

**Camilla Hawthorne**, *Contesting Race and Citizenship: Youth Politics in the Black*

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As Mediterranean crossings have returned to pre-pandemic levels, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's government has issued a decree drastically limiting NGO rescue operations at sea, part of efforts to stem arrivals. While these violent policies and restrictive approaches to migration management are linked to rising nationalist tendencies, they are not singularly tied to far-right administrations like Meloni's. In fact, calls to close Italian borders are intimately tied to longstanding policies and practices within the country, in particular concerning citizenship and race.

The Italian case illustrates how *jus sanguinis* (bloodline) policies racialise citizenship, making full legal recognition difficult for migrants and their children to obtain. Whereas *jus soli* (birthplace) policy would grant Italian citizenship to the children of immigrants, *jus sanguinis* treats migrants and their children as foreign, even when they are born and raised on the peninsula. Responding to these exclusions, activists with Rete G2—the Second Generation Network—aim to reform the law to recognise those born in Italy as Italian. Italy is a relatively young nation, and its first citizenship law was codified in 1912, 50 years after Unification, as the country sought to expand via colonial campaigns in Africa, which continued under Fascist rule. The 1912 law enacted *jus sanguinis* citizenship, which has enabled the grandchildren of Italian emigrants in North and South America to claim Italian citizenship. At the same time, this law differentially affects people born in Italy with African, Middle Eastern, and South Asian heritage, as it bolsters racialised assumptions that non-white residents of Italy do not belong within Italian society and are not Italian.

Camilla Hawthorne's *Contesting Race and Citizenship: Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean* centres these issues through an interdisciplinary study of Black Italy and second

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generation movements for citizenship. The book is an insightful investigation of contemporary neoliberal citizenship and its connections to racism, articulated through the perspective of social and activist movements among, by, and for Black Italians who challenge their legal and social exclusion from the Italian national body. As Hawthorne observes, invoking Katherine McKittrick, Black Italy is simultaneously “everywhere” and “nowhere” (p.17)—a fact of (in)visibility that underscores the importance of Black geography perspectives, as well as the use of multiple methods for studying citizenship and racial politics in Italy. Hawthorne writes as both a scholar of and a participant in anti-racist and citizenship movements, as well as through media and archival research. *Contesting Race and Citizenship* makes critical interventions in studies of Black Europe and Black geographies, migration and citizenship studies, and Italian studies. The book also represents Hawthorne’s significant contributions to understandings of the Black Mediterranean, an analytical model and political praxis that explores the entanglements of colonialism, enslavement, and mobility linking (in this case) Italy and its former colonies on the African continent, with the politics of race and migration today (Proglione et al. 2021; see also Paynter 2021). Framed within the Black Mediterranean, the book is also a decidedly postcolonial study that brings complex and nuanced questions of gender, youth, and belonging to the fore.

Approaching the study of Black Italy through the lens of citizenship, the book engages a significant and complex debate: how to interpret activism around national belonging by groups whom the racial state has long excluded. In other words, why citizenship? The author is careful to clarify that, rather than debating the *value* of citizenship (just or unjust, good or bad?), this book is interested in how citizenship operates in Italy, what realities it makes possible or precludes, and how it echoes and reproduces racial divisions. In addition, rather than focus on whether Black Italians feel “more Italian” or “more African”, the book examines “how their mobilizations exhume long-blurred links between the bureaucratic apparatus of liberal citizenship and racism” (p.4).

It matters, of course, that debates about Italian citizenship are unfolding as Italy continues to treat arrivals by sea as a “crisis”—a framing I address in my own work on precarious migration. African asylum seekers and refugees, often seen to represent this so-called emergency, are seen as a problem, and as incapable of becoming Italian or European. With this

in mind, Hawthorne also addresses a shift in citizenship and G2 / *seconde generazioni* activism, from an earlier movement that sought to distinguish itself from recently arrived migrants, to more recent work in solidarity with questions of migrant rights, recognising the entanglements of anti-immigrant and anti-Black racism.

The book is organised in two parts: “Citizenship” and “Diasporic Politics”. Chapter One, “Italian Ethnonationalism and the Limits of Citizenship”, traces the history of the country’s citizenship law, including the recent—yet repeatedly failed—push for *jus soli* or a modified law that would at least recognise residents who have been brought up in Italian schools. Translating W.E.B. Du Bois’ famous question “How does it feel to be a problem?” into the Italian context, this chapter traces this longer legal history through an account of *jus soli* activism in the 2010s, including Hawthorne’s observations of activists strategising about how to lobby for reform.

Chapter Two, “Black Entrepreneurs and the ‘(Re)Making’ of Italy”, focuses on Black women in Northern Italy, highlighting networks of entrepreneurs who foster connections and support across the diaspora, including work in fashion to reconceptualise the “Made in Italy” label to include Blackness and Africanness (p.78). Hawthorne’s observations of how these women challenge widespread associations of Italianness with whiteness and create spaces for solidarity align with what Heather Merrill (2018) terms “Black spaces”. At the same time, Hawthorne also posits tough questions about the limits of entrepreneurship as a model for asserting rights, and specifically, about whether lasting transformation is possible within capitalist structures (p.72).

The third and fourth chapters elaborate how historical questions of race and the nation shape contemporary debates about national identity and belonging. Chapter Three, “Mediterraneanism, Africa, and the Racial Borders of Italianness”, addresses longstanding discourses that see “race” and “racism” as “historical aberrations” associated with fascism. Instead, as Hawthorne explains via archival work on 19<sup>th</sup> century criminologist and phrenologist Cesare Lombroso, these questions are part and parcel of the Italian nation and notions of Italian identity. Opening the book’s second section, “Diasporic Politics”, Chapter Four, “Translation and the Lived Geographies of the Black Mediterranean”, cites anti-racist movements that took shape in response to the July 2016 murder of Nigerian asylum seeker Emmanuel Chidi Nnamdi,

in order to take up questions of Mediterraneanness, Blackness, and Italianness as complex, rather than monolithic, categories. Here, as she does throughout the book, Hawthorne discusses the impact that the social construction of citizenship has had on her own experiences in Italy as she has had to constantly explain her heritage to people who assume that because she is Black, she must not be Italian. Hawthorne's own experiences of discrimination resonate with those of fellow activists and underscore the need for substantive change.

Chapter Five, "Refugees and Citizens-in-Waiting", brings the problems and possibilities of citizenship into conversation with struggles that asylum seekers, refugees, and undocumented migrants confront in Italy. This chapter focuses on the 2015 case of Eritrean-Italians in Milan who coordinated aid for unhoused Eritreans who had recently arrived by boat and were living on the streets. Efforts like these bridge the politics of citizenship, asylum, and humanitarian aid and represent what Hawthorne terms a "Black Mediterranean diasporic politics" (p.161) that articulates how the racial state excludes long-term and recently arrived Black residents, as well as forms of solidarity that emerge from these frictions. Here again, Hawthorne's nuanced analysis of the relationship between citizenship and race informs a discussion of how the dominance of liberal notions of citizenship and nationalism can in practice preclude certain critiques of the racial state—critiques that see restrictive notions of citizenship, everyday racism against Black Italians, and the marginalisation of sub-Saharan African immigrants and refugees all as different facets of the same larger phenomenon.

The practices of solidarity that a Black Mediterranean diasporic politics makes possible, Hawthorne argues, do not reflect a uniform or fixed understanding of Blackness or citizenship. Yet they highlight the significance of diasporic alliances for cultivating community and making white Italian publics aware of the stakes of citizenship laws and practices they may take for granted.

Hawthorne conducted the bulk of the fieldwork that informs this study in Northern Italy, and the closing pages aptly gesture to expanding anti-racist movements and G2 alliances in the Italian South. This is an important acknowledgement, given historical North/South tensions, and the work of local and transnational groups across Southern regions—efforts I recognise from my own fieldwork in the South, where I met, for instance, Calabrian reception centre workers who

led anti-racist campaigns in small villages, and collectives like Porco Rosso in Palermo, who understand their migrant rights advocacy as anti-racist work.

As an interdisciplinary study of legal, historical, and cultural entanglements, *Contesting Race and Citizenship* contributes to several fields. First, the book brings an important study of the Italian case to the growing body of scholarship on citizenship and Black Europe. Like in France, where Jean Beaman has described the “citizen outsider” position of the children of North African immigrants, second generation Italians also experience a “disconnect” between their birthplace and “how they are perceived” by the dominant culture (Beaman 2017: 3). In a context in which a majority of migrants arriving by sea are young men, Hawthorne’s focus on Black Italian women’s activism and entrepreneurship is significant, recalling Tiffany N. Florvil’s discussion of women who “shap[ed] the intellectual, cultural, and political contours of the modern Black German movement” (Florvil 2020: 15). Yet the Italian case also takes shape through the specificity of life and history on the peninsula, and Hawthorne situates Black Italy within African diasporic movements across Europe, while drawing on questions that emerge from the Italian context—Gramsci’s “Southern Question” and the relevance of Italy’s South–North relations for understandings of race—as well as the Black Radical Tradition.

Second, readers approaching the book from migration and refugee studies perspectives will find Hawthorne’s linking of G2 and refugee issues especially compelling. Scholars have tended to treat these areas as distinct fields of study, but Hawthorne, while focused primarily on G2 issues, insists on their entanglement. As *Contesting Race and Citizenship* reveals the racialisation of citizenship to go hand in hand with the exclusion of Black and brown migrants, it can also be read alongside studies of “deservingness” (e.g. Abdelaaty and Hamlin 2022; Zetter 2007), challenging narratives of good v. bad immigrants that circulate, for instance, in the perception of Black entrepreneurs as good, successful Italians, and Black refugees as vulnerable, foreigners in need of pity.

In addition, Hawthorne is readily in conversation with scholars of Black and postcolonial Italy who, like her, critique discriminatory practices while also highlighting solidarity movements and possibilities (see, among others, Carter 1997; Hom 2019; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012; Pesarini 2021). Italian studies has increasingly embraced postcolonial perspectives,

and the field is beginning to reckon with the role of decolonial methods and a broader decentring of the nation-state frame in the study of “Italian” cultures, histories, and politics (e.g. Brioni et al. 2022). While Hawthorne applauds this trend, her book encourages still more incisive, interdisciplinary work in these areas in order to grapple with Italy’s relationship with its own colonial past, and its position at the South of Europe and the North of the Mediterranean.

Two final points are worth emphasising. First, in addition to the activists and scholars whose work informs these chapters, Hawthorne’s interlocutors include Black Italian artists and writers, for instance Somali-Italian author Igiaba Scego and Nigerian-Italian rapper Tommy Kuti, whose lyrics call out racism in everyday life (“I have dark skin, a Brescian accent / a foreign last name but I’m still Italian”, he sings in “#Afroitaliano”). These creative works are crucial for documenting and theorising Black Italy, especially in the absence of Black studies programmes or departments in Italian schools and universities, as Hawthorne has underscored elsewhere (Hawthorne 2021).

Second, Hawthorne’s multifaceted discussion of translation weaves an especially insightful thread connecting questions of theory, praxis, politics, and language throughout the book. Here translation and border crossing are key diasporic modes for cultivating space and community; they also describe conceptual moves, for instance as Hawthorne discusses how Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1995) informs understandings of the Black Mediterranean (Chapter Four). In addition, language itself emerges as a fulcrum for activist debates about how they define their own identities and collectives, including questions of hyphenation and how to account for a possible “Afro-Americanization of the circumstances in Italy” (p.152). Motivated by gaps in the Italian language, which for instance lacks an adequate term for “Blackness” (p.151), Hawthorne and members of an activist circle translate work on race and Black Europe into Italian as an exercise in finding and creating language to describe Black Italy and the heterogeneous experiences inscribed within it. As Isabelle, one of Hawthorne’s interlocutors, explains, “In the Italian dictionary, these terms don’t exist. I think that we have to invent, we have to Italianize, we have to find terms—even in dialect” (p.150).

Amid the rise of right-wing extremism across Europe, addressing racism and challenging exclusionary discourses and laws will only become more urgent. Hawthorne’s archival and

ethnographic study of the Italian case looks both backward and forward, from the colonial underpinnings of notions of race and citizenship in Italy, to the future-oriented advocacy of Black entrepreneurs and activists shaping Italy today. Students will find the methodological appendix a useful resource and will be drawn to Hawthorne's discussion of the debates and alliances within multiple diasporic social movements that are often instead treated as singular, homogenous groups. By focusing on debates among Black Italian activists themselves, Hawthorne illustrates a range of citizenship practices and possibilities. And here *Contesting Race and Citizenship* promises to contribute to the task of finding and creating spaces and languages for these critical movements.

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