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Research paper

Racialised Italians' Response to #BLM: Forms of Solidarity, Activism and Community Building on Digital Spaces

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ABSTRACT

Following the rise of the #MeToo movement, the social isolation that followed the Covid-19 pandemic and the global ascent of the Black Lives Matter movement, there has been an increase in discussions and initiatives on digital platforms. In Italy, the alignment of these various phenomena has created a new fertile ground that helped the proliferation of discussions on race related issues arguably for the first time. These have been mainly led by second generation/ racialised Italians (the terminology used to define this group is still being debated in Italy, within the community itself). This article considers the forms of digital activism that developed in Italy, specifically in the years between 2020-2023, and how these tried to disrupt forms of structural racism, epistemic violence, silencing and question the concept of allyship. It draws upon postcolonial feminist theory and the concept of intersectionality to explore how the #BLM movement provided an opportunity to address various forms of oppression in Italy. The research combines autoethnographic analysis of the sociological podcast '*Sulla Razza*' [On Race] with interviews to four prominent female activists in Milan.

Keywords: Italy, racism, intersectionality, black lives matter, podcast

Race, racism, and discrimination manifest differently across global contexts, though their patterns share commonalities. While these concepts are deeply rooted in local histories, their contemporary understanding is increasingly shaped by anglophone perspectives, particularly American frameworks. This dominance of American conceptualisations poses challenges for understanding how anti-racist movements emerge and evolve in distinct national contexts, particularly through digital media.

The 2020 Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, coinciding with the Covid-19 pandemic, present a unique opportunity to examine how digital platforms transform local anti-racist organising. The constraint of physical movement implied an increment in online network communication (Sobande, 2020). In fact, social networking sites, especially in this particular context and historical moment offered platforms where protesters, activists from marginalised backgrounds could 'produce knowledge, disseminate information, and shape movement narratives' (Gajjala, 2021). While existing research has extensively documented BLM's impact in the United States, we know far less about how the movement's digital strategies were adapted and reimagined in other national contexts, particularly in countries like Italy with different historical and social relationships to race and racism.

In Italy, the 2020 BLM protests catalysed unprecedented public discussion of systemic racism affecting migrant communities. However, critical questions remain unexplored: how did Italian activists leverage digital platforms to build an anti-racist movement during pandemic restrictions? How did they translate global anti-racist discourse into locally meaningful action? What new forms of digital resistance emerged and how did these reshape Italian public discourse around race and racism?

This article addresses these questions through an examination of digital anti-racist organizing in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic. By combining autoethnographic analysis of the sociological podcast (Lewis et al. , 2021) 'Sulla Razza' [On Race] and with interviews to four prominent female activists – Selam Tesfai, Himasha Weerappulige, Laila, and Sonia Garcia – this research illuminates how Italian activists adapted global digital strategies to local contexts. Selected segments from podcast episodes are incorporated as illustrative examples to strengthen key arguments throughout the analysis. This study contributes to an understanding of contemporary anti-racist movements in three ways: first, it demonstrates how digital platforms enable the localisation of global protest movements. Second, it reveals how pandemic conditions reshaped activist strategies and networks. Third, it provides insight into how marginalised communities in contexts such as Italy use digital media to challenge dominant narratives about race and racism in non-Anglophone contexts. protests, coinciding with the COVID-19 pandemic, present a unique opportunity to examine how digital platforms transform local anti-racist organising. The constraint of physical movement implied an increment in online network communication (Sobande, 2020). In fact, social networking sites, especially in this particular context and historical moment offered platforms where protesters, activists from marginalised backgrounds could 'produce knowledge, disseminate information, and shape movement narratives' (Gajjala, 2021). While existing research has extensively documented BLM's impact in the United States, we know far less about how the movement's digital strategies were adapted and reimagined in other national contexts, particularly in countries like Italy with different historical and social relationships to race and racism.

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METHODOLOGY

Postcolonial Autoethnography

This article examines digital anti-racist organising in Italy through a postcolonial theoretical framework and a methodological approach that combines autoethnography and semi-structured interviews, supplemented by relevant excerpts from the *'Sulla Razza'* podcast. The analysis is shaped by my intersecting and entangled positionalities: as an academic researcher in London, a non-white Italian of Sri Lankan background born and raised in Milan, a podcaster and an activist in Italy's anti-racist movement. These identities do not exist in isolation but rather inform and influence one another, creating a unique perspective from which to approach this research. As a methodological foundation, this research draws on lived experience as both epistemic resource and analytical lens. A second-generation migrant background in Italy, born to Sri Lankan domestic worker parents, provides experiential knowledge of the socioeconomic barriers faced by migrant communities. The subsequent position as a first-generation migrant in London adds another layer of displacement and belonging that further nuances understanding of migration dynamics. The experience of racialization in Italian society offers insights that enrich the academic analysis, while a professional position as a London-based researcher provides both critical distance and comparative perspective. Simultaneously, public engagement as a podcaster has fostered relationships of trust within anti-racist communities, requiring continuous reflexivity about ethical responsibilities to both academic and activist spheres.

Thus, this intersection of identities and roles informs both the article's theoretical approach and methodological choices. Following Lewis et al. (2021), the research embraces the productive tensions between academic, activist and media creator roles. The analysis draws on Patricia Hill Collins' concept of dialogical knowledge production (2012), which emphasises the value of 'distinctive, competing, and often contradictory angles of vision that shift not only when one varies physical and intellectual social locations but also when times change around me' (Hill Collins, 2012). This framework is particularly relevant for understanding how digital anti-racist movements navigate between global and local contexts, especially during the pandemic. Postcolonial theory provides the critical lens through which the article examines how Italian activists adapted and transformed digital organising strategies. Postcolonialism challenges political and ideological hegemonies (Bhabha, 1996), making it particularly suited for analysing how Italian activists contest dominant narratives about race and racism. This theoretical framework helps illuminate how local resistance strategies emerge within specific historical and cultural contexts while engaging with global movements (Onay, 2024; Madison, 2012). Moreover, it allows examination of how digital platforms enable marginalised communities to disrupt conceptual frameworks that position them as passive subjects, that portray the 'Other' as a docile body (Bhambra, 2014).

Methodologically, the article combines autoethnography and semi-structured interviews to capture both personal and collective dimensions of digital anti-racist organising. As a 'hyphenated academic-activist' (Dutta, 2018) involved in Italy's BLM movement, autoethnography enables me as a researcher to document and analyse how the movement unfolded during and after 2020. This method serves as a tool for decolonising knowledge production, as it 'resist[s] the normative use of knowledge as an inherently colonial tool' (Dutta, 2018) and repositions the researcher as both subject and context. In addition, Chawla and Atay (2018) state that autoethnography and postcolonialism are inherently interrelated, as they are self-reflexive practices that push and question given academic practices of analysis. They require centring both the subject and object of research within a specific historical, local and cultural context. 'Postcolonial autoethnography has the capacity to challenge the core of autoethnography by engaging more diverse voices and employing more variant storytelling techniques' (2018).

This methodological potential was amplified through my work on the podcast '*Sulla Razza'*, which functioned as a platform for collecting and amplifying diverse testimonies. For each episode, the podcast invited Italians of migrant background to submit voice notes sharing their perspectives and lived experiences related to the episode's theme. This participatory approach created a polyvocal narrative space where multiple stories could emerge, intersect and sometimes contradict one another, disrupting singular authoritative accounts. This article includes contextual examples from the *'Sulla Razza'* podcast to illustrate key arguments and provide other authentic voices that enrich the analytical discussion. This addition complements the autoethnographic and interview approaches by incorporating data where participants speak on their own terms, further decentring a singular researcher's. This collaborative dimension of storytelling aligns with postcolonial autoethnography's commitment to decentring dominant narratives and creating space for marginalised voices to articulate their own realities in their own terms. In this article, voices traditionally marginalised in academia are made more central, extending the repositioning work initiated by feminist intersectionality. The research approach centres experiences within the communities involved in this activism, exploring shared activist spaces through interviews that honour the knowledge produced collectively.

Semi-structured interviews

Four key female activists in Italy's anti-racist movement were the key sources in interviews: Selam Tesfai, Sonia Garcia, Laila S., and Himasha Weerappullige. These participants were chosen because they had all contributed to the *'Sulla Razza'* podcast and maintained active roles in organising events and actions throughout 2020-2023, giving them valuable insight into the movement's development. During my extended 13-15 month stay in Milan during COVID-19 lockdowns, I was able to witness their organising work directly, despite my primary residence being in London.

During the early months of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, I temporarily relocated from London (my home since 2010) to Milan to stay with my parents. This approximately six-to-seven-month stay coincided with Milan's first BLM protest on 7 June, where I met Selam Tesfai, an Italian activist of Eritrean descent. Selam, who co-founded political organisations *'Cantiere'* and *'SMS-Spazio Mutuo Soccorso'* that advance anti-racist and anti-sexist causes in Milan, had organised the protest and delivered a speech there. She has been an integral speaker in various protests in Milan. She later became a regular speaker at Milan protests and contributed to the *'Sulla Razza'* podcast twice – reading Sojourner Truth's 'Ain't I a Woman' speech in the 'Intersectionality' episode and sharing her 2020 protest organising experiences in the 'Black Lives Matter' episode.

During global social upheaval, particularly in Italy, mobility restrictions pushed people toward social media platforms. Second-generation immigrants like myself found Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook became fertile ground for connecting with others sharing similar marginalized migratory experiences – people who would have

remained isolated from each other without these digital spaces. Through these platforms, I discovered '*Cardamomo Collective'*, '*Giovani Palestinesi'* and connected with individuals engaged with the anti-racist movement.

When restrictions eased, I participated in various in-person events before returning to London. During Italy's second lockdown, I came back to Milan for another 7-8 months, during which time we began recording 'Sulla Razza' from home. In June 2021, I attended the second BLM protest organized by Selam, which featured speeches from various female activists from racialized communities. One speaker at the event was Laila S., an activist with *'Giovani Palestinesi'* who identifies as Palestinian (though previously as Italian-Palestinian until 2024). She addressed the challenges faced by Palestinians and their diaspora communities in Italy and globally. Also present was Sonia Garcia, a DJ, activist, and journalist of Andean-Peruvian heritage born in Italy. Garcia co-founded SAYRI, a cultural platform creating 'a politicized space for queer latinx celebration in the Italian clubbing scene' (Garcia, 2021). She contributed to '*Sulla Razza*'s' 'Cancel Culture' episode, sharing her perspectives on debates surrounding the potential removal of Christopher Columbus monuments and imagery.

We invited Garcia to contribute to that episode after I heard her speak at the 2022 *'Marciona'* – an alternative to Milan's mainstream PRIDE event created by the local queer community. It was at this 2022 protest that I met many people involved in anti-racist activism, including Himasha Weerappullige, an Italian of Sri Lankan descent who works in film. In February 2020, Himasha founded the Instagram account '*Cardamomo* Collective,' which focused on content for South Asian Italians. Our connection began online before we eventually met in person during the 2022 *'Marciona'*.

Between January and March 2024, there were further semi-structured interviews examining how social media enabled movement were building during the pandemic restrictions, the formation of transnational networks, BLM's influence on Italian racism discourse and the evolution of concepts like intersectionality and allyship within Italy. This approach illuminates what Gajjala terms 'online/offline intersections' (2019: 10) in Italy's BLM movement, demonstrating how digital platforms facilitated novel resistance forms while transforming traditional activist practices during the pandemic.

MIGRATION, BLACK LIVES MATTER AND PODCASTING IN ITALY

This research is grounded in Haraway's (1988) concept of 'situated knowledge' – recognising that knowledge production is always partial and contextual. As explained before, as a 'native researcher' (Narayan, 1993) born in Italy to Sri Lankan parents, I navigate multiple identities: a 'second-generation' Italian, London-based Media Studies academic, and media presenter engaging with migration and identity issues.

My path from academia to public engagement solidified during my PhD research on the Mediterranean 'migration crisis'. In 2017, Maria Catena Mancuso and I created the podcast '*S/Confini'* to expand Italian migration discourse, covering topics from refugee crises to citizenship laws, constructions of Italian identity, emigration history, detention centres and border policies. This experience of transforming academic research into accessible media directly shaped my approach to studying Italy's digital anti-racist organising, highlighting the complex relationship between academic knowledge and activist practice.

My PhD research revealed how traditional migration studies presented Italy's shift from emigration to immigration as a simplified, economic 'dramatic Italian U-turn' (Caponio, 2008). This reductive framing obscures Italy's historical role as a Mediterranean migration crossroads (Corti and Sanfilippo, 2012). This academic perspective has shaped popular understanding through media representations. Mitchell's concepts of 'contamination by images' and 'migration of images' (2010) help explain how Italian migration discourse operates through visual regimes. These function as 'controlling images' (Collins, 2000) that systematically limit representation of anyone deemed 'Other' to white-Italian identity. While in London, I co-created 'S/Confini' with Maria Catena to counter these limiting narratives. Rather than focusing on statistics and 'flows,' we highlighted complex historical diasporas shaping contemporary Italian society through interviews with Italian emigrants in the UK, activists, journalists and academics, challenging the simplistic 'U-turn' narrative by emphasising Italy's simultaneous role in both emigration and immigration.

This work coincided with a significant evolution in Italian academia. Traditional migration studies objectified 'the migrant,' but recent scholarship has embraced postcolonial approaches. Researchers now analyse migration from former colonies through postcolonial frameworks, examining racism and discrimination within Italy (Bianchi & Scego, 2014; Ponzanesi & Blaagaard, 2011; Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2014; Giuliani, 2021; De Franceschi, 2022). The BLM movement was instrumental in extending these postcolonial perspectives beyond academia into wider public conversation. From object of studies, racialised people/researchers are becoming subjects of new research. Within discourses around BLM and its unfolding in Italy migrants are developing a subjectivity long denied to them.

The 2020 global emergence of BLM coincided with the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced populations into physical isolation and intensified engagement with social networking sites as primary connection spaces

(Sobande, 2020). Italy, hit early and severely by Covid-19, implemented strict lockdowns that fundamentally changed social interaction and information consumption patterns. This digital shift created unique conditions for anti-racist discourse engagement.

As isolation pushed Italians toward social media, they encountered firsthand accounts from racially marginalised communities, confronting many with questions of privilege and systemic racism for the first time. The movement resonated powerfully in Italy by connecting to local racist violence: Emmanuel Chidi Namdi and Soumaila Sacko's killings, the Macerata attack and Willy Monteiro Duarte's murder. These cases demonstrated that racism in Italy was not a distant American issue but a pressing local reality requiring specific analysis. The convergence of pandemic-induced digital immersion with heightened awareness of racial violence created a forced witnessing moment. Social media platforms transformed from casual connection spaces to sites where Italians unavoidably confronted evidence of systemic racism in their society. This dynamic shifted anti-racist discourse from marginal to central in Italian digital space, spurring the formation of local BLM groups and protests across multiple cities.

In Italy, but on a global scale as well, questions arose about whether people were more concerned with US police brutality against Black communities than confronting injustices faced by marginalised groups in their own societies. '*Sulla Razza*' was created specifically to address this 'globalised' mentality. Nadeesha Uyangoda, a fellow Italian-Sri Lankan journalist whom we had interviewed for *S/Confini* in 2019, contacted Maria Catena and me during early Covid-19 while writing her hybrid memoir/critical essay '*L'unica persona nera nella stanza*' [The Only Black Person in the Room] (2021). She proposed collaborating on a new podcast examining terminology from race studies primarily used in Anglo-American contexts but overlooked or misused in Italy. The podcast emerged as a response to the tendency for social solidarity to focus predominantly on US/Anglophone issues. We observed that discussions about racism, colourism, or tokenism in Italy almost invariably referenced American experiences rather than addressing Italy's specific context.

In recent years, activists with migration backgrounds and postcolonial studies academics in Italy have worked to increase public awareness of Italy's colonial history while advocating for social justice and historical memory policies. During this period, various podcasts emerged alongside ours – including *Black Coffee, Your Muslim Sisters, The Chronicles of a Black Italian Woman* – offering alternative migration narratives to mainstream Italian media and examining how Italian colonial legacies manifest in today's structural racism (Fabbri & Romeo, 2023; Finozzi, 2023).These discussions helped 'postcoloniality' develop a distinctly Italian dimension, increasingly connected to the Italian context and potentially diverging from its meaning in countries where postcolonial studies are well-established (Comberiati & Mengozzi, 2023). Through this process, Italian racialised subjects' experiences and perspectives contributed significantly to defining the concept of 'postcolonial' within Italy.

For us at '*Sulla Razza*', timing was crucial. Watching global BLM protests unfold, we felt frustrated by Italy's reception: black squares and #blackouttuesday hashtags across social media failed to reflect our lived experiences as children of migrants in Italy's supposedly 'post-racial' society (Lombardi-Diop, 2012). The stark contrast between attention given to USA deaths versus deaths within Italian borders or the Mediterranean was revealing – essentially gaslighting.

This veiled hypocrisy behind online trends and hashtag activism motivated us to challenge Italy's marginalisation of race issues, the *Italiani Brava Gente* concept (the myth of inherently benevolent Italians), and the habit of deflecting discussions about racism toward other countries. With this sense of outrage, we approached '*Sulla Razza*' as a form of 'digital resistance' (Bailey, 2021), creating counternarratives by translating, discussing, and applying these terms to Italy's unique context. Our first season featured twelve thirty-minute episodes, each examining concepts like fair-skin privilege, race, postcolonial literature, tokenism, model minority myth, intersectionality, and colourism. We secured Juventus Football Club as a sponsor, modelling our approach after NPR's 'CodeSwitch' podcast – analysing each term's origin and application rather than hosting free-flowing conversations.

Reflecting on our production process, '*Sulla Razza*' embodied what Lewis et al. (2021) define as a 'sociological podcast' through five key elements: functioning as public sociology; leveraging the medium's creative nature to transcend traditional academic formats and help listeners grasp complex issues; combating 'presentism'; democratising urgent political matters and cultivating hope and care. Through this approach, sociological podcasting effectively disseminates specialised knowledge beyond academic circles – precisely what we aimed to accomplish with '*Sulla Razza*'. Each episode followed a structured format: I would spend the first 5-10 minutes defining the term and providing its etymology or background within anglophone contexts, drawing on my media and diversity studies expertise to reference seminal texts and research. Then Nadeesha and Maria Catena would contextualise the term's relevance to Italy. For example, we explored how 'race' remains in the Italian Constitution and persists conceptually in society, despite the common saying that 'race does not exist'.

We featured contributions from individuals we had observed being vocal about each episode's topic. With '*Sulla Razza*', we aimed to create a platform where listeners could hear firsthand experiences related to our

discussions. This exemplifies a key characteristic of sociological podcasting: '[c]rucially, sociological podcasting has to be reflexive. It has to resist, contemplate and be at peace with its incomplete and imperfect presentation' (Lewis, et al., 2021). Although we recorded a second season with Juventus sponsorship and production at one of Italy's major radio stations, *Radio DeeJay*, it was our first season that garnered the most attention and following, likely due to its 2021 broadcast timing.

As a sociological podcast, it addressed social issues, fostered empathy, and encouraged collective action. For me personally, '*Sulla Razza*' became a tool to challenge the politics of In/Visibility (Ataç et al., 2015; Mazzara, 2015; Falk, 2010), where migrant subjects exist in liminal spaces between visibility and invisibility. As Mazzara explains, invisibility spaces reduce migrants to 'mere bodies, masses, numbers' (2015), while visibility manifests through migrant-initiated protests or campaigns that enable self-presentation as 'individuals challenging and overcoming predetermined processes of identification and classification'. Speaking out with our own voice and platform was integral to creating the podcast, driven by a need for audibility – not just to white Italians belatedly acknowledging Italian racism during #BLM, but primarily to other geographically dispersed racialised Italians with similar backgrounds to ours. As Nadeesha often emphasised, it was a podcast by us and for us.

'*Sulla Razza*' served as a medium for disseminating sociological insights and fostering connections between individuals, particularly during challenging times, nurturing a sense of community and empowerment in the face of adversity (Lewis et al., 2021). The first season that gave us the possibility to connect with other people involved in the BLM activities in Italy, to take part in the discussions and form new alliances with other systemically oppressed people, such as the activists I interviewed for this article.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS A PLACE OF RECOGNITION

From the inception of the project, Nadeesha, Maria and I all deemed it crucial to include other voices aside from our own to support the content that we would speak about in each episode. For this reason, we thought that including other minoritised people's opinions through would offer a different perspective on the subjects the three of us discussed in the podcasts, providing them with a platform as well to share their experiences as well.

This was the case with Sonia Garcia, who took the opportunity not only to talk about the dismantling of statues that glorified colonisers, but also denounced what was unfolding in Peru at the end of 2022/beginning of 2023 – the impeachment of the first *campesino* (someone who works the land with Indigenous ancestry in Peru) President Pedro Castillo and the rise to power of Dina Boluarte: 'I remember that it helped me to channel that turmoil I had in the key that you were also asking me about'.

In our effort to create an effective media product, there was also an attempt to befriend and involve other racialised people in Italy, to build a collective space that would foster discussion. For Himasha Weerappullige it was the sense of community, the collaborations created by the podcast that she was most enthusiastic about. Of her experience working with us, Himasha mostly recounts the feeling of community that she found by being included in the 'Contributors' section of our main podcast website:

> *The beautiful part was being able to fit into a collective narrative, of various experiences. Collective also in terms of disciplines. It's beautiful that moment when you check the final interface, you look at all the people who participated, and you see many familiar and unfamiliar faces. If you don't know them, you go look for them. You see this mosaic of experiences on a political and social level, and I just found it beautiful.*

Our collaboration with Himasha though was quite different. In fact, she created a series of Instagram Guides (a type of content that is not available anymore on the platform as of April 2024) on the Keffir community in Sri Lanka as an extra feature for the episode on the 'N-Word'. It was linked up to her own account '*Cardamomo Collective*', an Instagram page that promoted South Asian visual art in Italy, as she deemed images a good pretext to open up discussions that would not have direct answers, but which pushed for further questions, especially on platform such as Instagram. But in reality, she admitted ironically, it was done for selfish reasons; to connect with other South Asian Italians like herself, she called it her personal quest. Thus, for instance,

> *through the analysis of a painting from 2000 B.C. in India, you could open up a series of discussions about colourism or how it originated, how it became a modern phenomenon. (…) From those posts, one-to-one conversations would arise with the people who wrote to me. At one point, it was absurd because I received very long messages from people who told me their life stories, (...) Cardamomo Collective' gave me a boost because there was this awakening, this need to position oneself and define oneself and deconstruct oneself in order to rebuild from that moment on.*

It is important to also consider the timing of these events, the fact that the so-called BLM wave took place during a very strict lockdown in Italy. In her book *The Digital Lives of Black Women in Britain*, Francesca Sobande (2020) examined the ways in which digital life offers degrees of liberation for marginalised communities, especially amidst the isolating conditions of the global pandemic. During this specific moment in contemporary life, for individuals who have regular access to the internet and devices facilitating social connection, online,

digital spaces and networked communities may be their prime, or, even, sole source of social interaction for the foreseeable future' (Sobande, 2020).

Social media therefore not only created a space for new discussions and collaborations to grow, but it also enabled community, familial, social relationships to prosper. In connection with digital activism, as Gerbaudo and Treré (2015) claimed, social media can indeed be conceived as 'platforms in which new identities are forged and channelled' (2015). Moreover, it ensured a continuation of networking and with it a type of socialisation of knowledge to thrive, as Selam Tesfai highlighted. For Selam social media had been crucial during #BLM form many people on a personal level, as knowledge around issues on race studies was shared through posts on Instagram in an approachable way. Many also referenced their own life experiences and identities, as Selam explains:

> *I really saw that many people were using social networks almost like a blank slate, on which they would then build any service tool they needed: that is, I need the container where I can put all the photos of my family, of other families, to reconnect with a diasporic community. Then you could tell yourself, 'I exist'!*

People would express themselves through social media on pages and accounts that became connectors of communities. They initiated processes of visibility and audibility, essential to identity politics: politics of recognition of one's own identity and positionality that one holds in society (Taylor, 1991). Identity politics involves more than just positioning we within specific groups; it also entails a desire to gain visibility within mainstream society (Calhoun, 1992), also through protest and movements such as BLM.

Initiatives such as ours also enabled racialised people in Italy to access knowledge related to race, postcolonial and gender studies in Italian and not solely in foreign languages. '*Sulla Razza'* aimed to develop forms of storytelling related to these subjects in a less academic way.

For Laila, presenting and discussing issues around race, marginalisation and discrimination in Italian was key in enabling the wider population in the country to access what we were creating. As she recounts:

> *It seems paradoxical, but language also matters a lot. Indeed, even for us, with the 'Giovani Palestinesi', it's important because we try to translate a lot of things from English to Italian. And 'Sulla Razza', I believe, has been an important space for our community and has been very useful for many of us. It's not like one of those things that is done and then only received from outside the community, but it has been very much embraced internally. 'Sulla Razza' has that kind of language and form that is catchy enough to get its audience, but it's not moderate at all, it's very radical.*

However, for Selam and many others there was also a real desire to translate these virtual connections into real-life ones, meet people face-to-face. This was quite different from the 'usual' forms of activism she was involved in, which were predominantly participated by white Italians and where she at times would experience macro-micro-aggressions. Thus, there was some mistrust entering these places. The digital environment therefore offered a liminal space based on recognition and dialogue.

> *The social arena has been a means to recognize each other and then say, 'I would have written that too. I would have said that too.' (…) During that period, we expressed ourselves more radically, and therefore, I believe we met in radicalism. We even left some of those people behind, on the road; they weren't ultimately that radical.*

Social media enabled her community to be amplified, as she was looking for people to build a team. It was a form of 'digitally mediated consciousness raising' (Mendes et al., 2019). Yet this phenomenon did not start in 2020 for some communities. Since 2010, young Italians of African descent have begun connecting on social media platforms. As noted by Camilla Hawthorne (2019), they started creating forums to discuss their experiences of African descendants within the Italian context, which is characterised by structural racism and a lack of cultural decolonisation (2019).

The Role of Covid-19

During Covid-19 lockdowns social media platforms became even more central in aiding the rise of new communities. Movements like BLM exemplify connective action, where digital tools enable large-scale participation. This is different from collective action, as explained by Bennett and Segerberg (2013), which relies on strong group identity, formal organisations, and coordinated efforts to achieve a common goal. Connective action is more decentralised and personalised, often driven by individual self-mobilisation and technology-driven, as it thrives on digital networks. The immediacy that is intrinsic to social media, combined with the heightened sense of isolation during the pandemic, fostered a sense of urgency that helped not only to shape a discourse around race in Italy, but also connected individuals with other similarly 'Othered' people. This type of connectivity helped Sonia expand her music network. She connected with other DJs outside of Europe, in Latin America and the USA before 2020:

> *Then during Covid I remember that there was an explosion of online parties, dj-sets zoom parties and people would ask me to join in, to record my mixes and send them so that they could play them at these online parties.*

In Italy, social media platforms helped isolated 'Others' in various parts of the country to come together and find each other for the first time. For instance, for Laila, social networking sites have been crucial in finding

other fellow Palestinians around the world, other than ones connected through their families. If one were to see social media pages as places to display symbols of one's identity, for Laila the essential symbol was a Palestinian flag: 'Many Palestinians put the Palestinian flag in their bio, and I am, I wouldn't say obsessed, but it's one of my favourite things to find Palestinians around. So social media has helped a lot in finding my community.'

'*Cardamomo Collective*' for Himasha became essential to link with other South Asian Italians. She was brought up in Rome and was living there in 2020, but from there she would then connect to other experiences/lives in other cities around Italy, such as Milan, Turin, Naples, Catania. She would, for instance, video call with two Bangladeshi girls from Catania, who had come across one of '*Cardamomo Collective*'s' post shared by a friend of theirs at that time. 'They would literally just ask me, "would you like to talk on the phone?" and we would make a Skype call and share with each other all of lives. Their friendship lasted after the pandemic as well, since they continue to each other frequently. This is a form of digital diasporic communicating, which involve(s) interactions and experiences of interiority and intimacy that are dependent on departing from participation in public' (Sobande & Basu, 2023).

And while social media created virtual spaces for communities to meet during and after the rise of the BLM in Italy, Milano represented a promising space for people to meet then in real life. That is interesting to see why the movement seemed to develop more sustainably at the start, especially in Milan. Himasha, who later moved to Milan explained that the city provided a more conducive environment for community growth due to its smaller size, improved accessibility in terms of transport and the fact that racialised communities seem to be less relegated solely to the outskirts of the city: 'In Rome due to transportation and various forms of ghettoization, racialised communities end up truly outside the city, with few opportunities to come together. There are fewer common spaces in the centre.'

Digital platforms thus served as bridges, as the ability to organise beyond local constraints proved particularly crucial in Italy. The virtual infrastructure facilitated unprecedented connections between previously isolated racialised Italians and anti-racist initiatives across the country's diverse regions creating a networked movement that could coordinate actions and share strategies nationally.

TOKENISM AND 'POP-ANTIRACISM'

For Laila, the mobilisation for Palestine has seen its ascension as a movement in Italy thanks to what was accomplished during BLM. Despite it not being a properly structured political movement, Laila believes that 'it was the first political experience where racialised people were centre-stage and they had a voice, they weren't solely being represented by (white) Italians in the struggle. And this was fuelled by social media'. Through social media, discussions around systemic racism started arising in Italy, bringing to surface the injustices that racialised groups faced. 'It brought to surface the Palestinian issue read through the lens of systemic racism'. Yet, as Sonia highlights the level of tokenism that developed after 2020.

> *I was already beginning to notice certain contradictions in 2021: like there's visibility, but what does visibility really mean? Does it truly serve our interests, or does it exploit us? Especially with the capitalistic dimension of everything, and I believe that the BLM movement in 2020 has further legitimized this actually. Like it's become almost the norm. So, this is why I have mixed feelings.*

This was confirmed by Laila as well, as she argued that despite the newly gained visibility, there was also a worrying fetishising attention that grew out of the BLM towards second generation migrant people. A mainstream, liberal type of anti-racism movement started to rise. Himasha called it Pop-Antiracism, which in the end 'only reinforced the mechanism that it was claiming to criticize and dismantle', she explained. These reflections capture a critical tension that emerged in the aftermath of the 2020 protests: the commodification of anti-racist activism in Italy. While the BLM movement successfully pushed discussions of racism into mainstream Italian discourse, this visibility often translated into superficial forms of representation rather than substantive change. The movement's momentum had begun to be co-opted by market forces, transforming anti-racist messaging into what might be termed diversity capital – a marketable asset rather than a call for systemic change. Some racialised people on social media were responsible for this too – or perhaps victims of this sudden marketable performative visibility.

This perspective was also articulated by Kwanza Musi Dos Santos, activist and co-founder of *'Se Questa è Roma'*, an NGO dedicated to combating discrimination in the Italian capital. In her thoughtful voice note featured in the episode *'Attivismo Performativo'*, which examined performative activism, she observed:

> *With the advent of social media, performative activism has increased exponentially, so we've reached levels where the effectiveness of your activism is measured by how many followers you have. [...] And how can we talk about activism without also mentioning whiteness and mental pressure? The mental pressure that leads many people who perhaps do a lot in their daily lives but don't have the time or ability to share it on social media. And whiteness, which is central, for example, with the many feminists who*

write 'intersectional feminist' in their Instagram bio, but then often I've found myself confronted with a totally irresponsible whiteness and a glaring privilege, which is still difficult to recognize.

As Kwanza Musi Dos Santos hinted in her voice note, this form of online activism also entailed time-consuming emotional and mental labour that digital spaces organisers have to endure, which could often lead to burnout (Mendes et al., 2019).

Intersectionality

Another issue that many anti-racist activists confronted was how the term 'Intersectionality' (Crenshaw, 1989) was being deployed in Italian digital activism. Many social media accounts presented themselves as intersectional activists in their bios. However, several activists in the anti-racist movement expressed concern that intersectionality was being invoked without adequate engagement with its origins in Black feminist thought and its specific attention to how racism compounds other forms of oppression. Rather than questioning whether white women experience oppression or can use intersectional frameworks – they certainly do and can – the concern centred on whether the specificities of racialised oppression were being adequately centred in discussions that claimed intersectionality while potentially marginalising the voices and experiences of Black and racialised women. In light of this, the term intersectionality was discussed in episode 11 of the first season of '*Sulla Razza*'. Selam, who contributed to that particular episode, also gave perhaps the most compelling justification to this mistrust:

You cannot talk about intersectionality without understanding the distinction between the oppressed woman and the woman who oppresses... because you cannot put us on the same level just because biologically female, because socialized as female. (…) it means you don't know what decolonization is, and it means you haven't understood anything about intersectional feminism, (…) what the colonial experience was, and so this lack of knowledge, but also this need to always express oneself... it's a bit annoying, isn't it?

Selam's point addresses a specific dynamic: the concern that in Italian contexts, where discussions of race and racism are relatively nascent, intersectional feminism might be adopted in ways that inadvertently centre white women's experiences while obscuring the particular compounding effects of racism. This does not diminish other axes of oppression but rather insists that race must be meaningfully engaged with, not merely added as one item in a list of differences, as this would lead to what Banaji (2022) has explained as a 'packaged neoliberal idea of intersectionality'.

In the episode *Intersectional Feminism*, Nadeesha, Maria, and I emphasised the critical importance of applying an intersectional lens to feminism in Italy. This approach is particularly necessary given the widespread neglect that migrant female workers experience within Italian feminist circles. Despite being integral to the affective labour (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2014; Federici, 2012) – providing essential care and domestic labour – these women remain marginalised and largely invisible in mainstream feminist discourse. As Nadeesha highlighted during our conversation:

Perhaps one reason why Italian feminist movements don't address those women relegated to domestic and care work is that our economic system is indispensably dependent on their labour – they perform duties that white Italian women no longer fulfil. They are needed. The system remains standing by ignoring these workers, and it's justified with the idea of the white employer, the lady, a benefactor who is so magnanimous as to give them a job, regardless of whether it's underpaid or off the books.

In terms of intersectionality, for Sonia issues arose within racialised communities she is part of. Following BLM, she has had to deal with a few complicated discussions of what consent, sexual violence and discrimination itself with other people with migratory background such as herself. She admits feeling disillusioned after such conversations, towards the anti-racist movement itself. Yet she argues that it was possibly due to the pressure that everyone put on the BLM movement:

There was such a strong impetus in 2020, when the movement started, which practically idealized something, put it on a pedestal. And just as in individual relationships, even in interpersonal relationships, even in romantic and family relationships, this happens, right? You meet someone, you fall in love, and for you, they're an ideal at first.

The idolisation of the BLM movement perhaps was heightened by the complete isolation that took place just before June 2020, as it also provided some type of hope and renewed energy in an otherwise discouraging solitary reality.

ALLYSHIP

The initial sense of euphoria that BLM instilled in people, the possibilities and changes it promised slowly disintegrated as time passed by.

While the solidarities created among racialised groups were crucial, the attention by mainstream/the majority of the (white) Italian society was perhaps fundamental to the existence in popular/mainstream culture in Italy. And this bond between racialised people and white Italians was called into question through the concept of

allyship, a pact, somewhat of a social contract to stand together against systemic racism. Moreover, for Laila it was arguably also an agreement to represent marginalised people in situations of ongoing inaccessibility for this group. 'Real allies should position themselves as listeners first. (…) Then we should be able to delegate certain aspects of our fight to an ally, to a spokesperson, we should be able to ask for aid when needed'. Yet, a few years after the initial protest on 7 June 2020, this imaginary contract seems to have been revoked. 'There doesn't seem to exist an element of trust anymore', says Laila.

During and after the rise of the BLM movement in Italy, as a collective of marginalised women part of '*Sulla Razza*', we were frequently invited to participate in events that explored topics such as racism, discrimination, and intersectionality. While these platforms initially seemed like opportunities to amplify our voices, it became increasingly evident that many of these initiatives might not be rooted in genuine commitment to dismantling systemic oppression. Instead, they appeared to be superficial gestures driven by the popularity of these conversations in the wake of anti-racist global movements. One could argue that this trend, this wake-washing, reduced our lived experiences to mere talking points, commodifying our pain and struggles for the sake of appearing progressive or relevant. As Audre Lorde explains 'it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach the oppressors their mistakes. (…) The oppressors maintain their position and evade responsibility for their own actions' (Lorde in Crowley & Himmelweit, 1992). It was disheartening to witness how the urgency and depth of these issues were overshadowed by performative allyship, exposing a lack of genuine accountability or sustained efforts to address structural injustices.

Moreover, regarding the coverage of structural racism issues and certain tokenistic practices, Angelo Boccato – an Italian journalist with a migrant background now based in London – offered compelling insights in the second episode of our second season, '*Le Vite Nere Contano*', which examined the emergence of the BLM movement in Italy:

> *I believe that BLM has partially changed the conversation at the journalistic level, in the sense that greater space has been given to Black voices. However, the problem is that these spaces have very often been the so-called pigeon hold spaces [...]. So there's still the idea that Black voices can only speak on certain occasions about specific contexts— namely racism, Black Lives Matter, anti-racism, and in the Italian case, citizenship. […] The problem is that this system creates dynamics in which Black voices are nonetheless confined and are absolutely reduced, because we cannot have Black journalists and voices writing about economics, politics, and many other topics.*

Boccato's critique powerfully illustrates the profound difference between tokenistic representation and genuine structural change. This commercialisation of anti-racist discourse created a paradoxical situation. On one hand, increased visibility meant that racially marginalised voices gained unprecedented platforms in Italian media and cultural spaces. On the other hand, this visibility often served institutional interests more than movement goals, with organisations and brands adopting anti-racist messaging without meaningful commitment to structural change. This reflected to how anti-racist language and imagery became detached from their political roots, reduced to performative gestures that could satisfy market demands for diversity while leaving underlying power structures intact.

The unreliability of 'occasional fans'

One could say that trust was somewhat broken in inner circles already at the inception of the BLM movement in Italy. Himasha saw this happening to her own friendship circles, especially on social media. As she would share on her personal account posts that she created through '*Cardamomo Collective*', she noticed that white Italians would unfollow her. And then followed what she terms '*tifosi occasionali*'/occasional fans. Himasha explained:

> *If you decide to join a cause because everyone else is joining it … then that's a problem! Because as soon as there is no more enthusiasm about that information, as the algorithms get bored of it, then you will abandon it completely.... And that's the problem with social media, because it only gives you a cue on the issue, but then the action has to be brought into real life and on a daily basis.*

Therefore, being an ally also positions a person in a constant deconstruction of oneself, of constantly understanding the flaws in one's positioning or in one's political approach to a particular issue.

> *We see it now even with the Palestinian issue, how it's being completely obscured. They don't see that it's connected to everything that happened in 2020, as a result of the same system. So alliances can exist, but it depends on who and how you ally with.*

Reflecting on the events unfolding in Gaza, Selam wonders about the results obtained in the end with BLM.

> *They haven't understood what it really means to take a feminist, anti-racist, and anti-colonial stance, and what this signifies when I tell you that the coloniser woman is not the same as the Palestinian woman! And if you haven't grasped this, then you should understand, that two months after we participated together in Black Lives Matter, you and I now have nothing left to share! So, the problem is that for us, Black Lives Matter was important for some issues, but some have only understood Black. Lives. Matter.*

The BLM movement seems to have had an effect on Italian culture and society but perhaps missed to develop a more grounded understanding of intersectional perspective and approach to various issues, along with a real understanding of systemic racism. In fact, the movement does not appear to have impelled long-standing changes and impacts on a social and more political level. As Laila explains:

> *There hasn't been any kind of change in institutional policies towards a more, I don't even want to say decolonial direction because it's impossible in Italy, but at least towards a situation where some policies have been implemented from that perspective. The citizenship law is still the same, the issue of residence permits, access to asylum, in fact, certain things have even worsened. The issue of special protection, subsidiary protection, they've all remained the same.*

The stark contrast between Milan's two BLM protests reveals much about the limitations of digital activism and the challenges of sustaining anti-racist solidarity in Italy. The initial protest on 7 June 2020, embodied the momentum of global digital organising: thousands gathered in defiance of Covid-19 restrictions, their presence amplified by social media's immediate reach. Selam's powerful speech from the mobile stage, accompanied by protesters chanting Kendrick Lamar's 'Alright', captured a moment when digital and physical protest spaces seamlessly merged. The significant presence of white Italian allies seemed to signal a potential breakthrough in mainstream recognition of systemic racism.

However, the follow-up protests a year later told a different story. The dramatic decline in attendance – from thousands to roughly a hundred participants – highlighted the ephemeral nature of social media-driven solidarity. While the second protest's intimate format, with speakers like Laila and Sonia sharing personal experiences of racism in a circle formation, created powerful moments of community building, the absence of white Italian allies was telling. This shift in participation suggests that for many, the initial protest represented a type of viral 'pandemic solidarity' (Kavada, 2015; Pleyers, 2020) – a form of political engagement more closely tied to social media performance than sustained commitment to anti-racist action. The feeling of abandonment I experienced reflects a broader challenge facing racial justice movements: how to transform the immediate, visceral responses generated by social media into sustained political commitment and concrete action against structural racism?

THE UNSUSTAINABILITY OF AN ALL-ENCOMPASSING MOVEMENT?

The BLM movement in Italy connected racialised communities. The attempts were to keep together different individuals that have participated in the anti-racist fight in its various declinations in Italy, whether they be afro-descendent, of Arab origin, South-Asian, Latin-American, Asian and many more. One could argue that due to this general appeal, the movement somewhat failed to remain unified.

Islamophobia appears not to have been confronted with in depth, for instance, as Laila explains. There was an emphasis on the type of racism directed towards visibly racialised people. For example, Laila considers herself a racialised person, but also white-passing. In her view there seems to be a clash between these two conceptualisations, a lack of acknowledgement within the movement in Italy itself. It is the predominant reason why people/we have not been able to keep the movement together. In her view, we are still a long way from having a unified front. I would suggest that this simplification of various issues into an all-encompassing antiracist fight was rather instrumental at its inception. The aftermath perhaps failed to establish a more solid form of activism: while there was an intersection of various strands of anti-racism, what was missing was real intersectionality within the movement itself, as explained above by other activists. Selam confirms this:

> *We didn't have time to establish a common foundation, which can't be solely anti-racist; it must and should be transfeminist, it must be decolonial. Certain collectives or small groups even fell apart or, in any case, didn't manage to move beyond the online phase but then couldn't meet and exist in real life.*

Other aspects of the movement, the connections between certain individuals though did resist the test of time and real-life existence. As Sonia explains:

> *I think it was a catalysing moment for many marginalized communities in Italy, in Milan. (…) From what was formed during that period of Black Lives Matter, so much has transformed and much has disintegrated. I remain with this somewhat nostalgic feeling but also grateful that from these frictions, proximities as well have formed.*

Perhaps the long-lasting effect of the BLM in Italy was the creation of a collectives in the form of '*Dororidade*', a concept created by Brazilian activist, writer, and poet Piedade (2017), combining the Portuguese words for *dor* (pain) and *sororidade* (sorority). Thus, it goes beyond addressing sisterhood among all women, it refers to the shared pain and solidarity experienced by Black women as a result of systemic racism, sexism, and social inequalities. It is an intersectional term that Piedade uses to highlight how Black women, in particular, bond through their shared experiences of oppression, creating a sense of community and collective resilience. Despite perhaps still lacking a sense of intersectional perspective in the wider society, in Italy this sense of '*dororidade*' was at the core of BLM.

CONCLUSION

As of 2024, evaluating the long-term impact of the BLM movement in Italy requires careful consideration of both its achievements and limitations. The movement successfully brought together previously isolated marginalised communities across Italy's regions, catalysing new forms of digital solidarity and collective action. The digital infrastructure of the movement enabled unprecedented connections, allowing people like myself, Nadeesha and Maria Catena to create a sociological podcast, '*Sulla Razza',* that democratised information and knowledge otherwise available only in academic circles in Italy and in the English language. These virtual networks, forged during pandemic isolation, facilitated conversations that might not have occurred in physical spaces, demonstrating the unique potential of digital organising for anti-racist movements.

This article aimed to underline the significance of resistance against racism beyond the borders of the USA in the aftermath of #BLM. It highlights the importance of the BLM movement in bringing the antiracist movement to the forefront in Italian mainstream discussions. It brought together racialised communities, aiming to unite individuals who had participated in the anti-racist struggle in its various forms across the country, including those of Afro-descendant, Arab, South Asian, Latin American, Asian, and other backgrounds. However, despite its broad appeal, the movement struggled to maintain unity after 2020-2021. The initial surge of digital solidarity faced obstacles in translating online momentum into sustained organisational structures and political impact.

Moreover, while the movement successfully brought anti-racist discourse into mainstream Italian discussions, it struggled to develop more nuanced understandings of intersectionality and systemic racism specific to the Italian context. The concept of allyship, initially central to movement building, became increasingly contested, revealing the complexities of building coalitions across different experiences of marginalisation.

The findings of this article suggest that while digital platforms can effectively catalyse movements and create new forms of solidarity, they may not automatically lead to lasting social and political change. However, the methodological approach of this study, while offering deep insights into specific nodes of Italy's anti-racist network, carries inherent limitations. The reliance on autoethnography and interviews with four activists, while providing rich detailed insights, captures only a segment of Italy's diverse anti-racist movement. Future research would benefit from a broader range of voices, particularly from different regions and linguistic communities.

Finally, this study's timing – examining events still recent in Italy's social movement history – means that some longer-term impacts may not yet be visible. Longitudinal research will be crucial for understanding how these initial moments of digital mobilisation might shape future anti-racist organising in Italy and beyond.

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