Coco Rebecca Edogamhe: A Very Ordinary Girl

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"Really, I am a *very* ordinary girl." This is how Coco Rebecca Edogamhe, born in 2001, responds to the author's question about the overall path that led her to *Summertime* (2020–2022), in which she played Summer, the main character. Nothing about Edogamhe seems ordinary at first glance: she debuted at the age of 18 in a Netflix teen series without prior acting experience or training, and she is the first Afro-Italian actress to play the lead in an Italian TV show; she also became a model, appearing on the cover of major fashion magazines. Where, exactly, lies the ordinary? This is the question that informs this chapter, which tries to understand how Edogamhe built her professional culture and negotiated her public image from 2020 to 2023. The risks in handling carefully manufactured sources, such as press and video interviews, can be managed first by collecting the largest number and variety of them, which ought to be analyzed in a comparative and diachronic way, and second by assuming the posture of media production studies (Caldwell 2008; Mayer et al. 2009). Therefore, the research includes one in-depth interview (Mayer 2008) with Edogamhe conducted by the author on March 27, 2022, at the University of Bologna, and a public one conducted on the same day

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by Luca Barra, in the presence of other cast and crew members and in front of an audience of students.

Coco Rebecca Edogamhe is the daughter of an Italian Caucasian mother and a Nigerian black father: she is of mixed heritage—she describes herself as "*mulatta*"—and has a younger sister, Alicia Ann, who is also featured in *Summertime* in the role of Blue, the sister of Summer. Her ethnicity assumed a prominent role in her public image, and, along with her young age and sudden popularity, raised her as a symbol of a new generation of young Italian performers with a diverse background. Edogamhe did not reject this narrative, yet she expressed some uneasiness about it: "I am just a 20-year-old girl that still lives with her mother and sister in a town in the province of Bologna", she said (Edogamhe, in Meda 2022), affirming a paradigm of the ordinary, a booths-on-the-ground approach which she frequently relied on to lighten the responsibility of being "the voice of her generation," a role which she did not audition for. She often blurred sharp lines and proposed a tempered, quotidian model of celebrity, based on lightness, practicality, and modesty, intrinsically coherent with the tradition of television stardom (see Ortoleva 2000; Bennett 2011; Barra 2017). This emerged in three key ways: (1) through the interpretation she gave about her profession; (2) through the description of her sudden surge in popularity and the consequences for her private life; (3) and, finally, with a constant mirroring between her persona and the themes and tones of *Summertime*, which, in the worlds of Edogamhe, is "a positive, light, sunny show. It talks about teenagers, adolescents, about their everyday life, of the problems we all go through" (Franco 2020).

Edogamhe first expressed the relevance of being cast in a role not intended initially for an actress of color, the wonders of discovering the "great machine" of a television set, the "discipline, dedication and perseverance" necessary for the job, and of the importance of receiving the help of more experienced actors (Bellamy 2020). Hence, it was after filming the third season of *Summertime* that she started to reflect publicly on her whole career in a more structured way, referring to the start of it as a mix of coincidence, unconsciousness, and destiny. She recalled that she underwent the process "by chance," without expectations and with a certain level of "ingenuity" that helped her to face the whole thing with a light heart. As the "*very* ordinary girl" still in high school, she never thought she would have achieved such a result (Edogamhe 2022a). Despite an opposite declaration featured on *Vogue Italia*—"I always took the dream

of becoming an actress very seriously" (Edogamhe, in Osei 2022)—the truth can be found something in between: "it was weird becoming an actress, but at the same time in was not a thing that I never expected to do" (Edogamhe 2022a). In addition, she started to describe the set as her "school," as "an all-round experience that shapes you as a person": the actress connected this experience with her coming of age and with the fact that the end of filming triggered similar emotions to those felt at the end of the school experience (Edogamhe 2022b). Most importantly, interpreting the set as a school was strategic to compensate for her lack of training: "studying of course remains very important … however there you can fully verify what is the meaning [of acting], how you should be, what kind of behaviour you should have" (Edogamhe 2022a).

Afterwards, Edogamhe applied this "practice over theory" principle when she entered "the world of adults" that was the cast of *Rapiniamo il Duce* (*Robbing Mussolini*, Renato de Maria, 2022). She used the concrete metaphor of "stealing" to describe how she learned from more experienced actors to enrich her "personal set of tools in order to pour it into your character and use it in the scene." Being more self-conscious, she recognized that because she missed the basics of professional training her approach to characters "is always a little bit instinctive." To define acting, she used another practical metaphor, that of an emotional "washing machine" that stirs emotions, notions, and teachings derived from everyday life: "I am very curious by nature. I always watch interviews with actors and actresses, directors … I get inspired by everyone … even when I go out to take a walk and I meet strangers" (Fasano 2022). Therefore, after almost four years on the job, Edogamhe is finally putting together a self-theory to counterbalance what she perceives as her limits: it is rooted in common sense, based on a never-ending observational process and on the importance of the operative knowledge over a structured one.

Strictly entrenched in Edogamhe's life on the set is the managing of popularity and the negotiation with a collection of values and narratives that her figure inspires. Despite the apparent transparency of her Instagram account, her relationship with social media is rather ambiguous. At first, she expressed the desire to put it in service of a greater cause "to testify the beauty of being ourselves, regarding of our ethnicity," so as to help second or third-generation Italians (Mancinelli 2020). Still, as her career progressed, commentary on social issues was joined by advertised products—which she categorized as the "work" part—and bits of

everyday life (Osei 2022). She also started to express a certain frustration since the urgency to speak of something meaningful was at odds with the fear of "getting it wrong … because when you are a person with a large following, there are many who point the finger against you." She felt freer when she was not famous, while now she has to first "process what is happening" before exposing herself (Edogamhe 2022a). Nevertheless, in a video interview months later, she mentioned that she was trying to "speak head-on" about certain issues without fear of being judged, like in her attempt to "normalize" the fact that she was going to therapy (Essere Nero 2023). Edogamhe's ambivalences, frequent turns, and contradictions on the topic of social media presence acquire meaning if read in the context of the difficult situation of fame management in which she found herself. Her Instagram account "exploded" with followers after the release of the show's first season, and seeing this happening during quarantine was, in her words, "very weird." While the pandemic leveled her everyday experience with that of most young Italians—meeting friends on video-call, attending classes remotely, spending time in her room and in close contact with her family—overnight her face was "on a TV series on Netflix that everyone can see on a global level." While she rationally understood what was happening, it was difficult to perceive a radical change, as she felt she was "the same girl as always" (Edogamhe 2022a). Only later, when she started to go outside, did she have to get used to being recognized, asked for a picture, and put on a pedestal by ordinary people "on the street" (Edogamhe 2022b). The impact of the pandemic on the acting job (Antoniazzi and Barra 2022), the lockdowns and public distancing, all give a deeper meaning to the "I am just like you" rhetoric, a modesty discourse that sounds like a visceral call for normalcy: "I have my fears too, my insecurities … we can talk about the same things, we can speak about everything, about music … you see that in the end, I do not bite" (Edogamhe 2022a).

Edogamhe regards herself as a normal girl, not so distant from Summer who plays a primary role in the actress' self-depiction to the public, and whose ethnicity is rarely an object of controversy in the series: "When I play Summer … the last thing I think about is the color of my skin" (Edogamhe, in Osei 2022). This does not mean that ethnicity is not relevant for Edogamhe; on the contrary, representation matters and she hopes that her success could pave the way for other young Italians of color to pursue an acting career without being afraid of being cast in stereotyped roles, like those of "the immigrant" or "the prostitute" for

Afro-Italian actors, who were usually barred from main and multifaceted roles. Edogamhe endorses a truism that was not so distant from the reality of the Italian audiovisual industry until very recently. Research published in 2017 showed that all Italian movies had a Caucasian protagonist, while only 8% of them included characters of African descent. Moreover, the "foreign" character was always depicted as "problematic": the industry certainly "preach[es] inclusion … but has not yet been able to include in its horizon the plurality of a country that is heading towards a 15% of citizens of foreign backgrounds (and over 25% when it comes to younger generations)" (Manzoli and Minuz 2017). Edogamhe indeed wants to "demonstrate that it is possible to tell stories of diversity in a light-hearted way, not underlining anything, not weighing down on anything" (Edogamhe 2022a) as differences are not to be seen as "extraordinary," but as "nothing special" and "not exceptional," like herself (Bellamy 2020). This aspect, stressed by the actress since her first interviews, follows the rhetoric embraced by the series' producers and was boosted by the decision to cast her in the role of Summer (Di Benedetto 2022). Along with representation comes the issue of identity, which minimizes the possibility of liquidating Edogamhe's self-interpretation as post-racial: she is, in fact, proud to have been raised at the crossroads of two cultures, and she described the moment when she started to take care of her afro hair—"the symbol of an entire people" (Mancinelli 2020)—as the "complete acceptance" of herself and of her mixed heritage (Bellamy 2020). Moreover, during a roundtable on the Netflix Italia YouTube channel (2021), she recognized that her relaxed approach to race issues may be the product of her family history, as well as her being part of a younger generation. In stark contrast with the actor Haroun Fall who spoke about the pain of overcoming internalized racism, she considered herself lucky that, besides her past issues with her hair, she did not grow up "hating her Nigerian part." Certainly, the risk of color-blind rhetoric (Warner 2015) is always present, but Edogamhe is adamant in her conviction that it is the duty of a younger generation "to make other people understand" that Italians of color exist and that they are not problematic, but rather "the everyday" (Edogamhe 2022a).

Coco Rebecca Edogamhe's young age and relatively brief career has allowed us to identify a first core of professional practices and trade stories. First, she counterbalances her shortages with an "ecumenical and eclectic" self-theory (Caldwell 2008, 17–18), a public commitment to learning from everyone, and being open-minded about her overall chances in the

media industry. Then, she aims to be approachable in public and embeds the mainstream diversity politics of *Summertime*. One of her statements that summarizes it all is the following: "a person's peculiarity is not necessarily found in the extraordinary. Even the most ordinary and everyday things have their charm and importance" (Edogamhe, in Osei 2022). This redundancy of practical, mild, and ordinary aspects makes her the unconscious heir of a genealogy of television celebrities, updated to the current context of digital media. As she is still at the beginning of her career, time will tell us if she will treasure her supposedly adapting talents or if she will get lost in what remains a highly competitive environment. The challenge will be not to remain just Coco, *an* ordinary girl, but to become Coco Rebecca Edogamhe, *the* ordinary girl.

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