

From the Margins as Method: Notes on Making Political Culture from the Inside

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Abstract *This article takes the margin not as a condition to overcome, but as a method. Written from the position of a domestic worker and cultural producer in Milan, it traces how communities most affected by racialisation and structural exclusion in Italy are already producing sophisticated political and cultural analysis, largely without institutional recognition. Through two interconnected projects—Blackcoffee_pdc, a podcast conceived as a diasporic counter-archive, and Blackn[è]ss Fest, a free annual festival functioning as a collective laboratory for anti-racist and afrofeminist politics—the article argues that the intimate knowledge produced from sites of structural invisibility constitutes theory in itself, not merely lived experience awaiting academic elaboration. Drawing on Federici, Vergès, hooks, Fanon, and Freire, it proposes a distinction that runs throughout: making community through politics, not politics through community. The margin, here, is not a platform from which to appeal to the centre. It is a site of construction.*

INTRODUCTION

I write this article from a position that rarely appears in academic journals on migration—that of a domestic worker. For the past ten years, caring for the children of predominantly white, middle-class families in Milan has been my primary source of income. It has also been, though this is less legible, one of the primary sites from which I have come to understand how race, class, and cultural production intersect in contemporary Italy. This is not a confession, nor an attempt to claim authenticity through precarity. It is a methodological statement. As Silvia Federici has argued, reproductive and care labour is not peripheral to the capitalist system—it is foundational to it, and its systematic devaluation is inseparable from the racialisation of those who perform it.¹ To work inside that structure, in the intimate spaces of other people's homes, is to have access to a form of knowledge that is at once highly specific and structurally revealing. It is to see, from the inside, the gap between progressive discourse

and material practice. Between what people say about race and what they do with it.

Françoise Vergès, writing on decolonial feminism, insists that we must take seriously the knowledge produced from positions of structural disadvantage—not as raw material to be processed by theory, but as theory in itself.² This article attempts to do that. It takes my own position seriously, not as a limitation to be overcome, but as a vantage point from which certain things become visible that remain obscured from more institutionally legible locations. What becomes visible, from here, is this—the communities most affected by migration, racialisation, and structural exclusion in Italy are also producing some of the most sophisticated cultural and political analysis of these conditions, outside academic institutions, outside mainstream media, and largely without institutional recognition or material support. This article traces that production through two interconnected projects—Blackcoffee_pdc, a podcast conceived as a diasporic counter-archive, and Blackn[è]ss Fest, a festival that has functioned, across five editions, as a collective laboratory for anti-racist and afro-feminist politics.

The thread that runs through both is captured in a phrase I have come to use as a compass—making community through politics, not politics through community. It is a distinction that will return throughout this article, because it names something essential about what kind of cultural production is possible from the margin, and what kind remains impossible, or gets absorbed and neutralised, when it moves toward the centre.

DOMESTIC WORK AS EPISTEMIC POSITION

In the summer of 2025, a colleague—a racialised woman employed as a domestic worker by one of the families I work alongside—asked her employers for a few hours off to renew her residence permit at the local police headquarters. Under Italian law, non-EU workers must renew their *permesso di soggiorno* before it expires—a process that formally requires 60 days but in practice regularly extends to six months or more, with appointments difficult to obtain, documents frequently arriving already expired, and queues outside police headquarters that have been documented stretching through the night.³ Delays are systemic, with serious consequences: without a valid permit, a person cannot access welfare services, risks losing their residence registration, and may lose their job. The renewal is not bureaucratic inconvenience—it is the material condition on which a person's right to remain, to work, and to access basic services depends. My colleague had been employed regularly for two years, working around 20 hours a week. The request triggered what I can only describe as collective indignation among her employers. Why couldn't she do it at another time? Hadn't she thought of this sooner?

This from the same people who, less than a month earlier, had expressed support for the June 2025 citizenship referendum—a vote that would have reduced the residency requirement for naturalisation from ten to five years for non-EU nationals, and which failed to reach the required quorum. Italy's citizenship law, rooted in the principle of *jus sanguinis* since 1912, remains one of the most restrictive in Europe: children born in Italy to non-Italian parents do not automatically acquire citizenship, and naturalisation requires ten years of continuous legal residence. The paradox is sharp—a country that can grant citizenship to the great-grandchildren of emigrants who left a century ago, yet denies it to people born and raised within its borders.

I know this paradox from the inside. I was born in Italy. When people ask where I was born and I answer, they often say: "But then you're Italian"—

unaware that birthplace confers nothing under Italian law, or they say: "For me, you're Italian," as if my two degrees and fluent Italian were the conditions that made me legible as a citizen. This is the double standard that Patricia Hill Collins names as a feature of the matrix of domination—the idea that some people must continuously prove their belonging while others inherit it automatically.⁴

The request for a few hours to renew a document—a document without which my colleague could not legally continue working for the very family now expressing irritation—revealed the gap that Paulo Freire called the distance between the word and the world.⁵ These employers spoke the language of solidarity and civic engagement. They voted in a referendum designed to extend rights to people like my colleague. And yet, confronted with the material reality of what those rights—or their absence—actually mean in a person's daily life, they responded with impatience.

I have accumulated fifteen years of scenes like this one. Working in the intimate spaces of predominantly white, middle-class families in Milan has given me access to a specific form of knowledge—not the knowledge of the observer, but of the person who is structurally present and structurally invisible at the same time. Returning to Federici and Vergès, whose frameworks have guided this analysis from the outset—to work inside that structure is to inhabit, daily, the contradiction between what it produces and what it conceals, and to produce, from that position, a form of knowledge that demands to be taken seriously as theory in itself, not merely as lived experience awaiting academic elaboration. My position as a domestic worker is not a biographical detail to be disclosed and then set aside. It is the epistemological ground from which this article is written. The women who work alongside me in these houses, almost all of them racialised, most without citizenship, many renewing precarious permits year after year, are not marginal figures in the Italian economy. They are central to it. And yet they remain almost entirely absent from the cultural and political spaces that claim to speak about migration, integration, and

racial justice. This absence is not accidental. It is produced by the same mechanisms that make their labour invisible: the systematic devaluation of care and reproductive work, its historical entanglement with the racialisation of those who perform it, the exploitation that structures their conditions of employment, and the selective logic of visibility that determines whose knowledge is recognised, in which spaces, and on whose terms. These are the mechanisms that this article, and the projects it describes, attempt to interrupt.

BLACKCOFFEE_PDC AS DIASPORIC COUNTER-ARCHIVE

In 2019, Emmanuelle Maréchal, a Franco-Cameroonian journalist whose work focused on Afro-European experiences and perspectives, contacted me to interview me about *Appuntamento ai Marinai*, my documentary on second-generation Eritreans in Milan. What distinguished that conversation from the many interviews I had given around the film was the absence of a filter. Two Black women, speaking to each other without the mediation of a white interlocutor. We spoke about the racist structure of Italian society without moderating the terms, without managing the discomfort of the listener, without translating the analysis into something more palatable.

That absence of a filter was, I realised, rare. The interviews I gave to white journalists about *Appuntamento ai Marinai* took place in 2018 and 2019, a period in which racism had suddenly become a visible topic in Italian mainstream media. The shooting in Macerata on 3 February 2018—in which Luca Traini, a far-right militant with ties to the Northern League, wounded six African migrants in a drive-by attack—had concentrated public attention on racist violence in a way that felt, to many, unprecedented.⁶ The surge of media interest that followed was not, however, a genuine reckoning with structural racism. It was a political repositioning: racism was being reframed as a pathology of the right, as something that the rhetoric of Matteo Salvini, then leader of the Lega party and soon to become Interior Minister, had

produced or unleashed, which allowed progressive and centrist media to condemn it from a safe distance. What this framing systematically obscured was that racist violence, discrimination, and exclusion had not arrived with Salvini. They had always been here—in the law, in the labour market, in the schools, in the everyday interactions that racialised people navigate regardless of who holds the Ministry of the Interior. Right-wing politics had consequences, real and serious ones, but it did not invent the structure it was accelerating.

In this context, narratives like mine—the story of the well-integrated second-generation immigrant, educated, hardworking, culturally legible—were functionally useful to a certain kind of journalism. They could be offered as evidence that racism existed and that it harmed real people, while the implicit message remained reassuring. What those journalists were looking for was the good immigrant, the grateful second-generation kid, the proof that the problem was the racist right and that well-intentioned people on the left were exempt. When I said instead that racism was in the DNA of this country, that it was not a problem of the right alone, that many people with good intentions were part of the structure, when I used the word "white" and watched people on the left shift uncomfortably and ask why I was making these distinctions, the discomfort was edited out, or the quote was not used.

The topics that needed a space of their own were not abstract. They were the daily realities of racialised communities in Italy—realities that institutional and media spaces consistently misrepresented or ignored. Racial profiling by law enforcement, documented extensively in the 2024 ECRI report on Italy, which found many accounts of racial profiling by law enforcement officials targeting in particular people of African descent, and noted that Italian authorities appeared unaware that ethnic profiling could even be an issue.⁷ The mental health consequences of racialisation—a dimension that Frantz Fanon first theorised in his analysis of how colonial violence becomes internalised, producing what he called a

psychopathology of the oppressed.⁸ The creative and entrepreneurial work of Afro-descendant artists, musicians, and cultural producers navigating an industry structured around whiteness. And the collective life of diasporic communities—their internal diversity, their political debates, their ways of building belonging in a country that refused to recognise them as fully present, a dynamic that Stuart Hall described as the ongoing negotiation of diasporic identity, never fixed, always in process.⁹

bell hooks writes that the margin is not only a site of deprivation but a site of radical possibility—a place from which a particular kind of seeing becomes possible, precisely because those who occupy it are forced to understand both the centre and its underside.¹⁰ What the conversation with Emmanuelle made clear to us was that this seeing required a space that was not mediated by the centre's need for reassurance. Blackcoffee_pdc was created from that recognition.

The podcast functions as what I understand as a diasporic counter-archive—a space where Afro-descendant people in Italy speak about their lives, their work, and their political analysis without passing through the filter of white legibility. Not a space of complaint or of appeal to dominant institutions, but a space of internal circulation: knowledge produced within the community, for the community, on the community's own terms. Each episode is an act of what hooks calls choosing the margin as a space of radical openness¹¹—a refusal of the terms on which visibility is usually granted to racialised people in Italian media.

The dominant media logic that sought the story of the good immigrant was not only aesthetically limiting—it was politically functional. It allowed progressive audiences to position themselves against the racist right while remaining insulated from any analysis that implicated them. Blackcoffee_pdc refused that insulation. It created a space where the conversation could go where it needed to go—including into the contradictions of the left, the limits of allyship, and the ways in which well-meaning white progressives reproduce the structures they claim to oppose.

From this sonic space, a need emerged that sound alone could not fully meet the need for a physical space where these conversations could happen in real time, between bodies, across communities. That need became Blackn[è]ss Fest, a free annual festival held in Milan

BLACKN[È]SS FEST AS COLLECTIVE LABORATORY

In 2022, journalist Adil Mauro described Blackn[è]ss Fest as a *“laboratorio di resistenza”*—a laboratory of resistance.¹² The description captured something that the festival had never explicitly claimed for itself, but that participants and collaborators had been building across editions. Not an event, but a practice. Not a space of representation, but a space of political formation.

This distinction matters because it addresses a specific problem that the festival was built in direct response to. Cultural, artistic, and political spaces that claim to speak for or to marginalised communities often fail to reach the very people they claim to centre. This problem operates not only in mainstream cultural spaces but within racialised communities themselves. The format reproduces what it intends to challenge. Panels organised around expertise and credentials, discussions that presuppose a shared theoretical vocabulary, events that feel legible to those already inside activist or academic circles but alienating to those outside them. Blackn[è]ss Fest was built with an acute awareness of this risk, and with a deliberate commitment to working against it, through free entry, through the integration of music, dance, food, and performance alongside political discussion, through formats designed to meet people where they are rather than where organisers wish they were.

The festival emerged directly from the sonic space that Blackcoffee_pdc had opened. If the podcast created conditions for unfiltered conversation between Afro-descendant people in Italy, the festival made those conversations physical—between bodies, across communities, in real time. But it also added something the podcast could not fully provide. It added the possibility of collective

practice rather than dialogue alone. And it insisted on something that is easily said but rarely done—training listening and empathy as political capacities. Not the debate culture that dominates most political spaces, where positions are defended and opponents are overcome, but a slower, more demanding practice of hearing experiences that are not one's own and allowing them to reshape one's analysis.

What distinguishes Blackn[è]ss Fest from other cultural spaces that address race and diaspora in Italy is captured in a principle that has guided the festival from its first edition—making community through politics, not politics through community. The distinction matters because the second model is far more common, and far more dangerous. Martin Luther King, writing on tokenism, identified the mechanism with precision—the inclusion of a symbolic few from marginalised groups as a way of giving the appearance of change while leaving structures intact.¹³ What he described has its cultural equivalent in the way racialised communities are mobilised in Italian political and cultural spaces: invited to participate, asked to speak, used to signal diversity and progressiveness, but rarely given control over the terms of their participation or the resources that make it sustainable. Racialised experience becomes raw material—extracted, translated, made legible—while the spaces that extract it remain structurally unchanged.

Blackn[è]ss Fest was built in explicit refusal of this logic. This refusal has a structural dimension. All speakers, performers, workshop facilitators, and organising team members are racialised people. This is not incidental—it is a structural choice that shapes every dimension of the festival's programme and political practice. It refuses the logic by which racialised experience is invited into spaces that remain controlled by others and insists instead that the people most affected by the conditions being discussed are also the people who design, facilitate, and are accountable for the space itself.

This refusal also has a material dimension. Every collaborator is fairly compensated. In a cultural

sector that routinely relies on the unpaid or underpaid labour of racialised people, paying everyone involved is a political act. It refuses the normalisation of exploitation that Federici's analysis identifies as foundational to the system¹, and insists that Black and racialised knowledge has value that must be materially recognised, not merely symbolically celebrated.

The refusal also has an institutional dimension. Fanon analysed how the colonised subject seeking recognition from dominant institutions internalises the criteria of that recognition—performing legibility, moderating anger, separating analysis from experience—in exchange for conditional and always revocable access.¹⁴ The mechanism Fanon described operates with precision in contemporary Italian cultural spaces. The acceptable Black subject is the one who does not disturb the consensus, who performs excellence without putting structures in crisis, who provides visibility without demanding redistribution. Spaces like Blackcoffee_pdc and Blackn[è]ss Fest are unsettling precisely because they refuse this bargain. They do not seek institutional recognition as a condition of legitimacy. They build legitimacy within communities, on communities' own terms.

This is not a simple or tension-free process. Each edition of the festival has confronted the contradictions that emerge within racialised spaces—the hierarchies of gender, class, and sexuality that are reproduced even in anti-racist contexts, the pressure to perform solidarity without addressing internal accountability, the difficulty of building political relationships that are honest rather than merely cohesive. The festival has not resolved these tensions; it has made space for them. The third edition's workshops on privilege within racialised communities, the explicit inclusion of queer space and queer collaborators across editions, the practice of returning to difficult questions rather than declaring them settled—all of these are forms of internal accountability that distinguish the festival from spaces that use community as a backdrop rather than engaging it as a political subject.

hooks writes that choosing the margin as a space of radical openness means refusing to see the margin only as a site of deprivation and insisting instead on its generative possibility.¹⁵ Blackn[è]ss Fest has practiced this across five editions—and is practicing it again in its sixth. Not by claiming exceptionality, but by insisting on replicability—that a different cultural economy is possible, that fair compensation and political independence and community accountability can coexist, that what has been built here can inspire other grassroots initiatives to build something similar elsewhere.

The three elements this article has traced—domestic work as epistemic position, Blackcoffee_pdc as diasporic counter-archive, Blackn[è]ss Fest as collective laboratory—are not separate projects. They are a single movement: from the intimate knowledge of the uncompensated housework to the unfiltered voice to the collective space where that voice finds others. Each made the next possible. And together they demonstrate something that neither academic research on migration nor mainstream cultural production in Italy has yet fully reckoned with—that the communities most affected by racialisation and exclusion are not waiting to be studied, represented, or included. They are already building.

CONCLUSION

This article takes its title seriously. The margin is not a temporary condition to be overcome on the way to somewhere more central, more legitimate, more institutionally recognised. It is a method — a position from which certain things become visible, and from which certain kinds of political culture become possible.

The colleague I described at the opening of this article is still working. The *permesso di soggiorno* still needs to be renewed every year, through the same exhausting process, at the same understaffed police headquarters, with the same possibility of receiving documents that arrive already expired. The families I work alongside have not changed. The gap between their progressive self-image and their material practice remains. The structures that make

her labour necessary, and mine, and that of the many other racialised women who move through the intimate spaces of white middle-class Milan—those structures are intact.

What has changed is the capacity to name them. Not individually, in silence, as a private experience of frustration or humiliation—but collectively, as a structural condition that connects her situation to mine, and mine to the broader realities that Blackcoffee_pdc and Blackn[è]ss Fest have been working to make legible for five years. That process of collective naming—what Freire called conscientisation, the transformation of lived experience into political consciousness¹⁶—is not a solution. It does not change the law, or the labour market, or the intimate dynamics of the houses where we work. But it changes the conditions under which those realities are carried. It makes them shareable, analysable, and therefore actionable.

This is what making political culture from the inside looks like. Not the production of content for audiences that remain external to the realities being described. Not the performance of legibility for institutions that require marginalised communities to translate themselves into acceptable formats. But the slow, underfunded, structurally precarious work of building spaces where the people most affected by a system can speak to each other about it, without filter, without moderation, without having to make their analysis comfortable for those it implicates.

The principle that has guided this work—making community through politics, not politics through community—is not a slogan. It is a daily practice, with all the difficulty and contradiction that it implies. It means refusing to use the community as a vehicle for agendas it did not set. It means compensating everyone, even when the budget is tight. It means making space for internal conflict rather than demanding performed solidarity. It means accepting that the margin is not a platform from which to appeal to the centre, but a site from which to build something that does not need the centre's approval to exist.

That is what this article has tried to document. Not a success story, and not a manifesto. A practice, still in progress, with everything that it entails.

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