Listening to the Lived Experience of Black People in Italy
Subjectivity, Digital Representation, and Identity

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Abstract: The article aims to explore the forms of representation and identity formation among the so-called second generations of migrants in Italy, particularly young Afro-descendants. By considering them as ephemeral cultural artifacts, and through the analysis of digital content created by certain public profiles on social platforms such as TikTok, we can gain a better understanding of the new identity processes embedded in the contemporary Italian social fabric. For these notes on digital ethnography, the extensive philosophical and political tradition of Blackness studies serves as a valuable archive to explore. Additionally, by listening to the lived experiences of two young Black individuals, I found that in opposition to what I call the microphysics of racism, there is a subjectivity aware of representing something new. Something they termed: "New generation".

Keywords: Blackness; Italy; Social Media; Racism; Identity

Some methodological notes on doing ethnography in digitised spaces

Over the past two years, while scrolling the home page of various social media platforms, particularly TikTok, I have increasingly noticed the significant presence of content from public profiles and ordinary users who recount their "lived experiences" (Fanon 1970) as Black individuals in Italy. Despite the constitutive ephemerality of this platform, the more I dug the more it appeared that all those scattered videoclips put together a collective representation of subjectivities not entirely recognized. With diverse backgrounds, including adoption, mixed-parentage and, in general, being born or raised in Italy, the narratives of these individuals converge into a shared story that denounces a "normality" characterized by racist allusions and comments, while asserts their own identity and place in a changing country. Whether one likes it or not.

The presence of digital media in our everyday lives has redefined the ways in which we express our identities, representations, routine undertakings, and experiences (Coleman 2010). Therefore, to explore the communicative forms adopted by these users and the representation they provide could be significant in order to understand not only their daily lives in Italy, but also a new identity that cannot be determined within already-known geographical and cultural categories. Although I did not fully adhere to it, also incorporating traditional interviews, digital ethnography appeared to me as a necessary method to advance the anthropological understanding of identity processes and the social issues they encompass. Through the observation of digital content and in-person encounters, I aimed to prioritize the self-definition and self-representation of social subjects who, in contemporary Italy, challenge the conception of citizenship and "Italianness".

As we know, one of the main purposes of ethnography has always been to tell social stories. When an ethnographer returns "from the field", like Benjamin's storyteller (1969, p. 84), they have "something to tell about". The tools and methods used to tell these stories have inevitably been affected by the development of new technologies. The hand-drawn figures of Whyte's seminal work *Street Corner Society* (1993 [1943]) were replaced by machine-assisted line drawings. Similarly, the stenographic interviews conducted by the sociologists of the 1920s and 1930s Chicago School began to give way to magnetic wire recordings in the 1950s (Lee 2004). The advent of new digital technologies follows in these footsteps.

The participation of ethnographers in a virtual field site is often physically "invisible" – and could lead to what Ebo (1998, p. 3) terms "cyberstealth" – as they "read" web blogs, or covert as they take an anonymous web avatars in chat rooms or forums. Although the internet projects on air of neutrality, it is a space of power relations (Murthy 2008). For the ethnographer, Dicks *et al.* (2005, p. 128) caution that the internet should never be read as a "neutral" observation space as it always remains a fieldwork setting and, as such, a researcher's data selection and analysis are always biased by agendas, personal histories, and social norms. Thus, as in the physical field site, the ethnographer needs always to consider that access to the new digital technologies remains stratified by class, race and gender of both researchers and respondents. Generally speaking, what is referred to as "digital ethnography" is a method used to address questions of the social on digitised spaces (pioneering work in digital ethnography are Jones 1999; Coover 2004; Couldry, McCarthy 2004; Dicks *et al.* 2005; Jenkins 2006; Pink 2007). In other words, it encompasses ethnography of virtual spaces, cyberspace ethnography, ethnography of new media, online ethnography, and social media/new media ethnography. Is a method of "representing real-life

cultures through combining the characteristic features of digital media with the element of story" (Underberg, Zorn 2013, p. 10). The challenges, but also benefits of using digital ethnography, unlike traditional ethnography is that the digital medium cuts across geographic boundaries and divisions of space and societal structure of hierarchy and power, national and political boundaries, and educational divisions, all of which play out more prominently in physical spaces (Kaur-Gill, Dutta 2017). When conducting ethnography in digital realm, self-identities, social relations, and the structure of cyberspace are all relevant areas of inquiry (Hakken 1999).

Studying digitized mediums and spaces using the ethnographic method has encountered considerable criticism. Castells (1996, p. 31) suggests that digital media are "fundamentally altering the way we are born, we live, we sleep, we produce, we consume, we dream, we fight, or we die". Spitulnik (1993) critiques the method as incomplete because the researcher does not truly observe the participants' physical day-to-day rituals, resulting in no real immersion in their social worlds. The anonymity and unobtrusiveness afforded by the digital medium have sparked debates on how researchers should negotiate their roles in conducting ethnography in digitized spaces (see Ebo 1998; Hine 2000, 2005; Bell 2001). The online space blurs the boundaries between the public and the private, posing significant ethical questions for the ethnographer.

Revisiting Gary Alan Fine's (1993) *Ten Lies of Ethnography*, de Seta (2020) asks what deceptions digital ethnographers tell themselves and others. Here, "lies" refer to the illusions resulting from ethnographers' choices, textual forms of output, and requirements of secrecy (p. 29). The concept of "field" remains a pivotal point for debates around research practice (Amit 2000) and serves as a key concept for digital ethnographers to expound the peculiarities of their methodology (Beaulieu 2004, p. 144). To traverse multiple sites – through the "multi-sited ethnography" proposed by Marcus (1995, p. 105) – ethnographers employ techniques to trace people, narratives, biographies, and conflicts. Despite extensive debates on this topic, the prescriptive model outlined by Evans-Pritchard, based on the notion of "being there", has "for a very long time remained more or less the only fully publicly acknowledged model for fieldwork, and for becoming and being a real anthropologist" (Hannerz 2003, p. 202).

Throughout de Seta's fieldwork experience, "being there" became not only a matter of immersing himself in a local content and going phenomenologically native, but an actual condition that his informants continuously inquired about each other – and even sometimes demanded of him – across the communication channels offered by multiple digital media platforms. In his digital ethnography in China, he started, indeed, realising that his idealised reliance on weaving fields as networks (Burrell 2009) was built on lying about something.

Weaving networks into an ethnographic field can bring the most disparate things together, and particularly can result in a wealth of potential interlocutors and unexplored communities. Nevertheless, under constraints of institutional time and limited funding, the answers to these recurring questions often imply cutting away outbranching connections, declining offers of furthering socialization, and sealing off information outside the scope of a research project for the make of its timely completion (de Seta 2020). Besides the important acknowledgement of how these networked fields come together gradually and by chance (Hannerz 2003, p. 207), de Seta finds it necessary to problematise the idea of the "field as network" by highlighting how it is unavoidably built on disconnection as much as connection. Interestingly, de Seta links that mechanism to the process of the academic writing:

> [I]n order to decide what does or doesn't belong in one's research project and to produce a viable written report, the ethnographer continuously prunes down networks as they proliferate, constructing a skeletal "field as network" that eventually feels more like a crooked bonsai tree than an expanse of thick experiential wilderness (de Seta 2020, p. 84).

The problematic status of participation in digital ethnography is directly linked to the design of digital media platforms. That is, a large percentage of everyday interactions with websites, apps and online services are dominated by practices of reading, watching, and querying that are not explicitly participatory. Recent debates have tried to move beyond a clear-cut choice between active participation and lurking, and instead to explore the creation of intersubjectivity as a fluid outcome of an ongoing ethnographic engagement (Bealieu 2004, p. 151), arguing for the need to triangulate different forms of participation in online and offline contexts (Orgad 2005, p. 51), extending the notion of participation to very personal activities like browsing, following links and moving between platforms (Hine 2007, p. 625), or complementing observations of online activities with spending times with users in their everyday life settings (Boyd 2008, p. 120). Lurking becomes just a possibility alongside practices such as liking, commenting, sharing, and linking, which are all ways of participation that can be adopted situationally across different platforms and identities, and that ethnographers are asked to understand and incorporate in their own work. Besides the false choice between naturalist lurking and active involvement, the issue of participation should become a central concern of digital ethnography instead of a purely methodological decision. As any other form of representation in anthropological writing, reproducing textual interactions from digital media platform and including user-generated content in one's ethnographic ac-

count present all the conundrums highlighted by the "writing culture" debates (Clifford, Marcus 1986), as well as a host of ethical questions associated with the notion of privacy, informed consent, copyright, and intellectual property. The pervasiveness of digital platforms in everyday life (Hine 2015) necessitates the narration of stories and the practice of ethnography, recognizing the specific anthropological and cultural value of the content produced. Nonetheless, this methodological challenge, which centers on a redefinition of "traditional" ethnographic practices and fields, is met with a certain degree of scepticism. As Bachis (2024, p. 266) points out, particularly in relation to TikTok, anthropologists struggle to "take this social network seriously" compared to others, likely due to a generational divide. It is precisely this characteristic – being primarily a platform for young people (Ivi; see also Cervi 2021) – that makes TikTok significant for listening to the voices of individuals with from diverse backgrounds, who reveal social dynamics that offer insights into the society they live in. Finally, the ethnographic approach to TikTok still seems to lack a well-established methodological debate, often navigating a middle ground between an almost obligatory "internet-related ethnography" and a not always well-structured hybridization with other methodologies (Bachis 2024).

However, before discussing these users' creations, it is essential to understand the medium itself. TikTok is often referred to as a "meme breeding ground", a place where new trends continuously emerge (Schellewald 2021; Martin 2019). Generally speaking, the concept of a "meme" can be understood as communally shared "cultural units" that provide people with a set of established contents and formats they can rely on and adapt for self-expression online (Shifman 2014). Early studies on TikTok have focused on tracing how specific languages and meaning-making practices develop on the platform (Literat, Kligler-Vilenchick 2019; Rettberg 2017). As the critical literature on digital ethnography highlights some inherent risks in research practices, a key methodological challenge when observing TikTok is to avoid over-interpreting individual videos. Instead, the focus should be on their embeddedness within the broader context of shared trends, memes, or platform-specific languages (Schellewald 2021). Regarding my subject, even if there are no "consciuous" or widespread trends marked by specific hashtags, dozens of users have begun to share specific formats in response to a set of similar comments, as we will see in the following paragraphs.

Usually, as reported by Schellewald (2021), critical observations of TikTok appear to be mostly from the top-down, symptom of modern life market by the logics of consumption, "digital crack cocaine" (Koetsier 2020). A time-wasting machine, distracting people from more meaningful matters (Odell 2019). There exist a growing body of academic literature on TikTok already. However, its

primary concern appears to be understanding the larger political economy of the app (Chen *et al.* 2020) and discussing communications on the platform through the lens of the public sphere. It focuses, for instance, on topics like U.S. policies, youth political communication and activism, or science communication and the spread of misinformation. A characteristic feature of TikTok is the "For You" page, that is an endless stream of clips selected by the platform algorithms attempting to identify those videos that will likely resonate with a user's preferences. TikTok algorithms do so by observing and reinforcing a user's past viewing habits. The clips shown to the user are transient phenomena: they are only few seconds long, often variations of a meme or trend, and distributed through an algorithmic content feed.

Embedded within this feed, TikTok clips are, by design, consumed in light of a new video standing ready to replace the current. TikTok algorithms always place a new video just one swipe away. For these reasons – length of videos and their ephemeral or fleeting appearances – popular debates often falsely and prematurely fame short videos as mindless or meaningless (Schellewald 2021). Nevertheless, as Schellewald points out, we should look at these ephemeral clips as *cultural artifact*. The ephemerality of TikTok contents, indeed, does not prevent the formation of meaningful representation, the expression of self-identity, and the agency of marginalised subjectivities in addressing diverse forms of discrimination.

On Black identity and Blackness

An important element of ethnography is capturing how self-identity is formed, structured, and expressed, in this case, on digitally based platforms. The debate surrounding Black identity and Blackness is longstanding and encompasses various disciplines, including Cultural Studies, Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and Political Philosophy. Nevertheless, research on this subject has predominantly developed in the Anglophone and Francophone worlds. Consequently, there is an extensive body of literature on the lived experiences of Black people in the United States and on the political-literary movement of Negritude, but relatively little on how the categories of Black and Blackness have been adopted in Italy (Lombardi, Giuliani 2013). Nevertheless, through biography and trans-feminism an increasing number of Afro-descendant women writers have begun to address these issues (Khan 2019, 2023; Umuhoza Delli 2021; Efionay 2022; Ndiaye 2023). Following the urgency of public discourse, Italian academic production has primarily focused on current migratory phenomena and border policies, with some exceptions for research on the so-called

second generations (see Ambrosini, Molina 2004; Palmas 2006; Strozza 2009; Eve, Perino 2011; Ceravolo *et al.* 2013; Riniolo 2018, 2019; Grimaldi 2022), usually studied from a socio-statistic point of view. Setting aside a philological-scientific debate on the accuracy of the term "second generations", I believe what is most significant is how these subjects self-represent and self-define. Indeed, as we will see from the analysis of some TikTok clips[1] and excerpts from interviews I conducted with two young Black Italians, the term "second generations" is never used, and in some cases, even rejected.

By way of introduction, it seems important to dwell on a chapter of a text that can be considered foundational in Blackness studies, specifically the fifth chapter of *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon, in dialogue with Sylvia Wynter's *Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be "Black"* (2001) and Fred Moten's *The Case of Blackness* (2008). For Moten, the famous passage where Fanon asserts that "the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of a white man" (Fanon 1970, p. 78) leads us to a set of fundamental questions on what does black or blackness mean to be. One of these concerns the existence of a "black social life" and, consequently, the lived experience of Black people. "[I]f, as Frantz Fanon suggests, the black cannot be an other for an other black, if the black can only be an other for a white, then is there ever anything called black social life?" (Moten 2008, p. 178). From the outset of their articles, both Wynter and Moten highlight an inconsistency in the translation of the title of Fanon's chapter from French, where *L'expérience vécue du Noir* becomes *The Fact of Blackness*. The first English translation implies that what Fanon deals within this chapter is with Blackness as an objective fact. Instead, a more literal translation makes clear that Fanon is dealing with the "subjective character" of the experience of the black, therefore of "what it is *like* to be black" (Wynter 2001).

In fact, according to Moten, "experience" bears "a German trace, translates as *Erlebnis* rather than *Tatsache*, and thereby places Fanon within a group of post-war Francophone thinkers encountering phenomenology" (Moten 2008, p. 179), such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty. Thus, he lingers in the gap between fact and lived experience in order to consider the word "case" as a "broken bridge" between the two. He emphasizes his interest in how the "illicit commerce between fact and lived experience is bound up with that between blackness and the black, a difference that is often concealed, one that plays itself out […] by way of the shadowed emergence of the ontological difference between

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[1]   I have selected the most significant excerpts and formats from 43 TikTok videos out of 109 observed.

being and beings" (Moten 2008, p. 180). Moten, on one hand, focuses on the semantic and conceptual shift from the term *choses* to *objets* in Fanon's text, offering a sort of praise for the *thingliness* of things – rather than objects – using Heidegger's discourse on the "jug-thing". On the other hand, Wynter directs her attention to the fact that, according to Fanon, the black man's alienation is not an individual issue and therefore cannot be explained solely in the ontogenetic terms of the psychoanalytic model. Instead, it calls for another explanatory model, based on the hypothesis that "besides phylogeny and ontogeny there stands sociogeny" (Fanon 1970) – in other words, the always socialized "mode of being human" (Wynter 2001, p. 57). What Fanon proposes here is the possibility of a phenomenology in which specific neuroses can be seen as induced, challenging the premise that the individual subject, as a purely ontogenetic mode of being, pre-exists the processes of socialization.

In Moten's opinion, in narrating the history of his own becoming-object, the trajectory of his own being-fixed by the white gaze, Fanon fatefully participates in representational thinking, but in search of a sort of objective phenomenology and psychopathology of the Black. So, the problem of the inadequacy of any ontology to blackness, "must be understood in its relation to the inadequacy of calculation to being in general" (p. 187). What seems to be inadequate to blackness, is already-given ontologies. Thus, blackness needs to be understood as "operating at the nexus of the social and the ontological, the historical and the essential" (*Ibid.*). However, if we cannot give an account "of things that […] resist accounting", how could we speak of the lived experience of Black people? Even more so, if is black social life interdicted? In other words, "what are the implications of a social life that, on the one hand, *is not what it is* and, on the other hand, is irreducible to what it is used for?" (Ivi, p. 188). As far as I understand what Moten is telling us, he invites us to reflect upon the distinction between "our lives," meaning the lives of Black people, the "fact" of these lives, and their perception – in other words, how Black people are (self-)represented, the "case" of their blackness. While "Black" is a self-identified category for many, it can also be imposed, claimed, and resisted (Dei 2018, p. 3). Following this logic, I would like to focus on the "case" of Italian blackness through the "facts" of some "lives," emphasizing the necessity to address blackness in the plural and to analyse its various "cases".

Black scholars have theorised Blackness as an identity and experience with shared and contested histories and geographies (Du Bois 1903; Gilroy 1993; Hall 1992, 1997). It has also been noted that Blackness is more than racial identification. It is knowledge about Black culture, politics, and an understanding of the history of Black and African peoples' experience (Cesaire 1972; Fanon 1970). We cannot understand Blackness without getting at

the subject of Black disposability, particularly, the institutionalised disregard for Black people aspirations, and for the ways Black lives are wasted through incarceration, dysfunctional educational systems, and other forms of state sanctioned violence (De Genova 2002; Mbembe 2003). The study of Blackness has tended to dwell on the specificities of Black life and historical realities on the continent and in the African diaspora from a variety of perspectives including decolonial, anticolonial, and antiracist perspectives; Black social movements; and the intersections of race, ethnicity, indigeneity, class, gender, sexuality, ability and spiritualities (Dei 2018, p. 5). There is no sole narrative of Blackness, just as we do not have a singularity of the Black body, therefore it should be challenged an "oversimplification" of Blackness by evoking the multi-dimensionality of Black identity.

Colonialism has been deeply implicated in our constructions of Blackness and Whiteness (Pugliese 2002). Race and colonialism have worked in tandem to offer imperial readings of the human subject. Race has also been a fault line of making decisions about rights and citizenship and of determining who is able to live or die (Mbembe 2003). However, Blackness and Black identity should not be understood as a "metaphysics of difference" (Zeleza 2006, p. 15); conversely, they refer to body politics, history, and the pursuit of intellectual and political agency. While Black people should not be defined exclusively by their skin colour, they have to deal with the consequences of *our* imposition, as White people, of racial hierarchies throughout human history. Researchers must address race through examining its function and how it impacts Black lives and access to opportunities (Dei 2018, p. 11).

To give an example, Alleyne (2006) explores the experience of being Black in the workplace and the impact of this experience on the wellbeing of the worker. The findings of her research indicate that "workplace oppression was frequently initiated by subtle comments and behaviour that targeted the individual's race and cultural identity" (Ivi, p. 5) and encompasses failure of notice black presence, repeated instance of exclusion, evasiveness. It was repeatedly observed in psychotherapy practice, indeed, that Black workers appeared to be suffering significantly more damaging effects of workplace trauma then White workers. In Alleyne's belief, Black people's issue could be the psychological wounds of Black history carried within, which can be reopened by racial harassment, scapegoating or other oppression. "A post-slavery, post-colonial context whose baggage is passed from generation shapes black people's attachment patterns and relationships with the white Other" (Ivi, p. 7). Not surprisingly, many of her respondents referred to slavery and colonialism when describing their difficulties on the workplace, and the oppression they face may lead them to question aspects of their identity.

So, considering the impossibility here of an exhaustive discussion on the topic, the most effective approach might be asking directly what does "Black" mean to Black people? How are Blackness and Black identity lived and experienced by those people into the different places they inhabit? First, we should be aware that there are different valuations of White, and Black-related categories in societies. Black and White do not always symbolize the same things worldwide. Black does not globally represent "the Wolf" or "the Devil", paraphrasing Fanon in *Black Skins, White Masks*, as it is in European culture. It is instructive to quote Dugassa:

> Historical attention must be given to how the categories, distinctions, and differentiation of systems of ideas change over time to construct the subjects of our practices. For example, for most European languages, Black and Blackness are used in a negative sense, Black is symbolized as mourning, sorrow, bad luck, and evil. European languages suggest that White represents purity, holiness, and peace. That is why we encounter in literature phrases such as Blacklist, Black market, Black death, Black future, and dark day. Contrary to Euro-Abyssinian languages, in the Oromo languages Black and Blackness are either neutral or positive. According to Gada Melba (1988), for the Oromo, Black represents purity, holiness, and future. For example, "bishaan guracha" is translated "pure water" and "Waaqa Guracha" is translated "Black God", that is, Holy God (2011, p. 61).

Therefore, what interests me and what I have tried to understand is how these aspects translate into the Italian context. I had the privilege of discussing and engaging with Yvonne, a 26-year-old, born in Italy, student at the University of Naples "L'Orientale" and professional dancer, met during a workshop on ethnography I conducted in 2023. And Saiba, a 20-year-old, born in Burkina Faso, raised in Italy, employee and rap singer, whom I encountered by chance in a club called *Unity* during a talk on Afro beats music. Additionally, I found relevant to quote a few videos out of hundreds produced by Black Italians on TikTok, where, through specific formats, not only a "condition" but also a strong sense of self-assertion and self-awareness emerged.

"New Generation". Black Italians, agency and representation through digitised media

The migrants-born-children are often regarded as foreigners even if they were born and raised in Italy, and even when they are Italian citizens (Grimaldi, Vicini 2024). Possessing an ID or an Italian passport is not sufficient for them to

be recognized as such.[2] "I just wasted fifteen minutes of my life trying to explain to a guy in an office that if I give him my identity card, he cannot ask for my residence permit! It took me a quarter of an hour to make him understand this concept!" ironically says one of the users I follow in a clip.[3] In their daily lives, young Italians of foreign origin encounter actions, gestures, and phrases that remind them that, to some extent, they are not truly Italian. In his multi-sited ethnography, conducted in Milan, Addis Ababa, and London, Giuseppe Grimaldi (2022) highlights the differential foundation on which the construction of national identity is based. In essence, it could be stated that Italian identity has been constructed in opposition to an "otherness", which has taken different forms and characteristics over time. During the Unification, the construction of national identity relied on the difference between northern and southern Italy (see Teti 1993; Lombardi-Diop, Romeo 2014; Conelli 2022); in the colonial era, it was between Italy and Africa. Today, Italian identity is constructed in relation to an Other identified not only in migrants but also in their children (Grimaldi 2022). On the other hand, it is precisely their presence that challenges the mono-ethnic and mono-chromatic foundation upon which national identity, and thus "Italianness", is formed.

Grimaldi also examines the use of the term "second generations", which has been overused and criticized over the past few decades, both by scholars and by the "second generations" themselves. The author not only highlights its inability to capture the diversity of the experiences and paths of migrants' children but also seeks to move beyond it. The term "second generation" will resurface in the text to define a "condition". There is a "second generation condition" im-

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[2]   It is worth noting that acquiring citizenship in Italy is an arduous path. Specifically, for adolescents who have been legally residing in the country since birth, may become Italian citizens by choice, through a declaration of intent to be made within one year after reaching the age of eighteen. Generally speaking, Italian citizenship is acquired *iure sanguinis*, by right of blood, meaning it is granted if one is born to or adopted by Italian citizens. It can also be requested by foreigners who have resided continuously in Italy for at least ten years if they are non-EU citizens, or for four years if they are EU citizens, provided they meet certain requirements. In particular, the applicant must demonstrate sufficient income for self-support, amounting to €8,263.31 for a single applicant or €11,362.05 if a spouse is dependent, with an additional €516.46 for each dependent family member or child. The applicant must also provide certification of Italian language proficiency at B1 level of the CEFR, or a recognized educational qualification certified by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Furthermore, they must hold a valid EU long-term residence permit and a valid international passport. The applicant must not have committed any criminal offenses in Italy or abroad, have any ongoing criminal proceedings, or convictions awaiting validation. Additionally, they must not have any outstanding debts or penalties, whether civil, criminal, or administrative (source: Ministry of the Internal Affairs).

[3]   Both interviews and the excerpts from TikTok contents were conducted in Italian.

posed on the children of migrants, which constantly puts them "offside" in their Italian identity, hence the title of the book. Examining this "second generation condition" might help identify the differential structures that affect the development of migrants' children's lives (see also Grimaldi, Vicini 2024).

Nonetheless, the term was never pronounced by the users whose content I observed, nor by Yvonne and Saiba. "I am a Black Italian", "I am a Black girl in Italy", "Being Black in Italy" or "Afro-Italian" were the most common self-representations I found on social media. It was during the interview and in other informal moments with various Black Italians in Naples that a new way of identifying themselves emerged: "New generation". As I mentioned at the beginning, while scrolling through the TikTok app, I began to notice clips of Black men and women responding to comments posted in reaction to their content. Earlier, we discussed how TikTok's algorithm aims to reinforce users' habits and preferences by suggesting similar content. Consequently, as I increasingly focused on these clips, my "For You" page, in other words, my "Home", became a space where not only a troubled relationship with Italian identity was expressed but also a *microphysics* of racism (Agier 2020), comprising various forms of symbolic violence. Some were more *genuine*, spontaneous, and impulsive, while others were more explicitly discriminatory. My "Home" had become, in a way, an archive and a constant stream of voices, faces, and stories that, through their lived experiences, narrated what it means to be a young Black in Italy.

Despite being different individuals, in various cities, with different life stories and experiences of growing up in Italy, what united these people in their digitized self-representation was not so much the identity conflict of being recognized "neither here nor there", but rather the constant scrutiny of who or what they are through subtle comments, insinuations, insults, or even remarks veiled as compliments, which actually conveyed a racist and inferiorizing culture. The identity conflict does not exist prior to the subject; rather, it is socialized and induced by a surrounding environment that constantly questions you. Thus, without the sophisticated articulations of our scientific reasoning, young men and women tell us directly, in an immediately understandable and "memetic" manner, what it means to "Be Black in Italy", like the following 10-seconds reel:

> *Being Black in Italy 2021*
> At a job interview: "Were you born here?"
> During police stop: "Do you have something stolen in that backpack?"
> People: "Go back to your country!"
> Me: "But I'm already there!"

Or, in more structured format, like the following video:

> I am a Black Italian, so of course: "If I say I am Italian, I get insults because I'm supposedly not really Italian, but if I say I don't feel Italian, I still get insults for disrespecting the sacred Italian citizenship".
> I am a Black Italian, so of course: "If I enter a public place well-dressed, the reaction from other white people is, 'Eeeeeh, how is that possible?'".
> I am a Black Italian, so of course: "Every summer I have to endure the question, 'Anyway do you tan too?'".
> I am a Black Italian, so of course: "I have a group of only white friends and one of only Black friends. I am a Black Italian, so of course: my mother can cook both Italian and African cuisine perfectly".

As we have begun to see from these initial excerpts, these videos could be considered cultural artifacts that express the identity of content creators and the social dynamics in which they are embedded. The in-person meeting with Yvonne and Saiba, in some way, allowed the ephemeral nature of clips lasting only a few seconds or minutes to find materiality in their gestures, their gazes, and in physical interaction. During the interviews with them, many of the aspects denounced on TikTok emerged from their accounts. As Yvonne recounted her initial encounter with identity during wedding or parties organized by the "community":

> [T]here were groups of us, children of the new generation. We spoke Italian, we did our own things, so in my opinion, even the parents were accustomed to us being 'Afro-Italian'. Being Italian as well, it wasn't something radical; it was a middle ground. I felt somewhat alien, but it wasn't overwhelming. However, the postures, the different approach to food. I was always a bit formal, let's say. And my relationship with Italian identity, in the end, I always felt Italian. That is, I am Italian. I noticed, even compared to N., who had both African parents, that I still had privileges; I was perceived differently by our classmates. Taken aside, they would tell her, 'You smell of cooking,' 'You have frizzy hair'. Whereas having an Italian mother, an Italian grandmother, I was more 'settled'. […] It's as if I was accepted and recognized by Italians because I was born and raised in Italy, so I practically knew how Italians behaved. What they shared, their habits, practices, values, beliefs. But automatically, for me, being Afro-Italian means carrying with me, first and foremost, a different skin colour. Now I feel that I must also bring forth and highlight my African culture, so even when I walk, how I dress, when I speak, I try to bring out my African culture as well […].

Concerning the educational system, Ritchey (2014) points out that Black students attending predominantly White institutions – as it could be the Italian public school – begin their educational path with less awareness about their

Black identity. Those institutions, often fail to meet the challenges of cross-cultural student development (Bakari 1997) and expect Black students to fit into the mainstream White middle class value structure. What about the ones whose identities fall outside of being White and middle class? Ritchey asks herself. Indeed, this could lead to creating barriers and a context, an atmosphere, that is not conducive for non-White-middle-class students. bell hooks (1994) recounted her experience as a black woman student, "I know from personal experience as a student in a predominantly white institution how easy it is to feel shut out or closed down" (p. 86). Negative stereotypes about Black culture and Black people are imposed upon young Blacks in and outside the classroom through media, popular culture and textbooks. According to Adams (2005), "Black students are seldom exposed to scholarly work related to the Black experience and must construct their young adult racial identities from the raw and flawed racial stereotypes perpetuated in the media and popular culture" (p. 285).

Furthermore, Tatum (1997) argues that when Black students do not fit into the mainstream culture, they tend to group with other people who look like them for support. Black students "sit at the same table" (Ivi, p. 67) because they face challenges in a setting where they stand out and "academic success is often associated with being White" (*Ibid.*). As a result, they "turn to each other for the much-needed support they are not likely to find anywhere" (Ivi, p. 60). Then, I ask myself, in a setting like the Italian educational system, in which a Black student could be alone in the classroom or, more often, mocked like Yvonne's friend, where could he or she find support?[4] How do they build comfortable spaces in which grow up? "The identification with one's racial and cultural group represents a complex process" (Pope-Davis *et al.* 2000, p. 101), which does not happen overnight. Lately in their growing up, young Blacks "progress to internalise positive thoughts, not only about themselves as a Black person, but about other racial groups as well" (Ritchey 2014, p. 35). In addition, not only do people become aware of the historical articulation about what it means to be Black, they also put thought into practice to uplift Black communities, as shown by the two young Black people I interviewed and the users I follow on TikTok.

Thus, what emerges from Yvonne's account is that complexion and cultural belonging, associated with parental origins, somehow become measures of the level of acceptance by your schoolmates, marking a significant difference be-

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[4] An increasingly extensive body of literature seeks to address these questions (see amongst others Antonelli 2018; Gallone 2019; Caroselli 2022).

tween her friend's lived experience and her own. The brighter the skin, the more the exclusion becomes nuanced and subtle. Despite belonging to the Italian Symbolic and being more "accepted", Yvonne has not been spared from little, insignificant racism, as numerous Black Italian users on TikTok demonstrate, that lurks in comments or jokes: "You're beautiful for being a Black girl", it is one of the most frequent comments I found on the profiles of Black women. "You're my favourite bon-bon", a woman wrote under a photo posted on Instagram by Yvonne. "Don't be dramatic, he was just checking if you were working on the street or not.[5] Given your face, his doubt was more than reasonable", stated a comment on TikTok in response to a young mother's claim of having been mistaken for a sex worker, solely because she is black.

In the daily lives of these young Black Italians, racist violence is expressed by a varied set of affects, such as sexualization of black bodies, disgust, distrust, self-exculpatory discourses, but also, astonishment. Astonishment for Black people perfectly speaking Italian, or for having Italian citizenship. As recounted by a guy from the province of Naples in a video on TikTok:

> I entered a CAF[6] to ask for information. I waited my turn, then approached the young working woman, who said, "Can you give me your residence permit?" I replied, "Look, I don't have a residence permit; I can give you my ID because I am Italian". "Oh, are you sure?", she answered back. After completing what she needed to do, she asked, "But can I ask you something, are you sure you're Black? Because you speak Italian very well; you don't seem Black at all… I think there's something strange about this".

And more, in a podcast from the information and promotion account of Black Italian excellence *Essere Nero*,[7] a guest recounts that the only time he cried in his life was due to racism. A scene that anyone who regularly takes trains and public transportation has likely witnessed more than once: the train inspector chases that boy to verify his ticket and, unsatisfied, asks for his documents. The podcast guests were in no doubt as to the reason for this behaviour: the train inspector was so zealous for one reason only, the boy was Black, and if he had been White, there would not have been such an aggressive attitude, nor the request for identification. As we can surmise, these are just a few, though among the most common, practices that constitute what I have termed, after Aime, the microphysics of racism.

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[5]   Meaning sex-working.
[6]   That is, Tax Assistance Centre.
[7]   Whose founders introduced and moderated a press conference at the Chamber of Deputies of the Italian Parliament during Africa Day on 24th of May 2024.

What perhaps prompts even more reflection is the reaction of White individuals towards Black subjectivities that highlight the problematic nature of certain words and attitudes they suffer: "Why are you offended?"; "You're overreacting"; "You see evil everywhere", are the most common "white" answers listed by Yvonne. She continues in her account:

> What bothers me is that they[8] feel the need to absolve themselves, becoming the victims. [...] So these attitudes, which I didn't understand as a child and couldn't decode, I normalized and even accepted. But then, when I started reading some books, I asked myself, 'Yvonne, why do you feel uncomfortable?'. This phrase, 'You're beautiful for a Black girl,' does it mean that all Blacks are ugly and unkempt? So, the process of deconstruction started internally, from a more intuitive and spontaneous level, and later was consolidated through books. I'm not stupid. There are authors, men and women, who wrote about these things and theorized them. I'm not crazy.

The body and expression of a Black subjectivity are out of place within the Italian national identity.

There seems to be no space for them. It does not matter if Yvonne has a Roman accent or Saiba a Neapolitan one; the colour of their skin remains the mark of an impossible otherness. However, there are details and nuances that need to be observed and understood. For instance, the sexualization that also affects the Black male body or the intensity of skin colour, which can determine a greater or lesser degree of acceptance in a White society. Yvonne recounts to me that when she feels the object of a morbid desire:

> I don't respond in that moment, you see, I have to look at myself, within myself. I laugh, because at that moment I don't actually react. On the other hand, I have seen that, unfortunately, boys also suffer a lot from sexualization – hair, dark chocolate, muscles, and penis size, d'ya get me? These affect them greatly as well. And we women are seen as bon-bons. For both Italian and Black boys, I am light-skinned, d'ya get me? I am the perfect girl for them: I am Italian, but I am Black, I have a nice nose, a pretty face, so... On the other hand, I don't like those men's eyes on me, they make me... And Italians, they fetishize me". The fetishization and sexualization not only affect bodies but also the practices they bring, such as the dance of twerking. "You disgust me when you sexualize it because you think I am trying to pick up men, while I am expressing myself. I can be alone or with my friends all night. Who cares about you? Who are you? It's you who sees... You want to be sleazy, you want to try to hit on me... That for me is my space, it is my place where I express myself completely.

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8   White people.

Like a reverberating echo, the legacy of slavery and colonialism hangs, particularly, over black women bodies, associating the sexual exploitation of Black women with distinct dehumanising and degrading practices (Davis 2019; Townsend *et al.* 2010). In order to justify their enslavement and systemic sexual violation, the role of primitive sex object was ascribed to women of African descent, resulting in images depicting them as animal-like, savage, and highly sexual beings. Stephen and Phillips (2003) argue that in the United States the over-sexualised stereotypes of African American women propagated in the media and in broader society have helped to shape the perception of Black women's and girls' sexuality. These highly sexual connotated images and discourses may shape the way in which Black girls view themselves, as well as influence the way in which others value and interact with them (Townsend et al. 2010; Sinclair et al. 2006; Stephen, Phillips 2005). Thus, a lived experience marked by a constant struggle against paternalism, inferiorization and systemic racism, can have a dramatic impact on their affective development.

As Yvonne recalls, even certain dances and sounds become the object of sexualizing and racializing impulses. Nevertheless, they also represent arenas of struggle, of valuing cultures and traditions, as well as powerful tools of "care", as Yvonne put it. They represent spaces where something new develops. For example, Saiba's rap strikes you with a mix of Italian, Moré, and French. When I asked him if there was any intentionality, a choice behind this usage, he replied that it was never a conscious decision:

> I don't know how I started mixing languages. I did it because it's natural for me. At home, I speak with my father in Moré, my mother calls, I speak in French, a friend contacts me, I speak in another dialect, I hang out with you, I speak Neapolitan. Earlier we were at Aisha's, my friends spoke to me in Moré, with you I had to speak Neapolitan, then they spoke to me in French, you feel me? This is my life.

For his point of view, it was not so much about the comprehension of words and languages but the feeling his music conveyed. A lived experience that communicates a different and new way of living. It encompasses various contaminations, encounters, roots, the place where you grew up, went to school, where you have childhood and adolescent friends, where you are and where you want to be. However, this life is constantly punctuated by the episodes we have discussed: unrecognition; subject to both blatant and subtle racism; being minimized in the issues they raise. Just a few minutes before the interview, we had lunch together at Aisha's,[9] and as soon as we left, we saw a woman shouting at

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[9]   An African cuisine restaurant near Naples Central Station.

all the Black people she encountered. When she passed by us, she spat in Saiba's face, yelling, "You filthy n****r". The daily life of young Black people in Italy is filled of these incidents. So, what to do? When talking about the "solution", in other words about how to address racism, Saiba told me:

> There's nothing new to create. Think about what we experienced today. Believe me, as much as it might seem trivial, it's not. We were many different cultures all in one place, and then right after, that woman came and spat on me… These are things that happen throughout the day, that fill the day. […] I lived in an Italian home for three years. I'm originally Burkinabé, I'm here with my father, not adopted or anything, but I lived with Italians in both Giugliano and Casoria.[10] For me, the border, I wouldn't say is me, but yes, it is me, because I don't care bro, I mean tomorrow we are nothing, we are nothing at all. […] I'll give you a super real example. I lived in Giugliano, but my uncles live in Sant'Antimo,[11] and as a child, I would spend weekends at their house. […] My uncles, like everyone else, used to go to the African barbershop, while I went to the Italian one. And for them, and for Italians as well, it was something strange. But after going a few times, they got used to it. Obviously, you bring them money… but I made a change without wanting to. D'ya get me?

Unconsciously paraphrasing the title of the Italian translation of Shahram Khosravi's book *Io sono confine* (2019), Saiba confronted us with the fact that we are not accustomed to interacting with each other, spending time together, or sharing diverse culinary, musical, artistic, philosophical, political, and religious traditions. There is a border, as clear as it is invisible, that divides us in our relationships, affects, and even in our spaces. We are the border, with our bodies and lived experiences. And we can push it further, if we push ourselves beyond it.

> People fight so hard to be or not to be, but in the end, we are nothing. I was born in Burkina Faso, I am in Italy. I don't say I live like an Italian. I live the way I live. I live as Saiba. If I return to Burkina Faso, I am 100% Burkinabé. Here, I am 100% Burkinabé. I don't know if you choose your identity or not, this is something I'm questioning myself right now. […] Most people, in terms of how they feel, do not identify with that identity, you see? […] The story Yvonne told you is a story of almost all of us. But you know what the point is? That it is especially as children that we suffer from this, I don't know if it's as children or if it takes more time to process, but it's as children anyway that… Because you reach a certain point where you either surrender, well,

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[10]   Two towns in the province of Naples.
[11]   Another town near Naples.

you don't surrender yourself, you stay quiet, but in the sense that if you don't find a balance, bro, it'll kill you inside, ya feel me? So, you realize that when you return to Burkina Faso, to certain people I am Italian, to many people actually I am Italian, but to me, I am Burkinabé, I speak Burkinabé, I know the places […]. Identity involves a personal choice, but there is also the choice made by society. […] Because if we go back in time, if certain situations hadn't happened,[12] my father wouldn't have come here, my uncles wouldn't have come here. Many other people wouldn't have come. If I liked travelling, I travelled. If the world were normal, d'ya get me? But it is not normal. So, in the end, it is never a choice. You find yourself in a situation, in a position, and you find ways to cope with it, if we want to say it, it's an ugly word, but yes, you stay there, you are in the situation and…

An open issue

The lived experiences of Yvonne and Saiba, as well as the self-representation of TikTok users illustrated, whose videos, despite their ephemerality, can be considered true cultural artifacts, provide us with a grim depiction of the lived experiences of Black Italians. They describe the subtle expressions, the microphysics, of Italian racism that "fill" their lives, significantly impacting their job prospects, access to services, ability to form relationships, and their psycho-affective well-being. Most importantly, these young individuals confront us with their agency, whether through study, music, dance, or a certain melodramatic style in producing social media content. They embody an active subjectivity aware of representing a new element in Italian society. A "new generation" composed of hybrid cultures, languages, smells, tastes, sounds, and practices, in conflict with the systemic racism of our institutions and our (white) structure of feeling, as Raymond Williams would say. Second to no one.

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12   Clearly, he is referring to the colonial age.

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