

## **Introduction:** **Black Italia and the Insurgent Politics of Knowledge Production**

**Camilla Hawthorne and Angelica Pesarini**

This special issue of *California Italian Studies* is the product of a nearly decade-long collaboration between the editors. We first met in 2017 at Birmingham City University (U.K.) for a multi-day workshop on the Black Mediterranean. From there, we developed an academic partnership as well as a deep sisterhood. In 2020, we published a series of articles in *Public Books* and *Jacobin Italia* on the global Black Lives Matter movement and the politics of abolition across Italy and the United States<sup>1</sup>; in 2024, we collaborated with Barbara Ofosu-Somuah (an author in this special issue) on the politics of memory and forgetting in Italian historiography.<sup>2</sup> We were also among the founding members of the Black Mediterranean Collective, which in 2021 published *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders and Citizenship*.<sup>3</sup> Our work has been profoundly shaped by our lived experiences as Black Italian women with connections to multiple, overlapping Black geographies—including Italy, the Horn of Africa, the U.K., Canada, and the United States.

Our goal, since the inception of our collaboration on this special issue, has been to bring together a new generation of scholars and scholarship on racism/race and Blackness in Italy. As co-editors, we have made a deliberate choice to prioritize the work of junior scholars and advanced graduate students, as well as underrepresented scholars of color. Additionally, we sought to create space for artists, writers, and curators—whose work should not be viewed as merely the “raw material” through which scholars theorize, but as powerful forms of theory in and of themselves. This is particularly relevant given the relatively marginal status of Black, race-critical, and postcolonial studies in Italian studies. In fact, some of the most theoretically critical insights about Blackness in Italy have come not from the academy, but instead from writers, filmmakers, and other creative practitioners. Overall, in our editorial approach we have attempted to contest those hierarchies of knowledge production along lines of rank, institutional status, and method that differentially legitimize various modalities of intellectual work.

As scholars based in North America (Hawthorne in the United States, and Pesarini in Canada), we would be remiss if we did not take a moment to reflect on the *geographies* of knowledge production as well. Most of the contributors to this special issue are based at academic institutions outside of Italy, or received their training outside of Italy. While this might seem like an editorial oversight on our part at first glance, it actually belies a much more complex story about the fraught status of Black studies in Italian academia (and across continental Europe more broadly). While there have been several research groups and networks that have contributed in important ways to the emergence of Black, race-critical, and postcolonial studies in Italy over the last fifteen years or so—among these the *InteRGRace* and *PostcolonialItalia* networks, the *Slanting Gaze on Social*

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<sup>1</sup> Camilla Hawthorne and Angelica Pesarini, “Making Black Lives Matter in Italy: A Transnational Dialogue,” *Public Books*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.publicbooks.org/making-black-lives-matter-in-italy-a-transnational-dialogue/>; Angelica Pesarini and Camilla Hawthorne, “Black Lives Matter anche da noi?” *Jacobin Italia*, no. 8 (2020).

<sup>2</sup> Camilla Hawthorne, Angelica Pesarini, and Barbara Ofosu-Somuah, “Memory, Forgetfulness, and Multidimensional Acts of Resistance,” *Italian Culture* 42, no. 2 (2024): 279–97.

<sup>3</sup> The Black Mediterranean Collective, ed., *The Black Mediterranean: Bodies, Borders, and Citizenship* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021). The original members of the Collective are: Ida Danewid, Vivian Gerrand, Giulia Grechi, Giuseppe Grimaldi, Camilla Hawthorne, Angelica Pesarini, Gabriele Proglia, Timothy Raeymaekers, and P. Khalil Saucier.

*Control, Labour, Racism and Migration Research Group* at the Università di Padova, the *Centro Studi Postcoloniali e di Genere* at the Università di Napoli l’Orientale, *CENTRA* (Centre for the History of Racism and Anti-Racism in Modern Italy) at the Università di Genoa, and the *Beyond Inhabitation Lab* at the Politecnico di Torino—this work remains marginal in Italian universities. As a result, many Italian scholars who wish to study topics such as Black Italia or legacies of Italian colonialism are constrained to seek training and employment outside of Italy.

Rather than consider it as a limitation, we argue that the geographical composition of contributors to this special issue offers a uniquely transnational perspective on the contested politics of racism, race, and Blackness in Italy. Indeed, there is a significant theoretical challenge currently facing the study of racism and race in Italy. On the one hand, it is critical for scholars to identify the national and regional variations in histories and patterns of racialization that distinguish the Italian context. Black Italian activists themselves have long argued for the necessity of a political language that is capable of grappling with the specificities of anti-Black racism in the Italian context. On the other hand, however, claims to national distinctiveness or exceptionalism can also be deployed to deny the existence of racism in Italy. Hence, for instance, one encounters all-too-common claims in Italy that racism is an American obsession or that racism was an external imposition originating either in the influence of Nazi Germany in the 1930s or the influx of Black African migrants in the 1980s.

Ultimately, we believe, the problem is one of methodological nationalism—that is, the assumption that social phenomena adhere strictly to the boundaries of nation-states. While national borders might constitute a convenient analytical shorthand, however, a cursory glance at the history of race-making in Italy reveals that struggles over the racial boundaries of Italianness have long been shaped by globally interconnected processes of capitalism and colonialism, as well as the transnational circulation of ideas, technologies of power, and practices of resistance. We need only look, for instance, to the way that leaders of the Risorgimento drew parallels between Italians on the one hand, and enslaved Black Americans and colonized Native Americans on the other, or to the transnational exchange of ideas about race and criminality carried out between scientists and policymakers in Italy and the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup> More recently, as well, Hawthorne and Pesarini have written about the linkages between right-wing attacks on citizenship rights in Italy and the United States.<sup>5</sup>

## **Black Italia: Embodied Knowledges of Resistance**

While curating this special issue, we found ourselves grappling with the absence of a comprehensive definition of the emergent, interdisciplinary field in which we are both deeply invested, intellectually and politically—namely *Black Italia*, or *Black Italy*. There are two interrelated questions that we feel are necessary to answer in any attempt to define this multifaceted discipline: *what* is Black Italia, and *who* is Black Italia? If the first question invites us to delineate the contours of the field and to identify its key sites of production, the second is equally important, for it orients our attention to the centrality of intersectional lived experiences and positionalities.

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<sup>4</sup> Camilla Hawthorne, “Toward a Relational Theorization of Racisms,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 47, no. 8 (2024): 1620–28.

<sup>5</sup> Camilla Hawthorne and Angelica Pesarini, “US Aims to Abolish Birthright Citizenship: Italy Already Knows the Consequences,” *American Community Media*, May 30, 2025, <https://americancommunitymedia.org/immigration/us-aims-to-abolish-birthright-citizenship-italy-already-knows-the-consequences/>; Camilla Hawthorne and Angelica Pesarini, “US Aims to Abolish Birthright Citizenship: Italy Already Knows the Consequences,” *La Voce di New York*, May 20, 2025.

The field of Black Italian studies encompasses a wide array of subfields, methodological approaches, and intellectuals that extend beyond the scope of this introduction. Yet we find it necessary to advance a provisional definition, conceived not as a definitive or rigidly prescriptive formulation but rather as an opening intervention intended to stimulate further theoretical elaboration and critical engagement with this evolving field. Using an intentionally broad and porous definition that does not seek to impose labels, we understand Black Italia as an interdisciplinary field of study characterized by a set of intellectual, political, and artistic practices and approaches that broadly aim at (re)centering and excavating the Black presence in the Italian and Italian-speaking contexts. This presence encompasses African, Afrodescendant and Afrodiasporic histories, experiences, and cultural and artistic productions that, as artist and scholar Justin Randolph Thompson argues, *have always been there* but are systematically overlooked and marginalized.<sup>6</sup>

Black Italia can also be considered an epistemic project that extends beyond the walls of the academy. For some of us, it constitutes *embodied knowledges*, a methodological approach theorized and experienced in the body through activism, resistance, and the daily navigation of anti-Black racism that shapes the foundations of what we call Italy today, as manifested in experiences of aggressive racial profiling, institutional racism, police brutality, and disenfranchisement from citizenship. As Black Italian scholars, we understand that conceptualizing Black Italia often means reflecting on premature death, to borrow Ruth Wilson Gilmore's phrasing,<sup>7</sup> and the precarity of Black lives. In a 2020 epistolary exchange facilitated by Marie Moïse on the insurgence of BLM, we reflected on the devastating, transversal impacts of white supremacy following the terrorist attack led by far-right militant and *Lega* candidate Luca Traini in 2018.<sup>8</sup> And while writing these words now, we mourn the recent death of Alhagie Konte, a 27-year-old from The Gambia and an active member of the migrant-led activist group based in Naples, *Movimento Migranti e Rifugiati Napoli*. Having been incarcerated in Poggioreale prison while in good health, Konte endured solitary confinement and allegedly negligent medical care, as reported by fellow inmates. He ultimately died of pulmonary tuberculosis due to his delayed hospitalization while in the custody of the Italian State, a death communicated to his family only days afterward. Konte is but the latest in a long and ever-growing list.

These lived and embodied experiences of marginalization and violence are inseparable from the intellectual project of Black Italia, highlighting the profound epistemic and political stakes of this work; its approaches move beyond conventional frameworks to encompass both scholarly and lived knowledges. Black Italia stretches disciplinary and methodological boundaries, drawing on Black feminist epistemologies, postcolonial and decolonial studies, literary studies, history, cultural studies, geography, film studies, visual and performative arts, migration studies, sociology, and gender studies, to name but a few intersecting fields. It also inherently expands geographical borders. As Giulia Riccò and Serena Bassi argue, Italy is not a merely physical or territorial space, but is also a "contested site," a sign continuously reshaped by its multi-layered meanings and through its global circulation.<sup>9</sup> It is indicative, in this regard, that in 2022 Caterina

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<sup>6</sup> Cristian di Mattia, dir., *The Black Italian Renaissance* (TIWI, 2022).

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>8</sup> Pesarini and Hawthorne, "Black Lives Matter anche da noi?"

<sup>9</sup> Serena Bassi and Giulia Riccò, "Why a Transnational Approach to Italian Studies?" *H-TransItalian Studies*, <https://networks-h-net-org.myaccess.library.utoronto.ca/node/7645/blog/transnational-italian-studies-working-group/8928534/blog-why-transnational>. See also Serena Bassi, Loredana Polezzi, and Giulia Riccò, "Introduction: Critical Issues in Transnational Italian Studies," *Forum Italicum: A Journal of Italian Studies* 57, no. 2 (August 2023):

Romeo and Giulia Fabbri entitled their special issue of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* “Intersectional Italy” as a way to highlight the pluralities and complexities of Black Italian experiences and, in Romeo’s words, to disrupt Italy’s “chromatic norm” of whiteness.<sup>10</sup>

## Genealogies of Black Italian Studies

In the following sections, we attempt to reconstruct a broad overview of the institutional emergence of Black Italian studies and some of its key areas of inquiry, as well as sites of Black Italian knowledge production outside of the academy in the realms of literature, film, art, and activism.

### *Field-Building and Institutionalization as Sites of Struggle*

Any attempt to define Black Italia must engage with the enduring legacies of Italian colonialism and its afterlives. Italian colonialism unfolded contemporaneously with national unification; as such, the ever-shifting racial definition of *italianità* is profoundly intertwined with Italy’s imperial project. In this respect, rigorous historical scholarship on Italian colonialism has laid the foundations for this endeavor. The work of Angelo del Boca, Giulia Barrera, Nicola Labanca, Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, Alessandro Triulzi, and Barbara Sorgoni in Italy; Charles Burdett, Neelam Srivastava, Barbara Spadaro, Derek Duncan, and Jaqueline Andall in the U.K.; or Ruth Ben-Ghiat, Mia Fuller, Silvana Patriarca, and Ruth Iyob in the U.S.—just to name a few—have been pivotal sources of knowledge. This scholarship has facilitated what Sandra Ponzanesi calls a “postcolonial turn” in Italian studies in which, she argued, cultural and literary studies would play a key role.<sup>11</sup> The works of scholars such as Cristina Lombardi-Diop, Gaia Giuliani, Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh, Anna Scacchi, Miguel Mellino and Caterina Romeo, among others, solidified this postcolonial turn beginning in the early 2000s. Germinal texts such as *La critica postcoloniale: decolonizzazione, capitalismo e cosmopolitismo nei postcolonial studies* (2005), *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (2012), *Bianco e nero: storia dell’identità razziale degli italiani* (2013), *Parlare di razza: la lingua del colore tra Italia e Stati Uniti* (2012), *Il colore della nazione* (2015),<sup>12</sup> and *A fior di pelle: bianchezza, nerezza, visualità* (2017) have demonstrated the way colonial discourses continue to shape contemporary imaginaries of nationhood cemented in shifting constructions of whiteness.

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273–88. See also Stuart Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power,” in *Stuart Hall: Essential Essays, Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora*, ed. David Morley (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 142–84. Hall’s essay first appeared in 1992.

<sup>10</sup> Caterina Romeo and Giulia Fabbri, “Special Issue: Intersectional Italy,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 58, no. 5 (2022); Caterina Romeo, *Interrupted Narratives and Intersectional Representations in Italian Postcolonial Literature* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 133.

<sup>11</sup> Sandra Ponzanesi, “The Postcolonial Turn in Italian Studies,” in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 51–69.

<sup>12</sup> Miguel Mellino, *La critica postcoloniale: decolonizzazione, capitalismo e cosmopolitismo nei postcolonial studies* (Roma: Meltemi, 2016); Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, eds., *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Gaia Giuliani and Cristina Lombardi-Diop, *Bianco e nero: storia dell’identità razziale degli italiani* (Milan: Mondadori, 2013); Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh and Anna Scacchi, eds., *Parlare di razza: la lingua del colore tra Italia e Stati Uniti* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2012); Gaia Giuliani, ed., *Il colore della nazione* (Milan: Mondadori 2015); and Elisa Bordin Stefano Bosco, eds., *A fior di pelle: bianchezza, nerezza, visualità* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2017).

Building on these insights, a new generation of historians<sup>13</sup> has continued to deepen our understanding of the continuities between national unification, colonialism, Fascism, and postwar Italy, offering a comprehensive analysis of Italian colonialism's enduring legacies. This scholarship intersects with a body of critical scholarship on racism in the Italian context,<sup>14</sup> as well as work addressing questions of migration, refugeehood, xenophobia and border fortification.<sup>15</sup> The burgeoning field of Black Mediterranean studies also draws on these lineages to analyze the position of Italy and the wider Mediterranean region in the history of racial capitalist modernity.<sup>16</sup>

In tracing the genealogy of the term *Black Italia*, it is essential to consider its institutional origins as well. Black Italia took center stage at the historic *Black Portraiture[s] II* conference in 2015, sponsored by NYU Florence. This landmark event was conceived by then-director Ellyn Toscano in collaboration with NYU New York faculty members Deb Willis and Awam Amkpa, with the latter also serving as curator for the exhibition *Resignifications*. Toscano, in collaboration with Alessandra Di Maio, also launched *The Black Italia Series*, a year-long program through which NYU Florence became an epicenter of these emerging conversations. In 2017, for the first time both in Italy and within NYU's curriculum, Angelica Pesarini designed and taught an undergraduate course entitled "Black Italia," thus marking a significant moment in the institutional recognition and pedagogical development of the field.

At the same time, a parallel trajectory was unfolding across Europe. As early as 2016, Camilla Hawthorne had begun to invite Black Italian scholars and activists to participate in the *Black European Summer School* in Amsterdam (now in its 18th year) and to lead seminars on Black Italia. In 2017, Professor Kehinde Andrews launched the first Black Studies undergraduate degree program in Europe at Birmingham City University. Other established interdisciplinary conferences and research initiatives such as the *Afroeuropa@ns Network* (founded in 2004), the *Black European Studies Network* (active from 2003-2007), and the *Intersectional Black European Studies Project* (since 2022) increasingly began to include research on Italy and to situate Italian cases within broader European and transatlantic conversations on race and Blackness. These transnational dialogues and exchanges have served as crucial meeting points for scholars working across national boundaries, facilitating comparative perspectives and fostering the shared development of a distinctly European iteration of Black Studies.

The murder of George Floyd in 2020, and the subsequent global resurgence of the Black Lives Matter movement, marked a critical turning point for discussions of race and racism in Italy. Although many in Italy (including some on the political Left) insisted on framing racism as an external and uniquely "American" issue, the visibility of worldwide Black protests catalyzed a

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance: Valeria Deplano and Alessandro Pes, *Storia del colonialismo italiano: politica, cultura e memoria dall'età liberale ai nostri giorni* (Rome: Carocci, 2024); Donato di Sanzo, Beatrice Falcucci and Gianmarco Mancosu, eds., *L'Italia e il mondo post-coloniale: politica, cooperazione e mobilità tra decolonizzazioni e guerra fredda* (Milan: Le Monnier, 2023); Luca Peretti, *Un dio nero, un diavolo bianco: storia di un film non fatto tra Algeria, Eni e Sartre* (Venice: Marsilio, 2023); Victoria Witkowski, "'Fascism on Trial': Rodolfo Graziani and the Manipulation of Historical Consciousness in Post-War Italy," *Modern Italy* 30, no. 3 (2025): 305–20; Carla Panico, "Colonialismo italiano e questione meridionale: amnesie, memorie competitive e alleanze intersezionali ai margini di una comunità immaginata bianca," *Italian Culture* 42, no. 2 (2024): 243–69; and Stefano Bellin and Guido Bartolini, "Italy's Multidimensional Forgetting: Narratives, Contested Memories, and Solidarity," *Italian Culture* 42, no. 2 (2024): 91–108.

<sup>14</sup> See the groundbreaking text by Paola Tabet, *La pelle giusta* (Turin: Einaudi, 1996), which examined the reproduction of racist ideology among children in Italian elementary and middle schools.

<sup>15</sup> This includes scholars such as Sandro Mezzadra, Nicholas de Genova, and Martina Tazzioli, among many others.

<sup>16</sup> See The Black Mediterranean Collective, eds., *The Black Mediterranean*, as well as the work of scholars such as SA Smythe, Alessandra di Maio, and Iain Chambers.

renewed public interest in questions of race, citizenship, and belonging in Italy, as well as generating mobilizations led by Black Italians and other Italian activists of color.<sup>17</sup> The post-2020 moment amplified the visibility of Black Italian voices in research, media, culture, and the arts, and created new openings for interdisciplinary collaborations, conferences, and research projects explicitly engaging with Blackness in Italy and across Europe.<sup>18</sup> One notable example was Camilla Hawthorne's monograph *Contesting Race and Citizenship*,<sup>19</sup> published in 2022 in English and translated into Italian in 2023 by Marie Moïse, which was the first in-depth, book-length study of Black youth activism in Italy.

Yet the structural limitations of Italian academia still remain. The study of race and (anti)racism continues to occupy a marginal position, and the voices of Black scholars and scholars of color continue to be underrepresented. These developments must also be situated within a wider international context marked by the ongoing genocide of the Palestinian people perpetrated by Israel and supported by the United States, with the complicit silence of European institutions. The repression of protest and the shrinking of academic freedom in this climate have had direct consequences for critical disciplines such as Black studies, ethnic studies and gender studies, which have been increasingly attacked, delegitimized, and—in some cases—explicitly censored and defunded. This global backlash against anticolonial and race-critical scholarship highlights the necessity of nurturing transnational and interdisciplinary spaces of dialogue capable of resisting silencing while simultaneously opening new epistemic possibilities.

### **Black Italian Knowledge Production beyond the Academy**

Given the institutional limitations facing the emergent field of Black Italian studies, especially within the Italian academy, it is important to recognize the powerful intellectual contributions of Black Italian cultural workers who are outside, or “in but not [fully] of,”<sup>20</sup> academia. As Camilla Hawthorne has written:

Some of the most exciting thinking about Blackness, racism, and the legacies of Italian colonialism is actually happening through literature, material culture, curatorial work, and other forms of cultural politics. Indeed, I often remind my colleagues that we are, at best, playing “catch up” to the work of organic Black European intellectuals, whose work has made space for creative and capacious re-imaginings of Blackness in Europe in part because they are unbound by many of the disciplining demands of the academy.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See Angelica Pesarini, “George Floyd, Soumaila Sacko and Alika Ogorchukwu: Performative Anti-Racism and Black Lives in Italy,” in *Illegality and the Making of Italy*, ed. Stephanie Malia Hom and Dana Renga (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, forthcoming 2026).

<sup>18</sup> See for instance Gaia Giuliani's project “(De)OTHERING: Deconstructing Risk and Otherness: Hegemonic Scripts and Counter-Narratives on Migrants/Refugees and ‘Internal Others’ in Portuguese and European Mediascapes,” <https://ces.uc.pt/en/investigacao/projetos-de-investigacao/projetos-financiados/de-othering>.

<sup>19</sup> Camilla Hawthorne, *Contesting Race and Citizenship: Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022); Camilla Hawthorne, *Razza e cittadinanza: frontiere contese e contestate nel Mediterraneo nero* (Pisa: Astarte Edizioni, 2023).

<sup>20</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, “Black Study, Black Struggle,” *Boston Review*, March 1, 2016, <https://www.bostonreview.net/forum/robin-kelley-black-struggle-campus-protest/>.

<sup>21</sup> Bolaji Balogun, Sarah Demart, Claire Eldridge, Chandra Frank, Camilla Hawthorne, Stefanie Michels, Erin Kathleen Rowe, and Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon, “European History Quarterly Roundtable: Histories of Race in Europe and Questions of Knowledge Production,” *European History Quarterly* 55, no. 2 (2025): 39.

For this reason, literature, film, art, and activism should be understood as significant sites of knowledge production *by* and *about* Black Italia.

With regard to literature, Caterina Romeo's four-phase periodization of Black Italian writers who maintain a "direct or indirect"<sup>22</sup> postcolonial relationship with Italy offers a useful framework for tracking the evolution of literary production. From the first wave of authors (1990-1994) labeled as "migrant writers" and producers of "migrant literature," to the current fourth phase whose emergence Romeo identifies with the publication of the anthology *Future: il domani raccontato dalle voci di oggi*<sup>23</sup> (the first literary anthology of writing by Italian women of African descent), this excursus provides a comprehensive analysis of almost every volume published by an African or Afrodescendant author in the Italian-speaking landscape in the past thirty years. It reveals an extraordinary richness in terms of themes, genres, and linguistic experimentation—as is demonstrated by the "Writers' Assembly" dialogue in this special issue. Additionally, the translation of this Black Italian literature into other languages such as English and Portuguese has created new opportunities for the transnational and diasporic exchange of Black experiences.<sup>24</sup> Simultaneously, volumes such as *Voci amefricane: contesti, testi e concetti dal Brasile—lessico e antologia*<sup>25</sup> by Francesca de Rosa and Alessia d'Eugenio have further enriched the field by introducing Afro-Brazilian diasporic experiences and perspectives that resonate with and expand the conceptual and cultural contours of Black Italia.

Another important site of knowledge production is cinema, specifically films and documentaries made by Afrodescendant directors tracing the historical and contemporary Black presence in Italy.<sup>26</sup> In 2008, Ethiopian-born director Dagmawi Yimer co-directed *Come un uomo sulla terra* (2008) with Andrea Segre and Riccardo Biadene. Stemming from Yimer's firsthand experience of migration from Ethiopia to Italy via Libya, the film combines testimonial narratives with documentary footage and stands as a pioneering work in documenting the violence and human rights violations endured by migrants along this route. Italian Ghanaian filmmaker Fred Kudjo Kuwornu was the first to put Black Italian struggles and resistance on screen with his pivotal 2012 documentary *18 Ius Soli: The Right to be Italian*. In 2015, Italian Eritrean activist and artist Medhin Paolos, in collaboration with Alan Maglio, released *Asmarina*, a documentary on the Ethiopian/Eritrean community in Milan. Drawing on collective memory and personal archival materials, the film traces the ways these communities experience the enduring legacies of Italian

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<sup>22</sup> Romeo, *Interrupted Narratives*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> Igiaba Scego, ed., *Future: il domani narrato dalle voci di oggi* (Florence: Effequ, 2019).

<sup>24</sup> Barbara Ofosu-Somuah and Candice Whitney, "Translating Italy, Translating Blackness," *Public Books*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.publicbooks.org/translating-italy-translating-blackness/>.

<sup>25</sup> Francesca De Rosa and Alessia D'Eugenio, eds., *Voci amefricane: contesti, testi e concetti dal Brasile—lessico e antologia* (Alessandria: Capovolte, 2024). See also Rutgers University Press's *Other Voices of Italy*, a series presenting Italian works in translation featuring transnational and overlooked authors.

<sup>26</sup> Among the many scholars who have contributed to the field, we would like to highlight here Leonardo de Franceschi's work that has been pivotal in tracing the interconnections between race and colonial imagery through a postcolonial lens. His scholarship focuses on African and Arab diasporic filmmaking, while also examining the racial and colonial subtexts of Italian genre cinema. See, for instance, Leonardo De Franceschi, *L'Africa in Italia: per una controstoria postcoloniale del cinema italiano* (Rome: Aracne, 2013); Leonardo De Franceschi, ed., *Lo schermo e lo spettro: sguardi postcoloniali su Africa e afrodiscendenti* (Milan: Mimesis, 2017); *Spaghetti Runaway: incursioni produttive del cinema italiano in Africa (1950–1976)* (Venice: Marsilio, 2024); and Leonardo de Franceschi, *La cittadinanza come luogo di lotta: le seconde generazioni in Italia fra cinema e serialità* (Canterano: Aracne Editrice, 2018). Additionally, we wish to mention the work of film scholar Simone Brioni, who has produced a series of documentary films (*Aulò, La quarta via, Maka*) about and in collaboration with Black Italian writers.

colonialism in the Horn of Africa. In 2017 Ariam Tekle directed *Appuntamento ai Marinai*, a documentary recounting the experiences of “second generation” Italian Eritreans in Milan who were born or arrived in Italy between the late 1970s and early 1980s, while Sabrina Onana’s *Crossing the Color Line* (2018) exposes the enduring centrality of whiteness in the construction of Italian identity and the everyday strategies through which Black Italians assert visibility and self-definition. More recently, Daphne Di Cinto’s pluri-awarded short film *Il Moro* (2021) has expanded this cinematic genealogy by reclaiming the overlooked history of Alessandro de’ Medici, the first Duke of the Florentine Republic and the first Black man to rule a European state.<sup>27</sup> Through an interplay of historical reconstruction and critical fabulation, Di Cinto challenges racialized erasure in Italian and European historiography, offering a visual narrative that reimagines Black presence and power within the context of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>28</sup>

An equally vital dimension of Black Italia unfolds within the visual and performing arts, where curatorial and collective practices have created new platforms for reimagining the Black presence in Italy. In this regard, *Black History Month Florence* (BHMF), founded by Justin Randolph Thompson and Andre Halyard in 2016, functions as a transnational and interdisciplinary network dedicated to amplifying African and Afrodescendant cultural production in the Italian context. Moving beyond a month-long annual celebration dispersed across multiple venues, BHMF is now also *The Recovery Plan*,<sup>29</sup> the first archive in Italy focused on Black histories. The Recovery Plan operates as a multifunctional space—at once a library, gallery, community center, and site for children’s activities—that fosters new approaches and dialogues on artistic research and archival practice. In the same vein, in Rome SPAZIO GRIOT (a physical extension of the online magazine GRIOTmag active since 2015), founded and directed by Johanne Affricot in 2021, and led in collaboration with Eric Otieno Sumba and Celine Angbeletchy, promotes multidisciplinary experimentation and dialogue centering on African and Afrodescendant artists, while also supporting artistic and research practices that critically engage with the tensions and transformations of contemporary culture.

Finally, Black Italian activism should be understood as an important site of theorization about race, racism, and antiracism in Italy. This is praxis at work: through grounded struggle, activists have been working collectively to develop a critical lexicon capable of diagnosing the specificities of anti-Black racism in Italy as they intersect with processes of colonialism, nation-state formation, racial capitalism, and border fortification. This activism is not a recent phenomenon: when tracing genealogies of Black Italian struggle, we could look for instance to histories of African resistance to Italian colonialism dating back to the late nineteenth century, the Eritrean festivals in Bologna beginning in the 1970s, mass mobilizations in protest against the racist murder of Jerry Masslo in 1989, and the labor struggles of first-generation African migrants as early as the 1990s. Black Italian activism has many threads, each of which sheds light on different elements of Black life in Italy. Collectives like the *Movimento Migranti e Rifugiati Napoli*, *Refugees Welcome*, *Il Cantiere*, *SMS Mutuo Soccorso*, and *Cambio Passo* have mobilized against the degrading conditions faced by asylum-seekers in Italy, ranging from lack of healthcare and safe housing to exploitative and

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<sup>27</sup> On Alessandro de’ Medici, see also Catherine Fletcher, *The Black Prince of Florence: The Spectacular Life and Treacherous World of Alessandro de’ Medici* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed chronological list of Afrodescendant directors in Italy and their works, see <https://www.blackitalianfilmshowcase.com/filmmakers>.

<sup>29</sup> See <https://www.therecoveryplanfoundation.org/>.

discriminatory working conditions.<sup>30</sup> Organizations led by the children of immigrants who were born or raised in Italy—such as *Rete G2* and *Italiani Senza Cittadinanza*, as well as regional groups such as *Culture Connection C.V.* in Castel Volturno, *Arising Africans* in Padova, and *Questa è Roma* in Rome—have contested Italy’s racial *ius sanguinis* citizenship regime, and more broadly seek to radically transform dominant representations of what it means to be “Italian” today. Networks including *Abba Vive*, *Razzismo Brutta Storia*, and the *Coordinamento Antirazzista Italiano* have developed critical analyses of structural racism in Italy, challenging the narrative that racism is not an Italian problem. Initiatives such as #cambieRAI, #prendiamolaparola, and the open letter penned by a group of Black Italian women to the editors of *Corriere della Sera*’s *Style* magazine<sup>31</sup> seek to combat dehumanizing representations of Black people in Italian media. Additionally, collectives such as *Rete Yekatit*, *Resistenze in Cirenaica*, and *Postcolonial Italy* mobilize against colonial amnesia by tracing the material and ideological legacies of Italian colonialism in Africa as they continue to shape the landscape of contemporary Italy.

## Overview of the Special Issue

This special issue begins with two key documents, each framed by analytical commentary. We open with a transcript of the Writers’ Assembly at the 2024 American Association for Italian Studies (AAIS) in Sorrento, Italy. In this intergenerational panel discussion, Gabriella Ghermandi, Espérance Hakuzwimana, Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, Gabriella Kuruvilla, Shirin Ramzanali Fazel, and Djarah Kan speak about their experience as Italian writers of African and Asian descent. This landmark conversation, organized by Juliet Guzzetta and followed by a response from Angelica Pesarini, foregrounded the voices of creative practitioners who are leading the way in shifting narratives in Italy (and beyond) about identity, belonging, colonialism, racism, and the Italian literary canon. As Guzzetta explains in her afterword, the Writers’ Assembly provides an important model of what it means to co-create knowledge across different intellectual spheres. In “The Abuna’s Prayer for Fascist Italy, Aksum, Occupied Ethiopia (June 11th 1940),” Mikael Muehlbauer examines the Italian translation of an Amharic-language public prayer by the Ethiopian Metropolitan of Aksum in support of Italy’s declaration of war against Great Britain and France. This archival document, never before analyzed in the scholarly literature, provides a rare window into the role of colonial elites—particularly religious leaders—in legitimizing the Italian imperial project.

The first set of critical essays in the special issue focuses on coloniality and representations of Africa in Italian cinema. In “The ‘Oppositional Gaze’ and the Italian Cinema: Joy Nwosu’s *Cinema e Africa nera* (1968),” Shelleen Greene revisits musician, ethnomusicologist, screenwriter and novelist Joy Nwosu’s pathbreaking book *Cinema e Africa nera*, first published in 1968 during a wave of decolonization across the African continent. In a conversation with Nwosu herself, Greene shows how *Cinema e Africa nera* represents perhaps the first attempt to approach Italian cinema as a multisensorial archive of Italian colonialism and its enduring legacies. In “Petro-Modernity and the Racialized Politics of Extraction: ENI and the making of the African Anthropocene,” Emiliano Guaraldo examines the corporate films of Italian petrochemical giant

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<sup>30</sup> Movimento Migranti e Rifugiati Napoli, “Fighting Fortress Europe as/for Migrants and Refugees in Naples,” *The Funambulist*, November 2, 2021, <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/music-and-the-revolution/fighting-fortress-europe-as-for-migrants-and-refugees-in-naples-2>.

<sup>31</sup> “Lettera aperta di un gruppo di donne nere italiane,” *Razzismo brutta storia*, May 2, 2019, <https://razzismobruttastoria.net/lettera-aperta-un-gruppo-donne-nere-italiane/>.

ENI to show how the conflation of Blackness with underdevelopment was (and continues to be) a central ideological legitimation for resource extraction in Africa.

The special issue subsequently turns to questions of literature, language, and translation. In “Fictive Archive, Temporal Reparations, and Italy’s ‘Postcolonial Now,’” Qian (Mauro) Liu addresses the politics of the postcolonial archive: to what extent can official archives—replete with structural erasure and dehumanization—be read against the grain to challenge colonial amnesia? And what other, unexpected forms might archives take? Liu argues that Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed’s postcolonial novel *Timira* represents an alternative model of archival repair that does not simply integrate once-marginal voices into historical master narratives and state archives, but rather disrupts the linear time of nation and empire altogether. In “Translating Black Feminist Thought: Marie Moïse, Rahma Nur, and the Politics of Visibility in Italy,” Barbara Ofofu-Somuah analyzes the translation of Black literature across English and Italian, ultimately arguing that translation is an important site through which Black feminist writers in Italy critique their own erasure and articulate new forms of transnational solidarity. As scholars and activists continue to develop a critical vocabulary for analyzing and contesting anti-Black racism in Italy, Ofofu-Somuah’s analysis serves as an important reminder that these dialogues are also unfolding in relation to similar conversations across the wider Black diaspora.

The next two essays in the special issue consider the transnational cultural politics of race and music. In “‘Le facce nere del festival’: Black Musicians at Sanremo in the 1960s,” Clifton Boyd delves into the history of Black musicians at Italy’s Sanremo Music Festival between 1964 and 1969. Most of these performers were Black Americans (e.g., Ben E. King, Dionne Warwick, Louis Armstrong, Wilson Pickett, Stevie Wonder, Eartha Kitt), and this provides Boyd with an occasion to analyze how *italianità* was articulated not simply in relation to a generalized “Blackness,” but also in relation to racialized ideas about the artistry of distinct national/regional Blacknesses, in the plural. Boyd’s article ends with a gesture toward the ascendancy of Black Italian hip hop and R&B in Italy today, including the groundbreaking performances of artists such as Mahmood and Ghali at Sanremo. In “On Afro-pessimism and Afrofuturism: The Black ‘Boogeymen’ of Childish Gambino and Ghali,” Lisa Dolasinski delves further into the ways Black musicians in contemporary Italy challenge the conflation of Italianness with whiteness. She analyzes the transnational circulation of the “Black boogeyman” trope across the United States and Italy, focusing on the ways rappers Childish Gambino and Ghali have both resignified this figure to confront and dismantle the many ways in which Black men are rendered “monstrous” in white supremacist societies.

While many of the articles in this special issue are focused on Italian colonialism and its afterlives, it is important to note that the emergence of racial ideologies in Italy also predated the Liberal and Fascist colonial eras. Jeffrey Achierno’s article “The Racial ‘Other’ in Italian Folklore: Analyzing ‘The Three Oranges’ and Its Adaptations” focuses on articulations of difference in medieval and early modern works of narrative and theater, following the evolution of an Italian fairytale across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Achierno argues that the figure of the “dark-skinned, enslaved false bride” figure in the story reflects the historical emergence of a racialized understanding of Christian Europe, constructed in relation to the Black, Moorish, or Saracen “Other.”

The special issue ends with two shorter “Notes from the Field” contributions. At a time of ecological catastrophe and climate collapse, it is important to remember that struggles for racial justice are not separate from environmental justice, hence decolonial feminist theorist Françoise Vergès’ use of “racial capitalocene” as an analytical formation that brings together “race,

capitalism, imperialism, and gender.”<sup>32</sup> In “Field Notes from the *Multispecies Futures Lab: Entangled Lives, Bodies, and Ecocultural Systems*,” Vetri Nathan lays out a vision for a new humanities research center—the Multispecies Futures Lab—that will serve as a collaborative, transdisciplinary space for thinking climate change alongside themes such as Mediterranean migrations, hyperexploited agricultural labor, and neocolonial resource extraction. In this way, he links unfolding debates in the field of Black ecologies to questions of nature, colonialism and racialized dispossession in the Italian context. Finally, we close with a critical intervention from artist and curator Justin Randolph Thompson. In “Last Gasp Attempts: Don't Believe the Hype, Don't Drink the Kool-Aid,” Thompson reflects on his work as co-founder and director of the Black History Month Florence, now a Black cultural center called *The Recovery Plan*, and discusses the challenges and contradictions of working within Italian cultural institutions that were never intended for Black voices, Black imaginaries, and Black futures. His intervention is a call to action that foregrounds the urgency of Black Italian art as it speaks truth to power during a time of globally resurgent racial nationalism and fascism.

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<sup>32</sup> Françoise Vergès, “Racial Capitalocene,” in *Futures of Black Radicalism*, ed. G. T. Johnson & A. Lubin (London: Verso Books, 2017).