

Rereading Afropean Identities Through *Espérance Hakuzwimana's Tutta intera*

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Abstract This article investigates the term 'Afropean' through an analysis of *Espérance Hakuzwimana's* debut novel *Tutta intera* (2022). It aims to show how the novel, far from losing sight of the national context as the term 'Afropean' implies, effectively mediates issues related to specific localities and temporalities (racist and racial configurations in Italy in the 2010s) and transnational influences (the European and North American experiences of colonialism and slavery). By exploring the intersection of Afropean and Afroitalian, the novel aims to decentre the notion of (white) Europeaness and Italianness while highlighting global articulations of Blackness. Space, language, and class will be key elements to demonstrate how the novel expands the boundaries of Afropean/Afropeanness beyond race to promote a more inclusive and intersectional understanding of the term.

Keywords Afropean. Blackness. Afroitalian. Italianness. Europeaness. Colour blindness.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Space, Class, and Language in the Making of Sara's Identities. – 3 Colour Blindness, Blackness and Beyond. – 4 Conclusion.



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Categories function as accepted descriptors
until they are replaced.
(Bernardine Evaristo, *Manifesto*, 5)

1 Introduction

This article explores how *Espérance Hakuzwimana's* first novel, *Tutta intera* (2022), adds depth and nuance to the understanding of Afropean and Afropeanness by contextualising the terms locally and exploring the frictions of class and racial affiliations that underpin them. Originally coined in the early 1990s by musicians David Byrne and Marie Daulne, the portmanteau word Afropean is today “at the cutting edge of cultural analysis” (Hogarth 2022, 1). However, defining and establishing its meaning and contours is still an ongoing task, mainly due to the elusive terms it incorporates, African and European (Miano 2008; Crumly Deventer, Thomas 2011; Fassin 2012). Questions arise about how to define them univocally since they are blurred markers in the first place, which cannot be defined unequivocally either through geography or ethnicity (Brancato 2008, 2; Crumly Deventer, Thomas 2011, 337; Fassin 2012, 98; Hitchcott, Thomas 2014, 3).

As a still-debated term, with no prescription about how to use it, Afropean becomes even more problematic in the Italian case, especially when it is used to define the literary production of African authors and authors of African descent, which has been labelled with two other elusive terms. The first, *letteratura della migrazione* (migration literature), started to circulate in the 1990s, and the second, *letteratura italiana postcoloniale*, came to light as an attempt to resolve the impasse created by the term ‘migration’ when used to define post-migratory authors, mainly of African descent, born and raised in Italy (Morosetti 2004; Ponzanesi 2004).¹ More recently, categories such as Afro-Italian and Black Italian have further enriched the debate around the literary production of texts which have proliferated over three decades that, even though heterogeneous, have nonetheless “allowed migrant and second-generation writers [...] to

As a researcher with a white Western background, I would like to acknowledge that my understanding of specific experiences may be limited and that there might be blind spots in my analysis and theorisation. I recognise that my perspective may not always be complete and that I cannot claim to speak for the views of racialised communities. My primary goal is to contribute to the critical discourse on issues of race and racialisation and shed light on the complexities of racism and discrimination.

¹ These two terms have been vastly debated. For a more detailed discussion on the terms *letteratura postcoloniale* and *letteratura della migrazione* see, among others, (Gnisci 2006; Morosetti 2004; Ponzanesi 2004; Sinopoli 2004, 2006; Parati 2006; Quaquarelli 2010; Pezzarossa 2011; Comberiat 2010; Romeo 2011; Fracassa 2012).

sensitize Italian readers to the kinds of marginalization migrants of ten endure" (Romeo 2017, 2).

This emphasis on national-related issues and readership highlighted by Caterina Romeo, much present in contemporary texts by authors of African descent, might represent both a trouble and a resource when the term Afropean is applied to the Italian context. As indicated, Afropean attempts to include multiple belongings and identities and has been understood differently in the works of several scholars; however, a shared thread is to employ Afropean in relation to the authors' nationality or language, which is, paradoxically, the idea that the term itself seems to reject, as it implies (trans)continental rather than (trans)national affiliations. This approach seems to parallel and rely on the category of African American, used for including Black Americans who, nevertheless, could not trace their ancestry back to specific African countries or ethnic groups. As some Italians of African descent have pointed out, prefixes "such as 'Black' or 'Afro' [are] not appropriate for the Italian context because Afro-descendants in Italy [have] actual countries of origin on the African continent" (Hawthorne 2019a, 9). Therefore, this emphasis on the nation is the main hindrance to any definition of Afropean that does not consider the authors' and texts' affinities to individual countries within Europe and Africa.

Losing sight of national affiliations might be counterproductive to describe Hakuzwimana's novel, which can indeed be defined as Afropean. In this regard, while Pitts explains that Afropean should refer to the children of the first wave of migrants "who have soaked up the paths of their parents as well as walked along a new route into contemporary Europe" (2014, 48), Christopher Hogarth has recently employed the term more broadly to encompass the works of a migrant Francophone author (Fatou Diome) and a post-migratory Italophone one (Igiaba Scego). Hogarth claims that their differences find common ground in how their texts address the idea that "Africa and Europe are reciprocally embedded", a connection that underpins the very notion of Afropeanness (Hogarth 2022, 1). Accordingly, Afropean should not be exclusively limited to second generations but connected to how authors show the "reciprocal embeddedness of the histories of the two neighbouring continents" (Brancato 2008, 2).

However, though some Afropeans may establish transnational connections that circumvent the national identity from which they are excluded, others, like the characters of *Tutta intera*, "focus on appealing to the nation-state for equal access to the rights and privileges of citizens while remaining critical of nativist formulations of national identity" (Van Deventer 2014, 66). So, to read *Tutta intera* as an Afropean novel, then, means acknowledging it as a text part of a community of African descendent authors who aim to renovate models

of belonging approved and accepted by European nation-states and their dominant cultural discourses.²

As we will see, *Tutta intera* contests the idea that Afropean “points to a group with dual cultural and political identities without any basis or investment in the national, either as a source of legitimacy or a target of resistance” (Nimis 2014, 49). On the contrary, the novel shows that Afropean might also imply connections with local contexts and national identity articulations instead of advising for a “postnational European identity” (El-Tayeb 2011, XXXIX).

The analysis will show how Hakuzwimana advocates for a more inclusive and intersectional experience of Afropeanness that cannot be contained *only* within continental or transnational influences or within the dichotomy between Black (African) and white (European). This article then proposes to use Afropean according to the suggestion of Serena Scarabello and Marleen de Witte, who consider the term as relational and contextual, as a flexible and adaptable space built on both transnational connections and local affiliations, and “rooted in multiple, sometimes contradictory, genealogies” (Scarabello, de Witte 2019, 318). The following analysis, accordingly, takes in this definition to investigate “modes of Afropean self-making in relation to both the multiple histories of imagining Africanness, blackness, and Europeanness, and the local particularities of the settings in/from which these imaginings are addressed, disrupted, and/or reproduced” (Scarabello, de Witte 2019, 319). In this regard, Hakuzwimana’s *Tutta intera* represents a helpful starting point to unpack the complexities of the term Afropean and explore the European joint involvement in colonialism, as the novel shows multiple connections between local issues of belonging, race/racism and class, deeply rooted in the Italian context, and global references, such as the Atlantic experience of slavery and exploitation.

As a flexible term, Afropean allows a more comprehensive understanding of the recent literary production from the so-called second generation of authors who rarely address, for example, colonialism as a historical event strictly connected with their parents’ biographies but are more attentive to inequalities and discriminations due to systemic racism and the interconnection between Blackness and Italianness. The lingering effects of colonial discourse, above all, and how the latter has been subtly co-opted by the Italian media and the

2 One passage of the novel clarifies this: when the protagonist, Sara, and her students discuss their belonging, the latter claim to be “the next citizens” and not the new ones as the Italian media and society perceive them (28). However, scholar Olivette Otele has noticed that this issue of rights and citizenship shaped European history, thus directly relating the novel’s concern about Italian citizenship to broader topics shared in other European countries, which still struggle with institutionalised racism and multicultural policies (2022, 6-7).

public sphere, appear to be the primary focuses of these authors, such as *Espérance Hakuzwimana*, *Djarah Kan*, *Leila El Houssi* and *Nadeesha Uyangoda* to name but a few. As Pitts notes, the experience of this generation “is itself a kind of portmanteau, built from separate pieces but forming something singular,” and “too indelibly woven into the tapestry of Europe to be African, and too black to be considered European (a term which is still generally used as a synonym for ‘white’)” (2014, 48).

It might then be helpful to stress the potential overlapping between Afropean and Afroitalian, as the latter seems to emphasise the national/local scope of the novel. In the “Preface” to the recent anthology of short stories entitled *Future* (2019), which showcases texts by Black Italian women and non-binary writers of African and Caribbean descent (including *Espérance Hakuzwimana*), scholar *Camilla Hawthorne* employs the term “Afroitalianness” to explain the recent mobilisation of Afro-descendants to create spaces of discussions and agency on social networks, blogs, protests, and other media.³ Hawthorne notices that Afroitalian, too, is not eschewing problems and that one single *afroitalianità* does not exist (2019b, 24). Like Afropean, Afroitalian is not a unifying concept as it encompasses a spectrum of “multiple experiences [that] converge around a series of subjectivities and shared fights” (24). These experiences are part of a network that ties together the racial discourse in the African American geopolitical and cultural context and promotes transnational identifications and belongings that reach beyond the nation-state; at the same time, however, it *also* deprovincialises the Black Atlantic narrative and recentres the focus on Europe, the Mediterranean, and Italy (Hawthorne 2019b, 30; Romeo 2022, 613).

To examine the overlapping between Afropean and Afroitalian, the article is symbolically structured following the various ‘pieces’ that make up the protagonist’s identity. As the title *Tutta intera* suggests, these pieces are crucial in Sara’s attempt to create a sense of unity with herself. Therefore, the intersectionality between race and class via space and language will be examined to explain how the novel mediates both localised and Atlantic/North American forms of exploitation by recurring to the ‘plantation imaginary’; it also subverts the main narrative about migrants by engaging with the language of the Italian media. The second ‘piece’ that will be investigated is the issue of Blackness and transracial adoption. Lastly, the analysis will touch upon experiences of discrimination and internalised racism that suggest a more inclusive understanding of ‘Afropean’ as it moves the term beyond the dichotomy between Black and white.

3 The term “Afroitalian” was first coined by *Alessandro Portelli* to echo “Afroamerican” and parallel African American literature (Portelli 2000).

2 **Space, Class, and Language in the Making of Sara's Identities**

Tutta intera, *Espérance Hakuzwimana's* debut novel, tells the story of Sara Righetti, a twenty-three-year-old woman of African origins adopted by Italian parents. Sara grew up in a middle-class family (a high school teacher of Italian literature, Giacinto, and a kindergarten cook, Giuliana) in Bellafonte, a fictional neighbourhood in a city of Northern Italy, located across a river called Sele and near a large orchard where seasonal workers pick peaches –the fruit celebrated as the driving force of the local economy. At the beginning of the novel, Sara takes on the role of a teaching assistant to support second-generation students outside of regular school hours. This main plot is intertwined with flashbacks of Sara's childhood memories and her experience of growing up as a Black, adopted child in a small Italian province in the early 2000s. The narrative in *Tutta intera* is organised into fifty-four short chapters, which shift between past and present, following the protagonist's struggle to come to terms with her multiple identities and, as we will see, the process of decolonising her mind. In doing so, Hakuzwimana draws a parallel between Sara's present as a teacher and her earlier experience as a student, implying a connection between her life as a Black girl in a white, middle-class environment and that of post-migratory subjects residing in the underprivileged area of Basilici, on the opposite side of the Sele.

Hakuzwimana strategically uses the urban setting to highlight the economic disparities and social inequalities between Sara and her students, thus reproducing a microcosm that echoes some present-day situations in Italy. In an interview, Hakuzwimana explained that the novel's setting is indeed loosely inspired by Castel Volturno (Campania) and Porto Recanati (Marche), two towns where immigrants and second-generations live in semi-illegality, pushed back by the autochthonous population and segregated in areas where practices of informal economy thrive (BCT 2023).⁴ These references to present-day Italy allow us to draw a connection between current unsuccessful multicultural policies (or lack thereof) and systemic racism, responsible for the current precarious status of migrants and their children who are not fully recognised as citizens (Camilli 2020). In

⁴ Six immigrants from Ghana, Liberia, and Togo were killed in Castel Volturno in 2008. The incident was initially thought to be a clash between the Camorra and African drug dealers, but investigations later revealed that the victims were not involved in either. The Italian media failed to acknowledge the racial aspect of the event, but the African community perceived it as such (Romeo 2012, 234).

other words, *Tutta intera* sheds light on the reluctance to publicly discuss the detrimental effects of the lack of *jus soli* on the social fabric.⁵

This reluctance to recognise migrants and their children as citizens and acknowledge their presence on the territory without pan-dering to populist views, results spatially in what can be called a 'desire for apartheid', as Achille Mbembe puts it: "Today [...] the idea is to make borders as the primitive form of keeping at bay enemies, intruders and strangers - all those who are not one of us" (2019, 3). Along a similar line, Alessandra Di Maio has reframed this idea to explain how this segregationist attitude towards African migrants affects not only space but language, too. Discriminatory and biased vocabulary are two examples of the strategies employed by the media to describe a reality in which Italians are, more frequently than before, in close contact with (im)migrants:

From an initial alleged invisibility, [the immigrants'] presence has become progressively more apparent in major urban centres as well as in the countryside, in the north and in the south, in schools, factories, the media, sports, politics, and the arts [...] The Italian language has undergone concomitant changes in view of the need to invent a new vocabulary. The media have promoted new terms and definitions, not infrequently revealing racist overtones. Neologisms have flourished in newspapers and on TV and are now used in everyday conversation. (Di Maio 2009, 124)

This idea of "inventing a new vocabulary" and using neologisms will be key to addressing some of the tactics adopted in the novel by the second-generation students to resist the main narrative that often targets them as foreigners or criminals and describes them via the media, as objects.⁶ From the very first chapters, *Tutta intera* makes clear this intersection between space and language, thus adding class as another reason for misunderstanding and marginalisation. While Sara comes from a middle-class family who lives in Bellafonte, or the City, her students are from Basilici, or the ghetto, an area known for low-income housing, migrants, and chemical waste (21-2). The media

⁵ More specifically, *jus soli* is the concept that citizenship is obtained by being born in a particular country, regardless of the parents' nationality. Currently, Italy follows instead the principle of *jus sanguinis*, regulated by Law No. 91 (enacted on February 5, 1992) according to which citizenship is determined or acquired based on the nationality or ethnicity of one or both parents.

⁶ In a passage of the novel, the students show their frustration when Sara asks them where they come from. They answer that "Here at the Rodari [school], here in Basilici we never ask, "Where are you from?" (33). This shows how Sara's question can be compared to the overall attitude of Italian society, "[w]here people of African descent are [...] often cast [...] as perpetual 'newcomers'" (Smythe 2019, 11).

play a primary role in shaping the inhabitants' perception of the space they inhabit, as Sara notices:

I think about the river that splits Bellafonte, Rossini and San Giacomo from Basilici. The City, as they call it in this area which is neither a suburb nor a ghetto, even if the elderly call it this way; a word they took from television and now chew with contempt. I had never noticed it until the other day, when Mrs Luciana from the oratory asked me if I really went there, to that place.

Where? I asked her, pretending not to understand.

There in the ghetto, among the foreigners, she replied. (37)⁷

The river Sele, which physically splits the two communities, further accentuates the distance between Sara and her students, and between Bellafonte and Basilici, thus foregrounding the idea that different ways of belonging are possible, and more identities can be simultaneously inhabited.⁸

These interconnected aspects become apparent during Sara's first meeting with the students. Whereas she tries to establish her role as a teacher and prove her superior education by purposefully speaking in a formal way to "defend herself against them" (13, 16), the students wear away her certainties and question the very image she built for herself:

She understands Italian, doesn't she? they wonder, conspiratorial, as if I weren't there.

[...]

I feel surrounded. Earlier, two flights of stairs above, the headmistress warned me to be careful with an unexpectedly confidential tone: Don't get fooled. I know that Father Paolo has convinced you otherwise, but even if you're like them, they're not like you (9).

Despite the supposed proximity with her students because of her Black skin (as the headmistress implies), Sara is made to feel like an outsider due to her non-belonging to Basilici and her contextually misplaced use of the Italian language. Moreover, she is questioned about her nationality and proficiency in her native tongue, if not wholly excluded from the conversation and made 'invisible'. The

⁷ It is worth noting that Hakuzwimana employs a minimalist style in her writing, omitting quotation marks for direct speech. This technique may be interpreted as a form of opposition to traditional Italian writing norms, as evidenced by her use of unglossed words (89, 164). All translations from the novel are my own.

⁸ The quotation by Cristina Campo from *Diario Bizantino* (1977), placed in the exergue, becomes clear as soon as the meeting between Sara and the students occurs: "Due mondi - e io vengo dall'altro" ("Two worlds - and I come from the other").

students do not perceive her as one of their own and articulate this difference by highlighting Sara's social class and language. In other words, her "phenotypical blackness" does not work either as a marker of belonging or as a signifier for shared experiences, as the headmistress bitterly remarks. (Scarabello, de Witte 2019, 320)

Hakuzwimana develops this intersectional perspective further when the students ask Sara if she comes from the City. She replies, "at once, wholeheartedly, as in a race" (9) that she lives in Bellafonte and is taken aback when the follow-up question investigates her parents' place of origin. When Sara answers that both her father and mother are from the City, the unsatisfied students prod her to provide a more suitable answer about her "mamma di prima" ("mother from before") or her *ommi* ("mother" in Arabic) (10).

Therefore, language acts as a tool of exclusion as much as space and class and creates a gap between the protagonist and her students, who have developed an interlingual vocabulary of their own as a form of resistance against a context in which Italian represents the norm. More than simply employing strategies of linguistic appropriation and adaptation, they enable a practice of creation to "convey a sense of cultural distinctiveness" that rejects the dominant language as the main system of references to describe their reality (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin 2002, 63). Besides being a creative act, this linguistic strategy can be read as a form of resistance against the official language of the media and the institutions, which have conceived neologisms and derogatory terms to refer to migrants (Di Maio 2009, 124). The novel captures the ability of second-generation students to subvert practices of exclusion and discrimination by creating new names to talk back to the dominant discourse which labels them, for example, as *marocchini*, a blurred marker generally used to describe Northern African people (Hogarth 2022, 107). At the same time, they use contractions like *profe* (short of professor, teacher) that denote their proficiency towards forms of linguistic localism and "the ability to perform at different linguistic levels in daily practice" (Parati 2006, 55).

Later in the novel, Hakuzwimana further emphasises these affiliative dynamics and resistance when she introduces the neologism *sísí*. The latter can be understood as a metonym of the lived experience of second-generation students who articulate their reality by crafting their own system of references. As Bell Hooks suggests, "language is also a place of struggle", and the students are indeed

using it to make it different from “the one that [the] oppressors imposed on” them (1990, 146).⁹

In this case, the term *sísí* refers to the people “who are not from Basilici” (129) and to those “who want to hear from us only one thing: yes, and yes again” (130). The term, then, cuts across ethnicity and skin colour as Sara is considered a *sísí* too, even though she claims a similarity with her students resulting from her skin colour:

So, I'm a *sísí* even though I'm basically like you?
But you are not like us! they reply all together, with a bit of amusement and the tone of a monotonous singsong.
I feel like a nocturnal animal in the sunlight. This black of mine is not enough, it is stained by something irreparable. (130)

It is evident that Sara's Black skin alone cannot corroborate her likeness with the students. Since she is from Basilici, has a middle-class background and does not share the same linguistic references, Sara is *perceived* as white (as her lack of understanding about the meaning of “*mamma di prima*” shows). This reading is further emphasised when the students talk about the orchard where Sara's uncle works as a keeper, thus revealing the power dynamics between the landowners (Faenza) and the families living in Basilici:

The Faenzas have taken everything: the houses, the land; they give and take away the license to those who want to open shops; Diri from the ground floor says they lay down the law! Even with people like us.
The foreigners, says Adelina Moraru making air quotes.
The *moretti*, adds Giulio Abour.
The *marocchini*, declares Zakaria Laroui, And the Romanians, the Peruvians, the *coglicogli*, the *lavalva*.
We occupied all the space for him and what did he do? He put us to pick peaches!
Like slaves, prof.
(53)

For Sara, the orchard where her uncle works holds fond memories of her youth; however, for the students and their parents, it represents a workplace of exploitation. The language used in this environment signals the novel's situatedness in the Italian ethno- and politico-geography, since *Tutta intera* mentions familiar terms commonly used by the media to refer to migrants and their families (i.e.,

⁹ In one passage of the novel, Sara herself rephrases Bell Hooks' sentence saying that “language is a battlefield” (108).

marocchino, moretto). Hakuzwimana, then, seems to invite Italian-speaking readers to be part of a conversation surrounding language and racism to re-evaluate these detrimental terms, too often uncritically employed in public discourse and everyday language. To accomplish this, she re-appropriates this offensive vocabulary and puts it in the hands of her students, who become subjects instead of objects of their representation.

However, along with the localised issues of language and the restoration of agency, another aspect should be observed. Even though slavery, as a historical event, is not foregrounded in Afroitalian literature as much as in African American narratives, forms of racial neo-capitalism with references to slavery via the so-called 'plantation imaginary' are nonetheless addressed in *Tutta intera*. Camilla Hawthorne has already investigated this parallelism, noticing that the economic contributions of migrant workers "reproduce exploitation, or a new form of colonial extraction" (2019a). The passage quoted accordingly seems to connect the local with the global by using the term *schiaivo* (slave), which references the trans-Atlantic imaginary directly.

Schiaivo, therefore, adds a transnational layer to the localised experience of Afroitalianness presented so far, situating Blackness beyond the national context and within the broader framework of the African American experience of exploitation. By placing *schiaivo* along with the more localised *moretti* and *marocchini*, Hakuzwimana recontextualises the term by proposing a more nuanced understanding of Black Italianness. This recontextualisation, however, does not completely disconnect the national from the US cultural framework but hooks it to a globally recognised imaginary of exploitation that Western readers often do not consider European (Hawthorne 2022, 8).

By placing emphasis on the word *schiaivo*, *Tutta intera* fosters a connection with the history of slavery as a European endeavour and relates it to the current "horrific labor exploitation in Italian agricultural camps" resulting from the migrations to Europe across the Mediterranean (Pesarini 2020; Hawthorne 2022, 500). The localised spatiality of the novel is then expanded to reterritorialise the Italian province within a plantation imaginary without disregarding the present-day dynamics of border control and migrant labour and "by extension, the political-economic dynamics that have created the conditions of possibility for African migrations across the Mediterranean to Italy from the mid-twentieth century onwards" (Hawthorne 2022, 12). As I will show in the following paragraphs, space and language are not the only two aspects that the novel employs to contextualise the term Afroitalian in the Italian present.

3 Colour Blindness, Blackness and Beyond

Sara grew up in a middle-class, white environment that prevented her from investigating her past (the burdensome question of 'origins') and making sense of her Blackness. Her fears and confusions about her identity do not find answers or comfort within the domestic space, as her parents often dismiss the question of race. In the opening scene of the novel, Sara dangerously and awkwardly attempts to wash away the Black of her skin using bleach, as suggested in a TV commercial (1-2). Even though the attempt fails because she topples the bottle, her mother notices but glosses over it; later in the day, when Sara is having dinner with her parents, the accident is discussed again, only briefly and superficially. Her mother remains silent when Sara admits her aims, while her father emits a strange sound without adding any comments (5).

On another occasion, Sara inquires about her origins after one of her schoolmates insults her by calling her "dirty African" (17). When she asks her father what it means to be African and if African people are dirty, he answers vaguely and then shifts the attention to who was responsible for saying such an offence. Sara decides to remain silent not to tell on her schoolmate, and her father does not press the matter further (77). As a result of these silences, at the time of the story, when Sara is twenty-three, she feels incomplete; her story, as much as her identity, appears fragmented and missing an essential bit of her past, namely the time before she was Saranostra ('our Sara'), as her father calls her. It is interesting to notice here that the novel does not place much emphasis on the African origins or the research of African roots, but on the meaning of Blackness within the Italian context. As Stephen Small has noticed, "Blackness is not just, or even, about African ancestry. It is about racialization and the ascription of blackness" (2009, XXVI). Accordingly, Sara does not seem nostalgic for an ancestral home but appears more determined to claim an idea of Italianness that includes her perceived difference. In this regard, Pitts notes that Afropean does not necessarily mean to look for ancestry in Africa but to explore how Africa is expressing itself in Europe (2014, 48). This approach highlights the complexity of terms such as Blackness and Africanness, which should be understood contextually as parts of multiple trajectories.

For example, in the novel, Sara faces a double *othering* due to being an adopted child and a Black girl/woman. Hakuzwimana addresses the challenge of transracial adoption and highlights the unpreparedness of parents (and social workers) who adopt Black children in Italy, more than showing Sara's attempt to negotiate her biological

parents' culture with the Italian one.¹⁰ At the domestic level, the unwillingness of Sara's parents to talk about – or even mention – the issue of race can be understood as a form of love that aims to protect her, but that eventually ends up denying her Blackness. This tendency to sidestep mentioning or addressing race and skin colour to avoid the possibility of appearing unbiased or racist can be considered a form of colour blindness that eventually ends up dismissing or minimising Sara's experience.¹¹ Rooted “in the belief that racial group membership and race-based differences should not be taken into account when decisions are made, impressions are formed, and behaviors are enacted”, colour blindness appears as the main framework in which Giacinto and Giuliana navigate their experience as parents (Apfelbaum, Norton, Sommers 2012, 205).

This domestic attitude parallels – and comes from – the lack of awareness at the national level about the legacy of the racist policies enacted during colonialism and Fascism. Caterina Romeo describes this phenomenon as “the evaporation of race” (2012, 221). Italy, unlike the UK and the US, “has moved to a postracial phase without ever going through a racial phase” and “has yet to acknowledge that colonialism and the racialization of internal and external Others were crucial steps toward the construction of its national identity” (Romeo 2012, 222). The “evaporation of race” can be read alongside colour blindness ideology in the domestic environment, as the novel shows how Sara is othered at home by her parents. In one episode, Sara tries to make her father look like her by drawing with a black pencil a photo of him (“Now he's like me”, 63). However, her mother seems oblivious to her aim and scolds her: “You passed the black marker over it, now you can't see anything!” (63).

This “evaporation of race” is also implicitly suggested at the formal level as a way to mimic the ambiguous attitude towards Black people in Italy. The protagonist's skin colour, for example, is implied in the text and often suggested through periphrases or allusions, especially in the beginning, when a couple asks Sara's parents: “Whose is this beautiful little girl?” (7), or when she meets Marcela, who is one of those “people who look like [Sara] because of their skin” (30), or when she questions her father about her classmates who “say that [she doesn't] have the face of a Sara” and later correct herself: “I wanted to say skin instead of face” (50).

This ‘evaporation’, however, stands in stark contrast to the openly racist environment in which Sara grew up. As David Theo Goldberg

10 Recently, Ferrani et al. (2022) conducted a study on the impact of ethnic discrimination role in moderating the association between reflected minority categorisation, on the one hand, and ethnic identity, on the other.

11 This same tendency could also be examined in relation to Sara's boyfriend, M.

has noticed, “race has been rendered invisible, untouchable, as unnoticeably polluting as the toxic air we breathe” but, at the same time, even though unseen, it still shows “its racist effects” (2006, 339). The novel makes this clear by suggesting that, while in the domestic and intimate setting of Sara’s home, she has internalised the so-called ‘white thinking’, in the outside world, she is persistently interrogated about her origin, skin colour, and name. In a brief passage Sara remembers insults and episodes of everyday racism: “Go back to your home, African!” (35) or “the Foreigner, the African, the Immigrant” (120). In another of Sara’s flashbacks, we also glimpse the systemic, institutionalised and deeply ingrained racism in the school system and, by extension, in Italian society, as the comments made by Sara’s English teacher show: “Well done, she says, you really improved; it’s a pity that people like you can’t go to high school” (35).

This overt racism, which is “enacted through processes of stereotyping and essentializing”, is built around the “chromatic norm” of whiteness (Romeo 2012, 225, 226). In this regard, Lilian Thuram has explained, rephrasing Frantz Fanon, that whiteness, or white thinking, is not a matter of skin colour but a way of being in the world, a mentality, and a political construct (2022, 7; Fanon 2008).¹² Sara internalised this white thinking and grew up othering herself, being split between her *invisibility* in the domestic environment and the *hypervisibility* of her Black body in public places (Caponetto 2021, 51; Romeo 2023, 143). Accordingly, when Sara’s skin colour is openly mentioned, it is with a racist undertone: “The day of my thirteenth birthday, at the party in the parish, Luca Tuân writes N**** on my plastic glass” (35). Sara is regularly treated as an outsider, to the extent that she avoids looking at herself in the mirror for fear of confronting her image and the resulting difficulty in identifying with her peers (Hakuzwimana 2022, 116). This highlights Sara’s challenges when she tries reconciling her self-perception with her multiple identities and the expectations of a society self-fashioned as homogeneous that considers whiteness the norm.¹³

Refraining from explicitly mentioning the protagonist’s skin colour until Sara herself feels prepared to address it reflects the concept of

12 In a recent interview, Hakuzwimana mentioned Lilian Thuram’s book *White Thinking* as one of fruitful source to explain Sara’s unawareness of her Blackness (BCT 2023).

13 In one episode, Marcela suggests Sara use a whitening *crème clarifiante* to make her skin lighter (174). However, this ‘white’ norm is not limited to skin colour, but also to the protagonist’s hair. On a few occasions, the novel addresses the topic of Black hair and their devaluation in comparison to Western beauty norms (31-2, 72, 77, 97). This topic draws a transnational connection with other recent novels (most notably, Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*) that have pointed out how “everyday praxis of hair-straightening potentially constitutes a camouflage or mimicry strategy” to seek acceptance in white contexts (Cruz-Gutiérrez 2019, 67).

evaporation and white thinking, which Sara internalised because of it. What Caterina Romeo says in her intervention about the anthology *Future* sounds true also in the case of *Tutta intera*, a novel that is:

not shaped around the author'[s] Blackness, but rather on how such Blackness is socially perceived in Italy and internalized by racialized and sexualized subjects, and on how the author'[s] self-perception of such Blackness has influenced the process of constructing [her] individual subjectivity. (2022, 613)

However, this approach towards Blackness also highlights one of the key themes of the novel, which is to transcend the rigid Black vs. White dichotomy and examine other concurrent forms of discrimination, embodied in the character of Luca Tuân, a Vietnamese student adopted by Italian parents who endures constant discrimination. It is interesting to notice that even though Luca and Sara have a similar background, they both internalised the racist discourse about them so much so to *other* one another. It is clear now that the novel is not entirely focused on defining Africanness or Blackness but is more interested in exploring the difficulties of navigating multiple identities and, above all, the struggle to articulate such multiplicity within a 'white space'. Blackness is inscribed in a context of marginalisation and discrimination, and compared to other experiences, like those of Italians with an Asian background. In this sense, *Tutta intera* seems to expand the definition of Afropean, in line with the more nuanced interpretation developed by Cameroonian author Léonora Miano. Miano believes that Afropeanness should promote "greater inclusivity", as succinctly summarised by Allison Van Deventer (2014, 64). Similarly, scholars Crumly Deventer and Thomas prioritise the shared experiences of discrimination among groups over ethnic factionalism. They focus on fostering inclusion and belonging, which can reshape current political configurations and reduce hegemonic tendencies (2011, 339).

However, the novel does not describe immediate solidarity between Sara and Luca; on the contrary, it shows how the dynamic between the two appears to be antagonistic, with both characters exhibiting reluctance to engage with each other, thereby hindering the possibility of establishing mutual understanding (Hakuzwimana 2022, 25-6). In this regard, the novel sheds light on the process through which racialised subjects also often become racializing subjects as a way of distancing themselves from more racialised communities.

The episodes with Luca Tuân underline this attitude as he constitutes a kind of double of the protagonist; even though they both experience discrimination because of skin colour and physical features, Luca's way of dealing with these forms of everyday racism consists of

an aggressive and racist behaviour towards Sara (25).¹⁴ As a result, teachers consider Luca a 'difficult boy' and a "monster", thus further contributing to his marginalisation and exclusion from white normativity (44-5). Sara, in turn, projects her fears on him by comparing her worries as an adopted child, who feels the need to indulge her parents in avoiding the risk of being 'sent away', to the hostile behaviour of Luca, who seems to be unafraid of speaking his mind and express his frustration. Their internalised racism leads them to see each other as strangers fighting to be included and accepted in the same white context.

Only later, when Sara begins the process of undoing her *white thinking*, she finally appreciates how similar her situation is to Luca's: "Instead of insulting each other, we could have said I recognise you and I understand you, I have things to ask you, let's find them out together" (125). It is the meeting with the students that triggers the process of questioning her identities and belongings and see the multi-faceted reality in which she lives, beyond clear-cutting categories of space, class, and race. Once a division between communities and experiences, the river Sele becomes a metaphor for multiple identities, as suggested by one of the students, a mixed-raced boy called Paul Bonafede (184). The river is a physical and symbolic element that not only divides places and communities but connects them, as it flows in between and is constantly moving. Later in the novel, we find out that Sara herself was born in Basilici and spent two months there before moving to Bellafonte in her adoptive parents' home.¹⁵

Discovering Basilici and its community (or, more specifically, crossing the river to move outside her comfort zone) allows Sara to close the circle and come to terms with that part of her identity that was concealed and avoided but which, nonetheless, completes her. The novel's title, *Tutta intera*, therefore, seems to refer to this idea of wholeness or, better, to the necessary process of collecting the pieces together to find a form of coexistence between multiple identities and belongings. This image echoes Pitts' description of Afropean identities and experiences as "a kind of portmanteau, built from separate pieces but forming something singular" (2014, 48).

14 Luca, too, is othered via biased language that relies on stereotypes ("Those of other classes call him Cinesino, Chin Chung Chang, Limoncello", 25).

15 "I've never talked with anyone about who I was before being Sara. There's not much to say: two months dry up quickly in the sun. I know that I was born in Basilici when it wasn't called that yet. A new-born neighbourhood, an idea that later became shameful, a showy stain" (123).

4 Conclusion

This article examined *Espérance Hakuzwimana's Tutta intera* and its complex connection to the term Afropean, which has been employed here flexibly and relationally, as Scarabello and de Witte suggested, to encompass a complex set of experiences that cannot be fully understood solely through the lens of race or origin. The novel, as shown, explores themes such as self-making, the sense of belonging, and Blackness in a society predominantly perceived as white, such as Italy, and underscores the importance of shared experiences in bridging cultural and social divides, as evidenced by the relationship between Sara and her students. With a focus on a fictional city, the novel presents a broader context in which different expressions of Blackness coexist and in which class, language, and spatiality play a fundamental role in the process of developing a sense of belonging and inclusion in a country where whiteness is still seen as a marker of Italianness. As shown, *Tutta intera* offers a more inclusive interpretation of Afropean. It eschews any strict or too narrow definition of the term and places it in relation to multiple histories and local specificities, in which a range of different (and contrasting) perspectives coexist. In this regard, rather than addressing notions of home (understood as the parents' place of origin) and Africanness, the novel focuses on the importance of inclusion and acceptance in the national context. In doing so, *Tutta intera* tackles local forms of domestic and institutional racism (colour blindness and the media's denigratory language) and connects these experiences to a broader context, thus reterritorialising the Italian province into the trans-Atlantic plantation imaginary. Without losing sight of the national realities and a sense of geographical belonging, *Tutta intera* suggests a fluid Afropean identity constructed via connections based on shared experiences of discrimination and marginalisation -instead of direct genealogies.

In conclusion, it is important to note that this article can only partly contribute to the analyses of the ever-expanding corpus of texts written in Italian by authors of African descent. Many works have been published recently, either within the conventional frames of nationwide publishing companies or through independent publishing or online media. It goes without saying, then, that this article only skims the surface of the material available. Still, I hope to have provided a helpful picture of the still-debated term Afropean and its application in the Italian context, thus pointing towards a feasible way of approaching the text.

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