**Urban Exergue: On Blackness, Spectrality, and the Poetics of Landscape
in Contemporary Italy**

by

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Dedication

This is for my beloved parents, for Henny,

and for all the migrants of color going through hardships

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Abstract

While the Black diasporic experience has long been a focal point of scholarly and popular discourse in North America and most of Europe, Italy has remained overlooked, despite the significant influx of Sub-Saharan African immigrants in recent decades. The emergence of a nascent Black Italian community and the subsequent entrance of Black collective voices onto the stage of Italian society underscore the need for a sustained study of the Afro-Italian lived experiences. In my dissertation, I propose a novel theoretical framework, "urban exergue," to examine contemporary Black Italian literary and visual productions through the prism of the urban landscape, positing it as the central political-aesthetic dimension for redefining Italy's postcoloniality and Black existence. In contrast to previous scholarship that focused on representations of the social struggles of belonging, citizenship, or racial discrimination in novels, films, or photographs, my project attempts to elucidate the ways in which places and bodies, and the speculative ideas suggested by Black images navigate shifting realities to embody the very forces of resistance in contemporary Italy. By delving into the distorted and ever-shifting epistemologies of Black urban imaginaries in Italy and investigating how disrupted notions of temporal linearity and spatial fixity are articulated, my dissertation paradoxically affirms the presence of Black communities within Italy's metropolitan centers and embraces the production of multifaceted and multidirectional assemblages that pave the way for imaginations. Through a critical examination of a diverse spectrum of textual and visual media, my research champions multiple ways of knowing the Black Italian modes of living while shedding light on

the ongoing resistance against oppressive racial discourses. Moreover, complicating what Katherine McKittrick calls the "poetics of landscape" that make space for Black geographical expressions, this project sustains that experimental aesthetics in the Black Italian and Mediterranean contexts articulates new spatial-temporal epistemologies alternative to the Black Atlantic and North American conception of race and Blackness.

Chapter 1 Introduction

Exergue: Toward a New Theory of Black Urban Landscape

In the vibrant spring of May 2023, amidst my research travel in northern Italy, I embarked on a day trip to Giardini Indro Montanelli, a renowned park nestled in Milan's bustling Porta Venezia district. My purpose was deliberate: to seek out the statue of Indro Montanelli (1909-2001). Located at the park's southwest gate, the statue stood untouched and looked clean. I sat on a nearby bench for hours, only to notice that both local residents and tourists passing by rarely paid attention to it. Three years before, during the height of the Black Lives Matter movements in Italy, local protesters defaced the statue of Montanelli, a famous Italian journalist who admitted to purchasing a 12-year-old Eritrean girl as his wife during Italy's colonial occupation in East Africa. The vandalism (figure 1-1) consisted of red paint that obscured the statue's features, including Montanelli's face, the overcoat, Montanelli's typewriter, the statue pedestal, and the hat on its left side. The graffiti in black letters, "RAZZISTA, STUPRATORE (racist, rapist)," revealed the local activists' indignation when smearing the statue, and a general confrontation of Italy's institutional obtuseness to its colonial past and reckoning with its historical ingrained racism.

Giuseppe Sala, the Mayor of Milan, then stated in a Facebook video that "lives should be judged in their totality," rejecting reluctantly the numerous activist calls to remove the defaced statue. Local authorities even took orders to clean it and keep it in place. A few days later, the Milan-based artist, Ozmo, one of Italy's most active and prominent street artists, deployed ink-spray paint to depict a fictional statue of Montanelli's Black "bride," Destà, in Milan's Via

Torino (figure 1-2). As direct defiance against Sala's inertia, and specifically in response to the prominent Black Italian writer Igiaba Scego's previous call to dedicate "a statue, a drawing, a memory to that distant child" (Bick), Ozmo's urban art asks how the production of Black aesthetics as anti-racist practice plays a role in complicating, dramatizing and proposing possible alternatives to an urban future that might seem impossible under the current conditions.
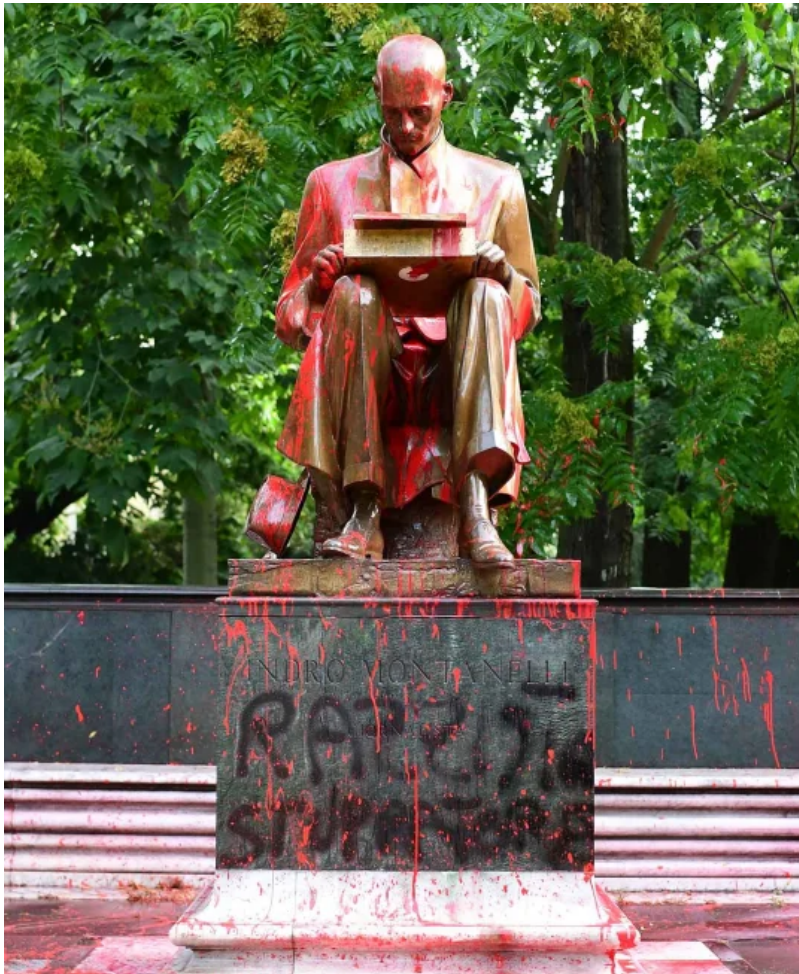
Figure 1-1 The defaced Montanelli Statue. Source: Miguel Medina/AFP/Getty Images[1]

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[1] Antonia Mortensen, Hada Messia, Sharon Braithwaite and Amy Woodyatt, https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/15/europe/milan-statue-montanelli-protesters-intl-scli/index.html

Figure 1-2 Ozmo's mural dedicated to the Eritrean girl, Destà, bought by Montanelli[2]

For both sides of the Montanelli event, the smeared statue and the flashpoint role it

assumes in relation to Italy's Black Lives Matter movements pertain to the concept that I call

urban exergue—an occupied marginal space that, for most of the time, escapes our notice but

enacts an inscrutable temporal-spatial coordinate that potentially heralds or disrupts dominant

urban narratives. This dissertation, *Urban Exergue: On Blackness, Spectrality and the Poetics of*

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[2] Photo by Gianfranco Candida. https://www.collegeart.org/news/2020/08/11/international-news-my-world-now-is-black-in-color-tenley-bick/

Landscape in Contemporary Italy, theorizes the expansion of Black/African diasporic literature and cultural productions in Italy, a country that despite once being a colonizer scrambling for Africa has always been left out of the debate within Black studies and/or African diaspora studies. Although the formation of Black community and the entrance of Black collective voices onto the stage of the Italian society are fairly a recent phenomenon, the ongoing radical and collaborative expressions of Black (un)livingness and humanity against the backdrop of social injustice, citizenship law, and racial discrimination in Italy must be acknowledged more than ever as an irreplaceable contribution to grasping the complexities of Black existence and cultural life. Theoretically exploring the significance of a Black Italy as both a geographical and temporal imaginary, this project questions how literature and visual aesthetics experiment with different meanings of *urban exergue*, representing and at the same time problematizing the conception of Italy's colonial past and its haunting connections with Black Italians' urban present in their lived experiences[3] and with recent Black refugees and asylum seekers from Sub-Saharan African countries. Within the Black Italian context, *urban exergues* sustain a paradoxical function, asserting Black presence within urban spaces while also generating ambiguous and sometimes surreal landscapes that fuel future imagination.

The word "exergue" contains a great variety of meanings and possible interpretations. Derrida, in his *Archive Fever*, defines *exergue* as something that

> consists in capitalizing on an ellipsis. In accumulating capital in advance and in preparing the surplus value of an archive. An exergue serves to stock in anticipation and to prearchive a lexicon which, from there on, ought to lay down the law and *give the order*, even if this means contenting itself with naming the problem, that is, the subject (7).

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[3] See "Note on Terminology and Language," pp.23-24.

According to Derrida, the emphasis of an *exergue* lies at the intersection of place and law, constituting a certain form of *topo-nomology* that authorizes within the entirety of the archive. It refers to a citation, an anticipation, a small external component intended "to give the tone through the resonance of a few words, the meaning or form of which ought to set the stage" (Derrida 7). In this way, the exergue embodies at once two parallel characteristics: an epistemological historization and the inherent power for preparing the future, which Derrida himself calls both *traditional* and *revolutionary*. Proposing a psychoanalytical interpretation of the archive through the lens of the exergue, Derrida then elaborates a complex, intimate and Freudian discourse intertwining memory, psyche and the very act of archiving.

Moving from singularity to amorphous figurality, Derrida reads the exergue as a prescriptive stratification that "accumulates so many sedimented archives, some of which are written right on the epidermis of a body proper, others on the substrate of an 'exterior' body" (20). Despite its excessive connotations with psychoanalysis, which Derrida complicates, the semantical origin from numismatics in fact refers to the small space (and by extension, the inscription within this space) beneath the central design of a coin or medal. It serves as a significant space for providing information such as dates, places, or signatures. Its frequent oblivion, determined by both its spatial marginality and the inability to attribute quantifiable values, can only be disrupted when an individual, such as a collector or connoisseur of antiques, spurred by external stimuli, most often retrospective, allocates specific attention and time to them for archaeological excavation or a reevaluation of the implicit capital it has accumulated through time.

Rather than modeling my research through an intimate, psychoanalytical exergue where the subjective drive of archiving, inscribing or even destroying mobilizes the very role one

exergue plays, the focus of my dissertation lies more in a materialistic body-space-society interpretation. By way of presupposing its systematic and often socially negated existence, this project conceptualizes *urban exergue* as a generative spatial margin that not only enables new systems of knowledge-production, but also suggests a fluid temporal frame among the forgotten past, the crumbled present and a future yet to come. My interest in reconceptualizing "exergue" as a theoretical frame lies precisely in this ability to hold within both history and future as well as its spatial implications. What I attempt to demonstrate in this project is that experimentations with and from Italy's urban margins, its *exergues*, propose a wide range of new arrangements that defamiliarize the conventional historicization of Black Italy, and project the Italian contemporary society into a transnational future.

1.1 Urban Margins and the Impulse of Postcolonial Resistance in Italy

In the present social and political conjuncture, which is marked by the contradiction between the rejection of structural racism from the Italian government and the grassroots Afro-Italian activist modes of resistance, the question of how to rationalize Afro-Italianness as a concept remains significant. Since the 1980s, the gradual influx of immigrants of color into Italy has not only altered urban populations, but also transformed Italian cities as contested sites where variegated discourses of race and belonging clash, converge or overlap, making them a primary dimension for the creation and reactivation of racial imaginaries. As revealed in her essay, "Imaginary Cities: Space and Identity in Italian Literature of Immigration," Sandra Ponzanesi emphasizes that "the city becomes the refraction of global processes of syncretism as well as of the multiplication of differences" (164). As a localized network of social relations and power dynamics, the city "is a place where operations of affiliation and alienation inform and

qualify each other" (Ponzanesi 164). Recent literary and visual works exploring the interactions between Black bodies and urban landscapes in Italy—whether in metropolitan centers or small-to-medium-sized towns—usually grapple with two key issues that have generally shaped the critical discourse on racialized spaces: the (physical or social) death of Black individuals, and their role of embodying Italy's dark history of colonialism and racialization. These two themes are also central to many Black activist-writers' radical critiques of Italy's political present (such as, its notorious *ius sanguinis* citizenship law) in the postcolonial and post-national era. The absence of a systemic reckoning with its colonial past in the postwar period can be identified as precisely the historical genesis of the present denial of Black subjects in Italy's urban imaginaries. If projecting the Italian case into a larger Western European context, either colonialism or the slave trade becomes definitive points of reference from which derive the modern (non)meanings of Black *bodies*: "they are threats to the Human body ideal, and to the psychic coherence of Human life" (Wilderson III 219).

In this project, I'm not interested in recreating a historical or philosophical geneology about the variegated trajectories through which Black diasporic subjects have been denied meaningful linkages in relation to urban space and public imaginaries. For Black diasporic subjects, simply put, there is not a transcendental sense of space and time at all, which can be unapologetically transferred to the Italian context as well. Political discourses, for example, negatively saw the appearance of Black bodies as menacing and dangerous. Yet, an Afro-pessimistic schema, stemming from the Black Atlantic and typically historicized within the North American context, is also not my scholarly emphasis. What I'm interested in, instead, is to explore how aesthetic experimentations with Black urban-corporeal relationships mobilize shifting meanings of identity, and ultimately how the Black Italian and Black Mediterranean

contexts can contribute to better understanding the transnational complexities of Black

subjectivities, livingness and anxieties in Europe.

This project investigates a variety of urban settings in the Italian context, separately but

also in their interplay, reiterating the imperative to grasp *Black Italia* through a *multidimensional*

and *multidirectional* framework. However, most of the critical discourses that I have elaborated

thus far may appear too weighty for Italy, which is not even considered as a conventional context

for Black studies and African diaspora studies. Pre-assuming racialized bodies and voices as

agentic ones in the Western European-American contexts poses radical challenges to the logics

on which the late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century post-Enlightenment spirit rests to exert its

influence.[4] Disclosing its dominant operations, Sarah Cervenak further develops Denise Ferreira

da Silva's philosophical reckonings with the violence, which is "necessary to sustain the post-

Enlightenment version of the [white, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, and bourgeoisie] Subject"

as the only autonomous and rational beings (12). The Enlightenment inheritances have

historically rejected the *othered* bodies, in particular the gendered and racialized ones, their

freedom and self-determination to exert spatial experience. The Eurocentric paradigm of

humanism, which implies the dialectics of the *self* and the *other* in all its multiplicities, later

transcends its specific historical contingencies to achieve a universalist idealism grounded in a

geographical system in which Europe is the absolute center.

It is possible to sustain that, in this long process of ideological separatism, one of the

unequivocal, if not the most unequivocal, formations of the dialectical distribution of rights and

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[4] Numerous theorists and critics across the Black Atlantic have pointed out this elsewhere. Paul Gilroy, for example, states that "it is the struggle to have blacks perceived as agents, as people with cognitive capacities and even with an intellectual history—attributes denied by modern racism." See, Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Verso, 1993; and Franz Fanon's representative works, such as *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961).

ownership to spaces emerged from European colonialism, or, to put it another way, from the imperialist domination against the racial *others*. Even philosophers including Hegel and Marx were very explicit in their emphasis on an "imperialist" solution and the necessities of searching for a kind of an *outer* dialectic, or a transformation because, according to Harvey, the contradictions that an *inner* dialectic causes, such as social instability and class war, "admit of no internal resolutions" (2). It is hardly original to claim that, not unlike other European national cases, the problem of Italian colonialism in Africa is also a geographical one. In a very narrow sense, it represented a certain degree of geographical domination in foreign lands. As Ashcroft asserts, not merely were colonizers obsessed with maps and acts of mapping in order to "know" and better manipulate the colonial others, the former also bore the impetus to eradicate the indigeneity of the colonized through "the act of writing over" (155). Colonialism, indeed, is also a primitive and hierarchical transnationalization of manners of speaking, writing, and ways of thinking, a process by which colonial territories were transformed from "inhabited place" into "empty space" and finally into new "inhabited places" (Ashcroft 156).

In any colonial discourse, the issue of ideology remains paramount. It becomes the core impetus of colonial spatialization, which, in turn, embodies it and even makes it so frivolous and omnipresent that its significance is often overlooked by many. It is right to acknowledge that, commonplaces in the critique of colonial ideology are anchored in predominantly variegated forms of debate, speech, discourse and national consciousness, the identification of which, as a consequence, can be much easier through languages and ideas rather than objects, bodies, and cities.[5] This tendency of disregarding the material while overemphasizing time and language can be extended to a more general level, now also examplified by the postcolonial European,

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[5] Thanks to the recent theoretical formulation in Andrew Cole, "The Dialectic of Space: An Untimely Proposal," in *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 119:4, October 2020, p.812.

Afropean, or *Afroeuropean* studies. This corrobates the fact that, in the process of "decolonizing the mind," to use the Kenyan writer Ngùgì wa Thiong'o's term (1986), that is, to disrupt an ideological framework heavily embedded with European imperialism, the sharpest and most powerful weapons would be taking up and questioning the same venues with which a colonial mentality was sedimented in history. In general, as Andrew Cole points out, ideology "tries to convince us otherwise in its penchant to homogenize everything as identical, persuading us that, no, language *is* materiality or that time *is* space (original emphasis)" (812). The "untimely proposal," as Cole calls it, reminds us of the risk of failing to distinguish spatial and temporal media, or disregarding the power of spatial dialectic in our critique of ideology (812).

The failure of spatial dialectics in "paving stone" or at least conforming to colonial and/or postcolonial ideologies thus calls for a more careful investigation of the ways in which the corporal-spatial landscape can make up for or distort the role that linguistic or temporal currents of dialectics usually assume in accounting for this oppositional ideology. In the postcolonial epoch, contradictions in language and time tend to unapologetically pop up on the conceptual frontline in elaborating forms of identity, subjectivity, or spatial relationality. The *post-* in postcolonial is not only a temporal concept and it is now widely accepted that the *post-* does not mean the cessation of colonial ideology or the colonial power system. In rationalizing postcolonial Italy, scholars in humanities and social sciences tend to highlight the urgency of valorizing historical legacies, leaving the coordinate of space and geography either as discursive background or something granted or short-circuited, or defining the spots of spatial representations around remapping. Therefore, this project suggests that Andrew Cole's proposal to spatialize more dialectical logics seems more urgent than ever. In this process of justifying the ideological poiesis of spatialization, though, language and time are often, paradoxically,

employed to help clarify a spatial legibility. Michel de Certeau, for example, made a direct comparison between walking and speech:

> The act of walking is to the urban system what the speech act is to language or to the statements uttered. At the most elementary level, it has a triple "enunciative" function: it is a process of appropriation of the topographical system on the part of the pedestrain (just as the speaker appropriates and takes on the language); it is a spatial acting-out of the place (just as the speech act is an acoustic acting-out of language); and it implies relations among differentiated positions, that is, among pragmatic "contracts" in the form of movements (just as verbal enunciation is an "allocution," "posits another opposite" the speaker and puts contracts between interlocuters into action). It thus seems possible to give a preliminary definition of walking as a space of enunciation. (97-98)

If we conjure up ideology as a means of positioning oneself, of selecting a perspective, or as a sophisticated manner of negotiating relative spaces, then de Certeau's conceptualization of urban walking bespeaks exactly an ideological take. For the purpose of this project, my focus is not to reopen a new debate for the historical and philosophical genesis around the "dialectic of space" that European societies have nurtured in their capitalist accumulations, but to locate different modalities of spatial mobilizations that can help demystify the challenges its historical justification encounters in the contemporary era. Specifically, this project looks at how the transformative forces that words and images—Afro-Italian urban aesthetics in this case— cultivate in disturbing or reversing conventional logics bound up with space and spatiality along the centuries of colonialism and at our present era. This is definitely not to say that this logic has disappeared on its own, or already been substituted by a new one. Rather, it still carries over to hold powerful sway in today's epistemological process of space. What is particular to the Italian context is that, unlike other principal European imperial powers, such as France or Great Britain, after the demise of its colonizing enterprises, the Italian peninsula didn't witness a mass immigration from these African colonies, nor did the Italian population concern itself with the African question, which Pinkus refers to as an "nonevent" in postwar Italy (300). As Pinkus

explains, the term "nonevent" suggests that "the lack of any traumatic severing of Italy's colonial appendages has contributed to the lack of a full scale reevaluation of the country's colonial past" (300). The fact that some individuals and institutions that had served in fascism's colonial empire continued to operate in Italy's postwar political landscape has even much fueled, if not further facilitated, the imaginary fixation of a spatial hierarchy against its African colonies.

In postwar Italy, this metropole—colony geographical hierarchy has rarely been placed under serious investigations. Even since the 1970s and 1980s, a period when Italy for the first time became a country where immigrants arriving from the Global South outnumbered its emgirants, the country has had difficulties in beginning any serious re-evaluations, either social-historical or literary-cultural, with East Africa. This is partially attributed to the fact that the number of migrants from Italy's Sub-Saharan colonies—mainly Eritrea and Somalia—was significantly lower than those of the displaced from elsewhere, such as North Africa (Morocco), Eastern Europe (Romania) or China. The rapid transformation of Italy's social milieu has been construed, especially at the beginning, more as a "migratory" crisis that demands a new definition of *Italianità*, rather than a proper "postcolonial" question where the problems of race, coloniality and decoloniality should be contested. In the last two decades, scholars across the Atlantic have witnessed the rapid growth of the field of postcolonial Italian Studies.[6] For example, Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo's co-edited volume, *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (2012), is one of the first scholarly works that addresses these issues in an expansive and systematical way, foregrounding major directions in

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[6] See, for example, Daniele Comberiati, ed., *La quarta sponda. Scrittrici in viaggio dall'Africa coloniale all'Italia di oggi*, Roma: Caravan, 2009; Graziella Parati, *Migration Italy: The Art of Talking Back in a Destination Culture*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005; Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan. *National Belongings: Hybridity in Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Cultures*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2010; Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, ed., *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012

conceptualizing Italy in a transnational and *postcolonial* frame. It opens up a new analytical

paradigm by involving contributions that discuss "the processes of racialization, gendering, and

cultural transformations engendered within contemporary Italy by the legacy of colonialism,

emigration, and global migrations" (2). Although Lombardi-Diop and Romeo explicates two

organizational axes—one temporal and one spatial—along which the book is structured, it once

again falls into a *temporalization* of space that privileges the historical while undermining the

spatial. The spatial issue remains un-dimensionalized. The historicist particularization of Italy's

postcolonial—linking colonialism, emigration, Italy's Southern Question, and recent

immigration into a single entangled framework—risks undermining the spatial hierarchies

radicalized all the way from imperialist impulse. Space as a critical lens seems to be relegated to

the supporting role as a background while other issues, concretized by historical realities and

current social environments, are always brought to the front.

It is yet imperative to state that, in this attempt to specify and problematize "space" in

Afro-Italian literature and visual culture, I intend not to elevate it up to a dominant, autonomous,

or exclusive position, while weakening the significance of other embedded elements in

conceptualizing their expressive potentials. The presumptive dangers of spatial fetishism or

historicizers' rigid devaluation and subordination of space constitute the two extremisms this

analysis attempts to avoid. Whatever the original impetus of imperialism is, it produces an

unequal distribution of territorial rights, and impacts how re-spatialization and re-

territorialization perform during postcolonial periods. This non-alignment stance between

materialistic and historicist tendencies also informs the ways I interpret and theorize *spatiality*.

Soja identifies two "illusions" about spatiality—*opaqueness* and *transparency*: an "objectively

measurable" appearance and its dialectical philosophical negation—an "intuitive realm of

purposeful idealism and immaterialized reflexive thought" (122-126). He disapproves these two interpretive simplifications that overemphasize either the physical or the mental, and the deficient focus on the dynamic process of spatial praxis, in particular the social transformation of spatialization. These three constitute what Soja, developing Lefebvre's thoughts, calls the "spatial trialectics." What is paradoxical, though, is that when critics writing on Afro-European visual or literary productions turn to a Lefebvrian mode of spatial thinking, the material and the cognitive are usually brushed over while prioritizing the role of lived experiences in recoding the historical and temporal foundation of national identity.

The radical dimension of Afro-Italian urban aesthetics necessitates a "trialectical" (physical, mental, lived experience) approach in an effort to valorize their power against post-Enlightenment's categories of humanness and the hegemony of rationalizing existence, setting an experimentalist stage for simultaneously disrupting the geographical hierarchy bound up with imperialism. Admittedly, this regulative logic for Italy—the imperial construction and reinforcement of geographical power—is relatively shaky in comparison to France, Britain or the United States, both for its short colonial history abroad and its complicated imaginaries on race and ethnicity. But this hidden hierarchy cannot be ignored or liquidated as something that has never existed. This proposal of trialecticality presents a challenge to conventional practices that attempt to anchor the cluster of Afro-Italian cultural productions as a metaphoric recovery of the consigned oblivion for fascist and colonial memories. It also, more specifically, questions the thematic emphasis on historical sites in Italy's metropolitan centers, such as Rome's Piazza dei Cinquecento, as the primary urban ordinate connecting with Italy's colonial past. The task of this project is not so much about the "decentering" or "relativizing" of the history of Italian colonialism in present-day Afro-Italian thinking, nor the rejection of historization as a method

itself, but rather inquiring into the role of historical materialization in grounding the Black

African urban poetics that can be deconstructed through a variety of narratives.

Within this context, Black bodies act as a generative force that challenges the

presumptive predictability of cartographical organization. As Merleau Ponty asserts, "by

considering the body in movement, we can see better how it inhabits space (and, moreover, time)

because movement is not limited to submitting passively to space and time, it actively assumes

them, it takes them up in their basic significance which is obscured in the commonplaceness of

established situations" (117). This echoes the thesis of many contemporary Black geographers.

Katherine McKittrick, for example, refuses any fatalistic way of conceptualizing space and

place, and argues that geography is not "secure and unwavering" (2006 xi). McKittrick reveals

that, "if prevailing geographic distributions and interactions are racially, sexually and

economically hierarchical, these hierarchies are natualized by repetitively spatializing

'difference'" (2006 xv). This process, as she continues to explain,

> is, in part, bolstered by the ideological weight of tranparent space, the idea that space
> "just is," and the illusion that the external world is readily knowable and not in need of
> evaluation, and that what we see is true. If *who* we see is tied up with *where* we see
> through truthful, commonsensical narratives, then the placement of subaltern bodies
> deceptively hardens spatial binaries, in turn suggesting that some bodies belong, some
> bodies do not belong, and some bodies are out of place (2006 xv).

McKittrick redeems the acts of Black beings in "producing" space, resisting the conventional

discourses that people of color, especially the Blacks, are deemed as "ungeographic" and

"philosophically undeveloped" (*Demonic Grounds* xiii). "Production" is a word that pervades

McKittrick's arguments, and the dynamic of a Black spatialization embedded within the logic of

radical racial antagonism reinforces its dialectical origin in the economic sense, as *something* is

born from *nothing*. The rigor that Black geographers show in pointing out the capability of Black

subjects of spatialization is also an ethical choice, in that a spatial dialectic renders Blacks unique

and their "products" something irreplaceable. This take is right away reminiscent of the

concretization of a dialectical relation of Marxist geography that is foregrounded by Lefebvre

and Soja. Further, we can safely say that McKittrick's approach resonates with the Lefebvrian

way of narrowing its conceptual limits and determining its possible meanings. In his classical

Production of Space, Lefebvre criticizes its conceptual deviation and liquidation by

contemporary critics:

> Since the time of Marx and Engels the concept of production has come to be used so very loosely that it has lost pratically all definition. We speak of the production of knowledge, or ideologies, or writings and meanings, of discourses, of language, of signs and symbols; and, similarly, of 'dream-work' or of the work of 'operational' concepts, and so on. Such is the extension of these concepts that their comprehension has been seriously eroded. What makes matters worse is that the authors of such extensions of meaning quite consciously abuse a procedure which Marx and Engels used ingenuously, endowing the broad or philosophical sense of the concepts with a positivity properly belonging to the narrow or scientific (economic) sense (69-70).

In chanting this dialecticity of space, however, there emerges immediately a logical contradiction

between these two intellectual threads. Thinkers such as Lefebvre and Soja, though both propose

a so-called trialectical approch to space, paradoxically prefer to valorize the "social relations" of

production, while discrediting the physical presence of the nature and things as characteristics of

their spatiality. Things, such as buildings, monuments, objects and products, are in a sense

spaces only if considered as *sets of relations*. If considered in isolation, as Lefebvre explains,

such spaces are "mere abstractions" (86). This is probably a conversation Sartre would join in his

later age while developing his revisionist, *par excellence* conception of Marxism. In his *Critique*

of Dialectical Reason, Sartre abandoned his earlier take on existentialist passivity towards

activities directed by connectivity, collectives and senses of community in seeking a re-

justification of our built environment. With the term "practico-inert," Sartre described the

tangible human engagement embedded in seemingly buried and dead surroundings. These praxes are again and again "preconscious" for us, "beneath our notice until they are pointed out" (Cole 817). Yet, the issue is, no matter how Sartre, Lefebvre, Edward Soja, or their classical predecessors attempted to dis-essentialize the spatial characteristic of every *Thing*, their dialectical proposal anyway foregrounds the "sociality," which is the central prerequisite for claiming existential meanings as spatial ones.

That social space is dialectical is deeply ingrained in contemporary discourse. As Lefebvre avers, ideologies that serve to determine places where particular activities take place project social space as unneutral (*The Production of Space* 210). Though we cannot address ideology as a universal force from which all localization within a society is derivative, as Lefebvre himself recognizes, Marxist geographers in the past tended to limit their focus on provincializing spatial dynamics around class conflicts, ending up with criticizing it as a purely European thing. Every social member beholds a specific mode of relating oneself to a space that is both reflectional and productive. Against this backdrop, if we have to name only one element that Lefebvre might fail to take into serious account in *the Production of Space*, the answer, in part, would be the very limits of *sociality* and *humanity* once projected in any European geographies, in which the questions of race and European colonialism are excluded. Though Edward Soja, especially in his *Thirdspace*, attempts to establish a set of dialogues with several contemporary postcolonial theorists such as Anzaldua, Spivak, and Bhabha, he does not extend his own theorizations to the limits of "human." bell hooks, in this sense, becomes a radical interlocuter with whom Soja, cognitive of the notorious monopoly of continental philosophers, offers us a timely corrective to traditional spatial thinking. hooks made almost all of her radical thinkings "space-informed" through her lived experience as an African-American woman,

unmasking the systemized, hegemonic power of white and male order in terms of the hierachical

distribution of spatial rights. The marginality that hooks intentionally chooses as "a space of

radical openness" thwarts nonetheless a binary antagonism to reach to, in Soja's term, a

thirdspace where the multiplication of radical subjectivities—specifically those of subaltern and

disenfranchised communities—enacts a deterritorializing and progressive potential against

contextual dominantions (242).

1.2 Chapter Overview

When grounding urban knowledge today, it is crucial to consider that the inherent

characteristics of urban space, whether in bustling metropolitan settings or small-town

environments inundated with a myriad of sensations, connections, and contradictions, render

them "no longer monumental and monolithic but differentiated and nomadic" (1986 193). Thus,

I not only examine Italy's big cities such as Milan and Rome but also delve into the intricacies of

small Mediterranean towns in Italy's South, symbolizing liquid geographies between land and

sea. Furthermore, this dissertation gathers a great variety of media forms, such as poetry, novel,

film, TV show, and brings together both prominent authors, filmmakers and works with lesser

known ones. This choice is also intentional, as Katherine McKittrick recently advocates,

"thinking and writing and imagining across a range of texts, disciplines, histories, and genres

unsettles suffocating and dismal and insular racial logics" (2020 4).

My dissertation is divided into three distinct but interrelated chapters. The first chapter,

"Black Wandering and the Limits of Embodiment in Afro-Italian Urban Narratives," mainly

focuses on the works of two Black Italian activist-writers, Sibka Ribhatu's poem *Parola*, and

Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's novel *il comandante del fiume*. This chapter explores wandering as a

theoretical site for both reimagining the meaning of and investigating the unreadability of the

racialized Black body. I pay particular attention to investigating the unsettled and disconfirming

narratives around Black urban-corporeal landscapes and how they can be employed as a radical

philosophical form to advance our understandings of Afro-Italian and Afro-European identity.

Disrupting the integrity of the distinction between Italy's colonial past and its postcolonial

present, these texts reveal how the Black body becomes a shifting site through which new

paradigms of spatial arrangements against power and authority are articulated. In *Parola*, the

Afro-Italian activist and poet Ribka Sibhatu prompts us to speculate what a phenomenological

approach to Black corporality would signify in an Italy at the crossroad of postcolonial and

Black diasporic settings. Written for her young daughter, its new poetical framework allows the

alteration of the epistemological context in which Italians of African descendent catalyze the

negotiation of identities, subjectivities, and the sense of a Black community. In Ali Farah's

novel, the author's experiment with Rome as an actual character de-romanticizes it as a historical

fixed site, and instead displays the possibility of plurality in the shape of Black corporeal

relationality. The protagonists in Ali Farah's novel remap Rome as a Black city and carry

forward a Benjaminian mode of flâneur to observe the city's fragmented and chaotic

arrangements, demystifying its undercurrent construction of racial exclusion.

  The second chapter, "Specters in Contact: Silent Urbanism and the Landscape of

Interior" shifts its focus away from metropolitan centers, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Instead, it explores an alternative track to theorize Black physical and conceptual encounters

with Italy's remote landscapes in the South, providing clues for speculating of a Black Italia

within a *multidirectional* and *multiscalar* framework wherein different spatial dimensionalities

gesture toward a variety of *exergues*. This chapter provides a new interpretation of two

internationally acclaimed films: Emanuele Crialese's *Terraferma* (2011) and Gianfranco Rosi's

Fuocoammare (2016), showing how both texts aestheticize Italy's far flung urban specters –

Lampedusa and Linosa – upon the arrival of Black refugees and asylum seekers crossing the

deadly Mediterranean Sea. Introducing urban spaces centered on silence, ghostliness, a pervasive

sense of despair of existence, and the cramped interior spaces of domestic lives, Crialese and

Rosi invite spectators to recast the Mediterranean islands as urban spectacles that set a dramatic

stage for a distorted reality beyond conventional narratives of urbanity and community. I argue

that both these filmmakers draw ambivalent relationships between the apocalyptic deaths of the

Black refugees in the Mediterranean and that of local residents living a displaced urban life,

creating a double-layered struggle for space and a spectral body-network. Both Lampedusa and

Linosa become the most unearthly sites of *urban exergue*.

The last chapter, "Power of/to Imagination: *Zero*, Black Time, and the Possibility of

Urban Utopias," relates to the question of Black diasporic speculation that opens up possibilities

for an alternative urban future. Set in today's Milan, Netflix's 2021 superhero series *Zero* is the

first Italian television series featuring a predominantly Black-led cast. This chapter explores

alternative pathways to investigate the *urban exergue* in its temporal dimension, as a more

complicated and multisensory site in which experimentations with Italy's urban margins gesture

toward a wide range of temporal. Applying a utopian and Afrofuturist framework illuminates the

show's relevance beyond the Italian context by connecting its aesthetic innovations with

alternative epistemologies of urban space and time. This chapter reflects on the political agenda

of Italian pop culture as a utopian strategy of aesthetic dimensions, helping us better grasp the

anxieties of Black Italians and the limits of the images of Black presence in Italy. This chapter

thus draws connections between Italy's TV productions, where Black Italians conjure new

futurist aesthetic implications, and the struggles of activists that indefatigably push forward the future actualization of images.

1.3 Note on Terminology and Language

Framed within postcolonial Italian Studies, this project takes a step further by exploring the aesthetic innovations from or about Black subjects. Staying in line with other scholars, such as Camilla Hawthorne, Angelica Pesarini, and SA Smythe, who have recently published on Black Italy, here I consider "Black Italy" as an inclusive racial imaginary that implies multiple ways of understanding. For the purpose of the dissertation, I limit my focus to both Black Italian writers and artists and Black refugees and asylum seekers just arrived on the Italian land.[7] In Italy, as Hawthorne claims, "the language of self-identification is vast, varied, and highly contested – a testament to the relative newness of these conversations (2022 xvii). Even though each term, such as Black Italian, Afro-Italian, African-Italian, contains slightly different meanings, for the purpose of this project, I use "Afro-Italian" and "Black Italian" as two interchangeable terms to refer to Black Italians who were born and/or grew up in Italy, or those who have lived in Italy for many years so they are fluent in the Italian language and negotiate their identity through literary or visual productions. In chapter two, when I discuss the southern encounters between sub-Saharan Black refugees and asylum seekers and local residents, I simply

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[7] SA Smythe, for example, declares in her essay: "When I speak of Black Italy, I am speaking more broadly of the lives, histories, cultural productions, and politics of Black Italians, Black migrants, Black undocumented people, Black domestic workers, Black students or visitors, Black asylum seekers, and other configurations of Black people of African descent in their relation to Italy." SA Smythe, "Black Italianità: Citizenship and Belonging in the Black Mediterranean," in *California Italian Studies*, 2019, 9(1), p. 4. In a similar spirit, Camilla Hawthorne emphasizes in her book, "It should also be noted that any references to Black Italians in this book are not intended to generalize across the experiences of all Black Italians – and indeed, part of my intellectual and political project in these pages is to challenge the notion of a unified, collective Black subject in Italy or elsewhere." Camilla Hawthorne, *Contesting Race and Citizenship. Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2022, p. xviii.

use "Black refugees" or "Black asylum seekers" to indicate those who flee from their home

countries in Africa and cross the Mediterranean Sea for humanitarian purposes.

Chapter 2 Black Wandering and the Limits of Embodiment in Afro-Italian Urban Narratives

> Taking a relatively short chronological sample within a restricted geographical area – European culture since the sixteenth century – one can be certain that man is a recent invention within it. It is not around him and his secrets that knowledge prowled for so long in the darkness. […] the transition into luminous consciousness of an age-old concern, the entry into objectivity of something that had long remained trapped within beliefs and philosophies: it was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangements of knowledge.
>
> - Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 2005

> Instead of imagining the persistent reiteration of static relations, it might be more powerful to analyze relationship dynamics that extend beyond obvious conceptual or spatial boundaries, and then decide what a particular form, old or new, is made of, by trying to make it into something else. This—making something into something else—is what negation is. To do so is to wonder about a form's present, future shaping design—something we can discern from the evidence of its constitutive patterns.
>
> - Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography*, 2022

> I walk through the busy streets of my Rome the Capital
> and my heart, my wacky little heart,
> becomes instantly placid.
> Only in Rome do I walk so well.[8]
>
> - Igiaba Scego, *Roma Negata*, 2014

2.1 Wandering as a Method: Ribka Sibhatu's Poetical Articulation

It is difficult to think about the possible linkages between Blackness and city without beginning with the discussion on Black embodied experiences. The built environment, as well as

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[8] The translation is mine.

its physical space, after all, are just a part of what makes a modern city. However, in Italy, and more generally in the European and North American contexts, addressing the corporeal engagement of displaced Black subjects within urban surroundings can be highly problematic. What, among many disputes, comes to the fore is the question of whether the Black bodies in the space that is historically constructed upon Western epistemologies are *also* endowed with meanings and have a real right to the city. If yes, then, how do their process of spatial signification differ from the philosophical and theoretical hypothesis of Western knowledge in terms of the inherent connections of bodies, places, cities, and geographical reckonings? In the context of modern and contemporary Italy, however, such assumption proves itself false because Black bodies always remain outside of its urban imagination. But there is more to it than simply being denied plausible access to public spaces or being marginalized as other minority groups, such as women. In Italy Black bodies represent an entire void of existence, physical as well as epistemic, predicated on the oblivion of modern Italian history and public consciousness.

This systematic dismissal of racialized bodies in general echoes exactly what the prominent Italian historian Alessandro Portelli defines as the "self-reflexive color-blindness" of Italians (30). In historical and political discourses, it already seems to be a commonplace to link Italians (themselves) with "normal" rather than with "white." Therefore, issues of race and racism are not anything explicitly spoken about. This situation, on the other hand, would partially mobilize an epistemological ground in which any fictional (literary, visual, aesthetic) intervention suggests spearheading a particular mode of seeing and understanding the still-slippery conceptual configuration of Blackness and racial embodiment in contemporary Italy.

> Sacra Parola,
> misteriosa essenza,
> terra della straniera

che girovaga!

Tocca la figlia che
cammina tra
luci e ombra,
coraggio e paura.

Suona melodie
che danno forma
al mondo
a cui appartiene

Parla parole che
emanano profumo
e portano l'animo
nel tempo e nello spazio.

- Ribka Sibhatu (2009)[9]

In *Parola*, the Afro-Italian activist and poet Ribka Sibhatu prompts us to speculate what a phenomenological approach to Black corporality and geography would signify in an Italy at the crossroad of postcolonial and Black diasporic settings. Written for her young daughter, its new poetical framework allows the alteration of the epistemological context in which Italians of African descendent catalyze the negotiation of Black identities, subjectivities, and the sense of a Black community. Ribka Sibhatu asserts that "word" constitutes a consecrated territory over which the displaced "wandering woman" prevails but finds it difficult to decode the true nature of the word. Then, by putting the poem into a generational context, the Eritrean-Italian poet suggests embracing the daughter while she walks with paradoxical feelings of fear and courage. A political appeal is also enacted by *Parola* in the last two stanzas, in which Sibhatu appeals to bring sound and voice into play for transforming the surroundings in which the implied persona

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[9] Ribka Sibhatu, *Aulò! Canto Poesia dall'Eritrea. Testo tigrino a fronte*, Roma: Sinnos, 2009. Its English translation by André Naffis-Sahely is also available online targeted for a broader audience: "Holy Word/inscrutable essence/land of the foreign/wandering woman! // Touch the daughter/who walks between shadow and light, /courage and fear. // Play melodies/that shape/the world/to which she belongs. // Speak words that/emit a fragrance/and carry the soul/through time and space." Source: https://www.poetrytranslation.org/poems/word

lives and is related to. In the present political and social conjuncture, marked by the contradiction between the rejection of structured racism as a socio-historical problem from the Italian government and the grassroot Afro-Italian activist modes of resistance, the question of how to rationalize Afro-Italianness as a concept remains no less important. It is amid such a changing cultural-political landscape that activist-writers like Ribka Sibhatu negotiate body and geography, crisis and identity, authority and resistance.

Born in 1962 in Asmara, the capital of Eritrea, Ribka Sibhatu's life experience embodies a unique and epic story. Her diasporic trajectory fleeing from Eritrea to Ethiopia, France and, finally becoming a resident in Italy derives from a dramatic combination of reasons straddling between private and public spheres. After refusing to marry an Ethiopian officer under the regime of Menghistu Hailemariam she was incarcerated in Asmara in 1979 for more than ten months. Afterward, she fled to nearby Ethiopia, where she completed her high school diploma; she worked and traveled in France for ten years, then moved to Italy, in 1996, and has lived in Rome ever since (Brioni 2015 123). These years in which Ribka Sibhatu endured local political persecution, decolonial turbulence in African countries, forced migration to Europe, experiencing clashes of cultures and identities, also marked a crucial historical moment for postwar Italy, a country undergoing a radical societal shift from a country of emigration to one receiving immigrants from the Global South, and ill-prepared to address knotty issues such as citizenship, border controls, and racial discrimination. Against this societal and global backdrop, from the late 1980s and early 1990s, Italy's cultural landscape (in particular literature and cinema) underwent a radical restructuring as for the first time, terms such as immigration, inclusion, and post-colonial, were dramatized and put onto real stages of national conceptualization.

Recent literary and filmic depictions of Black subjects who live in Italy's metropolitan areas are inevitably subject to two issues that have foregrounded the production of racialized spaces and the individual locus of the activist-writer's radical aesthetic critiques of post-nationalist ideology: (physical or social) death and colonialism. The latter is the historical genesis of the denial of Black bodies in Italy's urban practices and imaginaries. Colonialism and the Atlantic slavery trade, become the definitive point of reference from which derive the modern conceptualization of Black *bodies*: "they are threats to the Human body ideal, and to the psychic coherence of Human life" (Wilderson III 219). What Ribhatu proposes with this poem is thus a contradicted but bounded relation that redefines the sociality and materiality of the Black body in modern Italy in a critical transition to a multiracial society. Reading *Parola* through the critical lens of space, wandering, and corporality requires the recognition of the exclusive access of white Italians to public dimension, and the belief that new meanings of Black visibility and epistemology are conceivable through the contentious prism of urban-corporeal landscape.

The poem's abstract spatial framing – without explicit reference to any actual cities, places, or monuments – can be thought of as posing a dual proclamation of both defiance against corporeal confinement and a challenge to the material fixity of geographical knowledge. What can reverberate such a spatial openness is Ribhatu's choosing to try on a variety of personas, which in turn further shapes the imaginative (non-) boundary of the work's poetic language. For *Parola*, Sibhatu's target audience seems to be clear, which is demonstrated in the second stanza where the poet incontestably stages a parent – if not necessarily refering to Sibhatu herself – "touching" the daughter living in a foreign land and moving "between shadow and light,/courage and fear." However, what the poet herself presents here seems to be a more open horizontality that mobilizes a heterogeneity of positions and subjectivities. To put it differently, *Parola* is not

a piece developed in explicitly personal, racial, or geographical terms. But such a kind of referential vagueness can be somewhat resolved if we construe the poem around "straniera" in the first stanza, a word of overarching value indicating a double-layer relationality emphasizing the status of being at the same time *foreign* and *woman*. The choice of "straniera" instead of its masculine counterpart "straniero" is essential, emerging in and from a particular personal-social consideration that really reminds us that, at least in Italy's case, gender can never be separated from problems of race and immigration. In this sense, the poem also acts as a critical mirror that raises the broader question of exclusionary social politics in post-war Italy – the oversimple label of "migration" papers over and regulates the multiple identifications (race, gender, sexuality, age, class, religion) of people of color, an act in itself that "might be considered colonial in the way that it flattens and reifies difference of all kinds" (Hom 10).

If we consider the poetical articulation of Sibhatu and that written by the subaltern people as a particular literary apparatus seeking possible bridges between interior emotions and the exterior conditions, Sibhatu's experimentation triumphs in confronting individual experience both as a self-representative image, and as an emancipatory reflection for the Black diaspora. In *Parola*, the employment of verbs in the imperative mood – "suona" and "parla" – that initiate the last two stanzas breaks up a singular commentary: on the one hand, the *imperativo* can be interpreted as Sibhatu's self-assertion to reestablish contact with the external world, which seems to be more persuasive if we look at the two verbs together with the previous "tocca la figlia"; on the other hand, the *imperativo* can be read as a generational order imposed on the daughter herself to find ways to react against the foreign hostile environment saturated with everyday racism and anti-Black violence. While the "projective" merging of personal experience and lyrical voice seems straightforward, the echoes of the commanding sound are no longer limited

within the specific social and political circle where the poet in real life belongs. Therefore, any subjects categorized as a "foreigner" or living an "alien" life ostracized by mainstream societies, or rather, the subaltern groups in general, can identify their own personalized meanings and potentially expand the poem's semantic spectrum from *Parola*'s universalist and uncompromising political agenda.

Despite its refusal to adopt either a purely nationalist or individualist voice, *Parola* from its first line opens up a larger metric for exploring the possibilities of the theoretical linkage between bodies, languages, and spaces in Italy's and/or Europe's diasporic contexts. The poet thus invokes a process that is simultaneously physical and psychological, which does not in any way indicate two symbiotically equal or mutual subcurrents, quite the opposite, in fact. While the former points towards an Afro-pessimistic deadlock, where the Black body cannot find a hospitable epistemological platform, the latter believes in the potentiality of agentic forces. If the former is static, fatal, historical, the other is instead a reversed course that is lived, dynamic, and always speaking to the future. *Parola* thus shows concern over the ways in which agentic linguistic intervention can react against the social negation of Black ontology, and the exclusionary spatial politics imposed on non-white diasporic bodies. In this sense, "language" as a weapon of racial resistance comes to the front independent from previous social circumscriptions. However, by starting the poem by consecrating the role of the "parola," the poet calls for an ironic reevaluation because for her, reading "language" through an essentialist lens may also be shown to be deeply problematic. Black (female) subjects are often committed to seizing and employing the linguistic device as a defensive tool, yet are not allowed to claim it as something inherent with invariable properties ("inscrutable essence"), hinting at a paradoxical sense of elusiveness opposed to any idea of fixity, clarity, or radicality. In this regard, the Italian

context is by no means an exception. "Girovaga (wandering)" thus becomes a core point of reference, not simply for its very basic connotation of *moving in physical spaces* but also indicates how non-white foreign – perhaps especially Black – female bodies in postcolonial Italy experience and explore meanings of existence in relation to their new, often hostile, social, ontological, and epistemological orientations.

In this poetical and aesthetical intervention, "wandering" as a key word may require a more careful analysis. Sibhatu's ambiguous description around it in a way contributes to its semantic richness and offers a productive pathway to theorize the ever-changing landscape of Black and postcolonial Italy. In this chapter, my conceptual engagement with "wandering" stays more in line with Sarah Jane Cervenak's critical and philosophical articulations. In her seminal book, *Wandering: Philosophical Performance of Racial and Sexual Freedom* (2014), Sarah Jane Cervenak identifies that "wandering is as much an interior as it is an exterior activity, it at once resists decryption and sustain an unavailable landscape of philosophical desire" (3-4). Put it differently, "wandering" basically consists of two levels of meaning. It is first of all related to the movements of physical bodies in public environments, specifically referring to the act of walking; on the other hand, it holds connotations from a more intimate sphere, that of enunciativity or non-kinetic agentic activities such as speaking, thinking, dreaming, or desiring. Of particular note is that, by differentiating these two layers of connotation, I am not accentuating any exclusive or antagonistic relations between these two categories, as both address the issue of agency and in many occasions take place simultaneously. In her book, Cervenak shows less interest in *wandering*'s interpretative availability, as such, with the traveling, especially that engendered by the second category, often remaining unseen, unnarrated and unremarkable (2). And what would it mean, she then provocatively inquires, "to leave alone

that which cannot be read or that which resists the epistemological urgencies at the heart of such readability and knowability" (3)? Inspired by this proposal, I may wonder, what will emerge if we look at "Black wandering" in the Italian context not simply as a kind of displaced *movement* challenging spatial fixity, hierarchy, or as a postcolonial act of resistance "remapping" the imperialist geographical arrangements, but also as an aesthetical enactment that suggests an unreadable Black landscape? It is perhaps this reluctance to explicitly announce and articulate that constitutes the most powerful force of resistance on the part of the Afro-Italian literary and cultural production.

This chapter thus explores *wandering* as a theoretical site for both reimagining the meaning and exploring the unreadability of the racialized Black body in contemporary Italy, and the corporeal relation to materials, places and urban landscapes. I pay particular attention to investigating the unsettled and disconforming representations of Black bodies and subjectivities and how they can be employed as a radical philosophical form to advance our understandings of Blackness. The aesthetic linkage *Parola* establishes between bodies, wandering, and Blackness invites the speculation on a series of questions: how do Black bodies and their textual unavailability delineate the way in which Italy's postcoloniality is crafted? In what way can this haunting corporeal-spatial landscape embark on the revolutionary desires Black activists, poets and novelists mobilize in redrawing the boundaries of Italy's national identity? Could we consider *wandering*'s inherent negation of readability also as an act of resistance amidst the current tendency that everyone seems to seek to recreate the historical, anthropological, or sociological details? And perhaps most importantly, would it be possible to take up this literary/aesthetic praxis as an ideological endeavor?

In *Parola*, the poet highlights the complexities of "wandering" but at the same time redraws a dialectic boundary that serves to reconfigure the meanings of Black agency, existence and spatiality. The "wandering woman" concluding the first stanza seemingly bears both a kinetic as well as an interior and non-kinetic connotation. But this statement may reveal another ethical paradox as the conflation between the racialized Black (female) body and the capability of executing carefree and unconstrained physical movements in public spaces in a country like Italy still seems to be an impossible preposition. In short, in the post-Enlightenment Western world, the former is not commonly regarded as an idealized moving *subject* (my emphasis). In *Parola*'s second stanza, "cammina tra/luci e ombra" reflects exactly this societal and historical precondition antagonistic to the public exposure of Black bodies. But here what might render Sibhatu distinct as a diasporic Afro-Italian poet is her broader awareness of how activism and literature can carry weight with each other. She clearly bears in mind what it would mean to live in a place lacking a national history of Black resistance, and where forming a Black intellectual framework in the near future will be an almost impossible task. In this sense, Ribhatu's experimental poetry offers a powerful pathway for the Afro-Italian communities in the midst of struggle and resistance. "[Cammina tra] coraggio e paura" does not simply act as a plain, literal description of "the daughter" who is physically moving between fear and courage, but rather symbolizes a political call for potentially empowering local Black Italians to seek to obtain spatial accessibility, equality, and the very right to *wander*.

At the same time, with its title "Parola" and throughout all the lines, the poet seemingly intends to metaphorize speech as a "territory" by aggregating wandering with interior activities. Both "sacred" and "mysterious" in this poem, as briefly pointed out, indicate a shared quality of discursive unreadability. In this case, speech as "a space of enunciation" to which kinetic

movements (walking) are often drawn comparison in order to give the latter's definition comes

to lose its foundation (de Certeau 97-98). "Terrains of movement," as Cervenak continues to

argue, "thrive beyond the discursive, epistemological, and empirical" (3). This seems to be a

statement that Sibhatu would also agree with in her literary musings. Read in this way, the lack

of the interior and verbal availability represents in *Parola* the most compelling aspects of literary

resistance. The poet thus joins in the effort of rethinking wandering as philosophical performance

and provides a new case calling into question its role in framing the contemporary Black,

especially Afro-Italian, epistemological landscape. What the last two stanzas reveal to us is

precisely Ribka Sibhatu's position of re-conceptualizing the ways in which the discursive

elusiveness of Black speech and subjectivity can also be transformative. For Sibhatu, however,

this process is by no means easy, tangible, or straightforward. "Forma," "profumo," and

"l'animo" all gesture towards the elusive force of tranformation engendered by speech, melodies,

and words. The poem thus is also a proposal that comes to undermine the aforementioned socio-

historical rhetoric of the reduced agency and subjectivity of the Black people and denial of their

movements, kinetic or not, frequently taken up as reactive or disruptive instead of generative.

Though, as partially mentioned before, the poem implicates a shifting sense of power and

authority through the use of imperative mood of the verbs and the exclamation point, it in fact

emphasizes the imperialist origin of humanness and at the same time opens up the possibility to

rethink the decolonial mission under the present social and geographical organization. In this

sense, *Parola* ought to be thought of involving the exploration of an undercurrent that jolts the

epistemological basis of what Katherine McKittrick, in developing Sylvia Wynter's thoughts,

calls "Man's geographies" (*Demonic Grounds* 123). In line with other Black and/or decolonial

thinkers, such as Aimé Césare, Frantz Fanon, and Walter Mignolo who have expansively

criticized the formation of modern consciousness of human and humanness, Black theorist

Sylvia Wynter proposes that:

> […] in the wake of the West's second wave of imperial expansion, pari passu with its reinvention of in Man now purely biologized terms, it was to be the peoples of Black African descent who would be constructed as the ultimate referent of the "racially inferior" Human Other, with the range of other colonized dark-skinned peoples, all classified as "natives," now being assimilated to its category—all of these as the ostensible embodiment of the non-evolved backward Others—if to varying degrees and, as such, the negation of the generic "normal humanness," ostensibly expressed by and embodied in the peoples of the West (266).

Here I am not interested in following Wynter to reestablish a geneological origin on "how Man

comes to represent the only viable expression of humanness" (2006 124). What is at stake,

instead, is the ways in which *Parola* stages a new case challenging the ontological base of the

invention of Man. On the other hand, if the making of Man necessitates its encounters with the

unknown Human Other, then geographic processes can be considered as a material premise, at

least partially, of the imperialist racial construction. On the other hand, in the process of the

European imperial expansion, the formation of the "racially inferior" parallels and fosters the

production of the "geographically inferior." What remains as "superior" in this hierarchy then,

becomes something hardly disturbed or challenged. Sibhatu's poetical response to colonial

hierarchy, in this sense, investigates an essentialist dilemma, which can be expanded to a racial

phenomenological performance centering the metaphorical conflation of corporality and

language. The phenomenological experiences as a racially-embodied framework, rather than

Merleau-Ponty's *touching – sensing* system here create a distinct constellation of spatial and

geographical imaginaries, where the embodied senses of racial exclusiveness are constantly

reexamined and rehearsed.

Since the Enlightenment, Black diasporic subjects in Europe have always been marginalized as an absolute *other*. Obviously, this statement is not anything new. Many historians, philosophers, sociologists and critical theorists have advanced the geneological negation of Black existence, as well as the conception of Blackness often as the racial synonym of reduced agency, rationality, and subjectivity. Linking together the thoughts of Denise Ferreira da Silva and of André Lepecki, according to Cervenak, "the rational, self-same, self-possessed, and self-mobilizing subject, invented and revised by recognized European and American Enlightenment philosophers from the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries, still pervades state thinking about appropriate public (or visible) kinesis and inspires an antiwandering ethos targeted particularly at the nonnormative" (6). Similarly in the Italian context, Black bodies are not just excluded from public spaces, but the act of *moving* itself in urban surroundings often turns out to be the tragic death.[10] Yet, as a European country that has only in more recent decades witnessed the rapid formation of Black communities, Italy is a no-less-hostile ground, where public space and the justified presence of Black bodies proves to be mutually exclusive. Black bodies in Italy's urban areas are considered as outsiders, intruders, threats, rendering them unable to enjoy the full freedom of walking, or even basically *being* in this urban environment. The fact that Italy as a country has come late to terms with such Black immigration thus indexes "a larger belief system that figures Blackness as incapable of rational comportment" (Cervenak 6). Sociologist Camilla Hawthorne as such introduced the death of the newly-arrived Nigerian asylum seeker Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi. When Emmanuel and his wife Chinyery one summer

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[10] This negation of Black urban mobility in a way echoes what Stephanie Malia Hom, focusing on the Italian context, argues around "the control of mobility." In Stephanie Malia Hom's seminal book, *Empire's Mobius Strip: Historical Echoes in Italy's Crisis of Migration and Detention* (Ithaca and London: Duke University Press, 2019), the author contends that "mobility – and specifically, the control of mobility – forges lasting connections between Italy's imperial formations. Mobility regimes operate unevenly between times and spaces, between macro- and microscales, and between political and economic spheres to create powerful sovereignties that stratify and subjugate over the longue durée. Empire rests on these connections: the power over movement equates to power over people" (4-5).

night were going outside for a walk in the urban center of Fermo – central-Italian town on a hill facing the Adriatic sea, two native white men shouted insults at them. "At one point, one of the men grabbed Chinyery and called her '*una scimmia africana* [an African monkey].' When Emmanuel intervened to defend his wife from this assault, Mancini (the assulter) attacked him with a street sign ripped out of the ground nearby. Emmanuel fell into an irreversible coma from the beating, and died the following day" (Hawthorne 2017 154). Emmanuel's tragedic story in a way epitomizes the inequal status that Black bodies are forced to bear in order to stay in or access public sites, implying a complex relation between body, kinesis, race, space and notions of humanity that are still rootedly charged with a colonial ideology and racial hierarchy.

A comprehensive appreciation of *Parola* also demands the rethinking of orality as an African cultural tradition, not only mediating here and there, margin and center, past and present, rootedness and migration between Africa and Italy, but one that implies a larger temporal and geographical reconfiguration of Black imaginary that delineates the threshold of Afro-Italian identity within a global network of racial entanglements. As mentioned above, "wandering" is projected here as a theoretical framework that moves beyond any simplistic, direct, race-or-gender-blind connotation historically anchored with enjoyable and unconstrained kinetic movements in modernized European and American megacities, such as Benjamin's 19th-century Paris. It is imperative to emphasize that, instead of encouraging a romanticized poetic reading, the text in question involves a rather resolute and radical sense of *impegno*, social and political commitment. *Parola* embodies an overarching literary ground for articulating materials, places, kinesis, corporalities, and temporalities, and calls for an emergent effort to theorize the role of race and racism in negotiating Italian colonialism and the postcolonial era. In this case, "wandering" might also be employed as a metaphor to disrupt linear conceptions of time,

dismissing the commonplace of the sovereignty of colonial past in validating the knowledge of

the postcolonial present. To be clear, the poet definitely does not intended to nullify the history

itself, nor mean to reconstruct a fictional temporal framework in which the present supersedes

the past or the two become interlaced. What the poem demonstrates to us, however, is the idea of

how the historically constructed and the highly political manifacture of Italy's postcolonial time

is challenged if we situate "wandering" at the center of temporal imagination. This should come

as no surprise. *Parola*'s second stanza – "tocca la figlia che/cammina tra/luci e ombra,/coraggio

e paura" – greatly molds the historical marks, while the poem's second half speaks to futurity as

a shifting form of temporality that tends to redefine the meaning of Black subjectivity as always

pointing toward non-meaning or a deathly end. The unreadibility of speech in a sense denotes

that the speaker's relegation of white supremacy and the legacy of imperialist ideology is

doomed to orient the contemporary conceptualization of Blackness in the Italian context toward

a new mode of rationalization, one that must not be overwhelmed by the past and must be

determined to move toward a future point of resistance and resolution. The poet thus reads

"word" itself through a non-redemptive undertone, guiding the reader to a new temporal

narrative that highlights the effects of generation rather than disruption. This chapter examines

the philosophical ramifications of the notion of "wandering" in order to identify the elusive

portraits of racialized Black corporality and subjectivity. It thus explores the shifting meanings of

the Afro-Italian urban imaginary and Italy's postcolonial spatiality and temporality, as it contains

the very forces of Black racial counterpolitics.

    Glancing over the current spectrum of the Afro-Italian literary and cultural productions,

however, one has to admit that interlocutors such as Sibhatu, (or other more widely-known

figures such as Igiaba Scego or Ubah Cristina Ali Farah), still represent a relatively privileged

group. It thus seems imappropriate and gratuitous to group Sibhatu together with recent disenfranchised refugees crossing the Mediterranean, as Sibhatu earned a doctorate in Communication Studies from Rome's La Sapienza University, and holds citizenship in France, Italy and Ethiopia. Yet, viewing dialectically and diachronically in this context does not mean to categorize the two groups, or put them in opposition to one another, but rather leads toward a *racial impasse* – a fatal and discreet phenomenon where the label of "immigration" in public discourses often papers over the deep-rooted racial epistemologies and twisted racial representations, or the concept that Caterina Romeo coined as "racial evaporations" (Romeo, "Racial Evaporations" 221). As Romeo explicates, "the term 'evaporation' evokes the presence of something that has momentarily become invisible but has not disappeared. Race – historically a constitutive element in the process of Italian national identity – has 'evaporated' from the cultural debate in contemporary Italy as a result of the necessity to obliterate 'embarrassing' historical events" (Romeo, "Racial Evaporations" 221). The appearance of people of color in Italy from the early 1990s has generally been viewed in public speeches as an invasion, threat or danger to Italian society; meanwhile their writing were widely viewed as sociological texts, devoid of aesthetic or literary values for serious critique. Sibhatu's literary invention of postcolonial Black corporality and spatial problematics, in a way pushes the very questions of race and (female) embodiment to the forefront in the writer's effort to radicalize an Afro-Italian sense of space, territoriality and imaginary community.

Among the cultural productions focusing on post-coloniality and Blackness, Italian cities – such as Rome, Milan, Bologna, Turin, Palermo, and Bari – have sprung up as prevailing narrative elements. As Graziella Parati declares in her study on migrant writers and urban space in Italy, those narratives "have chosen Italian cities as interlocutors with the goal of performing a

remapping of being in place and out of place which grounds itself in dialogues with space. They focus on the representations of traditional and nontraditional spaces in order to destablize concepts of belonging" (Parati, *Migrant Writers* 3). Parati is right in pinpointing two components inscribed in space widely-conformed in theoretical reckonings: urban space is not abstract, transcendental or a scientific entity, but rather as a sociocultural construct open to dialogues and metamorphosis, on one hand; it is also often underpinned by affective attachments, on the other. What illuminates my analysis lies in the experimental remapping of Italy's postcoloniality in the limited spectrum of Afro-Italian bodies, places, and times mediated through "wandering," a swirling process where the subaltern groups ardently anchor and further concretize their subjectivities of resistance. Urban space, I argue, is not simply a platform, an objective, or a material essence on which Afro-Italian writers and activists fall back to disrupt concepts of history, memory, identity and belonging. Rather, itself embodies a radical site in furthering the articulation of Black Italian resistance, indicating the mediated implications of words, images, and objects that are deemed to generate powers to dispute the way we view, know, and conceptualize shifting realities. Thus the problem confrronted in decoding *Black Italy* as a concept seems to have less to do with Spivak's classical maxim "can the subaltern speak?" than "how they speak" and "what is the significance of what they speak and show to us."

Prior to extending the textual-theoretical reading of race and Blackness in decoding the intersection of wandering*s* (added emphasis on its plural form), bodies and places, it is crucial to emphasize that race can never be completely separated from other coordinates of investigation. Recent Afro-Italian urban writings that explicitly engage with Black subjectivity or racial entanglements are predominantly written by Black African Italian women. As Michelle Wright has poignantly reiterated, "race cannot operate in a vacuum, divorced from those other subject

categories—gender, sexuality, and class—that are always already part and parcel of any subject status but especially that of the subaltern" (229). Similarly, for human geographers, "race" is hardly the only discourse through which the claims—of geography either as profession or as collective apprehension—to power and knowledge are mediated. In the context of the imperialist origins of human geography, both whiteness and masculinity enabled the claim to exhaustiveness (and autonomy, rationality, objectivity, context-freeness), whereas racial minority or femininity were invariably marginalized as *Otherness*. Many Black feminists, such as bell hooks, Saidiya Hartman, Katherine McKittrick, Denise Ferreira da Silva and Ruth Wilson Gilmore, have exceptionally advanced the debates about intersectional intricacies. Clearly, a fair interpretation of *Parola*, as with other writings by Igiaba Scego and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, is predicated on the idea that multiple dimensions, specifically the postcolonial framing of Blackness and femininity, contribute to dramatized conjunctures for urban literary invention. The doomed linkage between cities and bodies additionally provokes the widely-developed debate from the Middle Ages on the production and reinforcements of gendered urban dynamics.

Yet, in an effort to illuminate the haunting bodies within a complex site of currently undertheorized Afro-Italian urban imaginary, this chapter is less concerned with leveraging gender to the same analytical horizon as race, but rather takes femininity as a supplementary lens in helping mediate post-colonial racial negotiations in Italy. The basic rationale of such an analytical proclivity is that while admitting the activist-writers I explore here are Black women, gender and sexuality do not above all register as their primary and most pressing narrative themes of experimentation calling for disrupting normalcies of viewing history, memory, and Italian identity. But it equally has to be underscored that this approach has nothing whatever to do with beholding "gender" as secondary, irrelevant, or anything dispensable. In the postcolonial

state of the re-orientation of social visibility, gendered representations become a crucial and complicated site for negotiating an Afro-Italian specificity of community, where both Black female activists and fictional bodies are repeatedly introduced, visibilized, and experimented on in public discourses. This literary makeup proposes to take intersectional facets as bounded relations that alter and superimpose each other in accord with the situatedness of framed pressures in the Black diaspora. This thematic stratification is no longer the classificatory schemas of conceptual range but a dynamic testing for literary genre enabling the reformation of structures and styles at the juncture of Black and postcolonial aesthetics. It is due to this unique way of marshalling and defining forces of literary expression that Afro-Italian urban aesthetics can create a generative space of cultural critique.

2.2 Projecting the Haunting Body in *Aulò: Roma Postcoloniale*

The threat of a compromised existence that Black bodies have undergone in Italy's urban junctures are not unlike other European and North American urban settings. Since Black spatiality is deeply connected and annullated by the European Enlightenment and colonialism, which has limited capacity and universalist underpinnings, rejecting anyone from this kind of global mappings. What's ought to be noted here is that, in an effort to particularize the Italian case and underscore its *Southern Question* and emigration as a historical counter-context for discussing Blackness, and the related spatial problems,[11] the literary and visual productions that I

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[11] Recent scholarship in postcolonial Italian Studies appears to give priority to exploring how Italian history, including Italy's colonial endeavors in East Africa, its "internal colonialism" in the South, and the emigration of southern Italians to the Americas, can shed light on contemporary pressing issues such as racism and immigration, and how to position Italy within global postcolonial studies. See Teresa Fiore, *Pre-occupied Spaces: Remapping Italy's Transnational Migrations and Colonial Legacies*, Fordham University Press, 2017; Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, ed. *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

examine in this chapter suggest an alternative commentary to the question of inhabiting space and a potential shift wherein lie the very forces of undoing of colonial ideologies and hierarchical inventions. In this sense, the Afro-Italian practices of narrative analyzed through the critical lens of "wandering" form a particular type of resistance, one employing Italy's urban cartographies as their strategies of staging racial conditions. They participate in and accost the conventional conceptions of *postcolonial Italy*, a recently-cointed cultural-historical concept that is at the same time unraveled and highly reinforced in historical conjunctions of crisis, legacies, and social changes. The urban narratives adopted in the works examined in this chapter have the potentiality of redefining the boundaries of human existence beyond colonialism and the contours of what Cedric Robinson called *racial capitalism*.

In Sibhatu's *Parola*, the steer constrast of implicit meanings embedded with physical mobility and oral opacity emanates a sense of tension and transformation, putting into question the visual configuration of bodily existence and readibility. It is interesting to note that some of Sibhatu's other works share a similar spirit and are also embroidered with experimental ways of representation. Sibhatu, in certain cases, even seems to intentionally explore and embrace such kind of spectacularization of the existential *play* around Black wandering in an effort to problematicize the aesthetics of Black urban-corporeal landscape as a contested site of meaning production. Her participation both as the leading character and one of the producers in the 2012 documentary, *Aulò: Roma Postcoloniale* (co-directed by Simone Brioni, Ermanno Guida, and Graziano Chiscuzzu), constitutes a non-less complex visual aesthetization where the cinematic urbanity of Rome and the restrained availablity of the Black body (performed by Sibhatu herself) form a visible-but-phantasmagorical network. In fact, *aulò* epitomizes a kind of specific oral poems from Eritrea and Eritrean poets often reinvent them with new socio-political junctures.

Sibhatu's earlier semi-homonymic collection of poems—*Aulò! Canto poesia dall'Eritrea. Testo tigrino a fronte* (2009), in which *Parola* is also included—epitomizes hybridity as its poetical characteristic insofar as it assembles various forms (autobiography, poetry, fairy tales and pedagogical texts) and contents (diaspora, multilinguality, border crossing). *Aulò* poems, as Simone Brioni reveals, "occupy a central social role in Eritrean society, which has no correspondence in Europe: they express either great joy or sadness; they provide information and express a critical judgment about facts; they are rhetorical speeches that could solve complex political problems" ("Across Languages" 123-124). Based on Brioni's statement that speeches from activist-writers such as Sibhatu contain the visible power of transforming the socio-political contours of racial minorities in Italy, here I intend to advance the idea that the indignant voices indeed perform a radical operation that multiplies the perspectives through which we see, know and understand Black diasporic identities in contemporary Italy. Hence, either as a general lyric genre of the Eritrean culture or as a specific case as materialized by Sibhatu's volume, *aulò* ought to be thought of symbolizing a spirit of multiplicity and elusiveness, itself being an epistemic statement that fixity and identity constitute two elements contradictory one another.

Alluding to a more naunced, persuasive, and complicated depiction of Black urban-corporeal landscapes in contemporary Rome, *Aulò: Roma Postcoloniale* provides a stage that moves beyond the conventional journalistic mode of retracing the relations between Rome's historical monuments, Black migrants (from Italy's previous colonies), and its colonial history. The majority of existing non-fictional films, essays, or novels focusing on this material-historical linkage, such as the book *Roma Negata. Percorsi postcoloniali nella città* (2014) by Rino Bianchi and Igiaba Scego, capitalizes the urgency of bestowing value on the forgotten

monuments in the city that connect Italy's colonial history.[12] What these initiatives bring about, often not without feelings of indignation and annoyance, is that Italian colonialism and its darker episodes in East Africa are not anything untangible, frivolous, or always suspended in the collective historical reckonings. On the other hand, these works demonstrate how entangled, unsettled, and present Italian colonialism remains and how these particular streets, buildings, and monuments situate the materiality of the colonial past that also undergirds today's urban rhythm of Rome.

In this regard, *Aulò: Roma Postcoloniale* occupies a unique position in that it is not merely a visual representation of the colonial past but a radical *space of representation*, to use Lefebvre's words, where the threshold between the "real" and the "unreal" becomes surprisingly blurred in its search for the realist portrait of the urban straddled between Italy's colonial past and its postcolonial Black present. Such an argument is definitely not meant to discredit its effort and effect of visual historization, but rather to recognize its particularity in really pushing the boundaries of configuring Italy's colonial history and its entangled relations with Blackness. In the documentary, Sibhatu's performance is dominated by her oral narrating of her own life trajectory as a Black Eritrean woman living in Rome, her witnessing of the public obliviousness of Italy's darker history, and the biased representation of Black immigrants in today's cultural landscape. As Ribka Sibhatu herself declares, "vorrei che la mia storia contribuisse a popolare Roma, la mia città, con i colori e profumi dell'Eritrea (I would like my story to help populate Rome, my city, with the colours and the scenes of Eritrea)"[13]

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[12] For more detailed references on the linkage between urban space (mostly Rome), Italy's colonial past, and its current immigration, see Igiaba Scego, *La mia casa è dove sono,* Roma: Rizzoli, 2010; Rino Bianchi & Igiaba Scego, *Roma Negata. Percorsi postcoloniali nella città*, Roma: Ediesse, 2014; Graziella Parati, *Migrant Writers and Urban Space in Italy*, London & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017; Caterina Romeo, "Remapping Cityscapes: Postcolonial Diasporas and Representations of Urban Space in Contemporary Italian Literature," in *Semestre di Studi e Ricerche di Geografia*, Roma – XXVII, Fascicolo 2, luglio-dicembre, 2015, pp. 101-113.

[13] Simone Brioni, Ermanno Guida, Graziano Chiscuzzu. *Aulò: Roma Postcoloniale*, REDigital, 2012.

Aulò: Roma Postcoloniale opens with a series of random interviews filmed on an unknown beach (presumably near Rome) to demonstrate the ignorance of those vacationers on where Eritrea geographically is. Then the camera moves inside Sibhatu's apartment (figure 2-1) where she is preparing Eritrean coffee with the aid of traditional wares and utensils. The saturated naturalist surroundings (see below) elaborately decorate the intimate space she inhabits, producing a disrupting effect such that spectators have no clue of its spatial associations with the city of Rome. The interior of Sibhatu's home, a Foucaultian space of heterotopia that is supposed to be incompatible to the traditional portrait of Rome's urban imaginary, takes the role of the primary site of contradiction against any kind of spatial universalization (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 6).

Figure 2-1 Sibhatu sits in her apartment and prepares Eritrean coffee

As Simone Brioni declares in an interview, this project is to "create an African version of Rome" (Walker). Through voices, stories, photographs, it shows "the Italian presence in Asmara,

which are juxtaposed with several sequences, usually shot using fixed wide angles focusing some monuments in Rome" (Mancosu 39). The church of San Tommaso in Parrione (a popular gathering place for the Ethiopian-Eritrean community in Rome), the Via Appia, and the Piazza dei Cinquecento all require a spatio-temporal reconceptualization of modern Rome filtered through its historical linkage with colonialism and East Africa. This overlapping of transnational cultures into iconic metropolises like Rome is increasingly defined by the impetus of recuperating the imperialist legacies that foreground the very rendering of racialized urban identities. As mentioned before, *Aulò: Roma Postcoloniale* can be easily acclaimed as an urgent collection of gauges indicating the passages of time, the ones that are located in the juxtaposition of stories and places. Its inherent didactic concern, as directly shown by the random interviews with vacationers appeared in both its beginning and concluding scenes, emphasizes its aim of engaging the general public still ignorant of the linkage between Italy and the Horn of Africa.

This documentary is definitely a crucial move for Italy in its transition towards a more multiethnic society. But such a critique, however, might fail to acknowledge the multiplicity of elements that come to define Black subjectivity and spatiality within metropolitan centers in Italy as more than just historical sites. As Yi-Fu Tuan reminds us, space "is given by the ability to move," and has a more abstract nature than the concept of place (12). Bodies, voices, tastes, smells, rhythms, relations, as Sibbhatu herself reminds us in the film, all lend character to objects and places, rendering them idiosyncratic as part of what might be called an Afro-Roman urbanscape. Therefore, the visual representation of Black body performed by Sibhatu should not be regarded as irrelational, or removed from the documentary's task of remediating the meaning of the *post-* in post-colonial geography. If there is only one lesson that we should learn from Merleau-Ponty's *Phénoménologie de la perception*, is the primary function of moving bodies in

animating the perception of space. For him, a bodily space provides the determinant ground for valorizing external space "in a practical system," where "the first being the background against which the object as the goal of our action may stand out or the void in front of which it may *come to light*" (Merleau-Ponty 117). If we dismiss the assumption that racialized bodies also enact a spatiality of situation, one in an active and integral relation to its external co-ordinates, we will become once again the accomplice for confessing the eradication and irrepresentability of Black bodies in contemporary Italy. Yet, this statement is not compatible with what Merleau-Ponty sustains as the absolute "permanance" of the body, as a peculiar object "always being there," or "a field of primordial presence" that predetermines the presence or absence of external objects (105-106). The visualization of Sibhatu's body instead probes an embodied space of exclusiveness, break, discontinuity while resulting in a complex feeling of orientation and disorientation whose linkages with the space of the landscape bear radical negotiations.

In the post-colonial era of circulation of cultures and identities, moving images' rehearsal of collective emotions engenders a new shifting platform on which the very meanings of and the associations between reality and resistance ought to be put into question. Against this backdrop of what Rey Chow refers to as *the age of hypermediality*, the range of the sensible world has had a fundamental change that goes much beyond linear understandings of social revolution. In this sense, *Aulò:Roma Postcoloniale* provides an alluring provocation: the filmmaker's treating of the Black body encourages a novel theory of perception from which a peculiar meaning-making order in relation to racial embodiment within the Afro-European context emerge. Reading it through this aesthetical lens, I would rather not conclude by evaluating the ethical stance of the dominant gaze betokened by its three white-male-Italian directors towards the visualized unearthliness of the Black female body, insofar as Ribka Sibhatu herself was in fact one of the

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documentary's screenwriters and producers. As for the documentary in question, the political *impegno* and its original intention in concocting a historical and autobiographical realism is arguably hedged by its aberrant aestheticization. While aiming at defamiliarizing the urban imaginary through disruptive images, sounds and stories that directly associated with Africa, African diaspora, and the Italian colonialism, their camera inexplicably follows a parallel white Italian gaze—that of Ermanno Guida. As the male character, Guida for most parts of its filming presumbly stands behind the camera. However, his participation reveals crucial if we see his bodily performativity in juxtaposition with that of Sibhatu. In *Aulò: Roma Postcoloniale*, Guida's body is caught in consistent motion in relation to its urban surroundings, with either wandering through Rome's ancient monuments or driving his car around the urban center, while Ribka is staying motionless in both domestic and public spaces, which might indicate a corporal confinement which is immediately reminiscent of her personal life-story—in 1979 she was imprisoned in Eritrea for refusing to accept the forced marriage with an Ethiopian occupier.

Figure 2-2 Sibhatu stands in front of vertically-arranged iron bars

Throughout the film, this urban-corporal landscape raises the issue of how the displaced, postcolonial, Black body as a participating agent redraws the epistemic limits of Black existence in Italy and Europe. When Sibhatu stands close to the Piazza dei Cinquecento telling us that "trovo che l'Italia non ha fatto i suoi conti con la sua storia coloniale (I'm convinced Italy has yet to come to terms with its colonial past)," we can see that right behind her (figure 2-2), from the bottom to the top of the image, there are vertically-arranged iron bars that seem to be a site for historical restoration. However, here it is very difficult for spectators not to recuperate the traditional perceptions of Black bodies in historically-white urbanscapes where reduced visibility overlaps with inferiority, suppression, and enclavement. The only sequence in which Ribka is physically walking, though lasting for only a few seconds, takes place on a roof terrace, which would perhaps be one of the residential building where she lives in. Thematically, as well as metaphorically, associating her personal trauma with being *dispossessed* of freedom and agency

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to practice kinetic movements in European urban spaces, *Aulò:Roma Postcoloniale* also mirrors the deathly tragedy currently suffered by African migrants in Italy's metropolitan centers and in the Mediterranean crossings. It aesthetizes *Parola*'s undertone of contradiction and stages a more spectacular encounter between the disempowerment of bodily spatialization of Afro-Italian diasporic subjects and their lyrical interiority as an abstract space that consists of potentials subverting discursive normalcies in terms of debating racial existence and urban identity in Italy's postcolonial renderings.

The familiarity of the documentary's predominant setting in Rome's recognizable sites, monuments, and temporalities manifests itself both as hospitable and comprehensible. However, Ribka Sibhatu's visual alienation from her surrounding spaces creates a sensation of uneasiness – a limitation that simultaneously holds out promises that the body as the theory of perception requires re-mediation and re-contextualization. If a white, male, Western European body "keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive," I read *Aulò: Roma Postcoloniale* as unique experimentations with Black corporality where various levels of *contrasting existence* (my emphasis) percolate the cinematic representations of place and embodiment. Such a stylised gesture culminates in an earlier sequence, when the eyes of the spectators are directed to a yellowish, abandoned open ground strewn with straw in Rome's urban periphery, costellated in the background clusters of undifferentiated residential buildings.

In this surrealist and ghostlike scene (figure 2-3), while Ribka's voiceover chanting aloud the homonymous poem *Aulò* in its original language, her stiff body looms alternately at various spots without following any predictable or linear logic. On an even closer look, Rome's blazing summer causes the air around Ribka's body to shimmer, producing a kind of mirage effect that aesthetically dwindles Ribka's physical presence. The cinematic assemblage of the ghostly body

and the anonymous periphery of the urban sprawl denotes a resulting feeling of placelessness and

disorientation, or rather, to use Marc Augé's terminology, a *non-place*. Here, to be clear, the way

this scene evokes non-place might not be the same as Augé's theoretical hypothesis on

supermodernity, as for him, non-places signify "spaces which are not themselves anthropological

places and […] are listed, classified, promoted to the status of 'places of memory', and assigned

to a circumscribed and specific position" (78). What the film suggests, instead, echoes Marc

Augé's spatial stance of the "opposed polarities" between non-place and place, for which the

former represents a particular palimpsest where "the scrambled game of identity and relations is

ceaselessly rewritten" (Augé 79). In this scene, even Rome's easily recognizable and identifiable

contexts fade away. The missing of a reassuring reference, paraphrasing Binetti's words,

displaces a predictability of the spectator's *orizzonte d'attesa* (70). Yet, Sibhatu's haunted

embodiment can be instead thought of as momentarily performing what Binetti describes as a

"zona di sottrazione" (Binetti 73), or a "hiatus" where alienating dynamics inherited in Rome's

historical environments become open for new kinds of spatialities that do not bear limitations

from the national and the urban past. Therefore, considering these disparate elusive forms is not

just a matter of urbanscape and geography, but also referring to a contestation of urban

temporalities. AbdouMaliq Simone might agree that such a visual alignment conforms to what he

calls *the surrounds*: "neither a strictly geographical nor a temporal phenomenon but can alternate

to varying degrees" (4-5).
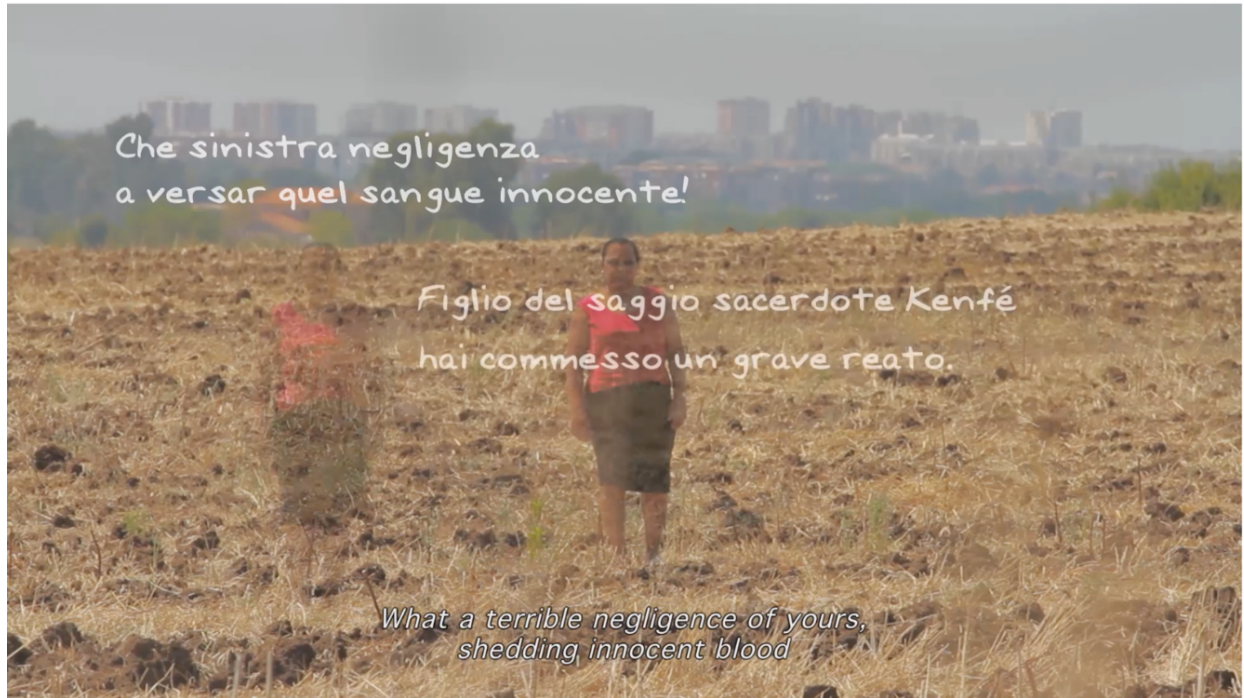
Figure 2-3 Sibhatu's stiff body looms irregularly when she chants aloud the poem *Aulò*

Ribka Sibhatu's *Parola* and *Aulò: Roma Postcoloniale* complicates in multiple ways the

linkage between embodiment, Blackness, temporality, and urbanscape. The next section will

further investigates the aesthetic work of Black Italian urban–corporality and the ways in which

this kind of haunted visualization, as personified by Ribka Sibhatu, finds a powerful echo also in

Black Italian fictional writings. Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's second novel, *il comandante del fiume*,

in this sense, sets a unique stage around fragmented flashbacks to resignify the configuration of

Afro-Italian urban identity and community. These flashbacks are rendered through a complicated

recoding of Rome's urbanscape by its protagonist, Yabar, a young Somali immigrant who

experiences a mysterious disfigurement of his body and narrates his past as he recovers in the

hospital. The Black body thus becomes the primary shifting site through which new paradigms

of spatial arrangements against power and authority are articulated. Ali Farah's experiment with

the city as an actual character de-romanticizes it as a historical fixed site, and instead displays the possibility of plurality in the shape of Black corporeal relationality in determined stances. In this novel, not as observed objects, the protagonists remap Rome as a Black city and carry forward a Benjaminian mode of flâneur to observe the city's fragmented and chaotic arrangements, demystifying its undercurrent construction of racial exclusion.

2.3 Black Flâneur and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's *Il comandante del fiume*

The publication of Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's second novel, *Il comandante del fiume* (2014), came at a critical time when both the Sub-Saharan African migrants in Italy and the literary productions of Afro-Italian writers were on the rise. Ali Farah seems to believe in the potentiality of diasporic writings in terms of envisioning divergent sets of geographical arrangements. The novel's protagonist, Yabar, a young Black Somali immigrant in Rome, is born to an irresponsible father who abandoned the family to lead Somalia's civil war. His somewhat modern mother, however, rejects the clannishness of Somalia's traditional society, and at the same time, urges her child not to carry on her painful memories. Yabar escaped from Somalia right before the outburst of its civil war, and himself faces multiple obstacles in orienting his sense of belonging, whether it is racial, familial, generational, communal, or spatial. All of the above in the novel are filtered through a complicated recoding of time and space by Yabar, who suffers serious bodily disfigurement which remains mysteriously vague to the readers.

Exploring new paradigms of postcolonial diasporic storytelling in Italy, the novel—its title already predicates the narrative centrality of place and metaphorizes how geographical sites gesture toward power and authority—evolves around fragmented flashbacks to resignify the

configuration of the Afro-Italian urban identity. The book simultaneously enriches and reevaluates the structure of postcolonial writings as Ali Farah mobilizes a standard set of spatial oppositions—center/margins, Italy/Somali, here/there—to depict a fragmented *Bildungsroman* deeply embedded in Rome's urban fabric. Articulating the novel into a frame story (Yabar's surgical care in the hospital) and an inner narration (fractured plots of memories), Ali Farah further links personal anecdotes and historical events—in particular the Italian colonialism and Somali's civil war in the 1990s—to converge to mark Yabar's episodes of growth.

A secondary plotline in the novel is Yabar's search for the family truth about his father being an assasin in Somalia. Ali Farah, by having Yabar observe, experience, and imagine Rome's urban physicality, sets an existentialist stage to investigate Black Italians also as "geographic subjects" (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* x), not so much aligned with traditional depictions of Black ghettoizations and their exclusion from Italy's urban imaginaries. The novel provides clues on how racialized bodies in contemporaray Italy can be contested and chafes against the common mode of perceiving Italy's colonial-postcolonial as a temporal continuation to which rhetorics of disruption often bear a negative or counter-productive undertone. Read through transmorgrifications in both Black bodies and Rome's urban materiality, *Il comandante del fiume* constitutes a refreshed indicator for Rome's increasing role as mediating between Italy and Africa, colonial history and the postcolonial Black diaspora.

This section attempts to investigate the spatial poetics of disruption in Ali Farah's urban literature in its potential role in recoding the geographical hierarchy begotten by the Italian colonialism. Specifically, it reads the kinetic movements of Black bodies through urbanscapes as a counter-narrative that demystifies the city as a carrier of ideologies of imperialism and power. "When crushed into its racial dimension," as Roberto Esposito reminds us, "the body has been

the object of an exclusion taken to the extreme of annihilation: in its collective form it can become the agent of political restructuring within a people and among peoples" (13). While limiting its analysis to *Il comandante del fiume*, this study, in addition to the newly coined term "Afro-Italian urban narrative," can also be applied to Ali Farah's other two novels: *Madre piccola* (2007) and *Le stazioni della luna* (2021). While in these two novels Rome does not function as the primary urban setting—*Madre piccola* charts a transnational network of Somali diaspora and *Le stazioni della luna* is set in the 1950s' Somalia under the *Amministrazione Fiduciara Italiana*—urban geography always occupies a primary position in orienting the author's works on diasporic subjectivities and identities. Amid the tendency to recalibrate the multilayered connections between Italy's colonial past and the post-colonial present, Ali Farah here rekindles the rhetorical dynamics of Afro-Italian literature by a conjuring of places, bodies, temporalities, and memories. But, on the other hand, she does not essentialize space and spatiality, nor give particular weight to dramatize how to seek the essential – quite the opposite. The author, I argue, appears to suggest a non-essentialist way of articulating spatial knowledge, encouraging the readers to think of a Black Italian spatio-temporal frame that veers off from any explicitly singular, rooted or linear trajectory. The problematization of the conditions of *existing* and *living* as Black via the ongoing debates over race, diaspora, and *Italianità* provide a wide range of fictional instantiations. Such narratives of *impegno* serve as correctives to the mutual exclusiveness between Black corporality and public space in an epoch in which Italy's metropolitan areas, like Rome and Milan, undergo unprecedented transformations due to the arrival of Black migrants, especially those coming from its former colonies in East Africa.

2.3.1 Mapping the Urban Ghostscape

Il comandante del fiume opens with a grotesque scene, immediately following Yabar's

unknown physical and ocular trauma. The bloody and unhinged Yabar stumbles along the streets

and riverbanks in Rome's Trastevere district at midnight, turning the city's most iconic center

into a ghostly spectacle. The opening episode introduces an irresistible feeling of horror, where

Yabar's body and Rome's warped landscape, characterized by its monumental stability,

antiquity, and wholeness, unanticipatedly enter into a dystopic apolyptic landscape:

> È notte, saranno le due passate. La luna rischiara l'isola e mi fa da lume, risplende come una nave incantata d'oro. Sembra risalire il fiume e lui la abbraccia con le sue acque brillanti e buie. I semafori non funzionano, o forse mi sbaglio, non riesco a vedere bene.
>
> Supero i binari, il tram a quest'ora non passa. All'improvviso il suono di una sirena, cresce e si increspa, ma non vengono per me, neppure lo sanno, credo, nessuno mi ha visto. Camino spedito, non c'è un filo di vento. Nell'umidità del fiume un topo si infila in fretta nella grata. Poco più avanti il camion della nettezza urbana, con il suo rumore inconfondibile, si ferma, carica un cassonetto, lo rovescia, il compattatore entra in azione. (Ali Farah, *Il comandante del fiume* 9)
>
> [It's night, it must be past two. The moon illuminates the island, which, shining like an enchanted ship filled with gold, lights up my way. It looks like it's going back up the river, which embraces the island with its sparkling, dark waters. The streetlights are out, or maybe I'm wrong – I just can't see very well.
>
> I cross the tracks, the tram isn't running this time of night. Suddenly the sound of a siren, growing, reverberating, but they aren't coming for me, they don't even know – at least I don't think they do, since no one saw me. I walk quickly, there is not even a breath of wind. In the dampness of the river, a mouse slips into a grate. The garbage truck a little way ahead, that unmistakable rumble, it stops and loads a trash bin, turns it upside down, and the compactor kicks into action. (3)][14]

In the ghostlike cityscape of late-night Rome, the young Somali migrant struggles to make sense

of the urban dynamic of which he seems to bear no knowledge and experience. The reduced

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[14] In this section, all the English translations of Ali Farah's *Il comandante del fiume* are sourced from the superb translation by Hope Campbell Gustafson, which was released in 2023 by Indiana University Press.

corporality of his moving body and his abrupt loss of vision, are almost as spectral as the city itself. The opening is perfectly modulated by Ali Farah's inclusion of the mysterious appearance of natural as well as non-human elements. Yabar is not merely flustered with the operation of Rome's infrastructure, but also deliriously fantasizes the plants as they "lungo il fiume, a centinaia, mi si stringono intorno, come fantasmi fumosi, spuntando a ogni passo" (9) ["along the river, hundreds of them, close in around me like foggy ghosts, more crop up with every step" (3)]. Yet, the natural elements in this scene are presented with such horror and monstrosity that Yabar cannot build any agentic connections. He instead helplessly wishes a rain shower could wash off his blood that is "ovunque, in faccia, sulla maglietta, una goccia a ogni passo" (10) ["everywhere, on my face, T-shirt, a drop with each step" (4)].

The fact that Yabar's eyes become blind one after the other calls into question his visual descriptions, and the very issue of reality. This at first seems to be a bold interpretation since even the most realistic novel is an imaginary one. However, we should pay more attention to how the real elements of our world and fantastic inventions can cross-reference in a productive way to inform the way we approach the real. This real—unreal hybridity in Ali Farah's storytelling spreads throughout the novel, opening up possibilities for considering and embodying Rome's cityscape as imaginatively porous, transformable, and as a poetics of landscape in which non-linear and fragmented histories can coexist and claim their own meanings. The figurative destruction of Yabar's body might denote less the Afro-pessimistic social negation of Black existence than a radically generative force that resists the assumptive predictability of spatial arrangement that is "naturalized by repetitively spatializing 'difference'" (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* xv). Put differently, being physically disfigured implies a kind of regeneration, allowing Yabar to paradoxically both simultaneously blend in and keep distance

from his surroundings. The author's employment of multiple sensorial devices and the narrative mode of *favola*, which distances everyday urban realities from the habitual gaze, forcefully drives the reader to ponder the hidden fragments that also make up the city's rhythm of operation. This opening episode of an intimate, but deranged Rome is crucial in that it sets the general tone for disrupting the common linkage between spaces, bodies, and subjectivities in postcolonial Rome. The transfiguration of reality prompts a reckoning with the question of existence as a consequence of the post-traumatic crisis. Such series of amalgamation—the human and the non-human, the real and the fantasized, the bodily and the material—emphasizes the necessity to probe the shifting meanings of a Black corporeal and psychic landscape in relation to the contemporary imaginary on Rome and on Italy. Being at the same time a Black migrant, and a heavily traumatized postcolonial subject, Yabar represents an ontological challenge to the city's romanticization and historical solidity, soliciting a new meditation that belies homogeneous and race-blind beliefs about urban-corporeal landscapes.

The novel's storytelling begins with Yabar's hospitalization in the Fatebenefratelli, an actual hospital located on the Isola Tiburtina in the middle of Rome's Tiber River—"a pulsing vein providing a [provides] vital lymph to everyday life" (Romeo, "Remapping Cityscapes" 108). While slowly recovering from his fits of delirium, Yabar begins to suffer post-traumatic nightmares and becomes an amnesiac. His inability to recall what actually happened that ghostly night in part results in the doctors being unable to diagnose his condition. It is only with the appearance of Zia Rosa in the hospital room towards the conclusion of the first chapter that the young Yabar manages to rehabilitate his memory, and reveal to us what the likelihood of existing and living as a Black inhabitant in Rome would be. After this the spatial focus quickly moves from the interior of the hospital to its outside—the riverside along which Zia Rosa and her

daughter Sissi run for exercise almost every day. It is in this very place that Yabar's embodied experience influences his urban identity, and the way he approaches the surroundings. In the beautiful seasons, for Yabar, the Tiber is such a crucial location that his contact with it becomes a formational encounter, directing him to view the world based on selected values, such as multiplicity, wholeness, and community, rather than isolatedness: "ci si riversa il mondo intero: corridori della domenica, poliziotti a cavallo, ciclisti, bambini con i pattini a rotelle, vecchietti e signorine a passeggio con il cane" (21) ["everyone pours out onto the path: Sunday runners, police on horseback, cyclists, children on Rollerblades, little old people, and ladies walking their dogs" (14)]. This foreign city not only constitutes a material place subject to Yabar's observation, it rather acts a living counterpart offering him a way to make meaningful connections, and symbolically mobilize the places where racial dynamics are also spatialized.

His passage to inhabiting Rome's public places, however, does not occur as a direct or smooth process. Alhough Yabar follows Sissi and Zia Rosa only by riding his bicycle at a certain distance and shows unwillingness to join them, these two female characters should be somehow considered as playing a pivotal role in Yabar's *coming-of-age* trajectory and as framing the urban context where he grows up. The simultaneous alienation from the mother and closeness with Zia Rosa, a matriarchal figure who for him has the qualities of "come una seconda mamma" (39) ["like a second mother" (30)], valorizes the communal rather than blood ties in the process of forging an Afro-Italian diasporic urban lifestyle and the sense of a Black community. This is indeed an "elective" community, which is "created by female relationships capable of opposing inherited patriarchal violence" (Lori 125). Agility, powerfulness, determination, and indefatigability are also the characteristics of the equally young Sissi, which seems to signal a generational continuation that is nevertheless suspended in Yabar's own family. Born into an

interracial family (a white father and a Black mother), Sissi becomes another focal figure with whom Yabar is able to gain sensitivity about and a clearer understanding of the issues of skin color and racial difference. This connection and disconnection between them is made explicit in a moment when Yabar complains about Sissi's lack of consideration of race as a serious problem: "non vuole credere che siamo diversi: è sempre stata convinta che, siccome siamo cresciuti insieme, gli altri ci considerano uguali…nessuno guarda me e Sissi allo stesso modo, gli occhi della gente vedono le differenze…io sono nero, da due genitori neri, mentre Sissi è bianca, ha i ricci dorati e gli occhi grigioverdi" (36-37) ["she doesn't want to believe that we are different. She's always been convinced that, since we grew up together, everyone considers us equal…No one looks at me and Sissi in the same way, people's eyes see the differences...I'm black, born from two black parents, while Sissi is white, with golden curls and grey-green eyes" (27-28)].

Differences in physical appearance (hair, skin, eyes) in modern history has played a central role in triggering the discourses of or on everyday racial discrimination that marked the Italy in transition. Yabar is clearly aware of that and the heartfelt repudiation of the role of everyday cohabitance and fraternal affinity in bridging the exterior gap between Sissi and himself suggests an identitarian confrontation between personal experience and societal alienation. Walking one day in a heavy rain along the Tiber River, experiencing this sensibility, Yabar's self-restrained grievance, born out of simple comparisons, quickly escalates to an open outrage calling into question the very issue of Black existence in Rome:

> …che non basta l'amore fraterno per fare un colore, perché il colore è quello che vedono gli altri, non è quello che vedi, che senti tu, e nessuna favola, nessuna canzone, nessuna amicizia può cambiare il colore che vedono gli altri. È per questo che io posso dire <heil!> mentre Sissi non può neppure pronunciarlo. Per me <heil!> non è un tabù, perché sono io stesso il tabù, ed è il mio colore, qui, in questa città, luogo il fiume, a essere un tabù (37).

[that brotherly love isn't enough to make a color because color is what others see, not what you see, what you feel, and no fairy tale, no song, no friendship can change the color that others see. That's why I can say "heil!" but Sissi can't even pronounce it. "Heil!" is not a taboo for me because I myself am the taboo, and it's my color, here, in this city, along this river, that's a taboo (28)]

What Yabar expresses here displays an ironic affirmation of the structural and systematic racism that has deep roots and a firm foundation in contemporary Italian society. It also points towards the contradiction of the city and Blackness that he identifies as offensive or dangerous to Rome's urban imaginary.

As urban narratives develop as a popular genre for postcolonial Italian literature, these complicated interactions between bodies, places, and cities are becoming an impending terrain for critical and theoretical interventions. Similar to in Ali Farah's first novel, *Madre Piccola* (2007), as in fact also in the works of other Rome-focused Black Italian writers, the city of Rome acts not just as the narrative backdrop, but rather as an integral protagonist, an authentic material storyteller that encompasses its urban inhabitants. Historic monuments (Piazza dei Cinquecento), multi-ethnic neighborhoods (Piazza Vittorio), and Rome's Termini station all materialize in the Afro-Italian postcolonial writings of Ubah Cristina Ali Farah and Igiaba Scego. However, rather than attempting to articulate Black places by "discovering" them in literary representations that serve to revert colonial ideology and disrupt notions of colonial domination, *Il comandante del fiume,* involving what Alessandra Di Maio points out as "an artistic agenda" (550), suggests exactly embracing a new way of *practicing* and *inhabiting* places, one that by illustrating recurring positionalities, the issues of spatial authenticity and ownership are radically contested.

Equally as substantial as the role of urbanscape in Ali Farah's urban writings, is her extensive experimentation on the Black body, and more specifically, its mutilation, reduction, and reproduction, and its intricate interrelations with race and diaspora. In her *Madre piccola*,

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one of the protagonists, Domenica Axad's self-inscription becomes "a means of inscribing and achieving mastery of her relations with her parents and of her dual heritage identity" (Bond 52); while in *Le stazioni della luna* the connection between the two protagonists—Clara (a girl born to white Italian parents) and Ebla (a Black Somali wet nurse)—is wholly dramatized through breastfeeding experiences (Review by Liu). In a similar fashion, Yabar's existential crisis gestures toward a kind of Black phenomenology on bodily experiences. In this context, however, the phenomenological existences as a racially-embodied framework rather than Merleau-Ponty's system of perception, create a distinct constellation of urban instantiations, where the embodied sense of racial existence is constantly reexamined and rehearsed. As Merleau-Ponty asserts, "by considering the body in movement, we can see better how it inhabits space (and time) because movement is not limited to submitting passively to space and time, it actively assumes them, it takes them up in their basic significance which is obscured in the commonplaceness of established situations" (117). When we cast this statement into a Black diasporic dimension, what Merleau-Ponty defines as the most granted and intrinsic essence to bodily movement, becomes the enigma to be deciphered. If the imperialist origin of geography is not unwavering, Yabar's destructive embodiment redraws a literary ground in Italy such that racialized bodies as modes of meaning-production, require to be renegotiated. What I refer to as unsettling is that these antagonistic conceptions recurrent in analyzing Black diaspora in Italy and Europe, do not point towards another instantiation of a postcolonial *interstice* or *in-betweenness,* since such a conceptual lens involves the risk of falling into another kind of fixed identification. As the prefixes, either *inter* or *in*, imply a spot or an area within a certain spectrum, a space, or an ontological framework established by two logical structures. This also echoes with what theorists such as Homi Bhabha called a "passage", or Edward Soja's widely adopted notion of "third-

space." What this analysis proposes, instead, is that as an emerging literary genre, Afro-Italian urban narratives uneasily challenge postcolonial epistemological patterns in which the *post-* has dominated as a temporal and spatial imaginary. This recoding as a process of discontinuity, a fracture that moves not so much *between,* but *beyond* spatio-temporal binarism, generates an effect that does not easily follow existing rules or knowledge of cartographic arrangements modeled through other spatial-historical contexts. This tendency epitomized by *Il comandante del fiume* is, obviously, still undertheorized. Ali Farah's novel no longer accommodates the traditional model of calling into question what is the "real" or what has been the "forgotten" portrait of the city of Rome, while underscoring the unreadability of the urbanscape concerning Italy's fascist and colonial past. What the author suggests is precisely the philosophical urgency to see in a new light the perception of Blackness mediated through the corporeal landscape in the Italian and European contexts, and to illuminate a productive way of decentering the haunting predominance of the Black Atlantic and the metaphor of the ocean in criticizing Black diasporas.

2.3.2 Beyond the In-between

To interrogate the rhetoric of disruption radically negotiated through Ali Farah's Yabar and the city of Rome, it is essential to look back to the imperialist origin of geography and how its intrinsic linkage with whiteness has dominated hierarchical spatialization against racial minorities. This process, as McKittrick notes, "is, in part, bolstered by the ideological weight of transparent space, the idea that space 'just is,' and the illusion that the external world is readily knowable and not in need of evaluation, and that what we see is true. If *who* we see is tied up with *where* we see through truthful, commonsensical narratives, then the placement of subaltern bodies deceptively hardens spatial binaries" (*Demonic Grounds* xi). A different spatialized

politics always registers as something unimaginable, as McKittrick poignantly continues, "because we assume they [Black geographies] do not really have any valuable material referents, that they are words rather than places, or that their materiality is always already fraught with discourses of dispossession" (*Demonic Grounds* 8). Her pro-Marxist critique redeems the acts of Black beings of "producing" space, resisting the conventional discourses that people of color, especially those of Black people, are deemed as "ungeographic" and "philosophically undeveloped" (*Demonic Grounds* xiii). "Production" suffuses McKittrick's discourses, and the dynamic of a black spatialization embedded within the logic of racial antagonism reinforces its dialectical nature in its economic origin, as *something* born from *nothing*. This mode of analysis valorizes alternative ways of expression and the possibility they hold for places and spaces to speak for themselves. It is philosophically from this Lefebvrian standpoint that Black geographers underline the practice of space-making as meaning-making, and emphasize that Black experiences also pertain to the epistemological, if not automatically the social production of space. This perspective enables a restored direction in probing Italy's struggles in grappling with its historical relationship with its former colonies in East Africa, and its socio-political relativities with its recent immigrants. What Karen Pinkus refers to as a "nonevent" in Italy— that the Italian peninsula did not witness mass immigration from its African colonies, nor did the Italian population concern itself with the African question after the demise of its colonizing enterprises—should also be recalibrated as a geographical question (300). The lack of a comprehensive reevaluation of the country's colonial past sadly signifies the fact that the spatial hierarchy between metropole and colony, and Italy and Africa has rarely been seriously investigated. However, space, in comparison to time, often fails to justify its function as a coordinate in orienting postcolonial critique. The term *post*-colonialism tends to be misconceived

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only as a temporal concept, even though it does not imply the cessation of colonial ideology or power systems. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo's edited volume, *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (2012), is one of the first scholarly works that expansively foreground new major directions in conceptualizing Italy in a *postcolonial* frame, by involving contributions that discuss "the processes of racialization, gendering, and cultural transformations engendered within contemporary Italy by the legacy of colonialism, emigration, and global migrations" (2). Although both editors explicate two structural axes—one temporal and one spatial – the volume in question again enters into a *temporalization* of space privileging the historical while undermining the spatial (Cole 12-13). The spatial problem, in fact, remains un-dimensionalized. Such a discursive particularization of Italy's postcolonial risks blurs the spatial hierarchies radicalized from imperialist ideologies. Space again is relegated to a supporting role as the background against which other questions, concretized by the impulse of recreating historical realities calling for actions transforming the social environments in Italy, are always brought to the front.

Il *comandante del fiume* thus offers a series of decisive cases that calls for interrogation of the deep meaning of "Black spaces" within the Italian context. Narratives of respatialization come to reframe what has signaled "profoundly racialized symbolic and material sites, how these are embodied, and fundamentally how they are negated from plain sight because they are located in what Saidya V. Hartman refers to as the 'position of the unthought'" (Merrill 3). While acknowledging the systematic production of Blackness in Italy as socio-historical erasure, this chapter tends to emphasize that space itself is not static, exclusive, or a determinate of historical ideology. Social-spatial racialization based on the historical production of European hegemony of whiteness necessitates a timely reevaluation at the current juncture saturated with discourses

on postcolonial and post-national identities. My proposal does not try to illuminate what has

been buried or misunderstood in the historical-geographical origins of the Black (non-)space in

Italy, but rather attempts to reapproach space as a theoretical paradigm to explore how current

epistemological bases of power, authority and hierarchy are contested. My perspective

accentuates the changing connotations of race and Blackness, not simply through their realist

projections, but looks at how the junction of the real and the imagined transforms the way we

know, understand, and analyze geographical issues. That is to confirm that while race is

structural, it is also slippery (Gilmore 113). The mutual constitution of race and space through

"multiscalar hierarchies" also renders the latter a shifting category so that the acts of producing

counterdefinitions of bodies, places, and landscapes illustrate peculiar modes of re-spatialization

as resistance. As Gilmore reminds us, "whether radically revolutionary or minimally reformist,

anti-racism is fought from many different kinds of positions, rather than between two teams

faced off on a flat, featureless plain" (115).

Bodies, places, and matters in *Il comandante del fiume* become real characters that all

live a re-spatialization, infusing Rome's urbanscape with stories, emotions, and fantasies serving

to condition the perceptual ranges of Black subjectivity in postcolonial Italy. The "Black spaces"

that the novel proposes therefore, do not refer to a fatalistic reality gestured from the dominant

white society, nor will it ever become the material or figurative spaces *of* Black Italians, but

rather indicates a contested epistemological ground where bodies and places bear ongoing

alteration of power-difference couplings. Yabar's enigmatically destructive body epitomizes

what Derrida refers to as a "spectrality effect," a co-present status of both being and non-being,

and his enforced imagination of apocalypses brings about the question of wandering and urban

embodiment at the very center of the author's reinvention of spaces. The racialized bodies bleed

into Rome's urban imaginaries, expanding spaces of resistance in a continuity of places and bodies—in an embodied landscape.

In *Il comandante del fiume*, the author explores diasporic negotiations of the essence of identity and selfhood, finding a welcoming platform that permits relational and experimental interpretations. No matter how realistic or surrealistic, the novel solicits a grounded inquiry for manifold forms of Black Italian social existence, while also leaving room to speculate the spatio-temporal ambiance the multiple characters inhabit. Rather than simply presenting a chronicle of events, the novel's focus on interlacing realistic, imaginative and fantastic scenes, problematizes the bodily urbanscape in disrupting the linkage between place and selfhood. What the author suggests here is the possibility of opening up a multilayered, rather than a simple author-narrator double commentary, linking Ali Farah, Yabar, Zia Rosa, as well as other minor characters, such as Sissi or Ghiorghis. A glimpse of the life trajectories of Ali Farah herself—born in Verona in 1973 to an Italian mother and a Somali father,[15] growing up in Mogadishu until the outbreak of Somalia's Civil War in 1991—reminds the reader that the novel ultimately can be thought of as a platform by which the author is retelling herself to bear witness to the social, cultural, and urban realities of the recent past. All these characters, in this sense, represent a partially fictionalized form of Ali Farah, and a resuscitated precursor of the social, spatial and identitarian struggles of the Somali-Italian community in the city of Rome.

One of Rome's most touristic landmarks—the Tiber River—ceases to simply act as a decorative setting, becoming instead the pulsing material narrator and, at the same time, a concrete but also fantastic place, repeatedly *produced* via unfamiliar records, figures, and

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[15] Alessandra Di Maio also adds that this represents a "reversal of the typical colonial white-man/Black-women liaison." Alessandra Di Maio, "Transnational Minor Literature: Cristina Ali Farah's Somali Italian Stories" in *Women and Migration. Responses in Art and History*, ed. Deborah Willis, Ellyn Toscano, and Kalia Brooks Nelson, Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2019, p.540.

materials. Yabar is not merely a figure within Rome, he is also "the producer of a city, one that is related to, but distinct from the city of asphalt, brick, and stone, one that results from the interconnection of body, mind, and space, one that reveals the interplay of self/city identity" (Parsons 1). Any familiar tool of charts, maps, or official figures is suspended and thus decolonized by a politics of voice commonly labeled as "uncharted." Staying conterminously with Edouard Glissant, McKittrick states that "expressive arts" for Blacks are "also a process of self-assertion and humanization" (*Demonic Grounds* xxii). Thus, the novel's influential range ineluctably extends its fictional horizon much beyond the narrative itself, and invites its reader to reflect on the way narratives mirror or distort societal realities. The Tiber that Yabar inhabits incorporates a complicated space that reinforces its microcosmic metaphority, ironically alluding to Italy's inertia and reluctance in coming to terms with itself as a multiethnic country. A touristic, colorful, and bohemian riverside suddenly disappears, superseded by the congregation of "i veri abitanti del fiume" (22) ["the real inhabitants of the river" (15)], which includes the homeless, the poor, and people of different colors and races:

> Sono persone the che non hanno niente in comune tra loro, se non il fatto di essere sole e molto povere. Un signore africano sempre intento a sfogliare vecchie riviste, una ragazza zingara con i suoi due bambini, un'anziana dai capelli bianchi lunghissimi, una copia di fidanzati bengalesi mano nella mano. Si riforniscono d'acqua alla fontana di Ripa Grande e camminano in fila indiana con i secchi caricati sulla testa. Certe volte senti le loro voci tra le frasche e, se capiti da quelle parti quando è buio, vedi accendersi tanti lumini sparsi. (22)

> [People who have nothing in common with one another rather than the fact that they're alone and very poor. The African man always leafing through old magazines, the Gypsy girl with her two children, the old woman with extremely long white hair, the Bengali couple holding hands. They all stock up on water from the Ripa Grande fountain and march back single file, carrying the buckets on their heads. Sometimes you can hear their voices behind the bushes, and if you're ever around when it's dark out, you'll see scattered lights. (15)]

Contrary to Pasolini's inquiry of Rome's cityscape typically focusing on the subproletarian communities at its geographic margins, Ali Farah portrays a vertical and three-dimensional scenery in Rome's city center in a way that appears to evoke exotic and phantasmagoric imaginations. Such a "darker" space deterritorializes the Tiber and its surroundings, transforming them into a heterotopic space where coexisting sites are incompatible and thus foreign to each other (Foucault, "Of Other Spaces" 6). This spatial reformulation enables a redefinition of what stays inside and/or outside of certain spatial limits. Rereading James Baldwin's observation in his well-known essay "Stranger in the Village," Michelle Wright highlights the echoes in contemporary Black European literatures where the Black seems no longer *a* (original emphasis) stranger, but rather the city itself is what becomes strange (183). That Ali Farah's portrait of the city of Rome has much more to do with non-human subjects—birds, seagulls, swallows, ducks, pullets—seems to further spectacularize the fluidity between nature and the city so that this can be considered as an alternative mode of interrogating Rome's image as a modern and global city. Unlike Paris and London, which historically served as metropoles for their global empires and unequivocally took on identities as multicultural and postcolonial megacities, Rome has been examined "predominantly as a historical monument, focusing on the marvelous art and urban architecture," and has thus commonly escaped such scrutinies at the global stage (Marinaro and Thomassen 2). With the arrival of a large number of Black migrants in the last decades, Rome has rapidly transformed itself into a global hub for tourism, global diplomacy, and religious pilgrimage. The novel, in this way, explores this fast-changing urban reality and pertains to mobilizing the branders that Rome has long taken advantage of. *Il comandante del fiume* eveals a fragmented or even contradictory view of Rome's urban center, leaving readers disorientated in locating the author's position.

The novel's disruption with spatial closure, certainty, and supremacy is radically deepened through both the daily kinetic movements of the Black bodies of Yabar, as well as those of other female characters—Zia Rosa and Sissi—and its mystification through a local Somali legend, a character from which "the commander of the river," is a great swimmer nominated to govern the lives of crocodiles and the Somali people. This re-constructed poetics of urban geographies, then, comprises real-and-imagined possibilities through variegated stories serving as "real responses to real spatial inequalities" (*Demonic Grounds* xxii). Ali Farah validates the protagonists' cartographic observations, expressions, and knowledge, a process which locates consolidations by clear discourses of possession over voices, memories, and spatial positionalities. Claiming Black ownership in Western geographies suggests a radical force to undermine the totalizing narratives against the legacies of center-periphery and colonizer-colonized dualisms bolstered by racial hierarchies. In an earlier moment, Yabar remembers the after-school time together with Sissi and a small group of friends, walking back home along the riverside enjoying an appealing view and the colorful flowers. In the springtime, for Yabar here "un giardiniere misterioso ci pianta persino le primule" (32) ["a mystery gardener even plants primroses" (24)]. His privatization of the public common and sense of ownership culminates in the novel's conclusion, where he celebrates that "Roma è la nostra città" (204) ["Rome is our city" (172)]. For both Ali Farah and Yabar, Rome represents a complex identity that is constructed upon more than one culture. Yabar's Rome is not readily legible, even when he himself becomes a real, if not exclusive, commander of Rome's historical center.

The novel's multilayered rendering of "Blackness" articulates a local-global and a native-diasporic network of the transnational Somali-Italian diaspora. Yabar's obsession with the notable African American actor Will Smith offers a case to call into question the possibility of

building an "imagined community" as for him, the American celebrity is "non solo sveglio e simpatico ma con la pelle nera come la mia" (85) ["not only clever and kind but had black skin like mine" (69)]. The fact that the Smith doll becomes an essential component of Yabar's everyday life, always clenched in his hands, secreted in his pocket, and never lets himself be separated from it, metaphorizes the characteristics of Somalia's diasporic community that interweaves a transnational past, present, and future. Such an assertion may sound disturbing, since the author offers a corrective, that holds symbolic value, highlighting the fact that speaking of an Afro-Italian community can not be considered a misnomer. Yabar's recall inscribes the experiencing of spaces and territories within acts of memory, relocating his national origin within larger familial networks in Britain, Kenya, and possibly also other places around the world. Kin relationships, on the contrary, seem to pull apart and further complicate Yabar's urban belonging. This struggle is made explicit when Yabar is sent temporarily to London to stay with his extended family. There as a witness of a ghettoized Somali British community and its attachment to Somalia's folkways and everyday customs, Yabar himself becomes a strange outsider. These feelings, Caterina Romeo suggests, "have the effect of producing in Yabar a reinforcement of his sense of belonging to the Roman urban environment" ("Remapping Cityscapes" 108). A closer reading, however, would again reveal a kind of split, fragmented, or even schizoid relationship with Rome, where urban space embedded with local Black communities on occasion acquires the form of continuous confrontations that generate a sense of struggle and loss.

Ghiorghis, Yabar's elder Ethiopian-Italian comrade, in this sense plays a crucial role in mobilizing the problematic dialecticity of Yabar's awareness toward selfhood and communal alliance. A developing degree of empathy towards the socially marginalized people in Rome

overlaps with the reluctance to come to terms with a universalist Black urban community. The first time Ghiorghis meets Yabar, the former persists in addressing him as "fratello" or "fratellino" just for having the same skin color, despite the fact that Yabar expresses his discomfort and demurs that "perché mi chiami fratello se manco mi conosci?" (112) ["why are you calling me brother when you don't even know me?" (92)]. Yabar's suspicious stance at the beginning symbolizes another example of the novel's underlying rhetoric of division and non-linearity, suggesting that in a foreign European land, forging a unified pan-Africanist idea of community may not be easy.

2.3.3 Wandering as a Black Flaneur

All of the above adds evidence to the previous argument that Yabar presents as an elusive, fugitive, and mentally unstable figure. With the disjunctive shifts of spatial-temporal coordinates, the novel reorganizes the narrative fragments by portraying the protagonist as a *postcolonial Black flâneur*. When thinking of and through *Black flâneur*, what ought to be emphasized is that even the very basic act of walking and observing, and that of meditating what he perceives in relation to his urban experiences become a precondition that encourages us to rethink the unlikely linkage between Blackness, freedom, and urban territory. Approaching Yabar in this way denotes two layers of implications: on one side, Yabar, as a Black urban observer, visions Rome in an untraditional way bringing to life less visible elements by "walking, as if alone, in its streets" (Williams 231). On the other side, this *Bildungsroman* harmonizes various juxtapositions of stories, events, moments, and places into a striking thematic composition that mirrors the indispensable and dramatic transformation of Rome's urban dynamic. The seemingly boring everydayness in fact offers the most engaged spatial

platform through which Yabar walks, observes, and shows how the stereotypical image of Rome has glossed over multiple minor and deviant representations. In a summer night, prior to attending Sissi's first-time concert in a social center in the Tiber district, Yabar decides to take a walk around it and stops in front of a kiosk, selling his favorite *grattachecca*, a local ice dessert in Rome. Not willing to wait in line, Yabar then goes to rest on "una seggiola lì vicino per vedere se la gente diminuiva" (105) ["a chair nearby to see if it would eventually shorten" (86)]. His deep concentration on observing how the vendor makes the dessert, and calculates the number of people waiting in line, presents an interruption for Yabar to keeping a measure with time and space. It is only when suddenly catching sight of the luminous numbers on the phone of the person sitting beside him, that Yabar reconnects with the surrounding world.

In a variety of passages in the novel, Yabar meanders among Rome's streets and places without "una vera e propria destinazione" (198) ["any real destination" (167)]. At times, he can even feel dizzy and disoriented, finding it difficult to spatially orient himself in Rome's most recognizable urban center. After finally discovering the secret that his father is a military assassin in Somalia, Yabar undergoes an existential crisis and experiences waves of mental disturbance while walking aimlessly:

> Non avevo dormito per tre notti e mi risuonavano in testa tante filastrocche in lingue diverse, una moltitudine di suoni incoerenti. Il problema è che dentro la testa è impossibile abbassare il volume. […] Non avevo idea di dove andare e me la sono presa comoda. C'è un bar che fa angolo con via del Corso, aperto a tutte le ore. Ho ordinato l'ennesima birra e sono rimasto per un po' impalato in mezzo alla piazza a piangermi addosso: mio padre era un assassino, io un impotente, tutte le persone che amavo mi avevano piantato in asso, cos'altro mi potevo aspettare dalla vita? (199)

> [I hadn't slept for three nights, and all around me resounded a multitude of nursery rhymes, all incomprehensible, made up of incoherent sounds – the problem is that inside one's own head it's impossible to turn the volume down. […] I didn't know where to go, so I ordered another beer and just stood for a while in the middle of the piazza, feeling sorry for myself. My father was an assassin, I was impotent, all the people I loved had bailed on me – what more could I expect from life? (168)]

Meandering in the city, Yabar becomes a *displaced* character intensified by both physiological and cognitive forces. This is a symbolic moment that conflates personal loss and spatial disorientation. Unlike the cumulative process of spatial production marked by subaltern writings as progressive texts resisting authority, Yabar embodies a complex spatio-temporal order orienting a conjunctive and disjunctive articulation of places. Or rather, here he examplifies "different forces and effects of a city" (Tally, *Spatiality* 96). What fortifies this sense of disruption is Ali Farah's depiction of the young protagonist, as one excellent neither in conduct nor in school. He is, in a way, a shiftless, egotistical, and troublesome teenager always on the edge of explosion, and isolation from his own Black communities, examplified by Yabar's later childish squabbles with and estrangement from Sissi. His frequent indulgence in drinking alcohol and smoking creates an anachronistic aura that disrupts time's linearity and the future's singularity presumed in Italy's postcolonial time—the past is constantly evoked to valorize the present while there is no predictable chance for a Black future. Yabar, rather personifies a conflation of past, present, and future. In the same night when hurrying back to Sissi's concert, Yabar remembers that "allora ho cominciato a correre e, siccome avevo appena finito l'ennesima sigaretta, ho preso a tossire come un vecchio" (105) ["so I started running and, seeing as I'd just smoked the umpteenth cigarette, began coughing like an old man" (86)]. Here, though probably not intending to dramatize an explicit temporal framework, Ali Farah invites the reader to speculate the possibility of heterotemporalities that deviates from the standard of Italy's postcolonial time that absolutizes the historical. In this vein, the pluralization of time represented by Yabar's moving body is also an urgent call to acknowledge the temporalities inhabited by individuals who are not commonly included in the imaginaries either of Italy's postcolonial or urban time.

The Baudelairian character of *flâneur* acts as a crucial mediator between the individual, the crowd, and urban spaces. Inspired by the French artist Constantin Guys, Baudelaire considers Guys a philosopher wandering along the Parisian streets *appreciating* (my emphasis) the modern urban rhythm. The simultaneous distance from the interior, and a solitary feeling of being immersed in the urban anonymity—"the Baudelairian crowd"—is the prerequisite for inspiration. It is in part with the paradigm of *flâneur* that Walter Benjamin, for equivocal pleasure, attempts an urban demystification in drafting his *arcades project* (Benjamin). Yet, the constituitive elements of *flâneur* as both a socio-historical and metaphorical figure, calls into question the very effort of pursuing a transhistorical rereading. Staying closer to Deborah Parson, this analysis deems the *flâneur* also as elusive, not in a figurative sense, but conceptually implying "a variety of 'wanderings,' in terms of ambulation, nationality, gender, race, class, and sexuality" (Parson 4). A Black *flaneur*, differing from the feminist debates around the private-public spatial praxis, (and in fact the systematic negation of *flaneuse*), consists primarily in a societal stage of existence informed by ontological significance. To inquire more from a racial perspective: what does wandering among Rome's urbanscape imply for rearticulating the position of Black migrants in postcolonial Italy? If we contextualize Yabar through the lens of *flâneur* both for historical as well as symbolic ramifications, it allows likening him to the Baudelairian "kaleidoscope" that can rechannel the (post)colonial linearity into a multiplicity of urban images, inviting readers to be mindfully connected with Italy's historical legacies with Somalia, and the Somali immigrants' urban identifications. In short, the Black *flâneur* is not so much about being able to offer a totally new *knowledge* of the city itself, but to approach Rome's urban reality from a particular perspective, to *experience* and *see* it differently. Reframing Black *flâneur* is also to recognize a distinct but less dominant existence, a mode of moving away from

looking at 'walking idly' as a scopic metaphor, rather to demystify the cities' labyrinths of architextuality and to emphasize a whole range of possibilities for spatial expressions of racialized minors. The gaze of Yabar, as it falls on the city of Rome, still seems to be the gaze of an alienated allegorist among the changing urban dynamics (Benjamin 10). "Benjamin's geography of the city", as Parsons suggests, "is indeed marked by an obsessive attempt to know the city in its entirety, a surrealist desire to penetrate the fantasies of its phantasmagoria, and a determined project of reacquisition of its fragments" (1). The iron construction and the department store to which the nineteenth-century *flâneur* associated his existential crisis, indeed can find a thematical counterpart in Yabar's vision of a distorted reality and personality embedded within Rome's urbanscape. Though against a backdrop different from Benjamin's bourgeois urbanity, Yabar as a Black *observer* continues the Benjaminian conception of reading a city's fragmentary, uncertain, and chaotic patterns. We can say that all the characters in the novel—Yabar, Zia Rosa, and Sissi—are autonomous observers, rather than objects of observation, from the Fatebenefratelli Hospital to the call center where Yabar accompanies Libaan, (a Somali-Italian he had just encountered) and becomes the latter's translator when Libaan calls his mother in Somalia. Libaan had migrated to Italy at a young age, but since he had then been abandoned by his father he struggled to speak Somali, as shown in this particular phonecall. It is this moment—when he linguistically switches between Somali and Italian—that contributes to breaking Yabar's psychic barrier with his own country of origin. The call center, frequented by Black residents, immigrants and refugees, becomes simultaneously a hyper-localized and hyper-transnational space, thus enabling Yabar and his fellows to feel simultaneously both detached and connected with a Black community.

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The critical deployment of Black *flâneur* is also a strategic one to accentuate the *modus operandi* of processing and evaluating the overwhelming experiences of contemporary Rome as an increasingly globalized and cosmopolitan city. However, Yabar problematizes the observing gaze, deviating from the Parisian one that fetishizes the urban "outsiders" in a hidden process of reification and colonialism. In a way, he not only symbolizes the observation from a different standpoint, but is inextricably tied up with a non-conventional spatial rearrangement that decolonizes the established meanings. This analysis grounds the postcolonial roots in the novel not as any concrete material or historical circumstances, but as a loose re-definition referring to a diasporic subject who is aware of the colonial ideologies in creating subjectivities and perceptions of Westernized urban landscape. As Yabar's coming-of-age story unfolds, he is gradually allowed access to the complexities of the historical moments (of parents and family), and to interrogate the interrelated stories of violence, inequality, and diasporic cultures. The contrapuntal "wandering" here provides another force of resistance against a totalization of views "looking down like a god" (de Certeau 92).

In the novel, the combination of the stories on everyday anti-racist gatherings with urban space further emphasizes its impossible stasis and neutrality, which, on the other hand, serves as a powerful literary corrective to the generalized racial discourse that Black subjects in contemporary Italy, if anything, are only granted spatial accessibility or passive interlocutors filling the spots. In this sense, Ghiorghis plays a crucial role in turning Rome's piazzale Flaminio—a real place between Villa Borghese and the Tiber River—into a place for revolutionary gatherings. To help dissolve the hesitation Yabar shows in joining their small group, Ghiorghis points out how "the production of space is bound up with racial ideologies and experiences" (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* 8):

Quando avevo più o meno la tua età frequentavo già da qualche anno il mitico Big Burger di piazzale Flaminio. È lì che si riuniva la mia comitiva, anzi, lì si riunivano quasi tutti i giovani stranieri di Roma. Quel piazzale era l'unico luogo che sentivamo nostro, eravamo liberi di dire quello che volevamo, non eravamo costretti a recitare nessuna parte. Smettevamo di essere come ci vedevano gli altri e non eravamo più "il bisognoso", "il drogato", "lo sfigato", "il superdotato", "l'atletico", "il ballerino", non eravamo più neri, eravamo semplicemente noi stessi. (114-115)

[When I was your age more or less, I'd already been hanging out at legendary Big Burger in Piazzale Flaminio for a few years. That's where my crew gathered. Well, actually, that's where almost all the black kids of Rome gathered. That piazza was the only place we felt was ours – we were free to say whatever we wanted, we weren't forced to play any part. We stopped being what other people saw us as, we were no longer "the beggar," "the junkie," "the loser," "the well-endowed guy," "the athlete," "the dancer," we were no longer black, we were simply ourselves. (93-94)]

The way in which Ghiorghis recalls the past—juxtaposing stereotypical Italian society against Blacks with the heterotopic piazzale Flaminio where real arrangements are overturned—reminds us, in particular, of how race, space, identity, and power can be condensed, immediately producing a paradoxical feeling of both pride and depression. Space does not sit passively within the confines of social processes, but actively participates in shaping them. Such differential imaginaries of places provide us with a literary representation of what George Lipsitz once articulated :"the lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience has a racial dimension" (12). This contradictory overlapping of racial exclusion and freedom, of heterotopia and dystopia, can be thought of as a micro race—spatial prism through which Ghiorghis also comes to conceive the city of Rome itself. Ghiorghis bitterly confides to Yabar that "Roma ci stava stretta e molti di noi desideravano andarsene verso uno di quei luoghi dove la gente è più mescolata…anche per me è arrivato il momento di partire" (115) ["Rome felt constricting, and many of us wanted to leave for one of those places where people are more mixed...the time to leave came for me too" (94)]. Upon returning, Rome, however, has already come to represent home, and Ghiorghis feels nostalgic for the city, as for him "è bastato un

attimo per capire che ero tornato a casa, bagnato dalla luce di questa città" (116) ["it only took (me) a second to realize that I had come home, bathed in the light of this city" (95)]. By highlighting personal musings and sensibilities, Ali Farah recognizes the metaphor Ghiorghis can embody of the real social tensions encountered by Black Italians between lived urban experiences and a long-standing, systematic, and institutional rejection of connecting Italianness and Blackness as an acceptable way of belonging and identification. This is then dramatically *performed* when Yabar returns back to Rome from London, and Italy's airport officials only reluctantly accept his Italian citizenship even when he holds an Italian passport. In this way, Ghiorghis and Yabar come to symbolize a shared experience in destablizing how Italian identity is defined by descent, and illuminate a meaningful alternative to an idealized multiracial co-presence, a physical, emotional, and imagined spatial perception of affiliation in Rome's urban cartographies.

As the novel concludes, Ali Farah further illustrates the tension that is created between the bounded Black community in Rome, and transnational connections of the Somali diaspora, a tension through/by which Yabar finally learns to prioritize the local present over a historical past. He constrasts the effort of reappropriating his father's mythification through oblivion, and self-asserts his subjectivities in what is probably the highest emotional point in the whole book: "Non tradisce la fiducia del popolo, non abbandona la sua famiglia, non uccide gli innocenti. Finalmente, dopo tanti anni, capisco. Non è mio padre, sono io, Yabar, il comandante del fiume" (204) ["He doesn't betray people's trust, he doesn't abandon his family, he doesn't kill innocent people. Finally, after so many years, I understand. It's not my father; it's me, Yabar—I'm the commander of the river" (172)]. Yabar's repressed past has a way of powerfully resurfacing his personal experiences as intimately anchored in Rome's urban spaces. Both Ali Farah and Yabar

in the novel situate a palimpsestic negotiation for personalized reconceptualization of selfness,

and counterpoint the redefinition of Italy's capital, enabling the reader to experience a novel and

vibrant perspective of Rome's emergence as a global and postcolonial city.

Chapter 3 Specters in Contact: Silent Urbanism and the Landscape of the Interior

> Without claiming to draw from it a complete theory, as a hypothesis we shall attribute a good deal of importance to these relations between towns, and especially ports, with space and (cosmic) time, with the sea and the world: to that which unites these towns with the world through the mediation of the sea.
>
> - Henri Lefebvre, "The Rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean Cities"

> The geography of the Mediterranean effectively rendered claims to racial purity untenable.
>
> - Camilla Hawthorne, *Contesting Race and Citizenship*

What significance would *urban exergue* hold if the exploration of space within Italy's Black diasporic settings extended beyond the confines of bursting historical metropolises such as Rome? What epistemological shifts might arise when putting perceptions of *Blackness* in the Italian context in radical conversations with a peripheral or underdeveloped urban setting—a physical and representational space itself marked by disregard, inferiority, and liminality? Building upon Camilla Hawthorne's statement that the "emergent Black Italia does not have a geographical referent" (*Contesting Race*, 17), I sustain that, instead of a singular referent, there exists a diverse spectrum of geographical markers that play a crucial role in shaping Afro-Italian identities and the concept of Blackness. Today, when reconfiguring the conceptual boundary of Italianness, "the Mediterranean simultaneously represents the promise of a postracial future and a source of racial contamination; it is an alibi to deflect accusations of anti-Black racism and a way to create space for Black people within the Italian nation" (Hawthorne, *Contesting Race* 96).

Though emphasizing the paradoxical role of the Mediterranean discourse in Italy's racial imaginary, Hawthorne is not vindicating racist ideology rooted in the Italian peninsula, nor proposing a utopian blueprint for the emerging grassroot Black activism. Her argument specifies yet the potential risk of adopting absolutist or nationalist viewpoints in deciphering Italy's racial issues. Both the historical and present-day "Africanness" and "Blackness" in Italy's Mediterranean context raise the fundamental question of what would be the conceptual boundary of "Afro-Italianness."[16]

To obtain a more nuanced insight into the Black *lived experiences* in the context of Italy's "urban" imaginaries, this chapter shifts its focus away from metropolitan settings. Instead, it explores an alternative track to theorize the Black (physical and conceptual) encounters with Italy's remote landscapes in the South, providing clues for speculating the Black Italia within a *multidirectional* and *multiscalar* framework wherein different spatial dimensionalities gesture toward a variety of *exergues*. Understanding "urban" as a non-universalist notion allows the exploration of the undercurrent implication of "urban exergue" and crafts a wider spectrum of spatial encounters (domestic/public, rural/urban) opened up in the Italian context to rethink about the postulated invisibility and social negotiations of Black subjects in Europe.[17] Although the

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[16] It's noteworthy that, in this chapter, I maintain the concept of "Black subjects" within the framework of the African diaspora. While acknowledging Italy's internal colonization and racialization of the South as "backward" and "African," which has been fundamental to modern Italian identity, I am conscious of and resist any oversimplified equation or terminological merging that overlooks their historical contexts.

[17] As mentioned in the introduction, the conceptual frame of "Black subjects" within the contemporary Italian context aligns with the work of other Black Italian scholars. See, for example, Camilla Hawthorne, *Contesting Race and Citizenship. Youth Culture in the Black Mediterranean*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022. In theorizing urban exergue within Black diasporic, it is crucial to remain mindful of the significance carried by the term "diasporic." This project's conceptual engagement with Blackness is founded on the understanding that it embodies multilayered interpretations. Two main connotations emerge: firstly, individuals who immigrated to Italy decades ago or second-generation (or mix-raced) Black Italians, and secondly, Sub-Saharan African refugees or asylum seekers struggling to reach the southern Italian borders. It's important to clarify that this differentiation does not stem from an intellectual intention to categorize or challenge existing understandings of Blackness and the Black diaspora in other geographical contexts. Rather, it aims to reimagine Black Italy as an evolving route towards alternative perceptions of humanity's diversity. Furthermore, I do not intend to imply the absence of interactions or

majority of Black migrants reside in large Italian cities in the North, Hawthorne also points out that Black refugees and asylum seekers "are increasingly incorporated into the informal economies of southern Italy" (*Contesting Race* 185). However, in this chapter I am not interested in retracing the traditional metaphors of fluidity, porosity, and cosmopolitanism that typify Italy's Mediterranean metropolises such as Palermo and Naples.[18] This chapter instead investigates radical conceptual openings in small coastal towns because in most cases these remote settlements serve as the very first places of arrival for hundreds of thousands of refugees crossing the sea. Over the past two decades, Sicily and its southernmost islands, in particular Lampedusa, have garnered international attention due to the influx of refugees and asylum seekers, especially those from the Sub-Saharan Africa in search of better living conditions for political, religious, or economic reasons. Scholars across various social science and humanities disciplines have significantly contributed to the debate regarding Europe's southernmost frontiers as contesting sites for the dispossessed, the suffering, and anonymous Black bodies. As described by Proglio and Odasso, the Mediterranean Sea has now transformed into an "open-air cemetery" (1-3). At the same time, though, this humanitarian crisis acts as a critical catalyst, drawing attention to something that has long been overlooked by Italy's general public and the global audience. These small islands, as part of the Pelegie archipelago, are geographically closer to Tunisia and the African continent than mainland Italy. This proximity further complicates Italy's historical ambiguities with imaginaries of race and Africa. In this sense, Italy's southernmost lands represent not only a geographical gateway between Southern Europe and

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overlaps, nor the existence of a binary notion of "Black" between these two groups. "Distinguishing" them serves only as an effort to facilitate a deeper understanding and connection between them.

[18] Many critics have written about Italy's southern metropolises such as Palermo and Naples. For example, see Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings. The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008. In this book's chapter four, "Naples: A Porous Modernity," Chambers provides with a critical and poetic account of the city's historical and contemporary urban imaginaries.

North Africa, but also embodies what Gaia Giuliani refers to as a "moving mosaic of power relations" that have contributed to the sedimentation of the role of Mediterraneanism that have long been integral to the country's self-reference and self-imaginations, both within and beyond its national boundaries (73). As Chambers and Cariello observe, "Gramsci's observations on the potentiality of geography to render explicit the spatiality of power propels us to comprehend how the Mediterranean is culturally and politically produced; it is never simply a geographical or historical 'fact'" (141). Most of the recent cultural productions on the Sub-Saharan refugee crisis do not simply take up the matter-of-course mission of raising public awareness, they also enable different ways of representation that put the Mediterranean space into a contesting one.

In this chapter, I will first detail a socio-historical account on the ways in which the physical and imaginary encounters between Black refugees and Mediterranean small towns in Italy's remote landscape offer alternative but equally fundamental pathways to conceive the intersection between Black Italy and geographical reckonings. Then, through careful readings of two globally-acclaimed Italian films, Emanuele Crialese's *Terraferma* (2011) and Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare* (2016), I reveal the multiple ways in which conceptions of *urban exergue* are further produced in their visual experimentations and how the notion's implication with phantasmagorical livings are presented and mobilized by both filmmakers' techniques.[19] This chapter contends that, by experimentalizing spaces centered on silent ghostliness, a pervasive sense of despair, and the cramped interiors of domesticity, both filmmakers revitalize the small Mediterranean towns also as fundamental spatial spectacles that set a troubling stage for a distored reality by virtue of counter-conventional narratives of urbanity. The act of viewing serves as a potent tool for shaping perceptions of postcolonial power dynamics and becomes a

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[19] Here I use the term "phantasmagorical" intentionally as to emphasize the visual illusions both films generate, as an invitation to speculate their aesthetic implications on the issues of interracial encounters and embodied spatiality.

conflicting mechanism through which intersectional hierarchies—if we consider both Crialese and Rosi as also dominant male gazes—are reinforced or destablized in the understanding of Black urban-corporeal landscapes.

3.1 The Liquid Imaginaries of Italo-Mediterranean Small Towns

What would be, to simply put it, the novel framework based on which we could approach landscape disassociated from metropolitan mentalities? In his short essay "The Rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean Cities," Lefebvre shows much caution in pinpointing the possible nuances and contrasts in generalizing the common characteristics of what he calls the "Mediterranean towns," which as a whole differs from their Nordic or Atlantic counterparts. Yet, as he lucidly admits thereafter, the confine of his scholarly engagement to large historical towns in underlining "the plurality of rhythms" opens itself onto further investigations that could possibly draw finer and more critical conversations with what he has teased out (100). This chapter thus resumes from where he halts and probes how cultural experimentations proffers new stances that help reconfigure the imaginary limits of urban spaces in the context of the Mediterranean peripheries. Here, "new" does not indicate anything previously non-imaginable or nonexistent. Instead, it points towards what has consistently been left behind at the liminal landscape between land and sea: in most cases, large European metropolitan cities, such as Venice, Marseille, Barcelona, and Genoa, as well as their North African counterparts Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, Alexandria, automatically assume the role of the most valid representatives when attempting to define a Mediterranean urban culture. Lesser in size, economically underdeveloped, and marginal places such as, in this case, the *comune* – equivalent to *municipality* in English – of Lampedusa and

Linosa, often tend to be dismissed as too "trivial," "liquid," and "marginal" to deserve serious consideration as also an urban dimension.[20]

Speaking of a "Mediterranean urban encounter"—in this case, that of Black refugees and aslyum seekers disembarking on Italy's southern shores—requires us to first frame this contact within the relationship between Italy's South and its national project. In the Italian context, discourses on certain terms such as "otherness," "alterity," "colonialism," and "race" did not originate solely from or remain confined to "the realm of the external or extra-national" (Wong 25), rather, they were rooted in the internal divisions between its North and South. Over centuries, travelers pathologized southern Italy as "non-European," "African," "primitive," and "barbarous," Such racialization of the Italian South extends outside of the Italian geographical boundaries. Historical records indicate that between 1880 and 1915, thirteen million Italians departed their homeland, marking what historian Mark Choate has called the largest emigration from any country in recorded world history (*Emigration Nation*). For the most part these Italian migrants were coming from the southern regions of Calabria, Sicily, Basilicata, and Campania. While this "hemorrhaging" of people was taking place, liberal politicians also pursued an ambitious expansion of the Italian colonial empire, which, from the end of the 19th century to World War II, encompassed territories in East Africa, Libya, diverse Mediterranean regions, and a tiny concession in Tientsin, China. As Teresa Fiore emphasizes in her book *Pre-occupied Spaces*, postcolonial immigration in Italy cannot be understood without a rigorous consideration of both its colonial and imperial experiences as well as its historical emigration (4). Such *multidirectional* migratory routes intricately coincided with the formation of what historians and

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[20] The metaphor of "liquidity" in academic discourse, as many scholars have stated, has become a "constitutional" referent to the Mediterranean. See Claudio Fogu, *The Fishing Net and the Spider Web. Mediterranean Imaginaries and the Making of Italians*, Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020

sociologists call "racial liminality," a dual racial status of Italians oscillating between the role of

racializer, directed against their southern compatriots and the indigenous people in its African

colonies (more symbolically than practically), and the *racialized* others (such as the Italians

emigrated to other northern European countries or the United States). In today's Italy, there is a

urgency shared amongst Black Italians to highlight how Italy's intertwined histories of internal

colonialism, imperialism, and emigration-within the Mediterranean context continue to

complicate Italy's multilayered and multidirectional imaginaries of race.

Even in economic or sociological terms, there is no standard definition of what a "town"

or "urban" area is.[21] When cast on the Mediterranean context, this question seems to be a more

controversial one. As Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell reveal in terms of the difficulties

and ambiguities in defining "towns" in the Mediterranean:

> Since reliable statistics about population density and occupational structure in the
> preindustrial past are usually lacking, studies of urban systems have tended to invoke a
> crude demographic criterion: only settlements of more than 10,000 people – or a figure of
> that order—qualify for discussion. This strategy has the clear advantage of eliminating a
> good many potentially difficult cases. But numerous smaller settlements, many of which
> might well in other circumstances have been categorized as towns, are also excluded.
> And that exclusion is particularly unwelcome so far as the Mediterranean is concerned.
> So many of the settlements on which its reputation as a highly urbanized region must
> largely depend have sheltered no more than one or two thousand people—"small towns"
> on certain definitions but towns none the less (*The Corrupting Sea* 93).

Since antiquity, in the Mediterranean region, the definition of "urban" has been inherently

flexible, a characteristic further compounded by the heightened challenges in today's more

industrialized and globalized lifeworld. In this chapter, I am not interested in reopening a forum

to consider what factors should be prioritized to define a Mediterranean town, nor discussing

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[21] According to National Geographic, "'urban area' can refer to towns, cities, and suburbs. An urban area includes the city itself, as well as the surrounding areas. Many urban areas are called metropolitan areas, or "greater," as in Greater New York or Greater London." https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/urban-area/

whether Lampedusa and Linosa are essentially a town or not, but rather to investigate how their

liquid imaginaries between domestic and public spheres radically complicate Italy's Black

landscape and how the replay of interracial encounters constitutes a novel mediating force to

unsettle the geographical fixity historically crystallized by colonial hierarchies.

Framing the phenomenological rhetoric of Black diasporic bodies only through European

cities implies the peril of monopolizing the multiple dimensions of urbanscapes in which Black

imaginaries are continuously invented and mediated. A renewed focus on small coastal towns

serves as a pressing summon to demystify the hegemonic position of major cities, which

paradoxically showcase romanticized stories of cosmopolitanism and local anti-Black violence.

Small towns, on the other hand, are often considered as isolated vacuum places devoid of cross-

racial contacts and entanglements,[22] insofar as the majority of scholarly works about

Lampedusa's spatial relations to Black bodies focus on the notorious *centri di accoglienza*

(detention centers).[23] What I intend to point out in the following pages also gestures toward the

common risk of generalizing the rhetoric of violence and precarity in the context of the Black

Mediterranean as one assuming a clear racial *directionality*, and that unintentionally overlooks

the exergue these small Mediterranean towns unfold in inscribing the spatial-corporeal

specificity in the process of reformulating a Black epistemology. The examination of moving

images also suggests looking at contemporary racial anxieties and entanglements beyond a

purely anthropological or sociological lens, since the films' experimentations with places,

bodies, and landscapes mobilize various aesthetic of exergue. *Urban exergue* develops into an

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[22] This is a formulation inspired by Judith Halberstam's *In a Queer Time and Place* (2005).

[23] See, for example, Stephanie Malia Hom*, Empire's Mobius Strip: Historical Echoes in Italy's Crisis of Migration and Detention*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019.

active, shifting, and open archive capable of challenging conventional understanding of center-margin dynamics.

In this sense, it would be beneficial to reframe such a southern encounter between Lampedusa/Linosa islanders and Black refugees through the concept of what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih call "minor transnationalism" (*Minor Transnationalism*). In their terms, "Minor transnationalism" allows a radical rejection of Delezue's and Guattari's notion of "minor literature," as both the French philosophers, according to Lionnet and Shih, "end up falling back into a recentered model" (2). What they proposes, instead, stays closer to a sociological adaptation of Deleuze's theories on "rhizome," implying a non-hierachical, transformative and lateral topography of relations that exceed a mere parameter of the major. Lionnet and Shih argue that, "common conceptions of resistance to the major reify the boundaries of communities by placing the focus on action and reaction, excluding other forms of participation in the transnational that may be more proactive and more creative even while economically disadvantaged" (7). This approach, according to them, also gives rise to novel forms of identification that navigate through national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries, facilitating "the minor's inherent complexity and multiplicity" (8). The ethical implication of this conceptual innovation also reveals significant in that it prevents the reification of a minor subject, or circumvents in the transnational context a kind of "stranger fetishism" that defines the stranger as a commodity cut off from the dominant narratives (Ahmed 5).

However, there is also a flip side of the concept, especially when projected onto certain situations such as this chapter's focus on Mediterranean encounters. For both Terraferma and Fuocoammare, the cinematic mobilization of this minor relationship suggests a kind of participation different from Lionnet and Shih's proposal on "action." In other words, the

filmmakers become the dominating mediators so that their characters are arranged as somewhat "passive" participants, further complicating the meanings of resistance and coalition in relation to what could be categorized as "the major" in this context. Therefore, unlike the analysis of the expressive works produced by Black authors or artists, both films imply the impossibility of claiming refugees and island residents as, at least visually, equal agentic subjects. I suggest also not ending up with just "comparing" or "balancing" these two, nor generalizing such a southern encounter as a kind of romanticized reunion to form spirits of solidarity or frontiers of resistance against the North. Rather, this novel line of inquiry stays closer to Lionnet and Shih's "minor transnationalism," or even what Edouard Glissant calls the "Relation identity," which "is produced in the chaotic network of Relation and not in the hidden violence of filiation."[24]

Taking both "urban" and "Blackness" as terms that indicate liminal epistemologies, in what follows I examine two internationally acclaimed films, Emanuele Crialese's *Terraferma* (2011) and Gianfranco Rosi's *Fuocoammare* (2016). Their releases coincided with a critical time when both Italy and Europe began mobilizing a large number of political and diplomatical actions to govern their southernmost frontiers. However, both have much more in common than their appearances would suggest. Parallel to showing the inhumanity of the Black refugee situations and the intrusion of border enforcement by the Italian government, the films perform a visual investigation of the local islanders who maintain pristine, isolated, and monotonous daily routines. Both, by exploring new connotations of space, corporality, and spectral landscapes through their convergent but also specific visual narratives, draw ambivalent relationships between the apocalyptic deaths of Black refugees and the displaced urban life of the island

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[24] Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.144. For the Caribbean theorist, the poetics of Relation "does not think of a land as a territory from which to project toward other territories but as a place where one gives-on-and-with rather than grasps." Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, p.144.

residents, creating a double-layered struggle for space and a type of spectral body-network. The visualization of *objectivized* refugee bodies carries the catalyzation of bringing to the spectators' attention some forgotten and defamiliarized Italian landscapes, ones that have been ignored for a long time from Italy's public discussion and cinematic productions.[25] Of particular note is that, by bringing back and revivifying what has previously been excluded in Italian cinema, both *Terraferma* and *Fuocoammare* take a step further in calling into question the conceptual boundaries of "landscape" beyond the term's actual meaning as physical, geographical location. The cinematic aesthetization of physical spaces and landscapes in these two films invites us to consider the spectral as an analytical mediator in complicating existential conditions. Though categorically different in genre—a feature film and an observational documentary—the filming techniques deployed by both films appear to bring about a variety of visually mediated representations that move beyond the anthropological definition of Black bodies or places.

Racial ambiguities framed in the southern context bear epistemological openness in contemporary Italy. This is why when disenfranchised Black bodies have only recently appeared on the Italian screen, we have to reconsider not only what was removed in the past, but also what would be the aesthetic effect of moving images on the speculation of Black corporeal-spatial landscapes. As Avery Gordon observes, "haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way we are notified that what's been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us" (xvi). Thus, in the Black Italo-Mediterranean context, the evocation of *urban exergue* creates a new but unearthly horizon to redefine the meanings of "margins" and "outsiders" where

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[25] Giorgio Bertellini, in a similar vein, argues that "as Italian cinema focuses on immigrant characters and narratives, it also critically re-explores the rendering of Italian places and landscapes and as such reactivates one of the nation's most important cultural patrimonies, that of the spatial experience." in Giorgio Bertellini, "The Earth Still Trembles: On Landscape Views in Contemporary Italian Cinema," in *Italian Culture*, Vol.xxx, No.1, March 2012, p.39.

both historical reckonings and aesthetic innovations play an important role in orienting possible trajectories of encounters.

Each film demonstrates specific facets of urban ghostliness and distinct instantiations exploring the relationships between Black corporality, urban community, and the Mediterranean itself as a liminal space, both on a historical as well as a metaphorical level. The commitment of moving from metropolitan centers to small coastal towns in Italy's remote landscapes would thus also be a historicist one—by challenging the intellectual imprisonment of urbanity as a discursive and social product of the post-modernist near past, it calls for a radical intervention in what perhaps has become the core of most sociological reckonings: *moving towards* the city (Lefebvre, 1996). Through looking at the ways in which the accidental encounter between Black African refugees and Southern Italy come to complicate a series of relations that plague their configurations (Black versus white European, Southern Italy versus Northern Italy/Europe), in the next two sections I attempt to demonstrate and problematize how Ciralese and Rosi's aesthetic experimentations invite their spectators to adopt a comparative and relational viewpoint to perceive the haunting subjects in Italy's and Europe's geographical margins. What I hope to show may constitute the most unearthly and disturbing implication of *urban exergue*. Here, the word "unearthly" contains two layers of meaning: shifting the spatial focus to Italy's marginal places and putting the notion of "Blackness" into a relational, contingent, and non-oppositional frame of meaning-making. This, in other words, suggests reapproaching the notion of "Blackness" not only as a representational social category, but also as a way of thinking.

3.2 *Terraferma*: Family and Precarious Lives

As Lefebvre reminds us, Mediterranean towns connect with the world "through the mediation of sea" (*Rhythmanalysis* 92). Land and sea are two deeply intertwined elements, and an engaged understanding of the former hinges upon its multiple interactions with seawater. The sea, far from being a mere geographical feature, also emerges as a vital medium that calibrates knowledge with the ground. As Elena Past writes, "the liquid borders on the edges of the island spaces are particularly porous, particularly shifting, and particularly interesting ways to challenge fixed notions of nation, selfhood and ecological identity" (58). Set on the remote Sicilian island of Linosa, Crialese's *Terraferma* recounts a bittersweet story revolving around a local fishing family struggling between maintaining the traditional way of life and leaving the island. One day, the family's routine is disrupted when Ernesto (the grandfather) and Filippo (the grandson) rescue a group of African refugees from a sinking boat. The entire family then grapples with the moral conflict of providing humanitarian care while risking punishment from local authorities, as Italian law prohibits Italians from rescuing illegal immigrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

The film opens with a long sequence set underwater and Crialese's camera slowly moves along with the flow of benthic waves. A fishing boat sailing vertically on the screen pulls a giant empty net, which, generating an overwhelming sense of infinity, envelops Crialese's camera in the immense Mediterranean Sea. Spectators are directed to an ungrounded space and may feel as though they are the only captured living beings. Before the introduction of local everyday life and human engagements, such a slow underwater scene evokes a radical rupture from modern industrial livelihood, implying not only a sense of danger, poverty, and precariousness, but also the difficulty of escaping and securing alternative ways of survival. When the camera floats to

the surface, the two male protagonists, Filippo and Ernesto, catch sight of pieces of wood and propeller, which are supposedly parts of the shipwrecks that carried refugees attempting to cross the Mediterranean. In this scene, Crialese craftily seeds the potential drastic encounters warning us of what kind of ending would occur if we were to succumb to the oceanic monstrosity. By depicting both Ernesto and Filippo as "ignorant" when facing the wreckage of the refugees' boats, the film's opening gives the impression of a generational continuity of their isolation and unpreparedness to face the recent humanitarian crisis.

Depicting the relationship between the islanders of Lampedusa and refugees as an unearthly site of encounter, the opening scene reinforces a stereotypical image associated with Italy's South. It suggests that these local people, even if they do not have direct contact with refugees, are cut off from modern developments in information technology. It is in these southernmost territories that visual reconceptualizations could accommodate the most engaging and dramatic rehearsals. When the filmmaker subsequently moves his camera towards the domestic dimension of Filippo, Ernesto, and Giulietta (Filippo's mother), he creates a nostalgic *mise-en-scène* that transports the viewers to a southern Italian imaginary in which elements of family, domesticity, poverty, and the continuous struggle for a better life remain prominent tropes. This also implies that, in *Terraferma*, the domestic sphere within the Mediterranean's fluid imaginaries functions as the ongoing spatial coordinate that mobilizes the relational conceptualization of a Blackness informed by southern epistemologies. The portrait of the family, first and foremost, illustrates a variety of personal and environmental characteristics that suggest a displaced sense of present. As a group of people dressed in black walking slowly alongside an unspecified stretch of the island coastline, Ernesto reveals to the spectators a somber story that haunts the entire family, who is struggling to find a predictable pathway to the

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future: Filippo's father, Pietro, who should have also been a fisherman, lost his life in the Mediterranean Sea three years ago. This brief scene at the beginning of the film serves as a disruptive reminder of the similar precariousness experienced by both refugees and local islanders within the natural landscape of the Mediterranean Sea.

The narrative interplay between natural and domestic spaces opens up a radical channel for critically grasping the relational connotations of life and death within the Mediterranean cartographies. Giulietta, now the center of homelife, has nurtured an empirical plan to repaint the interior walls of their old house and rent it to tourists during the summer. The family's pure dependence on fishing has proven financially insufficient to support them adequately, let alone provide for Giulietta's wish to ensure her son's education and development. However, Giulietta's desire to "escape" from the island faces serious generational objections from both Filippo and Ernesto. This suggests a gender divide in the challenging process of reorienting the family's future and renegotiating the macro-micro spatial dynamic within the multilayered rhetorical relationship between human survival and the island's liminal geography. It is clear that "leaving" isn't in the destiny of the old Ernesto, born and taught to be fisherman deeply rooted in Linosa, who is even reluctant to embark on a temporary medical trip. This reluctance mirrors Filippo's sense of rootedness and inertia, indicating a reluctance to transition from the rural, pristine, pre-industrial past to a more prosperous and modern future. This contrasts with Giulietta's plan to relocate to her cousin's place in Trapani (a Sicilian city near its capital, Palermo), which instead constitutes a formal northward emigration. Reinscribing the family within a series of larger North-South confrontations in the Italian context, the filmmaker remediates a less familiar geographical setting completely different from Italy's northern industrial cities.

Later, upon the arrival of the three vacationists from the north of Italy, the domestic space remains the primary site of tension. Maura, a teenage girl from Milan, along with her two male friends, Stefano and Marco, arrives to "occupy" the newly refurbished and redecorated house, which is up for rent. Giulietta serves as their cook. Meanwhile, Giulietta and Filippo retreat to a dilapidated garage, where they have set up their temporary "home" where two single beds are simply screened off by a curtain. The north-south dynamics are reshaped within the household, as Giulietta and Filippo exhibit a spectrum of anxieties and desires that prompt a series of temporal critiques prior to the introduction of Black refugees as disenfranchised and atemporal bodies within a transnational framework. Filippo, for example, does not seem to follow a conventional development trajectory for an adolescent of his age. The sense of Filippo's rusticity, exemplified by his occupation as a fisherman like the older Ernesto, is further underscored and made more explicit and disturbing by Giulietta's accusation against him of being incapable of speaking correct Italian, a sign of his lack of a formal education on the island and a plan for a future possibile escape.

In fact, Filippo, who has a crush on Maura, is unable to fully integrate into the outside world. One of the most embarassing and comic scenes takes place when Filippo, when hanging out with the three tenants, cannot understand what the English word "topless" refers to. In the interactions with the outside world, Filippo comes across as an anachronistic figure in the film, suggesting an interplay of temporalities wherein the parallel between backward-thinking and forward-looking is displayed. Crialese poses to his viewers not only the question of how visual representations rehabilitate historical discourses but also how various embodied times multiply the haunting effect of the forgotten past. It is evident that *Terraferma* here produces at least two types of temporalities within the same spatial coordinate in which Filippo embodies. This is

reinforced through his dressing styles and bodily gestures, depicting a relatively isolated and rustic life suspended between two epochs.

The aesthetic experimentation with the garage as a temporary space of shelter and survival bears more careful consideration. In this case, the traditional notion of the house as private property is radically blurred. If we agree with the basic thesis that physical—not to mention the affective and even metaphysical—networks, such as the movement of human bodies and material objects, unquestionably connect houses with the public sphere of city streets, to what extent would the attention to the garage as an affiliate domestic space of transit mobilize the conception of stability and mobility, inside and outside, public and private? In this sense, space "ceases to be a coordinate soly employed by film to locate the narration, and appears in its fascinating complexity as a dimension that is represented on screen but at the same time that is physical, off-screen, where the film actually unfolds" (Baschiera and De Rosa 1). When Filippo and Ernesto choose to secretly host the pregnant Ethiopian refugee, Sara (played by Timnit T., a real-life refugee), and her child in this new garage-home, they provide them with basic necessities and a physical shelter where Sara can rest while waiting for the chance to depart to reunite with her husband, who is working in Turin, one of Italy's industrial centers. They also assist the Ethiopian woman in delivering her baby girl. However, Giulietta remains uncertain about aiding her till the end (Faleschini-Lerner 55). The anxiety and hesitation that Giulietta immediately displays do not stem from a feeling of xenophobia or a panic of invasion but from state regulations that prohibit local people from rescuing, let along accomodating refugees crossing the sea. Crialese transforms this place into a conflictual space of transnational negotiation wherein the vulnerability of the local family is further dramatized upon the arrival of Black refugees.

Indeed, family in this film constitutes a central nexus around which the local, the national, and the global intertwine and contradict. Nino, Ernesto's other son, is also aware of the law that prohibits aiding illegal immigration. Running a beach resort for tourists, Nino once declares in a meeting of local residents that as islanders, all they can do is avoid any contact with them. Filippo's altruistic and firmly humanitarian grandfather—together with the older generation on the island—remains devout to the "law of the sea," which holds fishermen responsible for saving people from the sea, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or national origins. Crialese alludes to the ongoing discussions surrounding border enforcement in Italy and Europe, introducing an additional dimension of familial conflict to heighten the complexity of the socio-economic situations on the island and for its residents.

Figure 3-1 Sara and her two children, Giulietta and Filippo

Not unlike from Emanuele Crialese's previous cinematic works, such as *Respiro* (2002) and *Nuovomondo* (2006), *Terraferma* initiates its visual storytelling within the framework of neorealist aesthetic tradition. His selection of on-location settings, frequent utilization of long

shots, incorporation of local dialects from Linosa, visualization of the local landscape, and the portrayal of a struggling ecomomy all reminiscent of Italy's post-war filmmaking practices.[26] However, as Crialese's camera shifts solely into the dim and airtight garage, the neorealistic style seems to give way to a new trend of cinematic narration, where sites of reality and surreality allow for speculation about unexpected modes of thinking concerning epistemic convergences or ruptures within the Mediterranean's liquid imaginaries of geographies. Sara's first appearance in this garage-house coincides with her moment of maternal parturition. Here, uninterrupted, the camera moves from right to left and then focuses motionless when Sara and her newborn remain in bed, while Giulietta and Filippo sit away from the spectators' position, gazing at the new "inhabitants" (see figure 3-1). Here, Sara, in her sleeping pose recalling Giorgione's *Sleeping Venus*, and all the other characters' faces become indistinct in the darkness, indicating the comparable risks both sides take by physically remaining in this temporary shelter space. Moreover, it creates a sense of crowding and the loss of freedom and autonomy. In unfolding the concept of "spaciousness," Yi-Fu Tuan reminds us that "spaciousness is closely associated with the sense of being free" (52). He further connects the sense of freedom with the act of moving, considering that "space and its attributes are directly experienced" (52).

In this scene, Crialese's camera frames five people, leaving spectators clueless about their emotional states while simultaneously hinting at a sense of crowdedness and disorientation. At this moment, the camera appears to impose restrictions on the free movements of both Giulietta and Sara. Both women, compelled to protect their family for various reasons, have no other choice but to stay inside. What further complicates this site of tension is Crialese's manipulation

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[26] Past, Elena "Island Hopping, Liquid Materiality, and the Mediterranean Cinema of Emanuele Crialese," in *Ecozon@*, 2013, p.56. Even the recent widow, played by Donatella Finocchiaro, a tall, buxom, and aspiring woman with earthy practicality, seems to pay tribute to Italy's legendary actresses, such as Anna Magnani and Sophia Loren.

of lighting through a chiaroscuro divide, with Sara's reclining female body occupying almost half of the screen. However, Giulietta's initial actions of erecting barriers are not an exact mirror of the aggressiveness displayed by Italy's carabinieri, but rather an indication of her fear in the face of state power.

From this sequence onward, the bordering space between them gradually deterritorializes as Sara and Giulietta forge a constructive yet still fragile transnational minority community. In a subsequent scene, speaking a hard-learned Italian, Sara begins to retell her Tartarean journey from Ethiopia and her imprisoned days in Libya. At the same time, Giulietta's maternal instinct is evoked as she cradles Sara's newborn. For spectators, it is obvious that Italian is not Sara's first language. However, the choice of speaking it with Giulietta is not only for the purpose of communication but also implies a symbolic attempt to bridge the linguistic distance that separates them. At this moment, Giulietta also switches to an always-unconjugated, slow, standard Italian, a choice underscoring her inherent kindness to assist and create a more intimate connection between themselves and the new arrivals. As Giovanna Faleschini-Lerner observes, "though the screenply here seems to embrace an orientalizing view of Sara's Ethiopian culture, which is represented as less rationalistic and more open to spiritial interpretations of human experience, it also put forth a definition of kinship that is based on emotional connections, rather than legal and biological ones" (Faleschini-Lerner 57). The visually mediated formation of mutual care and intimacy, or, to use Faleschini-Lerner's words, the "spiritual" representation of interracial contacts, poses the fundamental question of how the new arrangements of bodily-space landscapes enable alternative trajectories of imagination and knowledge-making.

In the postcolonial and globalized era, material records of colonial times, including urban geographies such as specific colonial monuments or human settlements, have become open

battlegrounds where Black subjects either experiment with or passively participate in new pathways of experiencing and living. Material geographies in cultural productions, such as novels or films, transform conceptual and creative configurations. These landscapes enable discursive and imaginative engagement to reveal the hidden geographical organization. This points to an essential interplay concerning the ways in which the position and the notion of "landscape" relate to spatial physicality: landscape is not so much about a closed or definite entity, but it points towards relationality and holds potentials to stretch beyond our immediate sight. In his essay "Uncanny Landscape," Jean-Luc Nancy explicitly pinpoints the characteristics of *relationality* about landscape. According to Jean-Luc Nancy, landscape is not given. Highlighting its immaterial ramifications, he proposes a very radical perspective, arguing that "the landscape begins with a notion, however vague or confused, of distancing and of a loss of sight, for both the physical eye and the eye of the mind" (53). For Nancy, "landscape" implies relational ruptures and openings, and the visionary uncertainty it paradoxically solicits and compromises. Even the most concrete sites turn against predictable traces of rationalization or predetermined rules of definition. This refers to "a question of the relation to what is far and near, in a sense that is not simply that of measurable spatial distance" (52). Perhaps due to this open relationality, singling out the conceptual boundary of "landscape" allows us to speculate on a wide spectrum of Black urban-corporeal relationships in the Italian context. In this regard, *urban exergues* do not indicate an abstract synonym for what is or can be categorized as Black marginal spaces, nor are they related to the question of which material sites Black Italians or refugees come to occupy and valorize for revolutionary reactions. Instead, they represent an open imaginary where new channels of Black subjecthood are mediated and produced through a variety of forms.

On the other hand, "immaterializing" the notion of landscape here does not equivocate with any metaphysical or theological effort to discredit what stands right in front of our eyes, or the things that we capture, connect, or make sense of based on commonplaces or previous educational experiences. Instead, it emphasizes the process of "creating an opening and thus a view, not as the perspective of a gaze upon an object (or as vision) but as a springing up or a surging forth, the opening and presentation of a sense that refers to nothing but this presentation."[27] Here, Nancy suggests that we should view the landscape as a phenomenological and existential dynamic rather than as a granted material, and emphasizes the significance of both locality and cognitive externalization in its critical potentials. Exploring the intersection of Blackness and urbanscape implies the unavoidable pathway of projecting Black spaces within a relatively larger geographical context, rather than placing overwhelming weight on decoding the ethnographic characteristics from a singular urban setting. This presses us to not regenerate a hierarchical constellation of urban dimensions and positionalities—urban centers versus peripheries, metropolises versus medium or small towns, but instead to diversify and decentralize so that we can enable new relational frameworks.

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[27] Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Ground of the Image*, p.58.

Figure 3-2 The teary Sara and Giulietta hug each other

The sense of intimacy is particularly reinforced when, towards the very end of the film, Giulietta steps forward to embrace Sara before the surreptitious plan of smuggling those three refugees to terra ferma. Both of them shed tears and altogether succeed in forging a mutually caring space. It is a non-verbal act of loving community, and from this scene Terraferma even emanates a heroic and adventurous sensation, in which Filippo quickly matures into a real heroic character. The final scene signals Filippo's overcoming of his previous fears and oppression as he sends away the immigrants with his own boat. Yet, throughout the film until the conclusion, Filippo endures a morality ordeal. One evening, when Filippo and Maura, one of his northern Italian tenants, sneak out to the sea dreaming of a romantic rendezvous, a group of dark-skinned bodies is swimming toward their boat and waving their arms. He violently beats away these refugees using a stick, and refuses Maura's advice to report it to the police, resulting in a morality crisis for him that somewhat disrupts his existential basis. Crialese concludes *Terraferma* with a vertical bird-eye view, presenting spectators with a small boat sailing on the sea but without a clear direction. The filmmaker alludes to the arduous and uncertain journeys of

refugees, during which Sara and her two children play an important role in Filippo's coming-of-age adventure. Certainly, it is their arrival, presence, and interactions with Filippo and the whole family that precondition his cognitive growth and foster a deeper undertanding of himself. Evidently, Crialese is cognizant of visual metaphoricity, leaving the ending highly open to interpretation. For both Filippo and Sara, this epic episode could be further unpacked as a symbolic gesture of transcending all the invisible and visible boundaries in search of a faraway solid ground, or *terra ferma*, a place where all human beings deserve to be treated with equality and dignity.

3.3 *Fuocoammare*: Silence and the Spectrality of the Interior

Not unlike *Terraferma*, Gianfranco Rosi's film is also a powerful exploration juxtaposing the everyday life of the island's residents with the harrowing experiences of African refugees. Or rather, we can even claim that the film revolves around local daily life, staying "with the islanders, feeling their rhythms, until more is gradually disclosed" (Wilson 12). The delay, as Wilson writes, "makes the encounters with the migrant tragedy even more blinding, dark and surrea" (12). Many film critics and scholars have addressed this aspect elsewhere. However, what remains underexplored is what we can learn from this "spectral coexistence" and how the breaking-up of the living-death threshold in this remote desert landscape generates a relational sense of spectrality beyond the political message of challenging contemporary Europe's systematic obliviousness. By "spectral coexistence," I refer to the simultaneous absence of embodied interactions and the lingering continuities of precariousness, introducing a particular spatial and temporal critique. However, it is evident that the precarious living conditions between local residents and Black refugees are not symmetrical, and it is not the aim of the filmmaker to

liken one with the other. In this new cinematic framework, the comparison between the limited view of domestic space and the relative vastness of natural geography creates a constellation of spatial containers where the reduced subjectivities of both sides become the primary factors of mediation and negotiation. Thus, the common ground shared by both films lies exactly in their exploration of these spectral bodies as moving mediators.

In Rosi's film, first of all, the metaphor of laziness constitutes a significant factor in orienting the understanding of the two parallel worlds through the gaze of a 12-year-old local, Samuele. The film opens with detailing concrete geopolitical information about the island of Lampedusa: it is less distant from the African coast than the Sicilian island. In the past 20 years, around 400,000 refugees have landed on it, and about 15,000 have lost their lives. Attempting to reach its coasts, yet, such an apocalyptic reality of humanitarian crisis immediately encounters an ahistorical scene when Samuele, also the son of a fisherman, is wandering carefree among the wild pine trees and making a slingshot. Although Rosi continues to intersperse the scenes in a balanced alternation, "swinging from harshness to lightness, desperation to optimism, cold surveillance to solidarity" (Ponzanesi, "Of shipwrecks" 160), the space that Samuele embodies and embraces partains to an environmental vacuum resembling his innocence and the disconnection from the outside world. In this sense, Samuele is presented here as an embodied "non-place" that "creates neither singular identity nor relations" (Augé 103). The only occasion on which he engages in contractural relations with the adult world outside is during his medical appointments with Lampedusa's doctor, Pietro Bartolo, who also treats refugees for chemical burns and undertakes other humanitarian tasks such as delivering babies and burying bodies. Bartolo reassuringly examines Samuele's symptoms of hyperventilation and anxiety, which occasionally leave him struggling to breathe. Besides such symptoms, as confirmed by an

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optician's test, Samuele also possesses a "lazy" eye, metaphorically suggesting a more urgent

and severe form of political ailment that harshly afflicts many countries across Europe today: on

the one hand, it refers to its "lazy", or even the "blind" eye towards the inhuman crisis unfolding

at its southern borders, and on the other hand the "lazy" eye hints to the anxiety of numerous

native Europeans and right-wing politicians towards foreign immigration and the coexistence of

multiethnic communities in the era of globalization. In this regard, Samuele becomes a deeply

politically engaged embodiment that mirrors the realities of contemporary European society.

In spite of the choice to depict these two guiding characters, temporal suspension—which

Crialese aesthetically manipulates in his filmmaking technique—is not particularly accentuated

in *Fuocoammare* by way of direct conflicts among subjects. Rosi's observation of the local

reality, as Wilson observes, is "about letting a special closeness, an alliance, genuine connection,

emerge" (11). Rosi immerses the camera along with the islanders, in ingeniously crafted

amphitheaters evocative of naturalistic rationality and pre-modern rituals. As Ponzanesi points

out regarding Rosi's filmmaking process:

> The filmmaker, who operated alone on the island for over a year and a half, is the
> epitome of auteur documentary maker, doing the filming, camerawork and sound all by
> himself, and therefore not operating with a crew at his disposal. This artisanal aspects
> testifies to his observational documentary style, through which he follows, observes and
> gains the trust of local inhabitants, the young boy and the patrolling navy operators, by
> sharing day-to-day events and humdrum moments ("Of shipwrecks 160).

One of the aims of this docudrama is to foreground and mobilize what appears to be absent from

mass media and political discourses. However, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter,

critics' celebratory remarks on Rosi's filming techniques, which were internationally

recognized—winning the 66th Golden Bear Award at the 2016 Berlin Film Festival—reveal

something quite provocative regarding the relationship between documentary filmmakers and

participants. This relationship is often close, intense, and in many cases, problematic. For Rosi,

observation also signifies a subjective process of negotiation and selection, increasing the sense of confusion in his spectators: by framing those characters within his camerawork, who has been screened out, and what elements of Lampedusa's local reality have been remade invisible and deprived of an appropriate "space"? What could be the aesthetic as well as the political implications of framing local public and private life through a pervasive sense of solitariness and silence?

Upon initial examination, Rosi's observational style yields a balanced portrayal alternating between the everyday lives of Lampedusa's local residents and the inhumane treatment endured by immigrants. This is why some critics label his work as a partial failure for its substantial disconnection between these two worlds, alongside accusations of improper distraction and sentimentality within a film addressing the refugee crisis (Wilson 14). What this chapter sustains, in fact, lies exactly in the opposite and suggests complicating the task of analyzing the film through a relational lens to renew the dialectical vision. The island itself, like Linosa in *Terraferma*, becomes a microcosm for Italy's Mediterranean imaginary in which precarious places and subjectivities coexist and interact without a definitive or biased approach to describing identity.

The richly metaphorical title of *Terraferma* finds its strongest echo in *Fire at Sea* (*Fuocoammare*), which combines both realistic and symbolic meanings. It refers to a semantic reconstruction that cohabitates multiple temporalities and spatialities. In a sequence that captures Samuele's grandmother, Maria Costa, sitting by the window, doing needlework, with thunders outside, she recalls World War II with Samuele, telling him that "the ships fired rockets, and at sea, it was like there was fire at sea." Interestingly, this peaceful scene interlinks with a subsequent one as Rosi shifts his camera into another domestic setting. Here, Maria Signorello,

another elderly Lampedusa housewife, calls her DJ nephew, Pippo, to dedicate a wartime Sicilian song "Fire at Sea" to her fisherman son who cannot go out for fishing due to the bad weather. The song is about an Italian warship bombed in 1943 at Lampedusa's harbor, and in this way, the connection between old-time warfare and natural adversity in a deranged spatio-temporal coordinate reminds the spectators of Italy's own past as wartime refugees and further hints at the ongoing tragedy that boatloads of migrants are facing within another regional panorama. From here, spectators could easily associate it with a reality in which both the island residents and African refugees share a dominant and unbeatable enemy—nature. All their destinies are at the mercy of the sea, reminiscent of Crialese's family drama in *Terraferma*.

In *Fuocoammare*, however, the aesthetic experimentation with isolation and loss of life seems to lie not only in the phantasmagorical portrayal of physical space but also, perhaps more intriguingly, in the embodied lifelessness and incompleteness of one of its protagonists, Maria Signorello. Rosi's filming technique parallels extreme long shots of natural environments with medium, short, and slow-moving shots in domestic settings. Such a visual conflict, alternately shifting from openness to occlusion, emphasizes for the spectators how the filmmaker perceives and associates spatial coordinates. In all three sequences featuring Maria Signorello, the character is never framed outside of her home and captured by Rosi as performing tasks of silent domesticity as the camera, except for her last scene, concentrates exclusively on the kitchen as the core site of visual narratives. All of these shots underscore a local rhythm that represents the absolute opposite of a modern, globalized, and rapid lifestyle.

In an extremely symbolic sequence, DJ Pippo receives a call from Maria to play another song, "The Cart Driver's Loves," dedicated to her husband Giacomino, "con tanto tanto amore" ("with lots and lots of love"). Then, with music playing, Rosi switches the camera into Maria's

kitchen, where she is preparing coffee for another elderly man sitting by her side, perhaps Giacomino (see figure 3-3). What is particularly provocative in this shot is the absolute lack of communication between the two characters, reflecting an overall sense of silence, disaffection and confusion for to the film's spectators, as they may lack have the basic indications to understand their relationship. Maria epitomizes a tranquil disorientation of space and time. The filmmaker appears to highlight her actual isolation from both public life and familial dynamics (Maria is never captured talking with her husband Giacomino and their son, Nello).

Figure 3-3 Maria Signorello and another anonymous elderly man, perhaps Giacomino

A subsequent shot attests to Rosi's cinematic philosophy of utilizing the silence of observed participants as an integral representational element. The camera gracefully glides into Maria's relatively spacious bedroom—an indoor setting in contrast to her cramped kitchen. In this larger space, for more than 150 seconds and against the backdrop of Rossini's opera playing on the radio, Maria is routinely making her marital bed, showing a "Vermeer-like tranquillity" (Wilson 12). This protracted and haunting sequence challenges spectators to decipher the exact

nature of Maria's actions and what her subsequent acts would be. In this extended moment of

disorientation, spectators find themselves intrigued as Maria slowly walks towards a corner of

her bedroom, assuming a posture of prayer in front of a small effigy where another one of the

Virgin Mary gazes down to the floor. Within Maria's domestic domain, spectators do not have a

chance to achieve a comprehensive view of its architectural layout, nor do they gain a clear idea

of Maria's daily routine. Moreover, the film deliberately severs any coherent link between

domestic life and public gatherings, whether on the streets, squares, markets, or the nearby

seashore. Gianfranco Rosi's film, more aptly described as an assemblage of sequences between

local residents and refugees, weaves an illusion of familiarity while defying the capture of

anything tangible.

Figure 3-4 Maria Signorello preys at her bedroom's corner

In the current era of the escalating Mediterranean refugee crisis, Rosi's cinematic

experimentation invites a redefinition of the relationship between the human body, the built

environment, and landscape where aesthetics of silence and inconsistency open a new portal to

temporal and spatial imaginations beyond an anthropological focus solely on the African

diaspora in Europe. In *Fuocoammare*, Rosi constrasts a group of local inhabitants, including

Samuele, who are depicted as somewhat evanescent and incomplete subjects. His filmic negation

of linearity and a sense of collectivity in local everydayness materializes a spectral gathering that

simultaneously contains layers of solitariness and multiplicities. The silence and deprivation of

realistic interaction with the outside not only allude to its geopolitical marginalization within

Italy's national discourses, but also to an absence of social collectiveness or "production" that

constitutes a (social) space. Following Lefebvre, the "space" represented in *Fuocoammare* is

nothing related to "their interrelationships in their coexistence and simultaneity—their (relative)

order and/or (relative) disorder" (Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* 73), but to a loose

constellation that contains a rhizome of apathetic objects, sounds and Lampedusa's residents that

aesthetically resist binary representation or narrative linearity. In this sense, I underline Rosi's

authority as a documentary filmmaker in endowing all the "human" participants (locals and the

anonymous mass of refugees) with reduced subjectivities—becoming "haunting" figures, to

borrow Derrida's term—which results in a loss of proper spatiality. Apparently, interpreting

images in such a way is not indicative of any equal status or universalist solidarity between them

but rather testifies to a double logic of minority and societal refusal of a full visibility and

recognition.

Figure 3-5 An anonymous diver walking on the street

Figure 3-6 Refugees at the detention center playing a soccer game

In *Fuocoammare*, in fact, there are few sequences through which spectators can map a vague picture of Lampedusa's townscape. In a later scene, Rosi's camera follows a mime-like diver stepping out of a door and then disappearing into the distance, making him the only figure captured within this limited view. On this gloomy rainy day, the camera moves slowly, almost still, capturing the desolate atmosphere. Even the most open areas of the island generate a horrible sense of pressure and lifelessness. This scene stands in stark contrast with another: one night, the Black refugees in the detention center gather to play a soccer game. In this moment, despite fleeing from different countries, these refugees form a transcient utopia in which sport unites them all, finally granting them an opportunity to live as real humans.

In the liquid imaginaries of Mediterranean geographies, all the thresholds between human and nonhuman, living and death, local and other, public and domestic are radically mobilized in remote landscapes. Both filmmakers experiment with multiple filming techniques to reveal the impossibility of approaching Black Italy through a singular geographical dimension or referent. Using Lampedusa/Linosa as a conduit and a barrier at the same time—a phantasmagorical space of encounter—they create new imaginaries as powerful proof that the Mediterranean in the contemporary era is consistently produced and imagined. The distorted spatial relationships evoked in these films indicate the potential of moving images to shape new kinds of perceptions of spatiality. Moreover, Crialese's open poetic ending and Rosi's slow narration also imply the filmmakerss' conflictual positionalities in relation to their captured bodies, inviting the spectators to speculate what the spatial-temporal implications of exploring an alternative rhythm would be. In this microcosmic *comune* of Lampedusa and Linosa, Filippo, Giulietta, Ernesto, Samuele, Maria Signorello, and the Black refugees can be interpreted as embodied signifiers of time

interacting with the built environment, powerfully unsettling the presumptive lack of meanings of precarious bodies.

Chapter 4 Power of/to Imagination: *Zero*, Black Time, and Urban Utopias

> Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?
>
> - Mark Dery, "Black to the Future," 1994
>
> Between my horror at what's happened down at Dovetree and my hopes and fears for my own people, I'm upset and at loose ends and, perhaps, just imagining things.
>
> - Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Talents*, 1998
>
> But that little girl is also an opportunity to make peace with the past and finally be free to live the future.[28]
>
> - Antonio Dikele Distefano, *Qua è rimasto autunno*, 2022

In the final sequence of Netflix's superhero series *Zero* (2021), the Black protagonist Omar ambulates into a phantasmagoric hall with visually blurred figures huddled in a mysterious religious ritual, holding in their hands burning torches that appear discordant from the surrounding darkness. Omar's disappeared-in-real-world mother stands lifeless in the front line, next to his somewhat authoritarian father, where her frigid body maps onto the equally ghostly surroundings. On seeing his mother, the dubiousness that Omar displays when loudly calling her "mamma" magnifies the extent to which his life experience is marked by the conflation between real and unreal, past and present, utopian and dystopian. His unremitting attempt throughout the series to rehabilitate the mother-son linkage finally achieves fruition in an alternative world free

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[28] "Ma quella bambina è anche l'occasione di riappacificarsi con il passato ed essere finalmente liberi di vivere il futuro." Antonio Dikele Distefano, *Qua è rimasto autunno*, Milano: Rizzoli, 2022. The translation is mine.

of real-world restrictions. Till this moment, Omar's mother only haunts his memory and consistently passes through his mind via various material objects: his mother's portrait hung on the wall, a bracelet she gifted him long before, and the basketball jersey with number ten on the back, which Omar frequently wears. Multiple connotations of time interweave between past and present. Simultaneously, the textual allusion to a future-oriented utopianism culminating in *Zero*'s final spectacularizing and allegoric critique enacts an invitation to reassess the conceptual limit of Blackness in Italy's postcolonial epoch towards a multiscalar direction. Elements of spatial and temporal estrangement overlap in an unearthly ground, breaking up the conventional bodily forms of Black existence and widening the scope of the counter-hegemonic perspectives of Black epistemology in Italy's cultural landscape.

Figure 4-1 Omar enters an unknown otherworld where he finally reunites with his disappeared mother

In *Zero*, Omar's superpower of becoming invisible and of *being* in two worlds, already

displayed when he was little, points to a heroic narrative in the sense not so much of individual

narcissism, but as of collective resistance to the sweeping force of capitalist societies that exploit

and intensify differences. It thus should be considered a political project sharing a resolution

similar to the wider spectrum of oppositional cultures (anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-

feminist), speaking to a more radical question of social engagement and responsibility. If we

acknowledge that contemporary oppositional cultures are inherently utopistic in their mission of

confronting the dominant and seeking alternatives, *Zero* as a cultural practice effectuates a

necessary and urgent pathway in its novel transition to a utopian realm amidst the endless

discourses regarding Black Italians' plight of being unable to change. However, the

"oppositional" vision does not necessarily refer to the historical dialectic of what it is and what

has not yet been realized, but more to a dynamic transformation of what Tom Moylan calls a

critical utopia.[29] The show's conclusion—the spatial-temporal travel to an unreal world where

the Black superhero himself appears alienated—largely complicates *literary utopias* in a more

traditional sense as unified and representational texts. It is rather, according to Moylan, "much

more fragmented—narratives intertwining present and future or past and present, single

protagonists being divided into multiples" (45). The time Omar embodies is experienced as more

cyclical than linear, with the past continuing to shape the present and the future. That a Black

utopia is also tied to the idea of reclaiming a lost past or reimagining a new present is powerfully

explored and implicated by Antonio Dikele Distefano, the creator of the show. Thinking of *Zero*

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[29] Tom Moylan here uses the word "critical" in a more intentional way. As he explains later, "'critical' in the Enlightenment sense of *critique* – that is expressions of oppositional thought, unveiling and debunking both the genre itself and the historical situation. As well as 'critical' in the nuclear sense of the critical mass required to make the necessary explosive reaction." Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible. Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination*, Bern: Peter Lang, 2014, p.10.

as a critical utopian text allows me to explore its self-reflexivity and its subtle connections with time and temporality. *Zero* radically turns away from the socio-realist representation of Black Italians' living experiences, and by the breaking up of linear progressive historical time, enables new pathways to reformulate the Black presence in Italy's postcolonial imaginary.

Set in today's Milan, Italy's quintessential symbol of capitalist advancement and a global vanguard of design and fashion, *Zero* is the first Italian television series featuring a predominantly Black-led cast.[30] This series not only marks a watershed for Italian television, as Shelleen Greene suggests,[31] but also represents a fundamental shift for the Afro-Italian cultural landscape as well. Visual productions before *Zero* have been relying, even if not completely, on realist or autobiographical approaches, grounded in debates about questions of national citizenship, colonial history, racial exclusion, and Italy's notorious *ius sanguinis* law. Unlike the American and other European—such as, German—contexts, in Italy cultural productions had not explored the boundaries of Black futurity before *Zero*, which is the first to emphasize this theme as its primary thread of narration.[32] The protagonist, Omar, a Senegalese-Italian pizza-delivery teenager who aspires to become a professional comic-book artist, has the superpower of turning physically invisible when strongly emotionally aroused. His other-than-human body intricates with Milan's urban rhythms through a variety of spatial and temporal confrontations. Though not

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[30] *Zero* is a TV adaptation of the recently published novel, *Non ho mai avuto la mia età* (I was never my age), by the Angolan-Italian writer and artist, Antonio Dikele Distefano. The novel was published by Mondadori, in 2018.

[31] Shelleen Greene, "Review of *Zero*," in *Journal of Italian Cinema & Media Studies* 10, no. 3, 2022, p.527.

[32] See Priscilla Layne, "Space is the Place: Afrofuturism in Olivia Wenzel's *Mais in Deutscheland Und Anderen Galaxien* (2015)," in *German Life and Letters* 71, no. 4 (October 2018): 511–528. This still does not signify that no correlation can be drawn between the people of color in Italy, or more specifically, Black Italians, and the fantastic or surrealistic ways of representation. If we look at Black Italian writing or visual productions in the last few decades, there has constantly been, though indeed in a minor way, clusters of fantastic, imaginative, or horror elements, if not necessarily science-fictional elements within it. In the film *La vita davanti a sé* (2020), the young Black protagonist Momò (Ibrahima Gueye) dreams of a fictive lioness as a friendly company, which reappears figuratively at the very end of the film, during the funeral of the female protagonist Madame Rosa (Sophia Loren). Such a sparkle of visual experiments blurring the threshold between reality and fantasy also finds an echo in Igiaba Scego's novel, *Adua* (2015).

considering *Zero* as one that intentionally invokes utopian or futurist tropes, this chapter argues

that it offers a distinct paradigm to critique everyday racism and confront the fatalistic dead-end

that Black Italians in the last few decades have been futilely attempting to challenge.

Highlighting the exigency of uncovering the underlying implications of utopia and bodily

metamorphosis helps illuminate the show's significance in addressing the politics of utopian

aesthetics as a critical modality for better understanding Milan's multiethnic society. At the same

time, Omar's superpower and the multiple worlds it allows him to inhabit, push my analysis

beyond the context of a specific nation-state, because its theoretical implications for alternative

epistemologies of utopian actions and forms of humanity place Italy in a much larger global

network of Black imagination and liberation set up to fight historical oppression.

This chapter explores alternative pathways to investigate the *urban exergue* in its

temporal dimension, as a more complicated and multisensory site in which experimentations

with Italy's urban margins gesture toward a wide range of temporal arrangements defamiliarizing

the conventional historicization of Italy's cultural involvement with Blackness and the Black

diaspora. The temporal as an analytical lens is thus not secondary or complementary to the

spatial but a radical coordinate around which depictions of Black Italians in *Zero* suggest the

establishment of a new horizon of existence and way of meaning-making. In this chapter, I am

less interested in tracing any genealogical roots of Afro-Italian utopianism/futurity than in

looking at how the efforts at incorporating utopia both as a form and as a narrative theme

accommodate critiques of time and how Milan maintains an urban battlefront where the

confrontation between capitalist expansion and Black livingness provides new modes of viewing

utopia. Speculating a Black utopia in Italy, however, does not signify any kind of optimistic

projection of an Afro-Italian political blueprint or an anticipation for a concrete revolutionary

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action in the near future, but rather helps us better grasp the current anxieties of Black Italians and the conceptual limits of the images of Black existence, bringing to light concurrently the impossibility of imagining a radically different future. As Alex Zamalin argues in his *Black Utopia*, "combining black utopia's unseen transformative possibilities with an awareness of its limitations can invigorate contemporary political thinking" (2). This chapter connects Italy's TV productions where Black Italians as embodied urban exergues conjure new aesthetic implications and the struggles of activists, scholars, and artists that indefatigably push forward the future actualization of Black images. This chapter is conceived with the conviction that only through a careful investigation of time can we fathom the meaning of *being* Black in contemporary Italy.

4.1 Black Pop Culture, Utopian Form, and Transmediality

As Moylan argues, critical utopia destroys the flattening out of traditional utopian writing, and it registers in fact a refashioned narrative form that falls casualty to "the penetration and cooptation of the market system" (43). The shift from literary imaginations resisting the affirmative culture of contemporary capitalism towards a more complex and ambiguous relationship with the latter—portraits of utopia are incorporated into consumer culture and global circulation in view of the development of various new media forms—requires a more careful reading of the temporal critique inherent in the self-critical utopian texts. In the current moment in which transcendental or universalist perceptions of modern time undergo a series of radical contestations, more than ever before, as Derrida reminds us, "to think one's time, especially when one takes the risk or chance of speaking publicly about it, is to register, in order to bring it to play, the fact that the time of this very speaking is artificially produced" (Derrida and Stiegler 3). For Derrida, time as an artifact in the public dimension is "calculated, constrained,

'formatted,' 'initialized' by a media apparatus" (Derrida and Stiegler 3). The political present ought not to be viewed as something given or monochromatic but opens to inventive productions and interpretations made possible by a variety of mediating formats which are, to follow Derrida's words, "*factitious* and *artificial* (original emphasis), hierarchizing and selective" (Derrida and Stiegler 3). Emphasizing the urgency to unhook notions of time from the epistemic construction of the *historical*, and to redefine the interpretive limits of "reality" and "actuality," this proposal testifies to the belief that lived experiences in general are subject to distortion due to the transmissive intervention of (especially new) media technologies. Here, the mediating characteristic of Afro-Italy thus deals with time, temporality, and utopia both at a contextual and a formal level, adopting a specific rhetoric in terms of the global circulation of productions (in *Zero*'s case, Netflix), and without temporal or even linguistic restrictions. The legibility of the Black present is mobilized in such a radical way that the transmitted images provide another possibility for exploring the disrupting forces of Black revolution.

The meditation on the shifting dynamics of the Afro-Italian temporalities raises exactly the question about how national experiences of historical negotiation are technologically re-mediated through global networks of production, documentation, and circulation. For the past few decades, visual (film, documentary, television) productions on race, migration, and more specifically the Black diaspora in Italy were dominated by Italian producers and usually displayed limited attention for circulation and marketing. A quite large number of them were even independent productions, so screenings in many cases were subject to the physical movement of filmmakers themselves. Therefore, the original copy-image, as argues Rey Chow, is "trapped in its own aura, imprisoned in the specificity of its 'natural' time and place" (4). There has been a recent change in this situation, as many Black Italian productions have started

to be released officially via international on-demand streaming services, in particular Netflix (*Zero*, *Summertime*) and Amazon Prime Video (*Autumn Beat*).[33] Such a switch in strategies of screening accessibility massively enlarges the range of their global circulation, requiring a more careful consideration over how new experiences of approaching images engaged with Black Italy would also have a temporal connotation in their confrontations with the non-territoriality of (moving) copy-images today. The copy-image, "by virtue of becoming (re)producible in forms that were previously unimaginable, lives a life of versatility and mobility, enabling even the most distant and exotic sights to be held in one's hand, visually pried open, and examined up close, at the same time that they are disseminated far and wide" (Chow 4). Reframing the Black spaces in Italy as a political present—not given but actively produced, reproduced, sifted, and invested— suggests exactly a reconfiguration of the conventional logic of images, and artistic productions in general, in a period in which the notion of reality is set in consistent motion and transformation. What is at stake here, as anticipated previously, is not so much about simply highlighting the postcolonial deterritorialization of technologically mediated images, but rather to rethink the collapse of time lag between the (non-)recorded past, the present happenings, and the predictable infinity of visual reproductivity. For this becoming-instantaneous visibility, or rather, the new order of times in Europe's postcolonial context, what new epistemological forms of Black presence and fugitivity would come to the fore? What would happen when we take a reversed route, to look at how the future partitioning of Black images not only sets in motion the actuality but also shifts the way to reassert memories of colonialism and Black diasporas in contemporary Italy?

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[33] "Black Italian productions" refers to the Italian visual productions in which Black actors play leading roles.

4.2 Afro-Italian Future: An Alternative Critique on Time and the Postcolonial

Discourses of urbanscape are so closely bound up with space that the temporal dimension in cities is always ignored in meticulous considerations. When contemplating the metaphysical source of "looking down on" from the summits of skyscrapers in New York City, Michel de Certeau engagingly pinpoints how out-of-grasp vertical constructions in the American city are also related to a temporal texture.[34] A modern city represents a multitude of time-space compressions, allowing its inhabitants to embody particular psychic and physical experiences marked by variegated temporal trajectories. The epistemological shift in conceiving a metropole—from *urban-spatial* to *urban-temporal*, or rather, to a shifting time-space dynamic—builds up a fundamental layer to the effort of theorizing *urban exergue* and the practices of Black experiences in urban margins. Envisioning the role of the possible linkage of multiple temporalities in re-spatializing urbanscapes necessitates reconsidering our engagement with urban exergue, one that, challenging the past as the dominating force in articulating temporal knowledge, opens up a new terrain where past, present, and future could partake in an entangled and non-linear process of meaning-production. The Black presence in Europe's metropolitan centers itself assumes a temporal undertone when considering Blackness a certain type of marginalized group. The rational past-present progression places the histories of European colonialism above the public call to understand the Afro-European present. It almost becomes commonplace to recognize the urgency of exposing Italy's often forgotten colonial entanglements and ascertaining the common absence of Blackness in the construction of its national as well as, if we can say, urban identities. After all, in most Italian metropolises that

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[34] For New York, unlike Rome, its present "invents itself, from hour to hour, in the fact of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future." Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988, p.91.

foreground their built environments and urban cultures for centuries, inhabitants and recent immigrants of African descent are undoubtedly forced out of the formation of collective imaginaries. Yet, to claim that Black subjects in Italy did not develop a shared urban past does not necessarily indicate the impossibility of forging a Black urban-temporal route through which the recuperated past might not, discursively and epistemologically, monopolize the frayed present, and more significantly, the unimaginable future yet to come. On the other hand, being an *outsider* in history may constructively constitute an advantage for an activist in the sense of being able to stay closer to utopia's political commentary on the present.

This temporal elusiveness itself—the absolute evacuation of the Black urban past—should be considered a particular kind of historical account, closely connected with the postcolonial inertia of geographical thinking. Time and space, in their simplest terms, represent only two aspects of the same problem. Continuing the task undertaken by previous chapters here, I would inquire about the possible outcome by rethinking *urban exergue* through a spatial-temporal reversal and the way it can further deepen the conceptualization of Afro-Italian subjectivities. Such a postcolonial "anachronism," however, is not a singular case. It is, in essence, not specific to any geographical context. An implausible explanation is that colonial encounters with local indigenous peoples also induce a colonial *temporalization*, converging the multiple temporalities into one linear and homogeneous aggregation. Walter Benjamin, for example, has investigated this homogeneity around the concept of "progress," an attribute for many critics and theorists as the defining symbol of modern Western historical consciousness. The shift to postmodern and postcolonial society does not signal, instead, a rupture of progress narratives. "Though intractable differences divulged by culture contact always threatened to expose the fiction of a single homogeneous present, such differences were *temporally managed*

(original emphasis) by distancing the indigene from the colonizer's present" (Lim 45). The post in *postcolonial*, in this sense, emphasizes, rather than undermines, the temporal continuity of imperialist domination, not as terminated or expired. The colonizer's temporal ideology not only refuses to wind down in the face of postcolonial challenges but also exposes itself as the unique carrier of temporal rhetoric against which the time embodied by the colonized has no way of justifying spectral presences and upholding the right of operating autonomously.

What does the future mean amidst the urgency of grappling with Italy's colonial past? What forces mediate different perceptions of time in which new possibilities of Black experiences have their way of claiming meanings? The theorization of "urban exergue" as a particular form of urban margin is postulated on the reinvention of the Afro-Italian identity as a temporal arch bridging past and present. Thus, furthering our understanding of "exergue" as a temporal framework becomes pertinent to explore how the time associated with Italy's colonial-postcolonial transition is multiplied, reproduced, and transmitted across various media platforms. The period my dissertation examines corresponds to the cultural-political shifts in Italy in the last two decades to a transitional era when Black Italians began to extend their expressive spectrum as a collective voice representative of their own. Moving away from the focus on the scenes of colonial legacy, histories of migration, and the struggles of Italians with the transition to a multicultural society, the conceptual ground tested by the new cultural productions in this inquiry forces a disruption of a linear and singular conceptualization of temporality, such as the revisiting of the imperialist construction of geography. It reveals also the very political act of imagination and speculation as a terrain open to experimentations with new temporal experiences deeply embedded into the (post)modern rhythms of urban time. *Zero* as an artistic production is no longer just a work of popular art as such but also "a veritable system of documentation,

information, and construction of the visibility and conceivability of the world" (Rancière and

Engelmann 106). If we continue to follow Rancière in his thesis on politics as revolving around

"the properties of space and the possibilities of time," what is at stake here then is how reframing

and rearticulating the sensible world could help develop revolutionary potentialities (Rancière,

The Politics of Aesthetics 13). Current situations in Italy may still not allow an exact sociological

account of "Black politics," but the role of images and artists themselves as vehicles of social

struggles radicalizes the sensible transitoriness of *exergue* as an open ground to rehearse Black

collective sentiments within a new cultural landscape that is consistently revamping the meaning

of reality and Black livingness.

Like most of Antonio Dikele Distefano's *oeuvre*,[35] this Netflix show is also set in Milan's

metropolitan areas while simultaneously and fundamentally stepping forward by juxtaposing its

position as a financial center and as a major destination for Black immigrants. The northern

Italian metropole fittingly becomes a primary site for meaning-production, radicalizing the

conceptual boundaries of the implied rigidity, fixity, and timelessness of the utopia as rendered

in its traditional Western contexts. One of *Zero*'s principal narratives occurs in a fictional

suburban area known as "Barrio," interweaving a series of episodes revolving around a thug of

young Blacks seeking to save their neighborhood from a disgraceful real estate plan that, by

destroying the Barrio district, forces its inhabitants to leave. Living also in Barrio, an area

populated by mostly colored immigrants, Omar bicycles around the city's diverse areas to deliver

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[35] At the center of the Italian writer and filmmaker Antonio Dikele Distefano's *oeuvre* is often the motif of imagination, time, and the city of Milan. One intriguing case can be proved from his latest novel, *Qua è rimasto autunno* (2022). The book is set against the backdrop of the funeral of its haunting protagonist, Paco, a promising Black Italian musician. Both Paco's wife, Ife, and his brother, Tito, struggle to move forward as they cannot let go of the past. Ife leaves the family and the daughter, Aisha, whom Tito has no choice but to look after. Distefano's novel offers an intriguing case to explore how past and present are interlaced and how the reconnection of Ife and Tito after Paco's death is projected towards a new time-space compression, allowing them to redefine the meanings of Black love, family, and subjectivities in contemporary Italy.

pizzas and thus has the opportunity to encounter the affluent financial districts interspersed with ultra-modernist skyscrapers. During one of his deliveries, Omar comes across Anna, an aspiring white Italian architect, and falls in love with her. However, what appears to be a promising interracial love romance is soon jeopardized when Omar finds out that the person maneuvering the unscrupulous plan to destroy Barrio is Anna's father. Despite such a personal-collective conflict, Omar displays no hesitation in deploying his superpower and in the end defeating the corporate institution which turned out to be aligned with a criminal network. We soon discover that Anna's father has been paying vandals to deteriorate the neighborhood to purchase it at a low price and then raise the rent so that the inhabitants have no choice but to leave.

Figure 4-2 Omar works as a pizza deliverer traveling among different parts of Milan

Here, Omar's dedication to fighting capitalist speculation to protect the local Black community and to safeguard their fundamental right to live and operate autonomously requires more careful consideration of *utopia* as both a historical and a theoretical phenomenon. If we

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agree that utopia speaks against the affirmative and homogenizing tendency maintained by the dominant ideology, the vision that *Zero* forges can be regarded as a cultural symbol disrupting its socio-economic undertone. Both A. L. Morton and Thomas More in the earliest texts describe utopia around the growth of a new social-economic system in which expanding production and consumption for accumulating profit become the principal motivator for the emergence of a new ideological paradigm. The images included in More's *Utopia* were "not blueprints to be imposed directly on everyday reality, but they were the beginnings, at the level of imagination, of actual solutions to current problems" (Moylan 3). As a result of a growth- and profit-oriented economy, the utopian narrative in times of deep transformation suits the discourse that considers both what is and what is not yet achieved. However, as Moylan then points out, a significant element that could differentiate the utopianized alternative societies of More's day from earlier visions lies in the geographical shift from the European continent to the "new world" in the Americas. "The Americas especially offered space in which the imagination could work out alternatives that broke the bounds of the historical status quo" (Moylan 3). Colonial exploitation created not only a geographical hierarchy but also a temporal scheme that from the 16th century began a prevailing process of homogenization of other times in other worlds.

In the period of global capitalism, this tendency abstracts lived time into quantifiable units of production and consumption. Milan's historical position in bridging global capitalism and Italy's national economy makes it an unmistakable token for acceleration, progress, and the instantaneity of real urban time. On the other hand, the modern conception of time is also deeply inscribed in the development of European industry, which is, if located within the European continent, centered around cities. Industrial production and urbanization centralized the conception of time based on a singular and linear definition—progress. Though Lefebvre holds

the conviction that industry and the arrival of production drive the conception of European cities away from the problems of the ancient or Greek city, he also doubts the modern urban view of time as only a linear, singular, as well as homogeneous one (*Writings on Cities* 214). Rather, it is plural, centrifugal, and ceaselessly proliferated in everyday social practices. The question of everyday life, one of his most crucial contributions to Marxist critical theories, refers to a multifaceted and ongoing epistemology. It proposes to look at the symbiotic interactions of space and time, which, according to Lefebvre, is a thing "for each person to invent."[36] This statement appears to be egalitarianist or oversimplified, but can still be rehabilitated as a political call, or as a mirror against which we could speculate what has been left out from the modern epistemologies of time and urban temporality. What is at stake here is to project the production of time in its widest sense, smashing the presupposition that it essentially relates to the domain of liberty and that everyone within a certain society holds full and unquestioned mastery of their own time. To put it differently, urban time inherently denotes a plurality of trajectories and should always embrace possibilities, which, however, does not signify an equal dissemination of rights in time-making across different groups within a certain society. As Massimiliano Tomba declares, capitalism not only destroys space through the acceleration of time but also alters "the form of human experience and human being itself" (vii). Temporal possibilities produced, documented, and mediated by the socially marginalized cannot receive equal recognition, completely removed from mainstream temporal discourses. In this sense, the exclusive feature of urban time is akin to that of urban space, where the presumed plurality and heterogeneity of the social conception of rationalized time encounter a series of problems when considering the issue

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[36] Henri Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities*, 214. Writing much more extensively about space than time in the urban context, Lefebvre throughout his *oeuvre* did not elaborate in depth his specific thoughts on urban time. Perhaps one of the most useful is his concept of "rhythmanalysis."

of suffering bodies. The internalization of capital in developing the Euro-American conscience catalyzed the unilinear conception of time, thus excluding all the other different instantiations of social forms as aberrant or backward (Tomba xiii).

Italy as a relatively latecomer in respect to postcolonial discourses presents a unique plight in which aesthetic experimentations and the urgency of historical reckonings advance hand in hand such that the conception of history itself bears open horizontalities. This is surely not to disregard history, nor negate historical time in centering public consciousness, but just to rethink historical time much beyond the universal and ideologically confined conception of history. Critiquing time as an analytical category indicates a shifting and transitional positionality and foregrounds the recent emergent anxieties of Black Italians as signifying temporal resistance. Time, in this sense, assumes a contradictory field, in which the special production of Black lived and rhythmed time also mobilizes to provide a new connotation for the *post* in postcolonial in the Italian context. Yet, the proposal to re-approach the *post* in postcolonial does not entail deliberate deletion or adherence to a kind of postmodernist angst of endless disorders but relocates the linear historical time within a much wider spectrum of conceptual possibilities in which different modes of temporal infrastructure can furnish a radical meaning of Afro-Italian temporality and urban identity. Capitalism's antithetical *other* could pinpoint a variety of local representations, among which the non-existence of Black Italians in Italy's collective imaginary refers to a historical lack of presence and cultural participation, at least partially testifying to the quandary of imagining a radically different future. This perhaps acts as the primary rationale of why the rights to search for alternative temporalities and modes of representation are violently cast off. If there were not such massive tragedies against Black people in modern Italy as elsewhere in the world, such as the United States, then what would be the socio-historical contexts against which

possible aesthetic experimentations of Black futurist thinking lay their epistemological

foundations to claim their meanings?

In a moment characterized by postnationalist perceptions of Italian identity defined as

shifting, hybrid, and transitional, *Zero* offers a radically new case challenging the boundary of

temporal knowledge as a critical addition to spatial spectacle-critique, which has already been

revealed to be more extensive and naturally more perceptible. The provocation *Zero* poses to the

entire cultural landscape of postcolonial Italy is not so much a revolutionary mentality fighting

against temporal erasure or an activist piece reminding its spectators of a forgotten community,

but a series of tensions in which different temporalities are consistently produced and mediated

through bodily emotional experiences. That such a renovated discourse of "postcolonial time" in

Italy's metropolitan imaginaries is not pre-existing discourages a dead-end reading, and at the

same time implies something made and remade through self-fashioning experimentations. This

non-totalizing and non-essentialist response to forms of time valorizes the aesthetic experiments

of postcolonial temporalities within a larger spectrum of the temporal landscape. For *Zero*, as

well as for rethinking *post* as a temporal logic in its inherent connotation for future

considerations—the end of history and the beginning of a new period, if not necessarily

indicating an absolute discontinuity, indeed, solicits a more careful examination over how the

epistemologies of the future become part of Italy's postcolonial imaginary.

In the Italian context, the seeming unrelatedness between Blackness and the idea of the

future does not necessarily, however, denote a conceptual deadlock. Instead, by juxtaposing the

critical dimension of capture as the liberalization of temporal boundaries with visual

representations of bodily metamorphosis regarded as utopian or futurist desires, one could

advance the Afro-Italian futurist meanings implicitly addressed through/in recent cultural

appearances. In 1994, Mark Dery first coined the term "Afrofuturism" in a series of interviews

with three African-American thinkers.[37] The notion of Afrofuturism, according to Dery, is

grounded on the belief that images of 20th-century technology can also serve as a medium for

expressing African-American concerns on freedom, social rights, and racial discrimination (180).

This suggests the challenge Afrofuturism poses to the previously presumed incompatibility

between Black subjectivity and the spatio-temporal dynamism informed by technology-related

imaginations. The new paradigm insists in the political appeal that the power of producing and

inventing time, and that of destabilizing temporal boundaries and fragmenting the authority of

historical narrative, ought not to be perceived, at least from a racial perspective, as exclusive or

discriminatory. African-American speculative fictions as a pop genre usually seek unlikely

places in an effort to interweave narratives that will not possibly manifest in real or familiar

circumstances. Although Afrofuturism continues the artistic ambition projecting towards the

future as foregrounded by the historical Futurism that originated in early 20th-century Italy,

Afrofuturists in a way distinguish themselves from the latter in that they uphold a more critical

and complicated position concerning the past, or specifically, the systematic and complete

eradication of African historical and cultural remnants.[38] As Priscilla Layne summarizes in a

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[37] Mark Dery coined the term "Afrofuturism" in interviews with three African American thinkers: Samuel R. Delany, a semiotician and long-standing member of the science fiction community; Greg Tate, a cultural critic; and Tricia Rose, then Assistant Professor in New York University, currently Chancellor's Professor of Africana Studies and the Director of the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America at Brown University. Mark Dery, "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delaney, Greg Tate and Tricia Rose," in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994, p.187.
[38] In terms of the systematic suppression of Black history and of the imaginative temporal narratives, the Afrofuturism largely rooted in the American context seems to sustain a slightly different implication from the diasporic voices in contemporary European contexts. As Samuel R. Delany declares in the interview with Dery, "The historical reason that we've been so impoverished in terms of future images is because, until recently, as a people we were systematically forbidden any images of our past. I have no idea where, in Africa, my Black ancestors came from because, when they reached the slave markets of New Orleans, records of such things were systematically destroyed. If they spoke their own languages, they were beaten or killed. The slave pens in which they were stored by lots were set up so that no two slaves from the same area were allowed to be together. Children were regularly sold away from their parents. And every effort conceivable was made to destroy all vestiges of what

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similar spirit, "Afrofuturists cast off the problems which allowed Futurism to align itself so easily with Italian Fascism, namely its misogyny, its uncritical praise of technology, its cult of youth, and its disavowal of the past. In contrast, Afrofuturists highly appreciate the past, and their interest in technology does not necessitate a rejection of pre-modern epistemologies" (512). In this sense, the futurist epistemology for African diasporic writers and artists operates as an alternative tool to empower the marginalized voices and re-establish a conceptual framework in which the past, present, and future can co-exist and interact.[39] It not only questions speculative fiction as a racially "monochromic" field, as a "white" genre but also radically mobilizes the previous Eurocentric exclusivity automatically discrediting the Black time that should have claimed its existence in its rights.

The past becomes a competing space of stories, a network of interpretational vertexes, which approximates the reality of *being* and *existing* as Black in Milan by staging it, in *Zero*, at the intersection of both utopian and futurist perspectives. The multiplicity of narratives, even from the retrospective position, gives the lie to an apparent contingency of time that posits postcolonial revisionism as a reaction to colonial-era historicity rather than a recitation of parallel, as more accurate and creative, narratives. Both utopias' inherent criticism of the political present and (Afro)futurism's imagination of future alternatives fragment the authority of

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might endure as African social consciousness. When, indeed, we say that this country was founded on slavery, we must remember that we mean, specifically, that it was founded on the systematic, conscientious, and massive destruction of African cultural remnants." Mark Dery, "Black to the Future," pp.190–191.

[39] That Black culture is an inherently futurist culture is also widely acknowledged. As many Black critics have pointed out, Black culture or *Blackness* itself suggests points of connection with the subject of fantasy or science fiction in that both inherently deal with the condition of being alien or alienated by the surrounding world. Speaking of the American context, as Greg Tate states, being Black "is a science fiction experience." Dery, "Black to the Future," 208. Simone Brioni and Daniele Comberiati, in their recent co-authored book, *Italian Science Fiction: The Other in Literature and Film* (2019), also emphasize "being other" as the topic of convergence for subjects in both science fictional narratives and those categorized as immigrant or postcolonial in the context of contemporary Italy. See, Simone Brioni and Daniele Comberiati, *Italian Science Fiction: The Other in Literature and Film*, London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, p.5.

historical narrative. The show, therefore, does not indicate a purely aesthetic movement

displaying hostility to and detachment from the past, nor does it seek a negation of historicization

or the tradition of systematical counter-memory itself, but is a much politically engaged proposal

that valorizes the past and includes it in critical conversations with Blackness as a political

present, crafting a new conceptual tool of rehabilitating the contemporary occurrence of

backward-looking and forward-thinking within the same conceptual framework. This redirecting

of Black Italian temporality towards a predictive as much as retrospective approach broadens the

intellectual aim of the current period. *Zero*, in this sense, "demonstrates our incapacity to

imagine the future and brings us down to earth to apprehend our present in all its limitations"

(Tomba 45). As mentioned before, Eurocentric racial narratives in the modern era have

frequently disrespected Africa's time as primitive, backward, or "anachronistic." Such a "non-

time," echoing previous discussions on the conventional depictions of Black subjects as "non-

geographical" ones, also becomes a contentious terrain. As in other European contexts, the

urgent demand of politically comprehending the haunting effect of the colonial past on the Black

present and the meaning of the Black present through the revitalization of the colonial history

calls for rethinking the possibility of new epistemologies in also disrupting the temporal

provincialism "that produces the self-representation of the Western world as the tip of the arrow

of historical time" (Tomba x). If we are to label the previous chapters as efforts to investigate the

spatialization of time, this last chapter implies a reversed one that, by displaying the hierarchical

reality of historical time, gestures towards a less tangible and possibly harder perspective—the

temporalization of space. This proposal of shifting perspective of and intervening critically with

Italy' postcolonial time offers alternative methods of grasping and articulating historical time and

temporal linearity. This effort, quite obviously, joins the temporal critique advanced by other

anti-colonial struggles across the Global South, and in general, the subaltern groups and those denied subjectivation in the formation and normalization of modern time.

Zero, on the other hand, locates itself uniquely between utopian and Afrofuturist traditions. It not only deviates by overcoming the historical tendency of utopian genres to limit the imagination to one particular ideal but also differs from the Afrofuturist movement spearheaded in the African American context that centers on the aestheticization of scientific and technological advancements. Time travels are usually enabled by space travels to a new planet or an unknown territory through, for example, spacecrafts. Yet in *Zero*, these sci-tech components are replaced by the supernatural transfiguration of Black bodies in the setting of Milan's spatial fabric. This close engagement with urban reality mobilizes the binary opposition of old/dominant and new/oppositional societies in a more ambiguous light (Moylan 43).

The fact that *Zero* is the first Black Italian production to utilize utopian and futurist tropes as its primary narrative may reflect that the Afro-Italian cultural imaginary has been nothing short of dystopian to date. There has always been a frenzied impulse to stay abreast of other European contexts that have had much longer episodes of colonialism, but always from a dominant historical perspective, meaning that one could attain a "correct" understanding of race and Blackness in Italy only by accounting for the history of colonialism and Italy's transnational mobility. This indeed exemplifies what Kodwo Eshun calls "the fatigue with futurity" (288). "Because the practice of counter-memory defined itself as an ethical commitment to history, the dead, and the forgotten, the manufacture of conceptual tools that could analyze and assemble counter-futures was understood as an unethical dereliction of duty" (Eshun 288). In the Italian context, what has plagued the Anglophone world throughout the 1980s is also prevalent. The emphasis on historical linearity becomes the monotone for postcolonial thinking, leaving no

room for fantasizing about a completely different mode of living and experiencing. However, it may not be enough to discuss or even claim what *Zero* represents on screen reveals anything equivalent to a utopian project or what Ernest Bloch has termed a utopian "spirit," but hewing closer to Fredric Jameson's category of "utopia impulse" exploring the possibility of imagination and invention and formulating utopianism without Utopia (xiv).

The effort of *temporalizing urban space* does not signify a rejection of space, nor that space is transformed into a temporal dimension. Rather, it suggests a redefinition of spatial arrangements and spatial scales similarly undergirded through a hierarchical ideology. This also points toward a conceptual shift to exploring the possible conjunctures of urban space and urban time without compromising one against the other. "Time and space are intimately linked and measured in terms of one another" (Lefebvre, *Writings on Cities* 31). What appears on the first page of Marinetti's *Manifesto del Futurismo*—the futurist, utopic, and desired version of the city—can be also viewed as anticipating the role of the urban landscape in multiplying visionary perspectives and defying the traditional ideas of urban staticity.[40] Urban spaces as one of the primary dimensions nurturing modernist imaginaries represent overwhelmingly places as radical sites of transformation and futurist desires. The lived experience of Black Italians, in a similar spirit, suggests reframing this question to a racial level, emphasizing the point that geographical concerns, in any sense, cannot generalize the regulatory, imperialist, and hierarchical intimacy of the nation-states in Italy. Black Italians already destabilize its presumed lack of livingness, challenging the conception of time and futurity projected only in the image of a single political form and ways of being. In *Zero*, Omar's superpower of being able to disappear suggests his relationship with the surrounding physical world, disrupting the representation of a homogeneous

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[40] See, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Manifesto del Futurismo*, 1914.

black Italian subject by positing the possibility of multiple ways of being and experiencing

Black, which do not necessarily coalesce to form a unified subject or follow a linear narrative.

4.3 Visualizing the Invisible: Urban Rhythm and Black Utopian Lives

Zero, thus, brings forward a unique case challenging the conventional portraits of Milan's

urbanity and experimenting with urban exergue as a multilayered way of living and

experiencing, wherein a variety of new rhythms, tensions, and overlaps are mobilized to define a

new urban epistemology. In the opening scene of *Zero*'s first episode, another Black character,

Sherif, is furiously running after Omar, holding a gun, and trying to kill him. When Omar hurries

into an enclosed room in an abandoned building and bolts the iron door, he finally escapes the

gripping scene of Sharif chasing after him. In later scenes, it is explained that Omar is accused of

setting a motorcycle on fire in the neighborhood. How *Zero* opens the whole series—an intense

gunfight episode without clear narrativity—introduces an aesthetic message of foregrounding the

tone for the whole series as a TV showcase characterized by pressing motifs of Black fugitivity,

violence, and racial liberation. What seems to be a commercialized spectacular stunt designed to

pique the audience's interest embodies the central intervention addressed by the effort to theorize

the *urban exergue* in its temporal dimension. "Exergue" refers to disruptive forces that have the

potential to shift or reverse the linear rhetoric of time. Such a deliberate intervention is usually

presented to reevaluate the whole system. In this sense, *Zero*'s opening critique of the role of

rhythm in the process of comprehending Black urban temporalities raises fundamental questions

about how everyday conditions of a Black individual's life could address and potentially redefine

the boundaries of postcolonial temporalities as a larger collective dimension. *Zero*'s implication

of rhythmic aesthetics maps onto what Lefebvre advances in his effort to mediate between the

minutiae of everyday life and metaphysical considerations. The moving archive of postcolonial

times in Italy thus champions a non-calculable understanding of time that is resistant to abstract

generalization (Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis* xi). Lefebvre's proposal for rhythmanalysis, similar to

his more well-known theories on space, is a non-essentialist mode of recognizing the socially

produced temporal patterns. Unlike the Hegelian notion of time as teleological progression,

rhythmanalysis employs developed forms—from natural and mechanical rhythms to repetitions

and cyclicality—to foreground the lived experiences of temporal scales. The evil power of

capital historically not only determines modern notions of humanness and the human body,

where racialized ones are categorized at the bottom of the hierarchy, but it also constructs itself

around what Lefebvre calls "the time of living" (*Rhythmanalysis* 51). The rhythm that is

inextricably associated with capital points to both the rhythm of production and destruction, ups

and downs. Lefebvre explains:

> […] in fact, there were, as we have seen, great rhythms of historical time: apology for the
> body and following that negation of the body—exaltation of love and pleasure, then
> depreciation and apology for frivolity—taste for and then refusal of violence, etc. Capital
> replaced these alternatives with the conflicting dualities of production and destruction,
> with increasing priority for the destructive capacity that comes at its peak and is raised to
> a world scale. Which, on the negative side, therefore, plays the determining role in the
> conception of the world and the worldly (*Rhythmanalysis* 51).

What Lefebvre elaborates on here is nothing new, as he admits thereafter. Over centuries, capital

has gained the power to monopolize social consciousness so that it tends to penetrate and

determine the foundation of social rhythms without, in most cases, leaving its imperialist marks.

This also regards the Western European formation of temporal ideology, sweeping away all the

other particularities antagonistic to the dominant mode of capital production. Such an idea might

reverberate with, at least partially, what Cedric Robinson coined *racial capitalism*, which states

that "the development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial

directions, so too did social ideology" (37). What this viewpoint emphasizes—the inherent

linkage between capitalist ideology and racial particularities—speaks exactly to the vulnerability

of rhythms as contingent upon social recognition by those already overrepresented as the

universal human in capitalist societies. The idea, or the basic presence of rhythm in Western

European imaginaries, thus assumes an infrastructural spirit as something usually invisible but

subjective to be spotted and reevaluated as to its importance to the functionality of urban systems

once it suffers from interruption, destruction, or irregular external forces. Rhythm is integral to

the lived experience but does not necessarily exist as a known or recognized one. "It is in the

psychological, social, and organic unity of the 'perceiver' who is oriented towards the perceived,

which is to say towards objects, surroundings, and other people, that the rhythms that compose

this unity are given" (Rhythmanalysis 77). This relates to the notion of rhythm as simultaneously

both personal as well as social and external. The opening rhythmic intensity in *Zero* is a

disrupting stimulus, challenging the limits of temporal perception and expanding new directions

for various modes of generating rhythms as meaning-productions. Therefore, a possible approach

to rhythmanalysis in Italy's postcolonial time requires addressing time as constantly produced

and mediated through multiple media interventions rather than as something taken. As

previously stated, the Afrofuturist trope epitomized in *Zero* is not informed by certain kinds of

technology that have far been achieved or even imagined in our real world, nor anchored

anymore in a completely fictional framework where either subjects, objects, or geographical

settings are crafted with ideas of non-humanism or posthumanism. Instead, it is an aesthetic

invention set in Italy's real time and real space and demonstrates explicit concerns about the

growing number and visibility of Black Italians in Italy's metropolitan center, Milan. The

inevitable sociality of rhythms requires linking the mediation of *Zero*'s experimentation with

temporal aesthetics with historical and social contexts. Unlike the cosmological (concerned with nature) or the phenomenological (related to duration) approaches to time and temporal consciousness, a much more society-grounded approach emphasizes the presentism of plurality and the struggle over conflicting rhythms.

According to the prominent British historian John Foot, "The story of Milan can be read as the story of a nation" (3). People coming from Milan's surrounding countryside and other northern Italian regions began populating the city in the nineteenth century, coinciding with its continuous waves of industrialization (Petrillo 34). The first emergence of large factories and the subsequent establishment of an industrial system in the first half of the twentieth century became the very reason for which Milan and its surrounding districts "had gradually become accustomed to acting as a clearing house for people of different origins and mentalities" (Petrillo 34). In the past few decades, Milan has gone through a series of tumultuous changes. It has witnessed many of the socio-political vicissitudes of postwar Italy (Foot 1-3). As the epicenter of Italy's *boom economico*, Milan has rapidly become a major destination for hundreds of thousands of migrants from the Italian peninsula. Rather than being wiped out from public discourses and collective memories, its urban peripheries have turned into a drastic dimension through which the imaginary boundaries of Milan's urban identity have consistently opened to new possibilities and interpretations. Its extraliterary margin has always been the nucleus for literary and visual experimentation, a process spectacularizing the shifting entanglements between places and spaces and the changing compositions of inhabitants in its metropolitan as well as suburban areas. This, quite reasonably, also ought to be cast into a recent larger phenomenon of transnational immigration in Italy, a transitional era when the blurred boundaries between local,

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national, and global declarations of urban realities, for the first time, bear a radical racial reformulation.

The stories of *Zero* take place in the Barrio, a fictional district that is set in the actual Milanese district "Barona," located on the city's southwestern outskirts. Barona, one of the most symbolic and important areas in Milan today, is a gathering place for young Milanese, becoming a cradle for the development of subculture (rap, trap, and street art) in the city.[41] One of its biggest and most dynamic sites, Piazzale Donne Partigiane, has also recently become an urban venue where depictions of Black women speak to the political and racial undertones it bears. Urban modernization serves as a basic thread for reflection on urban time. In the urban context, as Lefebvre contends, struggles between fractions and groups "strengthen the feeling of belonging" (*Writings on Cities* 67). In *Zero*, political confrontations over living space assume a racial significance between Black immigrants and building speculations epitomized by Anna's father, with the city itself as the real stake for rights, identity, and belonging. Italy's economic and financial center, Milan, becomes the battleground that necessitates a re-evaluation of the meaning of the city not as a production of material objects but rather as a relational organism that mediates, among many mediations, urban society as a whole.

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[41] Simona Romanò, *Milano, strade multietniche e rap: la Barona è molto più di Zero*, Leggo, accessed in 2023, 2021, https://www.leggo.it/italia/milano/milano_serie_netflix_barona_zero_31_maggio_2021-5992655.html?refresh_ce

Figure 4-3 Piazzale Donne Partigiane, one of the major gathering places in the Barona district, in Milan's southwestern outskirts. Source: Author.

In this regard, *Zero* represents not only a critical and urgent contribution that invites us to rethink the positionality of second-generation Black Italians in contemporary Italian society, but also constitutes an urgent reminder for us to re-examine the meaning of urban margins in foregrounding and transforming how we perceive urban knowledge as a whole. The city is a condensed dimension of space and time, involving both realistic facts and fictional narratives. The city of the Black future does not refer to the materialization of technology that embraces the potential of erasing racial antagonism in everyday situations but to the possibility of enabling Black people to locate a new method of rationalizing time and space. This aesthetic innovation perfectly performs what Lefebvre called the "experimental utopian city," where the nomadic

inhabitants could obtain mastery over their bodies and choose "their own sensory environment" and "organization of space" (*Writings on Cities* 12).

Though Omar is the only character that explicitly displays his superpower, the show gives a general impression of an artistic intent with the idea that imagination, fantasy, and the right to exploring an alternative mode of Black diasporic existence should not be restricted to a particular individual. *Zero*, in fact, interweaves several narrative threads and a group of fantasy-esque characters. Reflecting a political agenda, this aesthetic choice not only points toward a collective dimension but also proposes a utopian strategy to conceive a life beyond crisis, anxiety, and uncertainty. The material conditions of existence, in a way, generate the most fundamental basis upon which utopistic imagination might emerge to act as a critical device alternative to the present praxis. When one day Omar brings a free pizza from the pizzeria where he works to a homeless elder also living in the Barrio neighborhood, Dietmar, the latter starts to boast about his own superpower: "Eh, nobody sees me. But I see what people don't. I know everyone's secrets, including yours."[42] This seemingly oversimplistic or even naïve scene stands in stark contrast with what might be the most humiliating and annoying moment in the whole series when a group of gangsters violently beat the scrapped car Dietmar stays in with iron bars. One even climbs on top of the car, peeing toward Dietmar through the car's skylight.

In a subsequent scene, the sudden discovery of Dietmar's dead body might also be regarded as a major shift in Omar's formational journey, a tale of awakening that has the power to drive him to recalibrate his existential boundaries not from a personal or individualist perspective anymore but as a member belonging to and bound up with the whole Barrio community. These individual-collective and everyday-political paths thus propose another type

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[42] *Zero*, Antonio Dikele Distefano, Menotti, Stefano Voltaggio, Massimo Vavassori, Carolina Cavalli and Lisandro Monaco (2021), Italy: Fabula Pictures and Red Joint Film. Netflix.

of *Bildung*, reflecting exactly Moylan's emphasis on "process" in critical utopias (Moylan xvi). As he explains, "in the new utopia, the primacy of societal alternative over character and plot is reversed, and the alternative society and indeed the original society fall back as settings for the foregrounded political question of the protagonists" (Moylan 45). *Zero*, throughout its episodes, presents a collection of individual commentaries whose fantastical interventions altogether can challenge attempts to encapsulate an authoritative and homogeneous vision of Afrofuturist epistemology within the Italian context. This might be particularly relevant if Omar's family is taken as the testing ground for the possibility of multiple ways of experiencing and living as Black subjects.

From the initial sequences, the show also follows a relatively independent narrative line of Omar's younger sister, Awa, also a teenager, confronting the moment of *coming-of-age* disorientations. Awa initially displays a certain kind of eyesight problem that is common at this age. The show then implicates a mythic connection: Omar's use of his invisibility power will cause ocular and mental disturbances for Awa. Parallel to Omar's increasingly frequent employment of the superpower that allows him to become a heroic figure by saving the whole Barrio neighborhood against capitalist speculation, Awa instead embodies a physical deterioration that eventually turns into a supernatural power of evil. This is demonstrated after she uses a magic handkerchief that Virgin—a bald woman whom Omar first encounters at the poker game—hands her to deceitfully ease her eyes' pain. When Awa one day notices her boyfriend kissing her best friend, a Chinese-Italian girl, her inner rage escalates into a demonic gaze, and her friend falls dead. The demonization of Awa, in a way, challenges the traditional model of representing Black diasporic subjects, not only for the show itself but for the entirety of postcolonial imaginaries, as relegated victimized ones suffering from exclusion and racial

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discrimination. The new Black urban landscape this study proposes involves disrupting the thresholds between good and evil, innocent and culprit, attacked and attacker—a series of binary epistemologies that have been solidly anchored within conventional portraits of racial confrontations as such. The multiplication of what it means to be a Black "alien" implies a shift from the representation of the beyond-the-human in racial contexts, usually as a given or singular form. The alien is no longer "abstract from the relations that allow it to appear in the present and hence *reappears* no matter where we look" (Ahmed 2). These new forms of alienness push us to rethink Black representation as that which exceeds the previous ground of Black knowledge. *Zero*'s auto-reflectivity and intertextuality raise the question of what exists beyond this limit and what kind of epistemological relations can be drawn on this newly opened ground.

Moving beyond a much-predicted search for racial antagonism or spatial conflicts that would easily fall entrapped again within the ingrained racial hierarchy in Europe's metropolitan centers, the show implicates the urgency to rethink the racial power dynamics that might have been shifting and about who, in this new spatial-temporal imaginary, holds the "dominant gaze" and terrorizes the urban community. If we stay in line with Laura Mulvey's feminist critique of popular movies over their role of subjugating female bodies to the interpretation of a heterosexual "male gaze" (Mulvey), what *Zero* suggests would be a complete overturn of a white supremacist worldview in which Black racialized subjects are those looked at, acted upon, and, in most cases, subject to humanitarian assistance and empathy. On the other hand, the disruption of a native Italian gaze that is historically associated with whiteness also enacts a political message, empowering the racially marginalized within Italian society and redefining urban narratives and images beyond what was previously considered natural, granted, or rarely unchallenged. On the other hand, the narrative conflation of "Black evil" and "Black hero" does

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not attempt to re-essentialize a certain Black Italian ontology and figurability. The previous

linkage of what is a *stranger* and what is a *danger,* for which Sara Ahmed repurposed "stranger

danger," where it is assumed that being a stranger is a matter of inhabiting a certain body (4),

gives in to an updated impulse of not seeking to accentuate what kind of Black body, after all,

can represent what would be the more normal, welcomed, and closer-to-us one.

While experimentalizing the Black body as an Afro-futurist site where the impossible

enables the vision of a radically alternative existential form, the show emphasizes the haunting

effect of the traumatic past and, more significantly, how epistemologies of the past and future

could mediate a constellation of rhythms with the Black body as the primary ground of tension

and synthesis. Capturing a multiplicity of moments within a singular corporeal platform, *Zero*'s

ghostly landscape of Black bodies questions the conventional conception of Black corporality as

fugitive, fragmented, or meaningless. The corporeal complexities that Omar embodies contain a

simultaneously relational yet contradictory mode of thinking about continuities that contradicts

the temporal logic of time as homogenous and singular. This is not to say that the protagonist

here performs a relegation of stability or a negation of the past to orient himself to reclaim new

meanings of Black identity and social existence in the future. On the contrary, the family's past

plays an important role in delivering Omar to a liminal threshold of temporal relations. The

forced separation from his mother in a police station—possibly a detention center—when he was

young still haunts Omar's present life. The trope that such painful memories from the past can

function as the emotional resources that Omar uses to turn himself invisible provides a new way

of understanding Italy's postcolonial times. The past seeps into the present while at the same

time being made in anticipation of a Black future, an invention that defies the homogenizing

tendency of capitalist-imperialist forces, nullifying the temporal existence of Black diasporic

subjects. In *Zero*, the protagonist's superpower never takes him to an isolated territory where the time of real life is suspended. It thus refers to, in other words, a divergence from the conventional Afrofuturist tropes to envision a new, if not necessarily opposing, spatial-temporal system alternative to the real one in which Black time is marginalized as meaningless and nonexistent by Western European conceptions of humanity.

Afrofuturism, as indicated by the African American maestro Sun Ra, constitutes the abolition of time as a force of liberation for Black people (Goffe 109). Mainstream Afrofuturism conveys an ontological concern, being a much more radicalized aesthetic version of Blackness itself in terms of its inherent significance in criticizing time. The recent achievement of visibility by Black subjects on the stage of Italian society, simply put, should be understood as a challenge to the enclosure of Italian history in its own right, functioning as a catalyst to bring to light what was erased or overlooked in the past. The show calls for a more critical approach to Afrofuturist aesthetics within the new socio-cultural spectrum. Instead of proposing a radical rupture with the everyday suffocation imposed on Black Italians, *Zero* opens the path towards an interposed archeology of postcolonial temporality, putting into question its unified pattern of decoding predominantly informed by the post- as a temporal interlocutor. The temporal dialectic between Black erasure and imperialist homogenization contains a deeper meaning: by depriving Black beings of the subject of historical narratives, colonialism forcefully drives Blackness to a dead end of stasis, where the racialized do not have more ways of deciding, capturing, and mobilizing lived time as recorded units of social rhythms. Omar's bodily transfiguration as a method of negotiating radically diverse forms of postcolonial times illuminates a transitional locus that allows agentic impulses to experience forward and backward with their own rhythms, emotions, and everyday life practices. The defiance against the Black dispossession of creating an

unrestrained and shifting temporal framework enacts perhaps the most significant contribution

Zero provides to better approach Afrofuturism as an artistic act of liberation. Challenging the

limited capacity of people of color for temporal imagination and production, this speculative

attempt as an alternative praxis also serves as a critical addition to what Goffe, building on Sun

Ra's remarks, defines Black temporality as "a refusal to labor within the limits of history" (110).

The long-overdue effort to envision a new system projected in the future, on the other hand, is

not about re-essentializing time itself or searching for a certain situation, but rather about

developing a new aesthetic-philosophical critique to undo time's inherent imperialist nature.

As many have highlighted elsewhere, speculative fiction as a narrative genre embodies a

critique of the present (Lim 87). Expressing a certain form of life, after all, refers to the reality to

which it bears witness (Rancière, *Dissensus* 120). *Zero*, as a contemporary Afro-Italian

storytelling, though produced and made successful with the help of global capitalism, stages race

and racism onto a larger milieu where Italy has been undergoing a crisis of reconstructing

conceptions of its national identity. By framing Blackness in the domain of racial confrontations,

the show demands serious attention to reformulate the present racial anxieties, for which both

historical traumas of colonialism and migration and futurist visions of becoming materialize here

as accommodating forms of Black representation. The bronze statue of "The Migrant Worker," a

monument devoted to the internal migrants traveling from southern Italy to its northern industrial

cities throughout the last century, strongly reminds its spectators of what has historically

foregrounded Milan's urban identity of today (Greene). Rico, the Afro-Cuban criminal and

Bruno's henchman who takes up the role of ruining properties in the Barrio district for their

secret project to displace its inhabitants, also destroys the statue by removing its head. The

collective effort of Omar and his friends to try to snatch back the missing head by employing

Omar's superpower symbolizes the urgency of reevaluating how time, history, materiality, and urban geography come to form a unique dimension with which Black Italians in Italy's metropolitan areas carry forward to actualize their significance of existence.

Figure 4-4 Omar, Momo, Sharif, and Sara celebrating their successful snatching of the statue's head

The visual juxtaposition of the frequent occurrence of police racism and the everyday racial anxiety on the part of Black Italians refreshes its spectators' memory about the increasingly assorted manifestations of racial tension on the stage of contemporary Italian society. At the beginning of *Zero*'s second episode, local police are called to investigate the missing head of the bronze statue. Sharif complains to his friends: "O forse qualcuno si sta smerdando casa nostra. Vedrai che poi daranno la colpa a noi" ["Or perhaps someone is trashing our home, and you will see that we'll be blamed for it"].[43] Immediately after this, Sharif, Momo,

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[43] *Zero*, episode II.

Sara, and Inno are all asked to have pat-down searches or to show their documents, even though the policemen have no evidence to prove their guilt. Such a statement replete with frustration and a sense of fatality here carries a clear message: not differing from other Euro-American societies in Italy—and more specifically in Milan, regarded as one of the nation's most progressive and cosmopolitan cities—racially marginalized Black people have also been experiencing racially biased police stops or violence. Released in 2021, this scene constitutes a convincing interpretation of being an Italian tribute to what took place one year before: the death of George Floyd after a white Minneapolis police officer kneeled on Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes. In a subsequent moment in which the neighborhood generator is sabotaged and the white racist electrician reluctantly agrees to repair it only if the Barrio inhabitants pay him an amount of ten thousand euros, Sharif's previously pent-up discontent now escalates into an open demonstration of outrage: "Cosa siamo, degli animali?" ["What are we, animals?"][44] Despite this seemingly impossible task, Sharif's determination and his wise choice to recruit Omar finally solved the issue. It is evident here that Sharif functions not only as a figure intensifying racial antagonism that can help raise a wider public consciousness over the racism that Black Italians encounter in real space and real time but he also emblematizes an approach to thinking through how race in contemporary Italy is lived and experienced and becomes an explicit ground on which the interrelated conceptions of contemporary city and humanity require a more careful and radical reexamination.

Though as a singular case, Sharif's direct reference to the correlation between the urban Black refugees/immigrants and the situation of being placed at the bottommost place of social human hierarchy, in a sense, makes the most powerful call for its spectators to bear in mind that

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[44] *Zero*, episode II.

the historical negation of humanity of Black bodies is not a regional or national concern but assumes a global contingency, even in a country like Italy, which traditionally tends to avoid conversations about race and Black beings. The unique ability to lead and bring forth this cause also makes Sharif heroic. As viewers become aware of another powerful subject concerning Omar, the longing for social change no longer exists as a static individual task in a closed system of oppression. The projection of his rancorous responses within the entire show could lead to a new interpretation of the radical transformation of Black bodies, in which the possibility of a different form of existence disturbs the Western idea that Black people are regarded as holding a reduced status or being lower-class citizens. It needs to be pointed out that the path Omar takes does not suggest a racial fight for recognition of his humanness or for being treated as a social subject equally as White Europeans but represents a move beyond predefined human relations— the inevitable situation of being the wretched, poor, dispossessed, and disempowered others. The new living mode that his superpower allows him to maintain might still be considered post-human, as it displays an unstable threshold between human and non-human forms of behavior and experience. However, what is at stake here lies in the ability to create, transform, redefine himself, and more radically, to free himself of a predefined form of social existence in which he would be subjected to living conditions that confer upon him the bare status of the *living dead* (original emphasis) (Mbembe 92). In his discussion of colonies as zones of exception where all juridical orders can be suspended, Black theorist Achille Mbembe attributes this lack of legal codification to racial denials:

> In the conqueror's eyes, *savage life* is just another form of *animal life*, a horrifying experience, something alien beyond imagination or comprehension. In fact, according to Arendt, what makes savages different from other human beings is less the color of their skin than the fear that they behave like a part of nature, that they treat nature as their undisputed master. For nature thereby remains, in all its majesty, an overwhelming reality compared to which they appear to be phantoms, unreal, and ghostlike (77-78).

The metaphorical significance of Omar indicates a racial masquerade: corporeal fluidity redraws the boundaries of the human condition. However, *Zero*'s aesthetic visualization—to become unreal, ghostlike, and non-human—breaks up such a rhetoric and ontological linkage with nature or any transcendental forces imposed upon racialized bodies—quite the opposite. Omar's bodily performance reveals that he is the "undisputed master" who controls, commands, and disposes of his own body. Considering that throughout the Netflix show, Omar's application of his superpower is almost exclusively related—except in the final sequences in which he attempts to rescue Anna from being kidnapped by Virgine—to the emergency of preventing the Barrio neighborhood from being criminally speculated, he embodies a radical message for redefining "human" as an agentic pathway of acting in concurrence with the mission of concretizing the sense of a Black diasporic urban community. The longing that Omar and his friends feel is not merely one for a better urban society free of hierarchy, antagonism, or racial discrimination, but more significantly, for an existential alternative that allows them to overcome the despair of existing only on the margins, valorizing and making sense of an imaginable and comprehensible urban life. In a European country like Italy, where notions of Blackness and postcoloniality are still far from forming a well-developed system of knowledge and intellectual consciousness, Omar's redefinition exemplifies an emergent postcolonial desire for restructuring a different relationship between the Afro-pessimistic image of Black diasporic bodies in Italy as an inherent negation of meaning and the exploration of new signifying modes through the medium of aesthetic experimentations. The term "Black," as suggested by the show, thus becomes the signifier of a shifting identity that arises from the imaginative terrain wherein contested meanings of the Black body and urban community are articulated.

The radical remapping of Black corporeal-urban landscapes reflects the political agenda

that Black Italians have collectively put forward in the past few decades on the stage of Italian

society. If we view Blackness itself as a political construct, *Zero*'s envisioning of the impossible

suggests a utopian reconstruction of everydayness and, at the same time, highlights a radical

trajectory underscoring how subaltern politics and utopia in the age of postcolonial Italy can each

carry weight in the process of carving out an alternative framework of living. "Utopia," as

Fredric Jameson reminds us, "has always been a political issue" (*Archaeologies* xi). When

Jameson talks about utopia and utopian aesthetics in his seminal book *Archaeologies of the*

Future, he proceeds with remarkable caution in terms of trying not to undermine the tripartite

relationships between body, time, and collectivity, as well as their haunting linkage with cities

(xii). In the context of postcolonial Italy, the spatial and geographical references of Black utopian

aesthetics should never take precedence over their temporal implications. On the contrary, sci-fi

has shifted its narrative focus from traditional accounts of spatial excursions to time travel as an

indicator of the future. However, this does not suggest a comparison between the two analytical

coordinates. Or rather, this putting-together may become counter-productive in framing utopia as

a political attempt to project totality in that utopia, in a political sense, is not so much about

locating an accessible *other-time* or *other-space* than "a method by which one can attempt to

apprehend the system itself" (Tally, *Utopia* ix). This viewpoint is by no means startling, as many

critics and philosophers like Jameson have emphasized elsewhere how utopians offer alternatives

to help render the current system *conceivable*. What merits our particular attention, in the case of

Zero and for the task of theorizing *urban exergue*, is exactly how the attempts to elaborate new

temporal and spatial totalities in the aesthetic of the city itself would locate new ways to combine

the individual and the collective and relate to the political appeals that Black Italians have

advanced under current social and political circumstances. If we stage these possible linkages in more temporal terms, it will be imperative to ponder how the temporal projection of individual realizations would impact the conception of historical time. At this point, Jameson provides us with a provocative perspective, which here merits a full citation:

> At some point, discussions of temporality always bifurcate into the two paths of existential experience (in which questions of memory seem to predominate) and of historical time, with its urgent interrogations of the future. I will argue that it is precisely in utopia that these two dimensions are seamlessly reunited and that existential time is taken up into a historical time, which is paradoxically also the end of time, the end of history. […] But ethical depersonalization has been an ideal in any number of religions and in much of philosophy as well, while the transcendence of individual life has found rather different representations in Science Fiction, where it often functions as a readjustment of individual biology to the incomparably longer temporal rhythms of history itself (xi).

For Jameson, utopia not only refers to the conception of an alternative system; "utopian form is itself a representational meditation on radical difference, radical otherness, and the systemic nature of social totality, to the point where one cannot imagine any fundamental change in our social existence that has not first thrown off utopian visions like so many sparks from a comet" (xii). The aesthetic experimentation of *Zero* explicitly performs what Jameson describes as a genre that has so boldly affirmed itself "as argument and counterargument" (2). The inherent intertextuality of *Zero* carries much beyond what an individual text can singularly deliver to its audience, requiring, in any sense, cross-reference and a deeper understanding of the context it aesthetically modifies and reconstructs. Interpreting *Zero* through this lens allows the possibility of pushing against the boundaries of Afro-Italian political thinking and providing a politically energizing perspective. This defies the traditional belief of utopianism as "an idealism deeply and structurally averse to the political as such" (Jameson xi). *Zero* highlights visual productions as active cultural fields where relationships among the Italian state, migration, Black identities,

and art are reshaped to delineate specific imaginaries of a country on the trajectory toward

becoming postcolonial and post-national.

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