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From representations to self-representations. Young people with a migrant background in the *Sguardi Plurali* photography exhibition

Abstract

Although Italy today is in fact a pluralistic country of multiple cultural views, its political and cultural institutions tend to represent a uniform national identity, reproducing a fixed consensus of what being Italian means. Processes of "othering" reproduce a reified concept of being Italian that excludes both young recent migrants and the children of immigrants. Structural processes of demarcation, exclusion and marginalisation are at play. This article is based on the photographic essays produced in 2021 and 2024 as part of the *Sguardi Plurali* ("Plural Glimpses") project, a national competition and exhibition for photographers younger than age 35 who emigrated to Italy at a young age or were born in Italy to immigrant parents. After first analysing the rich visual materials and their accompanying text, I reflect on the contestants' widely differing life stories, on the complex connections between migration experiences and the photographic records of it, and on the relationship between generalised representation and self-representation. I explore not only the final submissions, but the creative process itself, reconstructed through the voices of the photographers, as well as how the project came about.

Keywords

Photography; Self-representation; Migrants; Second generation; Youth.

The author

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Introduction

Episode 1. It's a hot early summer afternoon, and we are in a large crowded hall in Trieste, at the opening of the photographic exhibition *Sguardi Plurali sull'Italia Plurale* (Plural Glimpses into Plural Italy). A dark-skinned girl from the audience speaks up: "I was born in Italy, I studied in Italy. My parents were born in Nigeria. I'm worried because, in this country, which is my country, I have no voice. I mean, ever since I went to school, adults would tell me: either here or there; either Italian or forever an immigrant ... These photos are truly beautiful because they show how we are all different, each of us has our own way of seeing reality. But we're not that strange compared to other young people of our generation."

Episode 2. In the cloister of San Giovanni in Monte church, in Bologna, a young man of Pakistani origin is wandering among the same photos of the traveling exhibition. He timidly approaches me and introduces himself: "I took one of the photos on display. I came all the way from Rome to see my photo mounted alongside the others. I'm a political refugee, and when I did this work, I was living in a reception centre; now I live alone in a house and I have a job. I had never participated in a competition, this was the first opportunity in my life; it's wonderful to see other people stop, look at my photo, read what I wrote about myself, and want to know how I see Italy. Thank you!"

I open this article with these two encounters because they are significant and occurred at the openings of the travelling photo exhibition *Sguardi Plurali sull'Italia Plurale* (Plural Glimpses into Plural Italy), a national competition for photographers younger than 35 living in Italy who had emigrated at a young age or were born in Italy to immigrant parents.[1]

The first episode highlights how, in Italy, the issue of identity is deeply felt among young people with a migrant background. These young people experience significant public pressure in their daily life and often feel unrecognised (Ricucci 2014). As the Nigerian girl pointed out, photography can bring out these hidden selves.

The second episode shows how participation in a photography competition can be a meaningful experience for young people who, due to their personal life situations, such as having to seek asylum, never had the opportunity to express themselves artistically, especially through photography. The young man saw being included in a public exhibition as fundamental to being seen and heard by others, as such visibility often challenges the image that the dominant society has produced of you (Mirzoeff 2011). This issue is central to young asylum seekers, since the success of their applications for asylum depends on the self-image that they transmit to the authority figures who will be deciding their future. Asylum seekers fear being "mis-recognised," being seen in the "wrong" way" or not being seen at all (Santanera 2018; 2022).

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[1] I organized this competition in the spring of 2021. Candidates were asked to send a short biography, detailing their migration experience or that of their parents, and to submit 10 photographs that told a story about that experience, with text putting that experience into words. In spring of 2024, I issued a second call for entries. Fifty photographic projects were submitted and exhibited in many Italian cities.

In Italy, the mainstream representation of Italian identity and belonging frequently excludes immigrants and their children (De Franceschi 2018; Giuliani 2019). The issue of these individuals' identity is highly complex because "Italianness" is a social construct, and some young people with immigrant backgrounds integrate and adapt, whereas others push back and reject adopting a new identity. Visual products, photography in particular, can explore these issues in a highly original and personal way.

In this piece, I intend to answer the following theoretical questions: How can photography by people who are unfairly targeted by culturally dominant narratives help to deconstruct those narratives? What are the central barriers that young people with a migrant background face when they talk about themselves? How can their art be linked to the theme of their Italianness? In the following section, I discuss the visual self-representation of migrants, and some central methodological issues that arose in organising the exhibition and analysing the submitted photos. Then I discuss the dominant image of young migrants that has been constructed in Italy. Using the submitted photographs, I deconstruct this dominant image through specific visual counter-narratives (Güell and Garcés-Mascareñas 2024). In the final section, I propose how these counter-narratives can be grouped into basic categories and typologies.

Migration and self-representation through photography

In the aftermath of the seminal work of John Berger and Jean Mohr (1975), who used visual images and poetry to study migration, there has been growing interest in visual methodologies in the academic field of international migration. This interest also manifests itself in the increasingly numerous visual representations of migration in the media (Cambre 2019; Martiniello 2017). De Genova speaks of the "spectacle of the border" to highlight how staged images along a country's border construct and confirm the power of the state, instantaneously producing discourse and public images that dehumanise and criminalise immigrants (De Genova 2013). Migration scholars have emphasised the need to reflect on the use of visual material in their research by analysing the ethical aspects, theoretical implications and methodologies involved (Desille and Nikielska-Sekuła 2023; Nikielska-Sekula and Desille 2021; Cocco, Crespi and Crescenti 2022). Abstract and stereotypical representations of migrants circulate widely in the public discourse. As Nikielska-Sekula and Desille point out, "we must start to find solutions [to the problem of] the reduction of migration experiences to one generic migrant figure. As such, a visual methodology holds the potential to multiply and complexify accounts of migration" (2021: 19).

In the proliferation of stereotypical images in the public debate, researchers who use photography to study migration phenomena must be very careful about which elements to highlight and why. It is essential to be aware that every visual image is essentially a creative undertaking. This awareness corrects the false perception of photography as simply the transparent reproduction of reality (Banks 1988). Photographic "truth" is indeed a myth. All photography involves acts of selection, framing and personalisation that stem from subjective choices. The camera always

mediates, and its visual products are the result of a co-constructed relationship between what photographers "see" from their cultural perspective, the subjects that are represented, and the audiences for these visual products (Frisina 2016). Photographs are unprocessed, ambiguous, fleeting and changing in meaning and hold enormous potential for expression. This is especially true for photographs that are taken, handled, collected, exchanged and archived in the depiction of immigrants (Troelenberg *et al*. 2020).

In full recognition of above, I emphasise how photography can be an important means of self-representation for migrants. Thy Pu (2018) underlines how important it is to centre visual self-representations because they counter "the danger of perpetuating imbalanced visual encounters more concerned with how distant spectators view refugees and less with how refugees view themselves" (Pu 2004: 135). Cabañes highlights how photography can be a means of interpreting "migrant voices." He refers to the "migrants' capacity to speak, and to be heard speaking about their lives and the social conditions in which their lives are embedded" (Cabañes 2017: 33). Photography has three qualities that enable it to play this role. The testimonial character of photography, referring to its indexical properties, allows narratives to be made concrete and authentic. Photography's iconic properties allow migrants not only to speak about their individual experience, but to refer more broadly to all migrants' experience and to translate personal memories into collective memories. The medium's symbolic properties allow meaning to be attributed to visual narratives. Cabañes discusses how, through a collaborative photography project, Indian and Korean migrants in Manila realised a self-representation of themselves, which challenged the dominant culture's representations of them. For many migrants, photography also serves as a means of preserving memory and cultural heritage. This aspect of self-representation goes beyond mere documentation, becoming an act of resistance against cultural erasure. Migrants' own images affirm their identities, preventing them from being erased or subsumed as generic "immigrants" instead allowing them to be sustained and celebrated in photos that are shared across generations. For example, Phu and Dewan discuss projects meant to reflect on self-representations in family photo archives (2017).

Social media have expanded the reach and impact of migrants' photography, allowing self-representative images to reach global audiences instantly. Platforms like Instagram and TikTok provide spaces where migrants can tell their stories directly, often using hashtags to connect their stories to broader themes. The immediacy and accessibility of social media allow for real-time self-representation, amplifying migrant voices and expanding their visibility in ways that traditional media often do not. Giovanna Santanera (2018) analyses the functions of digital images taken with smartphones and shared on social media by young African asylum seekers. These online images circulate widely among friends and acquaintances in Italy and among others in the African diaspora; they encapsulate how young immigrants visualise their aspirations. To understand their views and aspirations, Chiara Denaro asked young migrants to share with her digital images taken during their journeys to Europe and after their arrival in Italy (Denaro 2016). Chiara Pilotto (2023), in her analysis of videos depicting racist

violence circulated by Nigerian asylum seekers in Italy, highlights how these videos enable migrants to disseminate self-identifications that offer an alternative to the dominant, racialised narratives in public discourse (Godin and Donà 2016).

By taking control of how they are portrayed, migrants also reclaim agency over their own narratives. Self-representation through photography becomes a form of self-advocacy, allowing migrants to counter the reductive and often damaging portrayals of migration in popular media. In documenting their own experiences and sharing them publicly, migrants encourage empathy and understanding among viewers. Through this process, photography becomes not just a medium of individual expression but also fosters dialogue around migration, identity and the shared human experience.

Vivienne and Burgess (2013) explore the politics of self-representation and personal photography on social media, using the digital storytelling movement as a case study. Small groups of participants at risk of cultural exclusion share personal images and identity narratives - including family photographs, manipulated images and stock photos. These online-curated self-exhibitions involve processes of selection, manipulation, and editing of personal photographic content, and are described as forms of "everyday activism" or "networked identity work."

Scholars have focused not only on the production of digital images and their use on social media by migrants, but also on how these images are reappropriated and recontextualized by mainstream media. Chouliaraki (2020) examines migrant self-representation through selfies and their deployment in digital journalism. The selfie articulates and circulates claims to the self as an authentic presence and, in doing so, invites viewers to engage with this presence through various forms of sympathetic spectatorship. In digital journalism these selfies are recontextualized and absorbed into dominant visual economies, shaped by journalistic norms of appropriateness and newsworthiness - criteria that determine who becomes visible, how they are portrayed, and why their stories are deemed worth telling. Within this process of selection, a symbolic bordering takes place - one that establishes prevailing standards of humanity, recognition, and voice. Migrants' self-representations are thus appropriated and embedded within institutional frameworks of visibility, and in this incorporation, they often lose their agency.

The self-representation of migrants can also be studied through specific visual-research methods, such as photo-elicitation and photo-voice.[2] These methods provide a democratic means of self-expression and self-exploration through extracting the evocative nature of images. Migrants, through photographs, can narrate how they have adapted to their new multi-ethnic neighbourhoods (Collier 1957). In other cases, young migrants have used photography to describe their health and well-being (Ortega-Alcázar and Dyck 2012); migrant women have discussed their emotional condition

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[2] In photo-elicitation research, migrants take photographs that act as conversation starters in interviews, prompting mutually interesting back-and-forths between interviewer and interviewee, and serving as a probing tool to uncover meaning within complex social worlds (Harper 2022). In photo-voice research, participants are given cameras and guided to use them to capture significant aspects of their lives. The investigators and subjects decide together on the methods, timing and objectives of such photo-based research (Piemontese 2021).

(Thomsen 2021); young political refugees have reflected on their forms of civic participation (Joyce and Liamputtong 2022); and elderly migrants have reflected on their social relationships (Salma and Themuri 2024). "Immigrant Sisterhood" is an Italian ethnographic project in which young women asylum seekers in first reception centres in Sardinia showcased aspects of their lives through images, overriding the dominant visual representation of refugee women as helpless victims or sexualized objects (Tiefenthaler and Lynch 2021). Photography can be a very effective tool for young migrants to explore their relationships within local communities (Marzana et al. 2023) or to describe how they experience religion (Frisina and Bertolani 2016). All these examples of photographic self-representation challenge conventional narratives, presenting a more diverse, personal and human view of migration. Photography thus becomes transformative, allowing individuals not only to depict their realities but also to assert their identities and bridge cultural divides, creating new pathways for connection and understanding. In the next sections, I discuss the self-representations that emerged from the exhibition *Sguardi Plurali sull'Italia Plurale*.

On Methods. From the organisation of the competition to the discussion of the projects

In my project on the visual self-representations created by young people with a migrant background, I made some methodological choices that I briefly summarise here. I decided to involve several established and professionally active visual artists and photographers from immigrant backgrounds from the beginning (from the moment the call for entries went out). These artists not only participated in all phases of the competition but also sat on the jury, which thus had professionals with similar characteristics to those of the contestants. The inclusion of senior migrant photographers in working groups as advisors is a strategy adopted in photography projects (Phu and Dewan 2017; Sheehan 2018). The calls for entries promoted maximum freedom of expression, specifying that contestants could create a project in any photography genre, including documentary photography, portrait photography, street photography and abstract photography. Thus, contestants were not restricted to a single genre and were encouraged to explore a full range of creative possibilities. Allowing expressive freedom is an important requirement in all photographic projects aimed at promoting self-representation (Desille and Nikielska-Sekuła 2023). Great care was taken to disseminate the calls for entries to reach the widest possible audience.[3]

One last methodological aspect must be emphasised. In the competition announcement, I specified that all the photos and material submitted would be publicly disseminated in an exhibition, in the catalogue and also on multimedia platforms, such

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[3] Collaboration between the sponsoring organisations was fundamental. The wide variety of sponsoring institutions ensured that the contestants represented diverse backgrounds and experiences. The sponsoring organizations were: two prominent photography and film centres (Camera-Centro Italiano per la Fotografia and Società Umanitaria Carbonia); two research non-profits that study migration (Forum Internazionale ed Europeo di Ricerche sull'Immigrazione, or FIERI; and the Dipartimento di Storia Culture Civiltà, or DISCI, Università di Bologna**)**; and one very large Italian cultural and political non-profit (Associazione Ricreativa Culturale Italiana, or ARCI).

as websites (i.e., https://fieri.it/sguardiplurali/). The contestants were therefore aware that their images and biographical information were for public use. When I prepared the catalogue, I sent the contestants the selected images, captions and texts for their approval. In some cases, the photographers asked for changes.

After the photos were exhibited, I conducted an ethnographic analysis of the images; that analysis evolved into this article. For this phase of the analysis, I selected photographic projects - among all those submitted - that fulfilled one or more of the following criteria: they featured a clearly autobiographical dimension; they offered insight not only into the photographer's own life but also into the lives of their peers; and they engaged with themes of intergenerational relationships, collective memory, and the past.

At different stages of the project, I played different roles: I initiated the call for the competition; I served on the jury; I organised the exhibition; and I interpreted the meaning of the visual materials (Cabañes 2017). A few ethical-methodological reflections on identity politics in research are in order. When the visual material produced by others becomes the subject of reflection by the ethnographer, the issue of the complex relationship between the researcher and those who produced the images emerges (Allan 2012). In the context of a photo competition, the young photographers created subjective views of their selves that reinforced their identities on an individual and community level. The ethnographer's interpretation of these images requires an ethical responsibility to respect the subjects studied (Fabietti 1999). For this reason, all the images selected for this article were signed off on by the photographers; I also shared and discussed my interpretations of the works with the photographers during the writing of the article.

The organisation of this exhibition has allowed me, as an anthropologist, to intertwine my perspective with the perspectives of the young photographers involved. There was a constant negotiation over the meanings of the photographs. The first interpretation was the reality that the contestants captured in their photographs; the second interpretation was mine, that of the anthropologist who, in collaboration with the photographer, observed and interpreted the images. Photography always involves mediating between images and reality; the exhibition helped me access each artist's subjective view and interpretation of their world, something that could not have been achieved with written materials alone.

Dominant photographic representations of young people of foreign origin. Deviant or exceptional

As Pogliano and Solaroli (2012) point out, immigration has a fixed visual geography in Italy with established, uniform interpretations in the media.[4] Images of them as "regular" people going about their daily lives are rare, with few images showing how multiple

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[4] This geography of popular images has its key locations, such as the country's southernmost island of Lampedusa, which is associated with "illegal immigrants" coming from the African continent. Similarly, rural Southern Italy is depicted as being overrun with immigrant "slaves" working in agriculture, and the outskirts of Rome as being marred by camps built for the Roma, to name a few more examples.

population groups coexist. When native-born Italians are present in these photographs, they often belong to law enforcement or humanitarian groups. These images result from a deliberate, multi-tiered framing process. Photographers select certain aspects of reality and signal them as part of a specific informational "text" to promote "a particular definition of a problem, a causal interpretation, a moral evaluation" (Entman 1993: 52). Abstract, out-of-context and stock photos of the immigration experience often predominate in the media. This aspect has been analysed in several media, including newspapers (Gariglio *et al* 2010), television, the Internet and cinema (King and Wood 2013). Benson (2013) distinguishes three prevalent visual frames for migrants as subjects of photography: the threat frame, the victim frame and the hero frame. In the threat frame, migration is linked to crime, deviant behaviour and urban decay—with migrants posing a clear threat to the national culture of the destination country. The victim frame foregrounds the most vulnerable migrants. The hero frame celebrates the migrant as perfectly integrated into the destination country's culture, but always elevated by the "exceptional," and based on the stories of specific individuals, such as foreign-born athletes or artists.

These three frames also apply to the visual representation of young people with a migration background. One of the most widespread treatments is portraying these young people as "deviant others." Young migrants are associated with youth crime and urban marginalisation.[5] Images of young immigrants involved in street life, urban conflict and gangs are widespread (Queirolo Palmas 2009) and are particularly damaging. Opposing a deviant and marginalising frame is one of upward social mobility that highlights young migrants' success. While these representations are positive, emphasising overcoming formidable obstacles to achieve outstanding results, they can be problematic if they overlook the structural disparities and systemic challenges that many similar youths still face. These success narratives are highly individualised and often take on the characteristics of an idealised portrait. Young migrants are often excluded, even from photographic images, from debates on the issues that most directly concern them, such as the reform of the citizenship law (Zincone and Basili 2013; Howard 2009).[6] No "second generation" immigrants have been interviewed by journalists; they remain invisible, as do their views on the laws that would redefine their lives.

Political and cultural institutions tend to uniformly represent nationhood, reproducing fixed images of what it means to share a national identity (Favell 2022). In the Italian case, early efforts to forge a cohesive Italian identity were driven by a need to create a sense of unity from profound diversity. Visual elements were strategically selected to build a narrative of continuity and greatness, masking the deep inequalities and internal divisions. This attempt at national cohesion laid the groundwork for

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[5] Photographic images place them, for example, at protests and at the centre of civil unrest. Media coverage of protests involving second-generation immigrants often highlight moments of violence or confrontation.

[6] According to current Italian law, children who were born in the country to immigrant parents have to wait to apply for citizenship until their 18th birthday. The main requirement is uninterrupted legal residence in Italy since birth. This citizenship law, approved in 1992, is stricter than those adopted by other EU countries. Although there have been several attempts to amend the citizenship law since the late 1990s, none has been successful.

exclusionary practices. National identity became tied to narrow cultural markers - being ethnically Italian, speaking standardized Italian, and conforming to Catholic and Eurocentric norms. (Schneider 1998). These early internal divisions set a precedent for how the nation would later respond to external "others," particularly immigrants. In many ways, Italy's nation-building project required an "us" versus "them" dynamic, cementing a vision of national identity that has remained relatively rigid well into the 21st century (Triandafyllidou 1998; Andall 2002). Since the 1990s, the media have perpetuated stereotypical representations of migrants born outside Italy, mostly aimed at questioning their belonging in the country and to the national community. Although no single characteristic defines what it means to be Italian, the continuous "otherisation" of migrants produces a reified Italianness by a process of elimination—i.e., it is defined by what migrants are *not* (Giuliani 2019). Young people with dark skin are still very rarely represented visually among the newest generations of Italians. In photographs of young people in the Italian media and in news reports on work, school or cultural events, one very rarely finds dark-skinned young people, underlining how new migrants are often excluded from the national, collective imagination (Grimaldi 2022). In his work on the representation of second-generation youth in Italian cinema and television, De Franceschi (2018) highlights how many media narratives still perpetuate negative stereotypes. The public representations of young people with a migrant background are constructed by the mainstream media; these young people rarely produce their own images. With a few exceptions, young people from an immigration background do not hold prominent positions in photojournalism, publishing and the photography market. As De Franceschi points out:

More and more young "G2s" feel the need to tell their stories, sensing the widespread absence of second generations in the hegemonic narrative of Italy. There is a hetero-constructed image of what being Italian means that is produced by Italian directors and screenwriters, who rarely have direct and in-depth knowledge of the complex issues of this segment of Italian society. (De Franceschi 2018: 259)

Supporting the products of the "eyes" of young photographers with a migrant background is the only way to counter the stigmatising and othering portrayals of migrants as threat, victim or hero (Güell and Garcés-Mascareñas 2024). In the following section, I analyse content from three sources: the submitted photographs, the biographies and notes prepared by the photographers, and interviews conducted with some of the contestants.[7] I have selected five photographers and, for each of them, I highlight the central themes raised by their work, quoting their own words about their images. The aim is also to discuss how their various styles bring out their points of view and convey their central messages.

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[7] Although it could be very interesting to study the processes of circulation, re-appropriation and consumption of images (Rose 2022), this article excludes discussions of how the photographs were used after the exhibition (Awad 2020) and how visitors engaged with the stories told by the photographers. My analysis is limited to the production of the photographs and the meanings attributed to them by their creators.

The battle for recognition

Photographic images can play a central role in the recognition that photographers seek from the observers of their images. Here I take up the concept of recognition as formulated by Honneth (1995); he distinguishes between three forms of recognition: affective recognition, social recognition and legal recognition.[8] For young people with a migrant background, photographic self-representation is a way in which the struggle for recognition is realized. This plea for recognition may begin in the affective sphere, extend into the social sphere, and ultimately reach the legal sphere. The work of Karim El Maktafi, a young photographer with Moroccan parents, evokes all these dimensions. He introduces his photographic project as follows:

At a time in history when the discussion on *jus soli* [birthright citizenship] seems to have been completely dropped from the Italian political agenda, I want to show the faces of those who every day come to terms with the absence of birthright citizenship and the lucky few who manage to obtain citizenship at the age of 18. Telling the story of the "second generation" means asking what these young people's vision of their future is—what they expect of love, of friends, of school. It is not easy to give an answer, but I believe that a story and a visual investigation of their/our present can give viewers an honest image of those who, despite difficulties and antiquated, inhumane laws, are fully entitled to be Italian citizens.

As these words show, the aim of Karim's visual investigation is explicitly political, that is, the legal recognition of citizenship for young people born in Italy to immigrant parents. As we will see later, the use of photographic portraiture is key to realizing this objective.

Karim El Maktafi is a photographer born in 1992 to Moroccan parents in Desenzano del Garda, Italy. After gaining early experience in photography, he moved to Milan, where he attended a photography academy and later began working as a professional photographer.

His submission, entitled "They Call Us Second Generation," features group photos of boys and girls in various open spaces in Milan and close-up portraits of individuals in house interiors. Underlying Karim's work is a reflection on his own experience growing up, feeling "poised between two realities"—the one he experienced within his family, and the one required by socialisation at school and in interactions with peers. Drawing from these personal experiences and contradictions, Karim decided to explore how he and others who were born in Italy to immigrant parents navigate their relationships. The

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[8] Honneth states that recognition is an essential condition for the personal and social development of individuals and he identifies three main forms. The first is affective recognition (love or care), which occurs in close interpersonal relationships (such as with family or friends) and refers to the individual being recognised for their vulnerability and need for emotional support. The second type is social recognition (social esteem), which concerns the appreciation by society of an individual's skills, competences and social contributions. The third type is legal recognition (respect), in which the individual is recognised as having legal rights and duties, contributing to their moral autonomy. The three forms of recognition (affective, social and legal) are interconnected and contribute to the psychological and social well-being of individuals.

individuals portrayed by Karim engage the observer with looks that are often defiant and convey a profound awareness.

In one photograph, a girl with tattooed arms poses, relaxed, on a cluttered couch, an Amazon parcel behind her, and a drawing of a colourful toucan above her head, staring directly at the photographer (and us).

Photo 1 They Call Us Second Generation. Photo by Karim El Maktafi, 2021.

Another photo, taken in a public park, shows a girl proudly wearing a hijab, a symbol of her Muslim identity, with a skateboard under her feet, referring to one of her favourite activities. Frisina and Hawtorne (2018) have shown how wearing a "fashionable" Islamic head covering is for the daughters of immigrants a way of contesting the othering that targets their bodies and excludes them from the public representation of Italianness with its gendered markers of whiteness. The girl, by agreeing to be portrayed this way by the photographer, aims to convey a specific message about her identity.

Photo 2 They Call Us Second Generation. Photo by Karim El Maktafi, 2021.

Another photograph shows a group of three adolescent males; the one in the centre is in focus, eyes downcast with a pensive expression. The other two boys are increasingly out of focus—the one right next to the protagonist looks off into the distance, while the one in the background is so out of focus that his face is nearly obscured. This photo strongly expresses the dynamic between individual and group identities, between collective identification and differentiation, so important to Karim.

Photo 3 They Call Us Second Generation. Photo by Karim El Maktafi, 2021.

Karim, in this project, builds a dialogue with a community that, as emphasised in the collection's title, is seen by others as a single monolith, but is made up of myriad individuals. His aim is to normalise these young people by highlighting their aesthetic tastes, passions and clothing styles, which are basically the same as those of all other Italian adolescents.

These young people claim an Italian identity that is denied to them, and at the same time, they re-signify this Italian identity, attributing new meanings to it (Grimaldi and Vicini 2024). What unites these young people despite their intrinsic differences (in terms of gender, degree of religiosity or social class), is their being denied legal status as Italian citizens. For this reason, Karim's project has the explicitly political goal of advocating for migrants to obtain legal recognition through citizenship.

The use of portraiture serves this purpose. A crucial aspect of photographic portraiture is its ability to evoke emotions and generate empathy (Roberts 2011). Images can convey deep feelings of joy, grief, hope and resistance, inviting viewers to connect with the experiences of others. This emotional dimension of affective recognition works on two levels. On the one hand, it aims to intimately move viewers; on the other hand, it also aims to mobilise viewers in the public space to act. The portrait reduces social distances between subjects and observers. The young people in the frame look directly out at the photographer and the viewer, with all three—subject, viewer and photographer—being social equals (Van Leeuwen 2008).[9]

Karim's photographic portraits also directly challenge the Italian racial imaginary.[10] The gazes of his subjects—hijab-wearing young women or young men with dreadlocks—are demanding the "right to look" of people in a subaltern social position (Mirzoeff 2011). Through capturing these young people's bodies and faces, Karim wants to normalise the public images of second-generation immigrants and, at the same time, convey their battle for social recognition and legal recognition through citizenship. Karim's work centres on the present. However, photography can also serve as a means of bridging the gap between the photographer's contemporary experience and his/her family history - as well as the histories of others people. Photographic images have the power to illuminate the transnational ties that link young migrants with their relatives, while also offering a point of comparison with the transnational ties forged during past migrations. These themes are central to the analysis of the following photographic project.

Emotional attachments, multiple migrations and transnational ties

The identity of children of migration can also be nurtured by transnational ties. Within this context, affective relationships play a crucial role in familial and social frameworks. These transnational affective relationships are complex and can be ambivalent. While such ties provide emotional support and continuity, they can also create tensions and feelings of guilt due to physical separation. Missing the people one leaves behind and one's homeland is a central fact of the migrant experience (Baldassar 2018; Boccagni

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[9] Van Leeuwen explains that in photography, the subjects represented and the viewers of those photographed subjects form a relationship based on three aspects: the distance between the viewer and the photographed subjects (spatial distance connoting social distance); the perspective from which the photo is taken (from above exercises power, horizontal means a direct relationship); and the subject's gaze (if the person depicted looks directly at the observer, he builds a relationship).

[10] Regarding the power of photographs to mobilize, other scholars have reflected on how images of racist violence have been used by African-Americans to build their claims, countering the media portrayal that depicts Afro-descendants as suspects and criminals (Bonilla and Rosa 2015).

and Baldassar 2015). Young migrants often keep up with their families and communities through communication technologies, such as making video calls and posting photos on social media, fostering a sense of virtual closeness. These images transmitted from one's new country allow young people from immigrant backgrounds to be in contact with their past and present simultaneously. Baldassar points out how "the emotion of longing for and missing people and places therefore appears to be an integral (though not essential) feature of the kin-work and emotional labour needed to maintain transnational relationships" (Baldassar 2018: 250).

The work of another contestant, Oleksandra Horobets from Ukraine, highlights the emotional power of photographs exchanged between parents and children who are separated by migration. Oleksandra Horobets was born in Ukraine in 1997. When she was very young, her mother left for Italy, leaving her in the care of her maternal grandparents. When she was eight years old, Oleksandra was finally reunited with her mother in Naples. She studied at the Academy of Fine Arts and then attended the Higher Institute for Artistic Industries in Urbino. Her work is a highly original, visual reflection that links her own story of separation from family with the stories of others who also left home and loved ones behind.

Oleksandra's project alternates between photographs of her mother, photographs of herself from childhood, and physical fragments of letters sent by her mother. These are interspersed with photographs of people and objects found in an abandoned house in a small town in southern Italy.

Oleksandra recounts entering this house and discovering that the owners had emigrated abroad, leaving behind personal belongings, furniture and photographs. She used the interior of the house to set the visual story of *Kolobok,* the protagonist of a Slavic fairy tale about a loaf of bread that, as soon as it comes out of the oven, comes to life and runs away, being chased by people and animals. Oleksandra writes:

Entering the house, touching, investigating among the letters scattered on the floor and the photos, I found myself in a house that was not mine, seeing myself in the photos and their unknown subjects' gaze. The calendar was stuck in the year 2003; it was the home of Italian emigrants. And it was here that I decided to set my photograph, retelling the plot of the fairy tale.

The following photograph represents the interior of the house in which Oleksandra has placed a large loaf of bread.

Photo 4 *Kolobok.* Photo by Oleksandra Horobets, 2021.

The relationship with her mother is a central theme for the photographer, and it is through the photographs sent by her mother that this relationship was built. Oleksandra reflects:

The first time I saw my mother was in a photograph that she sent me when I was six years old. In the first few years after she left, I used to ask my father: 'What does my mother look like?' 'Bobbed hair and red lips,' he would answer. That was the image I had of my mother until we started sending each other pictures. It became our only way of communicating–through photography.

The photograph below is a combination of a photo found in the house and a portrait of Oleksandra's mother.

Photo 5 *Kolobok.* Photo by Oleksandra Horobets, 2021.

Oleksandra's work is a profound reflection on the psychological and emotional experience of living in a transnational family. This dimension is also connected to a reflection on the shared experience of migration across societies–that of Italians moving to foreign countries and of immigrants coming to Italy–a theme that has also drawn the interest of scholars (King and Skeldon, 2010). In Oleksandra's case, a central element of

her identity as a daughter of migrants is her relationship with her mother. This transnational relationship is visually reconstructed through the use of personal photographs, placed within a symbolic visual narrative, that of *Kolobok*. Photography highlights another crucial aspect: the identities of second-generation youth are internally diverse, shaped by multiple social and cultural influences. These identities defy rigid classification and reject any demand for singular loyalty. These aspects emerge in the photo diary discussed in the next section.

The Search for New Anchors to People and Places

In the history of photography there is a long tradition of photographic diaries to narrate autobiographical experiences (Jones 2006). A photo diary is a visual form of documentation that captures moments, experiences or events through a series of photographs, often accompanied by short notes, captions or reflections. It is similar to a written diary but primarily relies on images to convey personal memories, emotions or the progression of time. It can be a powerful tool for a young migrant to explore and express their evolving sense of identity. Each image reflects moments of adaptation, nostalgia or belonging, allowing the person to visually narrate their journey of self-discovery (Rose 2016). A visual diary serves not only to personally reflect but also to build a connection with the diary's viewers. The third contestant whose work I describe, Danielle Souza da Silva, explores her existential condition as a daughter of migrants by creating a photographic diary.

Danielle was born in Brazil in 1997. She grew up there with her mother and adoptive father until the age of seven, when she moved to Bergamo with her two brothers. In Bologna, she took a university course in Development and International Cooperation. Danielle has travelled extensively for study and work in England, Bulgaria, and Holland.

Her photographic diary, Ship's Logbook, presents portraits of people important to her: her siblings, her maternal grandmother, her mother, her Swedish boyfriend and her best friend of Moroccan origin. These are alternated with photos of places, such as her house in Bergamo and glimpses of urban neighbourhoods. Danielle writes:

I visually created pieces of my life that can be fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. Mainly through visual testimonies that contain symbols and stories. Inside there are two chapters: the first five images talk about my family and my origins. The other five, on the other hand, tell of my journey away from home–to Bologna, via Sicily, and to other "places" I encountered indirectly, such as Sweden or Morocco, the birthplaces of loved ones with whom I established strong emotional ties.

A composite identity emerges, full of references to different social and cultural spaces. There is a dominant representation in which "second generation" youth live between two national paradigms, two social contexts and two forms of belonging (Grimaldi 2022). However, in her diary, Danielle shows how her social and emotional life occupies multiple identities and geographical poles (Thomassen 2010).

Photo 6 Ship's Logbook. Photo by Danielle Souza da Silva, 2021.

Danielle writes about this image:

Hannes is my boyfriend. We met in Bologna through skateboarding, a sport we both practice. He came to Italy from Sweden by foot for most of the journey. The culture of skateboarding has not only given me him, but it has also given me the pleasure of making friends with so many people from different countries and places; crucially, the skateboarding community integrated me into Italy.

A culture of transnational movement clearly emerges from the words and photographs of this young woman. The positive values of discovery, autonomy and cultural blending are attributed to the phenomena of physical and social displacement. This attitude is shared by many young people with an immigration background like hers:

As part of a new generation, the "second generation," I have often felt myself to be at the forefront of where global society is heading in fits and starts. In my awareness of belonging to more than one culture at the same time, I can welcome everyone and all diversities without renouncing my origins, and without having to feel threatened by the speed and novelty of change.

While Danielle recognises the importance of movement and travel in her life, she also feels the need to anchor her identity to specific places and people for a sense of security and belonging. In this regard, I present the emblematic image of the swallows outside the window of the house in Bergamo:

Photo 7 Ship's Logbook. Photo by Danielle Souza da Silva, 2021.

Here is Danielle's comment on the photograph:

During the first lockdown, I went back to my parents' house for a couple of months after returning from Erasmus. During that time, I watched swallows build a nest under the roof of the house over several days. Being cooped up at home gave me the chance to reconnect with my family and rediscover my own sense of home.

The images in Danielle's photo diary, as in the case of Oleksandra's photos, provoke emotion in the viewers (Campt 2017).[11] Danielle also includes in her diary many portraits of loved ones; the people are depicted frontally and gaze directly at the viewers, creating a connection and a sense of familiarity that reduces social distances. Danielle's work centers on her personal experiences and emotional connections. For young migrants, photography is not only a means to explore their own situation, but also a tool to reconstruct and make visible the connections with the stories of previous generations.

Memory and genealogy

The visual archives of colonialism preserve symbolic material that shapes what Giuliani (2018) describes as "figures of race." These archives serve as a lens through which postcolonial society still interprets events and contexts from a racially hegemonic perspective. Giuliani's concept of "figures of race" refers to images that, over time, accumulate across cultures, crystallizing specific meanings associated with human bodies–meanings that are deeply gendered and racialised. Today, perceived threats to national homogeneity and to a stable racial identity are projected onto the clearly defined "other." This construction of the racialised "other" serves two main functions: First, it rationalises discrimination, exploitation and differential inclusion; second, it establishes a contrasting background that helps construct whiteness as a normative ideal, thereby shaping, authorising and reinforcing a racially stratified social hierarchy.

The aim of the work of the next contestant, Deka Osman, is to subvert this hierarchy and to show how her Italianness is built on the legacy of previous generations of Somali migrants. She creatively reinterprets her family's photographic history to challenge the portrayal of migrants as racialised "others."

Deka Mohamed Osman was born in Turin in 1994 to Somali parents. She grew up in a very large family; both parents, an activist and theatre-actress mother and a doctor father, emigrated from Somalia in the early 1980s. She graduated from a design institute in 2018 and has since worked as a visual artist and filmmaker. In her project, she used photographs from family archives, passport photos, residence-permit photos

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[11] Scholar Tina Campt highlights how photographs have the power to generate experiential intensity, and how the dimensions of looking, feeling and listening are co-present in viewers' relationship with images. She argues that images contain an affective dimension that resonates with viewers. She suggests that photographs have the power to express their subjects' emotions, enabling viewers to engage emotionally with the images and thus experience empathy toward the people depicted (Campt 2017).

and studio portrait photos. She reworked these photographs and assembled them into a collage.

Some photographs are from her childhood when, for example, she went on holiday with her sisters. Others are photographs of her mother before she married; still others date from the 1980s and 1990s and depict Somalis who no longer live in Italy: university students, young women in Western clothing posing in front of their cars, family portraits, etc.

Deka provides images of an East African country where Italy has long had a physical presence, starting with the colonial period of the late nineteenth century. Since the 1970s, Somalis have reversed that trajectory and emigrated to Italy. Following a common pattern in the Somali diaspora, many of the individuals depicted in Deka's photographs started their new lives in Italy before settling in other countries such as England, the United States or Canada. In her photo collage, for instance, Deka combines the photos of identity documents with copies of residence permits. In this way, she humanises the immigration bureaucracy by linking the required standardised documentation and paperwork to real people at a specific point in time.
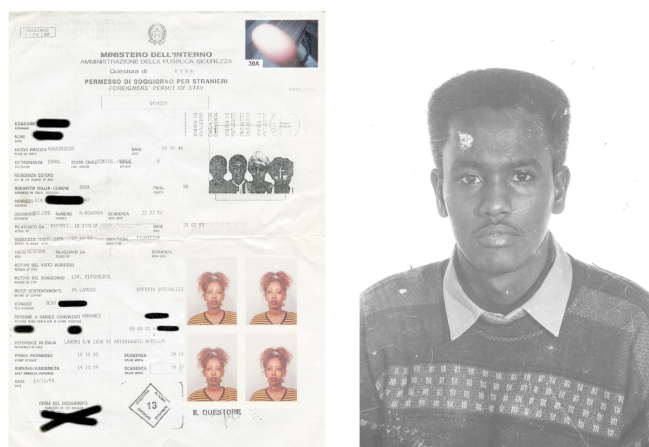
Photo 9. Ir-regular life. Photo by Deka Mohamed Osman, 2024.

This is her comment on the photo collage:

Collage with valid residence permit from 1993 to 1994. Scanned passport photos of a young Somali girl with red hair. She currently lives in Utrecht, Holland; is the mother of five children; and wears a veil. Passport photo scan of young Somali boy in Turin. Today he lives and works in the USA, in Seattle.

Deka mainly selects images of women that connect Somali diaspora generations, creating a symbolic bridge between herself and an earlier generation of migrants. The photograph below depicts Deka in her mother's arms, physically connecting the two generations.

Photo 9. Ir-regular life**.** Photo by Deka Mohamed Osman, 2024.
1994, Turin, birth of the second generation

Deka introduces her work with these words:

This project is not limited to preserving the historical memory of a community of immigrants from Somalia, a culture that has always been nomadic, but also aims to stimulate a broader discussion of issues of identity, belonging and coexistence. Through these images and stories, I hope to build solid bridges of mutual understanding. Today, a new generation of young Somalis, much more diverse than in the past, is growing up and being educated in Italy. Soon this generation will ask questions that require answers other than the traditional ones.

Deka's work, through the use of personal archives, brings to light three very important issues. First, it adds historical depth to migration representations, which are often flattened in the dominant discourse to the present and de-historicised. Second, it centres the centrality and agency of women, who are often placed in the background and in passive positions compared to men in diaspora narratives. Third, it prompts us to reflect on the links that new generations build with their past. Deka, as a member of this new generation of Afro-Italians, proposes her family archive and deconstructs the racialised social hierarchy that emerges from the colonial archives and that is still present in many examples of visual communication in Italy.

De-humanisation and irony

The images produced by new Italians can use irony as a tool to overturn identity and cultural stereotypes. In analysing videos created and circulated on TikTok by people with a migrant background, Bachis (2024) highlights how humour and irony create "complex and contradictory subordinate voices that transcend the boundaries of various hegemonic national identities" (Bachis 2024: 261). Through images and videos, new Italians ironically expose the most common forms of misrecognition of their Italian identity and challenge certain cultural preconceptions, including the notion that they must necessarily be connected to their parents' origins.

Irony in photography involves creating an image that conveys a meaning contrary to what is expected. This technique plays on visual contradictions, juxtapositions or incongruities to provoke thought and critique societal norms (Grundberg 1999). The

next contestant, Mounir Derbal, uses irony in his work as a powerful tool to denounce the dehumanisation faced by migrants.

Mounir Derbal is a young man born in Italy in 1997 to Algerian parents. After studying film directing in London, he returned to Italy and studied screenwriting. He teaches in Italian film schools. His project is a mock photographic reportage investigating what Mounir calls the "Androids of the Proletariat." He mixes archival photos, original shots and images of androids at work produced with generative artificial intelligence. There are robot babysitters, robot hotel doormen, robot house cleaners, robot grocers, etc. These robots care for and interact with white-skinned humans. The concept of the immigrant as a robot highlights the dehumanising ways in which migrants are often portrayed or treated. Like robots, immigrants are viewed as labourers, expected to perform demanding, repetitive or undesirable tasks with little regard for their personal needs, emotions or individuality. In Mounir's photographs, these robots are depicted in the scene as distant, which creates both a sense of symbolic distancing and an effect of symbolic disempowerment (Van Leeuwen 2008).

These images produce disturbing feelings because they highlight how two groups that are in close contact are clearly not on the same social level. Mounir explains:

The immigrant becomes a robot and is transported to an alternative reality where, despite highly advanced technology, the basic problem of integration remains. Real connection between human being and android is impossible.

Photo 10. Piston splitter. Photo by Mounir Derbal, 2024.

The social criticism is very strong and refers to how Mounir sees his parents being treated, but also what he sees happening in his own generation:

The reality is shocking and dramatic. Immigrants in Italy are treated as labour, as robots who are at the service of Italians. These robots have no human identity, they have no human needs. And this dehumanisation, unfortunately, is being repeated with us, the young people of the second generation. We too are treated like robots, children of robots.

Photo 11. Piston splitter. Photo by Mounir Derbal, 2024.

Mounir's entry can be linked to Karim's, whose work I started the article with, and closes the circle of young migrants' photographic self-representations. Their works involve very different techniques and styles. Karim's style is reminiscent of classical portraiture and reportage; Mounir's is very experimental and both playful and devastating. Karim uses the style of portraiture to give faces and identities to young people who are often portrayed as an indistinct mass of stereotyped characteristics; he does this to establish their humanity, and that they are deserving of rights—first and foremost, the right to be legal Italian citizens. Mounir urges us to critically reflect on rights being stripped away and the depersonalisation of migrants, of both first generation and their descendants (Dal Lago 1999).

Final Remarks

The works produced by these young photographers with a migrant background challenge the dominant visual framing of them in Italian society. As noted, the media often portray these young people through a narrow lens, which can only move from extreme frames of deviant, threatening behaviour to the rarer frame of perfect and successful integration. The dominant media representations also often exoticise young migrants' experiences, depicting them clearly as "others" who eat strange foods and dress in strange clothes. When young migrants are visible, they are hyper-visible and portrayed as entirely different from their native-born peers. But for them the opposite of hyper-visible is just invisible. The representational strategies adopted in images of young migrants produce their symbolic distancing and symbolic disempowerment, as they are portrayed as "others" or as inferior.

These visibility boundaries in contemporary Italian society are both reflected and criticised in the entries in the *Sguardi Plurali* photography competition. Through their photographs, the contestants challenge and reconsider the dominant images that have been produced of them. They do this by adopting different visual strategies and highlighting various themes. They were collectors of archived images; they produced new images and they co-produced images with their subjects.

One of the most entrenched narratives is that the children of migration form a distinct group separate from the majority society and are inherently unfit for full

integration. This perspective has led to the creation of a flat, de-historicised image of them. In response, some photographers have sought to highlight the transnational ties that shape and enrich their identities. They have repurposed archival visual materials, such as photographs sent by parents to their children.

Another significant aspect is the dehumanisation of these young people that emerges in public portrayals. To counter this phenomenon, various photographers emphasise the social dimension of intergenerational relationships. For instance, historical photographs of the Somali diaspora are recontextualised within a discourse that connects the present to the past, linking young people's identity to the immigrant history of their parents. In this way, the new generation recalls a history of mobility and connects with it. Immigration and emigration coexist in many of the submitted works. There is a clear visual reference to both present and past experiences of migration, whether by the young people themselves or their parents or grandparents. In Oleksandra's work, her mother's immigration to Italy is contrasted with that of her neighbours' emigration from Italy. Danielle's work emphasises her own movement across borders.

The connections with their parents and their cultural heritage are not the only important factors. There is a prevalent depiction of the children of migration as being perpetually suspended between two cultures. In reality, young people from immigrant backgrounds possess multiple identity references scattered across various locations. The photo diary, with its representational style, effectively captures this multiplicity of influences. Transnationalism is not an alternative to rootedness but complementary to it. On the one hand, several submissions describe the transnational ties that shape the identities of young people with a migrant background. These include, for example, the letters between Oleksandra and her mother. On the other hand, many images emphasise the need to represent oneself as firmly rooted in one's new home, such as Karim's portraits of Milan neighbourhoods or Danielle's photographs of domestic interiors, along with the image of the swallows that symbolise her search for roots.

In dominant visual narratives, young people are often portrayed as eternal outsiders, which prevents them from asserting their rights to citizenship. This situation ignites a struggle for the recognition of their full citizenship, both socially and legally. The use of photographic portraiture, where the subject engages the viewer directly from a position of equality, is instrumental in this endeavour. In many of the contestants' projects, the photographers adopted representational strategies that, rather than distancing the viewers, allowed them to connect with the images, experiencing empathy or resonating emotionally with the people and places depicted. Photographers thus seek to reduce social distances and the sense of estrangement toward the subjects of their photographs (Campt 2017; Van Leeuwen 2008).

The children of migrants continue to be depicted as racialised bodies, fated to experience the "othering" that their parents faced and be prevented from being fully integrated into Italian society. The stereotype of migrants as merely a labour force is both reinforced and subverted through a visual language rich in irony. While this may

involve evident objectification and symbolic distancing, it also serves as a form of social critique.

All these elements bring to light the relationship between these young people and the concept of Italianness. As we have seen, this relationship is highly complex, as Italianness is a construct that young people from immigrant backgrounds sometimes embrace and adapt as their own, but other times reject, and occasionally completely overturn as a concept. These photographs make crystal clear that there is no monolithic community, as the term "second generation" might suggest; rather, a diverse array of individuals exists, and these hold varied identities, speak multiple languages and hold a range of political beliefs.

The Italian identity portrayed in these photographs takes on many shades. Some contestants assert their belonging by showcasing the places and monuments of their cities, as seen in Karim's images of the outskirts of Milan. The message conveyed is clear: "We are here, and these are our spaces in our cities." In other instances, a different Italianness is claimed by highlighting aesthetic elements and clothing that diverge from standardized representations. These images communicate: "We are fully Italian; we wear the hijab, we have dark skin," etc.

Through irony, empathy and reflexivity—hallmarks of photographic language—these young artists have succeeded in deconstructing the representations as others who do not belong circulating in public discourse. They present counter-narratives that propose a re-evaluation of Italianness that rejects its narrow and exclusionary aspects.

The self-representations of these young photographers give them a voice that their representations in the dominant culture have denied them. They speak through the three properties of photographic language (Cabañes 2017): the indexical, the iconic and the symbolic. The indexical is particularly evident in the photographic works that aim to document the everyday life of these young people, such as Danielle's photographic diary; the iconic property emerges in those works that refer to the collective condition as opposed to the individual condition, such as Karim's portraits; and the symbolic property emerges through the photos that convey concepts, as in the case of Mounir's robots or Oleksandra's *Kolobok*.

Unlike the visual representations of immigrants in the dominant culture, which are often stereotypical and simplistic, these photographic projects offer a complex view of the identities and world views of young people. These photographers created self-representations through their own voices. From an ethnographic perspective, it is important to examine not only how these images were produced, but also how they circulated, were received, and ultimately, how they were appropriated and recontextualized (Troelenberg et al. 2020; Vivienne and Burgess 2013). I plan to undertake that research project in the near future.

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