

Introduction

Opening

“The landscape is absolutely forbidding, mountains towering on all four sides, ice and snow as far as the eye can reach. In this white wilderness, men and women and children move all day, carrying washing, wood, buckets of milk or water, sometimes skiing on Sunday afternoons. All week-long boys and young men are to be seen shovelling snow off the rooftops or dragging wood down from the forest in sleds. (...)

Everyone in the village knows my name, though they scarcely ever use it, knows that I come from America though, this, apparently, they will never really believe: black men come from Africa – and everyone knows that I am the friend of the son of a woman who was born here, and that I am staying in their chalet. But I remain as much a stranger today as I was the first day I arrived, and the children shout ‘Neger! Neger!’ as I walk along the streets. (...)

I say that the culture of these people controls me – but they can scarcely be held responsible for European culture. America comes out of Europe, but these people have never seen America, nor have most of them seen more of Europe than the hamlet at the foot of their mountain. Yet they move with an authority which I shall never have; and they regard me, quite rightly, not only as a stranger in the village but as a suspect latecomer, bearing no credentials, to everything they have – however unconsciously – inherited. (...)

These people cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it.”

James Baldwin, “Stranger in the Village” (1955)

When James Baldwin wrote these words during a winter stay in the remote village of Leukerbad, Switzerland, he unknowingly penned one of the earliest and most incisive reflections on race and whiteness in the Swiss context (Purtschert, Fischer-Tiné 2015, 14). His jarring experience as a Black man in an isolated Alpine village – where he was perceived not merely as foreign, but as utterly outside the villagers’ worldview, hyper-visible as an object of curiosity, yet invisible as a human subject with history, voice, and political presence – reveals

the foundational structures of racial imagination in a place often deemed politically neutral, racially homogenous, or even outside global colonial histories.

Baldwin's reflection on the villagers' authority, their unshaken sense of belonging, and his own racialisation speaks to more than a moment of cultural shock. It unearths the implicit power of whiteness in a European context, long before terms like 'white innocence' were theorised (Wekker, 2016). The myth of Switzerland as a land detached from histories of race, empire, and colonial violence is powerfully challenged by Baldwin's account. His presence in Leukerbad – and the villagers' response – lay bare the constructed boundaries of whiteness and the global reach of racial hierarchies, even in seemingly 'innocent' or 'apolitical' landscapes.

More than forty years later, Baldwin's insights remain unsettlingly relevant as Switzerland continues to project an image of neutrality and exceptionalism while promoting a vision of multicultural harmony. In 1994, the country ratifies the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and revises its penal code to include Article 261bis, criminalising racial hatred and incitement to discrimination. These legal reforms are presented as signs of progress and international alignment. Yet not long after, the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI), responding to an official Swiss report, offers a telling observation: "It may be necessary to dismantle certain stereotypes about Swiss society – for example, the idea that it is inherently open and multicultural" (Weill-Lévy et al. 2003, 113).

This statement points to a broader dissonance between Switzerland's self-image and its structural realities, highlighting the gap between official narratives of tolerance and the persistent challenges of naming and addressing racism. At the heart of this tension lies the absence of race as an explicit category and acknowledged reality in Swiss public discourse. While cultural diversity is often nominally celebrated, race remains largely unspoken – unspeakable, even. And indeed, there is some truth to this selective openness: research points to a general acceptance of certain forms of cultural difference – such as culinary traditions, foreign languages, or private religious practices. However, as the report on Switzerland as a multicultural society demonstrates, this openness has sharp limits. Cultural expressions perceived as threatening core societal values – like gender equality or secularism – frequently trigger discomfort or outright rejection (Grin et al. 2015; Gianni 2013). Strikingly, the boundary between what is considered 'tolerable' and 'intolerable' remains relatively consistent across language regions and political affiliations, suggesting a deeper consensus on the limits of acceptable difference.

This selective embrace of diversity points to a deeper issue: the tendency to depoliticise racial dynamics in Swiss public life. As the 2022 Report on Structural Racism highlights, discussions of racism are often confined to individual prejudice or extremist acts, while systemic and institutional dimensions remain largely overlooked (Mugglin et al. 2022). The findings of such reports raise a crucial question: How can racism be meaningfully addressed if naming it continues to provoke deflection, discomfort, or moral defensiveness?

This research takes this disconnect as a starting point to investigate how racism has been challenged within militant and institutional spaces in Switzerland, with a particular focus on trade unions. As historically significant actors in the organisation of labour and social justice struggles, trade unions provide a valuable lens through which to examine how race structures the labour market and shapes the broader conditions of migrants' insertion into the national space. After a first part dedicated to analysing the articulation of race in the Swiss context – both in discourses and policies – from the late 19th century to the post-Second World War era, the study then turns to investigate how, from the mid-1960s to the present, different moments of migrant labour struggles have intersected with shifting practices and discourses around race and racism. By tracing the responses of spaces traditionally aligned with left-wing, progressive, and internationalist politics, it seeks to understand how processes of racialisation have been acknowledged – or not – and to interrogate how anti-racism has been articulated, practiced, or resisted in contexts where solidarity is often framed primarily through class. Rather than assuming a fixed stance, the research aims to explore how racism is made visible, silenced, or contested within these evolving political and institutional terrains.

Understanding these responses requires attention to the specific history of racialisation in Switzerland. Throughout the 20th century, large waves of migrant workers from Southern Europe – most of whom were seasonal workers with specific permits – were subjected to precarious legal statuses and exclusionary social structures. At the time, their whiteness, was neither fixed nor guaranteed. These workers occupied an ambiguous position, often viewed as culturally inferior and racially suspect (Weill-Levy et al. 1999, 16-7). Over time, some of these groups – Italians, Spaniards – were gradually incorporated into the national fabric, their difference recast as a matter of integration rather than race, thus masking the continued operation of racial hierarchies beneath a language of cultural adaptation. This process was never neutral: as newer migrant populations arrived from non-European countries, the boundaries of Swiss whiteness shifted. Some were eventually included; others were to remain on the margins. The contours of racial belonging have evolved in ways that reflect broader global hierarchies,

while retaining uniquely Swiss characteristics – steeped in ideas of order, neutrality, and moral respectability.

This shifting landscape sets the stage for the central inquiry of this research: not only how racism has been addressed within leftist and institutional spaces in Switzerland, but also what conditions have made it possible – or difficult – for it to become a legitimate object of political struggle. In particular, this study explores how actors within spaces such as trade unions have developed their understandings of racial dynamics and the forms of action they have undertaken in response. What kinds of narratives, practices, or silences take shape in these contexts? And how do these dynamics influence the possibilities and limits of anti-racism as a collective and transformative project?

To address these questions, the study takes a pluridisciplinary approach, bringing together theoretical insights and methodological tools from discourse, visual, and policy analysis alongside ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, and interviews with workers, activists, and unionists. It traces how race has emerged, disappeared, and re-emerged in Swiss public and militant discourse – from its partial recognition in the 1970s, to its erasure during the 1990s, and its cautious reappearance in more recent years. The analysis focuses particularly on moments of tension: when racialised workers have taken to the streets to make visible the racist structures underpinning migrant labour management, and to demand recognition on their own terms; when institutional responses have tended to preserve existing frameworks rather than transform them; and when new reflections on its historical and global roots have begun to circulate in activist and institutional spaces. These moments serve as key sites for understanding how political solidarity is constructed, constrained, and contested in a context where race remains an uneasy and often marginalised issue.

Baldwin's words in the final lines of "Stranger in the Village" (1955) – "This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again" – still resonate with unsettling clarity. In contemporary Switzerland, that truth lingers just beneath the surface – felt in everyday encounters, in shifting demographics, in the voices of racialised workers – but rarely spoken aloud in political or institutional discourse. This thesis takes Baldwin's provocation as both a warning and an opening: a call to interrogate how whiteness continues to structure spaces imagined as progressive, and to ask what becomes possible when race is no longer deflected, but named, confronted, and reimaged as central to the struggle for justice.

Historical and Theoretical Landmarks

I arrived at the meeting without knowing exactly what to expect. I did not know anyone, but I immediately recognised the group I would be joining for this walking tour through the streets of Geneva. The meeting point was on Rousseau Island at 4:00 PM. It was cold, but a pleasant atmosphere quickly developed. Almost all of us were women, ranging in age from thirty to eighty. Leading the group was a Geneva-based historian and archivist, accompanied by a retired trade unionist.

I was aware of the theme of this tour, but I was also curious to discover or rediscover corners of the city through a path dedicated to the memory of seasonal workers. At each stop, a theme was displayed on a sign, similar to road signs, with a historical source to illustrate it. In the bottom right corner, a QR code allowed us to listen to testimonies from workers who had “built this city”, as stated in the exhibition flyer.

One moment particularly struck me: the last stop. When we arrived in the historical centre, we stood in front of the building housing the headquarters of the SIT, the Intercategorical Union of Workers. The worker’s voice we heard was not from the past; it was from the present.

(Geneva, Novembre 2024)

This encounter, where the past and present collide, encapsulates one of the central concerns of this research. As I moved through the city, it became clear that engaging with these histories is essential – not only to understand the struggles and lived experiences of past generations of migrant workers, but also to question how these histories are remembered, selectively acknowledged, or obscured in ways that disconnect them from the present realities of racism.

This research is situated at the crossroad of migration studies, labour history, critical race theory, intersectionality, and feminist politics. It builds upon a multidisciplinary body of work that examines both historical and contemporary processes of racialisation in Switzerland – focusing in particular on struggles around migrant labour and the responses these have elicited from trade unions, as well as other militant and institutional actors.

While the history of immigration in Switzerland has been extensively examined – especially regarding its socio-economic, legal, and demographic dimensions – the intersection between migrant workers’ struggles, trade union practices, and the articulation of anti-racism remains underexplored. This thesis seeks to address that gap by analysing how trade unions and

militant groups have responded to migrant workers' struggles – struggles that, as we will see, extended beyond workplace issues to encompass broader questions tied to the migrant condition in Switzerland. It also explores how these responses have, in turn, challenged the trade unions' own structures, practices, and understandings of their role in confronting racism and engaging with anti-racist politics up to this day.

The historiography cited here does not aim to be exhaustive, but rather to highlight the major themes in existing scholarship, while underscoring the weaknesses and shortcomings that arise from studies which, more often than not, overlook an intersectional perspective. These studies tend to treat issues such as class, gender and migration in isolation, rather than examining how these dimensions intersect in the lived experiences of migrant workers and in the political practices of trade unions and other leftist organisations.

A substantial body of scholarship has documented the waves of labour migration to Switzerland, particularly from Southern Europe during the 20th century. Scholars such as Etienne Piguet have traced the evolution of immigration politics in the country, while others – like Paolo Barcella and Morena La Barba – have offered valuable insights into the lived experiences of migrants, especially within the Italian community (Piguet 2017; Barcella 2018; La Barba et al. 2013; La Barba 2018). Complementing these accounts, Toni Ricciardi's *Associazionismo ed emigrazione* (2014) investigates how Italians built autonomous associations as both a response to marginalisation and a tool for political agency. Further enriching this body of work, Rosita Fibbi has made foundational contributions to the sociology of migration. Her research provides essential reflections on integration processes, exclusionary attitudes, and the experiences of the *secondos* – second-generation individuals from migrant backgrounds, particularly those of Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese descent (Bolzman et al. 2003). These authors have shaped crucial literature that traces how migrants were incorporated into the Swiss economy, often through temporary and precarious labour arrangements – highlighting the specificity and diversity of post-World War II migrant experiences, with particular attention to selected communities.

As will be further elaborated, while this research examines multiple waves of migration – particularly from the perspective of immigration management – key moments of tension, such as the 1970s, will serve as focal points. This is why scholars who have focused on the Italian and Spanish communities have been prioritised: their experiences align closely with the struggles identified in this inquiry. These studies underscore how cultural differences were

often redefined through the shifting notion of ‘foreignness’ – a flexible category shaped by political and economic imperatives.

In parallel, the history of the Swiss labour movement provides essential context for understanding how issues of race and class have been managed within institutional frameworks and in militant collectives. For understanding the context in which these struggles unfolded, the contributions of the *Cahiers du mouvement ouvrier* have been essential. These works have helped uncover the complexity of Swiss labour history – one often overlooked or downplayed in mainstream historiography, which has long contributed to the national myth of Switzerland as a conflict-free society. By bringing to light neglected histories of mobilisation and dissent, these texts challenge that narrative and open space for a more nuanced understanding of the country’s social and political past (Valsangiacomo et al. 2012; Valsangiacomo et al. 2013).

In this broader landscape of labour history, the 1970s stand out as a particularly rich period for the emergence of critical texts produced within militant spaces – texts that directly engaged with the conditions of migrant labour and the internal contradictions of solidarity-based politics. Authors such as Sergio Agustoni (1974) and Delia Castelnuovo Frigessi (1978) offered both historical documentation and theoretical reflection that remain central to this project. These works serve both as archival sources and analytical tools, allowing us to trace how trade unions in that era negotiated their role in internationalist struggles while often reproducing national and racist hierarchies. This tradition of militant historiography – which foregrounds memory, collective struggle, and political subjectivity – illuminates how resistance has been articulated within the labour movement and highlights the voices of those who have shaped it.

Building on this foundation, recent historical research by Frédéric Deshusses and Francesco Garufo revisits past labour struggles, offering fresh perspectives on the experiences of migrant workers and the militant contexts that shaped activism in the 1970s (Deshusses, Giancane 2013, Deshusses 2014; Garufo 2015). Through the re-examination of archival materials, their work sheds light on the strategies, conflicts, and solidarities that characterised this formative period, highlighting both the achievements and the persistent challenges in trade union agendas. Complementing this renewed historiographical interest, the 2024 volume *Compañeros de la emigración! Lavoratori emigrati!*, authored by Alain Mélo and coordinated by Alda Degiorgi, turns the focus to the years 1968 to 1974. This study expands the analytical scope by providing detailed morphological and sociological analyses of migrant labour networks and the alliances that crystallised during this politically charged era (Mélo 2024).

Together, these works underscore the significance of transnational solidarities and the complex dynamics that shaped labour activism in Switzerland and beyond.

Despite some valuable contributions, the literature on Swiss trade unionism remains relatively limited, particularly in relation to the intersections of race, class, and power. Valérie Boillat and colleagues' 2006 historical study *La valeur du travail* (2006) offers a foundational understanding of the development of Swiss trade unionism, yet it pays limited attention to the participation and struggles of migrant workers. Similarly, the 2019 volume *Le métier et la vocation de syndicaliste* by Fillieule, Monney and Rayner provides a nuanced sociological and gendered analysis of the actual trade unions' world in Switzerland, focusing on who enters union careers and how individuals reconcile militant engagement with salaried work. By drawing on biographical data and statistical analyses, the study traces the professional, militant, and family trajectories of union activists. It also sheds light on key dynamics such as the tensions between volunteerism and professionalisation, the sexual division of labour, and the barriers women face in accessing leadership roles despite formal promotion policies. While this work offers a valuable compass for understanding the internal organisation of unions it notably lacks engagement with questions of racism and migration – two dimensions that remain crucial to a fuller picture of the Swiss labour movement.

In a similar vein, Sarah Kiani's study *De la révolution féministe à la constitution* (2019) offers an important perspective for understanding the broader historical evolution of political struggles in Switzerland, particularly in relation to feminist movements. By exploring the tensions between institutional and non-institutional spaces and analysing the legislative developments in women's rights, Kiani brings to light often-overlooked processes such as the formation of new collective spaces and shifting alliances. Her attention to life histories and militant trajectories offered crucial historical coordinates for engaging with archival materials and oral history. Yet, as with other texts in this field, the study stops short of adopting a fully intersectional perspective. The role of migrant women in feminist mobilisations remains largely unexamined, inadvertently reinforcing a homogenised narrative of participation and obscuring the differentiated experiences that shaped these movements.

This gap in the literature has made more targeted works crucial for critically understanding the complex and often ambivalent relationship between trade unions and migrant labour. It is important to emphasise that Swiss trade unions have historically functioned as both spaces of solidarity and arenas of exclusion. Foundational studies – such as the analyses by Agustoni in the 1970s – document early attempts to integrate migrant worker concerns into

broader class struggles (Agustoni et al. 1973; Agustoni 1974). More recent contributions, such as the 2000 report *L'apport de l'immigration au syndicalisme suisse depuis 1945* by Malik von Allmen and Jean Steinauer, offer interesting insights into how immigration has reshaped union strategies, institutional practices, and political discourse, thereby illuminating the structural tensions that continue to shape trade union engagement with migration and racial justice.

Together, these works shed light on the evolving and often contested dynamics between class, migration, and political activism within Swiss political landscape. However, a notable blind spot persists: even the most recent and methodologically rich contributions tend to foreground issues of gender and professional identity, while consistently overlooking racialised forms of exclusion. This absence is not merely incidental; it reflects a broader epistemological tendency within both academic and union discourses in Switzerland to operate within a framework of solidarity that often renders racial difference invisible or irrelevant.

I have been invited to sit at the table of the organisation's upper leadership. A few people looked at me with curiosity, and eventually someone asked what I was working on. I mentioned racial discrimination and anti-racism, though I didn't have the time to elaborate on the reasons behind my presence.

One of the senior members responded with genuine enthusiasm. She said:

"Yes, it is so important to study gender discrimination – when I first joined the union, the men used to leave the congress and go to the brothels. Things have really improved."

In less than a second, race had disappeared.

(Locarno, November 2023)

This brief yet telling encounter reveals a recurrent pattern in institutional and political spaces, where discussions of race and racism are swiftly displaced by more socially accepted discourses – such as gender equality. The speed and ease with which race is erased from the conversation points to the deeper issue cited above: the inability or unwillingness of many organisations, particularly in predominantly white contexts, to grapple with racial dynamics in a substantive way. It is precisely this erasure that critical race theory and whiteness studies seek to address, enabling a deeper interrogation of how racial hierarchies are produced, sustained, and naturalised.

This work draws on the theoretical contributions of various authors who provide a structural interpretation of racism – viewing it not as an anomaly of the past or a matter of individual ignorance, but as a deeply embedded system shaping all dimensions of social life: economic, political, ideological, and psychological. Notably, Bonilla-Silva’s concept of ‘racialised social systems’ helps to understand how race persists as a social structure through shifting forms, narratives, and institutions (Bonilla-Silva 1997; 2021). Within this theoretical landscape and central to this project is the work of Alana Lentin, whose analysis anchors the study in the historicity of racism and its continuous rearticulation across contexts (Lentin 2008; 2020; 2025). Of particular importance is her engagement with Cedric J. Robinson’s theorisation of racial capitalism (1983), which illuminates the ways in which racial hierarchies function as a technology within economic and social systems – not as deviations from capitalism, but as constitutive of it. Lentin’s framework thus provides the analytical lens through which this study examines how state policies and migration regimes deploy race as an instrument of governance, making her work the guiding reference for the project’s core arguments.

Two works on the Swiss context similarly resonate with broader debates in critical race theory while offering detailed historical analyses: *Suisse: un essai sur le racisme d’État* (1999; 2003) by Anne Weill-Lévy, Karin Gündberg, and Judith Isler. These studies trace how the Swiss state has historically reproduced racial hierarchies through its management of labour and immigration, following the evolution and adaptation of legislation. They provide a rare and systematic account of how state mechanisms produced and regulated racialised categories, offering a critical lens on the formation of what can be understood as state racism in Switzerland. In this sense, these works also illustrate the articulation of race and capital in a Swiss setting: labour control and migrant regulation were central to upholding economic hierarchies and shaping access to rights, resources, and social recognition.

To interrogate how race operates – and how it is denied – the concept of whiteness, understood as an unmarked position of structural advantage and epistemic normativity, is central here. Key contributions in this field include the work of David Roediger, whose analysis builds on W.E.B. Du Bois’s concept of the psychological and material advantages conferred by whiteness, even among exploited white workers (Roediger 1991). His work, along with Guglielmi and Salerno’s *Gli italiani sono bianchi?* (2006), though focused primarily on the North American context, offers a critical lens for understanding how racialised privileges become embedded within class identities and labour politics. Complementing these perspectives, the recent study by Solène Brun and Claire Cosquer, *La Domination blanche* (2024), brings this analysis into the European context, offering crucial insights into how

whiteness operates as a dominant yet invisible norm that shapes both institutional structures and individual subjectivities.

These frameworks enable us to analyse how racial meanings are produced, transformed, and silenced – and how whiteness, while often rendered invisible, functions as a central axis of power. In the Swiss context, dominant discourses of national identity have historically constructed a culturally white subjectivity, despite the country's multi-ethnic composition. This underscores how racial hierarchies and exclusions can persist even when race is not openly acknowledged. Building on this, scholars such as Sara Ahmed and David Theo Goldberg highlight how institutional assertions of neutrality can conceal ongoing racial hierarchies (Goldberg 2002). Ahmed's concept of 'non-performativity' is particularly illuminating: it captures how symbolic commitments to diversity or anti-racism often fail to translate into substantive structural change (Ahmed 2006). Her reflections on racism, institutional life, and the politics of inclusion are highly relevant in this sense. While Ahmed's analyses focus on the UK and Australian contexts, the theoretical tools she provides are valuable in broader settings, including Switzerland (Ahmed 2012). They help to critically interrogate institutional language around 'diversity', 'equality', and 'inclusion' – terms that are widely used yet often disconnected from transformative practice. In Switzerland, where legal and political discourses tend to sideline the concept of race altogether, these theoretical insights are crucial for understanding how racial inequality is reproduced through silence, evasion, and bureaucratic neutrality.

An intersectional approach is also central to this work, particularly for analysing the multiple and layered forms of violence that migrant workers endure – both in the labour market and within institutional spaces such as trade unions. Rather than treating categories of identity as additive (e.g., gender 'plus' race 'plus' class), intersectional and Black feminist frameworks offer a way of thinking through the simultaneity and co-constitution of forms of oppression. Texts such as Patricia Hill Collins' *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) provide essential tools for analysing how subjectivities are formed at the intersection of multiple systems of power. These perspectives are particularly important in contexts like Switzerland, where one of the most overt forms of racism takes the shape of Islamophobia – targeting Muslim communities, and especially Muslim women, through culturalist narratives and exclusionary state practices. In this regard, Lila Abu-Lughod's *Do Muslim Women Need Saving?* (2013) offers a vital critique of the ways in which Muslim women's lives are often instrumentalised in public discourse, reinforcing colonial logics under the guise of liberal and democratic concerns. Her work

challenges us to resist simplistic portrayals and to attend instead to the political and structural forces that shape women's lives globally. These perspectives are crucial for challenging the limitations of mainstream feminist and labour discourses, which too often isolate single axes of oppression. By foregrounding relational and intersecting forms of power, they offer a framework that both centres marginalised experiences and resists reductive understandings of structural violence. This brings us back to Sara Ahmed reflections on how institutions respond to feminist demands (2012). As the fieldnote above illustrates, gender equality has become an increasingly prominent theme within Swiss institutions and political organisations, including trade unions. While this shift reflects certain advances, it also carries the risk of incorporating the experiences of migrant and racialised women into a dominant feminist discourse that fails to account for the multiplicity of violences they face. When institutional feminism is shaped primarily by white, middle-class norms, there is a danger that structural racism, economic precarity, and migration-related exclusions are rendered invisible or secondary. In this regard, Ahmed's reflections on the institutional life of feminism, as well as her critique of how inclusion often comes at the cost of political radicality, are highly relevant.

Equally important to this analysis are the contributions of Judith Butler, whose work on vulnerability, performativity, and alliance formation offers essential tools for thinking about political resistance. Butler's reflections on visibility and invisibility, especially in *Vulnerability in Resistance* (2016) and *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), help illuminate how certain lives and struggles are rendered invisible, and how collective action can emerge from shared conditions of exposure and interdependence. This framework is particularly useful for analysing the ways in which, today, migrant women organise within and beyond institutional structures, challenging norms of recognisability and reclaiming political agency from positions often perceived as marginal or fragile.

Bell hooks' extensive body of work also informs this reflection on resistance, care, and political action. Her writings insist on the transformative potential of love and community as sites of radical possibility, while never losing sight of the systemic nature of oppression. In tandem, Elsa Dorlin's philosophical engagement with violence and self-defense – especially in *Se défendre: une philosophie de la violence* (2017) – provides a powerful counterpoint to narratives that equate vulnerability with passivity. Dorlin's work invites us to consider how marginalised subjects develop embodied strategies of protection and resistance, and how these practices intersect with histories of colonialism, policing, and survival.

Together, these texts help conceptualise resistance not as a singular or heroic act, but as a web of situated practices grounded in care, interdependence, and collective struggle. They offer critical insights for understanding how migrant people navigate and contest the overlapping structures of gendered, racialised, and economic violence – often through forms of alliance and solidarity that defy the limits of institutional recognition.

By weaving together these theoretical strands, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how racism has been historically produced, managed, and contested – particularly within spaces that often perceive themselves as progressive. It positions trade unions not only as historical actors but also as dynamic sites of ideological negotiation, where questions of race, labour, gender, and belonging are continuously reframed in response to shifting political and institutional landscapes. In doing so, the thesis frames a reflection not only on theory but also on practices of resistance and critically interrogates the spaces – both institutional and informal – where these actions emerge, are shaped, and at times constrained.

Notes on Methodology

My methodological practice emerges from a constellation of theoretical and experiential positions – critical race theory, post-colonial studies, and Black feminism form its foundational bedrock. These epistemologies have long challenged the presumed neutrality and universality of Western knowledge production, foregrounding instead the importance of situatedness, embodiment, and relationality. To this foundation, I bring a sustained engagement with decolonial studies, especially the contributions of thinkers such as Walter D. Mignolo, Aníbal Quijano, Catherine Walsh and Laura Quintana, who offer compelling critiques of epistemic coloniality and the violence of modernity’s totalising narratives. Their work has reoriented my understanding of methodology not as a linear sequence of techniques, but as an ethico-political gesture (Mignolo 1999; Quijano 2000; Walsh 2007; Quintana 2023).

Drawing from this hybrid theoretical background, my approach refuses rigid disciplinary borders. It instead embraces a pluridisciplinary (and at times chaotic) methodology – a mode of inquiry that recognises the fragmentary, contradictory, and polyphonic nature of knowledge, particularly when produced in contexts of struggle, resistance, and marginality. This methodology is not a pre-given framework to be applied; it is something that emerges through the research encounter, through the rhythms and silences of fieldwork, and through a

commitment to epistemic disobedience, that is, the act of delinking from dominant regimes of knowing in order to make space for other ways of sensing and narrating the world (Mignolo, Escobar 2010).

The practice of ethnography, central to my work, is approached not as a neutral tool but as a historically situated and power-laden methodology that must itself be decolonised. It has taken place not only in the expected spaces of labour politics – such as trade unions – but often in more liminal, peripheral, and affectively charged zones. Gaining access to institutionalised structures like trade unions proved difficult and exposed the layered dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, legitimacy and illegibility. This redirected my attention to what Rosi Braidotti calls micro-narratives: fleeting, situated, and often informal stories that resist grand totalising schemes (Braidotti 2014). These micronarratives, found in everyday conversations – on trains, in cafés, at bus stops after conferences, in kebab shops, or during shared moments in living rooms – became vital methodological sites. They allowed me to access minor knowledges, the small stories that are often left out of dominant accounts yet profoundly shape collective and political subjectivities.

Braidotti's conceptualisation of nomadic subjectivity resonates deeply with my methodological orientation. Like the nomad who resists fixity and territoriality, my research has moved through and between institutional boundaries and spatial-temporal scales (Braidotti 1998). My ethnographic journey has traversed from the institutional 'inside' to the affective 'outside', often dwelling in spaces of in-betweenness – what Gloria Anzaldúa might call "borderlands" (Anzaldúa 1987). These spaces include feminist and anti-racist collectives that operate at the edges of, and in dialogue with, formal trade union structures. They are counter-power formations, actively reshaping the terrain of labour politics by foregrounding intersectionality, care, and resistance to racialised and gendered precarisation.

Drawing on the work of Gloria Anzaldúa and bell hooks, this project understands the margin as a site of radical openness (hooks 1989) – a vantage point from which to see, speak, and theorise differently. Marginality is not merely exclusion but a location of critical possibility, where language, experience, and analysis converge to unsettle dominant frameworks. As Walter Mignolo asserts, "I am where I think" (1999, 235), emphasising that thought is always situated in geography, history, and power. Border thinking thus becomes both a critique and a refusal of colonial epistemologies: it demands questioning who is authorised to speak, from where, and in what language, and it insists on interrogating the very foundations of established disciplines rather than merely incorporating marginal voices into them (Mignolo 1999, 241; 2011). In this

sense, as Josh Myers (2023) argues in dialogue with Sylvia Wynter, the task is not to reform or diversify existing disciplinary frameworks but to reimagine study itself as a praxis that emerges from and is accountable to marginalised epistemic locations – an effort to unsettle the colonial terms of knowledge and the category of the human that underwrites them.

In this light, the research problematises the spatial and social binaries of centre and margin by tracing the tensions, silences, and resistances that emerge within sites of institutional power – trade unions, leftist collectives and even archives –, as they are traversed by contradictory logics, historical exclusions, and unfinished struggles. Margins emerge and are negotiated within these structures, not located ‘elsewhere’. To study racialisation and structural inequality within these spaces is not to speak ‘from’ the margin, but to interrogate how margins are produced, inhabited, and negotiated from within the structures of the centre. Resistance is therefore understood not only as rupture but as the slow, everyday practices of negotiation, survival, and refusal. Methodologically, this commitment manifests in attention to narrative form, microhistories, fragmentary materials, and the reflexive use of fieldnotes.

Thinking with Laura Quintana, I approach positionality not as a static identity but as a situated, affective relation – something shaped by history, power, and embodiment. Quintana’s work reminds us that emotions are not just personal experiences but also political forces: they bind us to systems of injustice while also serving as catalysts for resistance. Her notion of “affective spaces” offers a valuable lens for understanding how institutions and social practices are imbued with feelings that regulate inclusion and exclusion (Quintana 2023). In this way, fieldwork was not defined by static spatial coordinates but by relational geographies – emergent connections between bodies, places, and stories. These fluid, often unexpected encounters challenged the conventional ethnographic desire for coherence or representativity, and instead demanded a methodology that could hold multiplicity, ambiguity, and rupture.

My methodological approach thus emerged as a layered and responsive practice: grounded in in-depth interviews – approximately 40 –, militant narratives, participant observation, informal and unrecorded conversations, and a steady accumulation of fieldnotes. These notes were never merely documentation; they became spaces of reflexive engagement, where I attempted to trace the rhythm, texture, and contradictions of everyday political work – including its silences, affective resonances, and incompleteness. They also prompted me to constantly rethink how I translated lived realities onto the page. Fieldnotes became a tool of interpretation and accountability, helping me to navigate the epistemic tension between proximity and representation, immersion and analysis.

Alongside this immersive ethnographic engagement, my work also integrates historical ethnography as both method and sensibility. In this sense, I see historical ethnography not as a retrospective reconstruction of a vanished past, but as a dialogic practice, one that allows the voices of the past to resonate with those of the present:

To the extent that historiography is concerned with the recovery of meaningful worlds, with the interplay of the collective and the subjective, it cannot but rely on the tools of the ethnographer. It must be more than a little bit anthropological. By the same token, however, no ethnography can ever hope to penetrate beyond the surface planes of everyday life, to plumb its invisible forms, unless it is informed by the historical imagination – the imagination, that is, of both those who make history and those who write it. (Comaroff, Comaroff 1992, xi)

By moving between the archive and the field, and by pairing written documents with oral histories, I sought to build poly-temporal narratives that expose the continuities and ruptures of racialised and gendered labour struggles. This approach is aligned with what Nathan Wachtel calls a “regressive strategy” – the critical movement from present traces to historical configurations, foregrounding memory as a site of resistance (Wachtel 2014).

In the archives, I encountered voices that denounced racial violence and exclusion in the past – voices that seemed to speak directly to the contemporary challenges I was witnessing on the ground. These were not mere echoes; they were living memories, insurgent temporalities that called into question linear understandings of time and progress (Tamboukou 2014; 2016). This is what Charles Stewart and Stephan Palmié term the “anthropology of history” – an approach that centres historicity as a plural, culturally embedded, and often contested experience of the past. Historical ethnography in this sense becomes a way to map relational worlds across time, to trace how certain narratives survive, mutate, or are erased – and how they continue to shape struggles in the present (Palmier, Stewart 2016; 2019).

Extending this logic, militant ethnography (Koenigler et al. 2020) has been central to my work – both in the field and in the archive, including sites such as the militant archives in Geneva. The historical dimension of my research, which seeks to illuminate continuities that have long been ignored or actively silenced, converges with the present through a shared focus on minor, often overlooked, stories. These minor narratives do not simply complement the dominant historical record; they challenge and reconfigure it, offering counterpoints to official

discourses that tend to erase dissent and marginalise subaltern voices. Drawing on traditions of militant research (Juris 2007; Shukaitis, Graeber 2007), I understand this practice as a co-constitutive process – one that traces the lived, affective, and epistemic dimensions of struggle across time. Militant ethnography here is an ethical commitment to hold space for fragmented and contested knowledges. In both historical and contemporary registers, this approach allows for the construction of what Avery Gordon (2008) might call “ghostly matters” – the lingering presence of unresolved injustices that continue to haunt the present and animate political action.

To synthesise, my methodology is multi-sited, multi-temporal, and multi-vocal. It operates at the intersection of critical theory and empirical immersion, of archival fragments and embodied narratives. Rather than seeking a fixed point of objectivity, it moves with and through the uncertainties, the interruptions, and the intensities of the research process. It is a methodology of entanglement, one that acknowledges that the researcher is always already implicated, embedded, and accountable.

This methodological stance, though at times uncomfortable or destabilising, is not accidental. It is a deliberate epistemological choice – to stay with the trouble (Haraway 2016), to embrace the chaos not as failure but as a space of generative possibility. In doing so, I aim not to represent the struggles I study but to remain attuned to their complexity, to their unfinishedness, and to their potential for transformation.

Structure of the Text

This study is divided into three parts, each composed of two chapters. The first part establishes the conceptual and historical groundwork by tracing how race was articulated in Switzerland from the late 19th century to the post-Second World War era, and how these articulations were applied by the state through the regulation and management of foreign immigration.

The opening chapter begins by defining what is meant by ‘post-colonial’ Switzerland, situating the country within broader global histories of empire, race, and exclusion despite the absence of formal colonies. It then turns to the racist policies of the Swiss state in the early 20th century, identifying both the populations that were targeted and the ways in which Switzerland aligned with wider European patterns of racial exclusion while maintaining its distinctive image of neutrality. Here, the introduction of the concept of the ‘post-racial’ makes it possible to distinguish between racism and xenophobia, and to show how discourses of fear have operated – and been instrumentalised – throughout Swiss history.

The second chapter focuses on the post-World War II period, highlighting how immigration and labour policies in Switzerland were structured by racialised logics. It foregrounds the immediate postwar years to revisit and complicate the chronology of migration, showing how early administrative and policy frameworks shaped labour migration up to the 1960s. Italian migrants, in particular, are examined as testing grounds of this system, providing a case study through which broader hierarchies of inclusion and exclusion can be understood. The chapter also explores the lived experiences of these migrants, demonstrating how legal precarity translated into social exclusion, family separation, and vulnerability to multiple forms of violence. In doing so, it shows that whiteness in Switzerland was not fixed but produced through a conditional and often violent process of integration via labour. By tracing these patterns, the chapter opens a broader reflection on the role of racial capitalism in shaping the Swiss labour market and the hierarchies it continues to reproduce.

This first section shows that even in the absence of formal colonies, Swiss racial hierarchies were deeply intertwined with state policies and public discourse, setting patterns that structured migration and inclusion for decades to come.

The second part of this study explores how racism has been contested over time, focusing on the forms of resistance that emerged across different social and political arenas. It centres on the period from 1964 to the 1990s, with particular attention to the decade between 1964 and 1978 – a moment marked by growing anxiety over the so-called ‘overforeignisation’ (*Überfremdung*) of Swiss society, as reflected in the popularity of the Schwarzenbach initiatives¹. While mainstream discourse during this period was shaped by exclusionary rhetoric, it was also a time of intense mobilisation by those directly targeted. Seasonal workers, in particular, played a central role in challenging not only their precarious labour conditions but also the broader discriminatory structures that governed their lives. Their struggles extended beyond the workplace and formed connections with broader political movements, including women’s collectives, communist organisations, and transnational solidarities.

These forms of militant engagement led to significant structural shifts. One of the most notable was the evolution of trade unions, which – after initial resistance – began to incorporate migrant workers more directly into their organisational structures and political agendas. At the same time, local associations and activist networks took on the role of exposing injustices and

¹ The period of the Schwarzenbach initiatives in the 1960s and 1970s, marked by rising racist discourses and political efforts to restrict foreign immigration, represents a pivotal moment in Switzerland’s racist history and will be examined in greater detail in the following chapters.

advocating for foreign workers' rights, helping to create the groundwork for a broader anti-racist politics. These developments culminated in the 1980s and early 1990s in a more institutionalised approach to anti-racism, marked by a growing emphasis on integration and tolerance discourses. However, this shift also contributed to the depoliticisation of racism itself: the term began to disappear from public language even as structural inequalities persisted. Chapter Four explores this paradox, tracing how efforts to challenge racism became increasingly embedded in institutions while often losing their critical edge – a process that unfolded just as new waves of migration, particularly from the Balkans and beyond, began to reshape the demographic and political landscape once again. This analysis demonstrates how moments of grassroots resistance reshaped institutional practices, even as they revealed the limits of progressive politics in confronting entrenched racism.

The final part of this research presents an ethnographic investigation into how racism is produced, negotiated, and challenged in contemporary Switzerland. Chapter Five examines how recent shifts in migration policy have reshaped the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, producing new hierarchies of belonging. It explores how racism has adapted to changing global and national dynamics by integrating certain groups – gradually assimilating them into forms of 'Swissness' or 'whiteness' – while constructing others, such as Muslims, Black people, and racialised migrants from the Global South, as enduring outsiders. Within this evolving landscape, the chapter analyses how trade unions have responded to racism, tracing their official commitments, practices, internal debates, and the limits of their anti-racist engagement. This part of the analysis illustrates that contemporary Swiss racism is adaptive, producing hierarchies that mirror both historical patterns and global racial logics.

Chapter Six builds on this analysis by exploring how trade unionists and activists navigate beyond the constraints of institutional frameworks. It examines how they engage with alternative spaces – such as the Feminist Strike Movement – to articulate forms of anti-racism that are more intersectional, flexible, and responsive to lived experience. These spaces, situated at the margins or in tension with traditional structures, become laboratories for reimagining solidarity and resistance. By centring the voices and practices of workers and activists, the chapter highlights how anti-racism is not only contested within institutions but also actively redefined through everyday struggles and creative forms of political engagement.

This study offers a critical reflection on the evolving articulations of race and racism in Switzerland. It does so by examining the spaces, actors, and discourses involved in migrant

workers' struggles, tracing how processes of racialisation have shifted over time and adapted to changing political, institutional, and social contexts. By analysing both public narratives and institutional practices, the research sheds light on how the figure of the 'foreigner' has been continually redefined – through mechanisms of inclusion, exclusion, and conditional belonging. Ultimately, this work contributes to broader debates on migration and integration in Switzerland. It demonstrates that national identity in Switzerland is actively sustained through the performance and reproduction of whiteness, and that anti-racist struggles – both within and outside institutions – offer insights into how these dynamics can be contested and reimagined.