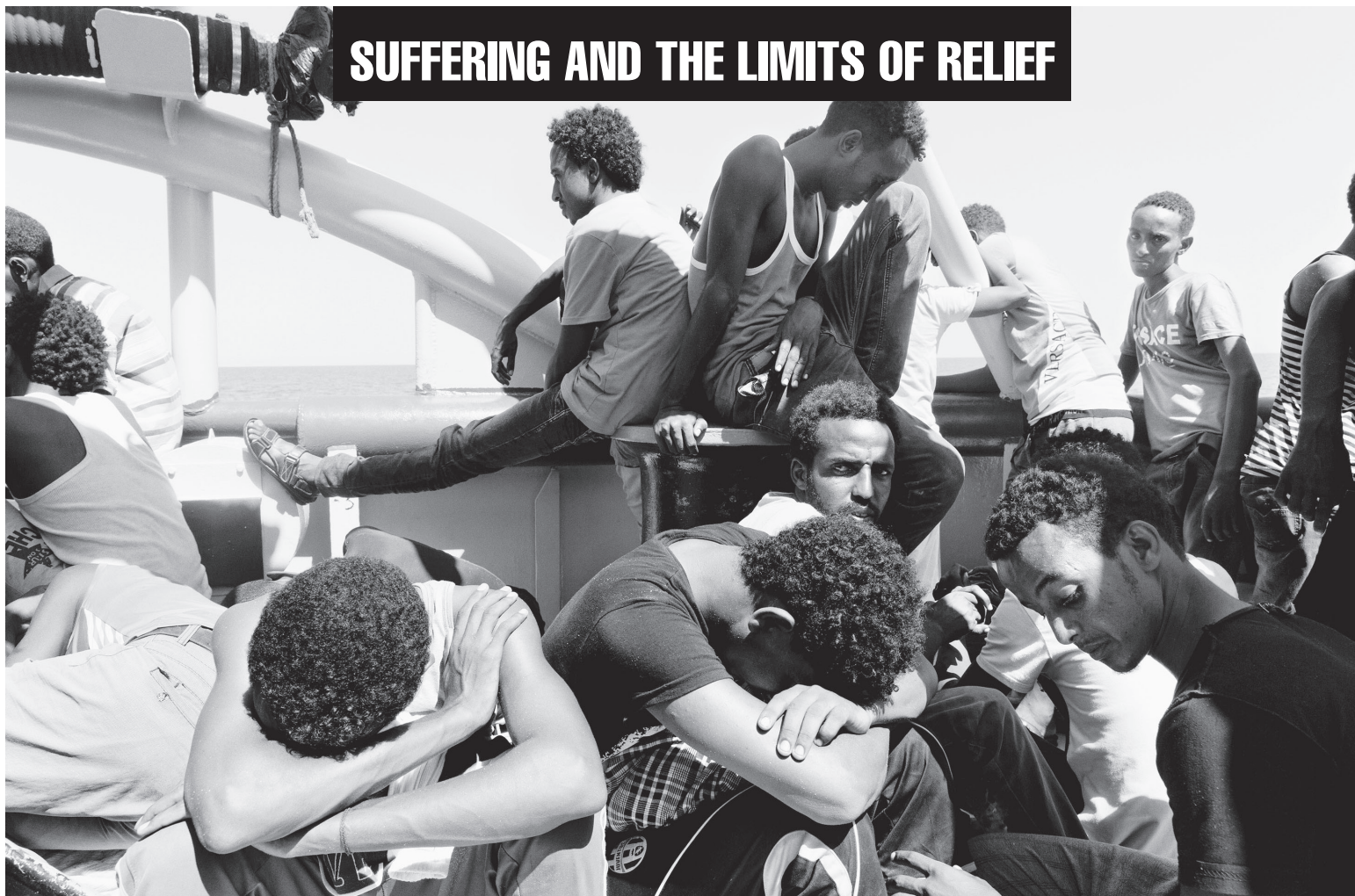Eritrean migrants, who were rescued at sea near Libya, on the way to Reggio Calabria, Italy, July 2015.

PAOLO PELLEGRIN/MAGNUM PHOTOS

The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Imagination

SA Smythe

> The sea in Italy doesn't even recede.
> You need to cross it to get to the stronghold,
>   you need to cross the sea in between, the
>   Mediterranean Sea—the White Sea to the Arabs.
> Many face the White Sea. But from my coasts, on
>   the Horn of Africa, before reaching the White
>   Sea some brave the Ocean on a dhow. They
>   want to know if it's really necessary to go that far.
>
> —Ubah Cristina Ali Farah,
> "A Dhow Crosses the Sea"[1]

On January 26, 2017, video footage surfaced of 22-year-old Gambian national Pateh Sabally thrashing around in the middle of the Grand Canal in Venice, Italy. Hundreds of onlookers were caught on camera jeering, gawking, waiting on the scene's dénouement. As Sabally's torso slowly disappeared under the wet, the water reached up to his neck. As his arms shot straight up, with nothing visible below the elbows, at least one person shouted, "Africa! Africa, oh!" Another demanded, "*Butta il salvagente*!" (Throw the life preserver!) as a boat full of tourists bobbed mere yards from Sabally who dipped and resurfaced with slowing frequency. Eventually a few people on the boat

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Author Igiaba Scego participates in a campaign called Ero Straniero (I was a foreigner) to promote a new law on immigration. Rome, 2017.

stirred and threw two or three of the life preservers overboard. Sabally did not grasp them. One flustered spectator scoffed, "Just let him die then." While Sabally's hands remained up in the air, perfectly vertical, cries of "*Scemo! Vai via!*" (Idiot! Go away!) spat from the crowd. Each time he bobbed, his body went lower. Soon, only the crown of his head showed, along with his fingertips. Then nothing. The rings produced when the life preservers hit the water dissipated. Soon, the sea was still again. The viral video abruptly ends.

In the media reporting on Sabally's drowning, a few headlines drew attention to the shocking complicity of the tourists and lack of "heroism" amidst the onlookers. But the media also incorporated into their narrative the assumption that Sabally wanted to die, with headlines like "African Refugee, Pateh Sabally, Drowns Self in Venice as Tourists Look On" and "Venice to Pay for Funeral of Migrant Whose Suicide Was Filmed by Tourists." The latter article has several quotes from the office of Venice mayor Luigi Brugnaro attesting

to the benevolence and good will of the city: "The money [for Sabally's funeral] will come from…Brugnaro's personal cost of living allowance in a gesture of respect from Venice towards Pateh Sabally and his shattered dreams," adding that "[t]he death of this young man has saddened all of us, and we feel pity towards those who, faced with the adversities of life, no longer find the strength to react to desperation." But Brugnaro also opines, "We can't continue to nurture the hopes of half the world coming to Italy. Everyone needs to realize it is impossible for our country to continue managing such a large-scale phenomenon in the way it has done so far."[2] In this politician's expressions of unaccountable pity, Sabally's story—including his unconfirmed, hypothetical motivations—was a symbol of all migrants, refugees and asylum seekers in Italy. The significance ascribed to Sabally's final actions and inactions were an ultimate violence to someone whose death was rendered a spectacle, his final gasps for breath a repository of negative emotion and dehumanizing racial hatred.

After identifying Sabally as the drowned figure, reports came in saying that he had initially obtained temporary residency papers for Italy, on humanitarian grounds no less. Others speculated that he had made the trek from The Gambia to a port in North Africa before setting sail across the Mediterranean and arriving in Sicily two years prior, where his claims for asylum were ultimately rejected. Pateh Sabally arrived by sea. He also departed that way.

A similar narrative occurred for 31-year-old Mussie, the Eritrean asylum seeker who lived in Italy for almost two years and who hanged himself on Via Aldini near Milan Central Station. Some of the scant coverage noted that Mussie took his life mere steps from the Arca Foundation, one of Italy's humanitarian non-profits dedicated to welcoming refugees. It was an odd point to observe since he had no discernible connection to the organization at the time. This framing failed to highlight how his death occurred in the context of increasingly aggressive security raids and identity checks targeting racialized masculine bodies in ostensibly public spaces. Some of the "raids" were unauthorized harassment by Italian soldiers at the station whose verbal altercations with presumed migrants occasionally turned physical but led to no arrests or reports against the perpetrators.

Mathematics of Black Life in the Mediterranean

Across centuries and continents, narratives of the arrival of Black people are often bound to the water. Blackness and the fear of Blackness seem to be below the surface, permeating through everywhere and every when. When Black Canadian poet Dionne Brand writes that "water is another country," she invokes the power, trauma and possibility located there.[3] Even as that which is liquid at times appears "ubiquitous and mute,"[4] the voice of our oppressors is the only one left to reverberate, like miscast life preservers on the surface of the sea. This ubiquity of the water is part of what ties us, binds us in time and spirit to the ontological depths of Black presences in historical and material relation to the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean—the routes of African enslavement and genocide and to the Mediterranean Sea.

In October 2013, the Italian government created Operation Mare Nostrum (OMN). Naming this naval and air operation *mare nostrum* (Latin for "our sea") was an imperial call-back to the Roman name for the Mediterranean Sea.[5] This use was not the first revival of the term. During the height of Italian nationalism during the period of *Risorgimento* (Unification), it was a rallying cry used by poets and political agitators who saw Italy as a successor to the Roman Empire and wished to expand during the "Partition of Africa." It was revived again during the era of Fascism, spread through propaganda demanding aggressive territorial expansion and "reclamation" of former lands. The part of northern Africa that included Italian-colonized Libya became known as the Fourth Shore.

The OMN was conceived as a national security system under the guise of an international rescue operation. Its naval and air-based "coast guard" purpose was to arrest human traffickers and rescue tens of thousands of migrants from shipwrecks and other maritime tragedies. It was established on October 18, 2013 after, and in direct response to, the October 3 shipwreck with over 360 confirmed deaths, and the October 11 shipwreck where at least 34 were confirmed dead. Since then, thousands more have died crossing from the northern coast of Africa to Europe, specifically to Italy, via the Mediterranean, making it one of the deadliest seascapes and migrant crossings in the contemporary world. Despite, or in disregard of, this reality the OMN was defunded one year later, in 2014, when the Italian government realized it would bear the brunt of maintenance costs instead of other European states or the European Union.

It would be a helpful provocation to examine the farce of the recurrent practice of enumeration, of counting people without being accountable to them. Such enumeration conforms to the logics of accumulation that structure racial capitalism. In the case of contemporary Mediterranean crossings, the counting of people who die or survive by the International Organization for Migration or various social and mass media entities reveals the quantified abstraction of Black and/or migrant lives. This calculated value of Black life is expressed through the state's own language of deficit, dearth and debt. Katherine McKittrick calls this "the mathematics of unliving."[6]

Across the Mediterranean, the death toll rises. These deaths, unlike the rising of the sea, are the result of racial calculus, not "nature." Frontex, the border agency for the European Union, has been charged with responsibility to "oversee" patrols of the sea. Overseeing is not doing, nor even seeing: Frontex has willfully turned a blind eye to thousands of requests for aid and has informed state agencies like Italy's beleaguered Coast Guard that it would not respond immediately to distress calls as it pulled its patrol area further north towards Europe and away from known sites of frequent shipwrecks.

This neoliberal iteration of racial calculus does not account for the loss of Pateh Sabally. Of Mussie. Of Emmanuel Chidi Namdi or the many others who were murdered or "allowed to die" by the necropolitical machinations of callous and dehumanizing statecraft. This focus on Italy is not intended to let other nations off the hook. Iterations of patriarchal White supremacy is something in which all of Europe is complicit, be it for their withdrawal of funding, their past colonial exploitation and gross historical underdevelopment or their current militaristic and neoliberal practices in Africa, which have exacerbated migration across the increasingly treacherous route.

The Racialized Calculus of Belonging

What about those who survive the sea, those who make it to Italy or whose families have undergone such a crossing

Gambian asylum seekers discuss their journey through Libya at a "hot spot," an asylum seeker reception center, in the port of Pozzallo, Sicily, Italy, 2016.

for them to be born there? In the last few years, there has been a concerted effort by groups like Rete G2 (a network of "second-generation" immigrants) for reform of Italian immigration law to offer more rights to systemically marginalized individuals—particularly children who are politically more palatable for a heteronational Italian public (that is, a public bound to ethnonationalism and heteropatriarchy). The assumption is that children would more readily assimilate into the Italian polity, and that education is a significant part of that kind of Italian acculturation. The new law would have lowered the age at which people born in Italy to non-Italian parents can apply for citizenship, from 18 years to between ten and 12. It enshrines the caveat that only children who have spent at least five years in Italian schools would be eligible. Unfortunately, the law has been tabled, and may not go up for debate in Parliament for quite some time, given the recent victories of right-wing politicians in the March 2018 Italian elections. Many of those politicians ran on platforms

of ultranationalism and overt xenophobia, and thus these reforms are likely to be deferred. (This deferral is similar to the political brinkmanship in the United States regarding the fate of undocumented individuals and DACA recipients, or DREAMers.) These amendments and new reforms have been repeatedly blocked by right-wing and ultranationalist factions of the Italian Parliament.

This legal reform to expand Italian citizenship to migrants, if it were to pass, undoubtedly would be a boon for many immigrants living in Italy. These new policies, however, bring forth new questions and, in some cases, exacerbate old ones. It is not clear how to calculate criteria for naturalization like *ius culturae* (right of acculturation, as distinct from the legal concepts that confer citizenship, jus soli or jus sanguinis—right of soil or of blood, respectively) or *ius soli temperato* (a compromised version of jus soli). How could one measure the level of an immigrant's cultural integration? What are "Italian values" and who are the ultimate arbiters of the culture? How does this codified

expansion of Italian citizenship facilitate the continued dispossession and displacement of those who remain outside of a citizenship framework, and thus the project known as "Europe" writ large? And lastly, how does this ostensibly more inclusive policy mask or reprise a colonial framework through which rights are bestowed based on cultural, political and racial attachments?

The very fact that citizenship rights are contingent on racially constructed notions of sameness and difference and are resisted in the name of a presumptively "fixed" category of White European interests and fears of a contaminated Italian polity is banal in the Arendtian sense. Citizenship can be, and often is, a banal mechanism in the systematic perpetration of dispossession, disregard and disunity. As we mark the anniversaries of migrant deaths or suicides, the terminations of coast guard operations and some of the major shipwrecks off the coast of Italy in recent years, how do we account for the fact that the people drowned—and drowning—in the Mediterranean will not soon have access to the modest improvements to Italian citizenship, especially given the recent victories of Italian far right and ultranationalist parties? Another orientation is required, one that does not look to state recognition and the calculated valuation of human life, but rather is generative of a new coalitional practice that can be conceived via the Mediterranean's shores rather than national borders.

The Black Mediterranean

Writers from T.S. Eliot to Mahmoud Darwish have observed that the sea does not end at the land's edge. The Black Mediterranean is a site and epistemology that fully acknowledges that reality. This concept, first popularized by Alessandra Di Maio, "focuses on the proximity that exists, and has always existed, between Italy and Africa, separated […] but also united by the Mediterranean […] and documented in legends, myths, histories, even in culinary traditions, in visual arts, and religion."[7]

The Black Mediterranean, which is already being mobilized within and beyond the geopolitical space of the Mediterranean itself, traces back to the Black Radical Tradition and particularly Cedric Robinson's *Black Marxism*.[8] Robinson, as Robin D.G. Kelley commends, "continued the earlier legacy of Diaspora studies but also developed a conception of the Black Mediterranean as a precondition to the Black Atlantic and the making of Europe itself."[9] For Paul Gilroy, the Black Atlantic was a conceptualization bound to the Middle Passage and the pervasive genocidal politics born from the transatlantic slave trade and present in the aftermath of slavery.[10] Rather than existing solely as a metaphor, a fixed geography or a paradigmatic site of loss often referred to as a "wet cemetery," the Black Mediterranean is a variegated site of Black knowledge production, Black resistance and possibilities of new

consciousness. In my view, the Black Mediterranean and its attendant regionalism foments cultural syncretism, intimacy and expansiveness, while still leaving room for geospecificity within a transnational frame. It engages the Black Radical Tradition and Black imaginative practices to show the way to use fragments of our past, (mis)remembered histories to envision new futures.

In every European state, majorities cling to a set of myths and assumptions about national origin and character. Italy is no different than other nation states in this regard. Those countries with a legacy of colonization tend to reckon with and absolve that bleak history by differing means. Italy has often attempted to render that history utterly contemporary. As Gilroy noted, racism "rests on the ability to contain Blacks in the present, to repress and to deny the past."[11] In *Black Marxism*, Cedric Robinson observes that:

> the history of Black peoples has been recast consistently in both naive and perverse ways. Most particularly, the memory of Black rebelliousness to slavery and other forms of oppression was systematically distorted and suppressed in the service of racialist, Eurocentric, and ruling-class historiographies. The sum total was the dehumanizing of Blacks...For the unaware, nothing was amiss.[12]

The "presentism" of current sociopolitical dynamics are commonly explained in terms of the impact of recent unprecedented immigration into Italy and the tremendous cultural change it portends. According to this narrative, immigration has so overwhelmed and altered the face of the nation that it is no longer possible to assume a monoracial or monocultural Italian national character—as though such a character ever existed. Quite the opposite: Italy must be viewed as an always and already multicultural nation—despite vehement right-wing insistence to the contrary and generalized international assumptions of racial and ethno-homogeneity. In *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, Robinson explains that:

> racial regimes are constructed social systems in which race is proposed as a justification for the relations of power. While necessarily articulated with accruals of power, the covering conceit of a racial regime is a makeshift patchwork masquerading as memory and the immutable. Nevertheless, racial regimes do possess history, that is, discernible origins and mechanisms of assembly. But racial regimes are unrelentingly hostile to their exhibition. This antipathy exists because a discoverable history is incompatible with a racial regime and from the realization that, paradoxically, so are its social relations.[13]

Thus, in the case of Europe's White supremacist policies and foundations, it is not just that race is a construct, but that it lies within a panoply of constructs that actively undermine the very idea of Europe. The Black Mediterranean represents a demand to acknowledge the connection between the present and the past—including the history of colonialism,

emigration and intranational migration—in which Italians have occupied positions of both hegemony and subalternity in different historical times and geographical locations. It also demands analysis of how migrations cause these positions to shift. This is central to understanding how a sense of *italianità* (Italianness) was constructed as the result of these events and why there is such a strong resistance to extending the privilege of belonging to migrants and subsequent generations. But this perspective also creates a spatial transnational continuity with other European countries with their own histories of colonialism and emigration.

The demands to acknowledge the connections between past and present manifest in the cultural productions of Black Italian writers of African origin or descent. They are unearthing and opening colonial archives, denouncing contemporary racism as a legacy of colonialism, identifying processes of racialization at the base of national identity formation, revealing the existing power relations between Italian, migrant and so-called "second-generation" women and mocking the resistance of Italians to considering the intersection of Italianness with Blackness and/or Muslimness. These are radical acts in a society that has historically and erroneously constructed itself as White and Catholic (and afforded primacy to heterosexual men). These themes redound through the works of Carla Macoggi, Igiaba Scego and Cristina Ali Farah—just a few of the Black Italian women writers concerned with geographies and memories of/in/across borderscapes—who articulate the radical possibilities of the Black Mediterranean through their meditations on citizenship, representation and belonging.

The State of Emergency

In "Theses on the Philosophy of History," Walter Benjamin offers a strategic vision and purpose for radicalism and resistance of "presentist" narratives:

> The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the "state of emergency" in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism. One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm. The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are "still" possible in the twentieth century is not philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is the knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.[14]

The Black Mediterranean, following the disruptive urging of Benjamin and inspired by the radical legacy of Robinson and the creative projects of many of the *italiani senza cittadinanza* (Italians without citizenship), Black Italians, asylum seekers

and refugees lends historical consciousness to the "crisis of migration" and the politics of belonging. It takes the term "crisis" literally and etymologically (from the Greek word *krisis*) as a turning point, which acknowledges that the contemporary social disintegration of the calculated cruelty of those in power requires a collective response. In this arsenal of resistance is a new politics of naming and cultural practices of complexity and sustained contradiction that carry with them a more livable destiny for us all.

Ultimately, the struggle for citizenship of second-generation or other Italians, specifically those "of color," remains a question of how to resist the seductions of state-oriented activism and its identitarian pitfalls. An underlying question embedded in practices of codifying citizenship can be further clarified by queer Black studies. What would a politics of citizenship and representation—a queer, radicalized form of *italianità*—look like that would refuse any and all "murderous inclusion"? That phrase was coined by trans theorist of color Jin Haritaworn to describe the depoliticization of LGBTQ people under the liberal rubric of "gay rights" such as same-sex marriage over and against other possibilities of rights.[15] The project of identifying and criticizing murderous inclusion targets those rights upheld or bestowed by the state that result in the "politics of queer subordination" and the limiting affirmation of policies that are neither queer, liberal nor beneficial for the most minoritized or radical within a particular oppressed group. We see this murderous inclusion time and again in the state's disavowal of refugees and asylum seekers, and in the racist parameters and criteria of citizenship. Do we want the state to love us or do we want to be free? Is what we are fighting for conditional citizenship or are we making demands and laying the grounds for our own emancipation?

Where there is emancipatory citizenship, there is the potential for ever more solidarity and for reconciliation and proliferation in the Black Mediterranean, a space that represents continuity with the past and discontinuity of the future from oppressive regimes of the present. As Robin Kelley surmises, "the Black Mediterranean is about the fabrication of Europe as a discrete, racially pure entity solely responsible for modernity, on the one hand, and the fabrication of the Negro, on the other."[16] We see this fabrication in Italians' prevalent ignorance of their own nation's imperial endeavors and their persistent "colonial benevolence" manifest in the popular slogan *italiani brava gente* (Italians are good people) that the mayor of Venice invoked, without irony, after Sabally drowned to a chorus of racist and disaffected slurs.

The implication of how bodies get stratified in relation to citizenship is clearly designated in cultural, ethnoracial, sexualized and gendered terms. Contemporary writings by Italian and Italophone authors of African descent evince an understanding of identity politics, but also assert claims to an emancipatory *futura meticcia* (mixed, as in mestizo,

future) that is not necessarily mired in post/colonial politics. While there are many national and cultural contexts from which to tease out those resonances and upend toxic paradigms cultivated by biopolitical and discursive processes, Italy's fraught history of internal political unification, its position in the European cultural imaginary, its relationship to Whiteness, its complex geopolitics within the Mediterranean and its fraught "(pre)occupation" with Africa make it one of the more powerful examples.

The Black Mediterranean offers a political paradigm shift that is radical, anarchic, collective, Black and queer. It fundamentally challenges state recognition as a goal or end in itself, as well as consumerist individualism and heteronationalist frameworks. It engages and fosters full use of Black imaginative practices, including an abolitionist vision that sees a world without border regimes and the Mediterranean as a site of cultural syncretism and radical possibility rather than a watery grave and site of dispossession, abjection and a receptacle of memory. This project works towards emancipation and affirmation, meaningful solidarity and compassion. The literature from women of mixed Italian and East African descent and art projects by Black migrants and queer people draw upon several grids of intelligibility to offer us new possibilities and pathways to more meaningful belonging, and in the process actively denounce any claims to a monoracial Italian identity. "To affirm," then, is more than just a proclamation; it is an ethical project in which Italy remains a rich archive from which to enact the Black Mediterranean. ∎
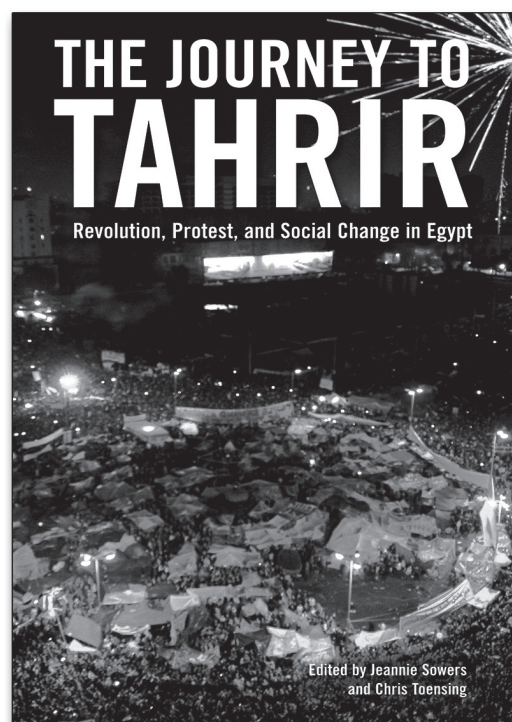
Endnotes

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