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# Transnational boundaries of distinction: the social locations and subjectivities of Italian migrants in London

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## ABSTRACT

By using notions from race, class, migration and decolonial literature, this article explores the discursive strategies adopted by post-recession Italian migrants in London when trying to overcome the socioeconomic and cultural divides that separate them from the dominant British society, namely *transnational boundaries of distinction*. In doing so, it reflects on the nature of these boundaries, shedding light on how migrants' subjectivities become connected to wider cultural and historical processes of coloniality, Europeans' racialization and the contingent hierarchies of whiteness. The analysis suggests that to increase their proximity to the British majority, Italian migrants disclose strong beliefs in meritocracy and cosmopolitanism, perceived as inner features of Britain's more "modern" value system. These findings contribute to new thinking about migrants' social locations in host societies and support the development of theoretical tools, which are apt for making sense of migrants' subjectivities in relation to nuanced forms of racialization and intersecting inequalities.

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## Introduction

The imperative of migrants' social integration has been deemed to carry the exclusionary logic of citizenship and nationalism, together with references to assimilative and often colour-blind policies (Favell 2016). Indeed, critical literature argues that social integration's practices and policies may risk reproducing "asymmetries" between migrants and natives, creating feelings of "radical otherness" (Rytter 2019, 680), while reinforcing symbolic and physical boundaries between insiders and outsiders – namely, a sense of "us and

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them” (Yuval-Davies 2016). To address these challenges, new thinking is emerging to examine how migrants find their space and construct their belonging to the society they move to. Literature on multiple and intersectional belongings (Pawlak and Goździak 2020; Yuval-Davies 2016) and on “homemaking” (Boccagni and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2021) seeks to look beyond the imaginaries that cast migrants as inferior, while considering the affective dimensions of developing “security and familiarity” to the location of settlement (Pawlak and Goździak 2020, 78). To contribute to this shift of focus away from normative ideas of social integration, this article considers the inner relational aspects of “homemaking and belonging” while drawing inspiration from the vast literature on symbolic boundaries, namely the lines that are constructed to “include and define some people and exclude others” (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2001, 850) and on the notion of coloniality. It is particularly concerned with the discursive strategies employed by post-recession Italian migrants in London to achieve recognition and develop belonging while trying to overcome the perceived lines of distinction between them and members of the dominant British society. I refer to these lines as “*transnational boundaries of distinction*”, a notion developed from data analysis and informed by the idea of “coloniality” (Quijano 2000). Coloniality provides a way to investigate the nature of these lines/boundaries, linking the wider processes of European migrants’ racialization to the personal identities and subjectivities of migrants (Robins 2019) and their social location within host societies.

Since the European enlargement and more recently Brexit, a wide body of research has documented the racialization of white minorities in Europe, particularly Eastern European migrants (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2015; Paraschivescu 2020). Although Italian migrants in the UK have been less subjected to systematic forms of racial discrimination, they have remained anxious about their exclusion from the dominant British society (Varriale 2021) and about being associated with subordinate social locations within it. According to Nowicka (2018), there may be different logics that play out when migrants try to acquire a higher social status and gain cultural proximity to the society where they settle: a neoliberal logic entails that migrants construct a deserving and hard-working identity to show that they can gain from the meritocratic spaces offered by the host society; whilst under a culturalist logic, one migrant group tend to racialise other migrants as inferior as a way to raise their social status. As we shall see, the analysis suggests that the logic of coloniality has acted as a boundary-making mechanism, dividing Italians from British citizens. To overcome these boundaries, Italian migrants have articulated a set of discursive strategies that bring together both neoliberal and culturalist “logics” aimed at gaining “respectability” within British society as both a social and a moral matter (Skeggs [1997] 2002). Their focus has been on moving beyond symbolic and racial boundaries by promoting new subjectivities via

discourses of identity and value change that can bridge the perceived socio-cultural gaps between them and the dominant British society. Therefore, by reworking and adapting concepts developed from class analysis (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Molnár 2002), this article aims to contribute to new thinking about migrants' social and racial locations within host societies, which are particularly sensitive to class and cultural processes of exclusion. The analysis also provides alternative articulations for thinking about migrants' strategies to achieve social status and belonging within newly accessed societies.

The article will first present the concept of *transnational boundaries of distinction* as it emerges from data analysis and elaborated in relation to the literature on transnationalism, boundaries, coloniality and whiteness. It will then examine how this notion plays out in the empirical data by exploring how migrants' subjectivities are constructed to overcome boundaries of distinction and create a sense of belonging.

### **Conceptualizing *transnational boundaries of distinction*: the logic of coloniality, modernity and European whiteness**

Drawing on class and decolonial literature, *transnational boundaries of distinction* are conceptualized as classificatory mechanisms that operate between migrants and the citizens of the country of settlement producing lines of distinctions between people from different countries. Hence, transnationalism is a key feature of these boundaries. In the 1990s, Basch et al. in "Nations Unbound" ([1994] 2005) identified the development and deployment of transnationalism within the hegemonic contention that, since colonialism, has produced hierarchical relations between the colonized and the colonizer, and more generally between "a core and a periphery". Yet, their legacy has been overshadowed and since then, transnationalism has mostly focused on uncovering migrants' experiences in light of global and cross-border connections (Vertovec 2001), whilst placing comparatively less emphasis on the history of power relations and the roots of inequalities underlying these connections (De Jong and Dannecker 2018).

Here "boundaries" describes the "types of lines" that people use to categorize others (Lamont 1992, 1). Boundaries act as "conceptual distinctions" (or "interpretative strategies"), generating feelings of both similarity/dissimilarity and so membership/exclusion (Lamont and Molnár 2002, 168) which may have a "moral", "socioeconomic" and a "cultural" nature (Lamont 1992) or a combination of all three. As we shall see, the analysis elaborated on the formation of these boundaries, which are only partly constructed by the self-boundary work (Lamont, Pendergrass, and Pachucki 2001) of Italian migrants making sense of their social locations within the dominant British society. Yet, boundaries are also the result of wider geopolitical processes defining hierarchical positioning among nations and communities.

The conceptualization of “transnational boundaries of distinction” also draws on the notion of “coloniality of distinction” (Varriale 2021). This notion sheds light on the structural and societal mechanisms behind the formation and functioning of boundaries, while linking migrants’ social locations in the host society to both their class-based resources and the “logic of coloniality” (Mignolo and Walsh 2018). This logic reveals the historical and systematic processes of ranking world populations and geo-political areas as more or less rational, more or less civilized, more or less “white” and so more or less “modern” based on socio-racial (Quijano 2000) and cultural (Mignolo and Walsh 2018) criteria of distinction. Therefore, coloniality poses modernity as a power structure of distinction (Quijano 2000) where Western/Northern standards of civilization become the measure to evaluate and racialize Eastern/Southern nations deemed as deviant and culturally inferior (Quinones 2016).

In the European context, these dynamics also systematise different degrees of whiteness and positions within a scale of modernity. For instance, Boatcă (2007) applies the decolonial critique to the positioning of Romania within Europe, arguing that the country has been subjected to an increasing process of externally imposed “Westernization” and has been constructed as peripheral, lacking Western standards of civilization. In sum, “coloniality” helps to make sense of the historical and structural dynamics that lie behind Italian migrants’ (perceived) subordinate social locations within British society. In this sense, “transnational boundaries of distinction” are constructed in the interplay between migrants’ subjective self-positioning within the host society and the objective structural classifications to which they are exposed as a result of complex historical and geopolitical processes.

Finally, the logic of coloniality also links hierarchies of modernity to an understanding of whiteness as a hierarchical, nuanced and contingent category of privilege and distinction. Whiteness has both strong cultural and material bases influencing “the way race is spoken about and the meanings attached to it” (Garner 2006, 265). As Garner (2006, 264) puts it, “whiteness grants differential access to economic and cultural capital, intersecting with, and overlaying, class and ethnicity” and involves thinking more contextually about racialized power relationships. All white European migrants – even the most marginalized – are being positioned by host societies in more privileged and desirable positions than other non-white migrants. Nonetheless, the way Eastern Europeans have been racialised and exposed to racial discrimination in Western European countries (Fox 2013; Rzepniowska 2019) shows how whiteness works across its internal hierarchies and within transnational European contexts of distinction. This article will explore how transnational boundaries are constructed and experienced by Italian migrants in the UK and how boundary-making relates to both pre-migration experiences and the interactions between different communities both in Italy and the UK.

## **Transnational boundaries of distinction: hierarchies of European whiteness, meritocracy and cosmopolitan subjectivities**

There is plenty of evidence that Romanians – and more generally, Eastern Europeans – have been subject to coloniality-like forms of subordination and are constructed as inferior and peripheral to other European groups. By contrast, Italians' position within hierarchies of whiteness and of scales of modernity is more blurred and the value of the Italian case is not in the unique experiences of exclusion that it presents, but in its potential to test and explore theoretical tools that can make sense of the distinctions between migrants and the dominant society they move to. Historically, Italy – as the main site of the Renaissance and home to important trading centres such as Venice, Florence and Genoa throughout the sixteenth century – had a defining role in the formation of the Western discourse of modernity (Mignolo 2007, 479). Yet, later Italy lost its centrality, became subject to foreign domination and had to engage in a long process of nation-building during most of the 1800s. Italian colonialism only began late in 1890 and remained geographically less extended than that of other European countries but, as critical Italian studies have warned, it was no less exploitative or violent (Pesarini 2021). During the 1880s, only two decades after its unification, Italian large-scale emigration to the Americas and North Europe also began and it continued throughout most of the twentieth century. The racialization of these first pioneer Italian migrants has been a subject of discussion (Caiazza 2018), with their whiteness put under question (Roediger 1993; Guglielmo and Salerno 2003).

As we shall see, in line with other research evidence, most white Italians in the study did not voice direct experiences of racialization in London and – for those from ethnic minority backgrounds – racial discrimination was more of a concern back in Italy than in the UK, which was perceived as a safer space. Nonetheless, Italian migrants disclosed a subtle sense of apprehension about being perceived as having a lower status within British society. The destabilizing effects of Brexit also play a role by making the previously “invisible” European migrants suddenly more visible and unwelcome (Mazzilli and King 2018). These fears also relate to the liminal social-racial positioning of Italians within the hierarchy of European whiteness because of their construction as whiter than some other Europeans, but also less white than Western and Northern Europeans such as white British people. Varriale's (2021) “coloniality of distinction” suggests that the social-structural positioning of Italian migrants in British society is exposed to the concurrence of their racialization as migrants with other axes of distinction, such as their Northern and Southern Italian roots, associated with unequal statuses. In sum, the location of Italians within racial hierarchies depends on overlapping national and transnational racialisations. While transnationally they remain subject to

subalternity and coloniality, internally, Italian identity has undergone a process of “whitening”. This process is based on cultural and biological traits that escalated during the Fascist era (Pesarini 2021) but still continue to portray “Italianness” as not fully attainable for Black and other Italian ethnic minority groups (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012).

The logic of coloniality helps to explain how transnational boundaries of distinction are drawn in the case of Italians in London, and so how their perceived sense of subalternity as migrants has developed in relation to these wider historical and cultural processes. Yet, this article also accounts for the subjective elements of boundary making and how Italian migrants draw boundaries but also try to overcome them by gaining “membership” (Lamont 2014) of the global and super-diverse city of London. To do so, they make references to cosmopolitan and meritocratic values as the main determinants of what sets Britain and London in a higher position within a modernity scale. These culturally mediated aspirations for meritocracy and cosmopolitanism express desires for an “allegiance to the world community” (Lamont and Aksartova 2002, 2) and for a fair system where social positions are acquired based on merit (Young 2008). As such, these aspirations contribute to Italians’ mobility (Varriale 2023) and are part of a wider Italian culture of migration (Franceschelli 2022).

## Methodology

This article draws on 51 in-depth narrative interviews conducted with Italian migrants in London, aged 23–40 years old (with the majority between their late 20s and early 30s). Following a narrative-biographical approach (Rosenthal 1993; Riessman 2008) respondents were initially asked to recount their life before migration, and then to tell the story of how they decided to move to London and how they explained their decision. The second part of the interview focused on their experiences of settling in London. We asked them what they remembered about the first few days after their arrival, the types of challenges they faced during their time in London, and how these were eventually overcome. The final questions were about identity and their sense of self and whether and how they felt migration had changed them. The interviews were aided by visual tools in the form of “life maps”: participants were asked to choose among pre-designed charts which one better reflected their migration trajectories, or they were given the option of drawing their own one (Miles, Savage, and Bühlmann 2011).

The interviews were fully transcribed, and the transcripts were analysed following a thematic narrative approach (Riessman 2008), allowing for both inductive and deductive coding. The concept of transnational boundaries of distinction was developed inductively from the data to explain the discursive strategies employed by Italian migrants to make sense of their

positioning within British society. The main themes were then generated more deductively based on the aims of the study and contextual literature. Four main themes were identified: (1) premigration, race and class; (2) distinction and the logic of coloniality; (3) linking boundaries, whiteness and modernity; (4) overcoming boundaries.

The sample includes 18 young adult women and 33 young adult men; three participants were from Italian ethnic minority backgrounds, respectively from Filipino, Caribbean and Libyan heritage. On average, respondents had been living in the UK for at least five years at the time of the interviews, which were conducted in 2019 and 2020 (but before the Covid-19 lockdowns and before the Brexit referendum became effective in December 2020). Most participants were qualified at degree level (many with a 3 + 2-year Italian degree); 10 had a master's, 3 had PhDs and 14 of them had FE qualifications. However, as detailed elsewhere (Franceschelli 2022), high qualifications were not necessarily associated with high socioeconomic backgrounds. We found high educational mobility among those in the migrant group compared to their parents, who tended to have lower qualifications (e.g. some only up to GCSEs and a few even lower) but a low occupational mobility, which is an established trend in the Italian labour market for these generations. There were several cases where lower-qualified parents were (or had been, if retired) in more professional, secure, and better-paid jobs than their children with degrees. Indeed, many participants in Italy – and some also in the UK – had been under-employed, often in part-time and precarious, low-paid jobs (Franceschelli 2022). All respondents in the sample were working full-time apart from one in full-time education, and they were employed in a variety of sectors from healthcare to hospitality, but also in the creative industries, marketing, IT, architecture, and urban planning. Participants were initially recruited via snowballing but to diversify the sample, we also used social media, and relied on gatekeepers such as a trade union group, a football association, the Italian Bookshop, and St Peter's Italian Church. These gatekeepers were interviewed and provided important contextual information about different generations of Italians in London. Pseudonyms were used in the reporting, and all the recognizable personal details were omitted or changed to protect the identity of participants.

### **Pre-migration experiences of race and class and transnational boundaries of distinction**

The analysis shows that the transnational boundaries of distinction were reinforced by pre-existing inequalities in the country of origin, such as those that affected Italian ethnic minority groups at higher risk of racialization. Research from the late 1990s and early 2000s (Andall 2002) has already identified second-generation Italians as lacking a sense of belonging



to Italy and professing a strong desire to migrate to escape racial discrimination. Indeed, in Italy, notions of Italian citizenship and Italian national identity are racialised (Bauer 2018) and predominately associated with whiteness (Pesarini 2021). In this context, the analysis suggests that Italians in London engage in boundary-making that constructs Italy as lacking the interculturality and the cosmopolitanism of London. The accounts of Italians from ethnic minority backgrounds – such as Domenico, Thomas and Samuel – exemplify this point particularly well.

Domenico, Thomas and Samuel had very specific migration trajectories embedded into stories about their racialization and experiences of discrimination back in Italy (Franceschelli 2022). For Thomas, a 31-year-old of Filipino origin, born in Italy and working in the hospitality sector, Italy and London are marked by deep cultural and social lines of distinction which mirror different levels of interculturality and cosmopolitanism with an impact on subjectivities and belonging:

No. I've never felt Italian. This is the real truth. Italy does not make you feel Italian if you are not from a [white] Italian family. They always make you feel different. It doesn't matter where you come from and that you were born there. In Italy there is still this thing, for them, it's just a joke, they give you a nickname – 'Oh the Chinese!' they used to call me. It's just a stupid thing but it makes you understand how things are. You are never part of it. Why do they have to give you a nickname without knowing anything about you??! For instance, I'm not even Chinese. Nobody here [London] will ever give you a nickname because of what you look like.

While he feels that his cosmopolitan identity is well-received in London, he lacks a real connection to Italy:

My father still doesn't feel integrated [in Italy] after 30 years. And he's less integrated than me in London. And I have only been here for eight years [...] I feel like a citizen of the world. In the sense that I don't feel connected to Italy. I was born and raised in Italy, where my family is, but I feel London in these eight years has given me more. Italy was like the mother, but like always, then the children depart so I went my own way.

The boundaries between the two locations – Italy/London – and the hierarchic superiority attributed to London become even more pronounced when Thomas reflects on the possible difficulties of bringing up his mixed-race child (London-born) in Italy:

I think that Italy will not change any time soon. I'm scared of the new generation there. I don't want our son to grow up there. They would not understand what it means to be born to a [white] Italian mother and a Filipino father. They would see him as a different child. Here [in Britain] when you go to school there are black dolls, to make you understand diversity, that every single person is still a human being. Put a black doll in an Italian school – it will be chaos! We will

never change. (...) Italy seems a backward country, which instead of moving forward goes backward.

Thomas's accounts position Italy at a very low point on the modernity scale because of its enduring racism and racialised citizenship drawing multiple boundaries between ethnically different Italians. These accounts add a specific racialised element to the more general "Italian culture of migration" and so to the wider set of motivations that lead Italians to migrate (Franceschelli 2022). As Thomas suggested, these boundaries are embedded in the critique of Italian provincialism and take on a specific connotation in the accounts of mixed-race Italians, and Italians who are descendants of immigrants, whose experiences of racial discrimination become turning points in their migration trajectories.

Together with race, the class differences between Italian migrants are also a lens through which to explore how transnational boundaries of distinction reproduce previously existing inequalities back in Italy. The idea that migration produces and reproduces pre-existing class relations between the country of origin and the country of destination is well-established in the literature (e.g. Erel 2010). Varriale (2021) connects Italian migrants' class resources to the internal divides between a supposedly less resourceful Southern Italy and the North. These divides resonate with the logic of coloniality and continue to occur after migration, determining Northern and Southern Italians' more/less subordinate positions within British society. The divides also shed light on the multi-layered nature of transnational boundaries of distinction and therefore on Italians' locations within social hierarchies of whiteness and modernity.

The interview with Matteo, a 35-year-old from Rome working for a housing association, demonstrates how in-group boundaries emerging in the country of origin affect the out-group transnational boundaries after migration. Matteo identified two types of Italian migrants: the "xenophiles", who are mostly concerned with fitting in and belonging by assimilating with British values and British social practices and lifestyles, and the "Italophiles", who maintain a stronger attachment to Italian culture and stronger networks with Italy and other Italian migrants:

Xenophiles are people who come here following a myth about London [...] they want to be like them [British people], they don't want to miss out [...] Therefore when they arrive here, as we said they 'transplant', they switch, they change completely [...] they change in the sense that they start drinking tea with milk, they start doing the stupid things British people do, start to act as if they were English, try to mimic the accent, try to live like them as much as possible. But we will never be the same as them! If you're from Rome, from Bologna, from Perugia, from Foggia, you can't be one of them [British], can you? These are people [xenophiles, who] look for a house with the English, try to go out with the English, get engaged to English women or English men, [...] [as if]

that was a mark showing that they have made it: 'You did it! you entered the society!' Instead, the Italophiles are the ones who pack their bags with pasta, those who complain because the mozzarella here [in London] tastes like nothing, the weather always sucks, and feel that back home, 'I eat this and that for one thousand lire'. [meaning very cheaply]

For Matteo, the boundaries between xenophiles and Italophiles are marked by different levels of privilege. Those who come already with good levels of English, who study in London and work in professional jobs, tend to distance themselves from other Italians and aim to acquire a higher cultural proximity to British people:

[‘Italophiles’] will give you the usual talk of a nagging Italian: I miss this, I miss that, things are not working here etc ... while people from a higher bourgeoisie background don't care about any of these stereotypical complaints. They come here to study, they come here to get good jobs and to live the English life.

The analysis shows that a higher status did not necessarily prevent participants from socializing with other Italians (often of similar status) and being critical of aspects of the British lifestyle. However, it does also show – in line with Matteo's claims – that Italians of higher socioeconomic backgrounds were defining boundaries between them and other Italians of lower social status who were perceived as provincial, less cosmopolitan and less likely to fit in and belong to London. Marcella – who studied in a private school and went to one of the most prestigious Italian universities – reinforces the stereotype about poor Italians in London: “ah [those ones] who still carry Italian cheese in their suitcases and complain about rats in London and the rain!”.

### **Transnational boundaries of distinction and the logic of coloniality**

If pre-migration experiences shape the dynamics between national and transnational boundaries, it is after migration that transnational boundaries of distinction between the countries of origin and destination become more evident. In their discourses, Italian migrants suggest an ambivalence to how Italy and the UK relate to each other on a hypothetical hierarchical scale (of modernity). Compared to Italy, the UK was perceived as scoring higher on levels of modernity as shaped by its meritocracy, fairness and availability of opportunities whilst remaining difficult to fully penetrate socially in terms of accessing social networks and making connections with attached risks of exclusion (Franceschelli 2022). The logic of coloniality helps to make sense of these distinctions, acting as the rationale for the cross-country comparisons and the hierarchical positioning of the two national cultures and socioeconomic systems.

In the participants' accounts, representations of Italy and Italian mentality have often been articulated in opposition to representations of Britain and British culture. These accounts suggest that they had internalized a sense of subordinate distinction from the British society where they live, – as Matteo, one of the participants, stated – “Italy comes up short” of meritocracy compared to Britain. This distinction initially emerged from discourses about the ongoing economic, moral and political decline of Italy, whose main strengths were perceived as belonging to its memorable past rather than its present, as Giovanni, a 31-year-old sales executive from the province of Varese, articulates:

On one hand, we say we are very proud of being Italian, but equally, we [are] also dissatisfied with Italy. I don't know how to say it: *we feel inferior*. We think we have been superior in many things that usually come from the past (...) like the Roman Empire or Michelangelo. But regarding the present, we feel we have become marginal in Europe and the world more generally ... there are some shining exceptions, but the nation itself is undeniably in decline and I don't see ... I'm not positive at the moment about what's happening in Italy.

Italian “mentality” often associated with “provincialism” (Franceschelli 2022) came under sharp criticism from some of the participants. Francesco – a 28-year-old working in hospitality – said that he had become “ashamed” of being Italian:

Italians are the real problem of Italy. It's not only the politics, which already portray us [Italians] in a very bad light, it's our way of thinking. [...] If you don't leave the country at least for a while you don't even realise how bad it is.

The distinction between Britain and Italy and their places in the hierarchies of modernity were marked by symbolic, moral and socioeconomic boundaries which expose Italy's weaker status. The markers of symbolic boundaries were multiple. Mauro, who was working in media, pointed to “British hypercapitalism”, resonating with the qualities of a “Protestant-like ethic” (Bouma 1973), and “Italian Catholic religiosity” as the distinctive cultural features of the two countries. Even if he was himself critical of capitalism as an economic model, he could see how London's capitalism had the advantage of pushing people to be “active and proactive”, whilst Italians' obsession with Christianity was slowing the country down toward stillness and backwardness:

I prefer a city [London] that has embraced capitalism in a way that, yes, it can be intense, but it's straight about it, it doesn't lie or hide it and so it can enjoy the positives. Rather than hiding behind being Christians like in Italy, and then behaving exactly the opposite than we should. There is hypocrisy in all this.

The idea that Italy was culturally at a standstill was reinforced by references to its socially conservative values, and its general incapacity and unwillingness to move forward:

Italy is a country where nothing works. The speed of life is slow, and no one is doing much. There are no rules on which to rely upon. In here [London], they are organized. Things work and get done. Here we have rules, the rules are followed and you don't mess with them because people know about consequences and responsibilities. (Angelo, 27 years old, architect)

Professionalism at work and basic social etiquette like queueing and letting people overtake on the Underground escalators were cited as examples of more organized and better functioning British social practices that were perceived as lacking in the Italian context.

Although having decent living standards in Britain was considered difficult due to its high costs, British economic superiority was asserted in combination with British moral and cultural ascendancy. These claims mirror a specific version of the "Protestant work ethic" (Bellah 1963) that only partly relies on an individual's hard work, sense of the rules, and commitment but also draws on a system that promotes efficiency and supports merit. Britain's economic superiority was acknowledged by references to a better-performing, much more flexible and easier-to-access labour market. Mauro highlights the importance of "work" not just as a pull factor for migration, but as an essential condition of life, which he feels in Italy is denied to his generation:

[Work] is an essential condition of life. In the hierarchy of life priorities, work is the top one. At the end of the day, you can own a property or not, you can be or not be in a relationship – you will live. But you can't survive without a job.

Working conditions and access to jobs in Italy were presented as overall poor by those who had experience with them, but also by several who had left Italy before even trying to find employment there (Franceschelli 2022). The narratives about difficult access, "corrupted public concourses", and getting jobs only via "recommendations" were common among participants, together with complaints about poor working conditions, informal and low-paid work, and precarious, short-term contracts (and sometimes unpaid work). This bleak picture of the Italian labour market was contrasted by better experiences of working in London, particularly in terms of the recruitment process, length of contracts and opportunities for career progression. The described deteriorating socioeconomic circumstances in Italy pre-dated the recession and followed a bundle of political scandals that, starting in the 1990s, have led young people and young adults to develop an enduring sense of distrust for Italian politics and institutions. Italians growing up in the 1980s and 1990s have lived through the shortcomings of the last three decades and are now "infuriated" – as Anna, a 31-year-old marketing executive, expressed:

What makes me most angry is the fact that we had to leave [Italy] because there was no chance for us to grow up or have a future there, and it's something that

makes my blood boil! It really pisses me off! How many people are here to look for work and not because they have to learn English, as they say in Italy.

The idea that Italy has failed these generations of young adults was articulated by many other “angry” participants – like Mirco, who emphasises the idea of Italy’s subordinate position among the hierarchies of European nations:

Italy gave me absolutely nothing and if I wanted to achieve my life goals, I had to look beyond my doorstep. I had no choice but to leave.

Italy was praised for its slower pace of life and better living standards (e.g. better food, weather, cheaper housing, better support networks, etc.). However, these benefits came together with a feeling of being unable to fully enjoy them. As Francesca – a university researcher – put it “[the relationship with Italy] is like a dysfunctional [love] relationship, where you really want to be with someone who keeps on ignoring you!”. These discourses reflect how symbolic and socio-economic boundaries operating between the two countries acted as the main justification for Italy’s subordinate position.

### **Transnational boundaries and hierarchies of whiteness and modernity**

Boundaries of distinction are also built upon Italian migrants’ sense of exclusion, which was ratified by their self-identification as “less modern” and therefore – as Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy (2015) imply – also as “less white”. Although the analysis suggests that there were no explicit experiences of systematic racism, there was evidence of boundaries of exclusion being drawn upon a sense of lack of belonging, and there were concerns about being othered as “foreigners” – as Carla, an architect from Puglia, describes:

Being an Italian here means being a foreigner. You are not a local, you are not autochthonous. Even if your pronunciation is good enough that it doesn’t stand out, at the end of the day you are still the foreigner, who has different tastes than those of people here, who complain about the weather when it rains and so on.

As Carla points out, mastering the English language was one of the many markers of distinction. Mirco failed to get a job back in Italy after completing a master’s in London and became resentful. He speaks more directly about social exclusion from British social circles as another line of distinction:

I had the opportunity to join a football team. All the other players were English. I was the only Italian foreigner. There I understood what it meant to deal with predefined groups, where you are neither fish nor fowl.

These types of boundaries, shaped by the feeling of being unwelcome, reflect the specific climate in which the interviews were conducted: four years after

the Brexit vote, but before the Brexit deal was finally ratified. This particular time has been marked by increasing anxiety and a deepening uncertainty among EU migrants regarding their legal status in the UK (Lulle, Moroşanu, and King 2018), and has led to new pressures to demonstrate the deservedness of inclusion:

I know very well that I am only a guest here. But I have always behaved according to the rules, according to the values that my parents have taught me. Then if a person tells me, 'You are an Italian, go back to your country,' it does not bother me at all. I understand where it comes from.

Other research has shown that even East European migrants, more likely to be a target of racism, do not always disclose having experienced discrimination, in an attempt to negotiate a higher racial status within British society and dismiss the possibility of being racialized as less white (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2015). The hierarchical nature of the boundaries between migrants and natives is expressed here by the Italians' sense of compliance with their positions within racialized hierarchies of modernity/whiteness, as Mirco (above) and Giacomo both imply:

It is much easier for two English people to get along at work and they can communicate on a different level, right? And then also for business reasons, sometimes it is better for the manager to choose English people who can speak better English, who can write it better, and who have worked for English companies, rather than foreigners. (Giacomo, 31 years old, FE qualification)

Similarly, Lilia, who was working in a bakery and flat-sharing with several other people, suggests that transnational boundary-making involved the acknowledgement of Italian subordinate moral standards. She told the story of being refused a flat for rent because the British landlord "did not trust Italians". While she admitted feeling "upset", she denied that this was about racism and instead complained about Italians' behaviour, which increases their reputation for being untrustworthy: "We [Italians] make ourselves noticeable everywhere we go!".

The downplaying of Italians' racialization was also a class matter, and those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds highlight a different angle of boundaries/boundary-making by questioning the supposed superiority of the British. Yet, while doing so, they also ratify the transnational cultural distinctions. Amelia, who was one of the highest qualified with a PhD, spoke about how the appeal of London life is only a construct put in place to sell a product that hardly meets the promised standards, pointing at the glaring social inequalities of London and Britain. Similarly, Silvia, who qualified at a prestigious private university and was from a wealthy Northern Italian family, criticized the British class system as highly divisive and the British political system as unrepresentative: "They are class's psychopaths! Like nowhere else! They have castes really ... I don't understand how they

haven't had a revolution yet. Just look at the House of Lords ... they are ruled by 0.01%, who keep them [British people] ignorant". Ultimately, both criticism and compliance with Britain/London's higher hierarchical positioning were reflective of perceived boundaries of difference and distinction.

### **Overcoming transnational boundaries of distinction: cosmopolitan values and meritocracy**

With some exceptions, Britain, and more specifically London, continued to score higher than Italy on social hierarchies of modernity and related hierarchies of whiteness. In opposition to a traditional and nepotistic Italy, Britain was constructed as "modern" in the accounts of Italians by referring to its socially progressive values, mostly embodied by the ideas of cosmopolitanism and meritocracy. Becoming closer to these British cultural features meant acquiring membership of British society and becoming "respectable" within it. In attempting to do so, Italian migrants implement discursive strategies that showcase new subjectivities reflecting identity and value change, as Riccardo from a provincial town in the centre-north of Italy highlights:

When I saw two men kissing for the first time, here in London, I felt a slight sense of uneasiness. A woman driving the bus? I could not believe it at first (...). I am who I am, I am the product of where I come from. That's how things are there. But you change. Now I would not care about things like that. It's just normal, the London-normal.

Migration research has found that migrants' social values and identities change when they move away from the society of origin and become subject to complex value adaptations, often leading to a higher association with the values of the new country of residence (Rudnev 2014). This was the case with Italians who claimed respectability via cosmopolitanism and meritocracy as a proxy of the higher moral standing of British "modernity". London cosmopolitanism was key among the progressive British values cited by participants, and so, becoming more cosmopolitan was regarded as a milestone toward increasing cultural proximity to British people and more specifically Londoners. While cosmopolitanism as an aspiration and inclination to mobility is considered a characteristic of the Italian cultural milieu (Camozzi 2022), here I refer to some specific aspects of being cosmopolitan, which relate to being open to diversity. The analysis suggests that Italians perceived cosmopolitan identities as less attached to national territorial entities. Because cosmopolitanism is conceptualized as "an allegiance to the world community", it contrasts the idea of nationalism and national boundaries, which separate groups and are associated with sentiments of xenophobia and intolerance (Lamont and Aksartova 2002, 2). Catia was from the province of Catania in Sicily, she was highly educated but from a rather



humble background. Her trajectory from the Italian province to the British academic world reflects some of the key identity and value changes also shared by others in the sample:

I had exponential growth since [coming] here, in the way I relate with different human beings whom I would have never had the chance to meet before (...) So now I know how to relate to an Indian, I know how to approach Americans or Scottish, etc., it's a wonderful thing! Here I understood what it's like to live [in] the world in a general sense. London is beautiful because it encompasses a bit of the whole world.

Claims of having acquired cosmopolitan values were opposed to the Italian backward provincialism associated with cultural immobility (Franceschelli 2022). When comparing Italy to progressive, modern and multi-racial Britain, the symbolic boundaries that emerge between the two countries echo hierarchies of coloniality:

Yes, I definitely feel Italian, but [there are] certain things that are putting me off, things like people's prejudices; whilst in here [London] you can say 'I live with multicultural people'... Instead, I still see Italian provincialism and Italy's closed-minded mentality.

Another important route that migrants employed to reduce their distance from British society and acquire respectability and inclusion was expressing their belief in meritocracy, which in Italy was perceived as an aspiration, while in London was considered a tangible reality. Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy (2015) have previously found that East European migrants manifested a high commitment to meritocratic values to claim a higher status within British society. While the Hungarians and Romanians in Fox's study were not claiming to be middle class, their discourses about meritocracy enabled them to "lay claim to the status honour enjoyed by the middle class" (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2015, 739) and so they were able to align with the culturally specific values of the British middle classes. Similarly, Italians' support for meritocracy also allowed them to adhere to the social norms of the majority and to validate the possibility of them gaining recognition and respectability as deserving members of British society. This was attained on a moral ground by presenting themselves as hard-working and their migration as proof that they had contested and left behind the unmeritocratic practices common back in Italy. These claims of having achieved higher moral authority are part of wider discursive strategies behind the construction of "British modernity" – of which meritocracy was a substantial part. Italian migrants' subjectivities emerged from narratives of professional mobility and personal successes as a result of self-reliance within a system that rewards individual effort. A common denominator was the hard-working ethic that they put into their career/social mobility, often

moving up and across sectors toward higher professional fields such as healthcare, media, marketing or IT. The story of Luca – a fully qualified nurse who could not find any stable employment in Italy and succeeded against the odds in London – is exemplary of the many narratives of meritocracy expressed by the Italians in the study. Luca was one of the several nurses we interviewed in our research. He was from a small village with only a few thousand inhabitants in Calabria, the poorest region in Italy, and his parents had only secondary school diplomas. Leaving Calabria to study in Rome, Luca fully qualified as a nurse but got his first job in a call centre and then struggled through several low-paid and precarious positions for four years. After failing a public exam for nursing jobs, he decided to move to London. He started studying English, sharing a room with several people, and once again accepted underemployment and low-paid jobs like distributing leaflets to get by. However, as soon as his English got better, he succeeded and found a job in social care, which was closer to his line of work. That was the start of his professional advancement: from there, he got a starting level nursing job in the surgery department of a public hospital. He then went back to study and at the time of the interview, he had become the deputy head nurse of a large hospital department in central London. His claim of success was equally credited to his hard work and the meritocratic British system that allows resilient people to succeed:

My job: I earned it! I didn't know anyone, I sent my CV like many others, and I earned it ... so there is absolutely meritocracy and they really don't care if you are English, Italian or whatever.

These widely shared stories of upper professional mobility in London reinforced criticism about the failing Italian labour market and had moral implications for the representation of Italians as lazy and uncommitted, and Italy as a corrupt and unfair system.

These discursive strategies also contributed to the construction of the moral standards that shape “modern Britain”, including fairness, social progressiveness and cosmopolitanism. Importantly, both cosmopolitanism and meritocracy acted as whitening narratives (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy 2015) employed to shift attention away from Italians' possible racialization as less white and to bring them closer to British/Northern European degrees of whiteness and modernity and the related higher social statuses. By relying on an individual's traits, meritocracy downplays the role of societal structures – including race and class – in defining migrants' social positioning within the dominant society. Similarly, embracing British cosmopolitanism allowed Italians to promote colour-blind narratives and protect themselves

from the anxiety of being associated with other more subordinated migrant groups.

## Conclusion

Using scholarship on class, intra-European migration, decolonial and racial studies, this article has examined how migrants position themselves and make sense of their social and racial locations in the society of settlement. By drawing on these perspectives, the article has developed the notion of *“transnational boundaries of distinction”* to contribute to a new understanding of how migrants’ subjectivities and self-perceptions of their positioning relate to historical formations of transnational systems of distinction. These systems also evidence Europeans’ racialization and coloniality, by defining different degrees of modernity and whiteness. In so doing, this article offers new ground from which to explore questions of migration and belonging, beyond the “neocolonial” conceptions of integration that risk problematizing migrants as “others” (Schinkel 2018). In this context, the logic of coloniality has helped to contextualize how migrants’ subjectivities are affected by the threat of “being othered” and how their discourses respond to the perceived boundaries of distinction. While referring to Lamont’s multi-dimensional conceptualization of symbolic boundaries (Lamont 1992), findings suggest that transnational boundaries of distinction play out on a moral ground by attributing a lower or higher moral authority to people from different national-cultural contexts with different emotional implications.

Emotions are important markers of human mobility (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015) defining migrants’ sociality, identity claims and their attachment to both their homeland and their interactions with local communities (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015). Indeed, the described boundaries highlight a mixture of sentiments that Italians disclosed about their social position in London, including compliance and acceptance, resentment toward the denied opportunities at home, but also a desire to overcome pre-existing social hierarchies and move on with their life course projects.

Together with coloniality, scholarship on “whiteness” sheds light on the mechanisms of boundary making and, on the colonial-like assumptions about migrants’ subordinate positions and the expectations about their social integration. Even if Italians were not at such a high risk of racial discrimination, they remained concerned about their racialization as migrants and their lower-class positioning. The analysis reveals that to increase their socio-cultural proximity to the British majority, Italian migrants employed different discursive strategies aimed at showcasing their strong beliefs in meritocracy and cosmopolitanism. As other research also found, these beliefs functioned as a whitening practice, aimed at fostering migrants’ access to British normative white spaces (Fox, Moroşanu, and Szilassy

2015). Here, whiteness is indeed a bridging concept that interprets both classed and racialised hierarchical locations placed between these two dimensions of inequality and connected to both “the white skin of the mainstream” and “the socio-economic status of those excluded from it” (Paraschivescu 2020, 2666).

In sum, the notion of transnational boundaries of distinction presents a different articulation of post-migration identity and adds to the critical analysis of how migrants develop a sense of belonging within a global and super-diverse site of destination. Finally, this article paves the way for further research that accounts for non-white post-recession European migration and the additional effects of gendered forms of exclusion.

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