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## Preface

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Preface to *The Black Mediterranean. Bodies, Borders and Citizenship in the Contemporary Migration Crisis*

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(Author's accepted manuscript)

**After 'the Mediterranean'**<sup>1</sup>

"What is the Mediterranean today: a solid sea or a liquid frontier, a bridge or a barrier?"  
(Iain Chambers, "Maritime Criticism and Theoretical Shipwrecks")

Most reflections on the Mediterranean begin with an interrogation. In the unstable relationship between surface and depth, structure and process, unity and plurality, the Mediterranean Sea has often appeared as a paradox, an "endless epistemological provocation" (Lahoud 2013, 83), a site of both "postrepresentational understanding" and "critical depth" eluding definition (Chambers 2010, 679). Let's take the paradox of Fernand Braudel's monumental work, for instance.<sup>2</sup> Its methodology of the *longue durée*, while substantiating an argument in favor of 'the Mediterranean' as a unitary sea, belies the fact that the actual unity of the Mediterranean world, if it ever existed, was disrupted in medieval times during the Crusades and again in the late sixteenth century, with the onset of the slave trade. It was then shattered by the consolidation of the European nation-state and its attendant imperialism in the nineteenth century. Writing at the time of the post-bellum reconstruction of Europe as a new order, Braudel acknowledges only marginally the pivotal role of the Mediterranean as a gateway to Europe's involvement with the transatlantic slave trade. In his complete *oeuvre*, comprising over 1300 pages, Braudel indexes the term "slaves" in one page, just to dismiss slavery in the West and East Mediterranean as "a

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<sup>1</sup> In this section, I will use 'the Mediterranean' in single quotation marks to signal an analytical category rather than the actual geographical sea.

<sup>2</sup> Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*. Volume I and II.

curious attachment to the past.” (Braudel 1995, 754) Yet, a few lines later, he writes that “slavery was a structural feature of the Mediterranean society” (Braudel 1995, 755) and not exclusive to the Atlantic and the New World. No other mentions of slavery follow after this statement. Concerned with the coherence of internal structures and the totality of natural history, his bird’s eye-view of the Mediterranean basin traces the gradual fading of the line of palm tree, the vineyards, and the olive trees, mapping ecological discontinuities at the expense of human mobility. Braudel’s Africa begins at the appearance of the sand.

*The Black Mediterranean* takes a different perspective as it plunges into the depth of the sea, concerned with its buried forces of racial terror and violence. In so doing, it dispels all illusions of structural ahistoricity. In making the Mediterranean black, it begins to offer some responses to both the unitary vision and the postcolonial kaleidoscopic image of the sea as undecipherable, fragmented, fluid, and plural. As Michael Herzfeld reminds us, ‘the Mediterranean,’ as a unitary category, has often served belligerent cultural imperialism. It is enough to mention the Fascist and proto-fascist attempts at revitalizing the concept of *Mare Nostrum*. When translated into a heuristic device, it becomes a stereotype-making machine.<sup>3</sup> When contacts and conflicts are brought up to the surface (such as mercantile local economies, the clash between Christianity and Islam, piracy, and slavery in the post-classical period), the utopian vision of one Mediterranean fades into the recognition of many Mediterraneans, as David Abulafia suggests. Trade, for Abulafia, is what all Middle Seas share comparatively. It is trade that makes the Mediterranean paradigm expandable to other parts of the world (the Saharan Mediterranean Desert, the Mediterranean Atlantic, the Trans-Oceanic Caribbean, the Japanese

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<sup>3</sup> Mediterranean stereotypical categories such as “honor” and “shame” still serve a series of self-representations in Southern Europe, as Herzfeld rightly asserts. I would add that categories such as “honor” and “shame,” for instance, still support gender hierarchies in Italy, with male “honor” being one of the hidden structures of feeling behind the high numbers of femicide. See Herzfeld, 2005.

Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean). Abulafia's structural model of 'the Mediterranean' interprets it as "an empty space between lands [...] in which waters create links between diverse economies, cultures, and religions" (Abulafia 2005, 65). His work opens new geographical perspectives, yet misses the opportunity to identify the common, extra-structural link (if trade, what type of global trade?) that connects these diverse systems of economic and social mobility. This is the fallacy that is inherent in the dominance of the classical, Mediterranean Studies model of the basin as a unitary sea. It is the de-linking of the Mediterranean from capitalist exploitation and its attendant infrastructures that used indentured racialized labor, restricted black mobility, incarcerated racialized individuals in detention centers and camps, and denied them dwelling and citizenship rights as it happened in other systems of sea/ocean connectivity, and as it continues to do so in the contemporary Mediterranean. The proliferation of borders, from Tijuana to El Paso, from Malta to Lampedusa, from Bihaic to Idomeni, far from being 'exceptional,' makes manifest a mechanism of repetition of racial capitalist operations.

*The Black Mediterranean* works against the grain of previous formulations of this specific Middle Sea. By historicizing the Mediterranean as a *mare nero*, this volume puts the methodology of the *long durée* to good use, recognizing that contemporary forms of violence against black migrants and refugees belong to the duration of racial subjection in Southern Europe. The historical role of Italy at the outset of the Atlantic slave trade is only one of the many connections between the black Mediterranean and the black Atlantic.<sup>4</sup> The "strong sequential links" (Davis 2000, 459) between the Atlantic slave system and the Italian Renaissance, involving Black slaves for the cultivation and the processing of sugar cane and the

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<sup>4</sup> A series of novels published in Italian by African writers chart the north-bound movement from Sub-Saharan and North Africa to Italy across the Mediterranean as a new Middle Passage. The apparition of ancestor spirits in these works indicate the presence of the afterlife of slavery and its temporal circularity. See Lombardi-Diop 2008.

sugar production in late medieval Sicily and Andalusia, had their roots in Southern European medieval kingdoms, and in the slaveholding colonies in the eastern Mediterranean and on the coasts of the Black Sea (Blackburn 1997). When the people in the Mediterranean become visible as Black, the sea's historical trajectory appears punctuated and scarred, as Iain Chambers puts it, "by slavery, drowning, brutality, and the wrecked lives of ferocious migration today" (Chambers 2010, 681). The rise of European modernity and the ontological formation of humanity appears predicated on the narrative (and myths, fantasies, and imaginaries) of the inhumanity of Black subjects, what Achille Mbembe defines as "the Western consciousness of Blackness" (Mbembe 2017, 28).

The volume in its totality thus functions as a turning point in our critical thinking of migrations, borders, race, postcoloniality, and antiblackness. Its interdisciplinary, trans-historical approach to these areas of inquiry shifts the critical focus away from the contingencies of European national borders and the historical specificity of unilateral colonial/postcolonial relations. Asserting the need for "decolonizing the Mediterranean" (Proglio 2016) as a larger geopolitical and cultural area encompassing not only its northern and southern rims but also Sub-Saharan Africa, the volume inverts the epistemological trajectory of postcolonial inquiries. Instead of tracing the durable effects of European racial history in the Mediterranean present, it positions the contemporary Mediterranean "in the wake" (Sharpe 2016) of the afterlife of slavery as "a past that is not past" (Sharpe 2016, 13), and a practice whose modalities survive in the disregard for diasporic Black life in Southern Europe. It shows that the Mediterranean stages a 'crisis' that is not a state of exception, as biopolitical interpretations of the sea have repeatedly claimed, but a state of repetition of the subjection of Black life through the same old means: borderless apparatus of surveillance, containment, captivity, forced displacement, forced labor,

the slave markets, and dehumanization. The separation between blackness and the heritage of European humanism precedes the material violence against Black bodies. As a corrective, the attendant responses to this predicament are also the same: fugitivity, wakefulness, citizenship struggles, rootedness, cultural transfigurations, and political subjectivity.

### **After the Black Atlantic**

“[T]he Black Mediterranean is a variegated site of Black knowledge production, Black resistance and possibilities of new consciousness.” SA Smythe (“The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of the Imagination”)

In its analogy with the Black Atlantic, the Black Mediterranean as an analytical framework is less about migration and national paradigms and more about new transnational affiliations, the diffusion of transnational capital, and diasporic Black existence in the Mediterranean. As a diasporic framework the *Mediterraneo nero* allows the scholars gathered in this volume to re-center our critical attention on the forms of affirmation and resistance of Black life, addressing the response to the systemic and representational violence which affects Black people in Southern Europe. In the wake of the Black Atlantic, the volume explores the question of a double consciousness, also so central in Gilroy’s work. However, in contrast to the cultural-studies turn inaugurated by *The Black Atlantic* (Gilroy 1993) the authors are less interested in literary, artistic, and cultural production and more in the configuration of everyday practices, life stories, fugitivity, antiblackness, and networks of solidarity mobilizing for civil rights. At least two of the chapters interrogate the predicament of Blacks as insiders and outsiders in Italian society, exploring the political and cultural implications of what it means to be Black Italian and Black European. Diasporic studies in a transatlantic context have shown scant interest in how the racial underpinnings of Italian migratory patterns have affected Blacks and non-white Italians. The word ‘race’ mostly refers to the differential treatment of Southern Italian migrants in the United

States, yet often fails to connect such forms of unfree labor to the global outreach of racial capital.<sup>5</sup> While postcolonial scholars in Italy have explored - not exhaustively, but certainly productively – how race has defined whiteness, Mediterraneanness, and Italianness, the question is here reversed: what is the place of blackness within Italy and what happens when blackness and citizenship are considered mutually exclusive? What are we to make of Mediterranean hybridity (*meticciato*) when it is evoked to neutralize blackness? This approach re-links the political struggles of Blacks in Europe to diasporic spaces of struggle globally, such as the Baobab Experience in Italy, the #HungerForFreedom in the UK, the French *Parti des Indigènes de la République* (PIR), and the UK Black Lives Matter. Moreover, taking stock of the prolonged inertia of Leftist antiracist politics in their refusal to see African mobilization as a political struggle belonging to Italy, the volume specifically addresses the connivance between the system of both African and Italian *caporalati* (labor patronage) in the Southern fields and their imbrication with institutional and political constituencies at the expense of truly hybrid political spaces for Black militants in Southern Italy.

Why do we need this book today? Countering the reluctance to comprehend the Mediterranean ‘humanitarian’ crisis as a racial crisis beyond national borders, and to acknowledge the anti-racist struggles of refugees and migrants diasporically, ontologically, and trans-historically, the volume mobilizes the political potential of a new type of activist scholarship. Its authors represent a new generation of researchers, many of whom have first-hand experience or a family history of migration and dislocation, who are geographically dislocated across Europe and the United States, and who are trained in disciplines that are undisciplined and

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<sup>5</sup> Donna Gabaccia’s seminal work on Italy’s global diasporas does mention the system of labor patronage in late 1890s New World run by the Italians as a form of unfree labor in a new global labor economy and places it along a continuum between slavery and free labor. See Gabaccia 2000.

contaminated, such as cultural geography, cultural anthropology, international relations, cultural history, social history, or critical race theory. This is a truly collaborative effort of a collective of individuals, many of whom are activists speaking out in the public arena, demonstrating, mobilizing, questioning, and inaugurating a truly exciting moment of emancipatory scholarship in and around Italy.



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