

Between a curse and a resource: the meanings of women's racialised sexuality in contemporary Italy

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This article explores the racialisation of women's sexuality in contemporary Italy at the intersection between the national imagination and transnational cultural and commodity flows. Starting from the experience of a young Italian woman whose work centres on the commodification of her sexual desirability and who is recurrently classified as 'foreign', it discusses the roots as well as effects of the racialised male gaze under which she negotiates her agency. In so doing, it examines the meanings of her failure to be recognised as an Italian citizen as she navigates between contempt and desire, stigma and praise, alienation and pleasure. On the one hand, the article traces the thread between her experience and the othering processes underpinning the construction of Italy as a nation state and an empire, and whose legacies persist in the country's postcolonial present. On the other hand, the article explores women's racialisation as a process which can magnify the social and economic value of their desirability in a context increasingly characterised by the sexualisation of culture and trade. Based on ethnographic research undertaken in 2012–2013, this article contributes to the emerging body of postcolonial scholarship and intersectional studies on women's sexuality in contemporary Italy.

Keywords: sexuality; race; nationalism; colonialism; respectability; erotic capital

Introduction

During the last years of rule of former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi, the relationship between power and sexuality (Foucault 1990) emerged as an explicit domain of political contestation. Concerns for the widespread sexualisation and objectification of women driven by media and advertisement companies, many of which he owned and/or controlled, played an important role in coalescing a women-led opposition to his rule (see for example: Zanardo 2011; de Gregorio 2011). Contextually, the leaders of the latter condemned women's use of their own sexuality as a social and economic resource, and portrayed this exchange as a threat to the nation to which they juxtaposed the respectable, sacrificial agency of Italian wives and mothers (SNOQ 2011).

This article explores when, why and how women's sexuality has been discursively used as a device of racialisation in service of the Italian nation, and with what effects on the agency of women who are, or are perceived to be, alien to it.¹ At its core stands the experience of Maha, a young Italian woman whose work revolves around the commodification of her sexual desirability, or 'erotic capital' (Hakim 2011),² and who recounted being recurrently classified as 'foreign' by the male employers and customers she interacted with. The article discusses the intimate entanglement between her failure to be recognised as an Italian citizen, male customers and

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employers' assumptions of her sexual availability, and her phenotypical appearance – notably her distance from the country's normative whiteness (Giuliani 2015). To this end, the article traces the roots of this racialised 'male gaze' (Mulvey 1975) back to the othering processes underpinning the construction of Italy as a nation state and an empire, and whose legacies persist in the country's contemporary postcolonial times. Although racialisation implies the establishment of a hierarchical relationship between Self and Other, its effects on the individuals subjected to it might vary based on their social location. In conclusion, therefore, the article discusses how race might function also as a booster of women's erotic capital within a transnational context characterised by the increasing sexualisation of cultural and commercial flows.

This article is based on ethnographic research I undertook in northern Italy in 2012–2013 across a continuum of spaces where the boundaries between consumption, work and affectivity were blurred.³ I explored how women of different classes and 'races'⁴ negotiated the tensions at the core of women's subjectification, as heteronormativity binds 'Woman' to perform either the respectable role of the chaste wife/mother or that of the sexually enticing but stigmatised 'whore' (Grosz 1990, 129). Focusing on women whose work centred on the production and exchange of their erotic capital, I examined how they attempted to reconcile the power and pleasure emanating from their heterosexual desirability with the gendered stigma attached to their use of it, i.e. the 'whore stigma' (Pheterson 1993). Towards this objective, I undertook participant observation and conducted open-ended interviews mainly with Italian and migrant women working in different niches of the leisure and sex markets, notably pole dancers, image girls,⁵ lap dancers and sex workers.⁶

The article is mostly based on an interview with Maha,⁷ a young woman of Moroccan origin who had become a naturalised Italian upon turning 18, and who regularly works as image girl in different commercial settings (discos, trade fairs). As a woman who did not inherit Italian nationality at birth but acquired it only at a later stage of life, her words will reveal the contradictory tensions which the national and colonial imagination project on her female body. In order to throw into relief the role of race and class in shaping her experience of racialisation at work, however, in the latter part of the article I will juxtapose it to that relayed by Monica,⁸ a natural-born Italian young woman who also works as an image girl, albeit only occasionally.

Racialising the whore

Maha is a young woman in her early twenties, born in a village in northern Italy to Moroccan parents of Muslim belief. I met her when she had just completed her BA with a thesis that challenged the everyday portrayal of Islam as the threatening, backward, illiberal Other of Western countries.⁹ 'I wanted to go against the prejudice that all Muslims are terrorists, and that the Qur'an spurs terrorist acts', she said defiantly, evincing frustration with the widespread Islamophobic attitudes in the country (Pew Research Centre 2014). At the time of the interview, she was looking at ways to transition from higher education to the labour market. In the meantime, she was continuing her work as an image girl in discos and at trade fairs, in which she had regularly started to perform after enrolling at university.¹⁰

Back then, she recalled, her decision to leave home to study at a distant but prestigious Italian university had been the subject of a family dispute. 'I was going too far away, [I am the] first daughter, a girl going out, [in a city of] millions of people compared to the few thousands living here...' she evoked sympathetically. Financial considerations also occupied a central position in her parents' concerns, as they 'had a house loan to pay, four kids, and taxes are high'. They nonetheless agreed to pay for the costs of Maha's studies (tuition fees and books) while living

costs were to be on her account – although ‘the second year, as I was paying a lot, she [the mother] stopped paying for books.’ Maha, therefore, sought a job ‘that would put me in a position to attend university and study, but at the same time, not be too demanding, like a part time [job]’, she explained, ‘because it would have been stupid not to attend classes in order to work.’ The job of the image girl seemed to her a valuable option, especially in light of its cost-effectiveness. ‘I was earning €50 from midnight to 4am, so it was a lower pay than in my hometown’,¹¹ she said recalling her early days at the bottom of the night entertainment industry in the town in which she had newly settled.

Then little by little, I started to know a few people who introduced me to the right milieu. Unfortunately, or luckily, it’s a vicious circle: they spot you and you also have to do anything to be spotted. But at the same time, you don’t have to give off too much confidence that would lead them to think – especially because I’m foreign – that you are an escort, a whore, a loose woman so to speak.

‘Do people really expect foreign women to be “easier” than Italians?’ I asked her, surprised. ‘Yes, of course. Sure’, she replied, seemingly puzzled at my naivety, ‘you are foreign, so they automatically think that you’re here without your parents, first and foremost that you’re here to earn your living and that therefore you earn it in any possible, conceivable way.’

Maha’s words aptly illuminate how her interaction with male customers in Italy is shaped by their expectation that a ‘foreign’ woman is more readily sexually available than a native Italian. The roots of their gendered and racialised assumption (Brah 1993), I contend, are twofold. The first is that in a country where migrant women are widely represented as either sex, domestic or care workers (García-Peña 2013, 151), women using their erotic capital as an economic resource are likely automatically classified amongst the first. The second is that away from patriarchal surveillance over their body and sexuality, women are ‘naturally’ promiscuous. Although Maha is neither a migrant nor a foreign woman, she is nonetheless viewed as one under this racialised male gaze, contributing to her self-presentation as ‘foreign’. More broadly, her words foreground the ways in which sexuality gets racialised and race is sexualised (Stoler 1995; Mosse 1996). As I discuss next, this racialisation of sexuality is embedded in the processes underpinning the making of Italy into a nation state and an empire.

Respectability and its others

From Edward Said’s pioneering *Orientalism* (1979) onwards, postcolonial scholarship has amply shown how race and sexuality have been deployed as two mutually constituting categories within discourses underpinning Western knowledge of, and rule over, people living in distant lands. Long before the apex of Western imperialism, the ‘uncertain continents – Africa, the Americas, Asia – were figured in European lore as libidinally eroticised’ (McClintock 1995, 22), and their inhabitants ‘as erotic and exotic, carnal and carnival’ (Nagel 2003, 200). For centuries, Europeans portrayed black African people using the trope of excessive sexuality (Nagel 2003, 97; McClintock 1995, 113). In the nineteenth century, this racial and sexual difference was epitomised by the ‘Hottentot Venus’, alias for Saartjie Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman who was taken from the British Cape Colony to London and Paris to publicly display her purportedly ‘abnormal’ sexual organs (Magubane 2011, 46; Gilman 1985, 213). Nineteenth-century evolutionary social theory theorised humankind’s teleological progression from ‘primitive promiscuity, marriage by capture, and exotic forms of sexual abuse’ to the perfection of Victorian sexual morality, representing the self-ascribed apex of civilisation (Lyons and Lyons 2011, 68). Temporality was racialised with ‘racial hierarchy and historical progress [becoming] the *faits accomplis* of nature’ (McClintock 1995, 38).¹² It was also gendered as criminal anthropologists theorised women’s expression of sexuality as a sign of their incomplete evolution and/or natural born deviance (Lombroso and Ferrero 1903).

This intimate entanglement of power, race and sexuality analogously characterised the orientalist gaze of north Western European travellers on the southern lands of the continent (Moe 2002). A prime destination for the young, upper-class men undertaking the Grand Tour during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, 'Italy' was imagined and consumed as a land of 'warm weather, cheap wine, relaxed company and sex'¹³ (Gundle 2007, 2). The southern regions of the peninsula were particularly perceived as primitive and picturesque, blending 'feudal residues, sloth, and squalor' with 'quaint peasants, rustic traditions, and exotica' (Moe 2002, 3). The racialised sexualisation of its people similarly featured in the accounts of foreign diplomats and travellers writing in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Naples and the south of Italy were, for example, portrayed as a 'land of sensuality, ignorance, barbarity, decay, corruption' (Moe 1992, 78).

Northern liberal elites' imagination of 'Italy' was deeply influenced by this gaze (Moe 2002) which used sexuality to position people differently within racialised hierarchies of rule. As a signifier, sexuality was further inflected by class, in a cultural context characterised by the hegemony of the middle-class ideology of respectability (Mosse 1996). The intersection of gender, race and class in the othering processes underpinning the making of 'Italy' emerge clearly from some extracts of the correspondence between the political and military officials engaged in the process of liberation, or conquest, of the South. For example, in a letter to Cavour, the newly appointed commissioner of Naples, Luigi Carlo Farini, wrote that the city was the 'capital of sloth and of the prostitution of every sex, of every class'.¹⁴ His contrasting tacit subtext is the orderly organisation of prostitution of only one sex (the female) and class (the destitute), which is a central tenet of the material scaffolding of respectability.¹⁵ By characterising the people under his rule as unruly sexually, Farini affirmed northern liberal elites' self-ascribed legitimacy to rule the country-to-be based on the tautological relation between their moral superiority and modernity. In another extract, which appears in a widely quoted letter of his to Cavour, he compares the South to 'Africa'.¹⁶ Arguably, though, it is his horror for southern women's active participation in the resistance to the nation-in-making that best encapsulates the intimate entanglement of power, race and sexuality at the core of Italian nationalism:

But, my friend, what lands are these, Molise and the south! What barbarism! This is not Italy! This is Africa: compared to these peasants, Bedouins are the pinnacle of civilization. And what misdeeds! [...] Even the hick women do some killing; and worse, they tie up the gentlemen (that's how they call the liberals) from their testicles, and they drag them that way through the streets, and then chop 'em off. Horrors beyond belief if they hadn't happened right around us in this area.¹⁷

Feminist and postcolonial scholars have abundantly shown how 'Woman' has been historically used to signify the 'Nation' within national liberation and nation building projects (see for example Yuval-Davis 1997; Kandiyoti 1991). At a time when women's use of space signified their class status, with respectable women constrained within the home and "'women of the streets" [becoming] a euphemism for prostitution' (Skeggs 1997, 46–47), Farini's representation of southern women as Amazons and agents of emasculation epitomises his view of southern people as primitively promiscuous. Indeed, women's visible defiance of the norms constraining their sexuality and mobility and their anti-national agency prompted their labelling as 'whores', at a time when white women prostitutes were considered 'the metropolitan analogue of African promiscuity' (McClintock 1995, 56).¹⁸ In the early years after the birth of the Kingdom of Italy, *brigantessa* (female brigands) struggling against a North-driven process of unification shoulder-to-shoulder with men were labelled '*cagne* [bitches] and prostitutes' (Cutrufelli 1974, 163), suggesting their distance from humanity and especially from its middle-class ideal.

There is copious scholarship showing how in the early decades of the Kingdom of Italy the justification of northern liberal elites' rule over the South was discursively underpinned by a

biological notion of race (see for example Teti 1993; De Francesco 2012). Northern Italians' lineage was linked to a white Euro-Asiatic population whose purportedly 'cold psychology, [and] rarely excitable self' made them fitter for modernity, progress and rule. Conversely, southern Italians' genealogy was linked to black African people, which reportedly made them "'passionate", individualistic, [and] with scant morality and organisational spirit' (Alfredo Niceforo cited in Teti 1993, 16). This racialised fracture at the core of Italian nationalism was temporarily blanketed by Fascism (De Francesco 2012, 10), and the 'blackness' of southern people projected outside the borders of the nation, onto the colonies (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013, 24).

Differently from the severe discipline of sexuality enforced by most Western countries in their colonies (see for example Stoler 1997; Hyam 1998), in the Italian colonies it was only loosely regulated, and Italian male settlers widely enjoyed intimate relations with native women.¹⁹ Their desiring gaze, nonetheless, was informed by and reproduced a taxonomy of race according to which bodies closer to the white 'race' were considered more desirable than black bodies by virtue of their supposed proximity to Western civilisation and modernity.²⁰ Conversely, Italian women, whether in the metropolis or in the colonies, were entrusted with the cultural and biological reproduction (Yuval-Davis 1997) of the white nation, whose respectability they were expected to embody based on a severe legal discipline of their sexuality (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013, 47).

A constitutive part of Italian nationalism and imperialism, these racialised hierarchies of feminine dis/respectability continue to reverberate in contemporary Italy. For example, discussing the racism experienced by black African migrant women in Turin in the 1990s, Merrill observed that they were broadly culturally classified 'as sexually available or promiscuous' based on their 'phenotypical distinctions or dark-coloured skin, foreign clothing, and hairstyles' and their single migrant status (2006, 5–6). Both these factors inform the male gaze under which Maha negotiates her agency at work. In the previous section, I suggested that her perceived foreign status and supposedly consequent freedom from parental surveillance prompt men's expectations that she is sexually available, and in the next I will show how Maha's skin colour produces similar effects.

Several scholars have discussed the contemporary productivity of this racialised 'whore stigma' (Pheterson 1993), showing how a woman's race affects her positioning within binaries juxtaposing naivety and unscrupulousness, pity and contempt, victimhood and blame. Hence, the typically feminine, respectable task of caring for others (Skeggs 1997) becomes a lure and a scene of deception when performed for money by 'foreign' women (i.e. as domestic or care workers), that media portray as greedy, home-wrecking female predators in disguise (Cvajner 2011, 357). Mainstream representations of the women involved in the sex 'scandals' surrounding Prime Minister Berlusconi during the last years of his rule (Dominijanni 2014) were analogously inflected by race. Indeed, Italian women were generally 'absolved' for reasons ranging from ingenuousness to economic need, whereas migrant women were 'portrayed as social climbers, ready to "sell themselves" for money and success' (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013, 135). This racialisation of respectability was reproduced in the appeal for the women's mobilisation that took to the streets on 13 February 2011 to demonstrate in the name of their 'dignity' (Gribaldo and Zapperi 2012). Women using their sexuality for personal gain were depicted as vectors of social and national pollution (SNOQ 2011) while contextually implicitly qualifying as chaste the feminine subject worthy of the Nation.

Shading the Nation

'People don't believe that I speak Italian so well', said Maha as she continued recounting her experiences of racialisation at work.

Unfortunately, also in trade fairs, if you are an average pretty girl – I don't mean a poor man's Naomi Campbell, but averagely pretty – and maybe also sociable, with a smile on your lips and witty, you are always taken for what you are not. Look, I also went to normal interviews: [for a job as a] secretary, whatever. [...] And unfortunately, the fact that I am mulatto, objectively foreign, leads me to certain things.

Maha's self-definition as 'objectively foreign' – notwithstanding her Italian citizenship – appears to convey the interiorisation of her status as an Other to the nation, which she perceives as marked by her skin colour. Her alienation is reproduced under and through the racialised gaze that men project on her, reflecting how Italian settler colonialism and imperialism imagined and consumed Arab and African women as primitively sexual and available. For Maha, her 'foreign' status therefore constitutes an everyday source of male innuendos, as well as what I term a 'recognition failure'. Psychoanalysis considers recognition to be central to the constitution of the subject as it rests on the intersubjective acknowledgement of his/her separation and autonomy (Benjamin 1990). Recognition also holds normative significance as subjects perceive one another as bearers of some shared qualities, attributes and/or status (Iser 2013). A recognition failure, therefore, describes a condition in which this mutuality fails, which in the case of Maha leads to her classification as 'foreign' for failing to reflect and reproduce the nation's normative whiteness (Giuliani 2015).²¹

Italy's self-imagination as a white nation came to the fore with the 1996 victory of the iconic 'Miss Italy' beauty pageant by a black woman.²² The crowning of Dominican-born, naturalised Italian Denny Méndez appeared as a statement of the changing demographics of a country with a net migration rate on the rise. The ensuing row (Scotti 1996; Bohlen 1996) revealed the extent to which this event symbolically unsettled the borders of the nation.

For Bob Krieger, an Egypt-born Italian fashion photographer and jury member, Denny Méndez was unfit to be Italy's beauty queen because she was not 'Mediterranean' (quoted in Ardizzoni 2005, 510). Yet, although his words suggest the interchangeability of the 'Mediterranean' and 'Italian' adjectives as qualifiers of national feminine beauty, the naturalisation of this equation is a relatively recent phenomenon. For decades after the establishment of the Kingdom of Italy, the figure of the dark-eyed, dark-haired and olive-skinned woman signified, in contrast, the primitive otherness of the South (Gundle 2007, 33). It was only in the context of the Fascist regime's attempts to align the unity of the Italian people behind its imperial ambitions that Mediterraneanity became both the canon and the cradle of Italianness (Giuliani 2013, 24). After the collapse of Fascism, the conflation between Mediterranean and Italian feminine beauty was reified in the gaze of American and British audiences, who consumed Italian movie stars as 'exotic, fiery, passionate', and 'unspoilt' by modernity (Gundle 2007, 142). By the 1990s, the primitive hypersexuality which had long signified the backwardness of the South became the trademark of 'Made in Italy' products (Gundle 2007, 239) in a global marketplace increasingly characterised by commodities' infusion with 'orgasmic' value (Preciado 2013).²³

Too light to be considered 'black' in the country of her birth (García-Peña 2013, 139), the skin colour of Denny Méndez was deemed too dark to represent Italy and signalled her status as a 'space invader' (Puwar 2004). As the words of TV producer, journalist and pageant judge Enrico Mentana suggested, Méndez belonged to the underdeveloped places where white Western tourists went to consume the sensuality of racialised others (Nagel 2003, 19). "She is exotic", he said, "like the women whom Italians who spend their vacations in Cuba find attractive" (quoted in Ardizzoni 2005, 510). In a country where migrant women were represented as either sex, domestic or care workers, Méndez's victory also conveyed a carnival-like subversion of hierarchies of power. It, indeed, suggested that 'Italy could be represented by the marginal, the poor, the

prostitute, the foreigner, and the object of fear and desire, in short, by those who should remain outside the nation' (García-Peña 2013, 151).

The values of race

'You always have to manage the thing and it is not easy,' Maha said with reference to male innuendos at work.

It does not mean that if the trade fair lasts five days, and you say 'no' the first day, they won't call you the day after: you've signed a contract so for five days you go. But maybe next time you won't go, do you get it?

Rather than just implying her status as a space invader, as she fails to be recognised as a proper citizen of the country where she was born and raised, male sexual projections on Maha's racialised body can also put her livelihood in jeopardy. Nevertheless, as I show below, these can also ambivalently function as a source of orgasmic value which women can mobilise and consume. Indeed, if a commodity's value in contemporary capitalism (also) rests on its capacity to generate pleasure, a woman's erotic capital might engender a pathway for her upward social mobility. 'Not to mention after Ruby's scandal!' continued Maha with a slightly flirty tone, 'I am Moroccan and she is Moroccan. You can't imagine: the end of the world! Scandal! People stopped me in via del Corso [and asked]: 'Ruby? Are you Ruby?!

Ruby Rubacuori (Ruby the Heart Stealer), the alias of Karima El Mahrough, was the young woman of Moroccan origin from whom, in 2010, the then prime minister Silvio Berlusconi allegedly bought sexual services when she was still underage, resulting in the opening of the judicial investigation dubbed 'Rubygate'.²⁴ At the time, both mainstream media and feminist and leftist intellectuals deployed racialised and sexualised metaphors to disparage politician and citizen Berlusconi. The 'sultan' epithet (see for example: Melandri 2011; Dominijanni 2011; Casarini 2011) symbolically positioned him in a premodern, undemocratic elsewhere, where male leaders dispose of a multitude of women secluded in their harem.²⁵ El Mahrough's Arab origins, in this context, appeared as the quintessential embodiment of the prime minister's racialised desire. A young woman who had run away from her humble family, El Mahrough was turned by the mainstream media's voyeuristic attention into a celebrity in a cultural context that glamourises women's confident display of sexuality (McNair 2002; Levy 2006; Attwood 2009; Gill 2009). For Maha, then, to be mistaken for El Mahrough partly constitutes an implicit acknowledgement of the value of her erotic capital, which holds the promise of standing out from an anonymous crowd. Indeed, the very possibility of this identity swap depended on her presence, as she coquettishly hinted, on the ultimate shopping street of Italy's fashion capital. Arguably, she consumed the – albeit fleeting and ambivalent – pleasure of embodying a woman whose sexuality attracted power and contempt, celebrity and stigma, pleasure and pain.

Maha's experience of her racialisation is therefore ambivalently shaped at the intersection between the national imagination and transnational cultural and commodity flows. The tensions marked on her female body illuminate how women's sexuality continues to operate as a device of othering which reproduces the boundaries of the nation through the desiring male gaze. The effects of these othering processes, however, vary on the basis of women's different social location, as inflected by race and class. To illuminate these fractures, I conclude by contrasting Maha's experience with that of Monica, an Italian woman of approximately the same age as Maha, who similarly reported being frequently mistaken for a 'foreign' woman while working as an image girl in discos.

Differently from Maha, Monica was born Italian; both her parents hailed from the same region where they resided, in northern Italy. When I interviewed her, she had already long been in a

white-collar job. Unlike most of her peers, after reaching the age of majority she did not go into higher education. She preferred instead to earn her economic independence and moved out of her parental home located in the small village of her birth. ‘You know, I had the typical controlling father who until I was 18 years old did not let me do a fucking thing’, she recounted bitterly. ‘He never came to pick me up from a disco, and he did not want me to go with strangers, so: “you don’t go”.’ As soon as she found a job in the city, Monica left home and could finally fulfil her desire to go out and have fun. ‘When I reached my twenties, I went crazy! But even now I am still fond of going out dancing, doing [stuff], meeting people...’ she said, her palpable enthusiasm revealing the lasting relief of having escaped her father’s surveillance.

With a secure job, Monica did not have to seek opportunities to earn additional income. However, she bumped into the opportunity to work as an image girl, as she was headhunted by the managers of the beach resort disco she frequently attended. ‘You know, there were people sitting, and I would go and break their balls [saying] “come on guys, let’s go dancing!” and this is how I made myself known’, she recalled. The boundaries between consumption and work blurred in Monica’s words, as she described that she worked ‘to have fun, not to earn money. I drank for free [...] when I go there I don’t spend a penny’. On a handful of occasions, though, she tried working in more formal settings together with a friend who worked professionally as an image girl in upscale discos. ‘We ended up with the typical entrepreneur Milanese in his fifties, right?’ said Monica, evoking one of these nights. ‘All very confident, because he did, he went ... and I felt very uneasy: what do you talk about with such a person? It’s hard, hey?!’ She recounted shadowing her friend in the conversation with the customer, at whose table sat, alongside them, four other women:

They were all foreigners, because the race mixture is very trendy in those milieux, because as a matter of fact the majority of girls who have half father from here [and] half [from] there, well, they are very beautiful, because they have highly characteristic features, tremendous bodies, etc., and in fact everyone used to tell me ‘no, you can’t be Italian, you’re too beautiful to be Italian.’ I swear!

‘But did Italian men say that as well?’ I asked her, puzzled, wondering how a woman who in my eyes embodied the quintessential Italian/Mediterranean beauty – shapely, with brown eyes, long brown hair and olive skin – could fail to be recognised as such. ‘Yes! Both the girls [her peers] and the people I met. I spent a whole summer being told “you’re Brazilian, you’re Brazilian”,’ she said bursting into a cheerful laughter, ‘and I don’t know, what the fuck can I have of Brazilian? My arse?!’ she continued, giggling.

Monica’s labelling as a ‘foreign’ woman is analogous to Maha’s, but it appears to acquire a different meaning with her, for reasons that reflect her different social location. Inasmuch as race and sexuality mutually constitute one another, Monica’s racialisation reflects her audience’s perception of her as a highly sexually desirable woman. Within heteronormativity, however, women’s sexuality ambivalently draws to them male desire and contempt, the obverse of their erotic capital being the whore stigma. This ambivalence emerged clearly in the case of Maha: her perceived status as a ‘foreign’ woman attracted male expectations that she was, as she relayed, ‘a whore’, contextually reproducing her alienation from a nation who gave her citizenship only upon reaching the age of majority, and which still uneasily accommodates religious plurality. Differently, Monica appeared to embrace the label of the ‘foreign’ woman. Confident of belonging to the nation where she, her parents, and their ancestors going back to time immemorial were born, her words did not indicate any pain at not being recognised as an Italian citizen. Rather, her laughter suggests that she found the label of the ‘Brazilian’ woman flattering. On the one hand, this confirmed that her sexual desirability symbolically exceeded the borders of the nation. She was perceived to belong to an exotic elsewhere: there, where native men burn with desire for their

fellow countrywomen,²⁶ and to where global tourists travel to consume their desire for racialised otherness (Brennan 2004; Nagel 2003). In a context where mixed-racialness circulates, as she relayed, as a valuable commodity, Monica therefore appeared to consume her racialisation as a confirmation or a boost to her sexual desirability. On the other hand, her status as a natural born Italian, and awareness that her livelihood did not depend on the exchange of her erotic capital, possibly tamed the stigmatising assumptions of sexual availability that Maha reported experiencing regularly at work.

Conclusion

The processes of racialisation recounted by Maha and Monica illuminate how their meanings are ambivalently shaped at the intersection between the national imagination and transnational cultural and commodity flows. This results in their experience of their racialised sexuality as a curse or a resource, a source of stigma or praise, of alienation or pleasure. Their perceptions and agency partly reflect their different social location, and specifically their different sense of entitlement to Italianness and levels of economic security.

A naturalised Italian of Moroccan origin, in the eyes of the male beholders (customers and employers) Maha is perceived as a foreign woman and therefore sexually available. The roots of this racialised whore stigma, as I have argued, are entangled in the processes of making Italy a modern nation state and an empire, and stretch back to the contemporary postcolonial times. Indeed, sexuality has been consistently used to position women differently within racialised hierarchies of dis/respectability: from the portrayal of Southern women participating in the resistance to national unification as agents of emasculation and whores, to the positioning of native women in the Italian Empire as mere objects for male settlers' sexual consumption, to the contemporary portrayal of women using their erotic capital for personal gain as agents of national pollution.

In contemporary Western contexts where the value of commodities is intimately entangled with their capacity to generate pleasure and women's confident use of sexuality is glamourised, however, women might as well experience their racialised sexuality as a resource. As the ambivalence of contempt and power characterising Maha's tale of being mistaken for Karima/Ruby suggests, race can magnify women's erotic capital, potentially engendering individual pathways for upward social mobility. Analogously, Monica consumed the pleasure intrinsic to her racialisation, which partly acknowledged and partly produced her status as an exceptionally desirable woman. In comparison to Maha, however, Monica's status of a natural-born Italian citizen and her higher degree of economic security contributed to the deflection of the whore stigma which her peer reported experiencing ordinarily.

This article also foregrounded the intrinsic instability of 'race' as a classifying device. Although Maha located her otherness in her phenotypical appearance, and notably in her skin colour, its resemblance with both Monica's and the canon of Italian/Mediterranean beauty suggests the fluidity of this category. More specifically, the experiences of racialisation relayed by Maha and Monica confirm the tautological relationship between race and sexuality. For both, the label of the 'foreign' woman simultaneously signified and heightened their sexual desirability, and vice versa, their high sexual desirability marked them as Others to the nation. All along, race was reproduced under and through the desiring male gaze of the beholders (Smith 2014).

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Notes

1. 'Racialisation' is a process 'by which ideas about race are constructed, come to be regarded as meaningful, and are acted upon.' (Murji and Solomos 2005, 1). Individuals and/or groups come therefore to be defined on the basis of some purported 'racial' characteristics, whose contents and validity are typically justified on biological, cultural and/or ethnic bases (Lentin 2005).
2. Hakim defines it as 'a combination of physical and social attractiveness which makes some men and women agreeable company and colleagues, attractive to all members of their society and especially to the opposite sex' (2011, 1).
3. Due to anonymity concerns related to the broader research project on which this article is based, I cannot specify the geographical location of my fieldwork further.
4. 'Race' is a classifying category, a 'floating signifier' (Hall, Jhally, and Media Education Foundation 1996) which varies in time and space, and whose meaning is socially constructed through its intersection with other axes of difference, such as gender, sexuality and class.
5. An 'image girl' (*ragazza immagine*) is a loosely defined service worker who is typically employed in a variety of commercial settings (e.g. discos and trade fairs) to beautify a venue or an event by virtue of their mere physical presence, or to provide more or less bespoke company to male guests and/or customers.
6. More specifically, I recorded over 200 pages of field observations on pole dance and Burlesque schools, showcases and contests; discos; night clubs; and women and trans people's street-based sex work. I also conducted, transcribed and analysed 43 open-ended in-depth interviews with Italian and migrant women. Contacts with my interviewees were developed during my participant observation, and interviews were based on a grid of topics I exchanged with them beforehand to ensure their informed consent.
7. Maha, interviewed by the author, 7 June 2013.
8. Monica, interviewed by the author, 21 January 2013.
9. Scholarship on this subject is extensive. On the Italian context, see for example Salih (2009) and Orsini (2006).
10. Maha first started to work as an image girl in discos in her hometown while she was at high school.
11. Maha recounted earning €80-100 per night for a four-hour shift when working in discos in her hometown.
12. McClintock speaks of the trope of 'anachronistic space', which, in its colonial version, represented 'imperial progress across the space of empire [...] as a journey backwards in time to an anachronistic moment of prehistory. By extension, the return journey to Europe is seen as rehearsing the evolutionary logic of historical progress, forwards and upwards to the apogee of the Enlightenment in the European metropolis' (1995, 40).
13. This term is here bracketed because at that time 'Italy' did not yet exist as a unified nation state.
14. Letter dated 14 November 1860, reproduced in and translated by Moe (2002, 175).
15. Women prostitutes were considered an expedient outlet for men's sexual urges, thereby protecting the value (i.e. the virginity) of the bourgeois brides-to-be on the marriage market. During the second part of the nineteenth century, several European states organised their availability by adopting the model of state-regulated prostitution: see Gibson (1999) for the Italian case, Walkowitz (1980) for Britain, and Corbin (1985) for France.

16. Letter dated 27 October 1860, reproduced in and translated by Moe (2002, 181).
17. In the original text of the letter (reproduced in De Francesco 2012, 85), Farini does not use the verb ‘to chop’ but an onomatopoeia (*ziffe zaffe*) which stands for the sound of a sword swooshing, and whose abstraction possibly serves to tame the fear of emasculation evoked by the action described.
18. McClintock (1995) observes that they were portrayed as ‘white Negroes’, as signified by their representation with “‘Darwin’s ear”, exaggerated posteriors, unruly hair and other sundry “primitive” stigmata.’
19. For example, ‘[t]he madame system, or madamism – illegal or temporary marriage between Italian men and Ethiopian women – was diffuse among all social ranks’ (Merrill 2006, 102). With the establishment of the Italian Empire in 1936, however, relations between Italian male settlers and native women were outlawed in the attempt to ‘establish’ the racial prestige of the colonisers. The devaluation of black African women served their positioning as mere sexual objects for white men’s consumption (see for example: Poidimani 2009; Stefani 2007; Volpato 2009).
20. Indeed, representations of both African and Arab women in the Italian colonial novels stressed their excessive sexuality (Stefani 2007, 204). The first, however, were characterised as more animal-like, signalling their closer proximity to nature, while the latter’s concealment of their sensuality behind the veil and the harem stimulated male fantasies of their specialisation in ‘sophisticated erotic pleasures [...] to prime amidst rivals and maintain male desire always alive’ (Spadaro 2010, 4).
21. This recognition failure accords with Italy’s racial laws prohibiting the naturalisation of ‘mixed race’ children during the era of Fascist imperialism (Barrera 2003) and reverberates through the contemporary, lasting resistance to granting Italian citizenship to children born in Italy of parents who are devoid of it.
22. The Miss Italy beauty pageant began in 1946, i.e. the year that the Italian Republic was proclaimed on the ashes of the Fascist regime and the Kingdom, and it epitomised the central role of the ‘modern woman’ in the unfolding US-styled economic and cultural modernisation (Gundle 2007, 114; Willson 2011, 203–204).
23. For Preciado, the contemporary phase of capitalism is characterised by the appropriation of what she defined as ‘orgasmic force’, i.e. a molecule’s ‘potential for excitation’ (2013, 42) which, in magnifying customers’ experience of pleasure, seduces them into consuming more.
24. At the end of May 2010, Karima El Mahroug was arrested in Milan on charges of theft. Berlusconi called the police station to have her released suggesting that, since she was the niece of the then president of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak (a claim which proved to be fake), her arrest could produce diplomatic embarrassment. Berlusconi was subsequently indicted for abuse of office and the unlawful purchase of sexual services from the young woman when she was still underage. Found guilty in 2013 by the Court of First Instance, the verdict was subsequently overturned by the Court of Appeal, and his acquittal confirmed in March 2015 by the Court of Cassation (Agence France-Presse 2015).
25. This same epithet was used by journalist and writer Gabriella Parca (1965) to disqualify Italian men longing for *case chiuse* (closed houses, i.e. brothels) in the wake of their closure following the endorsement of Law 75/1958 (i.e. the ‘Merlin Law’) which abolished state-regulated prostitution (Repubblica Italiana 1958).
26. During the interview, Monica recounted particularly enjoying Reggaeton (a genre of music born in the Caribbean in the late 1990s), whose typical dance style entails the simulation of sex acts. The lyrics of the songs, as Monica described, ‘speak of this very beautiful, amazing woman, and of this man who begs her “dance with me tonight, spend the night with me tonight, ask it to me”’.

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Italian summary

Questo articolo esplora la razzializzazione della sessualità nell'Italia contemporanea, all'incrocio tra l'immaginazione nazionale e flussi culturali e commerciali transnazionali. A partire dall'esperienza di una giovane donna italiana il cui lavoro è incentrato sulla mercificazione della propria desiderabilità sessuale e che è frequentemente classificata come 'straniera', esso discute le radici e gli effetti dello sguardo maschile razzializzato sotto il quale negozia la propria *agency*. Esamina pertanto i significati del suo fallito riconoscimento quale cittadina italiana, mentre naviga attraverso disprezzo e desiderio, stigma e lode, alienazione e piacere. Da una parte, l'articolo traccia una linea tra la sua esperienza ed i processi di alterizzazione sui quali si è poggiata la costruzione dell'Italia come stato nazione ed impero, e la cui eredità permane nel presente postcoloniale. Dall'altra parte, l'articolo esplora la razzializzazione delle donne come un processo che può esaltare il valore sociale ed economico della loro desiderabilità in un contesto sempre più caratterizzato dalla sessualizzazione della cultura e del commercio. Basato su una ricerca etnografica intrapresa nel 2012–2013, questo articolo contribuisce agli studi postcoloniali ed intersezionali sulla sessualità nell'Italia contemporanea.