Second-generation attitude? African-Italians in Milan

Jacqueline Andall

Abstract This article examines the emergence of the second generation in Italy. It draws on in-depth interviews with young African-Italians in Milan, concentrating on issues of citizenship and belonging. It is argued that being black and being Italian are still seen as mutually exclusive categories in Italy. Moreover, the subject of the second generation continues to be marginalised within the broader framework of the contemporary immigration debate in Italy. In Milan, a generally hostile political environment, incidents of everyday racism and, in many cases, blatant discrimination, can be seen to have contributed to young African-Italians’ propensity to identify with the wider black diaspora and to articulate a desire to seek better opportunities beyond Italy.

Keywords: African-Italians; Milan; Second generation; Racism; Black diaspora; Citizenship

The diversity of Italy’s migrant communities, not simply in terms of ethnicity, labour market integration or regional settlement, but also in terms of the stage they have reached in the immigration cycle, has meant that, while some minority groups have a relatively recent presence in Italy, others are already at the second-generation stage. Public and political attention has continued to focus on new waves of migration and especially on undocumented migration. As a consequence, the conditions of settled communities have tended to be of peripheral concern to immigration social-policy makers, although the establishment of an Integration Commission¹ was intended to mark a new departure. The experiences of the children of migrants – the so-called second generation – have received little attention. Nonetheless, statistical data on the presence of migrants’ children in schools confirm that the ‘second generation’ is indeed a growing phenomenon.

In this article, I will discuss the situation of young African-Italians in Milan. The material presented is drawn from 27 semi-structured in-depth interviews held in 2000.² Of this total, 23 interviewees were born in Italy, and the remaining four came to Italy before the age of six. The interviewees were of Eritrean (14), Cape Verdean (5), Sierra Leonian (4), Egyptian (3) and Ethiopian origin (1).³ Sixteen boys and 11 girls were interviewed. Seventeen were aged between 18 and 22, five were aged 16 or 17 and five aged 13 or 14. In addition, several group discussions were held at an Eritrean and Ethiopian youth centre in Milan. The bulk of the research was conducted during the regional elections of 2000 where the Centre-Right, including the Forza Italia and the Lega Nord parties, won an undisputed victory in the Lombardy region, which encompasses Milan.⁴ The extent to which the promotion of a local cultural identity by the Northern League will have a specific impact on the second generation in the North of Italy

ISSN 1369-183X print/ISSN 1469-9451 online/02/030389-19 DOI: 10.1080/13691830220146518 © Jacqueline Andall 2002, Published by Taylor & Francis Ltd Carfax Publishing
is as yet unclear, although some research suggests that racism is more acute in the North than in the South (Cole 1997; Daly 1999).

It would be premature to seek to offer any definitive assessment of the second generation in Italy. Young African-Italians, either approaching or having reached adulthood, must be considered involuntary pioneers. Indeed, the second generation in Italy should be internally differentiated. The older second generation is largely the result of the initial labour and refugee migrations to Italy in the 1970s (see Andall 2000). The younger second generation, currently attending primary school, are increasingly the children of those ethnic minority groups who migrated to Italy in the 1980s and 1990s. The experiences of the younger second generation may well prove to be different from those of the older second generation, given that the former group is present in larger numbers and, moreover, is growing up in a social and political climate where the issue of immigration has assumed some prominence.

I shall be focusing on issues of citizenship and belonging in this paper, although additional themes were explored during the interviews. I shall be arguing that the very notion of the possibility of being both black and Italian remains a marginal concept within the broader framework of the contemporary immigration debate in Italy. Nonetheless, the presence of African-Italians will begin to challenge notions of what constitutes ‘Italianness’, already a contested sphere of enquiry (see, for instance, Barbé 1999; Rusconi 1993 and 1996; Segatti 1999; Triandafyllidou 2000). Although hyphenated senses of belonging are not yet fully articulated in Italy, interview narratives reveal evidence of multi-positality within the notion of diasporic space – a space which encompasses both ‘the local and the global’ (Brah 1996: 195). It is furthermore worth considering that, unlike the second generation in countries such as Britain and France, the second generation in Italy, influenced by more recent political trends in Europe, may be drawn towards the idea of a European citizenship that is divorced from national belonging.

The second generation

Two principal methodological problems arise in the study of the second generation. Firstly, as Portes (1994) has argued, methods of data collection can obscure the empirical diversity of the second generation, particularly where methods of counting ethnic minorities do not distinguish between native-born and foreign-born. This is of some pertinence for the Italian case, as migrants’ children assume their parents’ nationality until they reach the majority. This means that a recently-arrived 16-year-old from Sierra Leone is statistically indistinguishable from a 16-year-old of Sierra Leonian origin who was born in Italy.

A second and related problem relates to whom to count and include when referring to the second generation. Academic studies certainly offer no evidence of consensus. A classic study of the second generation by Irvin Child (1943: 3) refers to immigrants’ children, ‘either born here [USA] or brought from the mother country at an early age’. Portes and Zhou (1993: 75), prominent contributors to the second-generation theoretical literature, define the second generation as ‘native-born children with at least one foreign-born parent or children born abroad who came to the United States before age 12’. Similarly arbitrary definitions of the second generation can be found in the literature dealing with the European context. Wilpert (1988: 3) includes ‘children … who may or may not
have been born in their parents’ country of origin’ and Modood (1997a), in a study of qualifications attained by people of different ethnicities in Britain, uses ‘the second generation’ to include those born in Britain or who had arrived in Britain before the age of 15. From a methodological perspective, it seems clear that including both native-born and 15-year-old foreign-born in the same survey is likely to affect research questions probing issues of identity, social integration, and identification with the home culture in quite a significant way. Rumbaut (1997) has promoted a more precise differentiation of the second generation, by introducing the terms 1.25, 1.5, and 1.75 generation – referring to foreign-born children arriving before the ages of 6 and 12, and after 12, respectively. As noted above, my approach defines the second-generation category to include those born in Italy or who arrived before age 6 (i.e. before commencing school).

My theoretical framework draws on the body of literature that relates to the new second generation in the USA. Portes and Zhou (1993) have developed the concept of segmented assimilation to account for the variable outcomes of processes of adaptation amongst the second generation. This theory focuses on modes of incorporation as a means of predicting outcomes. Recognising that society consists of ‘segregated and unequal segments’ (Zhou 1997: 984), Portes and Zhou (1993) recognised a tripartite model of adaptation, which included acculturation and integration into the white middle class (this was seen as the outcome for children of European ancestry), permanent poverty and assimilation into the underclass, or rapid economic advancement with deliberate preservation of the migrant community’s values. In other words, the assumption is challenged that a straightforward acceptance of the values, aspirations and work models of the majority population is necessarily the best strategy for the social mobility of the second generation. In some circumstances, it is the retention of the values of the migrant community that offers more opportunities.

Irvin Child’s (1943) analysis categorised the second generation into three groups, the ‘rebel reaction’, the ‘in-group reaction’ and the ‘apathetic reaction’. The rebel reaction involves the desire to be accepted by the majority group and hence a rejection of the ethnic minority group. The in-group reaction displays a desire for acceptance from the ethnic minority community and a rejection of the majority community. The apathetic reaction involves an avoidance of the conflict implicit in the former two choices and the desire for compromise. Further descriptive categories associated with the second generation focus on the concept of ‘second generation decline’ (Gans 1992), where the second generation, neither willing nor able to accept jobs which offer low wages, low status and long hours as their immigrant parents did before them, consequently find themselves located outside the mainstream economy. The notion of ‘second generation revolt’, on the other hand, extends this concept by referring not simply to the rejection of the low-status occupations of their immigrant parents, but emphasises the development of ‘oppositional’ or ‘adversarial’ cultures to mainstream opportunities for social mobility (Perlmann and Waldinger 1997: 913). The notion of ‘second generation attitude’ could form an additional descriptive category. The term ‘attitude’ encapsulates both the positive and the negative. In relation to the second generation, it can be conceptualised as the expression of an assertiveness which is different from that of their migrant parents and which is, in fact, indicative of their ambiguous insider/outside status as citizens (sometimes) who do not necessarily belong. Although ‘second generation attitude’ has the potential to lead to a negative and non-conformist
relationship to the wider society, more positively it can also disrupt static conceptions of identity and nationhood and contribute to the construction of social and political spaces which can accommodate hyphenated senses of belonging.

A number of areas of tension have emerged in relation to the second generation in other European countries and different outcomes have been observed for children of stigmatised groups compared to other groups. North American models may be helpful regarding the Italian case because of the attention paid to the influence of ethnicity. In Italy, the range of ethnicities present and their variegated geographical distribution (King and Andall 1999) will make the socio-cultural characteristics of ethnic minority communities increasingly relevant for the Italian context. Marked regional economic differentiation as well as highly differentiated local political subcultures within Italy suggest the pertinence of segmented assimilation theory which recognises that modes of incorporation can vary from ‘affluent middle-class suburbs to impoverished innercity ghettos …’ (Zhou 1997: 999). It is probable, therefore, that there will be a segmented incorporation of the second generation in Italy. Precisely what form it will take, however, is difficult to predict at this stage.

**Milan**

Any discussion of the second generation in Italy cannot be divorced from the broader immigration debate. The immigration scenario in Italy has undergone significant change over the past 30 years (King and Andall 1999). The second generation’s experiences have been set against this backdrop of changing migration patterns and policies. Particularly in the 1990s, there has been a marked negative politicisation of the immigration debate and the stigmatisation of specific groups. Lombardy, the region in which Milan is located, has the highest number of legally-documented migrants present in any Italian region (265,883), accounting for 21 per cent of the total migrant population in Italy (Caritas di Roma 2000). Figures for the province of Milan record 145,358 foreign citizens legally present there (Caritas di Roma 2000), of whom 104,990 are resident in the municipality of Milan (Comune di Milano 1999). In Milan, some of the more established ethnic minority communities are those from Eritrea, Ethiopia, Cape Verde, China, Egypt and Chile (Caputo 1983). It is from within these groups that one would expect to find an adult second generation. Regarding the ethnic communities from which the interviewees were drawn, the following data are from the Milan municipality and refer to 31 December 1999: Egyptians 11,832, Ethiopians 1,470, Eritreans 1,104, Cape Verdians 131, Sierra Leonians 33.

The ethnic groups listed above travelled to Italy principally as labour migrants in the 1970s and 1980s, although Eritreans and Ethiopians also migrated to Italy for political reasons. As other ethnic minority communities in Italy become more established, a general rise in family formation can be anticipated. A notable rise in numbers is already apparent in primary schools. In the academic year 1985–86 there were 3,025 migrants’ children enrolled at primary school in the Lombardy region, compared to 3,073 at high school (scuola superiore). By the academic year 1994–95, while the number at high school had increased to 9,089, it had jumped much more massively to 20,199 at primary school level (Besozzi 1997: 10). By the mid-1990s, the Lombardy region had the highest number of migrants’ children
enrolled in schools in any region in Italy (23 per cent), followed by the Lazio region in central Italy (14 per cent). As mentioned above, the available data regarding children officially resident in Milan do not distinguish between those born abroad and those born in Italy. Nonetheless, using a definition of the second generation which encompasses those who arrive in Italy before the age of six, we find a total of 8,775 children from the principal migratory groups in the 0–6 age group, according to unpublished data from the Comune di Milano (2000). Available data indicate that, over the next ten years, the numerically significant second-generation groups in the Milan area will be of Chinese, Egyptian, Filipino, Moroccan, Peruvian and Sri Lankan origin.

Given that the second generation is currently concentrated in the younger age brackets, it is not surprising that much of the literature addressing this issue focuses on multicultural education in schools (Ghiringhelli 1999; Giovannini 1998; Salati and Spadaro 1996). In the mid-1990s, the municipality of Milan’s immigration office confirmed the ‘unproblematic’ presence of the second generation: ‘It is a presence which still does not have any social visibility, as it has not caused any great alarm as yet. They are children, whose impact for now is almost only apparent in schools’ (Comune di Milano 1996: 5). There have been a few isolated accounts of the second generation in Milan that have attempted a broader overview of their experiences (Murer 1994; Salati 1997). Nonetheless, the terminology utilised to describe their experiences tends to endorse a prevailing view of them as young immigrants rather than as young Italians.

Citizenship

It is widely recognised that citizenship, as well as implying both rights and obligations, can be conceived from various perspectives. The classic text by Marshall (1950) focused on civil, political and social citizenship. Yuval-Davis (1997: 68), on the other hand, has promoted a ‘multi-tier’ vision of citizenship, which is applicable to people’s membership of ‘local, ethnic, national and transnational’ collectivities. Here, by focusing principally on formal citizenship, I am not discounting these various perspectives. However, formal citizenship is an important aspect of citizenship, given that it demarcates the state’s power to include or exclude. Globalisation processes coupled with new migration patterns have begun to erode ‘the context for a citizenship based on belonging to a single nation’ (Castles and Davidson 2000: 156) and the formal establishment of a European citizenship, since Maastricht in 1992, can be seen as an example of the development of such new forms of citizenship. However, whilst first-generation migrants will not uniformly enjoy an entitlement to citizenship within the European Union (EU), the notion of an entitlement to citizenship, albeit based on differing criteria, appears to be largely in place for the second generation (Hansen 1998; Hansen and Weil 2001).

The major division in access to formal citizenship has revolved around ius soli and ius sanguinis. The former confers citizenship on all children born in the country while the latter confers citizenship on the children of existing citizens. The Italian legislation on citizenship, as was acknowledged by Livia Turco, then Minister for Social Solidarity, is skewed towards protecting descent (Turco 1999). Italian citizenship legislation was reformed in 1992 (Law 91); some of its provisions suggest an exclusionary response to Italy’s new status as an immigration receiving society. Two provisions stand out. Firstly, the period of legal
residence required for naturalisation for non-citizens was increased from five years to ten, conforming to a Southern European trend of new restrictive measures regarding naturalisation requirements for primary immigrants (Hansen and Weil 2001). Secondly and conversely, former Italian citizens residing abroad were able to re-acquire Italian citizenship, which could also be granted to their children. In other words, a more restrictive approach to foreigners resident in Italy was apparent, alongside a desire to accommodate Italians by descent, although not living in the country.\textsuperscript{15}

The 1992 law on citizenship was also more restrictive in dealing with the second generation. The previous legislation (Law 555 of 1912) granted naturalisation to individuals born in Italy of foreign parents if such individuals were resident in Italy on reaching majority and if they registered their wish for citizenship within a year (Pastore 2001). With the 1992 legislation, on the other hand, comes the provision that children born of foreign parents in Italy assume their parents' nationality. However, if they remain continually resident in Italy, they can request Italian citizenship within one year of turning eighteen. This notion of continual residence is of some significance and ambiguity. One of the reasons that some interviewees of Eritrean origin were penalised by this provision derives from the particular circumstances of their parents' migration to Italy. The 1970s in Italy, when increasing numbers of Eritreans migrated to Italy, were a period of radical social movements. One strand of this radicalism revolved around the occupation of houses. Given the lack of housing available for new migrants and political refugees in the 1970s, many Eritreans lived in occupied houses until they were allocated council housing by the municipality of Milan in the early 1980s (Galeazzo 1994). As a result of this initial difficulty with housing, and also because some parents were not fully aware of the rules, there was frequently a delay in recording their children on the register of births, marriages and deaths. This removed the possibility of automatic citizenship on adulthood if requested.

Several of my interviewees or their siblings had been affected by this ruling and were resentful of what they saw as a denial of citizenship. One 20-year-old young man, who was born in Milan and had always lived in the city, stated:

I have Eritrean citizenship, even though I was born here. I was born in Milan, it's just that my parents did not realise that they had to register me immediately ... They registered me five months later and because of this problem I have Eritrean citizenship.

When asked how he felt when his citizenship application was rejected, he stated:

Well, I felt rather humiliated. I have been here for 20 years. My parents have worked for me, to bring me up here and this is what they have done to me. I felt really bad, really bad.

Some interviewees were not only critical of these bureaucratic obstacles to citizenship but also questioned the age at which they were granted access to Italian citizenship:

Do you realise that we are in a country where you are born without Italian citizenship? ... I had to wait 18 years before acquiring citizenship. This meant I had to get a visa to do all my school trips while everyone else did a common school visa. Nonetheless, thank God, I did get my citizenship (21-year-old female).

In Italy, reform of the current citizenship legislation has been proposed, notably in a 1999 conference held by the Integration Commission. At this conference, Livia Turco (1999: 8) stated:
Children [young foreigners] receive ambivalent and contradictory messages that can cause internal conflict. At least the message that comes from the Italian state should be clear. Above all, during adolescence girls and boys need to feel welcome and a part of the receiving society so that they can perceive it as their own country.

Both Turco (1999) and Giovanna Zincone (1999), the head of the Integration Commission, proposed improved access to formal citizenship for the second generation. However, these proposals were not implemented under the 1996–2001 Centre-Left government and are even less likely since a Centre-Right government took office in May 2001.

Questions of entitlement to citizenship have acquired some pertinence given the political climate of the 1990s where issues of national identity and the very unity of the country were placed on the political agenda. A weakened sense of national belonging, in part a result of social and political dissatisfaction with the governing national elite, has been more prevalent in the north of the country (Biorcio 1999). Within this context, the Northern League exploited the issue of immigration to increase its political profile as a new and emerging party, thereby legitimising racist attitudes (Biorcio 1997). While the Northern League has generally concentrated its invective against first-generation migrants, its leader, Umberto Bossi, has in fact argued that the second generation is even more problematic than the first generation. In an interview published in the Party’s newspaper La Padania (15 January 1999), and used in a political pamphlet as part of a referendum campaign ‘Against the invasion of illegal immigrants’, he states:

> The second generation is even more inclined to be delinquent. You only have to remember the night of San Silvestro in 1997 in Strasbourg. On that occasion, young people aged between 12 and 16, all descendants of immigrants, destroyed 60 buses ... and four Council buildings.

The young people whom I interviewed in Milan, however, did not consider the Northern League or its leader Umberto Bossi to be a real threat. When asked about Bossi’s political views, one 20-year-old male of Eritrean origin stated:

> As far as I am concerned, they are clearly wrong. However, as he is Italian he can say what he wants. It doesn’t really affect me and I’m not really interested. It’s important for Italian politics, for the progress of the country, but I’m really not interested, I just don’t want to hear it.

A 21-year-old male of Sierra Leonian origin said:

> Above all I think that Bossi is a false person who contradicts himself when he speaks. The few speeches I’ve heard are full of contradictions. He is someone with problems. I mean can you imagine if even amongst them he wants to divide Italy, Southerners there, Northerners here. As for his speeches and what he stands for, there came a time that whenever I saw him speaking I would change channels.

Another interviewee, this time a 21-year-old female, while dismissive of the League’s discourse, did not reduce the League’s politics simply to immigration:

> Having listened to many Italians, I am convinced that these are ideas for ... people who really can’t stand politics any more. Italian politics is just a big racket. These are desperate people who want some security ... about how their country is being run. They are disorientated with politicians saying one thing and doing another, with foreigners who continue to arrive and are demanding rights.

The interviewees’ dismissal of the Northern League suggested a degree of confidence in their right to be in Italy. This may have been because none of the interviewees had been exposed to physical racist violence, although they had
encountered other forms of discrimination, as we shall see. Generally, however, they were not at all interested in Italian politics, and even those who were eligible to vote in national elections tended not to, conforming to European trends where political disinterest is particularly prevalent amongst young people (Fraser and Emler 1997). One interviewee, a 19-year-old male born in Milan to a Cape Verdean mother and Sicilian father, was more interested in discussing the Mafia and what he considered to be the dishonorable behaviour of the *pentiti* (criminals who turn police informers), reflecting his own close identification with his view of appropriate Sicilian identity and behaviour.

**Belonging**

Sometimes I feel like a fish out of water and I ask myself what I’m doing here (16-year-old girl).

Did these young African-Italians feel they belonged in Italy? What degree of ethnic self-awareness did they display? What signals did they receive from Italian society about their inclusion as citizens? Rumbaut (1994: 754) has argued that ethnic self-awareness can be muted or enhanced ‘depending on the degree of dissonance or consonance of the social contexts which are basic to identity formation’. In turn, ethnic awareness can lead to the affirmation of ethnic solidarity and group self-consciousness. However, as Zhou (1997: 997) reminds us, ‘individuals may belong to social groups to varying degrees’ and segmented adaptations can exist even within the same family (Rumbaut 1994). Ethnicity and identity cannot then simply be viewed as static, essentialised constructs. Rather, it is more relevant to speak of plural identities, which are not only constantly negotiated but also situational. Moreover, one must also appreciate the intrinsic ‘fluidity and hybridity’ of youth identities (Rattansi and Phoenix 1997: 143). In the following examples and discussions I draw on the notion of the ‘politics of belonging’ developed by Favell and Geddes (1999), including their division into the ‘formal institutional’ and the ‘informal symbol’ dimensions of belonging.

**A difficult self-definition**

What emerged from my interviews was a difficulty in self-definition – indicative, perhaps, of the novelty of African-Italians’ particular location within Italian society. The overwhelming majority of young people of Eritrean origin had a strong sense of Eritrean identity, but this was undoubtedly conditioned by the specific circumstances of their parents’ presence in Italy. In the early 1980s, for example, one of the geographical reference points for the Eritrean community in Milan was the Leoncavallo social centre, where the community held regular political meetings and organised fundraising for the liberation of Eritrea (Metere 1983). For the second generation, this type of political activity facilitated the development of a strong community identity. One interviewee described how, as children, they looked forward to their parents attending the political meetings at this social centre:

We children grew up there, in the sense that we used to go there on Sundays. We couldn’t wait to go there, because for us it was like an amusement park. We would go there, meet up with each other, play with each other, beat each other up! (21-year-old woman).

This Eritrean group identity was further strengthened by the existence of the
Bologna Festival. Between 1974 and 1991, the European Eritrean diaspora congregated on an annual basis in Bologna, Northern Italy (Tabacco and Poidimani 2001). This meeting served both to celebrate an ‘imagined’ Eritrean national identity and to mobilise politically for the liberation of Eritrea. After the end of the war with Ethiopia in 1991, the festival was moved to the capital of Eritrea, Asmara (Galeazzo 1994).

It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that the majority of interviewees of Eritrean origin asserted an Eritrean identity, with a minority conceding an Italo-Eritrean identity. There were certainly no ‘rebel-reactions’ to be found within this community, but rather evidence of ‘in-group’ behaviour. Those interviewees from numerically smaller ethnic minority communities (or of Eritrean origin, but not having participated in Eritrean community activities) were more comfortable articulating a hyphenated sense of belonging. A 21-year-old man of Sierra Leonian origin, for example, recognised he was in a period of transition:

Up until a while ago, maybe a few years ago, I would have replied Italian but when you grow up you begin to notice differences and now I am turning back to my culture. From secondary school onwards [post-14] I began to realise that there was a difference. Okay, you can speak Italian well, they know that you are Italian and everything, but you always feel that there is something that doesn’t make you equal. So, maybe I might think that we are equal, but then someone will say, yeah, you speak Italian, you were born here, but you are black.

A 19-year-old woman, born in Milan of Sierra Leonian and Cape Verdean parentage, described an occasion which had contributed to her current self-definition:

Once they [a group of people] asked me where I was from and I said I was Italian and they started to laugh. I will absolutely never say that I am Italian. I say that I am Cape Verdean, that I am African … then maybe I will say that I was born in Italy or that I have lived in Italy, but I am African, I am not at all Italian, I was only born here.

A 16-year-old boy of Egyptian origin felt he belonged to Italian society but was very proud of being Egyptian. He noted his classmates’ interest in Egyptian history and culture. In the exceptional cases where an interviewee did affirm an Italian identity, this was still not unproblematic. As one 19-year-old young woman, of Cape Verdean and Italian parentage, stated: ‘I feel Italian in the sense that I was born here, but I don’t really feel equal to them’.

A 16-year-old girl, in comparing herself with her classmate from Naples, described an existing template for dual or multiple belongings in Italy. Responding to a question on how she felt her classmates perceived her, she replied:

It’s not that they look at me and say that I am just Eritrean. But they don’t think that I am completely Italian, maybe fifty-fifty. In other words, I was born here in Milan, I’ve always been here but in the end I’m Eritrean. I don’t know, I have a friend who is from Naples and he doesn’t feel Italian but feels Neapolitan. So maybe they think the same about me.

Non-belonging and discrimination

As Rattansi and Phoenix (1997: 131) argue, ‘knowing how young people label themselves does not indicate how they live their lives or what are their cultural practices’. This was certainly the case with many of my interviewees. Those interviewees who vehemently rejected an Italian label did not always have radically different views from those who accepted an Italian or plural sense of
identity with regard to views about their respective cultures and countries of origin. There was, however, some recognition that the experience of the older second generation was perhaps unique and that the younger second generation might view the idea of belonging to Italy differently. One 22-year-old young man, brought to Italy as a toddler by his Eritrean parents, made this point:

I think that Eritreans specifically, Eritreans, Ethiopians, are the ones that got the ball rolling and so we have had to suffer more. In a few more years, there will be others, however ... we were the first ... that's why I don't feel Italian or anything like that. In the future, they [Italians] will have become more used to us, there will be more black people, but we had to suffer.

Feelings of non-belonging were exacerbated during or after secondary school and this may in fact reflect the more negative politicisation of the immigration phenomenon which occurred in Italy during the 1990s. Nevertheless, despite many of the interviewees being subjected to incidents of 'everyday racism' (Essed 1991), they frequently attributed these to ignorance rather than 'real racism':

I don't think it's really racism, racism like in America where they feel they are superior. I don't think it's like that here. Most people [here] maybe don't feel superior but they will say, you're black, you're dirty, things like that. I don't know how to explain, but the racism here is not like the racism of white French people or white English people who really feel superior ... I don't think that Italians feel superior. I think that for historical reasons the English and the French feel superior, even the Americans. The Italians, no, they have no real reason to feel superior (22-year-old male).

An example of this 'ignorance' is perhaps epitomised in the following incident narrated by a 21-year-old interviewee. The incident took place at his workplace, in a small factory outside Milan, with a white Italian colleague:

They don't feel that a black person can get anywhere. One guy, I remember, one day even said to me 'Hey what are you going to do this summer, are you going selling on the beach?' I said, no, like you I'm here working and then in the summer I'm going away. So, no, I will not be selling on the beach. So he said, 'Don't take offence, it's a highly respected job, it's dignified and they earn good money'. So I said to him, well you and I are both working here in this factory so why don't you go and sell on the beach! When he asked me this question, I really looked at him ... he felt bad because I looked at him as if to say you really are ignorant and you don't even realise what you are really saying.

This incident not only reflects the routine ignorance, stereotyping and assumptions that the vast majority of interviewees were subjected to, but was also a reflection of the type of visibility that black people have in Italy. As I have argued elsewhere (Andall 1992), the migration of black and Asian women to Italy as live-in domestic workers in the 1970s and 1980s did not provoke any social or political hostility. Rather, it was the visible presence of black male street-vendors, as well as their rising numbers since the 1980s, which contributed to the rise in hostility towards migrants and which also reified an association of street- and beach-vendors with black men. This led to the common use of the term *vu Cumpra*, generalised in the late 1980s to mean migrant workers.

Several interviewees related their feelings of non-belonging to the general public invisibility of black people, particularly in relation to employment in the public sphere:

There are no black people working for the state. You don't see black people driving buses or taxis, not even in more menial jobs in supermarkets, you just don't see them ... Here [in Milan] it's only in the last two years that I've seen a black girl working at Benetton – All
the colours in the world! Do you know how many people used to bring their CVs there and were never employed? You see, it just would have been too strange to see a black girl behind the counter. As I've said to you, for them [white Italians], black people can only speak pidgin Italian (21-year-old female).

I have gone along to many supermarkets [for work], loads of them ... they give you a slightly malicious little smile and they put your CV aside, really aside, and they say, we'll have to see ... In Italy, that type of work isn't there ... I think they are scared. They think a lot about their customers, maybe they are worried that it will bother their customers (20-year-old male).

This year in Milan, I have started to see black people, for example at Macdonalds, working as security and in some supermarkets working as security. Even at the Central Station, where there is a duty-free shop there is a [black] girl working at the till. When I saw this three weeks ago, I was really surprised that with their [white Italian] mentality they would put a black person on the till. I thought, my gosh! ... things are changing (21-year-old male).

These views tie in with some other documented accounts, such as the following narrative by a Senegalese migrant in relation to the Milanese context:

As I am black, it's extremely difficult to get work in a bar. I have gone along to so many interviews. Sometimes they have told me that if I were a little fairer then I would have been suitable (Marchetti 1994: 330).

Police reactions to the visibility of young black men in Milan highlight the potential for the social exclusion of the second generation. One of the more disturbing themes to permeate my interviews with all of the older black men was the harassment they experienced at the hands of the police, reminiscent of the infamous ‘sus’ laws that the second generation of African-Caribbean origin were subjected to in the UK (cf. Roberts 1982). Young black men in Milan were frequently stopped by the police and forced to undergo routine checks. They were not generally apprehended when on their own, or when they were the only black person amongst white Italian friends; rather it was the visibility of two or more black men that precipitated unwanted police attention. The following two quotations exemplify different responses to police checks but highlight the potential for conflict in this area. Moreover, the second quotation confirms that developments regarding immigration more generally have an impact on these young people’s lives, despite the fact that many are in fact Italian citizens:

Once I was in a car with two of my cousins. We were waiting in ... [an area of Milan]. Clearly they saw that we were all black ... and they stopped us. But I have always been very peaceful, always had a calm attitude. Sometimes I like to challenge them and ask why they have stopped me. Because they always or often ... have an attitude of superiority, because they think they have in front of them someone without papers, without a stay permit, who doesn’t speak the language. Then they begin to understand and then everything changes (21-year-old male).

The second quotation is from a 20-year-old man who, interestingly, when asked if he had ever experienced discrimination or racism in Italy, said that he could not think of any direct experience. In fact, it appeared to me that for some young men, routine checks by the police had become so normalised that they sometimes did not remember to talk about it:

Oh the police yes, random checks. Plus now it’s a time when they are randomly checking for illegal immigrants and so in practice they are making all these checks ... it’s really annoying. I mean, they don’t know you and they ask for your papers in a very nasty way, I really don’t like it ... they ask for your papers, ask you where you come from, your stay permit. However, they don’t ask in a nice way and this is really very annoying. I automatically also get irritable and start answering back.
This blatant discrimination and harassment is endorsed, if not encouraged, by the current immigration legislation which states that foreign citizens must display their documents on request to officials or police or face punishment of up to six months’ imprisonment or a fine of 800,000 lire (about £250). Dal Lago’s (1999) questioning of the criteria utilised by police officers to identify ‘foreigners’ for such checks is entirely pertinent. The following account suggests that formal citizenship will be insufficient to guarantee black Italian citizens equal treatment with their white peers. One interviewee, a 21-year-old young woman, was stopped by the police with a group of Eritrean friends. Not only did she find herself the victim of the above legislation, but her treatment at the hands of the police was also conditioned by stereotypical views about African women’s involvement in prostitution in Italy:

There were three of us, three Eritrean girls and by mistake ... we did not have all our papers on us. They stopped us and took us to the police station. I can even comprehend that they did this to check our status, but don’t keep me there for five hours and don’t take my finger-prints and don’t treat me as if I were the last of the prostitutes. Then, can you believe it ... in the end they realised that they had arrested completely the wrong people and they brought us breakfast.

Black and Italian: mutually exclusive categories?

The above examples suggest that being black and being Italian were perceived as mutually exclusive categories. This view was not only evident at the institutional level of the police, but also amongst employers and by the gate-keepers of Italy’s physical borders. It is fair to state that generally these young people encountered disbelief that they could be both black and Italian, even when the evidence was staring their interlocutor in the face. This was the response a 19-year-old young man received at an agency offering warehouse work:

I brought along my CV where everything is written down – where I was born, how old I am, what I have done. He looked at me and said, ‘But were you born here?’ And I said, yes, it’s written there. Then he said, ‘But are you an Italian citizen?’ and I said, again, yes, it’s written there, I was born here. Then he said, ‘So you speak Italian?’ At that point I just looked at him and said no and left.

Similarly, a 21-year-old woman describes her experiences travelling in and out of Italy:

I had just come back from London and the guy [at the airport] was checking my identity card, he looked at me, looked at it, looked at me, looked at it, as if to say it just cannot be that this girl is from Italy. I just said to him, wake up, it’s the year 2000. We might be the first generation [of Black Italians] but we are here. Even when I was going to London, the woman at the check-in desk asked me for my passport and I said no, I’ve got my identity card and she said no, you have to give me your passport. And I said look, I was born in this shitty country and I’m giving you my identity card and I slammed it down.

At a personal level, some interviewees had to negotiate problematic articulations of their insider/outsider status. Age and confidence appeared to determine the response in certain difficult situations, but it is worth noting how, in both the following citations, the young women try not to condemn their white Italian friends:

My friend [an old Italian friend] and I were in the underground station with two of my university friends and there were some Senegalese men there. My friend looked around and said, ‘My God, we’ve ended up in Burundi’... I looked at her and I said ‘I’m sorry but I
Second-generation African-Italians in Milan

This latter interviewee was a very confident young woman, who had participated fully in the activities of the Eritrean community since her childhood. She had a clear sense of Eritrean (diasporic) belonging but was equally confident in Italian society and had both white Italian friends and her Eritrean-Italian friends. Another interviewee, on the other hand, was not only younger (16), but had not been part of the Eritrean network in Milan. The majority of her friends were therefore white Italians. Her response to a similar situation is very revealing in that it not only describes an unease that this older second generation have experienced in relation to their specific and novel location in Italy, but it also suggests that they have yet to elaborate a strategy of response. When asked whether her white Italian friends ever spoke badly about immigrants in front of her, she stated:

Yes, it still happens, when they are talking about the Albanians. They say things like, we’d burn all Albanian people ... and sometimes they say all foreign people. I’m sure they don’t do it on purpose ... They don’t even realise that they are saying these things in front of me ... because there are some people who think of me as more Italian and so by saying foreigners they exclude me from this category. However, it has happened and I feel bad but I don’t show it. Sometimes I pretend not to have heard, because I really wouldn’t know how to respond.

Moving on?

Perhaps the most revealing statement about the second generation’s sense of belonging in Italy was their frequently articulated desire to leave Italy. This can be explained by their general social experiences in Milan, their awareness (often through European or global diasporic networks) of greater opportunities elsewhere, and the nature of black people’s visibility or indeed invisibility in Milan. Here, their ‘attitude’, even if tending, as it did amongst the majority of the older men, towards an oppositional stance, was still positively directed to social mobility elsewhere. Thus, while their experience of discrimination and harassment might have led them to adopt an adversarial stance in relation to Italy, rather than this leading, as it may have done in other contexts, to their ‘decline’ or downward mobility, they were simply looking elsewhere to secure access to the opportunities they felt they deserved to have in Italy.

In another study (Andall 1999) I have shown how primary migrants can ‘immigration shop’ for the best opportunities, and the second generation in Italy, particularly those of Eritrean origin, demonstrated informed awareness of the existence of better opportunities elsewhere. While some interviewees felt that the increase in the number of immigrants to Italy would force the country to accommodate different cultures, several noted the palpable hostility towards immigrants in Milan, contributing to their feelings of non-belonging: ‘The situation has got worse. Italians are more irritable, it bothers them, you can see that it bothers them. You hear them speaking when you’re out’ (20-year-old male). Those who professed a desire to leave Italy were not advocating a mythical return to their countries of origin, however; interviewees tended to
acknowledge their Western identities and did not romanticise the reality of living in developing countries. In a group discussion with young people of Eritrean origin held at a youth centre in Milan, typical explanations offered were ‘we’re really fed up here’ or ‘we see that people are much better off than we are in other countries’. When one 20-year-old man was asked whether he saw his future in Italy, his response was ‘absolutely not’. He had travelled to Germany, France, Switzerland and Eritrea, but as he stated: ‘it was enough to allow me to see that the situation is better in other countries. For example in Paris, even Germany, they are more open or at least more tolerant’.

For those of Eritrean origin, a number of factors specific to the characteristics of Eritrean settlement in Italy can account for a strongly articulated desire to leave Italy. The generation preceding those interviewed had travelled to Italy principally as political refugees. Given that political refugee status in Italy at that time was largely restricted to Eastern European nationals (Fasti 2001), this meant that a sojourn in Italy, particularly for Eritrean men, was envisaged as a temporary stop before onward movement to the United States, Canada or Germany. There was thus an historic understanding that Italy did not offer the same possibilities as other countries. Ainom Maricos, a naturalised Italian citizen of Eritrean origin, attributes the Eritrean second generation’s desire to leave Italy to the difficulties involved in acquiring formal citizenship in Italy:

England, Germany and America are countries that are absorbing many of our youngsters. They prefer to choose to live in another country and begin a new journey rather than live as immigrants in the country where they were born.17

Hence, the existence of diasporic communities within Europe and, globally, fostered awareness of how people of Eritrean or Sierra Leonian origin lived elsewhere. For example, when interviewees of Eritrean origin travelled to Asmara on holiday, they mainly socialised with the returning Eritrean diaspora. This offered opportunities not only for an exchange of information but also for setting up support networks in potential immigration countries. The United States and the UK, especially London, were frequently cited as preferred countries of settlement. London was seen as a particularly attractive city because of the visible presence of black people in a range of jobs and professions. Some interviewees, however, were more ambiguous about the prospect of leaving Italy. This ambiguity reflected both a fear of being ‘foreign’ in another country and practical considerations such as acquiring proficiency in a different language. And so, in some cases, despite understanding and in part sharing the motivation of others who had chosen or were planning to leave, the decision to stay revealed a strong desire to change Italy. A further permutation of ‘second generation attitude’ can be seen in this final extract:

I understand them [Eritrean-Italians], because I’ve lived the same experience and the things that have happened and unfortunately continue to happen are really absurd. So I can’t imagine a future here. I see it, but then I don’t see it. You know, what one of my friends said to me is true. He said that in America, African-Americans are integrated but just look at what they had to go through to get where they are. Here, in Italy, instead of doing what they did we are running away and so there will never be integration. Those who came before us left, now we are leaving too … I think it is up to the foreigner … if foreigners just save money and then leave or put up with the lives they lead in Italy then Italy will never change. But if the foreigner imposes himself or herself and fights, then in time, there will be less problems (21-year-old female).
Conclusions

The young people I interviewed are still a largely invisible component of the wider immigration picture. However, evidence reported here confirms Murer’s (1994: 9) earlier hypothesis in relation to the second generation in Italy:

The current (temporary) absence of tension does not mean however an absence of discrimination. The delay in providing adequate support systems for the integration of those who, like foreign minors, are obviously disadvantaged, is an objective discrimination.

Narratives suggest that these African-Italians have experienced and are experiencing discrimination in Milan, even though they themselves attribute it to ‘ignorance’ rather than ‘racism’. Their employment opportunities remain constrained and young men are subject to excessive controls by the police. The dominant anti-immigrant discourse in the North of Italy, moreover, positions them awkwardly in relation to their white Italian friends who, when making anti-immigrant remarks, simultaneously include and exclude them from the insider group.

The experiences of these involuntary pioneers of the second generation may not necessarily be replicated in the younger second generation. Younger interviewees, particularly those who had mainly white Italian friends or did not have access to a strong community network, tended to be quite optimistic about the future. The older second generation have reached adulthood while Italy is still adjusting to the phenomenon of primary immigration, and even those who had been optimistic about the future in early adolescence, had become more conscious of discrimination in early adulthood.

Europeanisation, however, may find some support amongst the second generation in Italy. Interviewees tended to judge their current situation in Italy as unacceptable by European standards and anticipated a change in ‘Italian mentality’ ‘because they want to participate in the European Community’ (17-year-old male). Moreover, simply in terms of self-definition, the second generation appeared to be more comfortable acknowledging European aspects of their identity rather than a specifically Italian aspect: ‘I feel Westernised, but not Italian, European yes, in terms of mentality, I mean’ (20-year-old male). Identities, however, are never fully and finally ‘established’ (Rattansi and Phoenix 1997: 129), and future generations of African-Italians may be able to acknowledge and identify with an Italian identity if they feel it includes them. To date, the notion of black Italian citizens has barely been articulated and this accounts for why so many interviewees felt more comfortable expressing an African identity or indeed a wider Black diasporic identity (Gilroy 1987; Hall 1982; Sansone 2000). Interviewees epitomised the ‘partial belonging’ and the ‘ambiguous assimilation’ that Gilroy (1987) identified with black people in Britain. But as Brah (1996) has suggested in relation to the concept of diasporic space, there is an inter-relationship between all ethnic groups inhabiting the same geographical space. In other words, Italian culture is already being transformed by the presence of these African-Italians.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank the Nuffield Foundation for financially supporting this research.
Notes

1 This body was set up as a result of a provision in the 1998 immigration law under the Ministry of Social Affairs of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (see Pastore 2001).
2 All interviews were conducted by the author, who is of African-Caribbean origin. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.
3 The numerical dominance of young people of Eritrean origin is a consequence of their position as one of the earliest groups to settle in Milan. Their specific political history has also contributed to the nature of the political organisation of the community within Milan, including established Eritrean meeting places. Smaller groups, such as those from Sierra Leone, did not have such an extensive community framework within Milan. Nonetheless, with the exception of those of Egyptian origin, there was evidence of a black diasporic identity amongst the majority of the interviewees, regardless of nationality.
4 The issue of immigration was a prominent feature of both parties’ political manifesto for these elections and the Centre-Right candidate Formigoni gained 62 per cent of the vote against the Centre-Left candidate Martinazzoli.
5 It is difficult to present a general overview of the national origin of the second generation in Italy, given the regional patterns of settlement of migrants and refugees. See Giovannini (1998) for regional data on the younger second generation.
6 I am concentrating here on the experiences of Italians of African descent, but this argument is of course equally valid for other groups such as Asian-Italians.
7 This refers to post-1965 immigration to the USA following the 1965 Hart-Celler Act.
8 For example Zhou (1997: 996) has argued, in relation to the Vietnamese in New Orleans, that ‘being part of a Vietnamese network appears to offer a better route to upward mobility than being Americanized into the underprivileged local environment, or ... into the native-born mainstream youth subcultures’.
9 But see Waldinger and Perlmann (1998) for a critique of this literature. They rightly emphasise the importance of defining the relative size of those ethnic minority groups which are in decline or indeed socially mobile. See also Steinberg (2000) for a critique of the concept of ‘oppositional cultures’.
10 For some examples on the French situation see Hargreaves (1995) and Fysh and Wolfeys (1998); on the wider European context see Wilpert (1988) and Liebkind (1989). Recent empirical research in Britain draws out differences between the socio-economic performances of ethnic groups in Britain; see Modood (1997b).
11 Kürsat-Ahlers (1996) found that the Turkish second generation in Germany lived in ‘ethnically homogeneous friendship networks’ and were more segregated than other national groups from Germans. Hargreaves (1995), in relation to the French context, found that the second generation of Portuguese origin suffered less discrimination than the second generation of North African origin. Indeed, research has shown that even though 70 per cent of second-generation Maghrebis in France opt more for the culture of the French population than that of their country of origin, only a third of white French see them as French (see Hargreaves and McKinney 1997).
12 See Bertola’s (1999) paper on the mass media and prejudice in Italy, where reference is made to an infamous case in Capriolo, near Brescia, when a woman fictitiously claimed she had been attacked by foreigners, naming Albanians. As Bertola commented, the previous year the fictitious attackers would have been Slavs, before that ‘gypsies’ and before that Moroccans.
13 The latter figure refers to those registered at the anagrafe, the registry office for determining residence. Foreign citizens registered at the anagrafe have to be in possession of a regular stay permit for at least a year. Registration allows amongst other things access to council housing and eventual requests for citizenship.
14 I do not understand the boundaries and cultural norms of these ‘communities’ to be static, but rather open to contestation and renegotiation. For more on these established communities see Campani et al. (1994) on the Chinese in Milan and Ambrosini and Schellenbaum (1994) on the Egyptian community in Milan.
15 Of note also is the introduction of a clear hierarchy among the various categories of foreigners, with a range of different residency requirements to ensure naturalisation (see Article 9 of the 1992 law). See also Biondi (1995) and Pastore (2001).
16 The Eritrean community in Milan is atypical in many respects. Emigration to Milan began in the 1960s when female domestics returned to Italy from Eritrea/Ethiopia with their employing families. Thus, during this early phase, this was a form of female single-sex labour migration linked to prior colonial ties with Italy. The Eritrean armed struggle commenced in 1961 and in the
Second-generation African-Italians in Milan

1970s the nature of the migration changed, as increasing numbers of Eritreans left the region as a result of escalating tensions with the Ethiopian government.

17 See her contribution to the conference on citizenship; Commissione per le politiche di integrazione degli immigrati: Riformare la legge sulla cittadinanza, 22 February 1999, 43.

References


Second-generation African-Italians in Milan


Author details

Jacqueline Andall is Lecturer in Italian Studies at the University of Bath and, during the academic year 2001–02, Honorary Senior Research Fellow in the Migration Research Unit at University College London.

She may be contacted at:

E-mail: mlsjma@bath.ac.uk or j.andall@ucl.ac.uk