contribution to the Italian national debate on the Mediterranean route.²¹

Despite its success, the demonstration, which ended in the neighbourhood of Porta Venezia, produced strong tensions within the Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora in Milan. Many of the elders deserted or openly boycotted the march. As Amira, one of the members of Committee 3.0 said:

Most of my friends' parents did not want their children to join the march. Some of them were angry and openly tried to scare us or to boycott the demonstration. However, most of them simply told us that our intentions were good, but that kind of mobilisation was totally useless and counterproductive.²²

The lack of participation among the elders was justified by calling in question their fear of offering a negative representation of the homeland. As Hellen, an Italian of Eritrean origin who participated in the demonstration, stated: "Most of the diasporans mind their own business. They are afraid to talk. It could have been dangerous even to participate in a commemorative march."23

To avoid any form of identification within the fragmented Ethiopian and Eritrean political panorama,²⁴ the organisers chose to ban any flag or symbol associated with a specific political side. Instead, they chose

²⁰ Fieldnotes, Milano, 04.09.2015.

²¹ Few days after the march, on 18th of October 2013, the Italian government launched the Mare Nostrum Operation.

²² Fieldnotes, 10.04.2014.

²³ Fieldnotes, 04.05.2014.

²⁴ In July 2018 a peace deal between Ethiopia and Eritrea entered in force after 20 years. Its effects are yet to be explored both in the homeland and in the diaspora.

to identify with a common *Habesha* ethnic belonging: on the one hand, it was a way to emphasise a political disengagement from Ethiopian and Eritrean internal issues; on the other hand, they conveyed a message of brotherhood uniting the Milanese diaspora to the homelands. As one of the organisers stated during an interview with *Correire della Sera* covering the mobilisation:

We are the same people, *Habesha*; we are brothers with the people crossing the Mediterranean. I have been lucky because my parents made different choices during their youth. Otherwise, I could have been one of those people drowning.²⁵

The mobilisation presented above represents a powerful transformation in the social patterns that have long sustained the *Habeshaness* of Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins. The effects of the repositioning of their ancestral ethnicity as a space of common identification with the asylum seekers, however, produced a strong conflict with their parents' generation.

Their engagement with the refugees, actually, was connected to the ways public debate around asylum seekers changed in Italy from 2013 onwards. The redefinition of the Mediterranean route produced a suspension of the categories of identification and difference in the Italian public space. In relation to the refugees' arrival, the racial and symbolic attributions reproducing the hegemonic notions of Italianness became deactivated. In this liminal configuration, their ancestral ethnicity turned out to represent a source of political recognition in the Milanese public space.

Committee 3.0: Habesha Ethnic Engagement as an Italian Phenomenon.

The idea of the march was born on the 30th of September, right after the Sampieri shipwreck. Lampedusa came after that. At the mobilisation, by the way, all of the people only talked about Lampedusa.²⁶

In the extract above, Jack, the main organiser of the mobilisation "We are all on that ship" talked about the issues that arose during the march.

The process of organising the mobilisation started from a Facebook status he posted after the shipwreck of 30th September 2013 in Sampieri (Ragusa). A boat wrecked 15-20 meters from the shore, and 13 people (Ethiopians, Somalis and Eritreans), not able to swim, died. By posting a picture of burning candles²⁷ around the sinking boat, he wrote: "I think that if we, the people of the diaspora, who have the power and who are safe in Europe and in the US if we do not do anything it will not be the last time. Rest in peace." In his Facebook post, therefore, rather than focusing on the effects of the Mediterranean route management, Jack emphasised the issues related to the Ethiopian and Eritrean social space as the main responsible for the flow.

Following his message, some Milanese of both Ethiopian and Eritrean origins started to get together to organise a mobilisation in order to raise public awareness of the issue within the diasporic context.

On the 3rd of October 2013, during the organisation process, however, the Lampedusa shipwreck caught attention in the Italian news media and public debate. The effect the Lampedusa tragedy had on Italian public discourse was huge. The day after, the Italian government proclaimed a day of national mourning and state funerals were organised on the island.

Lampedusa shipwreck, with the international coverage it received, represented the watershed moment in the European politics on the Mediterranean route. The Mediterranean route, once in the periphery of Italian public discussion, became now a central issue in media and politics. Italian (and consequently

²⁵ Milano.corriere.it Eritrei, Etiopi e Somali per la prima volta in corteo "Lampedusa, siamo tutti su quella barca" https://goo. gl/H7Xhak

²⁶ Fieldnotes, Milano, 15.03.2015.

²⁷. The burning candle represents a symbol of mourning in Christian Ethiopia and Eritrea. During the 2013 Mediterranean tragedies, it was utilised worldwide as a symbol of mourning, and it became the symbol of the 3^{rd} of October.

²⁸ Jack's Facebook post, 30.09.2013 (my translation).

European) border politics changed fundamentally. On 18th of October, the Italian government promoted the Mare Nostrum Operation, a mission of search and rescue in the Mediterranean Sea, which replaced the Frontex defensive paradigm aimed at controlling the European border.

This configuration strongly influenced the mobilisation organised by Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins. The goals of mobilisation gradually changed from raising awareness in the diaspora to questioning the European framework of regulating the Mediterranean crossings.

The public and media attention in the Milanese social space, and the formal endorsement of the Milanese institutions, besides leading to significant participation of the Milanese citizenry, turned the march to a mobilisation of the "second generations." Their ethnic origins filled the disjuncture between the Ethiopian and Eritrean diasporic social life and the Italian discourses on the Mediterranean route. A common identification with refugees (despite being Italians), therefore, created a space of political legitimation for immigrants' offspring: the emphasis on their ancestral belonging turned out to represent a vantage point to gain social recognition within the Milanese public debate on forced migrations. The repositioning of their Habeshaness, this way, turned out to represent a way to navigate the politics of difference (Grillo 227, Soja and Hooper 181) within the Italian public discourse.

In these respects, it is important to consider the interpretations of the name they chose to represent themselves as a political unit. The activists chose the name Committee 3.0 (three point zero) to underline their difference with the public and political organisations of "second generations" in Milano (such as *Rete* G2, or Citizens 2.0). In most of the media that covered the organisation of the march, however, the name of the committee changed from "three point zero" to "3 October." By assuming that the march was the outcome of the 3 October Lampedusa shipwreck, the media misunderstood the graphic symbols of the Committee name. The interpretations of their name show how the hegemonic discourses on the Mediterranean route that spread in Italy during 2013 absorbed the meanings that led to their mobilisation.

"We are all on that ship" represented the first step of a wider engagement with the Milanese refugee issue among children of immigrants. From April 2014 onwards, in congruence with the eruption of the so-called refugees' crisis in the major Italian cities, Committee 3.0, together with social and political activists of both Italian and Ethiopian and Eritrean origins, started to arrange a humanitarian chain in the midst of Porta Venezia.

Differential Italianness as a Source of Legitimation

Do you believe in genius loci? Do you know what it is? It is the church of Lazzaretto. That of the Promessi Sposi. [...] Do you realise that today, after 400 years, marginalised people are here again?²⁹

In the extract above, Stefano, a Milanese architect residing in the neighbourhood of Porta Venezia, used Manzonian parallelism to describe the condition of the Eritrean asylum seekers. From April 2014, for almost one year, an informal help chain was set up by a group of Italian of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins in Largo Bellintani, the square in front of the church of Lazzaretto. The place represented the symbolic centre of Porta Venezia, and the area around was the core of the diasporic space.

Their engagement played a complementary role and, at the same time, was integrated within the institutional structures that were responsible for the organisation and the management of the forced migrations. Their activities were mainly threefold:

- 1) Daily activities ranging from food supply to the supply of basic clothes and medical care, providing a proper alternative to the institutional machine of the first reception.
- 2) At the same time, they constantly interacted with the institutions involved in the formal management of the arriving asylum seekers. They confronted the municipality structures, especially to look for night accommodations for the asylum seekers. They also had to reassure asylum seekers about the absence of identification practices in the institutional night centres

3) Lastly, the humanitarian chain they arranged intersected with the informal networks of the diaspora in supporting the mobility of asylum seekers in Northern Europe. The activities included contacting people in the diasporic networks, up to the assistance of train tickets purchase and the indication of the most suitable rail routes to cross the Italian border.

When considering the main activities of the informal help chain, two main features stand out. On the one hand, Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins performed their perceived doubleness by acting as cultural brokers (De Jong 46) to legitimate their presence in the Milanese public discourse over the refugee flow. On the other hand, in the first months of the reception, due to the growing attention to the refugee flow in the public discourse, they struggled to turn the refugees' issue into an affair that concerned the whole Milanese public space. This process is clearly expressed in the aims of the Committee 3.0. As they state in their official presentation: "We are a group of young Milanese aimed at defending human rights as well as the rights of the asylum seekers. We want to make the coming Italian community more sympathetic and antiracist." 30

The suspension of the European regimes regulating forced mobility (Glick Schiller and Salazar 183), therefore, allowed the people born in immigrant families to play their supposed ethnic *know-how* as a way to legitimate their perceived differential Italianness as a source of recognition.

From a Black Mediterranean perspective, it is possible to see this process within a wider process of re-signification of the Afro-European frontier. The opening of liminal space in the processes of regulating the Mediterranean route produced a resignification of the identification patterns and of the social spaces connoting the social condition of Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins. Their ethnic engagement, in this perspective, represented a way to re-articulate their membership as Afro-Italian and Afro-European citizens and to re-signify their differential condition.

The interdependency between the resignification of *Habeshaness* and the configuration of the Mediterranean route in the Italian public discourse clearly emerged in the processes that led to the end of children of immigrants' help chain in the neighbourhood. From the second half of 2014 on, a new phase in the understanding of the Mediterranean route was inaugurated; a post-liminal phase that structurally excluded children of immigrants.

When the Mediterranean Route Becomes too Italian

Since the second half of 2014, in parallel with the institutionalisation of the neighbourhood of Porta Venezia as one of the main Hub of the asylum seekers' reception in Milano, the Committee 3.0 started to decrease its participation to the public debate on refugees. From the opening of the Mare Nostrum operation on, the new configuration of the Mediterranean route as a central issue in both national identification and civic participation, generated powerful political, economic, and symbolic circuits.³¹ In this context, two main oppositional paradigms arose—humanitarianism and securitarianism—and the neighbourhood turned out to be the battlefield of opposed political factions.

Residential and shop owner committees publicly protested against the asylum seekers' presence. For example, a restaurant owner in via Lazzaro Palazzi, a street of the neighbourhood with one of the highest concentration of asylum seekers hung up a protest banner at the entrance of the restaurant, publicly positioning himself against the asylum seekers' presence in the neighbourhood. He specifically talked about the "African degradation" they led in the district.³²

In Porta Venezia, there was the institutionalisation of the oppositional rhetoric between "Us" and "Them." The neighbourhood turned out to be the home base of Milanese far-right political movements, and

³⁰ Comitato 3.0 Facebook presentation https://www.facebook.com/comitato.trepuntozero. Last visit, 04.08.2017.

³¹ The salience of the Mediterranean route in the Italian national politics led to the dismissal of the operation Mare Nostrum, and the opening of the European joint Triton Mission (01.11.2014), aimed at defending the European borders rather than searching and rescuing people in the Mediterranean.

³² For a deeper understanding of the dynamics that developed in the neighbourhood concerning the asylum seekers presence, see Grimaldi, *Goffman e l'antropologia applicata*, 52.

there was a spread of public and media narratives calling the neighbourhood as an unhealthy place as well as a space of illegality.

The takeover of different discourses was reflected even in the reconfiguration of the neighbourhood as a space of engagement for the city's political activist groups and humanitarian associations. The growing presence of humanitarian professionals led to a progressive externalisation of the asylum seekers presence from the neighbourhood dynamics. This process has been clearly expressed firstly on spatial terms: since the summer of 2014, the informal reception had been redirected in a park immediately out of the neighbourhood, with an almost stable presence of the police aimed at preventing gatherings in the district's area.

The humanitarian logic that developed in Porta Venezia, furthermore, led to a disjunction of the Mediterranean route from the wider Milanese social space resulting in a division of the "helpers" from the "helped" (de Jong 57).

The politics of recognition in the volunteer work by the Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins was surrounded by hegemonic representations of Italianness: the refugee issues and its management became soon too Italian to represent a space of public legitimation for people of immigrant family background. The restoration of a European border regime and of the Italian national paradigm in the Black Mediterranean space, therefore, was mirrored in the reactivation of children of immigrants' structural marginality in the wider Milanese space.

Conclusion: Black Mediterranean and Afroeuropeanness

For over 20 years, the Mediterranean route has been redesigning the social, political, and symbolic landscape of Europe. It continuously activates a series of structural processes intersecting with each other and redefining the social constructions of identity and difference on a local, national and transnational

This study sheds light on the direct connection between the redefinition of the regimes of mobility concerning the refugees' flow and the reposition of the categories of identification and difference among racialised citizens. The analysis of the resignification of the Habesha identification among Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins represented a vantage point to consider the Black Mediterranean as both a space of analysis and a theoretical framework. The Black Mediterranean, on the one hand, represents a wider transnational setting whose interconnections reverberate in apparently disconnected social spaces. The analysis of the diasporic neighbourhood of Porta Venezia allows us to consider the effects of wider transformations on a national and transnational level from a situated spatial perspective. Exploring the relation between Porta Venezia and the Mediterranean route enabled to make sense of the ways the diasporic setting was internally reconfigured in the wake of the refugees' flow. Furthermore, it has been possible to consider the transformation of the relation between the diasporic setting and the wider city space. This spatial perspective, finally, allows us to explore the processes of resignification of the diasporic space among Italians of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins without implying any predetermined ethnic or cultural continuity with the refugees' experience. Within the Black Mediterranean, the neighbourhood of Porta Venezia turned out to represent a space of possibility that allowed redefining the relations to the wider city space and national discourse.

On the other hand, the concept of Black Mediterranean works as a powerful theoretical framework to make sense of the processes redefining ethnic, national and transnational identity in the contemporary European context. By considering the activation of the Habesha ethnic belonging among Milanese of Ethiopian and Eritrean origins, it has been possible to analyse the ways they re-signified hegemonic national categories of identification and difference, as well as to consider the various structural processes they intersected with during their ethnic mobilisation.

These processes mirror the present social formations that are becoming common among racialised European citizens. They also show how historicized hegemonic productions that reproduce European modernity as a discrete racial unit are resisted. As a theoretical perspective, the Black Mediterranean allows deconstructing the narratives reproducing *Afro-Europeans*' life paths in Europe. The attention to the local, national and transnational processes related to the refugees' flow in present Europe, on the contrary frame the Mediterranean route itself as an integral part of the European social landscape. The Black Mediterranean, in this perspective, configures as a privileged analytical site to make sense of the power relations as well as of the ongoing resignification processes reproducing Afro-European subjectivities.

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