

Whitening Italian sport: The construction of 'Italianness' in national sporting fields

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Sandra Agyei Kyeremeh 

University of Padua, Italy

Abstract

This article examines the ways in which narrow understandings of race and Italianness are reproduced by those who govern and administer sport at elite levels of competition. By shedding light on how citizenship discourses establish who can and cannot represent the nation, I specifically focus upon the belongings and identities of Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage Italian women athletes. By doing so, this article elucidates the complex ways in which racially minoritized sportswomen fight for recognition within the Italian 'imagined community'. This article suggests that despite their commitment to, and pride in, representing the nation, their struggles have not proved sufficient to re-define Italianness: that is, to make it more open and inclusive of non-white citizens.

Keywords

citizenship, Italy, nation, race, the politics of belonging, whiteness

Introduction

In July 2018, the Italian female 4 x 400m relay team won the gold medal at the Mediterranean Games which were held in Tarragona, Spain. A photograph portraying the four athletes holding the national flag subsequently went viral. Besides national pride, which is characteristic of events such as this one, the image became an immediate media sensation. Arguably, it became notorious because it made visible the usually conspicuous absence of Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage Italian women athletes. The winners included Maria Benedicta Chigbolu (who was born in Rome to an Italian mother and a Nigerian father); Raphaella Luduko (who was born in Aversa to Sudanese parents);

Corresponding author:

Sandra Agyei Kyeremeh, Department of Philosophy, Sociology, Education and Applied Psychology (FISPPA), University of Padua, Via Melchiorre Cesarotti 10/12, 35123 Padova, Italy.

Email: sandra.kyeremeh@unipd.it

Ayomide Folorunso (who was born in Nigeria to Nigerian parents); and, finally, Libania Grenot (who was born in Cuba to Cuban parents). On the same day, in a Northern Italian town called Pontida, the leader of the far-right party Lega Nord (Northern League), Matteo Salvini, held a rally to call for ‘a Europe-wide alliance against mass immigration’ (Phelan, 2018). In contrast to Salvini’s anti-immigration rhetoric, on social media many Italians welcomed the news of the aforementioned victory; they saw it as a challenge to the rise of racism as well as right-wing populism in Italy.

The image of Italy as inclusive of Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage citizens became further evident in 2018, at the World Championship in Yokohama (Japan) where the Italian women’s volleyball team won the silver medal. Following this success, *Fuorigioco*, which is a supplement of the well-known Italian sport newspaper *La Gazzetta dello Sport*, dedicated its cover to the so-called ‘Sisters of Italy’: the women pictured – wrapped in the Italian flag – are the Italian-born volleyball players Paola Egonu (who was born near Padua to Nigerian parents), Myriam Sylla (who was born in Palermo to Ivory Coast parents) and Sylvia Nwakalor (who was born in Lecco near Milan to Nigerian parents). These Black-Italian women not only represented the multi-cultural history of Italy, but also symbolized the multi-racial constituency of the Italian athletics squad in Japan. As Papavero (2015: 2) and L’Eurispes (2015) have pointed out, immigrants who arrived in Italy during the 1980s and 1990s constructed a new ‘national outlook’ (Mauro, 2016: 13) which represented a growing number of Italian-born children. Consequently, it should not have been surprising to see more of these children as ‘second generation’ Black-Italians, wearing the Italian national team blue jersey or ‘la maglia azzurra’ with both joy and pride. However, their presence and acceptance as legitimate members of the nation remains contested. As Harrison (2013) observes (2013), sport is a crucial site where battles over the racial identity of a nation are ritually staged for public consumption, used to distinguish those who belong from those who do not. For instance, research about racism in sport (see Valeri, 2006) highlights the existence of a ‘colour line’ (Hylton, 2018), where spaces of sport operate as a ‘site(s) of precarious inclusion’ (Mauro, 2016: 2): that is, by separating legitimate from non-legitimate members of the nation, often based upon markers of race and ethnicity. Despite the significance of this work, with a few important scholarly interventions (e.g. Birrell, 1989, 1990; Ratna and Samie, 2018; Scraton, 2001), sociologists of sport have not critically interrogated the interconnections existing between sport, race and gender. More specifically, agreeing with Ratna (2014), I suggest that images of the nation are read through studies of race and sport by predominantly focusing upon men’s sports and men’s perspectives. Thus, the relationship between race, gender and sport – from the perspective of women athletes – is one that I seek to address through this article.

This paper, therefore, makes an empirical contribution to sporting knowledge, unravelling how the presence of Italian women athletes who are Black, foreign and/or of mixed origins disrupts the popular imaginary of sport in Italy as racially pure, white and male, as well as elucidating the strategies they employ to create their own senses of national belonging and Italian citizenship. When using the term ‘Black-Italians’, I refer to national subjects who were born to African parents (in Italy or overseas) and raised in Italy. When using the term ‘Italians of foreign origin’, I refer to the children who were born to non-African parents (in Italy or overseas) and raised in Italy. When using the term, ‘Italians

of mixed-heritage', I refer to the children who were born in Italy to at least one parent who holds Italian citizenship.

To do so, the first part of this paper reviews literature concerning race, citizenship and sport, in relation to historically grounded accounts of Italianness as a cultural identity. The second part introduces the methodology employed for this study, while the third part presents findings which emerged through 13 interview testimonies with Black-Italian women athletes of foreign and/or mixed origins and 13 representatives of sport in Italy (see below for further detail). This article concludes by arguing that Italianness is construed by sporting bodies, such as the Italian Olympic Committee, as a means to protect and (re-)whiten sport across the nation. By approaching whiteness as a gatekeeping practice, non-white national subjects' access to sport, and the right to represent the nation, is both in/directly surveyed and regulated.

Race, nation and the Italian context

In Italy, as in other European countries after World War II, the term 'race' disappeared from public discourse. Echoing Essed (2014: 68), Mauro (2016: 19) explains that such erasure is related to the association of the term with Italian fascism and the Holocaust. Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop (2013: 6) have also argued that race has been increasingly replaced with the concept of 'cultural difference'. However, as Petrovich Njegosh (2012) has noted, Italians' racial status has always been contested. For example, many Italian citizens struggled with embracing a white national identity during the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, between 1922 and 1943, with his view of Italians' Aryan racial status – as claimed in 'The Race Manifesto' (published in 1938) – being contaminated by (white) Italian Jewish people who were considered as a distinct (and inferior) race from the 'real' (and superior) Italian stock of people (Forgacs, 2014: 107). Definitions of Italianness, however, are based on a longer history. For instance, during the Liberal era, between 1861 and 1922, southern Italians were often racialized as 'Other'. According to Giuliani (2013a: 26), the south of Italy, and several countryside areas in the north of the country, were considered as inhabited by 'cultural, social and political alien bodies'. Gabaccia (2003: 63) thus suggests that, at this time, the struggle for a pure and white racial identity constructed ideas about who could claim Italianness (northerners) – and therefore be deemed 'civilized' – and those who could not (southerners). However, during the fascist period, the colour line shifted, allowing for southern Italians to identify as 'white' by marking themselves as racially superior to those positioned as former colonized subjects (Giuliani, 2013a: 60). In Italy's East African colonies, for instance, the racial superiority of all Italians was established by refusing Italianness, whiteness and civility, to those who were identified as of Hamitic origins. Thus, past preoccupations with racial and colonial distinctions continue to play a key role in current debates about nationality and belonging in Italy.

Zincone (2006), for instance, argues that Italians' understanding of citizenship, which she calls 'familist', is stubbornly grounded on the principle of *ius sanguinis*. According to this principle, citizenship is transmitted by means of blood ties, passed on from generation to generation. This principle has led to the implementation of a rather restrictive naturalization law (Caponio, 2007: 164): that is, automatically disqualifying citizenship

at birth to children of foreign parents. Rather, under Law no. 91, the children of immigrants ‘must wait until their 18th birthday to apply for Italian citizenship’ (Frisina and Hawthorne, 2017: 1). Such provision not only prevents Italian-born nationals from accessing important social, economic and civic services, it also precludes them from being viewed as valued members of the nation. Therefore, whiteness and white privilege do not necessarily correspond to a specific racial identity but are conflated with normality and universality, understood as opposed to Blackness, which is conversely associated with racial impurity, deviance and inferiority (Pinkus, 1997: 134–135). For more than 10 years, civil and activist associations have advocated to reform Law no. 91; campaigns such as ‘I am part of Italy too’ (2012) or ‘Italians with no citizenship’ (2016) have thus brought the status of children of migrants to public and political attention. This historical context particularly reveals that race, as Stuart Hall (1996) has argued, is a ‘floating signifier’ that is continually re/constructed and re/produced to mark the boundaries of national inclusion and exclusion, across time and space (Ferriter, 2019: 24).

Race, sport and gendered re/presentations of the nation

The chant ‘(T)here are no Black Italians’, which was directed to the Black-Italian football player of Ghanaian heritage Mario Balotelli, highlights the impossibility for football fans to see Italian national identity as non-white. A Black-Italian athlete such as Balotelli is, in fact, perceived as a threat to the whiteness of the Italian nation (Doidge, 2013). Dedication, effort and commitment are therefore demanded of Black, foreign and/or mixed-origin athletes – although deemed as a given for ‘white’ Italians – and read as further ‘proof’ of their loyalties to the nation. However, even when their loyalty is celebrated, national belonging and acceptance is never fully guaranteed. Balotelli is, again, a case in point. In 2012, he was hailed as an ‘Italian hero’ for scoring against Germany during the Euro semi-final football match but, in 2014, he became the scapegoat for the Italian team’s failure to qualify for the World Cup. On this occasion, Balotelli was accused of not ‘being a real Italian’ – that is, not truly committed to the ‘maglia azzurra’ – while also, at the same time, being depicted as a ‘cannibal wearing a skirt, made out of bananas’, in the Italian national newspaper *Libero*.

Black female athletes have not been spared from similar racist attacks. The aforementioned Black-Italian volleyball player Paola Egonu reported how, during a match in 2016, she was repeatedly called racial slurs such as ‘monkey’. However, as she won the 2018 World Championship and her performance in Japan was so highly regarded, she earned the moniker of ‘white’ sister. Abiola Wabara’s case, likewise, highlights the hostility Black athletes are made to endure in order to participate at elite levels of Italian sport. During a basketball match played in 2011, Wabara, a Black-Italian woman born in Italy to Nigerian parents, was both called racial slurs and spat on by rival team supporters. As Balotelli, Egonu and Wabara’s cases demonstrate, naturalization is far from sufficient to be included in the ‘(white) imagined community’ of the Italian nation. Sport thus represents an arena to explore how whiteness, and white privilege, are both constructed and maintained via institutional racism as well as tropes of racial, colonial and national otherness (Spracklen, 2001). Thus, there is a need to move beyond common beliefs which hold sport as a meritocratic and colour-blind space where a ‘level playing

field operates' (Hylton, 2010: 336). Arguably, there is a need to be suspicious of social institutions, including those of sport, and to empirically reveal the impact of organizational policies and practices upon the national identities and belongings of both male and female Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage athletes. I do so, in particular, through an analysis of the identities and experiences of 13 elite, international, Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage Italian sporting women.

Methodology

To unravel how the major national sport organizations in Italy reproduce a certain understanding of race, racism and national identity, with particular focus upon Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage Italian women athletes' experiences of playing sports such as volleyball, cricket, football, basketball, athletics and rhythmic gymnastics – at elite levels of international competition – between March to June 2016, I conducted interviews (mostly via Skype) with 13 sportswomen. In this article, I employed excerpts from the interviews with two Black athletes who hold an Italian passport (one of them also holds her parents' native country passport) and a Sinhalese athlete who does not hold an Italian passport. The remaining excerpts were taken from interviews with three sportswomen of mixed origins. Two of them were born to Italian mothers and one of them to a non-Italian mother. One of them also holds dual citizenship.

The sample included athletes from both individual and team sports. The interviewees were young women, between 18 and 36 years old, who come from the north and south of Italy, including 6 athletes who were/are in the Italian army. Overall, 6 out of 13 interviewees were semi-professional athletes earning a low and/or irregular income. The latter were given a daily allowance handed out to cover living expenses while travelling for international games. Furthermore, I conducted another 13 semi-structured interviews with coaches, sport sociologists and journalists, as well as racism experts. These included the president of the Italian Olympic Committee and the Italian Association of Sport for All. These experts were selected as much for their knowledge of Italian sports as for debating the problems and possibilities of national inclusion and exclusion.

The interviews with the women athletes specifically involved photo-elicitation as, in line with Frisina (2013: 35–36), I believed they could facilitate the recollection of past events related to their careers, athletic development and experiences as well as future sporting intentions and desires. For example, in order to explore questions linked to the construction of Italianness across different sport contexts, I showed the interviewees some photographs of popular Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage women and men athletes. Those photographs presented some Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage athletes in their moments of glory, wrapped in the Italian flag. I also showed two Mario Balotelli photographs: one while being immortalized in his Hulk celebration after scoring against Germany during the European Football Championship, 2012; and the other, the racist cartoon previously mentioned, printed by the newspaper *Libero*. Arguably, using photographs as part of my research helped me to understand how elite sportswomen saw the reality that surrounded them, permitting me to 'see through their eyes' (Chalfen, 2011: 27–34), as they analysed the photos and, with some probing, related back to their own sporting stories and self-representations. The interviews specifically

Table 1. Athletes.

Nickname	Gender identify with	Age	Sporting status	Race	Ethnicity	Citizenship(s) status	Geography
Adele	Female	26	Italian national athletics team sprinter	Mixed	Multiple ethnic backgrounds (Italian and Nigerian)	Dual citizenship: Italian and Nigerian	Central Italy
Alice	Female	18	Italian national athletics team hammer thrower	Mixed	Multiple ethnic backgrounds (Italian and Congolese)	Italian	Northwest Italy
Gioia	Female	19	Italian national athletics team, who specializes in the 400 metres hurdles	Black	Multiple ethnic backgrounds (Italian and Nigerian)	Dual citizenship: Italian and Nigerian	North Italy
Melany	Female	29	Italian national athletics team sprinter	Black	Multiple ethnic backgrounds (Italian and Ivorian)	Italian	North Italy
Rosi	Female	32	Italian national cricket team player	Asian	Multiple ethnic backgrounds (Italian and Sinhalese)	Sinhalese	North Italy
Victoria	Female	18	Italian national volleyball team player	Mixed	Multiple ethnic backgrounds (Italian and Brazilian)	Italian	North Italy

focused on the ways in which high-level sport reproduced meanings of whiteness and Blackness. If, on the one hand, the interviews were designed for the athletes to comment on their experience of racism, on the other hand, they allowed the interviewees to 'name their own realities' as a form of resistance in and of itself (Delgado, 1989, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1998: 13). According to Cook (2013: 185), this facilitates the production of counter-stories as grounded in the lives of those who have directly experienced race-related discrimination and/or privileges. Thus, some of the participants agreed to use their real names, and to be recognized as narrators of their own life-stories. Interviews lasted from 40 to 120 minutes and were audio-recorded via Skype. Further details about all the participants are noted in Tables 1 and 2.

Grounded theory approach guided my data analysis, using gerunds to name actions, events or situations expressed by the interviewees. I also applied in-vivo codings, drawing from the interviewees' own language to highlight popular terms, ideas, and the metaphors that they used to discuss their Italianness (Saldaña, 2009). Moreover, I used codes to label the emotions that they recalled which captured their experiences as Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage Italian women athletes. For example, the emotions

Table 2. Other stakeholders.

Nickname	Gender identify with	Age	Sporting status	Race	Ethnicity	Citizenship(s) status	Geography
A.C.	Male	39	Lawyer and Italian national under-19 female football team coach	White	Italian	Italian	Northeast Italy
F.J.	Female	30	High-level team cricket coach	Asian	Multiple ethnic backgrounds (Italian and Sinhalese)	Italian	Central Italy
Nicola Sbetti	Male	29	History of sport scholar and former cricket player	White	Italian	Italian	Northeast Italy
Simone Gambino	Male	56	Former president of Italian Cricket Federation	White	Italian	Italian	Northeast Italy

expressed about episodes of discrimination that they were subjected to, heard and/or witnessed (Salvini, 2015: 91). From this process of coding, and reviewing codes across all the material garnered from the different interviews, a number of key themes emerged: that is, in relation to both racist and socially inclusive sporting eligibility laws; the complexity of the interviewees' senses of belonging; and, with regard to forms of resistance, how the Black-Italian women athletes marked and celebrated their own senses of Italianness.

As a Black-Italian woman, and a Black researcher, in a predominantly white academy – such as the Italian one – my position was significant to how I comprehended 'the double or (multiple) consciousness' (Ladson-Billings, 2003: 421 cited in Maylor, 2009: 54) that was articulated by the research participants. In fact, being a Black woman researcher in Italy allowed me to better understand, specifically from an emotional point of view, the impact of discrimination on some of the research participants' lives. As in Ratna's experience (2018: 112), while dealing with other Black women, I have often thought about those moments 'of connectivity – in terms of both race and gender – and of dissonance'. Thus, unlike the misrecognition and isolation experienced by Black women researchers such as Maylor (2009: 55–57), in her studies of education in Britain, during my fieldwork I felt appreciated by those I was researching. In fact, at the beginning of my fieldwork, the support of my research participants encouraged me to continue with my work as a means to re/present their/our sporting life-stories; to take pride in my Ghanaian heritage even though my belonging within the Italian nation is also popularly perceived as tenuous. In my opinion, my presence as an 'outsider within' the white (male and elitist) structures of academia, sport and the nation gave me the ability to connect

with the racialized and gendered realities of Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage Italian sportswomen. Like Ratna (2018: 112–113), I therefore seek to unmask and challenge white privilege, and to critically analyse the relationship between sport, gender and race, especially through an empirical analysis of the experiences of Black, foreign and mixed-origin women.

Protecting whiteness in the Italian sporting field

As Valeri (2015) has noted, Italian national guidelines prevent Roma people, immigrants and their children from participating in sport. Starting from their word choices, through their policy regulations, many national sports Federations have effectively created a ‘geography of exclusion’ (Sibley, 1995). As Nicola Sbeti, a white male Italian history-of-sport scholar and former cricket player, pointed out during his interview, terms such as ‘national breed’ signify the country’s ‘clamorous fascist legacy’, which likens blood ties to citizenship status, national identity and belonging (Donati, 2013: 232). By enshrining conceptions of the ‘national breed’, Italian sport governing bodies operate as spaces where ‘brand new citizens’ – sharing dominant values and white skin colour – are forged and cemented (Doidge, 2019: 174–175). Consequently, the preservation of such national spaces symbolizes the defence and re-whitening of the imagined community. For instance, the Italian Olympic Committee National Council resolution adopted on 1 July 2004 aimed to make sports accessible for a wide range of participants, but was underpinned by exclusionary rhetoric about how the Italianness (read: whiteness) of sports must be protected at all times. As Mauro (2016: 7) has pointed out, quotas rationing the number of non-European Union (EU) national players allowed to be registered, and effectively play in domestic sport leagues, is also biased. Child athletes born/raised in Italy to foreign parents are exposed to processes of racial othering, due to their lack of citizenship, and are required to produce more supporting documents than their white Italian peers to prove their settled status. Such information is not always easily obtainable, such as an International Transfer Certificate and school enrolment certificates. The Italian Football Federation, for example, previously requested young players with an immigrant background to produce a copy of their residence permit (valid at least until the end of the football season) and proof that they have been living in the country for at least 12 months.¹ As A.C., who is a lawyer and Italian national under-19 female football team coach, reported with regard to one of her students:

Every year, far in advance, we have to send Doris’ documents for her registration to Italian Football Federation’s office in Rome in order to receive the authorization that allows her to play in our team . . . talking about her first two registration procedures, I think she did not receive the approval to play until the first 3–4 months after the beginning of the league . . . it took a long time for the authorization to arrive, because the office in Rome deals with a multitude of documents . . . now this issue has been addressed but at the beginning, in Italy non-EU citizens only held ‘the receipt’² and when they showed it, this was the answer they used to get . . . ‘No, you cannot register to a football team! No way, the law states that you need the resident permit to register!’ It is a struggle, it has been a huge struggle to register football players of foreign origins, multitude of papers, never-ending waits, unpleasant procedure in order to register the children, their parents’ income was asked as well . . . luckily this last requirement has been eliminated.

A.C., by explaining the existing registration process, policies and practices, elucidates how foreign-origin Italians are racially othered, and firmly positioned as outsiders from within the nation. Thus, children of foreign origins are still prevented from participating at higher levels of sport for reasons which have nothing to do with their athletic abilities. The conservative character of the Italian football governing body also highlights the ways in which ideas about national identity are reproduced: that is, Italian sporting institutions as gatekeepers of white exclusivity. Despite this white policing, from the sporting fields, a different understanding of Italianness also emerges. As the Italian female cricket coach and player F.J. of Sinhalese origin has observed:

As migrant numbers started to notably grow in the 1990s and children born to foreign national parents, without an Italian passport, began to practise cricket in Italian youth leagues, the Italian Cricket Federation asked to itself: ‘What are we going to do with those young players? How are we going to consider them?’ [Meaning: the same way as their Italian peers or as foreigners?]

The Italian Cricket Federation is one of the first national institutions that positively engaged with the increasing presence of non-citizen players, especially those who play in free public spaces all over the country. As the former president of the Italian Cricket Federation, Simone Gambino, explained during his interview, the Federation – during the early 2000s – negotiated with the International Cricket Council and the Italian Olympic Committee more inclusive eligibility criteria for both adult and child migrants to represent the national team. As he himself stated: ‘[I]n Italian sport what matters is to win, if you win an international competition with the Italian national team then you will gain social capital’. To put it differently, those non-EU citizens and children of immigrants who manage to succeed through playing cricket at the national level can claim a ‘sporting citizenship’ (Mauro, 2016: 154–157). As a matter of fact, as Sbeti has noted, the Italian Cricket Federation has been a pioneer in extending the residence criteria for non-EU nationals, who were raised in Italy, to migrants and their children. However, as Gambino clarified in his interview, ‘to respect [the] Italian Olympic Committee’s rules, they have had to guarantee a minimum number of “Italians” in the cricket national team’. The reproduction of Italianness requested by the Italian Olympic Committee, sadly limits the formation of a broader definition of national identity and belonging. Thus, whilst the Italian Cricket Federation’s willingness to include children of immigrants is evident, it still appears to be subjected to ever-shifting citizenship requirements. For example:

They [International Cricket Council] do not use the term Italianness but this concept is implied when using the term ‘indigenous players’ . . . I would like to say a few words about this expression . . . [indigenous player] could also be used to call your children . . . who do we point out when we use those terms? Indigenous Italians do not exist anymore . . . is the guy who lives in your neighbourhood and married a German woman more Italian than you? Do you get me? They should rather focus on the place where you were raised.

As Valeri (2014: 84–86) has noted, other national sports federations such as those of athletics, badminton and boxing, for example, do not prevent the children of migrants

from playing at the national level; thus they are becoming increasingly popular with Italian-born Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage residents of the nation.

The picture that emerged from the interviews conducted for this study highlights a clear disconnection between sporting institutions such as the Italian Olympic Committee and the Italian Football Federation which labours to maintain an exclusive representation of Italianness, and new emerging national sport associations whose ideas about who can represent the country at the national level are becoming far more inclusive (Beck, 2006 as cited in Mauro, 2016: 13).

‘Why a Black person cannot be considered Italian’

As Long et al.’s (2014) analysis of leisure spaces points out, sports represent contested territories which can and do simultaneously include and exclude racial and ethnic minorities. According to Back et al. (2001: 83), sport competitions should be considered as ‘a ritual activity where the relationship between race, nation and inclusion is continuously built and re-built, through the coded signifier “us”’. In this regard, 26-year-old Black-Italian sprinter Adele’s testimony, as someone who has represented the Italian athletics team, is illuminating. Whilst reflecting upon the Italian Athletics Federation’s and the Italian Olympic Committee’s invitations to speak at conferences that they organize with regard to sport and racism, she stated:

I know that there are many problems, they exist but I am lucky, I have been lucky [smiling], dad is Nigerian, and mum is Italian, isn’t that right? For example, at the second last conference I attended, they made me feel . . . like my mere presence was going to make the whole Italian press and society know how open-minded the Italian Athletics Federation and Italian Olympic Committee’s are to cultural integration . . . the same used to happen with my army athletics group, where me being there showed their openness to foreign people in Italy, do you get me? When this happens, my mind goes like ‘why do they involve me in this situation? I am Italian, ain’t I?’ [smiling]

Adele’s recollection highlights the gap that exists between how non-white Italians understand themselves and how others regard them. As she sees it, she is the daughter of a mixed-heritage couple, born and raised in Italy, and she cannot be anything other than Italian. However, for such sport organizations, Adele’s Nigerian father is what matters most. As she inherited from him her black skin colour and Afro-textured hair, she is automatically positioned as an outsider to ‘us’, and thus strategically used to prove Italian sport associations’ commitment to cultural integration.

Similarly, the 18-year-old Black-Italian hammer thrower Alice, who represented the Italian athletics team, stated:

[I]f we talk about people like me, people who like me were born here [Italy], I was born here, although I am not white I am Italian. Although I am mixed-race . . . I am Italian, and I do think of myself as 100% Italian.

Rosi too, who is of Sinhalese origin and has played for the Italian cricket team, elaborated on the need to de-racialize Italianness (Frisina and Giuliani, 2016: 81):

It does not matter where you were born or where you come from, do you follow me? None of this matters. What matters is that foreigners, Italians, Sinhalese and Africans live together in this country, we all live in Italy . . . If I can do something good for Italy I will happily do so as I live here, I work here, I love this country!

Rosi's claim to belonging highlights what Yuval-Davis (2006: 199) has defined as a subjective and/or emotional sense of citizenship: that is, the possibility for non-national subjects to forge connections with a place and/or a community that reflects their sentimental attachments (Wright, 2015: 391). Rosi's understanding of belonging as a feeling which grows out of living in the same place also resonates with what Carrillo-Rowe (2005: 28) has defined as 'differential belonging'. In her elaboration, 'differential belonging' refers to the existence of alternative, fluid and multiple models of belonging. Melany's interview further exemplifies this stance. Melany is a 29-year-old Black-Italian sprinter. Identifying herself as an Italian athlete, she does not feel the need to minimize her Ivorian origin. Her identities are composite as much as her feeling of belonging are multiple. As with the other interviewed athletes, Melany's statements highlight the floating nature of belonging (Colombo, 2014: 32) as the challenge that the children of migrants and mixed-heritage couples pose to dominant and racially exclusive notions of Italianness (Colombo and Rebughini, 2012: 119). Likewise, as Sbetti has observed in his interview, 'de facto Italian citizens', who also happen to practise sport professionally, reclaim their multiple identities as a cultural marker of their Italianness despite state-regulated efforts to constrain their identity within the parameters of their origins (Frisina et al., 2010: 157).

'Oh my God, my heart skips a beat every time I wear the Italian blue jersey!'

The presence of Black female athletes of foreign and/or mixed origins in national sports teams reflects the social changes that are taking place in Italy more broadly. In other words, their increasing visibility in the national sport scene obliges white Italians to rethink 'the colour' of the nation. Sociologists of sports are also registering the change and, accordingly, critically problematizing Italianness as a hegemonic representation that excludes non-white bodies from 'the imagined community' of the nation (Giuliani, 2013b: 256). This representation is exactly what the sportswomen I interviewed resist against in order to not be marginalized. Through their plural voices, and the mere presence of their Black bodies in predominantly white spaces of sport, the female athletes 'name their everyday realities' (Ladson-Billings, 1998: 13) and provide counter-stories about their own senses of belonging and Italianness. In many regards, by simply wearing the 'maglia azzurra', they have, almost heroically, re-signified one of the most important symbols of Italian national belonging. As Alice stated in her interview:

I am really happy to wear the Italian blue jersey, the first time I joined the national team I did not think about that too much but now I am putting more thought into it . . . I see myself as Italian and I belong to this country . . . I have never thought about the fact that being a Black-Italian can be seen as a problem by others, I do not care, I have never thought that somebody could disapprove of my presence in the national team only because I am not white. . . that does not make sense!

Similarly, 18-year-old Italian-Brazilian volleyball player Victoria explained that her sense of belonging consists mostly of an emotional investment to the place she lives (Anthias, 2006; Yuval-Davis et al., 2006). In the same vein, 19-year-old Black-Italian sprinter Gioia, who holds both Italian and Nigerian citizenship, described her relationship to the official Italian blue jersey as follows:

Oh my God, my heart skips a beat every time I wear the Italian blue jersey, every time I feel thrilled . . . at the beginning I did not want to spoil my national sport uniform so I started hoarding them in boxes, but then I told to myself: 'I cannot let them collect dust in the basement!', so I started wearing some during training sessions, sometimes, if I know that I have to try harder than usual, during training sessions, I wear the national jersey T-shirt or trousers to get more support . . . the national team means a lot to me . . . I feel like a serious responsibility it is put on me, that's why I try my best to honour it . . . I would feel insulted if someone tells me that there are no Black-Italians or that Black-Italians do not really commit to the nation because that would mean that people do not really understand how important it is for me to wear the Italian blue jersey.

As this excerpt illustrates, for Gioia, wearing the Italian blue jersey amounts to honouring her commitment to the nation. Her experience also demonstrates, the pride and pleasure that athletes such as her feel when representing 'their' nation, even if it is constantly questioned by the general public. As mentioned above, sport commentators and politicians have often interpreted minor slips in the performance of athletes (such as Balotelli) as a sign of their lack of desire to fully commit to the nation. In other words, any on-field mistake by them is sufficient for them to be (re)positioned as disloyal citizens and/or non-Italians, and thus acceptance into the whitened and whitening spaces of sport continues to be an on-going project for women such as Gioia.

Conclusion

The findings of this study reveal how the mere presence of non-white bodies in national sporting fields threatens to burst the fantasy that Italians cannot but be white (Giuliani, 2018: 3). As the first part of this article demonstrated, the children of migrants are often positioned as 'space invaders' (Puwar, 2004). Sports federations such as the Italian Olympic Committee's quotas on the number of child migrants who are allowed to play in national competitions are particularly telling of such an attitude. Similarly, as the second part of this article revealed, the bodies of Black sportswomen and/or athletes with a migrant and/or mixed-heritage background continue to be positioned as if they were 'foreign'. Seen as such, their commitment and loyalty to the country is also constantly questioned.

However, as this study also proved, sports can also function as 'a site of resistance' (Ratna and Samie, 2018): that is, national spaces where Italian female athletes of foreign and/or mixed origins negotiate, challenge, and – through their contestations – re-signify Italianness to include their lived realities. As most of the Italian sportswomen interviewed for this study testified, no matter how exclusive sport organizations' definition of Italian identity is, they all see playing at the national level as an important opportunity to

project their own understanding of belonging. This can be sentimental, as in the case of Rosi, or multiple, as in the case of Melany. Sadly, despite their best efforts at showing their pride in representing the nation in international sport competitions, Italian female athletes of foreign and/or mixed origins do not necessarily succeed at ‘de-racial[izing]’ Italianness (Hamilton, 2001: 496–497). As the case of the Italian Cricket Federation illustrated, sport organizations may support more progressive stances towards fostering inclusion, but even their most progressive initiatives have failed to shift the deep-rooted understanding that despite their love and loyalty for the country, sportswomen of foreign and/or mixed origins simply cannot be ‘Italian’ because they are not white.

The article contributes to both Italian and international debates about race, ethnicity and sports by showing the importance of focusing upon Black, foreign-origin and mixed-heritage Italian sportswomen’s lived experiences, and their multiple counter-stories through which their agencies and resistances can be explored, to unveil dominant representations, discourses and practices characterizing the white exclusivity of sport in Italy. It warrants further critical analysis of the whitening of sport and, at the same time, shows how the development and implementation of more progressive policies about who is entitled to represent the nation is needed, especially during these contemporary populist times in Italy, Europe and beyond (Thangaraj et al., 2018). The narratives of sportswomen are more specifically an important departure from male-dominated perceptions of race and the nation, which calls for future interrogations into how gender is significant to negotiating and achieving national inclusion, recognition and power (see, for example, Ratna, 2014) in both sports and from within the Italian national imaginary more broadly.

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ORCID iD

Sandra Agyei Kyeremeh  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8775-4694>

Notes

1. This requirement has since been abolished by the ‘Ius soli sportivo’ law issued in 2016, which states that youths with a migrant background born or raised in the country (at least before the moment they turn 10) have to provide the same documents as their white Italian peers in order

to be registered in sport clubs.

2. Non-EU citizens receive the receipt at post offices, after completing the first step of the application process necessary to obtain a residence permit. While waiting for their applications to be processed, non-EU citizens can use the receipt in lieu of the residence permit. For further information, see: <https://international.unitn.it/incoming/non-eu-citizens-stay-permit>

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