

**Remaking national identity: Postcolonial discourses at the intersection of gender and race in *Tutto può succedere***

In reflecting on Italy as a postcolonial society, Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo assert that the country is once again ‘a multidirectional passageway in the Mediterranean’, in light of trajectories of migration from Eastern Europe and the Global South after 1989 (2012: 9). In the context of globalization, the diverse nature of the immigrant population, also originating from Latin America, China and Southeast Asia, and new waves of emigration have made necessary a re-evaluation of national identity in transnational terms, further taking into account the position of second generations in the national body (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 372).<sup>1</sup> Such heterogeneity exposes the constructedness of the racial homogeneity through which Italy has historically defined its identity since Unification (Greene 2012: 3). At the same time, the presence of migrants and postcolonial subjects within European countries ‘reinstat[e] relationships of power created by colonialism - such as processes of racialisation and racism, for instance - which are reproduced and reinforced in contemporary postcolonial societies to defend a white, Christian, European identity’ (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 367).

These new subjectivities have gradually gained visibility across various forms of popular culture in Italy. Part of a growing group of TV series in which ‘new Italians’ are slowly coming to the fore (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 372), *Tutto può succedere* ‘Anything Can Happen’ (2015-18) represents an interesting case as the remake of the American *Parenthood*

(2010-15), clearly highlighting the negotiation of national identity through the process of cultural translation. The presence of postcolonial subjects in Italian cinema has generated a fertile body of works that interrogate Italian identity (Greene 2012; Nathan 2017; De Franceschi 2018; O’Healy 2019). However, their representation on television is yet to be explored in comparable depth. Michela Ardizzoni’s analysis of factual programmes between the late 1980s and the mid-2000s is among few examples. Ardizzoni crucially questions the boundaries of national identity through an intersectional approach, starting from the controversy surrounding the victory of Dominican-born Denny Méndez at the Miss Italia beauty pageant in 1996, where ‘the female body comes to materialize abstract conceptions of nationalism along specific constructed axes of femininity and ethnicity’ (2005: 511). De Franceschi offers a comprehensive overview of the presence of Afrodescendant subjects in fiction series in his work on citizenship (2018). Through his blog, he has further documented the growing number of Afrodescendant actors in series and films produced by Rai, in contrast with their paucity on Mediaset and cable channels, although often relegated in marginalized roles (De Franceschi 2016a).

While this provides a useful framework to situate the contemporary debates on Italian identity on television, little space has been dedicated to in-depth textual critique of popular series, albeit these occupy a more significant role than cinema in the current production and consumption contexts (O’Healy 2019: 5). Italian ‘quality television’ has catalysed international attention (Lombardi 2014), but, as Cardini argues, prime time series produced by Rai like *Tutto può succedere* represent equally complex

texts that draw ‘huge success from both audiences and critics’, thus deserving of scholarly focus (2016: 52-53).

In this article, I turn to *Tutto può succedere* to explore some of these complexities, with a focus on the negotiation of ‘Italianness’. Seemingly following *Parenthood* closely in plotlines and development of scenes, the remake presents some small but significant differences. Above all, the character of Jasmine (Joy Bryant), an African-American dancer, becomes Feven (Esther Elisha), an Eritrean-born musician who migrated to Italy with her family in the 1990s. This is of importance as Eritrea was the first territory to be colonized by Italy in 1890 (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005: xiv). I contend that this shift reveals the tensions that characterize Italian society in the negotiation of national identity, in relation to societal changes generated by migration and the still often submerged colonial legacy. Engaging with a postcolonial theoretical framework that emphasizes the intersectionality of gender and race, I will examine the interracial relationship between Feven and Carlo (Alessandro Tiberi), in comparison to Jasmine and Crosby (Dax Shephard), to highlight how the postracial discourses that marked President Barack Obama’s era (2009-2017) in the United States are superseded by postcolonial ones in *Tutto può succedere*. My analysis will demonstrate that Feven’s Othering through sexualization and exoticization exposes the persistence of colonial stereotypes in Italian visual culture and society. However, I argue that the displacement of racial discourses onto gender through the prism of postfeminism, emerging in the re-domestication of the working woman, contributes to a process of alignment of the Other with normative categories, which further engages

with the specificities of the Italian context in relation to religion. The resulting friction between progressive impulses and conservative stances speaks to the proliferation of contending positions in the current Italian socio-political context.

### **Postcolonial Italy**

Before moving onto the analysis of *Tutto può succedere*, it is necessary to contextualize it in connection with the debates on migration and citizenship that have marked the period of its production and broadcasting. The tragic shipwreck on 3 October 2013, which caused the death of more than 360 migrants, led to the intensification of these debates and the launch of the search and rescue operation 'Mare Nostrum'. The broadcasting of the final season of the show in 2018 instead coincided with the rise of the new coalition government formed by the far-right Lega and the populist Five Star Movement.

Italy has been redefined as a destination country since the late 1970s, with migration flows increasing at a quicker rate after 1989, prompted by end of the Cold War, the political conflicts legacy of colonialism and the reverberation of the effects of economic crises in the North on the Global South (Oso and Ribas-Mateos 2013: 6). Unlike countries like the United Kingdom or France, this shift did not correspond to decolonization nor did Italy experience large-scale immigration from its former colonies of Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Libya, Albania and Dodecanese Islands (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012: 6). For instance, Ethiopians and Eritreans represented the second largest non-European group of immigrants in the 1970s; in the early

1990s, their numbers were significantly lower compared to others of different origins (Andall 2005: 194-98). At present, the five largest groups originate from Romania, Albania, Morocco, China and Ukraine, with Eritrea featuring very low on the list (Demoistat 2019).

The heterogeneous nature of immigration in Italy is closely linked to globalization and neoliberalism, engendering forms of neocolonialism and precarious labour conditions on an international scale (Mellino 2012: 15; Oso and Ribas-Mateos 2013: 3). The widening gaps of inequality after the 2008 recession (Oso and Ribas-Mateos 2013: 9) and conflicts in the Mediterranean region, like the Arab Spring (ISPI 2018) have determined the intensification of migration in recent years. Despite the dissolution of the boundaries of nation-states due to globalization, as exemplified by the Schengen Convention regulating free movement in the European Union, new borders have been sanctioned through inclusionary and exclusionary criteria (Mezzadra 2012: 43). In the case of citizenship, this is regulated through forms of racialization inscribed onto the bodies of migrants within Europe while previously governing them in the colonies (Mellino 2012: 81-82; Mezzadra 2012: 45-46).

In Italy, the emergence of neofascist Alleanza Nazionale and far-right secessionist Lega Nord (then Lega) in the 1990s, legitimized through a rising new nationalist rhetoric in the early 2000s, has marked the debate on citizenship and immigrants' rights (Mezzadra 2012: 37). The anxieties provoked by the demographical changes connected with immigration have resulted in forms of xenophobia and racism, often distorted by the media through a rhetoric that privileges the spectacularization and negative

stereotyping of migrants, endorsing a right-wing agenda (Bond, Bonsaver and Falloppa 2015: 5-7).

Increasingly restrictive laws have sanctioned the access to citizenship through *ius sanguinis*, tying Italian nationality to ascendancy by blood and effectively excluding second generations. A new inclusive proposal to regulate citizenship through *ius soli temperato* ('limited birthright citizenship') was advanced in 2013, according to which those born in Italy to a parent with permanent stay permit and those who have been continuously educated in the country for five years could be recognized as citizens. Grassroots movements like Rete G2, an organization for the rights of second generations, and political figures like the then Minister of Integration Cécile Kyenge supported the reform (De Franceschi 2018: 86-88). The proposal was approved by the Chamber in 2015, but it was ultimately rejected in Senate in 2017 (De Franceschi 2018: 92-93). Further restrictions have been applied in 2018, promoted by the Minister of Interior and main representative of the Lega, Matteo Salvini. This reform has been interpreted as a direct response to migration, as already demonstrated by Salvini's rhetoric in closing Italian ports to migrant rescue ships (Cecini 2018): not only does it deny humanitarian rights to immigrants, but also envisions the revocation of citizenship to those who commit 'acts of terrorism' (Ministero dell'Interno 2019).

As De Franceschi analyses, the political debate on citizenship has been marked by a harsh campaign of disinformation in the media that especially targeted women of color like Kyenge through misogyny and racism (2018: 102-03). Ponzanesi argues that current representations of black bodies, as in

the case of Kyenge, still resonate with their colonial racialized connotations, especially in the field of politics, fashion and sports (2016: 380). A case in point is the response to the victory of the Italian women relay team at the Mediterranean Games in July 2018, in the same days of the Lega annual meeting at Pontida. The team, entirely made-up of second generation or naturalized athletes, was elevated to a symbol of integration beyond racial differences on social media, using the hashtag ‘#primaleitaliane’ that flipped Salvini’s slogan ‘Italians first’. For instance, Kyenge praised the athletes and a nation that integrates immigrants (Kyenge 2018), while activist Aboubakar Soumahoro presented them as the face of a ‘mestiza’ society (Soumahoro 2018). On the other hand, racist discourses were invoked, as in Salvini’s polemical comment that, while complimenting the athletes, accused clandestine immigrants to ‘bring war’ to Italy, employing the stereotype of the disruptive figure of the migrant as invader (Salvini 2018). Press coverage was also characterized by a similar tension. Even when celebrating the victory, newspapers like *Il Giornale* emphasized the ‘total black’ identity of the team (Malerba 2018) or depicted them as ‘good girls’, reporting in detail ‘how they became Italians’, as did *Fatto Quotidiano* (F.Q. 2018.). This example demonstrates the centrality of representation to the debate on citizenship and the crucial connection between gendered and racial discourses in interrogating the concept of Italianness, as inscribed onto the bodies of black women. In this context, the gendered racial politics in *Tutto può succedere* function as a barometer of a nation redefining its own identity.

### **From Postracial to Postcolonial**

The second and more successful televisual adaptation of the 1989 film by Ron Howard, *Parenthood* is a one-hour dramedy set in Berkeley, following the multigenerational Braverman family: grandparents Zeek and Camille, their four children, among whom Crosby is the youngest, and their respective families. At the time of its airing, the relationship between Jasmine and Crosby gained critical and audience attention, in connection with the increasing visibility of interracial relationships on American TV, such as Olivia and Fitz in *Scandal* (2012-18), Tara and Sam in *True Blood* (2008-14), or Veronica and Kevin in *Shameless* (2011-) (Blake 2014.; Gethsemanewwn 2013; Madden Toby 2013). However, commentators also criticized the lack of direct address of race and racism in these shows, underlining that race-blindness effectively ignores the ‘the experiences of people of color and the racism they do sometime experience’ (Richardson 2012) or the problems that racial difference may cause in a couple (Deggans 2011). Joy Bryant also reflected on this in an interview, celebrating the show for its treatment of race in a society where discrimination is rife. She however recognized that the interracial nature of the romance involving her character was never directly addressed (Bryant 2012).

As Catherine Squires analyses, Jasmine’s inclusion in *Parenthood* amplifies postracial discourses, in which interracial couples and children are central as a ‘shorthand for social and interpersonal progress and enlightenment about race’ (2014: 99-100). Increasingly used since the 2008 presidential campaign that led to the election of Barack Obama, the



postracial rhetoric envisions ‘an already-achieved multicultural nation [that] draws upon neoliberal ideologies of market individualism, whereby race/ethnicity presents us with specific choices to navigate’ (Squires 2014: 6). As Paul Gilroy emphasizes, such a rhetoric creates a discrepancy between black people’s material lives and Obama’s vision of a supra-racial America, wherein neoliberal capitalism invests in diversity on an individual level while, in actuality, it damages collective racial solidarity (2014: 2-3). By reducing identity to an individualist matter of lifestyle, the institutional nature of racism is concealed whereas diversity becomes a means to penetrate new markets (Gilroy 2014: 9, 12). Race is seldom addressed in *Parenthood*, usually by white male characters and especially by Crosby (Squires 2014: 112-113). Yet, the portrayal of Jasmine as a single mother, blamed for Jabbar’s initial fatherlessness and often marginalized in the main storylines, echoes racial stereotypes (Squires 2014: 118-119).

Like *Parenthood*, *Tutto può succedere* concentrates on the multigenerational Ferraro family, with grandparents Ettore and Emma, their four children and respective families. In the remake, Crosby becomes Carlo, while Feven, the mother of his son Robel (Sean Ghedion Nolasco), is a violinist interpreted by Esther Elisha, an Italian-Beninese actress. Set in one of Rome’s affluent suburbs, the series was adapted for Rai Uno into a format of 100-minute episodes for the first two seasons and 50-minute ones for the third, which allowed it to explore some of the storylines in depth, while others were mixed or altered in the process of cultural translation.

As Buonanno argues, Italian television has always entertained a close connection with American models, which were more widely adopted with

the rise of commercial channels and the import of a large volume of US series like *Dallas* (1978-1991) (2012: 39-42). Italian seriality has undergone an increasing internationalization since the mid-1990s, frequently importing formats that highlight the central role of the family, especially from Spain. The cultural translation is often so masterful that the original is soon forgotten (Buonanno 2012: 104-05). However, *Tutto può succedere* represents a rare remake of an American show that explicitly foregrounds its relationship with the original.

At the same time, the distinct socio-cultural contexts necessarily mobilize different racial and gender discourses. The postracial vision that underlies *Parenthood* is substituted by a postcolonial approach in the remake, linked to Italy's colonial past and its institutional repression after WWII. This is thrown into relief by the comparison between Jabbar's and Robel's birthday parties in the respective first seasons. In both cases, the Bravermans/Ferraros meet their in-laws, the Trussells/Neguisses, for the first time; the atmosphere is tense as Jasmine/Feven had told their relatives that Crosby/Carlo knew about their child from the start but refused any responsibility.

In *Parenthood*, the camera follows Crosby as he tries to interact with Jasmine's family. Through a series of quick shots, the Bravermans are seen mingling with their in-laws. Yet, only Camille is successful with Renee and Sekou, Jasmine's mother and brother, by demonstrating her knowledge of African history, which she attributes to her countercultural youth. Close-ups draw attention to Crosby when Sekou confronts him for abandoning Jabbar, until Zeek accuses the Trussells of disliking him 'because he's white',

provoking an uproar among the Bravermans. Jasmine then reveals the truth in a close-up that stresses the emotional moment, only for the camera to once again move among the Bravermans to capture their reactions. Jabbar ends the argument by asking for the cake. As Squires highlights, this represents a rare instance in which race is openly acknowledged through Zeek's reverse racism (2014: 116). This strategy reinforces the structural privileges conventionally associated with whiteness, which is thus established in its normative position through the opposition to blackness (Brander Rasmussen et al. 2001: 10) and the focus on the Bravermans throughout the sequence.

In *Tutto può succedere*, racial and ethnic differences are immediately foregrounded in the scene through the use of diegetic African folk music, as Carlo offers the guests some zighinì, a typical Eritrean dish. His casual attire and jokes highlight his inability to behave appropriately, in contrast with the seriousness of Genet and Senai, Feven's mother and brother. The tension increases when the Ferraros arrive. While talking with Genet, Emma asks her how long they have been living in Italy and whether they are of Tigrinya or Tigre ethnicity, knowledge of which she says to have acquired at university. When Senai confronts Carlo, the camerawork emphasizes Feven's reaction to their conversation, through close-ups highlighting her dejection. Ettore then intervenes, addressing Feven's family in a confrontational tone: 'You are not like us. Carlo is not black', to which Senai defensively answers: 'We've been here for 22 years'.<sup>2</sup> As in the original, the wandering camera subsequently privileges the Ferraros' embarrassment. The scene concludes as Robel asks for his birthday cake.

Unlike Jasmine in *Parenthood*, Feven stands out for her emotional complexity, underlined by the more frequent close-ups and the opposition with Carlo's immaturity. However, the scene draws attention to racial difference through an ethnographic approach that establishes an 'us/them' relation in Emma's remarks to Genet, reinforced by Ettore's line. Whereas *Parenthood* normalized whiteness through reverse racism, here this is achieved through its invisibility, in a process of hetero-referential racialization (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013: 5). While this bears similarities with the American context, the exchange between Ettore and Senai supports the idea that race corresponds exclusively to blackness, as typical of contemporary Italy (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013: 125). This performative reassertion of whiteness exemplifies the interrelational nature of race, wherein whiteness is 'a category of experience that disappears as a category through experience', as Sara Ahmed argues (2007: 150). Drawing from Fanon, Ahmed underlines that the institutionalization of whiteness is the result of repetitive actions that have unfolded in the past, inscribed onto bodies in the present, as a legacy of colonial history (2007: 153-54).

Significantly, the Neguisses are cast as long-established immigrants from Eritrea, whose arrival in Italy coincides with the post-1989 increase of global migrations. Very sparse pieces of background information present them as seemingly lower-middle class, thus steering away from the stereotypes that still characterize the representation of migrants in Italian cinema and TV, where female characters frequently occupy subaltern roles (Scego 2015; De Franceschi 2016b). Nevertheless, a closer analysis of

gender and race will highlight the persistence of colonial stereotypes, although the show leaves the history that ties Italy and Eritrea unacknowledged.

After Unification in 1861, the racialization of whiteness played a key role in the construction of national identity as homogeneous, despite Italy's historical heterogeneity (Greene 2012: 3). This realignment was deemed necessary to redefine Italy's peripheral role in Europe and its association with Mediterraneanness, too close to North Africa (Giuliani 2014: 574). Such a process was made possible through an internal Othering of the South, considered difficult to absorb by the Northern monarchy and thus cast as pre-modern. Positivist anthropological and political discourses posited Southern Italians as 'black', an internal Other in opposition to white Northerners (Giuliani 2014: 575-76). In the meanwhile, Italy tried to establish itself on the international stage through colonialism. Whereas Eritrea was declared *colonia primogenita* ('firstborn colony') in 1890, constituted in its borders and officially named by the Italian government (Fuller 2011: n.pag.), colonial trade relations had already started in the bay of Aseb in 1869 (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005: xiv). The racialized difference between colonizers and colonized at the base of the creation of national unity was reinforced during the Fascist period, when the South was recuperated as the 'cradle of the "New Italian"', in a conservative project that attempted to reconcile the modernity of industrialization with Catholic-inspired traditional family ideals (Giuliani 2014: 577). Thus, a distinction had to be made between the Italian South and the colonies by locating blackness outside the boundaries of the peninsula. As Giuliani argues,

biopolitics shaped the construction of Italian whiteness in the colonies, gesturing towards the close link between gender and race (2014: 575-76). While *madamismo* ('colonial concubinage') allowed relationships between Italian men and colonized women, white women, whose bodies were policed through matrimonial laws, regulated citizenship by gatekeeping male sexuality and othering black women in the domestic sphere (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2013: 48-50, 121). This changed in 1937, when segregation was enforced, prohibiting relationships between Italian men and black women, although these persisted (Giuliani 2011: 581). Therefore, as Lombardi-Diop and Romeo assert, it is fundamental to adopt an intersectional approach that considers the relationship of race and gender to a postcolonial understanding of Italian national identity (2014: 432).

Even after decolonization, as a result of military defeat during World War II, colonial relations with countries like Eritrea and Somalia continued either through political or economic administration, producing the myth of a less detrimental form of colonialism (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 368-69). The concurrent process of de-fascistization and silencing of the recent colonial past in the public domain led to the foreclosure of race and racism, which have resurfaced in present public debates (Mellino 2012: 111-14).

Yet, the disavowal of colonialism did not extend to personal memories (Fuller 2011) and an imperial discursive legacy has been further perpetuated in popular and visual culture through an archive of racialized visual tropes, consolidated and naturalized through time (O'Healy 2019: 82). These often emerge in migration narratives in Italian cinema, which

have commented on this phenomenon since the early 1990s, mostly from an Italian perspective (Greene 2012: 106; De Franceschi 2013: 189-90). O’Healy traces a shift in 2008, when films started to frame immigration as part of everyday urban life rather than an emergency or a new phenomenon, though still as a source of conflict (2019: 178). Nevertheless, a few comedies have been broaching the subject with a lighter touch (O’Healy 2019: 179, 208-09). *Tutto può succedere* can be associated with a series of romcoms across cinema and television, like *Bianco e Nero (Black and White)* (Comencini, 2008), *Butta la luna* (‘Thrown the Moon’, 2006-09) and *È arrivata la felicità* (‘Happiness Is Here’, 2015-18), in which interracial romance is central, migrants are presented as fairly integrated in Italian society and tensions related to identity are seemingly solved (De Franceschi 2018: 245-46). *Black and White* represents an interesting antecedent, in which colonial stereotypes emerge through the figure of the Black Venus (Greene 2012: 107; O’Healy 2012: 207). Employed to refer to black women in the East-African colonies, this stereotype embodied the asymmetrical politics of desire between colonizers and colonized, reinforcing gendered structures of power and racialized discourses (Ponzanesi 2005: 165-66). This image was first associated with sexual availability that would incite Italian men’s virility, metaphorically standing for the conquest of the territory itself (O’Healy 2009: 179-80). Photography was key in the dissemination of this fetishized figure, through pictures and postcards portraying nude black women under the guise of ethnography that circulated both in the colonies and in Italy (Ponzanesi 2005: 170-75). The Black Venus also embodied a deviant, monstrous Other, especially after

1937, when black femininity came to be considered as a threat to whiteness through miscegenation (Ponzanesi 2005: 170; O’Healy 2009: 180). The persistence of this gendered image in the present demonstrates the endurance of the colonial legacy (Ponzanesi 2005: 178; O’Healy 2019: 91).

Throughout the first season of *Tutto può succedere*, Feven is posed as an exotic Other through this prism. In a conversation between Carlo and his brother in the first episode, she is immediately othered through her ethnicity when introduced as ‘the Eritrean violinist’, adding that she speaks Tigrinya. Explicit mentions of her origins are frequent throughout the season, although they gradually decrease and disappear altogether in the second. Carlo’s old nickname for her, ‘Mani di fata’ (‘Fairy hands’), further evokes colonial imagery of sexual availability. This is comparable with *Parenthood*, where Jasmine, a dancer, is characterized as ‘flexible’ in a double entendre. Whereas this remark sexualizes Jasmine as much as Feven, no explicit mention is however made of her race, while the remake makes a point in underlining Feven’s Otherness throughout the first season. The association between black femininity and sexualization is further confirmed when, in Milan for work, Feven improvises a striptease while Skyping with Carlo, slowly shedding her bathrobe. Though modest, the use of the webcam accentuates the voyeurism and invites an alignment with his white male gaze by showing the laptop screen from his point-of-view.

Race is evoked in connection with Robel too, demonstrating how mixed-race subjects stand for Italy’s ambiguous racial heterogeneity (Greene 2012: 3). The eleventh episode of the third season represents a rare case in which race and racism are directly addressed. The storyline reprises that of ‘Left



Field' in *Parenthood*. However, some noteworthy differences once again reveal the shift from postracial to postcolonial. In *Parenthood*, Jabbar hears the 'N-word' at his father's recording studio, uttered by a black rapper, unlike the remake in which it is used in a racist attack against Robel at school.

In negotiating the power dynamics within the couple, Jasmine tells Crosby that she is the only one who could explain the meaning of the word to their son, having experienced racism and its effects. She does so in a conversation that they have with Jabbar, sitting around the table. Jasmine connects the term to the history of slavery, further evoking the Civil Rights movement (1950s-1960s) and Martin Luther King (1929-1968). While the editing alternates close-ups of the three of them, the camera lingers longer on Crosby's silent reaction. This also registers a shift between father and son, as Jabbar directs an accusatory look towards him while Jasmine answers his questions. Consistently with the racial politics of the show, the scene ends with Jasmine declaring that, despite the past struggles, they now 'live in pretty good times' because Obama is the President. Although racialization is clearly connected with US history, the final exchange places the issue of racism in the past, in another example of postracial discourses.

A displacement is also enacted in *Tutto può succedere*. As Feven is away for work, Carlo is the one answering Robel's questions, as to whether he likes the colour of his skin. The extradiegetic theme that connotes emotional scenes plays as Carlo sits next to him on the bed, establishing a haptic connection with Robel by caressing his head. In the safety of this intimate space, he reassures him that he likes every physical feature of his,

trying to lighten the mood. By socially and symbolically framing skin colour to indicate race, whiteness is once again normalized in its invisibility while othering Robel (Lombardi-Diop and Giuliani: 2013: 1). The racial abuse however continues at school, further upsetting Robel. Despite his misgivings, Carlo decides not to wait for Feven's return to have a serious conversation. Unlike *Parenthood*, racism is not directly connected with the country's colonial past nor with the present socio-cultural context. Rather, Carlo explains: 'In the past, black people were discriminated against and segregated because of something called apartheid, which existed in some countries.'

Therefore, racism is displaced both in the past and elsewhere, negating Italy's colonial past, the history of racialization connected to it and the present resurgence of racist positions against immigrants in public discourses. This should be further contextualized through the presence of other black bodies at the margins, such as the children at the migrant refuge where one of the characters volunteers. The storyline of the adoption of a Ukrainian child further gestures towards the reshaping of Italy as a multicultural and integrated society, whereas the Latino identity of the boy in *Parenthood* interpellated the fraught USA-Mexico relations. However, these presences only remain peripheral, confirming the exceptionality of Feven and Robel who are explicitly othered.

The process of adaptation presents another significant change. Although Crosby's perspective as a father is privileged, as the camerawork demonstrates, Jasmine still has an active role in relating her own lived experience as a black woman. The remake instead foregrounds only Carlo's

parenting by removing Feven from the picture. When he admits his feelings of inadequacy in talking about race, Carlo is met with reassurance from Feven, who instead exposes her failure as an absent mother. I argue that this is symptomatic of the displacement of race onto gender that takes place starting from the second season, in a process of association of the racialized Other with the normative through traditional gender roles and Catholicism.

### **The Domestication of the Other**

In a behind-the-scenes interview, Esther Elisha declared that she was attracted to Feven as a character because defined by her profession as a violinist (Elisha 2016). Yet, her work is consistently marginalized as she becomes increasingly associated with her role as mother and wife, in a process of ‘normalization’ through the appeal to traditional gender roles typical of neoliberal citizenship (Meeuf 2017: 10). The centrality of family discourses in the show is underlined by Rai Fiction director, Eleonora Andreatta, who has described *Tutto può succedere* as a ‘pure dramedy on the fragility of the Italian family’ (Fumarola 2017).

This emphasis on family highlights anxieties over foundational societal institutions that characterize the neoliberal discourses at the heart of contemporary Italian gender politics, based on (hetero)sexual difference (Zappino 2016: 17). The climate of austerity has further compounded embittered reactionary positions, as evident in resurgent groups advocating repressive reproduction rights (Zappino 2016: 10-11). The echoes of natalist policies in the botched campaign for Fertility Day in 2016 provide an apt example, which Faleschini Lerner and D’Amelio take as a

springboard to underline the tension between the nostalgia for traditional family values and contemporary experiences of motherhood, informed by migrations, LGBT rights and the secularization of Italian society in a postfeminist context (2017: 1-4). The connection between neoliberalism and postfeminism clearly emerges in mainstream media. As Gill and Scharff argue, the neoliberalist subject is '*always already gendered*' through the individualist, self-regulating discourses that characterize both late capitalist economy and postfeminist popular culture, demanding women to self-discipline (2013: 7, original emphasis).

Framing *Parenthood* within these neoliberal positions, Squires highlights the connection between postracial and postfeminist discourses, as it transpires through the comparison between different models of motherhood on the show and through Jasmine's false choice between family and career, ultimately choosing the former (Squires 2014: 124). This echoes the 'miswanting narrative' traced by Diane Negra in postfeminist media, wherein female characters realize that their professional ambitions are misplaced and should be redirected towards family and romance (2009: 95). Thus, anxieties generated by working women at a moment of economic unsettlement are managed through private forms of control (Negra 2009: 51).

A parallel can be traced with the re-domestication of Feven, although this process more clearly speaks to the Italian context. Despite the higher levels of education reached by women in the past 40 years, Italy is the European country with the lowest female work participation and the most marked asymmetrical gendered redistribution of domestic labour. This is

exacerbated by the presence of children, due to the lack of welfare support and incompatible work schedules (Craig and Mullan 2010).

The negotiation of race through its displacement onto gender in *Tutto può succedere* is mainly developed through the opposition between (bad) mothers and (good) fathers. While the nickname ‘Mani di fata’ enacts a sexualization of Feven, it also evokes dexterity in domestic labour, as in the title of a long-established Italian magazine dedicated to embroidery, which appeals to models of retro-femininity. The pairing of sexualization and domesticity resonates with colonial politics of desire, based on an unequal relationship wherein East-African women had to provide ‘the comforts from home’ to male Italian settlers (Iyob 2005: 233).

The false choice between family and work towards the end of the first season plays a key role in this process. When Feven lands a job in a prestigious orchestra in Milan, she leaves Robel to the care of her mother. The arrangement is soon questioned. In the ninth episode, returning home for the weekend, she surprises Carlo and Robel. Father and son are repeatedly seen *en abyme* from her perspective as they play, in a shot/reverse shot with her medium close-up. This conveys her feeling of exclusion both through her position and her wistful expression, motivating her to quit her job and move in with Carlo. From this moment, Feven is presented only as Robel’s mother and mainly seen in domestic settings, inscribing her in the miswanting narrative already observed in relation to Jasmine. This is echoed through the example of the other mothers on the show: Giulia, a lawyer, is presented as an inadequate mother because of her high demanding job; whereas Cristina plunges her family into chaos when

she returns to work after a 20-year hiatus to take care of her children but is ultimately confined to home by an illness. A nuclear heteronormative family, in which domestic labour is divided between traditional gender roles, is thus posited as ideal.

The recuperation of a traditional femininity is paired with that of masculinity, particularly through grandfather Ettore, who advocates the adoption of a tough attitude rather than a sensitive one. Phrases like ‘behave like a man’ or ‘from one man to another’ recur in the Ferraro men’s vocabulary, supporting a homosocial sphere in which masculinity is traditionally constructed through a ‘hard’ model. At the same time, a new paradigm of hegemonic masculinity emerges through the focus on the father-son relationship between Carlo and Robel, as already seen in the analysis of the episode dealing with racism. Late in season three, Feven’s return to work in Milan, prompted by a momentary crisis in the couple, leads to her further marginalization. Her absence as a mother legitimizes Carlo’s role as a father, which is presented as the cause of his maturation. In her analysis of masculinity in contemporary Italian cinema, Catherine O’Rawe highlights the foregrounding of fatherhood in male melodramas released after 2000, in which the absence of the mother is counterbalanced by the father’s adoption of a maternal role (2014: 73). O’Rawe connects such a representation to ongoing debates on fatherhood in Italian society and anxieties engendered by the involvement of fathers in childrearing as a form of feminization (2017: 80). This resonates with the model of postfeminist fatherhood, which Hannah Hamad defines as an ideal masculinity characterized by emotional articulacy and expertise in the

domestic realm, emerged in American society in response to second wave feminism and demands for equality in the private sphere (2014: 2). The marginalization of mothers and the adoption of a melodramatic mode are predominant in the articulation of this ideal on screen, analogously to O'Rawe's analysis (Hamad 2014: 21). Indeed, the use of music and the intimate, domestic setting in the scene in which Carlo talks to Robel about racism gesture towards melodrama. However, Hamad also traces examples in comedies that employ fatherhood recuperatively for the maturation of 'deficient masculinities' (2014: 91-92). This applies to both Crosby's and Carlo's cases, thus establishing fatherhood in its hegemonic position.

While the similarities between the shows underline the transnational reach of neoliberal identity politics and postfeminism, the cultural translation also highlights the specificities of the Italian context, in which the negotiation of national identity is further characterized by the association of conservative gender roles with Catholicism. This is clearly illustrated by Carlo and Feven's meeting with a priest in preparation for their wedding. She reassures the clergyman that Robel will attend catechism and, when asked to draw a picture of their future, Feven sketches a family portrait with four children and a house by the sea, conforming to a traditional family configuration.

The Neguisses' association with faith is reiterated through Genet, who repeatedly pushes to let Robel go to catechism. In the fourth episode of season three, in an argument with Carlo, she insists on the importance of religion while he wants Robel to choose his own doctrine once an adult. Significantly, the scene plays out in the laundry room, where Genet and

Feven are doing some chores: a domestic space where a gendered division of labour is performed. Feven is caught between the two, literally and figuratively. Although she does not openly oppose either of them, she appears to be conflicted, standing between the two while folding the laundry. At the same time, the shots/reverse shots focusing on Genet and Carlo visually marginalize her in the argument, which Carlo turns into a matter of parental authority.

The scene mirrors one in *Parenthood*, which employs similar camerawork and is set in another domestic space: the kitchen. This is however a setting like any other as neither Jasmine nor her mother are bound to any domestic activity. Furthermore, while Jasmine's physical position echoes that of Feven, she takes part in the argument by counteracting Renee's suggestions. The issue of religion is reduced to parenting in this case as well, although Crosby questions in own beliefs in the process, unlike Carlo, who instead represents a secularized perspective.

The remake thus negotiates Italian identity, historically constructed through the association between whiteness and Catholicism (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 367). The connection of Feven's family with the faith conventionally defining Italianness, in opposition to the Ferraros' religious indifference, contributes to their assimilation within a traditional Italian identity, while also redefining it by disrupting its association with whiteness. The fleeting mention to Catholic parishes in Asmara after the meeting with the priest, another oblique reference to the legacy of Italian colonialism, questions this assumption. Catholic missions, established in Eritrea since 1830, played a key role during the colonial period in raising



mixed-race children as ‘good Italians’ (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005: xiv; Andall 2005: 203-06), already reshaping national identity despite the claims of racial homogeneity. In contrast, the intersection of blackness and ‘Muslimness’ would have made the Neguisses' alignment with Italian identity irreconcilable in a climate of increasing racism since 9/11 (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2015: 372-73).<sup>3</sup> The connection between religion and gender further reinforces this, due to their historical link in the definition of national identity. As already seen, this association was crucial in the recuperation of the otherwise racialized Southern Italians during the Fascist period, embodied by the figure of the rural housewife as a symbol of fecundity that would have borne ‘new Italians’ (Giuliani 2014: 582). Analogously, the pairing of the racialized Other with hegemonic heteronormative ideals and Catholicism in the present performs a ‘normativization’ of blackness within the limits of patriarchal late capitalism, while making its compatibility with national identity more acceptable.

## **Conclusion**

As it emerges through the analysis of the process of cultural translation, the representation of Afrodescendant subjects in *Tutto può succedere* is symptomatic of the negotiation of Italian national identity in the wider socio-cultural context, in relation to migration and the public debate on citizenship. While offering the picture of a seemingly integrated multicultural society, the consistent Othering of blackness in the series, as

embodied by Feven in particular, through exocitization and eroticization exposes the persistence of colonial racialized stereotypes in contemporary visual culture and society. Although the colonial legacy is never openly acknowledged, racial discourses activated in the series clearly rewrite the postracial politics of the Obama era *Parenthood* onto a postcolonial perspective. Yet, the adoption of an intersectional frame highlights the containment of the racialized Other through a displacement of race onto gender. By re-domesticating the working woman in a miswanting narrative, characteristic of postfeminist culture, this threatening femininity is reconducted to traditional gendered roles while simultaneously asserting new forms of hegemonic masculinity. The connection between race, gender and religion further speaks to the specific Italian context, questioning the historical construction that links whiteness to Catholicism and partially recuperating blackness. Therefore, *Tutto può succedere* emerges as a complex text in which Italianness is negotiated through contradicting positions that bridge past and present. Indeed, the series demonstrates that contemporary mainstream seriality represents a fundamental locus of identity negotiation through popular language, which may further highlight the dialogue between the national context and transnational gender and race politics. It is for this reason that mainstream shows like *Tutto può succedere* warrant closer scholarly attention.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> I am adopting here the definition of ‘second generation’ provided by De Franceschi (2018: 12), as a term referring to the children of migrants, born either in Italy or abroad, also encompassing adopted ones whose somatic traits do not correspond to the historical ideal of white Italian.

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Italian are mine.

<sup>3</sup> It should be however noted that the majority of Eritreans follow the Orthodox Tewahedo religion.