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VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

Images of belonging among West African men seeking asylum in Italy

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Abstract
In this article I set out to analyze image-making among West African men seeking asylum in Turin, Italy, in relation to the burden of invisibility and hypervisibility, to which they are continuously subjected. Considering blackness not as a skin color but as a social construct that opposes whiteness on an inferior level, this article is about African people who are seen – "coded"– as black and their self-representation in public or semi-public spaces that are "coded" as white. After analyzing the social forces, forms of institutional and racist violence and institutional abandonment that shape the migratory experience in Italy, I will argue that these images open up an expressive space, where it is possible to articulate the rejection of being rejected, or rather the right to live and be happy in Italy, visualizing precarious forms of belonging, which are remindful of the notion of "Afropean".
This analysis is based on ethnographic research I have been conducting since 2017 in Turin on the intersections between digital technology, social inequalities, and the application for political asylum.

Keywords
Mobile photography – Migration – Racialization – Internal boundaries – Italy

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Introduction

In this article I will consider image-making among West African men seeking asylum in Turin, Italy, in relation to the burden of invisibility and hypervisibility to which they are continuously subjected. Considering blackness not as a skin color but as a social construct that opposes whiteness on an inferior level (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013; Giuliani 2019), this article is about African people who are seen – "coded" (Mapedzahama and Kwansah-Aidoo 2017) – as black and their self-representation in public or semi-public spaces that are "coded" as white[1].

The image of Italy as white stems from a process of whitening, that has its roots in the formation of the Italian state and the project of building a colonial empire. During the *Risorgimento*, intellectuals and politicians tended to identify a racial affinity between southern "uncivilized" Italians and Africans, considering Italy a *meticcio* (mixed-race) country because of its geographical location (cf. Moe 2002; Re 2003: 177; Teti 1993; Wong 2006: 47-50). A few decades later, other scientists – for example, Giovanni Marro, Lidio Cipriani and Guido Landra – instead asserted racial homogeneity as a way to promote national unity beyond fragmented regional identities, and to legitimize colonial violence. In Italian history, racism is neither solely a fascist aberration nor a recent consequence of immigration. Rather, it belongs to the fabric of the Italian state (cf. Andall and Duncan 2005; Dickie 1999; Giuliani 2015; Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 20113; Pesarini 2017; Sorgoni 2010). The construction of blackness as a marker of outsider status entails the burden of both hypervisibility and invisibility for Africans and African descendants in Italy (Giuliani 2019: 11). On the one hand, people racialized as black are deemed to be always out of place, threatening the homogeneous color of the nation through their mere presence (Giuliani 2015; Gordon 2000: 160; Puwar 2004). Their bodies are "supersaturated with meaning" (Yancy 2008a: 846), and are continually scrutinized and observed (cf. Browne 2015) by the white gaze, lest they disturb "the tranquillity of white life, white comfort, white embodiment, and white being" (Yancy 2008b: 3). On the other hand, people racialized as black are subjected to social erasure and invisibilization. Since their presence is rarely recognized and visualized in public discourse, they disappear from the imagination of the Italian community and the official

[1] I would like to thank all those who participated in my research, and the cooperative that managed the accommodation center, where I carried out the initial part of my fieldwork. The writing of this article benefited from the comments of the participants in the workshop "Immaginari di libertà e risonanza delle immagini. Tecnologie digitali, soggettività e politiche del quotidiano nella vita online della diaspora africana e oltre", organized by Bruno Riccio, Chiara Pilotto and the Centro Mobilità, Diversità, Inclusione sociale (MODI) of the University of Bologna, and from the debate that took place during the panel "Verso quale futuro? Etnografia, media digitali e migrazioni", at the Fourth SIAC National Conference "Il ritorno del sociale".
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narrative (Carter 2010: 4). This process of erasure goes hand in hand with the segregation and containment of African asylum seekers and refugees in accommodation centres, which are often located in isolated and poorly connected areas, with rules that limit the possibility of residents to leave and move freely. These restrictive measures serve the interests of the local white population, who see African migrants as a threat to security, rather than those of the people who live there (Biffi 2017: 144; Pinelli 2017: 60).

On the backdrop of these violent processes of othering and rejection, in what follows I will look at image-making in public and semi-public spaces by West African men seeking asylum in Italy, and I will reflect on what this image-making allows them to do and say about themselves. In the wake of Campt's research (2012) on family photographs among the African diaspora in Europe, I will interpret images as a record of choices rather than facts, showing how intentions, aspirations and performances are staged. My analysis will include both images posted online and images that stay (temporary) in people's phone galleries, as I am interested not only in how people would like to be seen, but also (and more generally) in how they would like to see themselves. I will argue that these images open up an expressive space, where it is possible to articulate the rejection of being rejected, or rather the right to live and be happy in Italy, visualizing precarious forms of belonging, which are remindful of the notion of "Afropean". Recalling the words of the photographer Johny Pitts:

> Afropean, even if only as a provocative suggestion, tears down a dividing fence and suggest the possibility of feeling connected to two ideas – Africa and Europe […] – without being mixed-this or half-that, Black-other or Afro-something. It is a space where Blackness has a role in shaping European identity at large, even if it isn't recognized (Pitts 2020: 243).

In evoking an Afropean sensibility, I follow Brancato, who suggests that Afropean should not be exclusively referred to so-called "second generations"[2], but rather connected to cultural creators that somehow express the "reciprocal embeddedness of the histories of the two neighboring continents" (Brancato 2008: 2). As a concept, I favor it over Afro-Italian (Hawthorne 2022a: 15; Kan 2020; Kuti 2019) because the forms of belonging sketched by my interlocutors are not bounded by the imagination of the nation state and bring to the forefront broader relational spaces. The notion of Afropean is not employed by my interlocutors, but is rather used by me in attempt to put in words what my interlocutors conveyed in images.

I will delve into these dynamics by focusing on some images – photographs and short videos – made by Djibril[3], a young Malian man in his mid-twenties, who applied for political asylum in Turin in 2016, and whom I first met at the beginning of my fieldwork in 2017. First, I will examine the social forces, forms of institutional and racist violence and institutional abandonment that shaped Djibril's migratory experience. Then, I will discuss

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[2] The expression "second generations" is used by the children of immigrants (for example the G2 Network. Accessed online [April 9th 2025]: https://www.secondegenerazioni.it), but it can also have the effect of othering people born/raised in Italy, ascribing foreign origins to them, if used with the problematic meaning of "second generation immigrants".

[3] I refer to all the research participants with pseudonyms.

the meaning of the images he took that obscure the difficulties of his present day in favor of the representation of a good life. I will argue that these are aspirational images that portray the life that flows outside the places alleged by the Italian society for African migrants, breezing social and spatial confinement. Finally, I will focus on Djibril's images depicting historical monuments in Turin to reflect on the (violent and silenced) history of the relations between Italy and Africa. In conclusions, I will look at what these images conceal, but which nevertheless affects their meaning, risking to reverse it. These reflections are based on ethnographic research conducted in Turin, Italy, between 2017 and 2023, with West African men seeking asylum. In addition to qualitative interviews (in Italian, English or French) and participant observation, I also followed my interlocutors on social media, and I recurred to photo-elicitation (Collier and Collier 1986; Buckley 2014), commenting the images with their authors. My interlocutors were not very vocal about them, and what I usually collected was a list of the people and objects represented in the picture ("denotations of object more than evocations" [Buckley 2014: 720]), in a way that nevertheless gives insights into what counted to and was considered valuable by them.

Despite the enormous difficulties they were facing, Djibril and many other young West African men navigating the asylum application in Turin allowed me to get close to them, and opened up their smartphones for me. Several authors have already written about the ethical problems proper of research with asylum seekers and refugees (cf. Bouillon, Fresia and Tallio 2005: 13; Sorgoni 2022: 153-154) and smartphones (Khamsi 2022). In this vein, I would like to make some remarks to better clarify the sense and limits of the analysis that follows. Although the time spent together, and the trust that my interlocutors and I were able to slowly grant each other, the structural inequality of our relationships marked a distance, which was impossible to bridge, and which was highlighted every evening by the fact that I could leave the accommodation center and return home. As a white Italian citizen, I never experienced on my body the symbolic violence and racism that made a great part of my interlocutors' daily life, and which I will nevertheless try to report in this article. The very different understanding of the object of my research speaks about this unbridgeable distance. On the one hand, people willingly illustrated their use of the smartphone to me, as this was a "light" topic compared to the tough questions the other professionals they had to interface with daily (for example, social and legal workers, lawyers, psychologists, police) generally asked them, forcing them to retrace painful past experiences. On the other hand, the "lightness" of the topic in a moment of their lives, characterized by "heavy" problems, led in some cases to perceive my research as pointless. As Daniel, a Nigerian man (who shortly thereafter was forced to move to a remote area in the mountains, far from his wife and a newborn son, because he was absent for few days from the accommodation center, without the previous authorization of social workers), reminded me well: "why instead of using your money to do research on our cell phones, don't you use it to buy us cell phones?"[4]. In light of the extremely precarious legal condition of my interlocutors, I decided not to publish the images that I will analyze. Images were often posted and then delated, as social media profiles were opened and

[4] July 17, 2017.

closed by my interlocutors, according to a choreography of secret (Santanera 2024: 48), which is not disconnected from the violent habits of European police and migration officers to open smartphones to detect migratory routes and find presumed visual "evidence" of people ineligibility for refugee status (Bolhuis and van Wijk 2021; Josipovic 2024: 1832; Khamsi 2002: 267). As their image production can at any time be used against their safety and security, I decided not to publish what they consented to share with me years ago, but what may have become harmful to them in the meantime.

The images I will discuss in this article are a part of a broader scenario, characterized by the cultural production and media activism of the Afro-descendant community in Italy (cf. Bachis 2023; Hawthorne 2022a: 16-17). These are young entrepreneurs, creatives, content creators, artists and intellectuals who use videos, photographs and texts spread through blogs and social networking platforms to change the representation of the black minority in Italy, introducing their point of view into the public sphere, especially on issues that concern them. In doing so, they deconstruct many stereotypes, and contribute to proposing an idea of Italy that clashes with the image of the homogeneous white country, conveyed by the national mass media (Giuliani 2019; Ponzanesi 2005). An example of this is the artistic project "Disintegrata" by Silvia Rosi, which displays a series of photographs collected in Italy (especially in Emilia-Romagna) between 2023 and 2024, among people who arrived from Africa before 2000. These family album shots – which display the ordinariness of life – propose an idea of Italianness that stems from landscapes inhabited by black bodies[5]. The images analyzed in this article are part of this broader scenario and, albeit in a different way and from a more marginal and less visible position, contribute to the reorienting of the multifaceted experience of being black in Italy. While other visual productions by African asylum seekers openly confront racism and racialization (Pilotto 2023), these images are more oblique, addressing this violence in subtle ways, which can only be captured against the light.

Life under the (perpetual) asylum seeker label

Djibril is a young Malian, who arrived in Italy in 2016. In 2017 – when I first met him – he was waiting for his hearing at the Turin court, to which he had appealed after the rejection of his application for asylum by the Territorial Commission. At the time, he spent most of his days scrolling the social media in his bedroom in an accommodation center in the outskirts of Turin and in the park in front of the Porta Nuova train station, where in his words he "waited"[6]. Periodically, he would go to a job center in the hope of finding a job, but his short-term residence permit together with the racist dynamics that shape the labor market, made it extremely unlikely[7]. Almost every week he tried to reach the people in charge of managing the accommodation center – who rarely showed up – to find out about his court hearing, rising suspicions that they were withholding information and not

[5]Accessed online (April 9th 2025): https://www.collezionemaramotti.org/it/dettaglio-mostra/-/silvia-rosi-collezione-maramotti/339441

[6] January 5, 2018.

[7] Migration regimes together with racial stigmatization have the effect of making African migrants vulnerable and tractable workforce, pushing them towards the black-market, while barring their access to decent and regular work (cf. Avallone, Grimaldi and Bartoli 2021).

making effort to anticipate the appointment. When the social workers told him that the judge had decided a further postponement of the hearing, in order to "unstuck" his life, he faced another dangerous journey. He crossed the border with France on foot and presented a new application for political asylum under a different identity. To this day (summer 2024) he is still struggling with the asylum system, and his time continues to be usurped by the European border regime (cf. Andersson 2014: 2; Fontanari 2017: 26; Fravega, Giudici and Boccagni 2023: 8). When he was in Turin, he often spoke to me about the "disaster"[8] he had in his mind and – despite never losing hope, as his multiple attempts to make the "system" listen to him, to find a job and ultimately, his decision to leave Italy attest – he was forced into passivity, which he struggled to accept. To reach Italy he crossed the Sahara Desert, lived in hiding in Libya to escape racist attacks against sub-Saharan Africans, and risked his life once again by crossing the Mediterranean Sea on a boat. Once in Europe, the violence and trauma continued with his life becoming entangled in the asylum system, which he was forced to submit to, since there are almost no other ways for Africans to try to legally live in Europe (Mahmud 2024: 41).

Djibril's suffering, anger, and extreme vulnerability – which are part of the daily life of many other asylum seekers in Italy (and beyond) – are produced by social forces, forms of institutional and racist violence and institutional abandonment. Numerous researches have documented the harshness of life in accommodation centers, where people are relegated for years, their lives being violently suspended in a sort of perpetual present (e.g. Pinelli and Ciabarri 2017). Waiting for the assessment of their application for asylum, they experience both temporal and spatial injustice (Fontanari 2017). The accommodation center where Djibril was hosted, unlike the majority of other centers in Italy, was in an area well connected to the center of Turin, and was run by social workers who were well aware of the critical aspects of the reception system, and worked hard to alleviate the socio-economic marginality of the residents. The deprivation of the social and political dimensions, the extreme narrowing of the margins of action were, however, clearly felt by my interlocutors, who lamented a life reduced to organic functions: "Eating and sleeping all day, it's not good", they used to point out to me[9]. While the cooperative that managed the accommodation center financed a six-month internship to all residents, they spent years at the "camp"[10], where they had no choice, but to wait for time to pass, if they were unable to find other jobs (which was common, given their precarious legal status and strong discrimination). As Djibril's life was violently suspended by the asylum system, what follows will show how suppressed futures and pasts subtly remerged in his image making practice.

Images of the happy life and the rejection of being rejected

In one of the many afternoons that we spent together in a public park in front of the Porta Nuova train station, Djibril showed me on his smartphone some images that he had taken

[8] December 15, 2017.
[9] Sekou, September 8, 2017.
[10] The residents used to call the accommodation center "camp".

in the previous days[11]. They were a series of portraits of himself in an electronics store in front of some television screens, a video shot inside the same store that started from the large screens of the televisions showing the image of the Golden Gate bridge in San Francisco and then snapped some of his friends inside the store together with him, a photograph that portrayed him near a black car, a selfie on the train, a series of photographs of a motorcycle snapped from different angles, a short video made in the central Piazza San Carlo of a girl who was juggling. These images of a good life – made of friends, consumption, and leisure time – do not mirror the harshness of life in the accommodation center, which Djibril often told me about, and differ significantly from those pictures that aim to provide documentary evidence of asylum seekers' daily life (Pinelli and Ciabarri 2017). As I have already shown elsewhere (Santanera 2022: 217), these images more than documents of the present, can be interpreted as visualizations of the positive future that many young men from West Africa desire, having freed themselves from exploitative post-colonial regimes that keep them in the social, economic, and political marginality (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005: 27; Honwana 2012: 4; Santanera 2020: 44-46). They are impregnated by a consumerist imaginary triggered by global market logics, from which Djibril was nevertheless kept on the margins, due to his precarious socio-economic condition and legal status.

Miller et al. (2016: 197) show that the desire to represent the best version of one's own life characterizes contemporary mobile photography in different societies, although what is meant by "good life" varies from context to context. To better understand the particular meaning of my interlocutors' aspirational photography, I would like to recall the image of adventure through which they thought of themselves and their future. When they talked about themselves, they rarely used the expression "migrants" (or any label taken from the asylum system), but rather defined themselves as "adventurers", "fighters" and "chasers". What it means to be on an adventure emerges clearly from the following testimonies. Adama is an Ivorian refugee, who dreamt of being able to take charge of his entire family. When I met him in the spring of 2017, he had recently obtained the refugee status, but was still unable to find a job. This greatly distressed him, as it prevented him from becoming a provider for his family network. One morning, he told me that the following week he would move to Malta. When I expressed my surprise at his sudden departure, he replied:

> When you are an adventurer, when you decide something you do it immediately, without thinking. […] Italy gave me the documents but it does not mean that my luck is here. I must go to Malta to see if my luck is there, otherwise I will go and look for it elsewhere: Spain, Ireland, Finland, Iceland… wherever I can go in Europe. Thank God now I have documents that allow me to move[12].

Demba is a young Malian, granted with a two-year residence permit for "humanitarian reasons". In 2017-2018 he was desperately looking for a job with a regular contract in order to (at least temporarily) protect himself from the risk of falling into irregular status,

[11] September 13, 2017.
[12] October 13, 2017.

transforming his national protection into a residence permit for work reasons. When he talked to me about his story, he said: "I didn't study in Mali, I'm not a person with great diplomas. Even many people who had studied in Mali didn't find a job: some returned to the village to cultivate the land, others became adventurers like me: they looked elsewhere"[13]. Finally, the words of Praise, a Nigerian young man, who was just eighteen years old when I first met him, communicate the exhaustion and loneliness of the adventurer, who must always be ready to leave everything and everyone to set off again: "I want to stay in Turin, I don't want to go somewhere else in Europe, unless I already have a job waiting for me. I don't want to go on an adventure anymore"[14]. The adventurer is a key figure in African migration. The notion of adventure does not simply indicate a risky migration, but refers to the desire to live differently and to find social and personal fulfillment – impossible at home – elsewhere. The slow, predictable and dead-end daily life that young males in West Africa are often forced to live (cf. Bellagamba 2011; Gaibazzi 2015; Santanera 2019) is contrasted by a philosophy of action and risk taking (Bredeloup 2013: 175; Zingari, Riccio, Sakho and Cissokho 2023: 42). In order to be successful, the adventure must be a phase of one's life, which ends through the accumulation of resources and material signs of success, that allow one to acquire respectability and dignity at home, through their partial redistribution. In this sense, it is possible to affirm that the consumer fantasies captured in Djibril's (and in many other African asylum seekers') images visualize the adventurer's realization and the emergence of a new gendered subject, who is able to provide for himself and the needs of his community, according to proper male adulthood (Amman and Staudacher 2021: 264).

By capturing a successful future, these images visually challenge the marginal place that Italian society envisions for black migrants. They call into question internal boundaries and racialized forms of social categorization, which establish symbolic difference and produce exclusion (cf. Fassin 2010: 6; 2011: 214). Here, it is helpful to recall the notion of "black space", elaborated by Merrill (2018) in her ethnographic research in Turin. Through the concept of "black space", Merrill points at the spaces of violence, racism, micro aggressions and social erasure that characterize the existence of black migrants, refugees and African descendants in Italy[15]. The black space extends well beyond accommodation centers to include the daily interactions and movements of racialized subjects in public spaces; it is a "space of experience", a "body-mind-world" (Merrill 2018: pos. 2760) of black people in Italy who perceive its presence and live its boundaries on their bodies, as clearly emerges from the words of Omar, a young Gambian, who worked in the kitchen of a popular restaurant in Turin, but who shunned bars. The "strange" looks (cf. Merrill 2018: pos. 5847) – depending on the case, surprised, curious, disapproving, scared, threatening – of customers and bartenders, who police the boundaries of white spaces, reminded him that he did not belong there: "Sometimes I'd

[13] October 3, 2017.
[14]October 20, 2017.
[15] Micro aggressions and everyday forms of racist violence are well documented in the works of black Italian writers and scholars. Cf. Frisina and Hawthorne (2017); Hakuzwimana (2019; 2024: 17); Pesarini and Hawthorne (2020); Scego (2018).

like to enter a bar but I'm ashamed, because I think that then the people inside the bar would look at me strangely because I'm African"[16]. Omar's testimony resonates with that of many other African migrants, who tend to avoid bars, cafes, and small shops, preferring the anonymity of supermarkets and large markets.

The images of success confront these boundaries, immortalizing and, through their serial repetition, normalizing a life outside the places alleged by Italian society for African migrants. By portraying themselves in those places, where white Italians would show them that they were not welcome through a myriad of micro-aggressions, my interlocutors vanished the attempts to socially erase and marginalize them, claiming their right to belong and asserting themselves as members of the polity. From this point of view, the expression "normal" that a young Gambian named Bouba used to describe these images is telling. It emphasizes that these images allow people to see themselves (and be seen, if posted) as "normal" people, rather than as racialized immigrants. As such, they are powerful assertions of one's being. The sense of belonging is elaborated aesthetically. As they represented themselves next to consumer goods, they wore fancy clothes, in tune with their surroundings, marking their membership sensorially: "These are photographs that are taken when you look beautiful, I mean, when you are well dressed, you are well-groomed. Look at this photo: everything is coordinated, hat, shirt, shoes… look at the colors! The clothes in this type of photographs are very important"[17], Bakary, a young man from Gambia explained to me while he was scrolling his smartphone image gallery. The aesthetic of elegance resonates with the West African tradition of portray photography that had its golden years in the Sixties, when people flocked to the photographic studios to be pictured with luxurious costumes, props, and backdrops (Santanera 2022: 217). In his research in Gambia, Buckley (2006) connects the sensuous experience of being elegant and receiving a photograph to the joyful feeling of being cherished and wanted by the postcolonial state, envisioned as a new beautiful and modern home to join; differently, for my interlocutors in Italy the aesthetic attunement with a perceived elegant surrounding frictions with the feeling of being unwelcome.

More specifically, the representation as consumers of expensive goods clashes with the future imagined and actively designed for asylum seekers and refugees in Italy by state institutions. The recognition of school qualifications obtained abroad involves a long, complicated, and expensive procedure[18], which is mostly inaccessible to those coming from countries – such as those in West Africa – where civil servants tend to produce the required documents only if paid[19]. As a consequence, it is very unlikely that West Africans will be able to use their school qualifications on the Italian job market, where they usually can only present their middle school diploma obtained in local adult education

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[16] October 20, 2017. This is a gendered racism that affects black men and women differently: men tend to be feared as dangerous and violent criminals, while women are generally reduced to sexual prey to be possessed (Giuliani 2019: 3).

[17] December 15, 2017.

[18] Accessed online (April 9th 2025): https://www.mur.gov.it/it/aree-tematiche/universita/equipollenze-equivalenza-ed-equiparazioni-tra-titoli-di-studio/titoli

[19] This is not caused by a "culture of corruption" (Jordan Smith 2008); it rather occurs because very often civil servants receive extremely low salaries, insufficient for a decent life, and are not paid regularly (cf. Ndjio 2008).

centers. Moreover, social workers tend to propose them training courses that prepare them to carry out poorly-protected, risky and low-paid jobs in line with the job market that, driven by racist dynamics, blocks their access to healthier and better-paid jobs. In this way, institutions actively plan their insertion into the lowest rungs of the social hierarchy, then calling this designed economic and social marginality "integration"[20]. Demba's words about his newly found job in a factory, where he had the task of separating the paper for recycling from the rest of the garbage, highlight the awareness of this confinement that is instead pulverized in the images: "It's the job I like! It's a little tiring but not that tiring. I like that it's a little tiring because it means that it's a job for foreigners, before I looked for work in restaurants, but these are jobs for Italians"[21]. This intersection between classism and racism typical of Italian society prevented my interlocutors from accessing the comfortable, consumer-oriented lifestyle they depicted in the images.

Images with a tourist flavor and the reframing of historical monuments

In his smartphone gallery, Djibril had also saved some photographs of Turin's monuments. In some pictures, only the monument was framed, in others Djibril was portrayed next to or climbing on top of the monument. When I asked Djibril why he had taken these shots, he replied: "as a souvenir"[22]. His answer suggests that these images are triggered by the journey in a foreign country long dreamt of and imagined, in a way that may remind the tourists' "memory travel" (Urry and Larsen 2011: 155), i.e. a journey that is "not so much experienced in itself but for its future memory" (Crang 1997: 366), although embedded in completely overturned power relations and in different regimes of mobility (Glick Shiller and Salazar 2013: 190). Images of wealth and fancy lifestyles in Europe transmitted by films, television, advertisements, and social media can influence the decision of young Africans to leave (Kleist 2017: 9; Wood and King 2001: 1). The "desires for 'transporting one's body' to the photographed place" (Urry and Larsen 2011: 173) recalls the longing of those tourists, who decide to leave for expensive trips dazzled by unexamined images of happiness (De Botton 2002: 9). Here, different forms of mobility intersect (cf. Riccio 2019: 7; Williams 2019: 71-73), suggesting the opportunity to go beyond the frame of migration and its categories to grasp the multiple facets of Djibril's experience in Europe.

Furthermore, the "abundance" (Edwards 2015: 237) of these photographs – i.e. what they include beyond their creator's control and immediate intention – let other latent stories to surface. The images of monuments evoke the history and values petrified in monuments. Monuments are political signs that mark the public space of the city and inscribe the current order in it. The more powerful, the more invisible to the gaze, they seem inert parts of the urban landscape, which thus remains unquestioned. Through their silent presence, they re-actualize the values they symbolize; they fix a certain version of history, erasing alternatives (Bargna 2020; Pesarini and Panico 2021). Turin is the city with the highest number of monuments of Italy (Sincero 1992: 26). The majority of them were

[20] Sorgoni (2010: 122) underlines the colonial legacy of this training in subordinate roles.
[21] December 8, 2017.
[22] September 13, 2017.

built in the nineteenth century, following the European "statuomanie" of the time (Agulhon 1978). In general terms, they celebrate the history of the Savoy dynasty and the heroes and soldiers of the *Risorgimento*, which resulted in the unification of Italy (Sincero 1992: 36-37). To give just a few examples, during the nineteenth and early twentieth century statues were erected of Amedeo Duca D'Aosta, Carlo Alberto, Vittorio Emanuele I, Vittorio Emanuele II, Garibaldi, Mazzini and Gioberti, together with monuments celebrating soldiers, such as the Alfiere sent as a gift by Milan to commemorate Piedmont's and Lombardy's unity of purpose against Austria and placed in the central Piazza Castello in 1859[23].

Among the histories silenced by the official narrative, celebrated in monuments, there is the record of the (violent and unequal) relations between the kingdom of Sardinia and the African continent. Princes and kings of the House of Savoy, as well as other Savoy citizens, made voyages of exploration and wove diplomatic and commercial relations with the political and economic elites of the African continent (De Filippis, Pagella and Pennacini 2023a: 12; cf. also Pennacini 1999). Material traces of these long-standing relations are the collections – significantly "forgotten" (De Filippis, Pagella and Pennacini 2023b) – of African artefacts in Piedmont (for example, at the Royal Armory and at the Castle of Racconigi), which were donated in the context of diplomatic relations altered by colonial aims, were the result of raids, or were purchased during commercial expeditions. The presence of African people in Piedmont in the nineteenth century is equally silenced. It can be comprehended mainly, but not only, within the process of building a unitary national (and racial) identity (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013; Giuliani 2019). Vittorio Emanuele II was given two child slaves – sadly known as "Akka del Miani", Thiebaut and Kerallà, purchased in the current Democratic Republic of Congo –, who became the object of racist anthropometric studies by the circle of intellectuals that revolved around Paolo Mantegazza, Arturo Zannetti, Enrico H. Giglioli and Pellegrino Matteucci. In 1884 the first of a series of human exhibitions was set up in the Valentino Park, during the Italian General Exhibition, two years after the establishment of the Bay of Assab as a royal colony. Three men, a woman and two children from Assab were forced to live in a small village made of four huts, together with some animals. Their spectacularized presence had the aim of representing blackness as an extreme (primitive) otherness, against which to shape the imagination of a white (modern) Italian community, capable of leveling regional divisions and promoting the integration of the newborn nation into Europe. It also wanted to be an incentive to support the emerging colonial project, inviting spectators to observe the staging of the supposed Africa's "inferiority". The Abyssinians, however, were far from being mere objects of observation, but actively interacted with the public and the organizers of the exhibition, quickly proving capable of renegotiating their presence in Italy (Accornero 1999: 77; Abbattista 2021: 122). This African presence during the *Risorgimento* is a part of a broader picture, that sees Italy within a dense network that over the centuries has shaped what has been called the Black Mediterranean (cf. Proglio et al. 2021; Grimaldi 2019; Hawthorne 2022a, b). As the film *We were here. The untold story of*

[23] Cf. the list of all the monuments that celebrate the history of the Risorgimento in Turin in Sincero (1992).

Black Africans in Renaissance Europe by Fred Kudjo Kuwornu (2024) recalls, in the Renaissance, ambassadors, servants, soldiers, pilgrims, interpreters, catechumens and students of seminaries and religious colleges from sub-Saharan Africa were living in Italy, particularly in Turin, Rome, Florence, Venice and Naples[24], while Italian traders played a role in the trade networks of enslaved Africans in the Mediterranean that paved the way for the transatlantic trade (Lowe 2013).

This process of invisibilization (Carter 2010: 4) of the relational space that has linked Africa to Italy over the centuries, in favor of the representation of discrete units, has the consequence of othering Afro-descendant people and placing them outside the boundaries of Italianness. It hides the fact that Africans have been part of the European world for centuries, and that the history of Africa and Europe (and Italy) are enmeshed (Coronil 1996: 73; Hawthorne 2022a, b; Merrill 2017: ch. 1). With disturbing lines of continuity with the past, present-day Italian mass-media continues to other people of African origin, by displaying the image of a homogenous white country, where they are new comers, in precarious living conditions. This representation is particularly pervasive, because it is transversal to different means of communication: it is not only on television and in newspapers, but also in cinema, where black Italian actors are generally required to play foreign characters, who speak a broken Italian and live on the margins of society, such as the newly-arrived refugee, the drug dealer or the prostitute (cf. Campani 2001; Danewid 2017; De Franceschi 2013)[25]. The documentary *Blaxploitalian. 100 years of Blackness in Italian cinema* (2016), by Fred Kudjo Kuwornu, denounces precisely this limited and limiting representation, which contributes to the reproduction of stereotypes, with the effect of aggravating the alienation of the black minority from the national community.

When read on the backdrop of this complex scenario, to a certain extent Djibril's photographs of Turin historical monuments assume another layer of meaning, beyond the touristic flavor. The presence of Djibril's racialized body on the monuments evokes (the violent) history of relations between Italy/Europe and Africa, which is usually silenced. By visualizing the missing part, it challenges the invisibilization of the Euro-African relational space and of Afro-descendant people in Italy, who can only be represented as radical outsiders as long as the official narrative continues to deny how the history of Africa and Europe are interweaved. Djibril's images mark a presence that seems to say "we are here (in Italy)" but also "we have always been here", giving historical depth to contemporary migration paths and challenging the narrative according to which the arrival of people from Africa in Italy dates back to the 1970s. Bringing blackness back

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[24] The presence of people of African origin (mainly servants) is partly documented in Italian Renaissance paintings.

[25] Some exceptions are noteworthy. Among the most recent examples, the *Summertime* series directed by Lorenzo Sportiello and Francesco Lagi and distributed by Netflix in 2020. The protagonist, a teenager from the Romagna Riviera, struggling with classic adolescent problems, is played by the Italian-Nigerian actress Coco Rebecca Edogamhe (accessed online [April 9th 2025]: http://www.afroitaliansouls.it/vi-facciamo-conoscere-coco-rebecca-edogamhe-la-giovane-stella-di-summertime-su-netflix/). The Rai fiction *E' arrivata la felicità*, directed by Riccardo Milani and Francesco Vicario and broadcast on Rai Uno from 2015 to 2018, is one of the first attempts by public television to propose Afro-descendant actors in non-stereotypical roles. Here, the Italian-Ethiopian actress Tezeta Abraham plays the role of a working student unlucky in love (accessed online [April 9th 2025]: http://www.afroitaliansouls.it/ciak-si-gira-afroitaliani-sul-grande-e-sul-piccolo-schermo/).

within national borders frictions with the attribution of citizenship by descent (following the right of blood), according to a law[26] that tends to relegate black people – even those with descendants who have been in Italy for several generations – to the position of outsiders, through the fatal coupling of race and citizenship (Hawthorne 2022a: 5; Tuckett 2024: 50).

Conclusions

In this article I have analyzed Djibril's image-making in public and semi-public spaces in connection with the burden of invisibility and hypervisibility, to which African people seeking asylum in Turin are being continuously subjected. I have argued that these images open an expressive space, where it is possible to visualize the rejection of being rejected, or rather the right to live and be happy in Turin. To a certain extent, they sketch precarious forms of belonging that recall the notion of "Afropean", as they evoke the intertwined history of the two continents.

After analyzing what these images reveal, I would like to conclude by reflecting on what they conceal. In her work on family photographs among the African diaspora in Europe, Campt (2012) understands photographs as records of choices between alternatives, rather than as documents of facts. It is only by considering the selection between possible alternatives that it is possible to reconstruct the multiple meanings of images. According to this perspective, the discarded options – what does not become a photograph – are meaningful. Barber (1987: 8), in her analysis of African popular art, argues that silences, loopholes and fissures are important because they highlight the doubts and anxieties of cultural creators, opening the possibilities of alternative views. Barber's concept of silence emphasizes that the unsaid does not disappear, but hovers in the air, fueling the chance of reversal meanings. This is how black spaces, silenced in the image-making practices analyzed in this article, do not disappear but reappear through the gaze and bodily reactions of some observers.

African asylum seekers' images of a happy life – which, when posted on social media, generally receive compliments by followers – are often verbally ridiculed by social workers. During my fieldwork, social workers repeatedly brought my attention to these images that they found on residents' social media, mocking them more or less subtly. This reaction demonstrates that these images are haunting for the receiving white society. They are never interpreted as documents that attest to a presence by social workers, who relate to them as they were sort of jokes. Like "the look" of the bartenders and the shopkeepers, the disbelieve and derision communicate an attributed non-belonging.

[26] These photographs can be linked to other operations aimed at bringing submerged memories to the surface, through the re-reading of some spaces of the city. For example, the "Valentino decoloniale" Walking Lab, promoted by the non-profit organization Renken, has the goal to reveal the almost unknown history of the human exhibitions that were organized in the spaces of the Valentino park (accessed online [April 9th 2025]: https://www.renken.it/4724-2/). Another attempt to call into question the version of history petrified and reactualized by monuments is the artistic project "!Memory Matters", which, again at Valentino Park, in 2021 proposed a reflection on collective memory in public space, through four commissioned artistic interventions to the artists Leone Contini, Alessandra Ferrini, Muna Mussie and Adji Dieye in collaboration with Silvia Rosi, who addressed the theme of monumentality and permanence and developed an investigation into the Italian colonial past, in search of its hidden traces (accessed online [April 9th 2025]: https://fsrr.org/mostre/memory-matters/).

Making fun of these images is a way to disempower them, bringing the subjects represented back into the spaces and categories imagined for them by the receiving society. The laughter of incredulity seems to say that African asylum seekers cannot in any way have desires and aspirations, other than the basic needs, and that a future of belonging for them cannot even be fantasized. On the contrary, their serial repetition represents the stubborn reaffirmation of the right to belong (i.e. of being visible, instead of hypervisualized/invisibilized), no matter how hard the white gaze continuously tries to confine and erase the presence of black people. This is what these images put at stake, while the discomfort (expressed through the laughter) they provoke to the whitened Italian society speaks volumes about the racist dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, which lay at the core of the social fabric.

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