Chapter 6
Transforming Italy Through Literature and Cinema? Voices and Gazes of Racialised Artists

Annalisa Frisina and Sandra Agyei Kyeremeh

6.1 Facing White Innocence to Transform Italy Through the Arts[1]

As Sievers and Vlasta (2018) showed, immigrant and ethnic-minority writers have fought for recognition in Europe (and beyond), have challenged the understanding of national literatures and have markedly changed these since 1945. Concerning Italy, the Italian literary canon has traditionally excluded authors "who did not conform to the ideal of Italian national identity", however, more recently, migrant writers and their descendants have struggled to "inscribe themselves into the Italian cultural identity" (Orton, 2018, p. 289; p. 313). Following Sievers on post-migrant society (see Chap. 2 in this volume), we are interested not only in changes in the literary field but also in how racialised artists can struggle through the arts for social justice and against racism in Italian society.

The migratory phenomenon that took place in Italy around the 1980s and 1990s laid the foundations for the development of so-called "migrant writing" or "Italian literature of migration". From the very beginning, the intention of writers of foreign origin to inhabit the Italian language in order to recount their daily life experiences was evident, even though this language often did not represent their mother tongue.

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[1] Annalisa Frisina wrote Sects. 6.1 and 6.2; Sandra Agyei Kyeremeh, Sect. 6.3; the conclusions were written by both authors.

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The generation of writers whom we included in our study, unlike their predecessors, were born and/or grew up in Italy and are therefore native speakers. What is at stake for the artists in our research is not only being recognised as "legitimate Italians" (Frisina & Kyeremeh, 2021) in their artistic field but also taking an active part in a process of a socio-cultural change in Italy.

Our research showed a deep desire to cope with a "dystopian present" – to use the expression of the writer Igiaba Scego – and a collective aspiration to transform Italy. It is collective because it includes not only the racialised artists mentioned in this study but also independent publishers and film producers, some literary and film critics, members of juries of prizes and festivals as well as members of the public who are searching for new narratives on Italian (and European) society.

Moreover, the artists included in our study can benefit from a new wave of anti-racist activism in Europe (Adam, 2020), which has an explicit focus on structural racism, the link with colonialism and the racialised minorities as leaders.

The cultural production of racialised artists has exposed the colonial archive and revealed the racialisation underlying Italy's national identity. Thanks to postcolonial studies, we see colonialism "no longer as a historical event" but as "a phenomenon (economic, political and cultural) constitutive of our global present" (Mellino, 2021, p. 19). The material violence in and exploitation of the Global South would not have (been) possible without the racial ideology that makes them justifiable by representing the "others" as "inferior-uncivilised". As decolonial scholars (such as Quijano, Mignolo and Grosfoguel) point out,

> It is not simply a matter of acknowledging the horror of capitalism, racial-colonial rule, slavery and imperialism, but rather the way in which these governing devices have shaped modern global history and continue to manifest themselves in the present (Mellino, 2021, p. 21).[2]

Scholars such as Gaia Giuliani, Cristina Lombardi Diop, Caterina Romeo and Silvana Patriarca have approached Italian national history and the legitimacy of its dominant, white-centred auto-narratives from a critical perspective, to bring out the relevance of colonialism and racism in the genesis of Italy as a modern nation.

A central element in the construction of modern national identity is the representation of Italians as good people (Del Boca, 2005), a local version of white innocence (Wekker, 2016) which emerged during colonialism with the aim of concealing racist/sexist violence. Today, this representation is mobilised to invisibilise the racism/sexism of Italian society. This innocent idea of Italianness has been contested by the so-called second generations of migrants, who we prefer to call the "illegitimate children of Italy" (Frisina & Kyeremeh, 2021) to make explicit the underground relations between race and nationality/citizenship in Italy. The refusal to recognise the right of citizenship to more than one million people born or raised in Italy since childhood (because of "their blood", see the relevance of "ius sanguinis" in the restrictive nationality law n. 91/1992) is connected to another historical,

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[2] All translations from Italian are ours unless otherwise indicated.

institutional misrecognition of citizenship concerning "*meticci*" (half-breeds), born from a "white-race" parent and a colonised one.[3]

Drawing on Critical Race Theory (CRT) to focus on the "role of voice" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) we recognise the importance of giving oppressed groups the opportunity to voice their everyday experiences of exclusion and marginalisation and of facilitating the creation of spaces in which they can be heard. Our broader research goal was to listen to the voices of those illegitimate Italians who experience racism in their everyday lives and use their art as a tool to affirm their political subjectivity, to contest the place assigned to children of immigrants in Italian society and to challenge the historical reproduction of racial hierarchies in Europe. Unfortunately, the length of the article is too limited to offer an exhaustive account of our research. We present the qualitative part that focuses on literary and film production.[4] Our sample was composed of 30 artists born or raised in Italy since childhood and racialised because of their appearance and/or origins. We were interested in those artists who consider racism (also) as an Italian issue and challenge the representation of Italians as good people, both through their artistic production and through their public statements. We started our research by exploring how online and off-line are interwoven into everyday experience, in line with Hine (2005), who suggests a "connective ethnography" to study contemporary connected lives. Following the artists' activities through their Facebook and Instagram profiles was useful during the phase of selection of participants because we familiarised ourselves with their views and experiences in order to involve those who were interested in reflecting on racism in Italy in our research. Moreover, as Lisa Nakamura clearly stated about social media (2007), through visual practices, racialised people articulate their virtual communities and challenge hegemonic media representations. Therefore, we introduced into our interview guide some images, videos and texts posted by artists on their social media accounts in order to use multimodal elicitation. Between January 2019 and January 2020, we conducted 30 discursive interviews, opting for low directivity, asking questions mainly based on what they posted on their social media about their artistic productions and about racialisation as experienced by them, to understand and discuss their artistic experience and (anti)racism in their own terms. In order to reflect on the audiencing of their artistic work, we carried out observant participation at various cultural events, such as book presentations or debates in which the artists selected for the research were protagonists.[5]

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[3] In the words of Vittorio Longhi (2021), an Italian-Eritrean, half-breeds/"*meticci*" were considered "side effects of colonialism" and were trapped in a condition of "eternal inferiority" compared to Italians. Their mothers, considered to be "prostitutes or madams", were sold "like spices, horses and guns" (Longhi, 2021, p. 69). His novel ends with a dedication to the love of these long-forgotten mothers.

[4] Regarding the musical production of young people born or raised in Italy by immigrant parents and their anti-racist practices, see Frisina and Kyeremeh (2022).

[5] From January 2019 to January 2020 we made on- and off-line ethnography while, from February 2020 until the end of the year, we went completely online due to Covid-19 health restrictions and followed artists in webinars and other online events.

In the following paragraphs, we reflect on how Black and Muslim women writers have committed themselves to naming the long-standing racism/sexism of Italian society through literature. Moreover, we show that, according to the racialised artists of our research, the time has come to "change the narrative" in Italian audio-visual productions. Finally, we offer some concluding remarks on how the struggle of racialised artists is hampered by structural conditions and what collective strategies they use to cope with these material difficulties.

6.2   Confronting Racism/Sexism Through Literature: Black and Muslim Italian Writers' Voices

Drawing on Bourdieu's literary field theory, Sievers (Chap. 2 in this volume) has shown how writers are part of a societal process of change, by questioning the national boundaries in the literary field. One of our interviewees, Igiaba Scego, was very clear on this point: for many years she has strived to be recognised as an Italian writer.

> Italianistics is very conservative [...], that's why when they interview me, I insist on saying that I am an Italian writer, not because I want to erase Somalia, no! I'm Somali, I'm Italian it's the same, but I'm an Italian writer, because I write in Italian.

Finally, in 2021, the literary work of Igiaba Scego was included in *Le vie dorate* (The golden routes), an anthology of Italian literature published by Loescher, a very well-known publisher in the field of education. In the introduction, the editor, Johnny Bertolio (2021), writes that his goal is to tell "another Italian literature" and to make "the image of contemporary Italy" emerge. The last "golden route" of the book (n. 45, pp. 237–241) is dedicated to Igiaba Scego and particularly to her book *La linea del colore* (The colour line, 2020) by Bompiani, a major publisher for Italian literature.

As the writer herself has argued, this book concludes "a trilogy of colonial and patriarchal violence", a journey that began with the novel *Oltre babilonia* (2008) and continued with *Adua* (2016). Her basic questions were: What happens to black women when violence is not only sexual but also systemic and goes through their bodies? How do they find escape routes?

The title of the book is a tribute to W.E.B. Du Bois, a pioneer in the sociology of racism (Frisina, 2020), who analysed in depth the system of racist domination in the USA and not only highlighted the struggles of African Americans but also helped to relaunch them through his cultural and political work, both inside and outside the university setting. Igiaba Scego reinvigorates aspirations for racial justice with Italy's Afro-descendants in mind. At the centre of her novel *La linea del colore* is Lafanu Brown, a native and Afro-American woman, traveller and artist, who erodes borders and prejudices; someone who by her very existence advances the struggle

of her people. The colour line is the one that divides humanity but, for Lafanu, it also takes on another meaning – colour is her art, the painting through which she seeks emancipation. The character of Lafanu Brown is inspired by two black women, Edmonia Lewis and Sarah Parker Remond who, in the ninetenth century, chose Italy as the place of their liberation. Reinterpreting the "grand tour" in an original way, Igiaba Scego wondered how the subaltern could travel, not just whether she could talk. The novel's second protagonist is Leila, born in Rome to Somali parents, who organises an exhibition at the Venice Biennale in homage to Lafanu Brown. In addition, Leila has two cousins: Binti – who flees Somalia to reach Europe but who, after multiple episodes of violence, is sent back to Somalia – and Shukri, who offers psychological support to illegalised travellers and, through forms of art therapy, allows Binti to process the heavy traumas she has suffered. This is a plural female novel, with Afro-descendants reconnecting seemingly distant places and histories and reactivating resistant memories. The writer digs into the past to offer the utopia of another possible Italy, where people can make a living from their art and become emancipated and where it is also possible for "non-whites" to travel freely.

In the numerous presentations of the book given online due to the pandemic, the writer discursively constructed "we Black Italians", "we Afro-descendants", "we descendants of the suffering of slaves", "we children of colonialism" before "we children of migration". On many occasions, Igiaba Scego strongly criticised the way in which Italian history is taught in Italian schools and she stated that Italy cannot be considered a country isolated from the world, because it is at the centre of the Mediterranean and its complexity.

In an online dialogue at Book City Milano,[6] Igiaba Scego said she wanted to reconnect the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, the slave trade and today's Mediterranean migrations. She gave the example of a woman who, at that very time, had lost her child in the crossing, stressing that the country of origin, Guinea, was not accidental and that the instigator of that death and suffering was still the same: Europe. Scego added that, as the daughter of Somalis, she knows what it means for Africans to be deprived of their freedom and to see their country impoverished by colonialism and neo-colonialism, which has made Somalia a "dustbin" and a "land to be grabbed".

In *La linea del colore*, she decried the white privilege of those with strong passports, talking about travel apartheid (Scego, 2020). She also clearly distinguished between real and fake allies in anti-racist struggles. The character who embodies the good ally is Ulisse Barbieri, whose name is taken from a real-life Italian anarchist, anti-colonialist, poet and playwright. Ulisse Barbieri recognises in the "Abyssinians, the true patriots" (Scego, 2020, Chap. 1) and, thanks to him, Lafanu learns about internal colonialism and the southern question. The fake allies are white women, wealthy ladies who want to be "protectors", treating the black women/Lafanu like

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[6] The event was organised online on 14 November 2020 by Monica Massari. Annalisa Frisina took part in the dialogue with the writer.

"a puppet" (Scego, 2020, Chap. 7) or "a monkey" and speaking for them (Scego, 2020, Chap. 3). They are fake allies, because they racialise (i.e. dehumanise) those whom they claim to help. Again, the criticism is oblique – it is directed at white feminism that wants to save "the others", even today.

For Igiaba Scego, art – in her case, literature – is in fact a part of a long-standing anti-racist struggle in which the critical re-reading of Italian and European history plays a key role.

> Literature is a conversation, it allows me to scratch colonial denial, the denial of racism... Literature is the desire to build another type of society by digging [...]. For me it was essential to write about colonialism, I think as for all those who make art and come from the Horn of Africa [...]. I wrote a children's book, *Clara la rinoceronte*, to explain racism and slavery [...]. We have schools that still have very white curricula and, in a multicultural society, it is absurd.

Her last book, *Figli dello stesso cielo. Razzismo e colonialismo raccontari ai ragazzi* (*Children of the same sky. Racism and colonialism told to teens*, 2021, Piemme) was born from her desire to "fill a gap in school textbooks". It is dedicated to her father and to the historian Angelo Del Boca, the pioneer of the critical study of Italian colonialism. The latter's work has tried to unpack the myth of Italians as good/innocent people, documenting the colonial crimes of Italy. In her book, Igiaba Scego imagines the meeting with her grandfather, Omar, who introduces her to everyday life in Somalia under Italian colonialism, making her reflect on the legacy of colonial racism in Italian culture and society. For instance, Omar describes the "human zoos" during the liberal period through the experience of a group of "*Assabesi*", who were "exposed" in Turin at the end of the nineteenth century (mentioning the racist/sexist violence on the body of a woman called Khadija). Thanks to her grandfather's words, she understands the colonial logic of the white gaze of Europeans, who felt superior when looking at racialised people in cages. According to Scego, the "toxic imagination" of colonialism is still alive (e.g. even today, "*Assabesi*" are chocolate biscuits in Italy) and she states, in the final pages of her book, that only the critical knowledge of the past can make us free from violence and social injustice at a global level.

> That is why it is important to know the history of colonialism. Because it is not anchored in the past but has consequences in the present. Today's migrations follow the colonial lines of the past. We (in the sense of migrants and children of migrants) are here because you (meaning not you, you, but Europe, the West) have been there, in Africa, sharing it out. And Europe's being there has meant that many lands have been condemned to perennial poverty, caused by yesterday's colonialism that plundered resources (and enslaved peoples) and by neo-colonialism that plunders resources in different ways today. The history of colonialism and the history of our contemporary world are intimately linked (Scego, 2021, pp. 188–189).

Another Somali-Italian writer engaged in telling hidden and complex stories of Italian colonialism is Ubah Cristina Ali Farah. Her last book, *Le stazioni della luna* (The stations of the moon, 2021) is set in Somalia under the UN Trusteeship (1950–1960), when the United Nations entrusted Italy (the ex-coloniser) with the (paradoxical) task of "accompanying" Somalia to independence. As emerges in several passages of the book, in reality, "the Italians are nothing more than the old

colonialists returning" who exploit Somali domestic workers ("boy and boyesse"), legitimizing themselves through civilising rhetoric (Scego, 2021, pp. 82–83), who use clans "to distribute privileges and punish opponents" (p. 123) and who "were fascists and remain fascists", expropriating land and houses by force (p. 168). The protagonist is Ebla, a female pastoralist who runs away to Mogadishu in order to emancipate herself, taking with her the traditional knowledge of astronomy and divination. Through Ebla, her son and her daughter, the struggle of the Somali people for their freedom emerges, as does the choice of Clara who, born privileged as a white Italian but a "daughter of milk" of Ebla, decides to stand by the Somalis and fight with them.

The cultural production of these post-colonial writers (Romeo, 2018) has finally brought to light the colonial archive and come up with a strong critique of colonial relations of domination, opening up room for rethinking power relations between white women and racialised women and for building new intersectional alliances.

In the voices of these writers, the strength of what the scholar Françoise Vergès has called "decolonial feminism" (2020) resonates, a feminism of the women of the Global South that asks white women to question their historical privileges and join the anti-racist struggle, leaving behind white saviourism – that is, the presumption of wanting to save "the others", without acknowledging their own complicity in the system of domination that oppresses them.

This is all the more relevant with the rise of "femo-nationalism" (Farris, 2019), i.e. the instrumentalisation of feminist issues by nationalists and neo-liberals in racist campaigns against Muslims and migrants. This goes hand in hand with the complicity of a large part of white feminism, which has contributed to the representation of Islam as an intrinsically misogynist religion/culture and Muslim women (migrants/refugees) as the victims *par excellence* to be saved. Clearly these representations have drawn on a racist and sexist imaginary of the colonial matrix.

In her last book *Quello che abbiamo in testa* (What we have in/on our heads, Abdel Qader, 2019), the Palestinian-Jordanian-Italian writer Sumaya Abdel Qader deeply questioned this political imaginary. She told us that her novel represents a plurality of voices of Muslim and non-Muslim women who, in today's Milan, face each other vividly and know how to become good allies, starting from very different personal experiences and stories of activism. The main protagonist is Hourra (which means "free" in Arabic), a law graduate and mother of two daughters, who experiences various forms of discrimination on a daily basis at school, at home and at work. Together with her friends, she confronts the sexism and Islamophobia of Italian society, both inside and outside Islamic communities. It is a choral story that effectively challenges Islamophobia (Law et al., 2019) and nurtures a political imagination capable of holding those above and below the "line of the human" (Grosfoguel, 2017)[7] together and in solidarity.

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[7] Inspired by Frantz Fanon, Grosfoguel considers racism as a global hierarchy of superiority and inferiority along the line of the human. The people classified above the line of the human are recognised socially in their humanity and, thus, enjoy access to rights, material resources and social

Takoua Ben Mohamed, a Tunisian-Italian cartoonist and graphic journalist, has also found her own way to counter Islamophobia. Talking with her, it is clear that she has as primary goals to communicate with wider and more diverse audiences and to address the "white fragility" (DiAngelo, 2020)[8] of Italians.

> I realized that recounting racism [...] in a dramatic way leads to absolutely nothing, because the way of thinking of the average Italian, or the average Western European, is: "These are the victims" [...]. I started telling these ironic stories precisely to change this way of thinking of the reader and it has changed! Because with [the comic strip] *Bomba al cioccolato*, for example, a veiled girl enters a bar and they tell her: "Terrorist" and she says: "I want a bomb!", joking... she managed to turn the situation around. So slowly I started [...] to focus on the everyday, because I wanted to take the reader to another level of identification, that is [...] so that he would automatically think, without even doing it on purpose, "That thing happens to me too".

Drawing on Philomena Essed's (2020) essay on the processes of de-humanisation, humiliation and the search for dignity,[9] we argue that those processes of identification mentioned by Takoua Ben Mohamed become possible bridges across which to weave intersectional alliances, facilitating mutual recognition. Those who have experienced what Essed calls a *dignity quest* in response to systemic humiliation more easily feel solidarity with people who experience similar things within other systems of domination. Nevertheless, Essed tells us to take into account the emotions of those who belong to a dominant group – i.e. in the case of racism of those who are part of the white norm – because they will be defensive, they will struggle to come out of their blindness to colour/race (and to social hierarchies); when faced with collective responsibilities they will feel, for example, shame, impotence, resentment and expressions of a "white fragility", the result of a long process of socialisation.

Having followed many of Takoua Ben Mohamed's public presentations in recent years (including several meetings with young people from secondary schools), we have indeed been able to observe how her cultural work contributed to interrupting the racist automatisms of everyday life by making them visible.[10] Indeed, her comics encourage white audiences to change perspectives by adopting a "humorous methodology", as Marianella Sclavi would say (2003).

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recognition. The people below the line of the human are considered sub- or non-human and the extension of rights, material resources and social recognition is denied to them.

[8] White fragility is a common defensive reaction which prevents the privileged from recognising and challenging racial inequalities.

[9] While de-humanisation is inextricably linked to racism, humiliation includes different systems of domination and aims at discouraging possible protests and sanctioning acts of rebellion.

[10] For example, in a high school in Padua, two (non-Muslims) girls, after reading Takoua, acknowledged that, until then, they had taken it for granted that Muslims were all "wretched", without agency. Listening to her, however, they recognised themselves in her daily struggles and in her desire to choose who to be, without being conditioned by the expectations of others, especially of men.

The claims of human dignity (Essed, 2020) are therefore also advancing thanks to the comic which, as Takoua Ben Mohamed told us, "is a very powerful means of communication, but it is underestimated, it is not considered literature".

These voices of racialised women writers have highlighted "ignored or alternative realities, allowing members of the dominant group to listen to counter-stories" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 8). Drawing on Critical Race Theory, we argue that the production of counter-narratives is a useful tool for deconstructing the hegemonic collective imaginary that the members of the dominant group use to narrate reality and relate to inferiorised subjects. The use of counter-narratives can trigger social and political practices through which power is reallocated (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 43).

Moreover, if we consider colonialism to be a "great wound still open in world history", as Igiaba Scego has suggested on many occasions, the artists we met in our research are trying to create cultural spaces for healing and for dialogues. Some of them are making space for other (younger) racialised artists who become able to heal the sufferings of racism/sexism through arts (Kilomba, 2021). As Marie Moïse, descended from a Haitian family and one of the writers in the *Future* anthology (Scego, 2019) – a collection of stories of Italian women of African descent – told us:

> The project of the book is what I really feel, a true political gesture of solidarity by Igiaba in taking a space that she occupies and making it available to a series of relationships that she had cultivated over time with women writers.

This anthology includes women writers such as Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti and Djarah Kan who, subsequently, published books in which their condition as black Italian women is at the centre of the story and the importance of freeing themselves from the white gaze that humiliates them on a daily basis is clearly affirmed. In her book *E ora basta. Manifesto di una donna nera italiana* (Enough, already! Manifesto of a Black Italian woman, 2019, pp. 95–96), Ripanti explains how it was only after meeting Afro-descendant writers that she came to realise the possibility for racialised subjects to speak for themselves in certain places without being seen and constructed as aliens (Puwar, 2004). Djarah Kan, author of *Ladri di denti* (Teeth thieves, 2020) in which she tells some of her life experiences as a Black working-class woman living in the south of Italy, challenges institutional racism and the ideology of "colour blindness". The recent publication of a growing number of women writers – thanks to publishers such as People pub. Which published not only Ripanti and Kan but also Oiza QueensDay Obasuyi with *Corpi estranei* (Alien bodies, 2020) – multiplied public dialogues on racism in Italy.

The restrictions imposed by the health emergency caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and therefore the impossibility of organising cultural events in person, have stimulated the emergence, since 2020, of numerous virtual spaces for discussion created by the artists encountered in our research. One example is the podcast *Black Coffee*, created by the Italian-Eritrean director Ariam Tekle and Emmanuelle Maréchal, which is broadcast on the Spotify platform. *Black Coffee* talks about black identities and highlights the complexity of the life experiences of the sons and daughters of migration in Italy. A second podcast is *On Race* (Spotify), conceived

and hosted by the Italian-Srilankan writer Nadeesha Uyangoda (*The Only Black Person in the Room*, 2021), together with Nathasha Fernando and Maria Mancuso. A third podcast is *Il salotto dei nuovi italiani* (Radiobullets/Spreaker), conceived and hosted by the Italian-Rwandan writer Marilena Umuhoza Delli (*Negretta. Baci razzisti*, 2020). Sumaya Abdel Qader also used social media in 2021 – in her case Instagram – creating *Scintille*, a series of dialogues with "Italians without citizenship" in search for new allies in antiracist and feminist struggles. In addition, the aforementioned Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti, Oiza QueensDay Obasuyi and Djarah Kan created the format *Non me nero accorta* on Facebook. The approach is a conversation between friends about structural racism and postcolonialism based on current events (Giuliani, 2021). Their critical dialogues were very successful and moved off-line in 2021, being hosted in one of the most authoritative Italian theatres, the Piccolo in Milan (Piccolo, 2021). Recognition of the cultural work of Igiaba Scego, Espérance Hakuzwimana Ripanti, Sumaya Abdel Qader and Takoua Ben Mohamed also came through their inclusion – as examples of 'extraordinary Italian women' – in the book *Bedtime stories for rebellious girls* (Favilli, 2021).

Social media has become more and more important for racialised artists in Italy, who seem to succeed in creating cultural productions that engage increasingly large and diverse audiences.

6.3   Time to Change the Narrative: Racialised Artists and Italian Audio-Visual Productions

In the introductory part of his book *La cittadinanza come luogo di lotta* (Citizenship as a place of struggle, 2018), Leonardo De Franceschi describes the Italian historical and political context in which the debate on *ius soli* and *ius culturae* in favour of sons and daughters of migrants in Italy has developed. De Franceschi, referring in particular to the year 2017, highlights the widespread political and cultural resistance to the recognition and inclusion in the body of the nation of individuals considered non-white and therefore foreign bodies to the nation. The exclusion from the so-called imagined white community (Anderson, 1983) of the children of migration also seems to emerge from the analysis of national audiovisual practices and products, which constantly reflect "the fantasy of a 'white nation'" (De Franceschi, 2018, p. 18), as Tezeta Abraham, an Italian actress and director of Ethiopian origin, points out:

> I'm changing channels, here they still tell us that the Italian girl is Mediterranean or at most she can be blonde. I look in the mirror, I'm black, why do I always have to look at African-American references? Because I grew up with it anyway, it's not like I was watching Fantozzi with my mother, my mother would pick it up and change the channel of course, I don't know all Italian comedy and I refuse to know it because it has never watched me, it has never considered me, so the references for many foreigners in Italy are American or foreign films.

What emerged from the interview with Abraham reflects the experiences of several sons and daughters of migrants who grew up in Italy in the 1980s and 1990s and who constantly have to deal with a "completely white narrative" that invisibilises their experiences and the complexity of their life stories. Even today, as Sievers (2014) points out, there are still processes of marginalisation of the foreign-born population and their offspring from the art scene (see also Jurkiewicz and Schneider in this volume). When artists born and/or raised in Italy are not marginalised, they struggle to be recognised as "real Italian artists" on a par with their native colleagues.

However, for several years now, audiovisual practices have become a space for the negotiation of citizenship and, in particular, of visual representation, which is claimed by the children of migration (De Franceschi, 2018). Through their plural voices and their presence in predominantly white contexts such as cinema and literature, for example, foreign-born Italian male and female artists "name their realities" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13) and provide counter-stories about their own sense of belonging and Italianness.

One example is the original Italian series *Zero*, released in April 2021 and produced for Netflix by Fabula Pictures with the participation of Red Joint Film. The series, based on an idea by Antonio Dikele Distefano, an Italian writer and screenwriter of Angolan origin, constitutes for him "[...] an aspirational project, a project that I have always dreamed of since I was a little boy, when I was a child I used to watch Italy-France, the European Championship and I used to cheer for France, because there were black boys" (Netflix, 2021).

Through *Zero*, Dikele Distefano challenges the marginalisation processes to which the lives of black people are subjected in the Italian public space, trying to give visibility to Italian actors of foreign origin who are often not involved in national artistic productions. The creation of an Italian black superhero thus constitutes "[...] a first window towards a better representation" (Insolia, 2021a).

The visual representation given by the series to the vicissitudes of young Italians of foreign origin in Italy constitutes the common thread linking Dikele Distefano's idea and the intentions of Netflix's top management, as reported by the manager for the Italian original series in an interview with the *New York Times* (Povoledo, 2021). In fact, Ilaria Castiglioni reiterates Netflix's intention to reflect the changes in Italian society, highlighting how, in the aforementioned distribution company, the questions of diversity and inclusion are very present. In fact, Netflix has made available a fund of 100 million dollars to broaden the base of those who realise and develop new projects (Insolia, 2021a). Castiglioni underlines how *Zero* is not a series like the others but "represents a show with a responsibility, whose intent is to normalize the lives of the protagonists by building a story with elements of fun and positivity, which proves to be highly entertaining" (Niola, 2021). The aim is to allow a large portion of the public – the children of foreign origin born and/or raised in Italy included – to be reflected in what they see on the screen.

The attempt to reach and involve the widest possible audience is evident, for example, in Netflix's choice to promote the release of the series through the involvement of various testimonials by sportsmen and sportswomen, models, dancers and artists of foreign origin born and/or raised in Italy.

In the production of the soundtrack were also involved artists known on the Italian rap scene and the Italian of mixed Egyptian heritage, Mahmood, winner of two editions of the popular Festival Music Sanremo (2019 and 2022).

The faces of these subjects appeared both in a teaser aired on various channels of national public television and in video previews spread on Netflix accounts and social media (Insolia, 2021b). It is important to emphasise that, on several occasions, these materials have been shared on the personal social profiles of children of foreign origin and, more generally, of activists, researchers and/or people sensitive to the issues addressed in the series.

As De Franceschi (2018) points out, citing Köhn (2016, p. 17), visual representation is intertwined with political representation, which makes marginalised subjects visible and gives them legitimacy in public space. That this is a necessity becomes clear from the following statement by Alberto Malanchino, a Milanese actor born of a Burkinabè mother and an Italian father:

> Even if we live in a world which is opening up, I do this [job] between school and work it must be 8–9 years I have done it professionally. I realise that there has also been a positive change in profiles, in the sense that stereotyped roles still exist, they do exist, I think this is a bit of a *conditio sine qua non* (something still necessary) for Italy but it is not only Italian – just go to America and listen to the interviews of Lucy Liu, a great American performer of Asian origin, who is still struggling with this kind of world.

This statement, made during a round-table discussion which took place in May 2021, highlights how cinema and audiovisual products in general constitute a space of constant challenge and negotiation of the dominant narrative, which often entrusts subjects of foreign origin only with inferior roles. The latter reinforce hegemonic and toxic representations that place Italian individuals of foreign descent outside the nation, painting them as foreign bodies, as Esther Elisha, an actress born to an Italian mother and a Beninese father, explained to us in an interview in April 2019:

> For me it was very frustrating, because I said to myself, how is it possible that someone who looks like me is only seen as either a prostitute or someone who always speaks of some kind of discomfort, a non-integration, I don't know. I know so many people who have different stories and this made me very angry.

If, on the one hand, as Malanchino and Elisha point out, Italian cinema still creates stereotyped roles for actors and actresses of foreign origin, on the other hand, there has been a change of course and the *Zero* series is considered by many to be a watershed moment or "a revolution in the Italian scene" (Povoledo, 2021). In fact, the first novelty is represented by the presence of a cast composed mainly of Italian actors and actresses of foreign origin, whose bodies are not flattened to the dimensions related only to their origins but are located and intertwined with other issues such as, for example, the gentrification of the Barona district of Milan where they live, the issues of citizenship and of racism. Omar (known as Zero), Sara and the other protagonists of the series are not only non-white actors and actresses but their roles also speak of the complexity and the infinite nuances present in the lives of young people of foreign origin born and/or raised in Italy, as we can already see from the trailer. "If you ask yourself what Japanese manga have to do with a black

boy born in Milan, my answer is nothing... I never have anything to do with anything, the drug dealer, the *vu cumprà* [a derogatory term for street sellers of African origin], what's better? To be mistaken for what you are not or not to be seen at all?" (Netflix, 2021).

The *Zero* series is therefore an attempt to overturn the dominant narrative through which everyday marginalised and racialised subjects represent themselves and take the floor in public space (Boccato, 2021), naming their realities and those of other Italian boys and girls of foreign origin. Omar (Zero) and his companions highlight one of the main issues addressed by the series, namely the condition of visibility and invisibility experienced by the children of migration in Italy. The invisibility given by Zero's superpowers seem to reflect the life experiences of young people of foreign origin in Italy: on the one hand hypervisible and racialised because of the colour of their skin and/or their origins and, on the other, hand invisible in the rights and multiple affiliations that they constantly claim.

Martiniello (2019) recognises in the arts a means of expression that allows the children of migration to take the floor by positioning themselves in the public space and recounting their life experiences. Through the *Zero* series, the film authors attempt to put themselves in dialogue with as wide an audience as possible, trying to engage with members of the dominant group and nurturing the collective aspiration to transform Italy. Through their artistic productions, the illegitimate children of Italy create meeting places in which their voices can be heard. These spaces, often virtual, are precisely aimed, for example, at that part of the dominant population that tends to invisibilise their lives and the processes of racialisation experienced by non-white subjects in society. These spaces are still, today, places of negotiation and struggle in which the voices of marginalised subjects are not always heard or taken into consideration. The Italian public space is still a predominantly white place where the voices of subjects considered as Others and the issues raised by them are often silenced and not recognised as legitimate. For example, the mentioned process of invisibilisation is evident in the absence in the mainstream media of discussions – promoted by a large part of the dominant group – on issues that concern the children of migration, such as the reform of the law governing the acquisition of Italian citizenship.

Against this exclusion, Italian artists of foreign origin, through their artistic productions, promote dialogue with those who want to be allies in the anti-racist struggle but often seem not to have the appropriate tools. As the Italian director of Sri Lankan origin, Suganga D. Katugampala, points out during our interview, the arts can contribute to the fight against racism, changing the narrative; however, for the construction of a new imaginary, the involvement of different audiences is necessary:

> In my opinion, making just one film today is not enough, because there are so many films, we all make films, I think there is too much production in the whole audiovisual world [...]. In my opinion, it is no longer enough just to tell a story and then to film it but, in my opinion, it is important to share it, that is, trying to understand how that story can then create a debate, so bringing people to the cinema or creating debates in some way to share it and this, in my opinion, is the interesting thing that can be done today, that is, to try to make works and deconstructing also an idea of cinema.

The director Katugampala recognises in the initiative "Come down, cinema it's here!", a collective attempt to build a "different" idea of cinema. This initiative, born in 2012 and the result of a cultural proposal by the Laboratorio di Quartiere Giambellino-Lorenteggio (a working-class neighbourhood in Milan), not only aims to bring together people from different social backgrounds who would probably struggle to meet but also aims to stimulate dialogue and open debates on the dominant representations present in society. In fact, the director describes this practice as an attempt to deconstruct the classic concept of cinema, making it more accessible and usable to audiences who, also for economic reasons, would have difficulty accessing it.

> [I]n Milan there is the "*cinema di ringhiera*", that is, films [screened] in the courtyards of the houses. If in a courtyard there is a Chinese film, a Chinese film is screened and then people join in, bring down food, watch from the balconies [...] to create small movements of small groups, associations, movements, circles that somehow create an interaction, create a contrasting thought to that dominant thought. [...] I am very friendly with the promoters, after all it was they who distributed *For a son* [the director's work], so we are very much in tune with this type of approach – that is, every night we through a film, they, more than anything else through a film, for me they make politics, that is, they create another type of approach [...] that is, other perspectives, other looks, in my opinion it is an incredibly necessary work now.

Cinema is therefore conceived of as a collective act, a set of actions in which several subjects take part – among whom the audience, to whom Martiniello and Lafleur (2008, p. 1199) attribute an active role. The audience thus becomes an integral part of the collective social experience (Santoro & Gruning, 2018, pp. 22–23) born from the conception of a film product. This element in fact, in accordance with Katugampala, seems to constitute the ultimate goal of cinema, namely, to create exchange and debates with the audience. In this sense, it is crucial to analyse the audiences that artists address with their artistic productions (De Franceschi, 2018) and to investigate the real and imagined audiences. While, on the one hand, artists try to create productions that address everyone and, above all, try to involve as wide an audience as possible, on the other artists construct, often also thanks to social media, their imagined audiences (Costanzo & Zibouh, 2014).

Often, as emerged from our research, the construction of one's audience coincides with the creation of spaces of resistance and political struggle (Clifford, 1994, p. 308) within which one not only intends to foster dialogue between often marginalised and racialised subjects but also wants to build places of citizenship, as in the case of the Brescian director of Moroccan origin, Elia Moutamid, whom we interviewed:

> In two or three situations always at the cinema, *Talien* was seen by a massive component of the Moroccan community and it was a great test for me [...]. All three times the audience was Moroccan, moved, very tried and shaken, because they said to me, "You told my story basically!", they all said the same thing to me, "You told my story!".

The creation of such places of exchange, in person or on virtual platforms, constitutes a practice of resistance on the part of artists of foreign origin who not only attempt to oppose the numerous processes of invisibilisation to which their

communities of origin are subjected but also intend to construct public spaces for them where they can speak out. The production of such places allows the imagined public both to identify with the protagonists' life experiences and to recognise the importance and legitimacy of their own history in a predominantly white context which tends to obscure it.

In addition, such films try to create a space for themselves within the public arena shared with members of the dominant majority. The latter, in fact, tend to assume different roles: they not only constitute part of the audience that attends film screenings but also play a fundamental role in distributing the artistic productions. Practices of distribution are another means for foreign-born artists to speak out and position themselves within different Italian political and cultural contexts. Some artists, such as the directors Katugampala and Moutamid, have also chosen to distribute their documentaries and films through the digital platform ZaLab. This collective of six filmmakers and social workers, founded in 2006, has not only produced independent films – often with a social background – but also promoted, thanks to the work of associations, networks and/or individual citizens, a "civil distribution" of national and international film products. They show the film both in physical spaces and on their streaming platform "partecipa.zalab.org", which constitutes a large space for sharing. The cooperation with this platform highlights the clear will of the filmmakers to build and reach their desired audience and a broad section of the public in general, beyond mainstream and traditional channels. Moreover, it illustrates the alliances existing between the artists and the members of the dominant group. Indeed, the latter, through their platforms, enact various practices of resistance. These not only challenge the invisibilisation of artists considered nonwhite and their artistic productions but also, often more generally, prove to be useful tools in anti-racist struggles and in the production of counter-narratives.

6.4 Concluding Remarks

In this chapter, we have discussed how racialised artists struggle through their arts to transform Italy. Their cultural work attempts to interrupt the reproduction of racial hierarchies in multiple ways: by searching for public recognition as "legitimate Italians" in their artistic field; by naming the racism and sexism of contemporary Italy and linking them to Italian colonial history; and by re-narrating Italian history from a transnational perspective and exposing a "non-standard" black and Muslim Italianness, in a society that has historically constructed itself as white and Catholic. Their struggle is hampered by structural conditions that make their work difficult. They are artists belonging to the working class and they experience severe job precarisation like the majority of young Italians. In any case, they are artists who do not operate in isolation but try to find collective strategies to deal with material difficulties. They resist in different ways – i.e. co-organising presentations in social spaces like independent bookshops that support transversal struggles or participating in meetings held in city neighbourhoods inhabited by people from

lower-middle-class backgrounds who are often excluded from places of circulation/distribution of culture.

The places in which the presentations and/or screenings of the works of Italian artists of foreign origin take place become spaces of solidarity where, for example, not only issues related to racism are discussed but where projects and networks are also created between subjects who are usually marginalised.

Finally, it would be interesting to understand how they manage the power relations in their respective fields. From our work it emerged a complex reality, where there are different dynamics and, depending on the social actors, there is more or less awareness about the risks of market co-optation (e.g., Netflix). Addressing this issue will require further research.

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