

# Redrawing the Boundaries of Italianness: Televised Identities in the Age of Globalisation

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*Two irremovable axes of national identity, race and gender are still pivotal parameters in contemporary attempts to redefine the existing boundaries of Italianness. While cultural identity is not strictly limited to notions of gender and race, I argue for the centrality of these two concepts in the Italian context. Indeed, more than class or religion, television adopts the lens of race and gender to visually codify the essence of national identity and promote unambiguous images of Italianness. In this paper, I will first summarize recent trends of immigration to Italy, which have turned the country from a land of emigrants to one of immigrants. This directional shift has coincided with a (patent or veiled) need to rephrase the limits of identity and belongingness. The second section of this essay focuses on some specific television programs that question the relationship between race and Italian identity. Here, attention will shift towards the insistent focus on the issue of colour to connote diversity. Decoding these programs in light of postmodernist understandings of race and nationalism will better assess their role in the Italian mediascape. In September 1996, Italian public television broadcast the election of the first black Miss Italy in the country's history. Denny Mendez, the controversial beauty queen, was an 18-year-old of Dominican origins at the time of the election. Mendez was a naturalized Italian who had moved to Italy in the early 1990s when her mother married an Italian citizen. Besides the age requirement, Italian citizenship is the only necessary prerequisite for all the contenders. Clearly, the official rules of the national beauty pageant do not emphasize the need for a particular skin colour, facial features, or command of the Italian language. As proven in 1996, the vagueness of the terms of participation leaves ample ground for unexpected endings, particularly at the end of the twentieth century when Italy, like much of Western Europe, could no longer eschew the ubiquitous presence of ethnically different citizens.*

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Mendez's election engendered tumultuous debates on the meaning of national identity in Italy and created a profound rift in the Italian public sphere. This was intensified by the structure of the voting system in the pageant. The final vote on the Miss Italy title was shared equally by an on-site jury, composed mostly of television and film celebrities, and by the home audience, who could call in to select their favourite beauty queen. Interestingly, the jury's first choice did not favour Mendez, who was instead penalized for her atypical look. 'I would like [the winner] . . . to be the mirror of this eternal Italy and not the copy of another country, another culture', a fashion photographer in the jury said.

Denny is beautiful and I would happily elect her Miss Universe. But what has she got to do with Italy? She has nothing of that typical naughtiness of Sophia Loren. She's not Mediterranean. (Identity becomes thorny when you're the wrong colour, p. A2)

Similarly, Enrico Mentana, the news director of Canale 5, argued that Mendez was neither the most beautiful contestant, nor the most beautiful foreign immigrant. 'She is exotic', he said, 'like the women whom Italians who spend their vacations in Cuba find attractive' (Italians contemplate beauty in a Caribbean brow, p. A3). Probably the most unreserved and angst-ridden comment came from the program's host, Alba Parietti, a former Miss Universe contestant, who later apologetically crowned and hugged the newly elected Miss: 'A black girl can't be Miss Italy. It's not in the rules. Just like Miss Italy can't be a German, a Russian, a Chinese or a Japanese girl' (p. A3). Parietti's words uttered what seemed to be an unspoken concern about the issue of colour and its significance in popular conceptions of Italian identity. The acute concern with colour (rather than the more generic and all-embracing 'nationality') was indeed revealed by the judges' preference for another non-native Italian, Maria Mazza, a US-born contestant of Italian origins who shared with Mendez the adoption of the Italian citizenship at a later time in her life. The only difference between the two contestants was skin colour: Mazza's white complexion would certainly raise less tormenting questions about the meaning of Italianness, while it could also display the Mediterranean sense of 'naughtiness' that was so keenly sought by some of the judges.

Denny Mendez's victory was thus decided by the call-in vote of home audiences. More than one third of the viewing public chose Mendez as the most beautiful Italian woman of 1996. This unexpected move by Italian audiences received overwhelming attention by national media, some of which saw Mendez's crowning as an attempt by some of the judges and viewers to go out of their way to prove to themselves and others that Italy, too, was ready to accept a multi-ethnic identity. Contrary to other European countries (such as Britain, France, and Germany), Italy had never, until the 1996 pageant, undergone such a radical reconsideration of its own identity politics at the national level. Indeed, Italy has for many years been host to hundreds of foreign athletes and artists who have repeatedly and successfully performed under the Italian banner. Yet, in these instances the issue of citizenship, colour, or representativeness did not emerge as an insurmountable hurdle towards a fair appreciation of sport and

art. As noted in *The Ottawa Citizen*, 'few Italians complained about Fiona May, a British black athlete who won a silver medal competing for Italy in the long jump at the Olympic Games in Atlanta' (True Italian beauty?: Black woman's win has nation debating racism, tolerance, p. A6).

Beauty pageants constitute a particular kind of symbolic embodiment of nationalism, where the aesthetic and external facets of identity occupy the most tangible and commodified level of representation. In the words of Banet-Weisner,

The beauty pageant ... represents a complicated arrangement of claims and embodies a variety of nationalist expressions: it is a civic ritual, a place where a particular public can tell stories to themselves about themselves, and it is a mass-mediated spectacle, firmly embedded within commodity culture, in a historical moment where almost all forms of social participation and social meaning are determined by a continuous interplay between representation and consumption (1999, pp. 2–3).

In beauty pageants, the female body comes to materialize abstract conceptions of nationalism along specific constructed axes of femininity and ethnicity. In doing so, the beauty contest develops as a unique Andersonian imagined community, the boundaries of which are often pre-determined by socio-cultural frames of reference and can rarely be transcended. In the few cases when such limits are pushed forth, as in the 1996 Italian pageant, these spectacles of beauty unfold as potential hubs of national crisis and cultural instability. Pageants are often ennobled by their (unconscious) attempt to display the local as well as the foreign on national television scale. Yet, as Wilk argues, the convergence of the two is not always successful:

Pageants as an institution can serve the state's goals of 'domesticating difference', of channelling potential dangerous social division into the realm of aesthetics and taste. But they can also fail in getting this message across, and can end up emphasizing and exacerbating the very divisions they are meant to minimize and control. (1996, p. 216)

This was indeed the case in the 1996 Miss Italy contest. The participation and subsequent victory of an 'Other' beauty queen (referred to as 'Miss Discord' by the press), whose looks were completely new to most audiences, engendered a set of contradictions, conflicts and irrefutable claims over the meaning of two terms that in recent times had been considered almost oxymoronic: Italian national identity and ethnic/racial diversity. Instead of opening the path for a more pluralistic conception of identity, Mendez's victory was widely perceived by the public discourse as a signal of the need to reinforce the mono-culturalist view of beauty that had so far been at the heart of the orthodox Italian pageants.

I have chosen to begin this essay with the Miss Italy election because this incident effectively captures the struggle over definitions of Italian identity that has characterized the last decade. Two irremovable axes of national identity, race and

gender are still pivotal parameters in contemporary attempts to redefine the existing boundaries of Italianness. While cultural identity is not strictly limited to notions of gender and race, I argue for the centrality of these two concepts in the Italian context. Indeed, more than class or religion, television adopts the lens of race and gender to visually codify the essence of national identity and promote unambiguous images of Italianness. In this paper, I will first summarize recent trends of immigration to Italy, which have turned the country from a land of emigrants to one of immigrants. This directional shift has coincided with a (patent or veiled) need to rephrase the limits of identity and belongingness. The second section of this essay focuses on some specific television programs that question the relationship between race and Italian identity. Here, attention will shift towards the insistent focus on the issue of colour to connote diversity. Decoding these programs in light of postmodernist understandings of race and nationalism will better assess their role in the Italian mediascape.

### **From Emigration to Immigration: Overview of a Geographic and Ideological Shift**

Since the 1980s, public opinion in Italy has shown an acrimonious concern over the issue of immigration into the country. This preoccupation became particularly severe in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, when growing numbers of immigrants from various parts of the world chose Italy as their port of entry to the hope of a better life (Zlavoe, 2004). Thus, a study conducted in 2000 indicates that 42.8% of Italians feared immigration increased crime, 25.2% feared it would threaten issues of cultural identity, and 32.3% felt immigration represented a threat to employment (Diamanti, 2001). This growing fear of immigrants emerged as Italy moved from being a country of emigration to becoming a destination of inflowing migration, a process catalyzed by the increasing poverty and social unrest in the developing world, the tightening of immigration policies in countries like Germany, Great Britain and Switzerland, as well as the emergence of Italy as one of the most powerful global economies in the post-WWII era. The phenomenon of immigration in the 1980s and 1990s did not involve Italy alone; indeed, immigration to Italy has to be read as part of a larger trend of inflows to Southern Europe, which are generally characterized by a focus on de-industrializing centres (Turin and Genoa, for instance), with smaller-scale factories and family-owned enterprises.

The so-called migrations of European Fordism in the 1950s through the 1970s witnessed an intra-European northbound movement. The status of 'immigrant' which generally designated Southern Europeans until the late 1970s underwent a considerable rearrangement starting in the early 1980s, when flows of mass immigration from countries outside Europe first touched the Mediterranean coasts. From a point of 'departure', countries like Italy, Spain, and Portugal soon became anchorage ports for thousands of African, Latin American and Asian immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Among the factors that seemed to have influenced mass immigration to Southern Europe is what Russell King calls the 'diversion effect', whereby the lack of clear and stable policies on immigration in Southern European countries eased the entrance of

illegal migrants (King, 2000). Other circumstances contributed as well: the porous nature of coastal borders; the economic development of Southern Europe since the 1970s, with a particular emphasis on the tertiary sector where a more flexible labour force is needed; a low-birth rate and an increasingly aging population (King, 2000). As both a result of and a response to these and other forces, immigration to Southern Europe displays a set of characteristics that clearly distinguishes it from immigration histories to the North of Europe. Southern European immigrants are more heterogeneous in terms of nationalities and social origins. Indeed, while countries like France, Germany and Great Britain still constitute destinations for a limited variety of ethnic groups (Maghrebis in France, Turks in Germany, Pakistanis, Indians, and Caribbeans in the UK), immigrants to the South cover a wider spectrum of cultural and religious backgrounds. Similarly, their options for employment are affected by the peculiarity of the Southern European market economy, which exhibits a coexistence of technologically advanced and backward enterprises, a regional dualism best expressed in the Italian North/South divide, and the duality of a primary and secondary labour market (King, 2000). In this sense, the sectors in which immigrants are employed are few (agricultural, construction, industrial, and domestic service) and categorized along gender lines—with domestic service and prostitution as the only viable fields for immigrant women (Campani, 2001).

As argued above, the immigration issue occupies a prominent place in the Italian public discourse and figures conspicuously in the media. Yet, contrary to other European contexts, Italy is one of the countries with the lowest percentage of foreign nationals. According to a 2003 Caritas report, legal immigrants in Italy amount to 1.5 million, about 2.5% of the population.<sup>2</sup> Despite the numerical irrelevance of these figures, some analysts have attempted to justify the overwhelming urgency with which the phenomenon of immigration is approached in Italy by drawing attention to the constant and rapid increase of influx during the past few years (Bertozzi, 2002). As an example, the grants of citizenship in Italy went from 555 in 1990 to 7,442 in 1995; similarly, the percentage of net migration<sup>3</sup> is one of the highest in the European Union (8.9 per 1000 inhabitants), third only after Cyprus and Liechtenstein.

The role of immigration in contemporary notions of ethnicity and national identity must be analysed in light of existing legal parameters framing the inclusion (or exclusion) of foreigners in the Italian public sphere that finds popular expression on television. The first immigration flows into the country in the early 1980s met with a legislation gap on immigration that favoured large entries. Indeed, it was only in 1986 that the very first, comprehensive immigration law was passed (Law 943/1986).<sup>4</sup> This law stipulated that workers with non-European nationalities should have the same rights as EC citizens,<sup>5</sup> including the right to family reunion; but, on a more practical level, it granted amnesty for 119,000 foreign workers with illegal status (Bonifazi, 2000). As the measures embraced by this law openly indicate, the first stages of Italian legislation on immigration were marked by an emergency approach that aimed at coping with the so-called 'immigration problem' almost on a daily basis and without any clear sense of the future of migration in or out of the country. In this

sense, immigration seemed to be a transitory phenomenon for which no substantial legislative procedures were needed. Similarly, on a social level, Italians showed a more or less general sympathy with the cause of displaced peoples. At this early stage, migrants could find jobs mostly in the informal labour market (picking tomatoes, working in dangerous and polluted environments, becoming street peddlers), a sector completely ignored by unemployed Italians in their search for jobs. Clearly, immigrants were not perceived as rivals at the economic or cultural level. This outlook was soon to change in light of expanding immigrant communities in the Italian territory.

During the years following the introduction of the 1986 law, several steps were slowly taken in order to fortify existing legislation and control the legal status of migrants without undermining the Italian economy. A new law was voted in 1990 (the so-called Martelli Law, n. 39). Unlike its predecessor, this law focused on the status of refugees already in the country, the abolition of geographical limitations, and reforms concerning entry and stay (Bonifazi, 2000). The 1990 law was an attempt to provide a more explicit organization of the amorphous groups moving into the country; in this direction, legal immigrant workers were granted health insurance, and more scholarship funds became available for immigrant students. In June of the same year, Italy was host to the First National Immigration Conference, which took place in Rome with 2,000 delegates from 250 countries. The magnitude of this conference awakened politicians and common people alike to the significance of immigration for the present and the future of the country.

The turning point in immigration policies and social attitudes towards immigrants was marked by the Albanian exodus that started in July 1990. In this period, immigration into the country was characterized by numerous displacements from the Balkan regions, where the collapse of previously existing regimes resulted in almost legislative anarchy. Most significant among these were the mass departures of Albanians towards a country they had known through television and which had come to embody the ultimate (and closest) dream of freedom and opulence (Mai, 2001). The euphemisms used at this point in the Italian press clearly recorded a shift of focus on the issue of immigration: from an emphasis on the successful accommodation of incoming immigrants, the mainstream press began to address contemporary migratory movements as a threatening and unstoppable pressure (Bonifazi, 2000; Campani, 2001). Similarly, Italy had at this point become a fortress to defend.

The inextinguishability of the Italian identity is a central, underlying ideal in the most recent immigration law—the 2002 Bossi-Fini law. Designed and proposed by the leaders of the extreme right, the Law 189 allows in the country only those workers who already have a job contract, imposes finger prints to non-EU citizens, reduces the number of years for the validity of visas, and invalidates the ‘sponsor’ figure, which had previously permitted foreign workers to enter the country if they were financially supported by Italian citizens (Law 189/2002). The Bossi-Fini law has been frequently criticized by national and international organizations that read it as an official effort

to restrict the presence of foreigners in the country and weaken the status of asylum seekers.

The ratification of the 2002 anti-immigration law testifies the increasing popularity of right-wing parties in Italy as well as in other European contexts. The success of radical right populism has marked the political scene of several Western European countries in the last decade—Austria, Germany, France, Sweden, and Switzerland. Radical-right parties gained popularity among diverse audiences as multi-issue parties that targeted several levels of socio-political ills (Zlavoe, 2004). Yet, there is little doubt about the precedence the immigration problem received in right-wing political campaigns. The radical-right ideology on immigration is indeed central to the success of these political factions and is embraced as an immediate solution by the growing number of discontented European citizens.

In 1991, Umberto Bossi founded the Lega Nord (Northern League), a populist political party which originally called for a federalist solution to the Italian problems of socio-economic divisions and cultural diversity between North and South. The rise of this and other right-wing regionalist leagues has been connected by several scholars to a series of events that characterized the Italian socio-political scene in the late 1980s and early 1990s: the crisis of a traditional Catholic subculture; the collapse of a party system that had governed Italy since the end of WWII; the weakening of industrial economies, particularly in the North; and, the unsatisfactory performance of high-level administrative and political sectors (Borcio, 1991; Cento-Bull, 1992; Diamanti, 1993). Yet, what seems to lie at the heart of the Lega's success with diverse portions of the population is precisely their ability to frame the country's problems and ensuing identity along territorial axes of exclusion/inclusion. In this logic, the true Italian is a Northerner; Southerners are the poor result of a failure to embrace Northern ideals and, consequently, Italianness.

In the discourse of the Lega Nord, these lines of demarcation have often shifted in order to adapt to economic and cultural necessities. Thus, while in earlier stages of the party, the North would include only the two regions of Lombardy and Veneto, which presumably shared a unique ethnic and linguistic background and a culturally innate commitment to hard work, in more recent times the same North has seen its boundaries expand towards Rome due to the fact that political and economic transformations in connection with the country's membership in the European Union could not thrive in the segregated version of Italianness previously put forth.

In a comment after the 1992 parliamentary election, Bossi used the following statement to clarify the perceived incompatibility of interests between the two 'territories': 'The North has chosen federalism and Europe, the South has chosen Africa and Fascism' (Dickie, 1996, p. 28). Here, it is clear that the North and South of Italy remain vague terms: the definition of the North has shifted from the strict limitation to only two regions to the more comprehensive inclusion of all the Northern territories (meaning all that is North of Rome); as a consequence, the geographical and cultural boundaries of the South have remained equally unstable

and subjective. What the rise of this political perspective indicates is, first, an intricate connection between politics and identity in the Italian national context, and, second, a tendency to think about national identity as an ‘Us vs Them’ divide that aims at defying current forces of globalization. This divide has recently been further exacerbated by the unsettling presence of foreigners who could not be easily categorized into the already established molds of Italian identity.

In his study on the ideology of the radical right vis-à-vis immigration and multicultural societies, Zlavoe (2004) highlights some characteristics of the Lega Nord that are central to better comprehend the perceptions of ethnicity and national identity promoted by television. Indeed, as outlined in Chapter 2, the presence of the Lega Nord in the current government has strongly influenced the media output. The process of othering that shapes the Lega’s approach to foreigners is founded upon a direct relationship between crime and immigration: the increase in crime rates is seen as an inevitable consequence of migrants’ presence and is divulged as such by the party’s media outlets.

The Lega Nord’s newspaper, *La Padania*, is peppered with articles that draw a correlation between crime, immigration, and multiculturalism. Padua is referred to as the Bronx and Vobarno [a small town in Northern Italy] is referred to as the small Bronx. In typical populist fashion, the Lega Nord newspaper reports on killings of native citizens by immigrants. *La Padania* emphasizes the local outrage over the killing of a *barista* [barman] in Vobarno by an immigrant, while the Lega Nord politician Roberto Calderoli linked this killing to the too liberal policies of the Ulivo government [the centre-left coalition that held power from 1996 to 2001]. (Zlavoe, 2004, p. 103)

As this incident suggests, the radical-right ideology of the Lega Nord and similar parties is embedded in a logic that assumes dominant European cultures have the right to protect themselves from what is perceived as an invasion by non-European (hence, barbaric) cultures. The regression within the local boundaries provides a safe haven for the preservation of cultural identities and is therefore a seemingly defensible position against accusations. The Lega Nord emphasizes the necessity to maintain one’s own ethno-cultural and religious identity and ‘not be reduced to a residual minority on one’s own territory’ (Mussa, 1998, p. 14; my translation). Analogously, a party document claims that

instead of being racist, those people who have a defensive reaction in the face of a phenomenon that threatens their identity and their community must be considered patriots. (p. 14)

While it is always difficult to establish a direct link between party ideologies and changes in public attitudes, I argue that, in the Italian context, the rise of the Lega Nord has engendered a regressive process, whereby anxieties about the Other, deeply seated in the Italian public imaginary since the late 1980s, were given more prominence in official discourses and were eventually addressed by legislative steps.

As I will discuss below, the centrality of this perspective in the current political establishment has influenced the presence of ethnic identity on television.

### Watching the 'Ethnic': Race and Colour on Italian Television

The history of programs on ethnicity and immigration in Italy starts only at the end of the 1980s. Indeed, during the 1970s and most of the 1980s the issue of immigration and ethnic diversity was completely absent from Italian television. Consistent with the existing official and legislative approach to migration, television producers adopted a similar outlook, whereby immigration was perceived as a transient phenomenon that would not affect the socio-cultural composition of Italian society. As such, immigration was never tied to issues of national identity, and Italy was still presented as a culturally and religiously homogeneous country.

#### *Nonsolnero* ['Not Only Black'] (1988–1994)

It was only in 1988 that Italian television decided to experiment with the first program on the cultural consequences of immigration. *Nonsolnero* ('Not only black') was a special segment of the public broadcaster's second channel, RAI 2, lunchtime newscast and aired, with some interruptions, for six years, until it was officially discontinued in 1994. Originally scheduled on Sunday at 1:30 p.m.—an almost ritualistic time for Italian family reunions—the program was eventually moved to Thursday evening. As the creator of the program remarks, this shift negatively affected the popularity of the program, which saw its audience decrease from 6–8 million during Sunday's broadcasts to less than one million on Thursdays (Ghirelli, 2003). The eventual shutdown of the program is attributed to the political changes that transformed the Italian government in the mid-1990s (Ghirelli, 2003; De Lourdes, 2003). Indeed, the election of the first Berlusconi government in 1994 and the consequent rise of a right-wing majority, that included National Alliance and Lega Nord, initiated a series of socio-cultural changes that resulted in the elimination of several television programs. As such, *Nonsolnero* was one of the first television programs that were directly affected by the unyielding link between media and politics that characterized 'lottizzazione'.<sup>6</sup>

The initial focus of the program on the relation between developed and developing countries soon shifted to the more consequential theme of immigration and racism. As suggested by the producers, the program attempted to familiarize large audiences with the growing presence of immigrants and foreign cultures in Italy as well as provide useful information for newly arrived immigrants (Frachon & Vargaftig, 1995). In this sense, the decision to have a young Cape Verdean woman as the presenter—the first black host on Italian television—was indeed indicative of *Nonsolnero*'s intended role as a cultural mediator between Italian and migrant communities. Maria De Lourdes Jesus was a young immigrant, who moved to Italy in 1975 and pursued her education in Rome, where she earned a university degree in

journalism. Her familiarity with the status of immigrants in Italy and her personal experiences with living in a diverse environment and being connoted as physically 'different' made her interested in collaborating on a project that would give voice to a reality that was becoming increasingly common in the late 1980s (De Lourdes, 2003). The idea of *Nonsoloner* was originally conceived by Massimo Ghirelli, an expert in international cooperation and intercultural communication, who had previously worked with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on issues of global development.<sup>7</sup> The choice of a black female host was a deliberate strategy to awaken the Italian audiences to the existence of visually different citizens, who embodied various cultural and religious traditions. In the 1980s, this stratagem proved particularly important for those provincial viewers who had not been exposed to ethnic diversity. Indeed, the early waves of migrants tended to settle mostly in the metropolitan areas of Milan, Rome, Naples, rather than the small-industry centers of the North-East.<sup>8</sup> De Lourdes' hosting was received mostly with curiosity from audiences and colleagues yearning to learn more about other cultures. Yet, as De Lourdes claims, such audiences seemed fascinated more by the mysterious exoticism exuding from the young Cape-Verdean journalist rather than the possibility to gain a deeper understanding of cultures they still perceived as distant (De Lourdes, 2003).

Indeed, at its very beginning *Nonsoloner* promoted an image of the immigrant as a traveller, a worker, who had just recently settled down in Italy. This image focused on the novelty of the experience: on the one side, the immigrant was a 'new' person with whom the ethnic Italian had to confront him/herself; on the other hand, Italians represented a new culture for the recent migrant, who was asked to adjust to a different (and often dissonant) reality. In light of this, *Nonsoloner* posited itself as a visual intermediary between the two groups. The first issues provided a sort of 'civic-aid kit' to incoming migrants, and attention was drawn towards immigration laws in Italy and the EU, facts and addresses of specific ethnic communities in the country (Portuguese, Arabs, etc.), and work possibilities in the different regions. As the number of migrants increased and their attachment to the host land intensified, *Nonsoloner* adapted to such changes by highlighting the growing interdependence between the Italian public and these communities. Hence, the 1993–94 seasons reflected a deep-seated concern over the need for Italian audiences to understand the cultural background of migrants; a reciprocal effort was considered an inevitable step towards a better integration of migrant communities (Ghirelli, 2003). The issues produced in these years discussed topics such as the role of women in Muslim societies (24 June 1993), the possibility of dialogue among the three monotheistic religions (3 June 1993), and the persistence of racism among Italians (24 March 1994). The more consistent approach to immigration that had characterized the legislative measures in the early 1990s found a public dimension in *Nonsoloner*. However, the similar indifference towards and annoyance with immigration issues that has infused the Italian political scene in the last ten years brought about the cancellation of this and other programs alike.

The program's format and length imposed a fairly superficial overview of the topics. Each 15-minute issue was equally divided between in-studio interviews and on-location stories. Yet, the limited amount of time available for each reportage seriously undermined the contextualization of each situation and prevented a well-rounded understanding of the issues at stake. An example in this respect can clarify my point. The program aired on 7 April 1994 focused on race and advertising, human rights, and family reunion. The program opens with a 3-minute story on the relationship between advertising and skin colour. This is followed by a brief (one-minute) survey of recent images used by advertisers in Italy. The program then moves to the topic of family reunion, which is presented in a 5-minute series of recorded interviews on the difficulties sustaining contacts with family members in the host country. This story is followed by some concluding remarks (about 30 seconds) on the broader theme of human rights. This instance is indicative of *Nonsolonerò*'s format and highlights the extreme concentration of issues in a short amount of time. The result is undoubtedly a cursory review of immigration issues and hampers a well-grounded understanding of the potential implications.

Overall, the images promoted by *Nonsolonerò* depicted immigration as a new phenomenon in Italy and drew a sharp distinction between Italians and migrant communities. Clearly, this perspective on the presence of other ethnicities was dictated by the socio-historical period in which the program took shape; indeed, the years between 1988 and 1994 were characterized by an initial acknowledgment of the centrality of immigration in the Italian context. Although the first waves of immigration to the country began a decade earlier, it was only in the late 1980s and 1990s that this phenomenon became more consistent and consequently played a bigger role in Italian society at large. As such, in those years the migrant was still perceived as an addition to Italian society, and his/her presence was not felt as a possible modifier of national identity. Hence, in *Nonsolonerò* ethnicity and immigration were conflated and Italian national identity was never debated, but only presented to newly arrived immigrants as an unassailable essence. In those years, the homogeneous fortress of Italian national identity excluded migrants *a priori* and rather emphasized the grounds of difference.

#### *Un Mondo a Colouri* ['A World in Colours'] (1998–2003)

Between 1994 and 1998, Italian television witnessed a void of programs dealing with race and ethnicity. After a first attempt to publicize the increasing diversity of Italian society, in the mid-1990s images of Otherness on Italian television were often relegated to news stories on the summer arrivals of illegal immigrants on the Southern coasts of Sicily. Over the course of the 1990s the number of migrants settling down in Italy increased dramatically and, when *Un Mondo a Colouri* was first aired, it met with a partially different audience than its predecessor. The issue of immigration had by this time become a common topic of conversation in Italian public discourse and people displayed a more or less latent knowledge about

immigrants and their problems. Thus, *Un Mondo a Colouri* was a program aiming at deepening and contextualizing such knowledge. As with *Nonsoloneo*, this program was also broadcast on RAI 2 during a fairly dubious time of the day (9:55 am) from Tuesday till Friday. Created from an idea by Massimo Fichera, a prominent journalist and former director of Euronews, the program moved beyond the mere description of migrants and focused more insistently on the interaction between cultures that resulted from the inevitable coexistence of Italians and other ethnic groups. According to Touadi, the times were ripe for migrants and their descendants to integrate in the Italian society; but, they were also auspicious for Italians to embrace Otherness as a variable to their national identity (Sasso, 2003). The choice of an African migrant as the host of the program was seen as an effort in this direction. Jean Leonard Touadi was a journalist from the Republic of the Congo, who had earned two master's degrees at the University of Rome and had contributed widely to promoting the images of immigrants and difference in the Italian media. Touadi's visible integration posed as an emblematic tool to persuade audiences of the possibility of successful interaction between cultures.

The format of the program changed in a non-systematic way over the course of the different seasons. *Un Mondo a Colouri* could include a series of brief, recorded stories on diverse topics without the host's intervention, an in-studio interview and debate with the audience, or an alternate succession of stories and in-studio presentations. These different structures are not characteristic of any one season or theme, but they were randomly adopted by the producers.<sup>9</sup> A description of the program aired on 29 October 2002 will exemplify the approach to ethnicity and difference put forth by *Un Mondo a Colouri*. The episode is made up of four thematic sections, each one focusing on a specific story or event, which are presented in succession without the host's intervention. The program opens with a 2-minute analysis of fights between immigrants and locals in the area of Padua: here, a brief re-enactment of the events is followed by some remarks by the local police and a local journalist. The second section, titled 'Emotions', narrates the vicissitudes of an Albanian immigrant in the South of Italy (Bari), who was given an old car as gift from one of his Italian clients. The story indeed focuses on the hardships the migrant has to go through to reach his work place, and the free car is depicted as a tangible sign of tightening relationships between locals and migrants. This 5-minute re-enactment is followed by 'Events', a brief overview of the 2002 'International Food Show' in Turin. Three fairly superficial interviews are conducted with the vice-president of Slow Food Association and the spokespersons of the Moroccan, Japanese, and Kurdish cuisines. The attention is drawn towards the possibility of mixing ethnic culinary habits as a symbolic interaction of cultures. The last, 2-minute section, 'Protagonists', features a Senegalese musician, Papa Kanouté, and his Italian band. The program ends with music composed by this group that suggests an amalgamation of cultures. This issue of *Un Mondo a Colouri* is emblematic in its attempt to address different realities and diverse approaches to the notions of race and ethnicity. Yet, the effort to compress four stories in the 15-minute time slot results in a superficial account,

which is remindful of the ‘CNN style’ of most current media and does not provide a much deeper contextualization than the images of immigration present in daily newscasts.

An important innovation introduced by *Un Mondo a Colouri* is the decision to broadcast some of the 2003 programs from one of the fulcra of intercultural exchange in Italy: the Galileo Galilei high school in Rome is situated in the Esquilino, the neighbourhood that records the highest concentration of immigrants in the city. The ‘Esquilino programs’, as they are often referred to, target a teenage audience and discuss the daily problems the young generation is confronted with. In this sense, discrimination at school, divergence between school and family cultural milieux, dating, drugs, music, and religion are some of the themes that the young, multi-ethnic audience is asked to reflect upon. Besides these timely topics, the use of vivid colours and upbeat music mark the background of these programs. Yet, the questionable airing time of the program suggests a low level of viewership among the target audience. The mid-morning time slot is more likely to attract unemployed, retired people or housewives. Ironically, these are arguably the social groups that may have fewer contacts with the multi-cultural society depicted by *Un Mondo a Colouri*. Furthermore, the brevity of the program (15 minutes) compels a superficial look at profound issues. As in the case of *Nonsoloneo*, the stories and interventions are rarely more than five minutes long and allow for hasty analyses. The images of immigration and difference promoted by *Un Mondo a Colouri* are clearly reflective of the changing patterns of Italian society; however, the program’s structure strongly limits the potentiality of its reach. In *Un Mondo a Colouri* existing notions of Italian identity are slowly and prudently questioned, and the future of a multi-ethnic society is given more prominence. The second-generation migrants and the children of mixed couples are featured often in the program and provide a visual connotation of the challenges that the all-white Italian identity is undergoing. In this sense, *Un Mondo a Colouri* has proven successful in adapting to a mutating society, but its larger impact on Italian audiences is confined to the young participants from the Roman high school.

#### *Shukran (1999–present)*

Created as a weekly appendix to the public channel RAI 3 noon news cast, *Shukran* (‘thanks’ in Arabic, the language most widely spoken by immigrants in Italy) was meant as program about integration. As Di Luca, one of the authors, claims, this idea came from two observations:

on the one hand, the dimensions that the phenomenon of immigration was taking in our country for the first time; on the other hand, the poor quality of information on immigration displayed by Italian television and the press. (Di Luca, 2002; my translation)

As mentioned above, most news media in Italy are characterized by a tendency to talk about immigration issues in exclusively negative terms or in relation to crime, prostitution, and illegality (CENSIS, 2002). Similarly, the language used to address newly arrived immigrants is rich in discriminatory undertones: the word 'extra-comunitario' ('non-communitarian'), for instance, denotes all the residents of countries outside the European Community; as such, Japanese or North American citizens would fit under this category. However, this adjective is reserved only for people coming from underdeveloped countries and has consequently taken on a specifically negative connotation in the Italian language. What is interesting to note here is the transfiguration of the boundaries of 'community': the clearly marked borders of the European community have been stretched to include the more loose precincts of the affluent West.

*Shukran* was perceived by its authors as a necessary step to redress such images and give vent to the positive sides of immigration. The program is targeted at Italians as well as immigrants in hopes of contributing to the goal of integration. During its first season (1999), *Shukran* posited itself as a means of 'counter-information', that is, intercultural information that would correct the often stereotyped and unbalanced images that permeated most Italian media at the time. Stories on immigrants in the workplace, at home or at school were presented as non-threatening and reassuring and were meant to deflate anti-immigrant anxieties that had infused Italian society. Similarly, a deeper knowledge of the immigrant in Italy was sided with an effort to contextualize the migrants' ethnic habits; hence, reporters were sent to the countries of origin and narrated the home reality of the largest migrant communities in Italy. In this light, the first two seasons talked mostly to Italians who were prone to interpret immigration as a form of contemporary invasion.

Over time, however, *Shukran* became a program for migrants as well and focused on the daily tangles of bureaucratic integration and the inevitable frictions with Italians. The 20 November 2002 issue is illustrative of this shift as it focuses on the regularization of immigrants who are already in the country. The largest portion of the 20-minute program is a virtual dialogue between three different parties, who hold different viewpoints on the topic. A re-enacted story provides the narrative background to the abstractly bureaucratic problem at hand: a legal immigrant in the North of Italy was forced to go through the procedure of regularization and pay twice for a status he already had. This incident is commented upon by the in-studio guest (the under-secretary of the Minister of Internal Affairs) who speaks live in the program and by a series of pre-recorded interviews with the spokesperson of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and two court justices. This structure clearly allows only the in-studio guest for a right of reply and thus gives more prominence to one (in this case, the official) view on the issue. Further comments by all interested parties are welcomed via email or fax. The fairly rigid format of the program, with a maximum of 3 minutes for each intervention, results in a highly calculated presentation that seems to defeat the purpose of dialogue put forth by its thematic choice. Consistently, the role of the host is solely to introduce

speakers and/or stories without evincing any intellectual or emotional involvement. This issue of the program closes with a call for more stories from the audience and a children's poem on skin colours.

*Shukran* provides more in-depth analysis of immigration issues than the other programs discussed above. Its focus on one central issue allows for more contextualized reporting of the different sides at stake and favours a clearer understanding of the complex path towards integration. Yet, two main aspects seem to jeopardize the potentialities of this program: on the one hand, its nature as a 'magazine' of RAI 3's noon newscast (the least popular newscast of the three RAI channels) and its weekly occurrence; on the other hand, the problematic attempt to initiate a virtual conversation between opposing parties fails in the face of the need to promote real dialogue on the issue of immigration and the possibility of integration.

### *RAI Med*

In April 2001 RAI inaugurated a new satellite channel that was intended as a mediatic bridge between the two shores of the Mediterranean. RAI Med was the first bilingual (Italian-Arabic) channel in Europe that targeted both the Italian and Arab communities. The channel opted for Arabic as the most widely spoken language after Italian and as a potential propellant of the closing cultural gap between the two communities. Since its beginnings RAI Med has featured programs previously broadcast on RAINews24, RAISat, and RAI 3 as well as original programs in Arabic. Every broadcasting hour presents a standard format, where two newscasts, two weather forecasts, two analyses, and two magazines are repeated in a fixed order and are regularly subtitled in colloquial Arabic. Among the topics that are often chosen for further development are economy, finance, technology, culture, and science. In this respect, popular magazines originally broadcast on RAINews24 and re-proposed on RAI Med are *Netstocks* about the blossoming relation between the Internet and the financial world, *Decoder*, a visual magazine based solely on videos from international news sources, and *Worldisplay* on the changing status of the world economy and geopolitics. The Arabic section of the day is aired between 9pm and midnight. During these three hours the RAI 3 news program is broadcast with an Arabic voice-over, and other entertainment, information, and analytical programs are presented with Arabic subtitles. This fragment of the daily schedule aims at an all-Arab audience living in Europe or the North-African regions and attempts to introduce viewers to Italian culture and inform them about recent events concerning Arabs (both at home and abroad).

Aside from the distinct ethnic groups, the channel clearly identifies a specific geo-cultural section of the population that would have access to satellite transmission and be interested in the featured topics. RAI Med can be received in the whole European, North-African and Middle-Eastern area for a total of about 200 million people. Yet, a quick overview of its programs allows us to infer that the potential viewership is

much smaller. As the official pamphlet of the channel highlights, the targeted audience is made up of affluent Arab families in Europe and the Middle East, who display concrete interests in Italian affairs, Arab opinion leaders, and Italian and Arab businesspersons, who regard the Mediterranean basin as a profitable ground for economic transactions and future financial cooperation (RAI Med: *Le Voci del Mediterraneo*, 2002, p. 7). These clearly constitute a visible minority in the social landscape of Arab immigrant communities in Europe and Arabs still residing in their home countries.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the choice of subtitling Italian programs in Arabic precludes the possibility for illiterate audiences to become part of this visual encounter; in fact, as mentioned above, the only program that features Arabic voice-over is the 30-minute daily news program.

The theoretical idea behind the creation of RAI Med is founded upon the need to negotiate stricter cultural and economic ties between Italians and Arabs. However, the notion of ethnicity promoted by this channel seems to be confined within the narrow boundaries of well-educated and prosperous communities on the two sides of the Mediterranean. In this sense, the focus on financial developments or made-in-Italy brand products emphasizes the desire to reach an audience that is willing to establish a particular kind of relationship with the neighbouring Other: a relation based on a cultural understanding that could eventually facilitate business transactions. Clearly, this vision undermines the effectiveness and potential scope of the channel and does not embrace the majority of Arab immigrants in Italy, who may find only one program (the newscast) of interest to them. Indeed, as Della Ratta argues, the availability of a wide range of all-Arab satellite channels curtails the immigrants' need to rely on RAI Med for news on their home lands and consequently restricts the scope of RAI's vision to reach expansive European and Arab audiences (Caridi & Giordana, 2002).<sup>11</sup>

### **RAI's Cultural Project**

The analysis of current times of globalization is inevitably linked to the process of localization that informs several realities worldwide. In 2003 the RAI network charted a cultural project that would substantially reinforce the visibility of local cultures in Italian television. As I shall argue, this program targeted an already developed sector of Italian television at the expense of the subtly suppressed notions of ethnicity and Otherness discussed above.

RAI's cultural project was designed as a theoretical response to the changing patterns of Italian media and society. Particularly, the project refers to the global and local trends as well as the European model that have strengthened the ties (but also intensified the tensions) between institutions, citizens, and society. Analogously, RAI's project attempts to attend to the need to represent

the numerous and various identities—geographic, environmental, historical, cultural, economic, social, psychological—that constitute the national community,

with all the new and old complexities and contradictions it has always embraced.  
(RAI Progetto Culturale, 2003, p. 4; my translation)

The 53-page long document eloquently clarifies the specific identities that RAI should address and that are rightful members of the composite 'national community'. These are the expression of the Italian regional cultures, perceived as the essence of national identity. Indeed, the complex dynamics that has always informed the ideological relation between different local realities is at the heart of this project. Despite the indirect style and convoluted language that characterize each paragraph of this document, it is possible to understand the persistent focus on local identities that permeates the whole project. In this light, RAI's objective to play an active role in the representation of the 'pluralistic socio-cultural Italian macrocosm' is shaped by the need to express diversity within unity. The constant attention to the common, unifying, and unassailable Italian patrimony constitutes the backbone of the project. Local identities are to be reinforced solely and unequivocally because of their role in forging the broader spectrum of national identity. In this sense, this cultural project reiterates and invigorates the traditional mission of the public service broadcaster in its effort to give fair and balanced representation to the multifarious social panorama. Yet, the arguable nature of this document and its clear alignment with rightist political sections<sup>12</sup> vigorously undermine its plan to display a cultural approach that is more independent of the political establishment and more respectful of all differences.

Consistent with the general course of contemporary Italian television, the entire text of the project never addresses the need to acknowledge the existence of ethnically different communities. The increasing presence of migrants on the Italian ground that is a constant, worrisome theme of daily news casts is completely ignored by this crucial report and can therefore be interpreted as a phenomenon not pertinent to issues of national identity. Indeed, the complete silence on the ethno-cultural changes that Italian society is undergoing and that shape the heart of most Italian cities bespeaks the conception of identity that should be promoted by the government's official broadcaster. This view on national identity precludes the possibility for peoples of other ethnic origins to partake in the national dimensions of RAI and feel included in the images of Italianness promoted by television. Thus, the Italian national essence is described as a mosaic of regional cultures, with different ideological and historical traditions, but with a common, immutable dedication to the preservation of the 'national Community'. According to this project, it is therefore unacceptable

for RAI to limit its local dimension to a cursory and superficial regional news program. Italian regions represent a complex and delicate pattern, made up of multiple historical, cultural, social and economic differences. Consequently, it is natural that they should have a significant and authentic presence in RAI's broadcasting schedule in light of the fact that the Italian national identity has its roots in the pluralistic values expressed by the different regional areas. (RAI Progetto Culturale, 2003, p. 13; my translation)

This perceived need to prioritize regional events has been concretized in more programs that highlight the centrality of localism in contemporary notions of Italian identity. Hence, the first steps taken by RAI in this direction see the creation of a 15-minute daily program on cultures and arts (*Tg delle culture, delle arti e degli spettacoli*), broadcast from Milan with interventions from other regions, and a 30-minute weekly window on RAI 3 that could be used in different (and independent) ways by the twenty regions (Conti, 2003; Roselli, 2003). The autonomy given to the regional RAI channels is consistent with the recurrent federalist ideal at the heart of the recent Lega Nord's popularity. Indeed, as outlined above, the radical-right trend that has characterized the last ten years of Italian politics is founded upon the urgency to reify identity issues along the axes of regional and local realities. In this perspective, the historical boundaries of each region have not been expanded to include the racially and ethnically diverse populations that have modified the cultural frame of these locales. As such, the images of regional identities that constitute Italianness are anchored in an immutable past, where the use of local dialects and the idyllic life of the province are the bastions of a fortress that cannot be demolished by other, non-Italian cultures. In this light, programs on unchanging regional cuisines, traditional costumes, and architectural sites promote an atemporal vision of Italy where the convergence of time and space has been suspended in favour of an idealized identity, unspoiled by the noises of contemporary life and global transactions. From this position, the compression of time and space and the cultural hybridity that are characteristic of contemporary globalized environments are defiantly disregarded in spite of Italy's recent immersion in economic and social processes of globalization.

## Conclusion

Italian television has recently undergone considerable changes in the attempt to join the impending trends of globalization with respect to the introduction of digital technologies and the further development of satellite services. These partial structural updates have not yet been met by an equally fundamental shift to include a renewed conception of national identity along ethnic parameters. Indeed, in Italian television the processes of digitization, on one side, and thematic re-invention, on the other, have followed divergent paths that have not resulted in contextually viable notions of national identity. As I analysed above, the presentation of ethnicity in the form of immigration is given limited space on national television. The few programs focusing on this topic have been relegated to obscure time slots that defied their inherent purpose. Similarly, the limited amount of time of each program provided only cursory coverage of immigration and race issues. *Nonsolomero*, *Un Mondo a Colouri*, and *Shukran* have permanently modified the landscape of Italian television. Yet, their preliminary efforts have not been bolstered by similar programming on either RAI or Mediaset, the commercial pole of Italian television. In this respect, it is important to remark on the lack of balance between the two networks: up to this day, Mediaset does not feature any program that is centred on issues of race, immigration or

diversity; rather, these themes are discussed solely in special sections of entertainment-based talk shows, where the nature of the program dictates the tone of the coverage. The RAI network, in this light, differentiates itself from the private channels and abides by its public service mission that decrees the preservation of an ideological equilibrium in the representation of cultures and identities. However, as a consequence of 'lottizzazione', this equilibrium has recently been distorted by the political establishment in favour of a more localized perception of cultural identity and a federalist interpretation of Italianness. Significantly, an analogous focus on regional realities surfaces in the satellite channels available on Sky Italia: nine channels are dedicated completely to regional issues, while there are no television stations targeting immigrants in particular, or debating ethnic issues.

This overview compels us to understand Italian identity as defined by long-lived and anachronistic notions of race and ethnicity: in this view, Italians are ultimately white and display a symptomatic attachment to their language, their religion (Catholicism), their traditions, and their geography. These notions of race and ethnicity do not acknowledge the more flexible boundaries demanded by today's world, but rather attempt to reinforce the historically viable conceptions of Italianness that were at the heart of the country's unification in the nineteenth century. The invincible ties between politics and media in Italy have resulted in the insistent promotion of these ideals, which find strong support in the current socio-political events. Thus, even the occasional windows on immigration and ethnicity in television tend to connote ethnic communities as Other by focusing on the inescapable differences and emphasizing the visible alterity of these peoples. While the decision to explain and illustrate differences—of food, customs, religion, costumes, language, colour—is a necessary first step towards successful intercultural interactions, it also carries the counterproductive focus on an 'Us vs Them' binary relation that will hardly result in positive integration. The need to understand the Other was deeply felt during the first waves of immigration into the country and was thus punctually addressed by the programs in the late 1980s and mid-1990s. Yet, it is my argument that a second step should be taken to give more visibility to a changing reality and the consequent repercussions this will have on national identity. I believe this new approach should step away from the issue of colour as the central pillar of cultural identity.

As claimed at the beginning of this essay and evidenced by the 1996 Miss Italy incident, colour is highly debated (even though not always in an overt way) on Italian television and seems the crucial obstacle towards a more realistic outlook on cultural identities. In this sense, it is not a haphazard coincidence that the first two programs on immigration opted for titles that defied the mono-chromatic vision of Italian television: *Nonsolnero* argued for the existence of other racial backgrounds (not only black), while *Un Mondo a Colouri* contemplated the co-existence of coloured peoples of all origins. A similar connotation takes the choice of African hosts for both programs: their visible difference aimed at breaking through the insurmountable barriers erected by public discourse. At the same time, though, it is arguable that the

persistent attention drawn to colour as an immutable characteristic of the Other emphasized the dichotomous relation between Italians and immigrants: despite all efforts, the public opinion would claim, ‘They’ could never become like ‘Us’ because of their skin colour. This simplistic logic conceals a more problematic view, whereby the Other is evaluated solely on the basis of his/her ability to assimilate into the host culture. As argued by Paul Gilroy, the dominance of images over writing in our culture has indelibly influenced the way in which we perceive the world:

The application of image-building and image-maintaining techniques has created a condition in which icons severely qualify and often dominate the vivid authority of the spoken word in ways that recall the operations of fascist propaganda. (2000, p. 151)

In this sense, the televised display of colours paraded by the opening scene of *Un Mondo a Colouri* or the closing jingle of *Shukran*, with close-up shots of smiling immigrants, provide the most tangible essence of difference proffered to Italian audiences. This diversity is invariably framed by race, of which skin colour is the ultimate expression. Considering the changing cultural and social landscape of Italy outlined above, I argue for the need to redesign the boundaries of national identity in the face of a postmodernist reconstruction of ethnicity above the colour line.

## Notes

- [1] The concepts of ‘departure’ and ‘arrival’ continually fluctuate and require a contextual use. In this sense, I use them to identify the shift from a locus of emigration to one of immigration.
- [2] This is indeed a small percentage compared to the EU average of 5% or Belgium and Germany with about 9%.
- [3] ‘Net migration’ refers to the difference between immigration into and emigration from the country.
- [4] This was the first law on immigration since 1931.
- [5] The vagueness of the expression ‘same equal rights’ does not disappear in the full text of the law.
- [6] ‘Lottizzazione’ is the practice of party allotment that characterizes the three public RAI channels.
- [7] Currently, Ghirelli is the creator and director of the Archive of Immigration in Rome and an active member of various non-profit, inter-cultural organizations.
- [8] The movement towards the North-Eastern regions (Veneto, Emilia Romagna, Friuli) is characteristic of the 1990s and 2000s, when these geographic areas witnessed an economic boom that imposed an increase of labourers in various fields (agriculture, leather, shoes, clothes, etc.).
- [9] The unavailability of the program’s writers and producers for the present study prevents me from drawing definite conclusions about the choice of the different formats. Yet, the programs analysed presented all the formats in what seemed to me an inconsistent pattern.
- [10] According to a 2003 ASSIRM survey, 60.9% of immigrants in Italy rent and only 8.9% own a house/apartment; the majority work in a factory, as housemaids or waiters, and earn between 500 and 700 euros (\$620–870) per month (Abis, 2003).

- [11] According to an Italian online satellite magazine, as of 9 January 2004 the channel RAI Med has been suspended because of an insufficient number of journalists (RAI Med: Programmazione Sospesa, 2004).
- [12] RAI's cultural project was drafted and approved by the RAI's administrative board chosen by the centre-right majority in the government. In this light, the cultural project has often been referred to as the 'federalist project' supported by Lega Nord and National Alliance.

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