



“New Slavery”, Modern Marronage and the Multiple Afterlives of Plantations in Contemporary Italy

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The condition of migrant laborers in the Italian farming sector has received increasing (though erratic) attention in the last two decades, both nationally and internationally. Across different fora, it is often glossed in terms of “a new form of slavery”. Such definition is not the prerogative of the media alone, whether local, national or international—albeit certainly they employ the image very frequently when

Most of the research and analysis for this piece was carried out between 2017 and 2020, within the ERC Advanced Grant project “The Color of Labor: The racialized lives of migrants” (grant no. 695573, PI Cristiana Bastos). Subsequent work has been supported by a grant from the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT), grant no. 2020.01002.CEECIND/CP1615/CT0009.

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dealing with the highly precarious working and living conditions of (especially West African) farm laborers. Politicians from across the spectrum, as well as international organizations, NGOs, trade unionists, activists and academics have relayed these depictions, if with different emphases. Workers themselves are among the least likely to identify with the label—although this does happen occasionally. Such representations may be ascribed to what critical appraisals have dubbed as the “new abolitionist” discourse on slavery (O’Connell Davidson 2015): global in sweep, it resurfaced onto the international public arena in the 1990s, concomitantly with growing policy preoccupations with the control of transnational crime and its presumed connections with cross-border migration.

Such endless summoning of “slavery” in descriptions of migrant workers’ living and labor conditions in Italian agro-industrial districts, as I have recorded them in ten years of research and engagement, prompted the questions I address here. Recurrent evocations of slavery, and their critiques, are always also preoccupations with a past (or rather a multiplicity of pasts) whose weighty, but partially disavowed or displaced, specters haunt the present. If, as Julia O’Connell Davidson reasons, “‘Modern slavery’ names not a thing, but a set of claims about what is (and what is not) morally and politically obscene” (2015: 26), then just what these claims might be; how they are articulated, responded to or occluded; what in turn they themselves work to occlude and, most poignantly, through what deployments of historical narratives deserve further attention in the context at hand. In particular, it is to the specters of “the plantation” as the (ob)scene of “modern slavery” that I turn, in order to trace alternative genealogies of the current organization and representation of migrant farm labor in Italian agro-industrial districts.

Multiple, geographically and temporally heterogeneous plantation pasts haunt contemporary agribusiness districts, the slums and labor camps which punctuate them, and their patterns of labor management, in different and even contradictory ways. My reflections are based on ten years of engaged, participatory research among migrant farm workers across several agro-industrial enclaves in Italy (mostly the Apulian Tavoliere, the Plain of Gioia Tauro in Calabria and the district surrounding the town of Saluzzo in Piedmont), supplemented by historical, archival and other secondary material, as well as by interactions with farmers, third-sector and state employees, and other actors who have engaged with such representations in different ways.

SPEAKING OF SLAVERY TODAY

While contemporary forms of “slavery” (often labelled as “modern” or “new”) have been identified across many economic sectors, in Italy the complex discursive assemblage that coalesced around the notion now invests farming more than any other activity except that of prostitution, where the latter is equated with sexual exploitation. (Indeed, this is the domain in which the discourse was first articulated, both in public debate and through legal dispositifs¹). In some cases the two spheres are juxtaposed, as when the plight of female farm workers and the sexual harassment and violence to which they are subjected is exposed,² or when describing the slum-like spaces in which African laborers live, where (mostly Nigerian) prostitutes also work.³ Narratives produced by the media, by politicians, NGOs, researchers, activists and unionists, but also legal dispositifs and their offshoots into corporate-management regulations and trade certificates have somehow internalized and relayed the notion that hyper-exploitation in the agri-business sector is to be identified with enslavement.

In their discourses, different actors have of course emphasized different aspects in relation to such imageries, stemming from a range of positionings, dispositions, assumptions and intentions. However, slavery is invariably associated with migrant, most often black (African) laborers, and the isolated, precarious camp- or slum-like housing patterns which have been the cipher of their condition and its representation in the last decade. Just what the term of comparison might be—the “old” slavery against which this “new” form is pitted—often remains unacknowledged, but several clues point to New-World plantations as its paragon. Clearly,

¹ Critical literature examining the emergence and significance of discourses on slavery related to sex trafficking and prostitution in the contemporary period is vast. For specific references to the Italian context, see for example Andrijasevic (2010) and my own work (Peano 2011).

² See for example Tondo, L. and A. Kelley 2017. “Raped, Beaten, Exploited: The 21st-century Slavery Propping up Sicilian Farming. Thousands of Female Romanian Farm Workers Are Suffering Horrendous Abuse”. *The Guardian*, 12th March - <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/mar/12/slavery-sicily-farming-raped-beaten-exploited-romanian-women>, retrieved 31st January 2022.

³ Barbaro, E. 2019. “Metà donne, metà schiave. Le vie della prostituzione sono infinite”. *Terre di Frontiera*, 30th October—<https://www.terredifrontiera.info/le-vie-della-prostituzione-sono-infinite/>, retrieved 31st January 2022.

the analogy with trans-Atlantic triangulations is lent particular power when applied to capitalist agriculture and racialized (black or brown) workers, reactivating plantation imaginaries that may be triggered by a spectrum of affective investments—from indignation and even repugnance to cruel detachment, manipulation and hypocrisy or sheer, perverse enjoyment derived from a feeling of omnipotence and the power to subjugate.

Several politicians, including former Minister for Internal Affairs, Matteo Salvini, have related “new slavery” to undocumented migration. Commenting on the news of seven speedboats, which carried 187 Tunisian citizens, landing at Lampedusa harbor on 15th September 2018, during a meeting with his colleagues from across the EU, he confidently declared: “We don’t feel the need to have new slaves to replace the children we no longer have”.⁴ The instrumental use of humanitarian sentiment to criminalize migration (here equated to a biopolitical conspiracy towards “ethnic substitution”) has indeed been a common feature in the repertoire of the notoriously anti-immigrant politician, as well as of many others. Before and after taking office, Salvini repeatedly justified inhumane policies of border closure and refoulment with the need to combat the trafficking, enslavement, torture and death of African migrants in Libya and across the Mediterranean (cf. De Genova 2017 on similar claims being made in 2015 by the previous legislature’s social-democratic prime minister, Matteo Renzi). In the media, images of makeshift boats and dinghies stuffed with black human cargo are sometimes juxtaposed with the plight of African farm workers, implying a direct and even exclusive connection between the (chronic, if policy-crafted and yet naturalized) “migration emergency” along the central Mediterranean route with the issue of migrant farm-labor exploitation.

While the “border spectacles” (Cuttitta 2012; De Genova 2013) of Mediterranean crossings have been seen to evoke the Middle Passage (Stierl 2019), their association to farm labor under hyper-exploitative conditions works to reinforce the analogy between the historic plantation complex and contemporary agribusiness.

⁴ Grignetti, F. 2018. Migranti, Salvini contro tutti: “Non ci servono nuovi schiavi”, *La Stampa* 15th September—<https://www.lastampa.it/politica/2018/09/15/news/migranti-salvini-contro-tutti-non-ci-servono-nuovi-schiavi-1.34045228>, retrieved 31st January 2022.

Visual artists have also produced portraits of disarticulated, reified and racialized body parts (such as chained black wrists and ankles, for example) that act as metonyms of migrant laborers and symbolize their exploitation in the farms (see Figs. 11.1 and 11.2). The same visual trope is found on countless book and magazine covers, on flyers, photographs and posters promoting discussions and analyses on the subject of migrant farm labor. In summoning, and even exploiting, the specter of extreme forms of alienation, carceral discipline and racial terror that have in American plantations their most recognizable, even primal, stage, these depictions at the same time deny workers’ very subjectivity, reproducing that fungibility (King 2016) that lay at the core of the enslaved condition on historic plantations.

In some instances, it is employers’ attitudes against workers that have prompted such analogies, as in the case of a farmer in the Pontine area, part of the district of Latina, south of Rome. News of his arrest, which took place in October 2019, reached international media outlets, including British daily *The Times*, whose correspondent wrote: “An Italian farmer has been accused of terrorizing his migrant workers with a shotgun and a knife and forcing them to work in the fields like slaves”. The reporter quotes sociologist Marco Omizzolo, who has been conducting research among the Indian Sikh workers in the area, declaring “It’s a new form of the slavery once seen in the American south”.⁵ Another article relating the incident, this time from a local newspaper, describes it as “an occurrence which seems to come straight out of the 2013 film masterpiece, directed by Londoner Steve McQueen, ‘12 years a Slave’”.⁶ Farmers themselves, or those in their close circles, have even been caught employing the term “slaves” to describe workers. Such is for example the case with one of the three men arrested in the district of Foggia (Apulia) in February 2020, following an investigation from which it emerged that dozens of workers (from West Africa, Morocco and Albania) were severely exploited, and even beaten, in two large and wealthy farms. In a phone call intercepted by the judiciary and published in the local press, a friend

⁵ “Italian Farmer Used Shotgun to Keep Migrant ‘Slaves’ in Line”, 15th October 2019, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/italian-farmer-used-shotgun-to-keep-migrant-slaves-in-line-vt5f62v68>, retrieved 27th January 2022.

⁶ <https://latinatu.it/larresto-dellagricoltore-schiavista-fa-il-giro-del-mondo-e-finisce-sul-times/?fbclid=IwAR0zeUkXB-yqNTPkTVPBAG-a4XqChJ7L6QOQEmuEGUBpmBcrm7CgijSjX98>, retrieved 30th January 2022. All translations are mine.



Fig. 11.1 “Solo braccia” (arms only), an installation by visual artist Alessandro Tricarico, commissioned by medical NGO InterSOS in 2020 to commemorate the death of 16 West African farm workers returning from a day’s work in tomato farms, in two separate road accidents that took place in the district of Foggia in the summer of 2018. The 32-m-high paper print was glued upon the dismissed wheat silos that tower over the railway line at Foggia’s northeastern end (Photograph by Marta Selleri)



Fig. 11.2 “No slaves”—Unknown author, mural painting spotted outside the train station in Rosarno, Plain of Gioia Tauro, 2018 (Photograph by the author)

of one of the defendants casually remarks “I went by [your farm] and I saw *the slaves* working”.⁷ Farmers’ and gangmasters’ use of weapons and of other forms of physical violence, as well as of verbal abuse and threats—as a means of disciplining workers and more generally asserting authority and inculcating terror—has been witnessed by several African farm laborers whom I encountered in the district of Foggia, and again may suggest analogies with the original scene of capitalist, colonial export agriculture. In my experience, migrant farm workers often equate the conditions of dire exploitation, vulnerability and existential precarity to which they are subjected to a process of animalization (cf. Peano 2020), clearly identifying the dehumanizing nature of structural racism and thus arguably also evoking American plantation enslavement as the context in which such racism was first, and to some extent most thoroughly and overtly, experimented and elaborated.

As anticipated, the new-slavery gloss inflects not only media rhetoric, political discourse, research, trade-union activism, artistic productions

⁷ <https://www.immediato.net/2020/02/12/caporale-foggiano-arrestato-le-intercettazioni-ho-visto-gli-schiavi-lavorare-il-reclutatore-se-padrone-non-risponde-cerco-altro-padrone/>, retrieved 27th January 2022.

and labor relations themselves, but also legal provisions against what is deemed to be the major *cause*, or instrument, of migrant farm workers' subjection: illicit labor brokering, known in jargon as "*caporalato*" (gang-mastership), a term denoting a quasi-military form of work discipline (cf. Ravano and Sacchi, this volume). New laws punishing such misconduct were introduced into the Italian criminal code following a two-week long, 400-strong wildcat strike staged by African migrants, that took place in the summer of 2011 and was heavily mediatized (Brigate di Solidarietà Attiva et al. 2012; Perrotta 2015). The workers had been employed in the harvest of tomato and watermelon in the countryside surrounding Nardò, a municipality in the district of Lecce, southern Apulia, and recruited by several migrant brokers. The bill, which was first drafted years before but had never made it to parliamentary debate until then, turned unlicensed labor intermediation (previously an administrative breach) into a criminal offense, initially punishing gangmasters only. In 2016 it was amended to include employers' joint liability, thus redressing, at least on paper, a classist and racist bias—for, in the majority of cases, gangmasters happen to be themselves migrants, and are certainly represented as such by mainstream descriptions, although a considerable "market" for Italian farm workers exists. Especially in the southern regions, local workers (the majority of whom are women) are recruited by Italian intermediaries. It was the death, in the summer of 2015, of one such workers on the job, 49-year-old mother-of-three Paola Clemente, that prompted the further tightening of repressive measures. It is as if Italian farmers could only be thought accountable if their behavior affected "one of their kind".

The legal dispositif criminalizing labor intermediation was inserted into the section of the penal code that punishes crimes against individual personality (such as reduction into or maintenance in a condition of slavery or servitude, child pornography and trafficking), as a subspecies of the crime of duress ("*plagio*"). Unsanctioned labor intermediation, therefore, oddly shifted from being considered by the law as a mere administrative breach to being rated among the most severe crime typologies contemplated by the code, so-called "natural crimes" (Di Martino 2015). Significantly, critical legal interpretations have pointed to the fact that the newly established offense, especially in its previous formulation, did not appear to display any conspicuous qualitative difference from that of enslavement, for both refer to situations of "violence, threat, intimidation, deception or the profiting from conditions of vulnerability, physical or psychic inferiority, and need" (Ibid.: 79–81 *passim*, my translation). In

general, and given the bill’s slippery definition of the nature of the crime, few trials and even fewer sentences have applied it so far (Torre 2019).⁸

Even before the 2011 reform, in judicial cases such as that which followed the strike in Nardò, enslavement and trafficking also featured among the charges leveled against the 16 defendants—who included both farmers and brokers—once again operating a slippage and an implicit, partial equivalence between them and the exploitation of waged farm labor (cf. Carlini 2016 for an analysis of the first-degree trial). While initially confirmed by the court, who convicted the defendants to several years’ prison terms, the appeal trial overturned the ruling on the ground that not enough evidence supported the conviction. In March 2022, the Supreme Court of Appeal (*Corte di Cassazione*, or Cassation Court) in turn annulled the appeal sentence, intimating that the trial start afresh.

To this day, despite the difficulties in elaborating reliable statistics and notwithstanding the extension of liability to employers, based on my interaction with African farm workers and with those accused of unlawful intermediation, it is evident that racialized migrants are generally the most heavily penalized by the law.⁹ In the implementation of controls, ostensibly against gangmastership, migrants are routinely stopped at roadside checkpoints, usually at the end of the harvesting season, and may be incarcerated for various unrelated charges, most often for the purchase of stolen vehicles and for driving without the necessary licenses and insurance—conducts to which they may be forced by a mix of factors, from undocumented status to scarce or no literacy and financial constraints. Further, when employers are held accountable alongside migrant labor brokers, the latter are often subjected to heavier precautionary measures

⁸ *Altro Diritto*, an interuniversity legal-research center that set up a lab focusing on labor exploitation and the protection of its victims, reports having found notice of 220 judicial inquiries initiated under such crime hypothesis in the agricultural sector, which led to 208 trials, between 2011 and 2021, predominantly concerning the southern regions (Santoro and Stoppioni 2022: 11). No data is provided on the number and nature of convictions resulting from such trials.

⁹ The figures reported by the study cited above (see fn. 8) point to a higher number of trials (154) involving farmers (alone or alongside intermediaries) than those involving only or also intermediaries (118; cf. Santoro and Stoppioni 2022: 17). However, no indication is given as to the actual number of defendants and their role, nor of sentences and their terms. Often, intermediaries are more numerous than farmers in trials of this kind, and they are dealt heavier sentences.

(most commonly imprisonment itself, sometimes on the grounds of a supposedly higher risk of flight, or of the lack of a valid address where to serve house arrest or at which to be reached by law enforcement, as many such defendants live in slums or abandoned, formally uninhabitable buildings). Moreover, companies with a clean record in relation to labor offenses are automatically exempted from any future check by the labor inspectorate after voluntarily adhering to the so-called “quality farm-labor network” (*Rete Lavoro Agricolo di Qualità*). Instituted in 2014 as part of a package of measures to contrast exploitation and illegal brokering in agriculture, it was then broadened and inserted into the bill that modified the criminalization of gangmastership in 2016.

Finally, besides the Italian criminal code, the notion of slavery in the legal domain concerns also multinational companies’ corporate social responsibility. Princes LTD, a Liverpool-based subsidiary of the Mitsubishi group that commercializes processed foods, has since 2011 run the largest tomato-processing plant in Europe, located in the Industrial Complex of Incoronata, just outside the city of Foggia. The surrounding flatland (known as *Tavoliere*) is home, in turn, to the second most extensive and productive district in Italy for the farming of industrial tomato. Like all UK-registered companies with an annual turnover of 36 million sterling pounds or higher, since the approval in 2015 of the *Modern Slavery Act*, Princes is legally bound to provide a “slavery and human trafficking statement for each financial year” listing “the steps the organization has taken to ensure that slavery and human trafficking is not taking place (i) in any of its supply chains, and (ii) in any part of its own business” (Part 6, Transparency in Supply Chains Etc.). As it is often the case, to comply with such requirements, in its annual statements the company demonstrates its goodwill by declaring conformity to GlobalGAP international safety certification standards—which, as several studies have demonstrated (Bain 2013; Busch 2000; Busch and Bain 2004; Caruso 2018), rely entirely on privatized assessment, performed mostly through self-administered forms and checklists.¹⁰ UK daily *The Guardian* revealed how in 2016 and 2017 Princes had sourced part of

¹⁰ In their 2019–2020 business report, the company claimed that the totality of the tomatoes processed at their Italian facility “came from farms with independent ethical accreditations (Global GAP/GRASP or SA 8000)”; cf. Princes Group 2020, *2019–2020 Business Report*: 60—https://issuu.com/princes6/docs/princess_-_business_report-feb_19_v15_single_p, retrieved 31st January 2022.

its raw produce from a farm in the district of Lecce, where in 2015 47-year-old Sudanese worker Abdullah Muhammed had died of exhaustion on the job.¹¹ This was the same farm whose owner, among others, from 2013 till March 2022 stood at the bar in the trial that followed the 2011 strike in Nardò, was convicted in the first degree and acquitted by the appeal sentence, and is now awaiting retrial.

In the summer of 2016, the Princes plant was blockaded by hundreds of West African (and some Bulgarian) farm workers, who identified in the processing and commercialization giant one of the main players in the industrial-tomato supply chain, for which tens of thousands of migrant workers are employed during harvest in the district of Foggia alone. Demonstrators demanded respect of labor agreements, with a commitment by companies across the supply chain to contribute to fairer conditions, and legal recognition as migrant workers. They saw in the interruption of the chain itself their most effective weapon. Some Italian lorry drivers delivering fresh tomato to the plant also joined in, exasperated by the drawn-out, days-long waiting times they are forced to endure outside the factory’s premises before they can offload their freight—delays which they attribute to a deliberate strategy on the part of Princes’ management to make the tomato dry up under the summer sun and thus reduce its weight and price. In 2020, three high-ranking members of Foggia’s main criminal cartels were finally sentenced to several years’ imprisonment, following a judicial inquiry that had begun in 2016, for the extortion of the same lorry drivers, to whom the cartels granted “protection” while stationed outside the factory, in exchange for cash payments.¹² Furthermore, Princes plant workers whom I was able to intercept between 2015 and 2018, both in the district of Foggia and in their native villages in south-western Romania, spoke of a fee they were forced to pay to be able to secure the job.

¹¹ Hunter, I. and L. Di Pietro 2018. “Food firm Princes linked to inquiry into worker abuses in Italy’s tomato fields. British company uses supplier currently under investigation for exploiting migrant workers who pick fruit sold in UK and European supermarkets”, *The Guardian*, 12th January—<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jan/12/italian-tomatoes-food-firm-princes-linked-to-labour-abuses-inquiry>, retrieved 31st January 2022.

¹² <https://www.foggiatoday.it/cronaca/foggia-ordini-carcerazione-processo-rodolfo-pellegriano-capuano-ruggiero.html>, retrieved 1st February 2022.

Besides its flagged commitment to anti-slavery standards, Princes also established an agreement with Catholic third-sector giant, Caritas, to employ 9 West African migrants within a project titled “*Lavoro senza frontiere*” (work without borders), for which initiative in September 2021 the company was awarded a prize (bearing the motto “fighting inequality, it’s possible”) by transnational human-right NGO, Oxfam, and later, in June 2022, by the UN’s High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), at the presence of Italy’s Minister of Labor.¹³ According to Princes’ CEO, interviewed in 2020 by national daily *Il Messaggero*, the merger of the company—established and previously owned by an Italian entrepreneur long under trial for mafia-related crimes, from which he was finally acquitted—was not

a predatory one, but a virtuous example that favored the import of both English and Japanese labor philosophy, that sees the employee at the center, a sort of managerial humanism. By virtue of such approach, all processes and strategies are aimed at empowerment because each person working within the company possesses their own degree of responsibility and autonomy that must be safeguarded and fostered with a view to welfare and professional valorization.¹⁴

While the company can claim compliance with anti-slavery standards and human-right protection, other forms of violence, exploitation and injustice, which fall outside the script of “modern slavery”, have continued to take place unabated within and around the Princes plant in Foggia, for which they could simply shrug off (or ignore) accountability, aided by their adherence to corporate social responsibility and fair-trade standards that say next to nothing about actual labor conditions.

In view of the sensationalism, shallowness and even active mystifications of abolitionist apparatuses’ representations, critics have highlighted how their definitions of what would count as slavery and exploitation are skewed, selective and racism-blind (cf. Howard 2017; Howard and Forin 2019 for specific reference to the industrial-tomato supply

¹³ <https://www.avvenire.it/attualita/pagine/lavoro-agli-sfruttati-dei-campi-premio>, retrieved 1st February 2022; <https://www.foggiatoday.it/attualita/princes-premio-alto-commissariato-nazioni-unite-inserimento-lavorativo-rifugiati.html>, retrieved 11th July 2022.

¹⁴ https://www.ilmessaggero.it/home/pia_princes_industrie_alimentari_senza_welfare_non_ce_futuro_per_lazienda-5197306.html, retrieved 31st January 2022.

chain that has the district of Foggia at its core). In such discursive assemblages, “new slavery” amounts to an exception-making mechanism treating extreme forms of exploitation as the remnants of a distant past, which has in the new-world plantation its most recognizable, if often implicit referent. New abolitionist discourse transposes and replicates such distant chronotopes into the present of some backward “other” place (such as Southern Italy, especially in its connections with “Africa”) where equally backward subjects (southern farmers or migrant gangmasters) are held responsible for the crime of enslavement. The continuities between different forms of labor exploitation and management, that are foundational to current, global political-economic arrangements, are thereby eclipsed. Ultimately, new-abolitionist ideology and its transposition into law and governance tools do not address the structural root causes of exploitation in global neoliberal capitalism. Rather, they criminalize subjects made into passive, infantilized and objectified “Others” or adopt cosmetic accountability measures aimed at staving off bad press more than at concretely improving labor conditions. Furthermore, these discursive operations rely on a selective and recursive summoning of history that occludes other potential connections with alternative space-times, in turn preventing any reckoning with their durable character into the present.

BEFORE, AGAINST AND BEYOND ECHOES OF THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

The instrumental nature of discourses on “new slavery” has egregious antecedents in the past two centuries, when the denunciation of practices of enslavement was expedient in justifying racist and sexist, imperial and extractive projects in the name of a dubious, paternalistic and self-serving humanitarianism (cf. e.g. Doezema 1999 on the moral panic over “white slavery” and its echoes in contemporary anti-trafficking discourses). In the Italian context, a possible genealogy of this rhetorical strategy can be traced through the 1935 colonial campaign of Mussolini’s Fascist government for the conquest of Ethiopia, when the abolition of “Abyssinian slavery” was employed to justify Italian troops’ invasion through the mobilization of a powerful set of propaganda tools, which also enlisted intellectuals (Satta 2014, 2016; cf. Trevisani 1937).

More generally, Italy’s colonial endeavor, which began in the late nineteenth century with alternating fortunes, could rely on the arguments and findings of the Italian Antislavery Society, established in 1888 under

the auspices of Pope Leo XIII, as well as on the parallel and somewhat converging institutional consolidation of the discipline of criminal anthropology and its “scientific racism” (Epstein 2001). The Society was at pains to demonstrate that whatever forms of slavery had existed on “Italian” soil in previous centuries, they were clearly less abominable than those practiced in the New World. Concomitantly, it sought to push the agenda of Italian imperialism in Eastern Africa by citing the example of freed black slave-turned-saint, Benedetto of Palermo, a Franciscan monk known also as “*il moro*” (the moor). Allegedly from “Ethiopia” (which in the sixteenth century could stand for any African provenance), he was made into an exemplar of how all Christian, black Africans had to be freed of their bondage and could (and thus *should*) become “Italian”—yet of course barred from most of the privileges afforded to white citizens. The specter of the American plantation was here a paragon of supreme evil, in ways that are not entirely dissipated today, and served to reinforce the colonialist myth of “*italiani brava gente*” (Del Boca 2005), of a “proletarian” and humane form of colonialism favorably compared to its British and French counterparts.

At the same time, the notion of slavery has deeper and equally consequential ramifications in Western political philosophy. Several scholars have pointed to the genealogy of discourses against slavery, common in European political fora since at least early modernity, as reflections upon political freedom that drew on and reinterpreted Classical, Greek and Roman thought. These were rallies against tyranny that only applied to those who were already deemed as “free men”. Their references to slavery had nothing to do with, and actively worked to erase, the systematically silenced or ignored predicament of actually enslaved human beings in both the Old World and in the plantation system of the New (Buck-Morss 2009; Lowe 2015; Nyquist 2013; O’Connell Davidson 2015; cf. Epstein 2001: 50, 150, for specific instantiations of such deployments of the term in the Italian context).¹⁵ In this sense, “slavery” works as a trope of injustice with high currency even today, regardless of the particular object to which it is applied.

¹⁵ Angela Davis (1981) made the same point in discussing early nineteenth-century white feminists’ association of marriage to slavery in the US context. At the same time, historical linkages between the abolitionist cause in the US and Romantic nationalist movements in nineteenth-century Italy (Dal Lago 2015) point also to the possibility of convergence between different types of anti-slavery discourse.

It is thus possible to read in this vein the ramblings of S., a farmer from the Gioia Tauro plain, Calabria—one of the most important districts for the production of citrus fruit in Italy, located at the southernmost tip of the peninsula. A man with a history of emigration to the United States, now in his late 70s, divorced from the woman for whose sake he had decided to return to his homeland, and with a strong penchant for verbosity and monologues, for several years he sought to organize his fellow farmers against the strangling of the sector by what he identified as “masonic powers”. His target were not only politicians, but also the powerful lobbies that work to concentrate land and trade in the hands of few well connected actors, misuse public money destined for farmers and allow for ruthless competition and the consequent depreciation of produce—to the point where, as he was very keen to show anyone who would have the patience to listen to his endless lamentations and follow him in his roamings across the countryside, many had decided to eradicate the trees they had so carefully tended to for decades, in the “gardens” (*giardini*) inherited from their fathers.

Of course, like most farmers in the area and in the rest of the country, S. routinely employed migrant day laborers for harvest and other work on his gardens, at the usual conditions (half the minimum wage, no social security or other benefits). In the presence of one of them, during a meal when he systematically ignored the young African man, at the peak of his rhetorical fervor he exclaimed: “*We* are the real slaves!”. This was also the slogan he had printed on the fliers with which he had littered the villages and towns of the citrus district. Like other farmers, he was embittered by what he regarded as the exclusive, obsessive attention reserved by politicians to the issue of *caporalato* and the plight of migrant workers whom, many claimed, were actually better off than farmers. The latter, at the same time, often justified the breach of labor laws on account of the low prices they received from the sale of their produce. The erasures and reversals that this type of discourse on slavery operates are significant and shot through by racist logics.

Furthermore, besides liberal attachments to slavery as the abstract, spectral double of a freedom that is always already barred from racialized subjects, and beyond evocations of New-World plantations, other, deeper and more complex genealogies can be traced from current preoccupations with slavery and its pasts. Steven Epstein (2001), pondering over the (especially linguistic) remnants of the semi-forgotten Medieval and Early Modern slavery that existed across different parts of Italy, has

argued that this history “affects the way in which Italians are thinking about race today”. He notes how “By the Fascist period the rediscovery of Medieval slavery and the development of modern thinking about race, antislavery and the colonies formed the milieu in which Italians conceived slavery’s past” (13). The alleged persistence of “African blood” in what during the course of the nineteenth century were progressively identified as southern Italian “races” (and their consequent, enduring stigmatization) was based on the understanding that African slaves had been bought and sold in great numbers in the ports of Mezzogiorno. Arab and Slavic captives were also added to the mix. At Lucera, now in the district of Foggia, a “Saracen slave colony” (made up of Muslim rebels from Sicily at the time of Christian re-conquest) was established by King Frederick II during the thirteenth century (Taylor 2003), and historians have speculated that it was through the Adriatic trade that the first “slaves”, as indeed the term itself, arrived on Italian territory.

The work of several historians further shows how different polities across what is now Italy played a significant role in shaping the European-derived history of slavery in the modern period, and the transatlantic trade itself (Blackburn 1997; Davis 2000, 2003; cf. Lombardi-Diop 2008, 2021). Indeed, it was in the context of Genoese and Venetian mercantilism that *both* the plantation model *and* the term “slave” (or *sclavus*, in Medieval Latin) were forged and diffused, if only partly in the same contexts (Craon 1984; Curtin 1998, 2015). Venetian and Genoese merchant-controlled Cyprus, Crete and then Sicily were the first locations for experiments in capitalist sugar plantations, before these moved to southern Spain, Portugal, the Atlantic islands and then the so-called New World. A mixture of slave and nominally free labor was employed in such establishments, with slaves imported from Africa (among whom were the parents of San Benedetto of Palermo), the Middle East and the Balkans. David Brion Davis (2003) further argued that the imbrication of race and enslavability, which characterized the plantation system’s ideological apparatus well into the nineteenth century, originated in the Genoese and Venetian slave trade between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries, especially along the Dalmatian coast (hence the term “*sclavus*”, from “Slavic”). This trade, Davis argues, “foreshadowed almost every aspect of the soon-to-appear African slave trade” (Ibid.: 18).

When the transatlantic trade did emerge, also thanks to Italian merchants’ financial support, it linked the term “slave”, and the stigma

that attached to it, to people “with supposedly visible African ancestry”. Gradually, “somatic or physical characteristics came to signify a new kind of social and psychological boundary” (Ibid.: 30). But the tendency to justify slavery in terms of innate characteristics and dispositions—the emergence of a relation between skin color, other bodily and genealogical features and enslavement—was already identifiable in the Mediterranean trade during the Middle Ages and the Early Modern period, first among the Arabs and then in the Italian context, where slaves were called by terms such as “Turks”, “moors” or “negroes” (Bono 2010; Epstein 2001). Besides plantations, slaves in Italy were employed in high numbers as domestic servants and, above all, as rowers in the Genoese galleys. Just as for new-world plantations, a (literally) carceral regime of racialized labor discipline was implemented through slavery in many contexts in the Mediterranean.

How exactly the elaboration and deployment of these technologies of sorting, discipline, containment and extraction were to become part of the global circulation of knowledge and matter in the following centuries is a story yet to be fully written. What is clear is that a planetary regime of carceral containment and labor discipline represents one of the afterlives of slavery—whose ensemble Saidya Hartman (2007: 6) has described as “skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration and impoverishment”—all conditions which apply equally well to the current predicament of migrant farm laborers in Italy as elsewhere, and which a certain “anti-slavery” discourse actively fosters. Overall, according to the official records almost a third of migrant farm workers in Italy are EU citizens (and more than a third are European, when non-EU citizens are factored in), with Romanians as the most represented nationality in absolute terms (i.e. including non-EU citizens). Among them, a significant proportion of those I met, especially in the district of Foggia, identify as Roma or “gypsy”. And yet, the association of European workers’ own plight with “slavery” is less common. The same holds for Moroccans (who rank second in terms of absolute numbers), Albanians (fourth) and Tunisians (sixth)¹⁶—another instance in which more localized genealogies of enslavement, that in fact featured “Slavs”, “tartars” and “moors” are covered over.

¹⁶ For official statistics on the numbers of migrant farm workers in Italy, see Magrini (2022).

At the same time, current regimes of migration governance—a key aspect of the institutional racism oppressing such subjects and fostering forms of hyper-exploitation and vulnerability (Peano 2021)—have also been seen as emerging from the rise and then the breakdown of the transatlantic system of racial slavery, and the consequent need to create new mechanisms for the control of labor mobility. The introduction of “coolie” indentured labor, and the concomitant adoption of the passport on a larger scale (after having been initially envisaged to control slaves’ movements in the North American plantation system—cf. Browne 2015; Parenti 2003), are often cited as the key mechanisms in this process (Mongia 2018; O’Connell Davidson 2015; cf. Ravano and Sacchi, this volume). And yet, even in this case, Mediterranean antecedents can be dug to the surface: prohibitions against transporting slaves without owners’ written permissions, and against slaves leaving the city of Genoa without the proper papers, were in place “as early as 1300 [when] Genoa had a pass system for slaves outside the city and suburbs” (Epstein 2001: 119).

Finally, what is depicted as contemporary Italian farmers’ adherence to New-World planters’ ethos and comportment might as well be genealogically traced to farm-labor discipline in nineteenth and early twentieth-century large estates, where landowners’ stewards, overseers and rent collectors were regularly armed (for the case of Tavoliere, see e.g. Snowden 1986; Rinaldi and Sobrero 2004). Indeed, labor discipline in the capitalist farm estates of early twentieth-century Tavoliere has been defined as nothing short of “carceral” (Cioffi 1984: 377; Mercurio 1989: 162). As noted, references to military-like labor discipline have survived in the now proliferating term, *caporalato*, with which gangmastership—especially when associated with farming—has been indicated in some parts of Italy at least since the nineteenth century.

Thus, not only are instrumental forms of abolitionism and humanitarianism, as well as selective, race- and class-blind conjurings of the idea of enslavement, integral to modern European thought and its colonial offshoots, and clearly identifiable in the Italian context. The casual evocation of the transatlantic trade and the new-world plantation as the scene against and in relation to which the contemporary (“new” or “modern”) “slavery” of migrant farm laborers is pitted, through spectacularized images of objectified black and brown bodies, as well as too narrow a focus on the North American context as the original and unique scene of capitalist plantation slavery, occlude other genealogies and trajectories

which impinge upon our present. The American plantation and the trans-Atlantic trade that supplied it pervade mainstream imaginaries in ways which reproduce the plantation complex’s race-making operations, even when representations are meant to distance themselves from its workings. Allewaert and Moore have coined the notion of the “plantation-obscene” to foreground such plantation spectacles’ reifying effects. Drawing on Hartman’s work, they note how

plantations and the social forms that followed in their wake—the ghetto, social work, the reformatory, the prison, the police—have produced, as the title of her first book puts it, scenes of subjection that feed the appetites of white onlookers. This mode of looking perpetuates a pornography of black suffering, which the plantation obscene marks as an ethical problem tied to the everyday violence of extractive racial capitalism. (n.d.: 3)

Furthermore, in the context of contemporary Italy and by reference to agro-capitalist extraction, references to a past that is actively made to feel spatially and temporally distant through several erasures occlude both alternative, and perhaps more poignant genealogies, as well as structural patterns within the current political economic regime, individualizing relations of exploitation and silencing racialized subjects’ power to speak and act, both individually and collectively.

Against these erasures, Allewaert and Moore urge for the development of “critical methods that attend to the ways of knowing and living that produced outsides to the plantation” (Ibid.: 4). Similarly, other authors have proposed to counter neo-abolitionist dogmas by paying attention to practices of “modern marronage” (O’Connell Davidson 2021; cf. Stierl 2019) in relation to histories of fugitivity, thereby foregrounding, rather than erasing, the crucial role that dispositifs of mobility control play in fostering extractive operations, but also acknowledging the subjectivity of those who are their targets. More than in enslavement, the echoes of the New-World plantation today may materialize in the desires of migrants for escape. Some scholars have located such emerging practices of knowledge production, resistance and flight within what they conceptualize as the “Black Mediterranean” (Danewid 2017; Hawthorne 2017; Proglío et al. 2021; Smythe 2018; cf. Gilroy 1993; Robinson 1983). In the concluding section, I seek to take up such insights and intuitions, weaving them together to trace alternative genealogies in the margins and “in the wake” (Sharpe 2016) of plantations past.

*Coda: The Black Mediterranean, Modern
Marronage and Their Shadows*

Transatlantic history and its Euro-Mediterranean antecedents certainly play a part in explaining not only current regimes of racialized violence, terror and exploitation in Italy, but also idioms of resistance to them, which may also employ the notion of slavery in oppositional terms. I have frequently heard West African migrants complain about their fellow farm workers and slum dwellers, saying they have “a slave mentality”—meaning they accept oppressing conditions. Others, commenting on their predicament in Europe, also remark how “slavery never finished; they just *modernized* it” by making people pay for their own journeys, for example. When talking about their origins, Gambian migrants are especially proud of the iconic figure of national(ized), semi-fictional enslaved hero, Kunta Kinte, and sometimes recall how the first known European to sail up the Gambia river was in fact Venetian explorer and slave trader Alvise Ca’ da Mosto.

The self-assigned toponyms of the shantytowns where West African migrants live, and from which many are recruited for farm labor, are also significant in this respect. Many are known as “ghettos”—a term drawn from Jamaican English via its Ghanaian assimilation, according to my interlocutors, indicating a space on the margins of or outside the law, where alcohol, drugs and sexual services may be purchased in dedicated *joints* or *connection houses*. Yet, the term also exceeds Black Atlantic imaginaries and their Afro-Mediterranean readaptations. While it clearly bears North American, Black geographical referents as well, dating back to the early twentieth century, its genealogies lead, once more, all the way back to fourteenth-century Venice, where the original Jewish *geto* was established (cf. Hutchinson and Haynes 2012), again summoning the (mostly eclipsed) Mediterranean prehistories of modern, racialized containment. Besides acting as recruitment hubs and devices of spatial segregation, these slums are also knots along migratory routes that originate on the southern end of the Sahara Desert and extend, along tortuous and ever-changing trajectories, to the far northern shores of continental Europe—what Harney and Moten (2013) would call “undercommons”, spaces of black fugitivity (cf. Peano 2021) (Fig. 11.3).

Black-Atlantic, Caribbean and North American connections also manifest in references to some or other version of Rastafarianism and more



Fig. 11.3 Layers of drawings and writings on a shack in the slum of “Mexico”, district of Foggia, 2018. The shack has since gone through several alterations, and the inscriptions are no longer visible (Photographs by the author)

generally to Jamaican culture (linked to the awareness of living in “Babylon”; see Fig. 11.3), or in the scathingly and bitterly ironic nicknames some such ghettos or squatted buildings are given (“Washington”; “the White House”; “Guantánamo”; “Mexico”). Appeals to Rastafarianism interestingly produce a reverse narrative to those discourses in which Ethiopian (and thus by extension, in the present, “African”) forms of enslavement justified oppression cloaked in the rhetoric of humanitarianism and the civilizing mission. Ras Tafari Makkonen (Emperor Haile Selassie, Rastafarianism’s Messiah) had been depicted by Fascist imperial propaganda as a megalomaniac and despotic leader who tolerated the endurance of slavery in Ethiopia, ignoring his efforts to eradicate it (Bekele 2008; Forgacs 2014: 76; Sbacchi 1985). Even the Chicanx and Latinx experience surfaces in this constellation of images: the now largest African farm-worker shantytown in the district of Foggia is known by its inhabitants (at least the older ones) as “Mexico”, by virtue of having been cut off from the asylum-seeker reception center of which its initial nucleus was a part—“we didn’t cross the border, the border crossed us”: echoes of other occlusions, in the truly global time of plantation afterlives.

Even when workers do make recourse to the language of slavery, they might evoke alternative genealogies to those of the American plantation, and only to detach themselves from them. During a field trip to Sliven, the Bulgarian city with the highest Roma population, many of whose

members migrate seasonally to be employed in large numbers in farming work in the districts of Foggia and Caserta, an elderly man strolling down the street of the tellingly named Nadezdha (*hope*) neighborhood inquired about the reason for the presence of myself and my travel companions. Upon learning that we were interested in talking to people about the conditions of life and labor of the town's migrant workers in Italy, the man invited us to his house, enlisting also his brother to support his story. He had been employed for several years as a daily farm laborer in Calabria, he explained. In excited and emphatic speech, when wishing us goodbye after an engaged conversation over tea and sweets, he recommended: "Go and tell your leaders that the Roma are not slaves!" He obviously referred to the centuries-long, much-forgotten bondage of their ancestors (Achim 1998; Beck 1989; Marushiakova and Popov 2021).

Contemporary racial and labor politics in Italy certainly developed in dialogue with, and were influenced by, what occurred across the Atlantic and with reference to imperial projects. And yet, local specificities and their durabilities, to borrow Ann Stoler's (2016) concept, also matter—as do the reverse movements whereby forms of enslavement and the ideological apparatuses support them, like early experiments with the plantation mode of production more generally, traveled from the Mediterranean to the "New World" in the early modern period. The history of the transatlantic trade and the New-World plantation doubtlessly have a prominent, spectral presence—evoked not only by selective references to slavery, but also through images of boats stuffed with black human cargo, by portraying disarticulated, objectified and racialized body parts, and in the coinage of the notion of a "Black Mediterranean" as a redemptive parallel to the "Black Atlantic". Yet, the tracing of alternative genealogies and the identification of recursive patterns, through which the histories of plantations and slavery are wielded for instrumental purposes, are irrenounceable tools for truly abolitionist struggles.

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