



# POSTCOLONIAL ITALY

Challenging National Homogeneity

Edited by

CRISTINA LOMBARDI-DIOP and CATERINA ROMEO



## Italian and Italian American Studies

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# **Postcolonial Italy**

## **Challenging National Homogeneity**

Edited by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo

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POSTCOLONIAL ITALY

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To Alassane, Isaac, and Maddalena  
And to their future in the country we envision in this book

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## Introduction

# Paradigms of Postcoloniality in Contemporary Italy

*Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo*

### Defining Postcolonialism

In a seminal essay that emphasizes the “dubious spatiality” and “problematic temporality” of the term “postcolonial,” Ella Shohat asks, “When exactly, then, does the ‘post-colonial’ begin?” (103). This question is particularly relevant for Italy, as the beginning of the decolonization process did not coincide with the beginning of the postcolonial era. In the period between 1890 and 1943, Italy claimed colonial rights over Eritrea, Somalia, parts of Libya, Ethiopia, the Dodecanese Islands, and Albania, but the postindependence period did not begin simultaneously for these territories. Italy officially renounced its colonial empire with the Paris Peace Treaty in 1947, but the colonies had already been lost following its defeat by the British Army in East Africa in 1941 and in Libya in 1943 and the take-over of the Italian colonies in Albania and the Dodecanese Islands by the German Army in 1943. Italy, however, sustained new kinds of colonial relations even after the loss of the colonies, both at a political level, as in the case of the Italian Trusteeship Administration in Somalia (*Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana della Somalia*, AFIS) from 1949 to 1960, and at an economic level, as occurred in Libya up until the mass exodus in 1970. Finally, the process of decolonization was not the outcome of colonial wars of independence, in which the periphery rebelled against the metropole; rather, it was the result of the weakening, and later the defeat, of Fascism. For all these reasons, the case of Italy—as a national paradigm rarely understood within a postcolonial framework—compels us to evaluate postcolonialism under a new light.

This volume addresses the Italian postcolonial condition as one of the main factors that affects lives and shapes cultures in contemporary Italy. In particular, it identifies the common, postcolonial context in which a wide array of discourses, social practices, and forms of cultural production are finding expression in contemporary Italy. The way in which the volume addresses the field of postcolonial

studies is not limited to the exploration of the relationship between former colonizers and colonized, nor is it confined to a rereading of colonial history and culture; rather, it considers how the postcolonial paradigm formulates new epistemologies produced by previously voiceless subjects, while at the same time highlighting and examining the relationships of power created by colonialism and reproduced and reinforced in contemporary postcolonial societies.

The term “postcolonial” has always been highly contentious both at a political and a theoretical level: if, on the one hand, it homogenizes spatial and temporal specificities, thus reproducing a Eurocentric position, on the other, it renders invisible the continuity existing between colonial and neocolonial relations of power. In line with critics who have argued that the prefix “post” followed by “colonialism” evokes the end of a phase, thus erasing the existing continuity in postcolonial times between colonialism and its effects into the present (Shohat; McClintock; Loomba), our notion of the “postcolonial” is grounded in the assumption that the economic and cultural effects of colonialism are still present in many countries, including Italy, predominantly in the way by which the imbalance of colonial power is reinstated in today’s global world through the unjust treatment and exclusion of migrants from developing countries who are often denied access to human rights and the privilege of global citizenship (Loomba). Starting with the awareness that the “post” in “postcolonial” signals continuity rather than fracture, our volume adopts a postcolonial perspective on contemporary Italy in order to redefine its cultural history and national identity.

The volume’s idea of postcolonialism is broadly defined as to include the processes of racialization, gendering, and cultural transformations engendered within contemporary Italy by the legacy of colonialism, emigration, and global migrations. As a condition that exceeds national borders, the Italian postcolonial, we argue, situates itself not in relation to the British and French histories of empire, in which the migratory fluxes were almost exclusively coming from previous colonies, but rather to the post-Cold War reconfiguration of Europe and its emerging postcolonialities (see Ponzanesi in this volume).<sup>1</sup> In the Anglophone world, the term “postcolonial” is generally used to define both a critical and theoretical approach as well as a historical period that begins with decolonization and extends to contemporary migrations from Asia, Africa, and Latin America to Europe and North America. In the Italian context, the term is beginning to be employed to explore the historical continuum and cultural genealogy that link the colonial past to contemporary Italy. In this sense, our volume adopts the term in order to reposition colonial history and its legacy at the center of the debate on contemporary Italy. Additionally, by incorporating emigration, the Southern Question, and immigration as phenomena closely intertwined with the postcolonial condition, the volume moves beyond the national and colonial context.

### **Colonialism, the South, and Emigration**

The volume is loosely structured along two axes, one temporal and the other spatial, which stress continuity and proximity. On the one hand, the notion of Italian



national identity and culture is shaped in a historical continuum that connects the postcolonial present to colonialism, to the subaltern position of the South, and to international and intranational migrations; on the other, the postcolonial perspective emphasizes a transnational spatial continuity, in that it reinforces the idea of diasporic communities in Europe and around the world which share the common experience of colonization.<sup>2</sup>

Italy has had a long history of both transatlantic and trans-Mediterranean migrations. Between 1876 and 1976, approximately 26 million Italians left their nation, thus establishing a record for international migration (Choate, *Emigrant Nation* 244, note 1). The fact that emigration became a mass phenomenon in Italy (1870s) soon after Unification (1861–70), and that a decade later Italy started acquiring coastal territories on the Red Sea (1882), soon to become the first Italian formal colony of Eritrea (1890), underlines the transnational nature of the newly unified nation-state, a state that found a sense of national identity and culture while projecting itself far beyond its territorial borders. Italy's history of emigration and colonization has not only created "a circulation of individuals and families, but also of capital, traditions, and ideas" (Choate, *Emigrant Nation* 1). In turn, emigration has de-centered the sense of national belonging<sup>3</sup> and disseminated linguistic and cultural features inherent to the concept of *italianità*, a concept that is now crucial to a definition and an understanding of the postcolonial condition in contemporary Italy.

Since the turn of the new millennium, migration studies with regard to Italy have focused on the continuity existing between international and intranational migrations (Gabaccia; Gaspari) as well as transoceanic and trans-Mediterranean migrations. Emigration and the colonization of Africa have recently been analyzed as interrelated phenomena (Labanca, "Nelle colonie," *Oltremare*; Choate, "Tunisia," *Emigrant Nation*) that were prompted by the necessity of the newly born nation-state to establish transnational economies in support of the national one. Nicola Labanca has underlined the need to analyze the emigrant nature of Italy's colonization in Africa—rather than limit the study of colonial history to politics, military strategies, and diplomacy—so as to understand the social implications of the phenomenon both in Italy and in the colonies and to examine the continuities and discontinuities between emigration and colonization. Mark Choate remarks that the word *colonia* was used to refer both to Italian possessions overseas and to communities of emigrants around the world (see also Fiore in this volume), although the Italians living in colonized lands and those who had emigrated elsewhere found themselves in opposing positions vis-à-vis the native populations (Choate, *Emigrant Nation* 2). Robert Viscusi assumes the same starting point—the double meaning of the word *colonia*—in order to deploy the notions of "colonial" and "postcolonial" in a different history and geography—namely, to analyze the development of Italian American studies in the United States. Although re-signified, this vocabulary is borrowed from postcolonial discourse in order to underline the centrality of the condition of double cultural subalternity characterizing Italian American culture in respect to both Italian "metropolitan" and US mainstream cultures. Placing core issues in postcolonial studies—the strategic use of language, the spatial articulation of the dichotomy metropole/periphery,

the question of cultural hegemony, transnational trading and commercial routes, and the processes of exoticism—at the center of his analysis of Italian emigration to the United States, Viscusi creates a discursive continuity between diaspora and postcolonial studies' critical and theoretical frameworks, thus complicating notions of subalternity and hegemony, as well as the very definition of Italian postcolonialism.

Although the propaganda of the Liberal and Fascist eras delivered the message that the African colonies, once acquired, would become an extension of the national territory and would accommodate the masses of Italian emigrants (Labanca, "Nelle colonie," *Oltremare*; Choate, *Emigrant Nation* 7), colonial emigration never reached the numbers of the Great Migration to the United States. Moreover, the "indirect" nature of Italian colonialism in countries such as Tunisia, for instance—a former Roman colony and a country that at the turn of the twentieth century had a population of eighty thousand Italian emigrants (Choate, "Tunisia," *Emigrant Nation*)—bespeaks the complexity of colonial relationships as well as of trans-Mediterranean migrations and introduces a connection between "indirect colonialism" and "indirect postcoloniality" in contemporary Italy, a country that has not experienced mass immigration from former Italian colonies.<sup>4</sup>

Before Viscusi's article appeared, Pasquale Verdicchio had noted that the Italian context offers an example for postcolonial studies to enlarge its scope beyond limiting dichotomies, given the position of the *Mezzogiorno* as a colonial extension of the North of Italy at the time of Unification. Italy's internal colonialism provides an example of how postcolonial discourse may emerge not only as an emanation of the colonial periphery but as an expression of subalternity from within the nation-state, and therefore away from traditional geographies of power (first vs. third world) and racial underpinnings (white vs. nonwhite). As a socioeconomic project that failed to fully incorporate southern Italians within the unified nation, the Risorgimento coincided historically with Italy's reterritorialization beyond its national borders through colonial expansion and emigration. When Italy's internally colonized subjects began to emigrate, nationalist literature readily coopted the plight of the emigrant laborers in order to further an imperialist agenda and thus implement the expropriation of Eritrean agricultural lands, as well as the occupation of the territories of Cyrenaica. Verdicchio thus contends that, given the historical and ideological link between southern Italians and other colonized people, "Italian immigrant writing, as it has emerged in Canada and the United States, is an expression of that postcolonial condition" (204). Such a position highlights the transhistorical and geographically expansive nature of postcoloniality in the Italian context.

Adopting a position similar to that of Verdicchio, the interdisciplinary collection edited by Jane Schneider, *Italy's "Southern Question"* (1998), addresses the essentializing and racializing nature of the political and cultural discourse on the Italian South from Unification to the present. Building on Edward Said's critical analysis of the representation of the Muslim world and the Middle East, Schneider's volume demonstrates how the discourse on the *Mezzogiorno* was based on mechanisms akin to those inscribed in the disciplinary and discursive practice of Orientalism, such as the imposition of simplistic dichotomies and the adoption of

a Manichean vision of the North/South divide.<sup>5</sup> While Schneider's path-breaking work translated Said's colonial discourse analysis into a critical reappraisal of Italy's internal colonialism, it did not extend its argument to an evaluation of Italian colonialism.<sup>6</sup>

What these critical views on the South share is their common genealogy in Antonio Gramsci's important work on the Southern Question and the concept of subalternity. Gramsci's relevance for postcolonial thinkers such as Edward Said, Partha Chatterjee, and the Indian Subaltern Studies Group founded by Ranajit Guha stemmed from the application of Gramsci's reflections on common sense, cultural hegemony, and political consciousness from the Italian context to the colonial one. Yet, the publication of Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks* from 1948 onward did not compel any significant debate on the impact of colonialism on national history and cultural identity in postwar Italy. In spite of the international interest in Gramsci as a postcolonial thinker,<sup>7</sup> Gramsci's thought has not stirred a conspicuous and consistent theoretical debate on Italian colonialism and postcoloniality among Italian scholars. Only very recently have postcolonial theorists begun to examine Gramsci's legacy in relation to Italian imperialism.<sup>8</sup> What emerges from their analysis is that Gramsci understood beforehand that Italian capitalism (unlike capitalism elsewhere in Europe) pursued a colonial agenda predominantly for ideological purposes in order to attain national unity at the expense of the *Mezzogiorno*. More importantly for postcolonial scholars, Gramsci also understood that the antislavery, anticolonial struggles were a necessary condition for achieving the political maturity needed for any liberation (Srivastava and Bhattacharya). Since the focus of Gramsci's analysis moved outside the borders of Italy to the imperial world, his writings constitute a useful tool for a definition of postcoloniality as an intranational and transhistorical category of analysis.<sup>9</sup>

The temporal and spatial axes that link colonization, emigration, and immigration set Italy apart from other European contexts. This is evident in the uneven formation of its history as a postcolonial country. In the postwar period, while other former imperial nations in Europe were receiving immigration flows from their previously colonized territories, Italy was still an emigrant country sending its own citizens abroad to Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, with the support of bilateral agreements. Southern Italians who migrated to other European countries were part of a process of labor recruitment across the Mediterranean basin of large numbers of industrial workers from Southern Europe, Turkey, Morocco, and Yugoslavia. This recruitment was not always linked to postcolonial ties. As guest workers, they received temporary visas and some form of social protection. Another migration flow was made up of those who moved to the industrialized regions of the North of Italy from the South, and who could indeed be considered internal "colonial migrants"<sup>10</sup> insofar as they shared some of the privileges of citizenship with northerners, yet were often discriminated against as second-class citizens in the labor and housing market. The fact that their racialization functioned also as an effect of colonial discourse is clearly rendered in a telling scene in Luchino Visconti's 1960 film *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and his Brothers*), in which the Parondi family first arrives at a Milanese apartment building to take up

their sordid basement accommodation and are designated by their new northern neighbors as “those from Africa.”

### Uneven Decolonization

Unlike Britain, France, and the Netherlands, Italy did not experience large-scale spontaneous immigration from its former colonies after decolonization. In the United Kingdom, the population of New Commonwealth origin increased rapidly after 1951, reaching 1.2 million in 1971 and 1.5 million in 1981. By 1970 there were more than 600,000 Algerians, 140,000 Moroccans, and 90,000 Tunisians in France. The Netherlands had two main inflows from former colonies. Between 1945 and the early 1960s, immigrants arrived from the former Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), and after 1965, increasing numbers of immigrants came to the Netherlands from the Caribbean Suriname. Most of these colonial migrants arrived in Europe as citizens of the former colonizing nations (Castles and Miller).

In Italy, by contrast, no major influx of migrants came from the ex-colonies, apart from the sporadic arrival of young Ethiopian intellectuals and Somali students sent to receive their university education in Europe as part of their formation as the new élite class in their home countries (Del Boca, *Nostalgia* 77–78).<sup>11</sup> In the 1960s, Eritrean women followed the returning Italian families to Italy to continue employment in the domestic service, while in the 1970s, it is estimated that Eritreans were the largest immigrant group in the peninsula, a consequence of the influx of refugees who fled the Eritrean liberation war with Ethiopia (Andall, “Immigration” 288).

Italy was confronted with the question of how to engage with its ex-colonies as early as 1944, and by the end of World War II, the official Italian position was in favor of maintaining control over all the colonies acquired before Fascism, with varying degrees of sovereignty, while obtaining a protectorate in Somalia. Amid the national debate preceding the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, almost 20 percent of Italians believed that losing the colonies would be a most painful “mutilation” (Del Boca, *Nostalgia* 32). After the treaty, when Italy was obliged to renounce all of its colonies, the “colonial question” returned as one of the major issues in Italy’s foreign policy. The motivations for Italy’s claim over Eritrea, Libya, and Somalia had a strong nationalist bent, resembling the arguments expressed at the inception of colonial expansion. The government declared the country’s need for a demographic outlet in order to control its population excess and valued these territories as a base for investments not only of capital but also of “white populations” on African soil (Rossi 302). Thus, the Italian establishment continued to protect the security and privileges of the *coloni* (settlers), particularly in Eritrea (Calchi Novati, “Italy and Africa”) and Somalia, where Italians managed to maintain their hold on many sectors of the administration at least until the 1950s (Del Boca, *Nostalgia*).

During the Italian Trusteeship Administration in Somalia (AFIS, 1949–60), postcolonial Somalia remained, in many respects, an embodiment of the colonial legacy (Morone). In the face of the growing demands of Pan-Somali nationalism

and the gradual establishment of an independent government, Italy's reaction was one of nostalgic attachment to colonial values (Del Boca, *Nostalgia*) and sheer protectiveness of its economic interests. The protection of Italianized sectors of the Somali economy, such as banana cropping, was of crucial importance to the activities of the AFIS (Tripodi). The anti-Italian position of the Somali Youth League (SYL) during the early years of the AFIS was a direct reaction to the colonial period, when Somalis were prevented from actively participating in the government and administration of the colony (Lewis). One of the main tasks given to Italy by the UN mandate during the AFIS period was to remedy the lack of a system of secondary schooling, another consequence of the Italian colonial legacy. From 1950 onward, secondary and postsecondary institutions were created in order to fulfill this goal, while a few selected Somali youth were chosen to travel to Italy to acquire a university education.<sup>12</sup> For most of the duration of the Italian trusteeship, Italian nationals remained, however, the administrative cadres of postcolonial Somalia and were instrumental in drafting the constitution of the new democratic Somali state (Tripodi).

Italy's political and economic involvement in the Horn of Africa, characterized by incoherent and often ambivalent measures and initiatives (Calchi Novati, "L'Italia e il Corno", *L'Africa d'Italia*) reflects the ambivalence and contradictions of a faltering postcolonial consciousness.<sup>13</sup> The fact that Italy did not receive significant numbers of immigrants from the former colonies during the period of decolonization corroborated its self-perception as a demographically and culturally homogeneous nation. Moreover, the impact made by widespread and protracted colonial resistance and anticolonial wars, as experienced, for instance, by Britain during the Mau-Mau Rebellion in Kenya (1952–60) and by France during the Algerian Revolution (1954–62), had no equivalent in Italy. These factors prevented Italian society from processing the meaning and import of the colonial experience, thus deferring the development of a postcolonial consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

Historian Angelo Del Boca has defined the process of silencing, omitting, and concealing evidence regarding the violent acts perpetrated by the Italian army against the colonized people as a deliberate attempt, on the part of the Italian government in the decade following decolonization, to rehabilitate the national image that had been damaged by the events of World War II. Italy's colonial campaigns involved land expropriations, the forced removal of masses of people, the creation of internment camps, the ruthless and inhuman military retaliation against resistance movements, the use of poison gas against civilians, and the enforcement of apartheid measures between Italians and Africans. "The lack of debate on colonialism and the failure to condemn its most brutal aspects have promoted Italy's denial of its colonial faults" (Del Boca, "The Myths" 19). With the complicity of the media and the cultural establishment, Italian civil society has, until recently, been kept in ignorance with regard to its colonial past, as this part of Italian history has been absent from school textbooks and from the general public domain.<sup>15</sup> In spite of such distinct processes of deferral, forgetting, and denial, Italian colonization left visible traces of its presence in the architecture, the built environment, the economic and political structures, as well as in the language and food culture of the Horn of Africa (Calchi Novati, "Italy and Africa"; Fuller). Colonial traces

are everywhere in Italy, as Mia Fuller suggests, “if one knows where to look.” In the public arena, monuments and place names dedicated to pivotal events, figures, and places from the colonial period are disseminated in the cities of Italy and especially in the capital.<sup>16</sup> The colonial archive, hidden and invisible for years, is just beginning to open up to the general view. Yet, as Alessandro Triulzi has observed, “Italian postcoloniality is no less anomalous than its colonial precedent as it continues to produce, sixty years after colonialism’s end, ambiguous displacements of memory in the politically volatile and unresolved public arena of both *metropoli* and *colonia*” (Triulzi 441). For this reason, postcolonial criticism also means relocating colonial memory at the center of cultural debates in today’s Italy. Part of the work of this volume also involves looking for colonial traces in contemporary Italian literature, cinema, music, and popular culture, including the exotic soft porn movies that flourished in the 1970s (see Caponetto in this volume) and Pier Paolo Pasolini’s significant “Ethiopian” works (see Trento in this volume).

While the traces of colonialism are relegated to a time and place that are elsewhere in relation to the here and now (see Duncan in this volume), historian Nicola Labanca recognizes at least three distinct phases of colonial memorialization: first, an immediate postcolonial phase between the 1940s and early 1950s, during which colonial memories were constructed by those who had direct contact and experience with the ex-colonies; second, a period of decolonization at the international level between the 1960s and 1970s, during which Africa, for Italians, no longer meant only the ex-colonized territories; third, a period of great world transformations between the 1980s and 1990s, in which contested claims over the memory of the colonial past diverged from revisionist accounts, initiating the development of new scholarship (Labanca, “History and Memory”).

It is important to add a more recent phase to this periodization, one in which Italy finally witnesses the consolidation of a shared postcolonial memory emerging from literary and cultural works by writers and intellectuals from both Italy and the formerly colonized countries. Writing the memory of the colonial archive in literary form has been, predominantly, a female project, and its preferred genres have been the memoir and other kinds of autobiographical writing. Whether written from the perspective of the settler—as in the case of Erminia Dell’Oro’s *Asmara addio* (Farewell to Asmara; 1988) and Luciana Capretti’s *Ghibli* (2004)—or the perspective of the formerly colonized subject—as in the case of Shirin Ramzanali Fazel’s *Lontano da Mogadiscio* (Far Away from Mogadishu, 1994), Marta Nasibú’s *Memorie di una principessa etiopica* (Memories of an Ethiopian Princess, 2005), and Gabriella Ghermandi’s *Regina di fiori e di perle* (Queen of Flowers and Pearls, 2007)—all of these works participate in the reelaboration of a collective memory and the rewriting of a counter-history of colonialism from the perspective of individual subjectivities that are intimately entwined with the fate of successive generations.<sup>17</sup> It is indeed by virtue of the extremely rich literary and cultural output produced by postcolonial citizens that Italy is now being urged to revise its national memory and cultural identity.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from these narratives by women we find a series of novels by Italian male authors, such as Andrea Camilleri’s *La presa di Macallè* (The Siege of Macallè, 2003) and *Il nipote del Negus* (The Negus’s Nephew,

2010), Carlo Lucarelli's *L'ottava vibrazione* (The Eighth Vibration, 2008), and Enrico Brizzi's *L'inattesa piega degli eventi* (An Unexpected Turn of Events, 2008). These texts all adopt vividly exoticized colonial settings shrouded in nostalgic and quasi-elegiac atmospheres where their (for the most part male) protagonists reenact major events of colonial history (in Camilleri and Lucarelli), or imagine a different postcolonial future (in Brizzi). The sardonic humor of these narratives serves to remind readers of their authors' emancipation from colonial rhetoric (see Triulzi in this volume). Yet the parodic mimesis of the colonial past is more redemptive than critical; salvaged from oblivion, its memory is rescued less for the sake of ironic distance than for its aesthetic and sensual enjoyment. Different from both these sets of narratives is Wu Ming 2's latest novel *Timira. Romanzo Meticcio* (Timira: A Meticcio Novel, 2012), in which the protagonist this time is a black Italian woman, Isabella Marincola, and her point of view is placed within a historical framework as the novel combines personal memory, archival material, and fiction. What all these narratives stress is the appropriation of colonial memory as one of the most important bases for Italy's redefinition of its identity as a postcolonial society.

### Immigration and Postcolonial Consciousness

Without ceasing to be an emigrant nation,<sup>18</sup> in the 1980s, Italy became a destination for global migrations. Multiple trajectories characterize Italy's geopolitical position as one of the Mediterranean countries that provide a passageway for southern and eastern migratory flows. The North/South duality, so central to Italy's self-identity, was matched from the postwar period onward by an East/West divide. During the Cold War and the polarization of Europe by the Iron Curtain (1945–91) Italy, under the leadership of the Christian Democrats, positioned itself on the side of Western liberal democracies.<sup>19</sup> After the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and as a consequence of both southern and eastern migrations, Italy has become again, as it has been in antiquity, a multidirectional passageway in the Mediterranean. The recent reconfiguration of Mediterranean migrations began after the 1973 oil crisis, when France, West Germany, and the Netherlands put a halt to the recruitment of guest and "colonial" workers, and Italy became an alternative destination. By the end of the 1990s, Italy had one of the most diverse immigrant populations in Europe, with migrants from Europe, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, China, and Southeast Asia, a heterogeneity that creates possibilities and challenges for a diverse type of multiculturalism, as Russell King observes.<sup>20</sup>

Such heterogeneity also poses distinct challenges to an idea of postcoloniality that is informed neither by a universalist, assimilationist culture (as is the case for France) nor by a particularist, integrationist culture (as is the case for Britain and the Netherlands). It also creates distinct possibilities. In the case of Italy, the persistence of the principle of *jus sanguinis* has, on the one hand, contributed to maintaining the idea of *italianità*, despite the historical dispersion of Italians through emigration. On the other, its critique has made possible the sharing of a sense of belonging for postcolonial migrants of diverse origin. This belonging is not linked to legal status, but rather to new ways of being Italian, whether by virtue of being

born in Italy, through everyday experiences and practices, or through participation in the educational system and a dynamic use of the national language. Hence it is not the legal principle of descent that holds the truth of the migrants' sense of belonging, but rather the shared cultural practices that transcend the biologically determined (and historically over-determined) idea of the nation, and which could be better identified as postnational, rather than simply postcolonial.

For this reason, our understanding of Italian postcolonialism in the present volume emphasizes how the postnational, migratory dimension is an essential component of the postcolonial condition in Italy. Migrants to Italy both from former Italian colonies and from other formerly colonized territories are today articulating the shifts of meaning in the processes of signification that subtend postcoloniality. Central to this process is the shift from the historical categories of racism to a new conceptualization of blackness that invests the very idea of Italianness. The work of writers such as Pap Khouma and Igiaba Scego, of Senegalese and Somali origins respectively, exposes the sense of uneasiness generated for (white) Italians by the association of blackness with Italianness. These terms are often conceived as incompatible and therefore as mutually exclusive (see Romeo in this volume). As we see in the work of first- and second-generation writers, *italianità* seems unattainable for black Italians precisely because national belonging is generally understood in terms of specific traits (both cultural and biological) that cannot be simply acquired by a perfect mastery of the language and of the Italian way of life (Andall, "Second-Generation"; Clò in this volume). Postcolonial writing in Italy is often haunted by the denial of political and cultural citizenship, as the legal principle for its acquisition is still caught in the ambiguity of racialist and biologist definitions of Italianness.

The reassessment of the project of *italianità* in light of a postcolonial consciousness underlines the need for a reassessment of the Italian cultural and literary canon, especially if one considers the unquestionable (and unquestioned) contribution of Italian civilization to Western culture since antiquity. In ways similar to those pursued by Said and others with regard to the British literary and cultural canon, a postcolonial critique of Italian cultural modernity reveals the complicity of the national culture with imperialism. Such a critique helps to unravel the cultural assumptions of a Eurocentric perspective that have shaped Italian modern cultural history and casts light on the way in which the colonial experience in Africa marked the accession of Italy's national culture to modernity.<sup>21</sup> In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues that, from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, imperialism and the novel were mutually reinforcing. The English novel, Said states, had no real European equivalent precisely because its position mirrored the unquestionable strength of the British empire. If we bring this idea to the Italian context, it could be argued that Italy had no meaningful tradition of the novel because it was, after all, a "minor empire." From the 1880s onward, however, Italian literature saw the flourishing of a series of Orientalist and Africanist texts by highly influential writers such as Edoardo Scarfoglio, Matilde Serao, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Giosuè Carducci, Giovanni Pascoli, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Edmondo De Amicis, Enrico Pea, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Riccardo Bacchelli and, in the immediate postwar period, Carlo Levi (see Derobertis in this volume) and



Ennio Flaiano. Critics have only begun to read this fruitful strain of nationalist and Orientalist writings in a contrapuntal way, that is, in search of “what is silent or marginally present or ideologically represented” (Said 66).<sup>22</sup> Yet, contrary to what happened in the British context, postcolonial studies in the Italian context did not emanate from a revision of the national literary canon, but rather from a critique of imperial cultures outside Italy.

### Postcolonial Studies in Italy

Postcolonial studies in Italy is a recent scholarly phenomenon set in motion predominantly in departments of English and American studies through the publication of path-breaking edited collections and monographs from the end of the 1990s onward (Chambers and Curti 1997; Albertazzi 2000; Mellino 2005). Meltemi, a Rome-based publishing house, provided a significant contribution to the postcolonial project from the 1990s through the first decade of the third millennium, publishing Italian translations of the major postcolonial theorists, such as Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Stuart Hall, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Paul Gilroy, Iain Chambers, Ania Loomba, Achille Mbembe, and Robert Young. These translations had the great merit of introducing postcolonial theory and literature to Italian academicians working outside English and American studies departments and to the general public. However, this important intervention has not proven to be sufficient, since the theoretical framework developed in the British context did not “translate” to the Italian one.<sup>23</sup> For the most part, critical works on postcolonial theory and literature remained limited to Anglophone writers and authors. As a result, the idea that a postcolonial discourse had no reason to develop outside an Anglophone environment was reinforced, by implying that in Italy there was no postcolonial condition to speak of. Significantly, during the same period Italian critics—some of whom were operating on both sides of the Atlantic—were focusing on the study of migrations to Italy (Parati 1995, 1999; Gnisci 1998, 2003, 2006).<sup>24</sup>

At the end of the 1990s, two volumes were published (one in the United States and the other in Italy) which included a section entirely dedicated to the Italian postcolonial condition (Allen and Russo 1997; Matteo and Bellucci 1999).<sup>25</sup> These volumes, as well as three edited collections that appeared in the intervening years (Palumbo 2003; Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005; Andall and Duncan 2005), did not adopt a postcolonial studies methodology to read contemporary Italy. However, they questioned previously established notions of Italian national identity in light of recent global changes—such as Italy’s position within a shifting European Union, contemporary immigrations to Italy and emerging multiculturalism, connections between Italian emigration, internal migrations, and immigration. At the same time, these studies examined the legacy of Italian colonial history, its political implications, and the insufficiently studied cultural production of Italian colonial societies.

The year 2004 saw the publication of two volumes (Ponzanesi; Morosetti) that marked a turning point in Italian postcolonial studies. These texts adopt

a postcolonial perspective, for the first time, to read the cultural production of migrants and second-generation Italians. Sandra Ponzanesi's work addresses the specificity of the Italian postcolonial condition, highlighting the marginality of Italian postcolonial studies—and of the Italian language as a postcolonial language—with respect to “mainstream” postcolonial theory and literatures in English. At the same time, it casts light on the intersection of postcolonial theory with feminist theory by analyzing how gender complicates postcolonial power relations. Tiziana Morosetti's volume includes chapters that apply central issues of postcolonial studies to the Italian cultural scene (a definition of the Italian postcolonial; the cultural influence of Italy in the colonies; issues of language; Italian multiculturalism) and other chapters that adopt a postcolonial perspective to reread the Italian literary canon.

Different trajectories of analysis and research developed around the same time and contributed directly or indirectly to an in-depth analysis of the Italian postcolonial condition. In the field of migration literature and film, Jennifer Burns and Loredana Polezzi identify international emigration and immigration, as well as intranational migrations, as crucial moments in the process of forming an Italian national identity and culture (2003). Graziella Parati employs a cultural studies approach to examine multicultural Italian society at present along with its literary production (Parati 2005; Orton and Parati 2007). Daniele Comberinati (2010b) explores migration literature in Italy from 1989 to 2007, structuring his analysis around the geographical origins of the authors and the cultural influences that such origins bring to bear on the literature they produce; he also devotes a chapter to the postcolonial relationship between Italy and Albania and to postcolonial Albanian Italian literature.<sup>26</sup> The essays collected by Lucia Quaquarelli (2010) analyze representations of community, space, gender, and postcoloniality in migration literature in Italy, while Fulvio Pezzarossa and Ilaria Rossini's collection (2011) suggests that the literary production of migrant and postcolonial writers has changed the ways in which Italians read their own culture and society. Although these volumes focus on migrations to Italy and address the Italian postcolonial condition to some extent, at present a postcolonial theoretical frame is not consistently employed in the analysis of Italian literary and cultural production.<sup>27</sup>

The latest development of a scholarly and critical discourse on Italy's contemporary transformation, taking place on an international scale, has formed in relation to Italy's Mediterranean-ness and to an Italian-Mediterranean imaginary. This critical discourse provides a reflection on the position of Italy and Italian identity within a new European and global scenario and in relation to the Mediterranean Sea—its history as a geopolitical unity, the colonial legacy, and the importance that it holds for contemporary transnational migrants (Chambers 2008). In particular, Iain Chambers's *Mediterranean Crossings* eloquently critiques the very premises of Italian historiography, predicated on the invisibility and exclusion of minority histories, and rereads Italy's cultural lineage and modernity in light of the often repressed history of Italy's contacts with the Ottoman-Arab world, the emigration to the New World, and colonialism, all reactivated in the consciousness of today's Italy through the arrival of migrants from across the Mediterranean.<sup>28</sup>

Together with—and also thanks to—all of these trends that suggest a remapping of the contemporary postcolonial world and insist on notions such as “deterritorialization” and “transnationalism,” the trajectory of Italian postcolonial studies has evolved in different directions on both sides of the Atlantic. After 2004, a number of collections, monographs, and articles have addressed the Italian postcolonial condition in connection with the Italian colonial past (De Donno and Srivastava 2006; Andall and Duncan 2010) in terms of the literary and cultural production of postcolonial subjects in Italy (Comberiati 2007, 2010a, 2010b; Lombardi-Diop, “Selling and Storytelling” 2005, 2008; Mauceri and Negro 2009; Romeo, “Vent’anni” 2011), the rewriting of the Italian literary canon (Benvenuti 2008; Derobertis 2010; Venturini 2010), and of social and political analysis (Rahola 2003; Mellino 2005, “Italy and Postcolonial Studies” 2006; Rigo 2007; Mezzadra 2008).

An important sign of the general interest in the critical methodology of postcolonial studies in Italy is evident in the publication of an introductory volume intended as an academic textbook for a nonspecialized audience (Bassi and Sirotti 2010). This collection of essays has the great merit of bringing together scholars who work in this field in Italy and of clarifying central issues and theoretical questions posed by postcolonial studies around the world. Since the analysis of cultural production in Italy is, however, confined to the last chapter, the volume also reinforces the notion that these studies are disconnected from—or only partially connected to—Italy itself. Much work still remains to be done in the field of Italian postcolonial studies; it is important to acknowledge nonetheless that many useful interventions have emerged in recent years that have laid the ground for a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of postcolonial Italy.

### **Methodology and Scope**

Our volume adopts a combination of critical methodologies that weave together postcolonial studies and cultural studies, race theory, and gender studies. In our understanding, race is constructed at the intersection of different categories of analysis (such as gender, class, sexuality, religion, nationality, and citizenship) and, in turn, racism intersects with other forms of discrimination, such as social exclusion, sexism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, economic exploitation, and legal discrimination. In the United States and Britain, race and racism are fields of scholarly research that have institutional and academic visibility and are rapidly changing to encompass a broader range of critical perspectives and disciplinary realms, including queer theory and whiteness studies. This is less the case in continental Europe. In Italy, race studies have meant predominantly the study of Italy’s historical racism against both internal and external minorities (southerners, Italian Jews, and homosexuals, in the first instance, and colonial subjects, Roma, and Sinti in the second).<sup>29</sup> Race theory in Italy has been articulated mainly as an analysis of race relationships in the context of colonial history and memory (Centro Furio Jesi 1994; Sòrgoni 1998, “Racist Discourses” 2002; Burgio 1999; Barrera, “The Construction” 2003, “Mussolini’s” 2003; Bonavita et al. 2005; De Donno

2006; Poidimani 2009) and in terms of contemporary racism and its representations (Sibhatu 2004; Naletto 2009).

Influential sociological works, with few exceptions,<sup>30</sup> first linked the rise of racism in contemporary Italy to the arrival of immigrants and the implementation of restrictive immigration policies (Balbo and Manconi 1990, 1992). A more focused attention to the colonial and fascist legacy of contemporary racism became possible with the availability of studies on the circulation of racist ideology and what Labanca defines as “widespread’ racism, racism of images, perceptions, behavior and praxis” (“Il razzismo coloniale italiano” 147) in the scientific literature and fascist popular culture, including cinema (Mignemi 1984; Centro Furio Jesi 1994; Pinkus 1995; Maiocchi 1999; Ben-Ghiat 2003). Only recently has a new wave of scholarship begun to approach the issue of race in Italy in its various processes of signification vis-à-vis the body and sexuality (Pinkus 1995; Pickering-Iazzi 2002; Ardizzoni 2005; O’Healy 2007; D’Arma 2008; Duncan, “Kledi Kadiu” 2010; Greene 2012; Caponetto and O’Healy in this volume), masculinity (Stefani 2007; Duncan 2008a), and power relations based on the privileges of citizenship and class (Andall 2000; Curcio and Mellino 2010). In need of further research and analysis is the construction of Italian whiteness (Lombardi-Diop 2011; Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop forthcoming 2013) and immigrant blackness (Makaping 2001; Portelli 2003; Romeo 2006, “Rappresentazioni” 2011; O’Healy 2009). Reflections on Italian whiteness have been strongly influenced by studies on the racialization of Italian immigrants in the United States (Orsi 1992; Vecoli 1995; Thomas Guglielmo 2003; Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno 2003). Recently, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have begun to engage the intersections of race, subalternity (of both international migrants and southern Italians), and youth cultures in contemporary music, examining how the racialization of the South and of migrants is central in hip hop cultures in Italy (Sciorra 2002; Dawson and Palumbo 2005; Clò in this volume). They highlight how contemporary migrant music in Italy is strongly influenced by the global dissemination of black music theorized by Paul Gilroy (Sabelli, “Vibrazioni” 2006) and explore how Italian countercultures have appropriated reggae music (Sabelli, “Dubbing” 2012). Despite the proliferation of such interventions, race studies in Italy still has no institutional existence or academic visibility.

Building on the body of scholarship on Italian racism that has opened the path for a serious reconsideration of its imperial and colonial matrix, in this volume we aim to understand how race is tied to wider social and cultural processes of racialization at particular points in time and through specific narrative conventions and media (see Caponetto, Lombardi-Diop, and O’Healy in this volume). We also interrogate how such processes affect the condition of migrant communities in Italy and the very idea of national belonging and *italianità* (see Lombardi-Diop and Romeo in this volume). As Iain Chambers has pointed out, “Today’s xenophobia . . . has much to do with the failure and unwillingness to work through a still largely unconscious European past in which colonialism and empire were (and are) distilled into national configurations of ‘identity,’ ‘culture,’ ‘modernity,’ and ‘progress’” (*Mediterranean Crossings* 7). This highlights the need to analyze Italian—and European—racism as it was constructed in colonial (as well as

internal) dichotomies of subalternity. It also reveals the urgency of understanding racism and racialization as structural components of contemporary nation-states, which exert surveillance over the metropolitan space and defend it by “differentially including” (Mezzadra) alterity and ambiguously celebrating multiplicity. Therefore, with regard to racial discourses, we focus more on the processes of racialization that target both Italians as a dominant group and Italy’s new Others than on the history of racism and its representation.

The field of gender studies in Italy has been strongly influenced by Italian feminist theory of the 1970s and 1980s and is still strongly marked by an essentialism that leaves the male/female dichotomy largely unquestioned. For decades, Italian gender studies have not embraced intersectionality to any significant extent, and when they have, they have not applied this methodology to the Italian context. As a result, different categories of oppression have often been examined independently of one another, which in turn has weakened the analysis of all categories of oppression, including gender. In the past ten years, however, issues of race and postcoloniality have appeared in the Italian feminist debate, both disconnected from the Italian context (De Petris 2005; Ellena, “White Women” 2010) and in connection to it. Feminist scholars working both in Italy and abroad have explored the relationship between Italian feminism and migrant women as well as the intersection of race, whiteness, and gender in Italy (Pojmann 2006; Merrill 2006; Giuliani 2010; Marchetti 2011); they have highlighted the conjunction of feminist studies and postcolonial studies (Demaria 2003; Curti 2006; Romeo 2012); they have probed issues of globalization and migration in relation to discourses of ethnicity (Campani 2002), labor, and precariousness (Bertilotti et al. 2005; Andall and Puwar 2007) with a special emphasis on domestic labor (Andall 1992, 2000; Marchetti 2010, 2011) and sex work (Andrijasevic 2003; Achebe 2004; Trappolin 2005); they have analyzed masculinity, queerness, homophobia and homonationalism in Italian colonial and postcolonial contexts (Stefani 2007; Duncan, “Loving Geographies” 2008; De Vivo 2011). Jacqueline Andall (2000) and Chiara Bonfiglioli (“Intersections” 2011) have called for a more inclusive feminism in Italy that would address “the experiential diversity of ethnic minority women” (Andall 2000, 3), the importance of their labor identity, and their role in the sphere of production. The combination of these approaches has a key place in this volume not only for an understanding of how immigrant women de-center the “grand narratives” of Italian feminism, but also for an exploration of the intersecting ways in which these women are racialized, sexualized, and marginalized based on a number of factors, including religion, sexual orientation, social class, and citizenship (or the lack thereof).

### Structure and Chapters

The chapters that follow are organized into four sections. The structure and organization of the volume reflect the methodologies employed. Rather than subdividing the book along the lines of disciplinary approach or medium of production,

we identify important junctions, contact zones, and convergences among methodologies and disciplinary perspectives.

Robert Young's opening chapter can be read as an epigraph to the volume, for it functions more as a contrapuntal commentary than a preface. Young's somewhat celebratory assessment of the distinctive profile of postcolonialism in Italy may in fact appear to run counter to the perception of many of the contributors to this volume. His essay serves nonetheless to remind us of the ways in which various elements within the Italian Left offered material and symbolic support to anticolonial struggles around the world from the end of World War II through the 1960s. For Young, it is the legacy of Italy's socialist and anarchist traditions that has enabled Italian intellectuals to articulate a unique strand of postcolonial discourse.

Part I, titled "European and Global Trajectories," reverses Dipesh Chakrabarty's provocative notion of "provincializing Europe," suggesting a de-provincialization of Italy. This is enacted through the creation of affiliations with other postcolonial and global contexts, while at the same time looking diachronically at Italian history and culture as founded on phenomena such as transatlantic and trans-Mediterranean emigration, the racialization of southern Italians, and contemporary immigration. The section opens with Sandro Mezzadra's chapter, excerpted and translated from his volume *La condizione postcoloniale* (2008), the core argument of which has already contributed to the creation of a productive new field of scholarship in Italy on citizenship, surveillance, and territorial mobility (Rigo; Sossi; Scurba). Both Sandro Mezzadra and Miguel Mellino scrutinize the Italian postcolonial condition through a combination of approaches that privilege political theory and cultural analysis, focusing on racism as the vantage point from which their chapters are developed. Mezzadra emphasizes how contemporary racism is enforced through a new migratory regime, that is, a form of governability that implements new mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion through a reconfiguration of space, mobility, and labor. This metamorphosed racism nonetheless feeds off the colonial archive for rhetorical elements used to stigmatize today's global migrants. Mellino, who closes the section, analyzes postcolonial Italy from the perspective of four basic points of departure: colonialism, the Southern Question, immigration and its associated cultures, and a denationalized neoliberal economy founded on the globalization of both capital and racism. Sandra Ponzanesi contextualizes Italian postcolonialism within a European perspective through an analysis of the postcolonial condition in different countries and reflects on the construction of a European identity in light of the common, silenced past of colonialism, a commonality that contributes to the structure of European contemporary societies. Finally, Teresa Fiore's chapter is centered on emigrants returning to Italy from Brazil and interrogates the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in relation to both citizenship and everyday life. Based on the analysis of a documentary video, her chapter creates a parallel between colonial expansion and emigration through the double meaning of the term "colonia," thus expanding the notion of the "postcolonial" through the concept of an "emigrant postcoloniality."

Part II, titled "Shared Memories, Contested Proximities," engages categories of temporality and spatiality, not to suggest an archeological approach to the colonial past and its official memorialization, but rather to examine how physical

proximity produces shared memories which, in turn, take shape at the intersection of and in coexistence with hegemonic and peripheral conditions. Alessandro Triulzi examines how memories of Italian Africa are constructed in contemporary Italy through the analysis of representations from different media (one novel, one graphic novel, and one documentary film). Although the presence of colonialism in the contemporary Italian imaginary testifies to “Italy’s willingness to cope with her colonial past,” the sense of adventure associated with the conquest of Africa in Carlo Lucarelli’s novel and Gianfranco Manfredi’s graphic novel clashes with self-representations of refugees from Ethiopia in the documentary film by Andrea Segre, Dagmawi Yimer, and Riccardo Biadene, creating a profound fracture in the way that national memory is, or can be, constructed in postcolonial Italy.

Applying a rereading of Freud’s notion of the “unhomely” and of “deferred action,” Derek Duncan explores how the problematic relationship between Italy and its colonial past emerges in contemporary films through the deployment of an indirect temporality. In these representations, the lack of a linear temporal structure, which is characteristic of postcoloniality, signals Italy’s inability to come to terms with its colonial past as a foundational moment in the construction of national identity. Another reflection on the uneven temporal process attending the formation of *italianità* is found in Barbara Spackman’s chapter in this section, which examines two apparently distant (both historically and formally) texts in order to propose a contrapuntal reading of Italianness beyond the confines of Italy’s national borders and literary canon. Spackman’s cross-cultural understanding of the 1830 *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Giovanni Finati* and Amara Lakhous’s 2010 novel *Divorzio all’islamica in Viale Marconi* extends the Orientalist paradigm to the more “peripheral” case of pre-Unification Italy, while simultaneously approaching so-called migration literature in its transhistorical and transnational dimension.

This section also includes Giovanna Trento’s revision of the literary canon through an analysis of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s “Eritrean texts,” that is, a series of critical and creative interventions written between 1968 and the mid-1970s. In retracing the colonial roots of Pasolini’s representations of the Horn of Africa, Trento highlights the continuity between prefascist colonialism, Fascism, and postcolonial representations of colonial Africa. The section closes with Roberto Derobertis’s rereading of Carlo Levi’s classic literary text *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* from a postcolonial perspective and with reference to archival material. Derobertis highlights the connection between the subaltern position of Italian southern peasants (and the resulting pattern of massive emigration) and that of colonized subjects in Italian East Africa. He further analyzes how global capitalism has created new forms of exploitation in the rural South, where recent illegal migrants have now taken up the position in the social hierarchy previously occupied by peasants.

Part III, titled “Intimations and Intimacies of Race,” is devoted to the construction of race and the representation of whiteness and blackness in contemporary Italy, emphasizing the proximity rather than the separation of black and white subjects at present. The chapters included here prompt the reader to consider the dynamics of interracial encounters and to interrogate what these intimacies produce in contemporary life and culture. Cristina Lombardi-Diop opens the section

with an interpretation of postcolonial Italy as a postracial society where discourses around race are most often diffused and deflected. She defines the current outcome as the result of the project of whitewashing Italians' racial identity, a project she traces back to the eugenicist conception of racial abjection in Fascist Italy and its hygienic policies. Through the advertising market, the idea of hygiene and whiteness infiltrated postwar Italian popular culture and reached contemporary Italy, where the normativity of Italian whiteness affirms itself silently and yet most potently. Rosetta Giuliani Caponetto, Áine O'Healy, and Caterina Romeo analyze literary and cinematic representations that highlight intersections of race and gender. Caponetto's reinterpretation of the image and ideological function of the Black Venus in Italian popular films of the 1970s directly speaks to the lingering presence of a racialized colonial imaginary in contemporary Italy, arguing that this resurgence is deployed to promote a kind of submissive femininity in opposition to the women's liberation movement. Áine O'Healy analyzes how racial difference is constructed in contemporary Italian cinema and how this difference hinges on the constructions of black masculinity and femininity inherited from colonialism, although not immediately identified as such. Caterina Romeo examines how African Italian postcolonial writers defy the lack of critical acknowledgment of race and racism by deploying blackness as a critical and theoretical tool and defining it as an inherent part of their Italian national identity. Her chapter extends its analysis to the ways in which postcolonial women writers represent the difficult relations between black and white women in Italy, thus questioning the notion of global sisterhood.

Part IV, titled "Postnational Aesthetics, Transcultural Production," explores music, cinema, literature, and youth culture produced by migrant and postcolonial subjects in terms of a postnational aesthetics that transcends Italy's national borders and cultural models. Alessandro Jedlowski opens this section with a chapter that examines the emerging phenomenon of Nollywood films in Italy, most of which are produced, distributed, and consumed within Italy but are not aimed at Italian nationals. Their cinematic aesthetics enacts an unprecedented de-centering of the paradigm of national cinema. Through her analysis of the work of filmmakers Haile Gerima and Isaac Julien, Shelleen Greene emphasizes the epistemic and aesthetic gap between official versions of colonial history and these contemporary counter-narratives, which posit continuity rather than separation between the history of Italy and Africa. By incorporating oral history and narratives of migration and survival, these films undermine the representational power of linear narrative and continuity editing as deployed in colonialist propaganda, thus making possible a visual rewriting of postcolonial history beyond the "West/non-West" dichotomy. Alessandro Portelli's chapter shows how popular music produced by migrant artists who are not strictly "postcolonial" is transforming the urban landscape of Rome by remapping specific areas as global sites of both Catholic religious expression and of popular, folkloric music. Portelli's research in this chapter highlights the continuity of scope and method between this study and his previous ethnography of the city of Rome in the way in which it departs from the traditional hierarchical division, which is particularly strong in the Italian context, between the producers and receivers of culture. Finally, Clarissa Clò's chapter analyzes the



transnational nature of cultural production by second-generation authors rooted in hip hop, popular culture, African diasporic elements, and postnational politics. In addition to their innovative and path-breaking cultural production, the second generation's critique of Italy's citizenship principle of *jus sanguinis*, their civic mobilization and their plurilingual, multiracial, and hybrid identity are introducing scenarios for the present and the future, in which the Italian somatic and cultural norm is shifting and will continue to shift, ultimately altering Italian culture and society and what it means to be "Italian."

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### Notes

1. Recent critical works analyze Italy's postcoloniality vis-à-vis that of other European countries, both in terms of cultural outcomes (Ponzanesi and Merolla; Ponzanesi and Waller; Ponzanesi and Blaagaard) and in terms of the history and geography of colonial Europe and their "refractions" on contemporary postcolonial societies (Poddar, Patke, and Jensen).
2. This approach is somewhat similar to Paul Gilroy's notion of the existence of a black community and black cultures that have developed common characteristics and a common aesthetics in different geopolitical contexts, rooted in the common experience of the African diaspora.
3. The contradictions inherent in the notion of "national belonging" are blatant in the Italian electoral system. Although Italians abroad (which often means people of Italian ancestry who do not have a strong relationship with Italy and do not speak the language) have been allowed to vote in Italian political elections since 2006, documented migrants who live, work, and pay taxes in Italy do not have the right to vote, not even in local elections.
4. Here we adopt the idea of "indirect postcoloniality" in Italy (see Fiore in this volume)—a term that acknowledges that the majority of migrants in contemporary Italy are not from former Italian colonies—in order to suggest that the same notion of "indirectedness" also applies to Italian colonialism up to a certain point. Nicola Labanca divides Italian migrations to Africa into three groups (*Oltremare* 372–75): colonial emigration proper; migration to Mediterranean countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, and French Algeria, former Roman colonies with which Italy had maintained a precolonial relationship; and migration to sub-Saharan Africa. Labanca points out that in 1893 there were 623 Italian civilians in Eritrea and fewer in Somalia (*Oltremare* 372). Libya immediately attracted a larger number of Italians; however, in the early 1920s there were approximately 17,500 Italian civilians in the country, a small number in comparison with the 80,000 Italian residents in Tunisia at the turn of the century. Numbers changed consistently in the 1930s, when Italian colonialism became more "demographic"; toward the end of the decade, there were one hundred thousand Italians in Libya and a few hundred thousand in East Africa (*Oltremare* 372–77).
5. For a fruitful analysis of Italian Orientalism as an important strain of European thought also see Dainotto, *Europe (In Theory)*, 172–217.
6. The analysis of the subalternity of southern Italy vis-à-vis the subaltern position of colonized people, initiated by Verdicchio, has been further developed in a recent volume edited by Bruno Brunetti and Roberto Derobertis. In his chapter in the volume, Derobertis argues that the discursive and political "multiplication of the South" ("Leggere" 100) continues to produce economic and geopolitical asymmetries within Italy and at the borders of Europe.
7. For a critical discussion of the relevance of Gramsci's writings on postcolonial theory, see Iain Chambers (*Esercizi*) and Giuseppe Vacca, Paolo Capuzzo, and Giancarlo Schirru (*Studi gramsciani nel mondo*).

8. On Gramsci's legacy for postcolonial studies, see Srivastava and Bhattacharya. In the introduction the editors dedicate a section to Gramsci's reflection on Italian imperialism.
9. Of great relevance for an understanding of Gramsci's reflections on Southern Italy, regionalist culture, and European cultural hegemony is Roberto Dainotto's *Place in Literature*.
10. For a discussion of colonial migrations, the guest worker system, and permanent migrations to Europe in the postwar period, see Castles and Miller, 68–75.
11. Migrations between Italy and the Horn of Africa between 1941 and 1951, though sparse, took opposite directions. As a consequence of the Italian defeats on the African front, by the end of the 1940s, more than two hundred thousand Italian refugees arrived in Italy from Libya, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Somalia, while between 1943 and 1945, in a countermovement of colonial subjects, those who had been arrested and detained in Italy during the Fascist regime, returned home to Ethiopia. For further details see Del Boca, *Nostalgia*.
12. Among them was the father of Igiaba Scego, as she narrates in her autobiographical work *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010). Igiaba Scego is one of the most prolific and visible postcolonial writers in contemporary Italy.
13. The partnership between Italy and Somalia continued after the proclamation of the independent Republic of Somalia in 1960. During the 1960s and 1970s, Somalia saw rampant corruption among its political leaders and in government administration, as well as violent political instability. Meanwhile, Italy continued to be one of the main donors of financial aid and, in the course of the 1980s, became one of the main providers of weapons and ammunitions. See Calchi Novati ("L'Italia e il Corno" 1999; 2008).
14. The news of the killing of fifty-four Italian civilians that occurred in Mogadishu in January 1948 reached Italy only three days after the events and without much media exposure. Central to the fostering of the symbolic imaginary of Somali nationalism, this violent retaliation against Italians continues to have little resonance in postcolonial Italy (Del Boca 1976). For the most comprehensive study of this event, see Calchi Novati (1980).
15. The first monographs on Italian colonialism written from a postfascist and postcolonial perspective were not published until the 1970s, Roberto Battaglia's work (1958) on the first military campaigns in East Africa being the only exception. See Rochat (1973), Del Boca (1976), and Labanca (1993, 2002b).
16. See von Henneberg (2004) and Triulzi (2006) for an illuminating reading of the link between colonial monuments and postcolonial memory.
17. For biographical details and extensive interviews with these authors, see Comberiat (2007).
18. As stated in the *Rapporto italiani nel mondo 2012*, it is not entirely possible to determine how many Italians live abroad and how many emigrate each year. The data retrieved from the *Anagrafe degli italiani residenti all'estero* (AIRE) state that, as of January 1, 2012, the number of Italian citizens resident abroad was 4,208,977. The enrollment to AIRE, however, is elective, and therefore the figure is not entirely representative (18).
19. For a very insightful discussion of contemporary migrations with regard to Italy's unitary identity, see Pratt 2002.
20. On Italian multiculturalism, see Grillo and Pratt (2002). As of December 31, 2010, there were 4,570,317 foreign residents in Italy, constituting 7.5 percent of a total population of 60,626,442. There are 147 immigrant communities of more than one hundred members, the most populous of which are from Romania (968,576), Albania (482,627), Morocco (452,424), China (209,934), Ukraine (200,730), the Philippines (134,154),

- Moldavia (130,948), India (121,036), Poland (109,018), and Tunisia (106,291). The “indirect” nature of Italy’s postcolonial migrations is evident in the fact that, with the exception of Albania, whose citizens constitute the second most numerous community in Italy, citizens of Italy’s former colonies do not feature among the most significant groups. Eritrea occupies the thirty-ninth position (13,368), Ethiopia the forty-ninth (8,593), Somalia the fiftieth (8,112), and Libya the ninety-fourth (1,516). These data are recorded in the *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2011 Caritas-Migrantes*.
21. For the nexus colonialism-nationalism in relation to Italian modernity see Ben-Ghiat (*Fascist Modernities*).
  22. The standard works on Italian colonial literature are Tomasello (*L’Africa, La letteratura*) and Pagliera. On the literature of exploration, see Lombardi-Diop (*Writing; “Gifts”*). On colonial novels written during the Fascist period by both male and female authors, see Lombardi-Diop (*Writing*), Bonavita and, more recently, Venturini. On the Africanist strain of Ungaretti’s and Pea’s work see Re; on Marinetti’s exoticism see Bongie, Sartini-Blum, and Trento (“From Marinetti”). For a postcolonial approach to Italy’s vision of Africa, with major attention to Pier Paolo Pasolini’s Africanist discourse, see Trento (*Pasolini*).
  23. More recently, publishing houses such as Ombre corte (based in Verona) and DerivApprodi (based in Rome) have produced texts directly related to postcolonialism or linked to postcolonial discourse. The journal *Studi culturali* has made a significant contribution to the field of postcolonial studies in Italy, publishing new scholarship as well as classic texts with a marked focus on issues of gender, race, ethnicity, and citizenship in postcolonial and multicultural contexts. *Scritture migranti. Rivista di scambi interculturali*, a journal published by the Italian department of the University of Bologna, focuses on cultural production associated with migrations, transcultural movements, and the postcolonial condition of contemporary Italy. The journal *Zapruder. Storie in movimento* has published two issues on Italian colonialism and postcolonialism: *L’impero colpisce ancora. Dinamiche coloniali e post-coloniali* (2005) and *Brava gente. Memoria e rappresentazioni del colonialismo italiano* (2010).
  24. While in the United States these studies were inaugurated as an extension of the field of Italian studies, in Italy they began in comparative literature programs. This testifies to the reluctance of the field of *Italianistica* in Italy to consider migration and postcolonial literatures and cultures as part of Italian culture at large and to the continuous attempt, still pervasive in numerous Italian departments, to protect the notion of national culture by characterizing this production as non-Italian.
  25. The second volume was published in Italy first and then in the United States (Matteo), but it is part of the work done by Italian scholars abroad.
  26. For early surveys on migration literature in Italy and related criticism, see Sinopoli (“Prime linee”; “La critica”).
  27. For a reading of colonial and postcolonial texts within the Italian literary tradition, see also Fracassa.
  28. The first issue of the academic online journal *California Italian Studies*, published in 2010, is entirely dedicated to Italy and the Mediterranean. See Fogu and Re.
  29. The path-breaking volume *Nel nome della razza. Il razzismo nella storia d’Italia, 1870–1945*, edited by Alberto Burgio (1999), exemplifies this type of comprehensive historical approach.
  30. These exceptions are Paola Tabet’s study on the impact of the colonial legacy for the perception of racial difference among school children and Alessandro Dal Lago’s work on legal discrimination and the legacy of colonial racism in the media representation of migrants.

# The Italian Postcolonial

*Robert J. C. Young*

Similarly dispersed, porous, and commingled is private life. What distinguishes Naples from other large cities is something it has in common with the African *kraal*: each private attitude or act is permeated by streams of communal life. To exist—for the Northern European the most private of affairs—is here, as in the *kraal*, a collective matter . . . Just as the living room reappears on the street, with chairs, hearth, and altar, so—only much more loudly—the street migrates into the living room.

*Walter Benjamin (1925)<sup>1</sup>*

**I**t was 2005 and I had gone to Italy to give a lecture at the Università di Milano Bicocca, an amazing example of the university as a manifestation of contemporary modernism rising in the ruined heartlands of industrial northern Italy, of knowledge as the new industrial commodity of the West, and then to participate at a *convegno* or conference in Rome organized by my Italian publisher, Meltemi. In Rome, I met up with my friend Homi Bhabha who had just given a series of three lectures at the Università L'Orientale in Naples. I had lectured in Italy several times that year, and the frequent appearance there too of what one Italian newspaper referred to as “il filosofo indiano” prompted the interesting question as to why there had been such an explosion of interest in the postcolonial in Italy.

The different European absorptions of and responses to the postcolonial are an example of the kind of heterogeneity which is often invoked in postcolonial discourse itself. What different, interrelated cultures, the cultures of old imperial Europe after all, have made of the postcolonial is itself a subject of historical interest for postcolonial critics. The variety is enormous, but there have, I think, been three main reactions, and none of them has reduplicated the forms of the postcolonial in India, Britain, or the United States (which are themselves in turn all distinct). One reaction has been “this speaks to us, because we are postcolonials too”—evident in Eastern Europe, Poland or Romania, and also in Spain, which is still in the process of recovering the heterogeneity of its different languages and cultures after the dead, homogenizing hand of Franco’s fascism. This means that

there is currently scant reflection on Spain as an imperial power or of the appalling history of the Spanish invasion of the new world. Given that they lost most of their empire successively roughly a hundred (1898) and two hundred (circa 1810) years ago, perhaps it is not surprising that Spain is not riven by postcolonial guilt or melancholia. France too remains largely in denial of its colonial past. Germany cheerfully more or less ignores its admittedly short colonial history in favor of a focus on “new literatures in English” in preference to the writings of its own immigrants. Despite the belated discussions about the trauma of the Algerian war, and, memorably, the long overdue official admission of the bombings at Sétif in 1945, French culture continues to resist the implications of a postcolonial perspective. Those for whom those issues were central—Bourdieu, Derrida—have gone. That together with a fierce resistance to interdisciplinarity means that in France the academic area which could be designated as postcolonial studies, whether Francophone or Anglophone, actually involves something more like an old Commonwealth literature approach, focusing narrowly on the work of individual writers around the world.

Italy, on the other hand, is developing in a completely different direction, and one which is altogether the most interesting among what is happening in this field anywhere in Europe, Britain included. In the first place, Italy still has a living culture of the socialist and anarchist left and remains haunted by the continued long-term effects of the political turmoil of the 1980s. In the second place, it has been producing some of the most dynamic work in political theory—Giorgio Agamben and Antonio Negri are themselves testimony to that. In the third place, its position in the front line of the migration flows from Albania, Eastern Europe, North Africa, Latin America, and South Asia—witness the frequent publicity surrounding the arrival of boatloads of illegal migrants on the tiny island of Lampedusa, just a hundred kilometers from the Tunisian coast—means that the twenty-first century has witnessed the transformation of Italian cities, an explosion of interest in issues of migration and multicultural matters, and the production of new writing by African and other migrants to Italy. The street migrates into the living room. Fourthly, a productive environment exists for the analysis of these developments, given that Italy was the European country perhaps most sympathetic to the anticolonial movements after World War II. You have only to think of Gillo Pontecorvo’s *La battaglia di Algeri* (*The Battle of Algiers*; 1966) and *Queimada* (*Burn!*; 1969) and the deep links between the *partigiani* and anticolonial movements that Pontecorvo’s own career exemplifies. This link goes back much further to the fact that the Italian Risorgimento was itself—and seen as such round the world—the first major national anticolonial struggle in modern times. In the centre of Havana, for example, stands a statue of Garibaldi. This legacy remains evident in the work of Antonio Gramsci and accounts for the fact that he was the only major European Marxist thinker for whom anticolonialism formed a major part of the political struggle. It seems to have been the combination of these factors that has led to an extraordinarily serious, political, and committed response to the postcolonial in Italy by intellectuals such as Sandro Mezzadra, Federico Rahola, Carla Pasquinelli, Iain Chambers, Miguel Mellino, Cristina Lombardi-Diop, and many others. There is a real sense in Italy that the postcolonial offers a radical transformative politics,

an evident excitement about its provocative possibilities, and this among those on the activist left. No tedious and unending arguments here coming from bookish academic Marxists complaining that the postcolonial doesn't conform to the time-honored formulae of traditional male class politics driven by the party as the vanguard of the people. Of course it doesn't—which is precisely why it is able to offer a politics and forms of political analysis that are addressed to the realities of today's world. What is particularly noticeable about this formation in Italy is that this interest in the postcolonial has far more often emerged in departments of anthropology and sociology than in literature, and in a complementary way, it is striking that many of the books in this area in Italian have been published by the remarkable publishing house Meltemi, run by Luisa Capelli, a former *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI; Italian Communist Party) activist, whose list, centered in anthropology and sociology, has shown itself to be particularly alert to what is going on outside Italy intellectually and politically as well as to the most interesting areas that are developing within the country, despite or perhaps because of the ossified institutional state of the Italian academy.

Speaking of institutional ossification, it is noticeable that unlike the Communist Party in France, which remained steadfastly committed to an *Algérie française* throughout the war in Algeria, the PCI, led by the redoubtable Palmiro Togliatti, was by contrast always actively committed to the freedom struggles. And so it was that I found myself dragging my colleague Emily Apter late one stormy afternoon, down past the *Colosseo* and the *Foro* to the charmingly named *Via delle Botteghe Oscure*, to look at the old headquarters of the PCI. Typical, she said, that of all the sights of Rome, this is the one you want to see. When we found it, by that time in the middle of a revolutionary thunderstorm, it proved to be a vast building that could not be described as anything other than a pukka palazzo, the staggering size of which made me realize how the PCI could so easily have generously offered the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) a permanent office inside during the war of independence. I wanted to see the communist palazzo not because of the PCI as such, but because it was there, at the FLN office somewhere deep inside that vast building built on a mass of colossal blocks of stone, that Frantz Fanon used to stay on his frequent visits to Rome (it was in Rome that the French Secret Service almost succeeded in assassinating Fanon by blowing him up with a car bomb). And it was to this same building that Jean-Paul Sartre would come on a plane from Paris to visit him for their long, passionate, and intense talks that went on right through the night into the morning. Strange status of place, to all appearances now indifferent to its past, and to the invisible haunting memories of those unyielding doors that had seen Fanon and Sartre walking through them.

The Italian postcolonial can be tracked down to such monuments, but rather like the otherwise forgotten island of Lampedusa, you find it also in the most unexpected places. Returning to America, I dropped off my bags in New York and took the train to the capital to participate in a very different professional milieu, the annual conference of the Modern Language Association of America. When I got to Washington, I took a cab to the hotel. The driver was talking away into an earphone attached to his cell phone—a distinctive feature of all US taxi experiences. He wasn't speaking English, and something about the sound of the language

he was talking intrigued me. At times, it sounded a little similar to Arabic, but it wasn't Arabic in any form, so far as I could tell. So, during a break in his conversations, I asked him what language he was talking in. "Guess!" he said. I got it on the third go—it was Somali. He had come about 18 years ago, he told me, in the first wave of Somali emigrants at the beginning of the civil war, long before the many more recent refugees from the war. He asked me what languages I spoke, and when I mentioned Italian, he immediately broke into perfect Italian. "So have you ever been to Italy?" I asked him. "No, never," he replied. Somalia is a former British and Italian colony with an unusual history—the British occupied the North, and resistance was so strong that in 1935 they abandoned it to the Italians, who had occupied the South. In 1941, during World War II, the British reconquered it, but found themselves as unwelcome as ever. The Italians, who were much more popular with the Somalis, were allowed to stay, and in 1949 the British gave up the country a second time, an event which must be unique in British colonial history, handing it over to Italy once more for a ten-year trusteeship. The history of Somalia since independence in 1960 is probably as complicated and troubled as any postcolonial country on earth, and I will not try to rehearse it here. One result has been that Somalia now has probably the largest diasporic population of any country in Africa. What fascinated me though in my conversation with my Somali taxi driver was how he showed the enduring power and porosity of the colonial effect: by the time that he was born, the Italians had left, but the ghosts of their continuing presence could still be heard almost fifty years later in the language of our conversation that took place in a taxi in Washington, DC, in December 2005.

### Notes

A previous version of this essay can be found on Robert J. C. Young's website at <http://robertjyoung.com/Poco01.pdf>. The chapter has been expanded and reprinted courtesy of the author.

1. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Works*, Vol. 1. Ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996–2003): 419.

Part I

# **European and Global Trajectories**



# The New European Migratory Regime and the Shifting Patterns of Contemporary Racism

*Sandro Mezzadra*

## A New Nationalism?

Once only a few of us would call Italy our fatherland. Today the majority of us do.

*Alleanza Nazionale, slogan for  
the Spring 2006 election campaign*

Let us remember the slogan—quoted above—adopted by *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance), the political successor of the neofascist *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (Italian Social Movement) during the election campaign of Spring 2006. To say that this slogan contained a grain of truth—like any effective ideological statement—is hardly a provocative claim. In recent years, a sense of national belonging has been revived as a fundamental public value not only by the political right in its tense relationship with the secessionist movements in the North, which found a voice and gained political legitimacy through the Lega Nord (Northern League). From this point of view, the seven-year presidency of Carlo Azeglio Ciampi (1999–2006) promoted and legitimized a process that was already in full swing. How indeed could one forget the increase in political rhetoric that accompanied the involvement of the Italian armed forces in military interventions during the 1990s? The emphasis on “the national interest” as the basis for direction in foreign policies, the promotion of “realism” in international relations, and the concern for Italy’s position in the world are certainly not characteristic of a rowdy band of Italian neocons. One could indeed say that a true bipartisan consensus regarding political rhetoric and public discourse has been taking shape since the

demonstration of “Atlantic loyalty” by the D’Alema government during the war in Kosovo—irrespective of the resistance expressed toward the unilateralism of the United States after September 11.

I believe that the new nationalism—outlined above in a few broad strokes—provides the essential context for a critical assessment of the shifting patterns of contemporary racism, which is the topic of the present chapter. This phenomenon is scarcely unique to Italy: it is a matter that implicates Europe as a whole, and it must be considered in connection with the modalities adopted by the European integration process that was instigated at the beginning of the 1990s. Although it may seem paradoxical, my thesis is that the new nationalism is symptomatic of the crisis and transformations of the nation-state. It is thus important to emphasize that the debate on this topic has already discarded the hypotheses and the rhetoric that had previously characterized it, namely, the idea that globalization corresponds to the gradual phasing out of the nation-state or to a sort of extinction (Ohmae). In other words, it seems increasingly clear that nation-states—obviously some more than others—were crucial players in initiating the processes of globalization, or “denationalization,” and they continue to play a decisive role in its contradictory governance at present. At the same time, however, nations articulate their actions with other levels of power, setting up an “assemblage” of authority, territory, and rights that differs radically from the model that characterized the centuries-old history of the modern state-form (Sassen).

Taking shape in specific ways that cannot be disregarded either on the global or on the European level, these processes lead to profound changes in the political and juridical space,<sup>1</sup> which seem to dispense with the assumption of territorial homogeneity that characterized the modern logic of sovereignty. Borders become mobile and porous, and new “lateral spaces” interrupt the juridical and political continuity within a single state’s territory; for example, in the zones of manufacturing for export that crop up everywhere in the “global South” and through the zoning technologies that represent one of the major features of Chinese development, the exercise of sovereignty manifests itself in articulated and layered ways, continually blurring the line that separates the norm from the exception (Ong). The same new nationalism that confronts us in both Italy and Europe must be understood in the context of these transformations, that is, by looking at its articulation with new assemblages that are emerging outside the national order. It seems particularly appropriate to consider this new nationalism both as a symptom of the limits (of the pathologies) of the process of European integration itself and especially as indicative of an emerging European citizenship (Melossi; Mezzadra, *La condizione*). On the other hand, we should consider it one of the fundamental elements of the context in which a new form of racism—completely postnational, postcolonial, and “postmodern”—is taking shape.

### Racisms

There are, of course, many points of view from which racism can and should be analyzed, and it is also true that many forms of racism exist. An intense debate

on this topic has emerged in recent years, centering on the *processual* dimension of racism, its “mobility,” or its flexibility in adapting itself to changing historical situations. This debate, moreover, has explored the shifting patterns of racism not only from a social and political perspective but also from a “cognitive” point of view, focusing in particular on the themes of “identity” and “representation.”<sup>22</sup> Several important realizations derive from this debate, which I will bear in mind in the course of the following discussion.

For the purpose of the argument I am making here, however, I find it useful to start from a political definition of racism of the type found in the work of Michel Foucault and especially in that of Étienne Balibar. Foucault’s analysis of the transition from the “war of the races” to the “racism of the state” insisted on the necessity of focusing on the moment in which “racism is inscribed as the fundamental mechanism of power that is exercised in modern states. This has meant that the modern state can scarcely function without becoming involved with racism at a certain point, within certain lines and subject to certain conditions” (254). To this Foucault adds, “The specificity of modern racism . . . is not bound up with the mentalities, ideologies, or the lies of power. It is bound up with the technique of power, with the technology of power” (258).

I believe that these are important assertions, both for the very close link they establish between the history of racism and the history of statehood and for the emphasis they place on the fact that we should not analyze (and criticize) racism by juxtaposing it, perhaps as some sort of “truth,” with the “lies of power.” Let us focus immediately on this second point: assuming the perspective indicated by Foucault, we can state without any contradiction that European migration policies have profoundly racist origins without simultaneously dismissing as mere rhetoric the discourse of European institutions today, characterized by antidiscrimination programs, “antiracism,” and an insistence on social cohesion.

So let us consider racism in relation to the shifting configurations in the relationship among the state, sovereignty, and citizenship in modern history, and let us keep in mind the essential role that nationalism has played in these configurations since the period around the turn of the nineteenth century, when the nation first presented itself as the basic cornerstone of this articulation. We thus recognize the special importance of Étienne Balibar’s claim that racism constitutes “*a supplement internal to nationalism*, always in excess of it, but always indispensable to its constitution and yet insufficient to achieve . . . the formation of the *nation* or the project of the ‘nationalization’ of society” (*Race, Nation, and Class* 54; emphasis in original). One must also add that evidently not even the nation is a fixed, static form. Its transformations, which are inextricably linked to the history of European colonial and imperialist expansion among other things, provide an extremely effective interpretive key for understanding the shifting manifestations of racism.

Once again, there are multiple points of view from which the transformations of the nation-form can be examined. It seems to me that the type of relationship of domination that the nation establishes and sustains with its own *space* by marking it as its *territory* is a useful consideration in this context. It is helpful to underline the semantic complexity of the terms “space” and “territory” by using them at least in more than one way. On the one hand, we need to keep in mind the

way in which the concept of territory was elaborated and formalized in the great tradition of European legal thought between the nineteenth and the twentieth century before finding a temporary arrangement in Kelsen's definition, according to which territory is the "sphere of validity" of a specific legal order (208). On the other hand, this meaning of territory, in my view, can and should be brought into productive interaction with the definition of "space" (understood as distinct from "place") offered by Michel de Certeau: "A space exists," he writes, "when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it" (118). I will return to de Certeau's definition later on. For the moment, superimposing the two meanings of territory and space I have referred to here leads me to emphasize that the act of creating a national territory (and tracing its boundaries, as they are legally defined by the "material constitution" of a state), has always involved dealing with the intersecting movement of bodies in a given space, with the management of mobility.

Furthermore, as a series of recent studies on "historical capitalism" has shown, the management of mobility plays an essential role in the production of labor power as a commodity, or rather, in the historical constitution of the labor market.<sup>3</sup>

It becomes clear that this process was anything but idyllic when one considers the long and difficult path that led at the turn of the twentieth century to the emergence of "free" wage labor (a provisional arrangement, we should perhaps add at the present juncture) as the contractual norm around which employment relations were organized in the capitalist West. A new trend in the history of labor law in Britain and the United States, of which Robert J. Steinfeld's work is a prominent example, has emphasized that throughout the nineteenth century wage labor was anything but free "of extra-economic" constraints and was especially hampered by limits on work movement (according to the still prevalent notion of "contractual freedom.") These studies point out that the "invention of free labor" was the result of fierce labor struggles, coinciding with the earliest experiments in economic and social legislation, which imposed some limits on contractual freedom precisely around the turn of the twentieth century.

By and large, one may argue that the labor market is made possible by a mass of political and juridical devices that aim, among other things, to establish a specific mixture of mobility and immobility of labor (of working bodies), and that even this mixture is historically mutable: from this perspective, the national territory presented itself in Europe and the United States in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as a space that enabled the production of the labor power as a commodity, and one in which the labor market could function "in orderly fashion" within the international division of labor. Racism also constituted the "internal supplement" to the formation of the labor market, and was manifest with particular virulence at moments of crisis and transformation within this process (it is clear that racism is not confined to this context, since it manifests itself in many others as well, and some forms of racism, such as anti-Semitism, cannot be explained in this way).

Evidence of this can be easily illustrated in reference to historical events in the United States.<sup>4</sup> But, for the purpose of reconstructing the history of racism,

I believe that it also has validity with regard to the Italian context. For example, one could apply this insight to the emergence of antisouthern racism in the early decades of the unified Italian state, when the very existence of a national labor market in Italy was a matter of debate (Teti). What is worthy of note in this context is the expression of a widespread concern for the specific quality of the Italian “racial stock,” which mobilized renowned anthropologists and criminologists and, in an unusual transposition across the Atlantic, ended up having repercussions on the circumstances of southern Italians in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. We have only to recall Alfredo Niceforo’s thesis in *Italiani del nord e del sud* (1901), according to which two “races” existed in Italy: an “Aryan” and “Caucasian” race in the North, and a “Negroid” race in the South. This concept was adopted and used by the United States census officials to question the whiteness of southern Italians, and thus it became one of the devices that made race and ethnicity *dispositifs* of citizenship and the labor market in the United States (Guglielmo and Salerno).

The colonial racism that culminated in the war of extermination conducted by the fascist regime in Ethiopia (1935–36) along with the violent anti-Semitism expressed in the anti-Jewish laws of 1938—two phenomena that a new generation of scholars has begun to study concurrently<sup>5</sup>—can be interpreted in turn as extreme versions of trends already fully present in Italy in the liberal era, which then became particularly virulent due to the consequences of the 1929 crisis. Now, it is evident that Italian anti-Semitism and colonial racism (the Italian version was, of course, a variant of a more widespread European phenomenon) still provide rich “archives” of rhetorical phrases that contemporary public discourse can draw on in its various strategies for stigmatizing immigrants.<sup>6</sup> But the overall articulation of the nation-state, sovereignty, and citizenship, of which anti-Semitism and colonial racism serve as the “supplement” (obviously in different forms during the liberal era and the fascist regime), was effectively severed by the resistance and the birth of the republic. The “social [and] national state” form—to use Étienne Balibar’s definition again (*L’Europe, l’Amérique, la guerre* 128)—that the Constitution of 1948 contradictorily established nevertheless rapidly accommodated a new configuration of racism in the material process of its development, which was directly linked to a profound and far from peaceful shift in the labor market.

Amid the spectacular processes of industrialization and modernization that took place in the 1960s, antisouthern racism, once again applying rhetorical “fragments” from previous eras to a different context, no longer had the function of “marking” the difference between the North and South of Italy, but rather that of helping to regulate the inclusion of the South in the North. In other words, this new form of racism cast itself as a functional “supplement” of the management—or the “domestication,” one could say—of internal migrations, a traumatic experience of mobility that radically changed not only the composition of the working class in Italy but also the country’s social and cultural landscape in general. This phenomenon has precise parallels in other European situations.<sup>7</sup> In Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, this new articulation of racism was challenged and defeated by the formidable workers’ movements of the 1960s, which called into question the general assemblage of the national state, sovereignty, and social citizenship—as a

complex knot of economic and social relations—that we now tend to describe as “Fordist.”

### The Crisis of the Labor Market

We must resume our argument here, first by underlining that, since the early 1980s, the growing presence of immigrants in Italy has been one of the basic components in the cluster of social and economic transformations connected to the crisis of Fordism. Indeed, since the crisis of the early 1970s, migrations on the global level have exhibited decisively innovative traits when compared to the past, while in Europe the end of “guest worker” recruitment in several countries signaled a new era in the history of migration and in the old continent’s attempts to manage it. The turbulence that marks transnational migrations in an increasingly pronounced way (along with the significant changes that characterize the composition of these migrations, including, in particular, processes of intense “feminization”) indicates, on the one hand, a tendency toward the dissolution of the international division of labor in a thoroughly contradictory manifestation, where we should nevertheless underline the subjective dimension of the new practices of mobility. On the other hand, this turbulence poses radical challenges to the classical models of migration management, in some ways anticipating the contemporary debates about the necessity of identifying more flexible plans for the management and governance of mobility.<sup>8</sup>

The Italian situation reflects the impact of these elements in an environment where—as in many other European countries—the practices of mobility and refusal to work that emerged during the long wave of workers’ protests and the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s had seriously threatened the national order of the labor market. The growing pressure exerted by migrations from the East and the global South thus intersected with the processes of economic and social restructuring that arose in response to the social practices indicated above. The new regime of flexible accumulation that began to take shape starting in the industrial districts of the “Third Italy” (that is, the areas of skilled, small-scale industrial production in northeast and central Italy, as distinct from both the heavily industrialized, large-scale production region in the northwest and from the underdeveloped south) in the second half of the 1970s established the conditions for the growing integration of migrant labor into crucially important economic sectors.<sup>9</sup> It is in these circumstances in Italy that “immigration’ has become, *par excellence*, the name of race” (Balibar and Wallerstein 222), as Étienne Balibar puts it in relation to the French context at the end of the 1980s.

We could develop this point more precisely by following the lead of another French philosopher, Jacques Rancière. In his important book *La Mésentante*, Rancière draws attention to the fact that those who are “racialized” and stigmatized “racially” are “immigrants,” as such. This is not to deny the fact that immigrants experienced what were often severe forms of discrimination under Fordism from the legal, social, and cultural perspective, as we have already noted. But their very designation as “immigrant workers” indicated at least a subordinate recognition

of their presence, meaning, in Rancière's terms, that they occupied a "place," and that they had a "part" in the legitimate order of things, in what I would call the overall structure of "social citizenship"—its absolutely material structure—which, as has been previously observed, marked the constitutional framework of Fordism (Mezzadra and Ricciardi).

The fact that racist rhetoric and practices adopted as their object what Stuart Hall calls an "empty, floating signifier"—which is to say, "immigrants"—signaled the fact that the legitimate order of things, the complex structure of citizenship itself, was becoming "empty and fluctuating" (Hall). As I have already mentioned, this complete and utter crisis of citizenship (beyond which we have not moved) cannot be traced back in an exclusive, linear way to the processes of capitalist restructuring and the introduction of "neoliberal" politics in Europe. Indeed, we must again underline the subjective aspect imprinted on this crisis by the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, by the demands for flexibility, framed as a quest for freedom and not as a technique of control over labor,<sup>10</sup> and also by the new practices of mobility into which those demands have been translated. A consideration of the crisis of citizenship from the point of view offered by migrations prompts us to focus on an aspect that is often overlooked: the fact that, as a result of the great transformations that began to emerge both within Europe and the West and on the global level at the beginning of the 1970s, it is the national order of the labor market (as a constituent cell of the international division of labor) that is increasingly called into question.

It is worth reiterating all the consequences that flow from this: the production of the labor force as a commodity—or the presupposition of a functioning labor market—no longer takes place in a comprehensive way within the framework of the national territory. A new mixture of mobility and immobility of labor had to be produced at this point, and migration policies attempted to confront precisely this problem, in Italy as well as in other European countries. As a result of the growing activity and prominence of different European organizations and agencies, a completely new European migratory regime simultaneously took shape, at least in its general outline.<sup>11</sup> We must focus on this new migratory regime to understand the shifting patterns in contemporary racism. We should also add that, in general, this regime constitutes a privileged point of view from which to study the origin and transformations of European institutionalism: its constituent element is, in fact, the emergence of new technologies for controlling Europe's "Eastern borders," technologies that signal significant changes within the institution of the border itself, once again in sync with processes occurring in other areas of the globe.<sup>12</sup>

There is a very close connection between the concept of citizenship and the institution of the border, both historically and theoretically. It is obvious that this link becomes especially important when a new form of citizenship is in the making, as is the case in Europe since the Maastricht treaty. What emerges here is the problem of tracing the borders that circumscribe the space of citizenship, simultaneously regulating the operation of inclusionary and exclusionary devices that every configuration of citizenship assumes as its presuppositions. From this angle, the new regime of border control that is emerging in Europe around the new

frontiers (that is, the “external frontiers” of the European Union) established by the Schengen Agreement and the subsequent enforcement conventions—before incorporation of the Schengen *acquis* in the 1997 Treaty of Amsterdam—reveals some of the specific features pertaining to the association that the EU maintains with its own space.

Based on Enrica Rigo’s study of this association, I can identify three ways in which the EU’s relationship with its territory differs from that of a modern nation-state and its territory.

*First*, models of interaction, which can be defined for all intents and purposes as postnational, among various organizations, agencies, and subjects are emerging under the control of the new “external frontiers” of the EU. These are hybrid models in the sense attributed to the term by Toni Negri and Michael Hardt in *Empire*,<sup>13</sup> insofar as the member states cooperate internally with agencies like the Schengen Committees and Frontex (the “European agency for the management of operational cooperation at the external frontiers”), the European Commission, the UN Refugee Agency and the International Organization for Migration, as well as with some nongovernmental organizations. In so doing, the EU member states share one of the key competencies in the definition of modern sovereignty, confirming that, even if the logic of sovereignty is far from the point of disappearing in our global present, the subjects, methods, and spaces of its application are undergoing radical transformations (Sassen 415).

*Second*, Europe’s borders, riddled with holes from the push of migratory movements, are forced to move continually toward the south and the east, becoming mobile and involving states both near and far in their enforcement. As has been recently noted, for example, while the trans-Saharan routes are becoming global migratory routes (in the sense that they are taken not only by sub-Saharan migrants but also by Asians and even Latin Americans), “Europe aims to ‘export’ or ‘outsource’ its contradictions: attempting to transform the entire Maghreb into a threshold . . . it recruits the countries of the Maghreb as its ‘vanguard,’ assigning them the burden of serving as barriers to contain the tide of African migration” (Bensaâd 13, 16). More generally, as one can see by studying the process of expansion toward the east, Europe’s “external frontiers” no longer designate in any way the external margin of the European juridical system’s “sphere of validity.” Rather, they articulate its outward projection, thus establishing various degrees of internality and externality in relation to the European space. Given these considerations as a whole, it is possible to speak in terms of a progressive deterritorialization of the border.

*Third*, the external frontiers of Europe today are essential junctures in the articulation (as well as in the process of external and internal projection) of governmental tactics directed specifically at immigrants, quite distinct from the techniques that we customarily associate with a constitutional state, rule of law, and citizenship. These tactics assign immigrants to a space that is distinct from that of “civil society,” which is analogous instead to the space that postcolonial theorist Partha Chatterjee defines as “political society,” a concept also present in William Walters’s notion of “domopolitics.” In their recent study of the control of Europe’s external frontiers around the Aegean, Efthimia Panagiotidis and Vassilis Tsianos



sharpen our perspective on this issue. Far from functioning like the wall of a hypothetical fortress, the border explicitly reveals its nature as a government device in the Aegean, as a kind of brake, a dike, and a channeling mechanism of mobility. Indeed, the detention camps scattered throughout the Aegean region present themselves as “transit stations,” constituting “the spatialized attempt to temporarily dominate determined movements, or rather to manage passageways and routes to make regulated mobility profitable” (79).

More and more often, a stay in a camp in the Aegean is an entrance ticket to the space of Europe rather than the prelude to expulsion (Panagiotidis and Tsianos 71). The border does not limit itself to “striating” space in this way; it also inscribes a specific temporality on the bodies of migrants, enacting the inscription of transit and waiting, designed to mark their movement and the conditions they experience throughout the entire duration of their stay in Europe; to produce, in Federica Sossi’s effective term, complete “border-biographies or biographies at the border” (34). A constituent of the colonial experience, the temporal border thus comes to be redrawn within the space of Europe, as it serves to determine the figure of its postcolonial heterogeneity.

### European Citizens, New Racism, and New Antiracism

We can now turn to Michel de Certeau’s previously discussed definition of space in order to note that the processes summarized above seem to problematize the possibility of clearly distinguishing “space” from “place” according to the modalities he has proposed. De Certeau defines the latter term as follows: “A *place* is the order (of whatever kind) in accordance with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. . . . The law of the ‘proper’ rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own ‘proper’ and distinct location, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability” (118). Now, de Certeau’s definition lends itself to a comparison with the concept of “police” as elaborated by Rancière (51). This term is understood as the distribution and “count” of the “parts” on which a specific regime of organization of a community rests: something very similar to what I would define as the institutional and legal framework of citizenship. But what happens in Europe today is that the mobility of the borders breaks down the “stability” of the “law of the ‘proper place,’” continually reopening its production through the very operation of the institutions and through the dispersion of the processes of government. Even the definition of the system of positions that defines European citizenship depends, in other words, on the way in which the European “space of circulation” is governed, to draw on one of the fundamental arguments in Enrica Rigo’s previously mentioned work.

Saskia Sassen recently wrote that, just as citizenship provides a privileged perspective from which to view the changing structure of laws as well as their quality, immigration “is a lens through which we can understand the strains and contradictions in nation-state membership” (293). The European experience gives particular meaning to these statements; namely, it shows how the movements of migrants,

as an expression of the complex transformations that involve precisely the level of belonging and determine the rise and multiplication of new “transnational social spaces” (Pries) figure directly in establishing the set of processes through which the underlying framework of the new, developing European citizenship is produced daily. On the one hand, these movements challenge the borders, forcing the governance and management of migration to mimic the unpredictability, flexibility, and “turbulence” of migration itself. On the other, the new European migratory regime ends up reinscribing the boundary within the same space of citizenship, promoting a process of selective and differential inclusion of immigrants (and of migrant labor) in that space. What results is the production of a number of juridical positions and a new hierarchical stratification around which citizenship and the labor market are currently being reorganized. And this process finds its own “limitation” in the structural presence of “illegal” immigrants, subjects that Saskia Sassen defines as “unauthorized but recognized” (294–96).

One could continue analyzing the new European migratory regime at greater length. Apart from the previously described border control tactics, this regime is facilitated, on the one hand by a system of administrative detention within Europe that is being “outsourced” well beyond its boundaries<sup>14</sup> and, on the other, by the link between residence permit and labor contract, which structurally limits the social and spatial mobility of immigrants, assigning them, in fact, to a subordinate position within the labor market. One might also mention, for example, a tendency that has become increasingly obvious in recent years to treat the external frontiers to the east and south of the EU in contrasting ways, favoring processes of selective openness with respect to the east, and of closure with respect to the south (Gambino; Sacchetto 35). In Europe (that is, within the space of European citizenship), the contrasting positions occupied by immigrants from the two frontiers clearly reflects this tendency, the motivations of which, though certainly complex, have the effect of privileging white migrations over those of color.

This observation allows us to return, in conclusion, to a consideration of the shifting forms of racism. It seems evident that this topic must be approached in the context of the processes I have briefly described above. As a result of these processes, the color line is being inscribed—for the first time in Italian history, though the situation is otherwise in countries like Great Britain and France—*within* Italian and European society. This sets the stage for the revival of an unabashed apartheid in fully postcolonial conditions as well as a reactivation of the commonplace distinction in manuals of colonial law between “citizen” and “subject” (Balibar, *Nous, citoyens d’Europe*; Balibar and Mezzadra; Mezzadra, *Diritto di fuga* ch. 4). The same new nationalism I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, given its interaction with emerging transnational levels of power, legitimizes and supports these processes in its daily effects, despite the “intentions” of its proponents, opening up the space in which racism operates (as one of its “internal supplement[s]”).

The new “fantasies of whiteness”—to allude to Ghassan Hage’s splendid book on race and multiculturalism in Australia—now circulating in Italy and in Europe along with the emphasis on the exclusive historical roots of “European civilization” (a concept that has been revived in the landscape of post-September 11 and the “war on terror”) do not merely result in a mystified understanding of

European history itself, the spatiality of which has been marked for centuries by a complex network of transits and exchanges with other lands and “civilizations,” while becoming inseparable in modern times from the violence that distinguished the colonial project and practices. Such fantasies also legitimize military actions outside (or at the “margins” of) the European territory and designate the space within which new racist rhetoric and practices spread (Amin).

The critical issue here is that the new configurations of racism we are obliged to deal with in Italy and elsewhere in Europe at present do not aim at assigning different populations to different spaces; rather, they function to uphold (as their “internal supplement”) migratory policies that aim to regulate the hierarchically organized cohabitation of different bodies within a territory, to the point of legitimizing complete and absolute segregation. This is certainly not the only perspective from which one might analyze contemporary racism in Europe. Nonetheless, to trace this racism to the processes of crisis and transformation in the “national” order of the labor market and in the international division of labor, to understand it as the result (and again as a “supplement”) of a European migratory regime that determines processes of selective and differential inclusion of immigrants, is to illuminate some of the locations and conditions of its production. It also allows us to materially anchor our analysis of both the devices of stigmatization and representation in which racism finds expression and the forms in which it is articulated, which are certainly not exclusively institutional (popular). It also offers important insights on how racism might be combated.

Precisely because the antiracist movement involves the overall conditions of the developing European citizenship (and thus nothing marginal or sectoral), this movement cannot disregard the struggle for recognition and movements on the part of male and female immigrants and the concrete “practices of citizenship” (Sassen; Rigo) that they promote.<sup>15</sup> These are the movements and practices that are decentralizing and “provincializing Europe” on a daily basis, opening it up to an awareness of the potentialities of the postcolonial condition. They are preparing the way so that the citizenship crisis—against the backdrop of which the new racism is being enacted—can become an opportunity for a profound reconsideration of the forms and norms of societal life, starting with a radical reinvention of the synthesis of liberty and egalitarianism.

Far from presenting itself as a desired objective that would offer a solution to the problems of migrant men and women, European citizenship appears more like a battleground on which an antiracist policy appropriate to our times must take up position, articulating itself on multiple levels. Inside and against the designated space of European migratory politics, a new antiracist policy can be a decisive element in the invention of a new European space, a space traversed by practices of struggle and cooperation capable of keeping the constant critique of the institutional boundaries of European citizenship structurally open.

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## Notes

This chapter is a revised version of “Il nuovo regime migratorio europeo e la metamorfosi contemporanea del razzismo,” which appeared as chapter five in *La condizione postcoloniale* (2008). English translation by Megan Gier and Áine O’ Healy.

1. See Galli, Balibar *Europe, Constitution, Frontière*, and Ferrarese for examples.
2. For an effective synthesis, see Siebert. Among the vast literature on the topic, see Bojadzijeve and Demovic. The work of Gallissot, Kilani, and Rivera provides insight into the important issue of the culturalist and “ethnicist” tonalities of contemporary racism.
3. See Moulhier Boutang; Mezzadra, *Diritto di fuga*, part I, chapter 2.
4. Many indications of this can be found in David Roediger’s important work.
5. It is worth recalling the exhibit “La menzogna della razza” held in Bologna in 1994. See Bonavita (2006). If the reality of Italian colonial racism has ceased to be a taboo topic today, it is due in large part to the remarkable work by Angelo Del Boca. His volume *Italiani, brava gente?* is particularly significant in this regard.
6. For examples, see Dal Lago (especially chapter 5); Dal Lago and Quadrelli, chapter 6.
7. For the case of Germany, see the accurate study by Bojadzijeve.
8. See Papastergiadis, Castles and Miller, Castles, and Mezzadra *Diritto di fuga*, part II, chapter 5.
9. See the accurate analysis by Gambino. Ricciardi and Raimondi, as well as Sacchetto, also offer abundant sources of information.
10. The analysis of Boltanski and Chiapello is important in this regard.
11. See Karakayali and Tsianos and the “cartographic” representation of European migratory policies developed on the website MigMap.
12. See the literature discussed in Mezzadra *Diritto di fuga*, part II, chapter 4.
13. See more specifically part III, chapter 5.
14. For a provisional map of the camps that can, for all intents and purposes, call themselves “European,” see the website Migreurop. For a theoretical placement of the problems of the camps, see Rahola.
15. For valuable information on this issue, see Sassen, chapter 6, and Rigo.

# The Postcolonial Turn in Italian Studies

## European Perspectives

*Sandra Ponzanesi*

### Introduction

To date, Italy's imperial enterprises have received little attention in comparative colonial studies. As Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller write, it was not until recently that Italian colonialism was accounted for in Italian national history. This positions historical studies on Italian colonialism in a double marginalization, with respect to its role in modern Europe, and with respect to its construction of the Italian national consciousness. However, though more limited in time and geographically restricted than that of the French and British empires, Italian colonialism had a significant impact on the development of metropolitan conceptions of race, national identity, and imagination (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller).

Conversely, while the field of postcolonial studies, as illustrated by Edward Said's publication of his seminal *Orientalism* in 1978, has reached a spectacular level of diffusion and consolidation both at institutional<sup>1</sup> and commercial levels,<sup>2</sup> the field of Italian postcolonial studies is still in its infancy. This does not mean that Italian postcolonialism is less urgent, cogent, or vital, but simply that it is, not surprisingly, somewhat belated compared with other European postcolonialisms. It would obviously be dangerous, and literally against its premises and principles, to dissect the operations, role, and political valence of postcolonialism into national enclaves, so as to reproduce the history of European empires and assemble the various "postcolonial responses" along the lines of the old metropolitan centers (London, Paris, Amsterdam, Lisbon, Rome), or to organize them in terms of importance, prestige, and dominance. However, it is no coincidence that revisiting the Italian colonial

past has been subjected to a rather prolonged silence, an act of denial which I have conceptualized as a full-blown “colonial unconscious” (Ponzanesi, “Fragments” xxv). This refers to the discarding, discrediting, and generally repressing of the history of colonial expansion. This questionable colonial history had brought Italy to its imperial peak under Fascism with Mussolini and his infamous Ethiopian war, and to its downfall with the shame of defeat and the handing over of the majority of the colonies to the British in 1941. The absence of an independence struggle and the unfinished colonial business (Burton) between Italy and the African colonies have relegated the Italian colonial chapter not only to historical oblivion but also to the unstable legacies of instrumentalized and nostalgic memorizing. Therefore, it is the relationship between a complex politics of memory and a distorted form of historiography writing after World War II that needs to be taken into account for the Italian case, together with a rather slow or indifferent response to the development of cultural studies as a field that focuses on connecting different contexts and methodological approaches, which have somewhat confined Italian postcolonialism to the investigations, studies, and publications by academic scholars operating abroad, mainly in North American and North European academia.<sup>3</sup> The irony should not be lost here, as one of the major influences on postcolonial thinking is Antonio Gramsci, whose cultural reading of his concepts of hegemony, subalternity, and the role of the intellectual, have given a crucial impulse to Edward Said’s understanding of colonial discourse analysis, to the South Asian Subaltern Studies Collective, to Gayatri Spivak’s influential theories on whether the female subaltern subject can speak, and to more recent revisitations and critical reevaluations of the concept of cosmopolitanism as a desirable but also contested notion (Chambers, *Esercizi di Potere*). This means that, until recently, the cultural aspect of “colonialism” has barely been taken into account in Italian academia, thereby precluding a more interdisciplinary understanding of Italy’s colonial past and a more contextual and comparative reading of Italy’s postcolonial present. Such reading would connect Italy to the rest of Europe and allow for the establishment of transnational connections on the history of empires and their aftermath.

For this purpose, this chapter first attempts to place Italian colonialism, and the development of postcolonial criticism, within a European framework, accounting for some comparison and differences. As I will briefly discuss, postcolonial critique has had different fortunes and genealogies within various European countries: yet there are common issues and paradigms that are worth addressing. After a brief survey on European postcolonialism from a comparative perspective, I explore the particularities of the postcolonial “turn” in Italian studies, providing some of the background for its inroads and recent boom in Italian academia and scholarship. I conclude by making a number of suggestions for further development, indicating how Italian postcolonial studies could be further improved and strengthened, avoiding prescriptive or totalizing narratives.



### European Postcolonialisms

As mentioned in the opening to this chapter, Italy was a very belated colonial power compared with the rest of Europe, and an even more belated country in acknowledging its colonial past and postcolonial predicament. We might perhaps console ourselves by acknowledging that France, despite its much more significant historical and geographical involvement with the imperial project, has also responded rather late and very reluctantly to the “postcolonial turn.” The whole debate on *Francophonie*, Francophone studies, and more recently, on French postcolonialism has been received with hostility. Said as initiator<sup>4</sup>, and postcolonial theory in general, has been accused of having misread French poststructuralist thought and of having made a melting pot of Foucault and Gramsci without seriously engaging with French theory.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, postcolonial theories have been experienced as a form of neocolonization, as an imposition of an Anglo-American fashion upon the more rigorous and intellectual French tradition. As Jean-Marc Moura has written, the characteristics of postcolonialism as a critical school concentrates on studying all strategies of writing that confound colonial codes, imperial codes, and national boundaries. However, this notion of the postcolonial is resisted by French academia, which tends to study postcolonial texts as an expansion, or ghetto, of the so-called official canon:

If you take France’s and the Francophone world’s literary histories, you will see that most of them treat this Francophone literature as a kind of extension of French literature, which does not need to be contextualized to be understood. People simply think that it is in French, and so should be spoken about it as if it were French literature. Postcolonial criticism does the opposite: it insists on specificities, and on the fact that you first of all need to position it in anthropological, sociological, and even economic terms before discussing and analyzing it in the way that you would with French literature. It is a global movement, therefore, as it defines itself in global terms, and a movement which, within this globalization, insists on each of these literatures’ specificities. (Moura, “Postcolonial Criticism”)

In a recent polemic on postcolonial studies, Jean-François Bayart accused the field of explaining current social divides (such as the *banlieue* riots in France in 2005) as the protracted effect of the past “colonial divide” by postulating a continuity that underlies modes of representation and behavior from the colonial era in the contemporary period (56). He complains, therefore, that the field is simply a catch-all term that is not only ambiguous and ambivalent but also fragmented. This is because postcolonial studies is a “river with many tributaries” (58), as there are many sources, and it is attached to different groups, categories, and claims. Bayart acknowledges, however, that postcolonial studies is now also flourishing in France, but he rejects the virulent claim that the country has resisted or is resisting this paradigm out of provincialism, conservatism, and above all, the impulse not to face its own colonial past. Through a long argument in defense of France and against the postcolonial essentialization of France, Bayart points out that postcolonial studies owes much not only to French theory but also, and above all, to the

intellectual, literary, artistic, and political trends that focused on the colonial question in the France of the 1950s. Therefore Bayart concludes in defense of France that “we’ve done our bit!” (59) with writers such as Aimée Césaire, Léopold Sédar, Frantz Fanon, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Octave Mannoni, who are seminal to the development of the field, and other French philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu, who have inspired the critique of other forms of domination such as gender, sexuality, and class, though they do not directly address issues of empire. More recently, Édouard Glissant and Étienne Balibar have kept the critique of colonial formations in sharp focus. Bayart’s tirade against the accusation of French antipostcolonialism is well taken, as it persuasively argues in considerable detail the way in which French culture has been inspirational, and even foundational, for postcolonial studies. However, it also reconfirms the blindness, or intellectual resistance, toward the transformation that these notions and this inspiration from French theorists and intellectuals underwent by traveling elsewhere and coming back in the form of postcolonial theory. The latter is rejected as imported and colonizing, which reaffirms a natural resistance toward theories traveling back to France from other contexts. Bayart concludes that it is because of empire and colonialism that we can discuss common principles and that therefore even a disagreement on the notion of the postcolonial is possible.

I place an emphasis on France not only to argue that it offers a clear case of anti-postcolonialism, despite it being a nation with a prolonged and important imperial past, but also to show that, like Italy, it is experiencing a real “postcolonial turmoil,” with critics acknowledging or dismissing the field, provoking a lively debate within French academia and public discourse at large, and also proposing a rereading of postcolonialism from new disciplinary and political perspectives.

I would also like to extend this attention to Germany and the Netherlands, as very few studies have been conducted in these countries from a postcolonial perspective. In Germany, as is also the case for Italy, colonialism was short lived in nature and archived in the national memory until recently; in the Netherlands, a country that can boast a long and prestigious colonial past, postcolonialism has barely found inroads into academia, except within the realm of English studies, whereas its societal relevance for immigration and the current problems with Dutch multiculturalism and its backlash are more than evident.<sup>6</sup>

Germany acquired colonies in 1884, later than other European powers, and lost these territories soon afterwards as a result of its defeat in World War I (1918). Germany achieved national unification very late (1871), as is also the case for Italy (1861). German overseas dominions included Togo, Cameroon, Namibia, and Tanzania in Africa, and Tsingtao and New Guinea in Asia. However German colonial past is not acknowledged in Germany and less known outside of Germany than other European empires. Similarly to Italy (1882–1943), the relatively short-lived colonial history stimulated neither immigration from former colonies nor the development of an African literature in German. However, even though there has not been a systematic attempt to address German colonial and postcolonial history, there are several interesting publications and projects related to this field (Zantop; Lützler; Friedrichsmeyer; Lennox and Zantop), along with an increasing number of publications that deal directly with colonial discourse in German

culture. Therefore some critics affirm that it is no exaggeration to say that German Studies is going postcolonial (Lubrich and Clark).

There is also growing interest in the literature of immigration, namely from Turkish-German migrants such as Emine Sevgi Özdamar and Feridun Zaimoglu, at times referred to as postcolonial German literature (Lützler and Spence). Recent studies have also explored blackness in Europe and specifically in Germany (and blackness in German national identity). Examples include the project on Black Europe (<http://www.best.uni-mainz.de/modules/Informationen/index.php?id=13>), the Berlin event around the Black Atlantic (<http://www.blackatlantic.com>) organized in 2004 by Tina Campt and Paul Gilroy, and the Leeds-Utrecht-Munich Postcolonial Europe research project (<http://www.postcolonialeurope.net>). When talking of new postcolonial engagement with German culture, the work of Claudia Breger and Tina Campt should be mentioned. Again most of these studies are published by scholars operating outside German academia, such as Meyda Yegenoglu (Ankara, Turkey), Claudia Breger (Indiana, USA), and Tina Campt (Barnard, USA), who work outside of the field of *Germanistik*, more in the fields of cultural studies and gender and race theories.

Unlike Germany, the Netherlands has a voluminous history of colonial expansion to the East and West Indies, and what it has in common with Italy is a very belated acknowledgment of its postcolonial status. Without its immense and lucrative empire in Southeast Asia (Indonesia) and the Caribbean (Suriname and the Dutch Antilles), the Dutch nation would, in the modern era, be little more than a small, insignificant European democracy (Boehmer and Gouda 40). Annexed to this colonial history and its legacy, the Netherlands also has a stratified history of immigration and diaspora, which does not relate directly to the colonial territories but today includes immigrants from Turkey, Morocco, Eastern Europe, and Ghana, and asylum seekers from Somalia, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, and other regions. These immigration patterns range therefore from direct postcolonial flows from Indonesia and the Dutch Caribbean, to guest workers in the 1960s, and to recent refugees and asylum seekers in the 1990s. History departments have widely acknowledged the impact of colonialism as a history of expansion and conquest, yet barely at all from a postcolonial perspective, thereby relegating postcolonial studies to the fields of English, gender studies, and cultural studies rather than to the study of Dutch literature and history.<sup>7</sup>

As Elleke Boehmer and Frances Gouda have argued in their overview of postcolonial studies in the Netherlands, postcolonial criticism, whether in the Netherlands's political arena or in academic discourse, does not have the same relatively firm historical base as can be found in Britain and France. This has consequences for the understanding of the history of Dutch colonialism in the past as well as for today's multiculturalism and its predicament. They write,

So the status of the Netherlands as an ex-colonial power remains unproblematic, and consequently the manner in which the history of colonialism might link up with the formation of national and migrant identities today is left insufficiently examined. Debates—about race, racism and identity in university forums for example—are not seen to link up in any direct way with conditions in the country at large.

Concomitantly, the Netherlands is widely said to lack a homegrown postcolonial critical discourse with which to properly address the experience of its diasporic populations. (39)

As in France, postcolonialism is seen as a remote and hegemonic discourse imported from elsewhere which does not fit the specificity of “Indische Letteren,” the canonical studies of literary practices in the Dutch Indies, imbued with a kind of “nostalgerie.” However, unlike France and similar to Italy, the Netherlands did not pursue a linguistic and cultural policy in the colony, the famed *mission civilisatrice*, by, for example, not using Dutch but Malay as the *lingua franca*. There was therefore no colonially educated élite that could write back in the language of the masters. Accordingly, as is the case for Italy, the development—or the belatedness—of a postcolonial critical thought seems to be linked to some disciplinary entrenchment. There is also a similarity in colonial practices which explain today’s belated postcolonialisms in these countries and also the sense of speaking a “minority” language within the postcolonial debate.

Given these different accounts of colonial histories, Italian postcolonialism should not be understood as “minor” or “belated” in comparison with the rest of Europe, nor even as less institutionalized or canonized. Italian postcolonialism should be seen as an integral part of the development of postcolonial studies; however, it has until now operated along the margins of dominant structures and hegemonizing discourses, including other dominant discourses on postcolonialism such as the French and the British ones. The geopolitical and cultural specificity of Italian postcolonialism helps readdress and requalify the precepts and principles of postcolonial theorizing by including the history of a different European south. This refers to Italy and its ambivalent relationship with Europe and Africa, alias the Mediterranean, as a new trope of ambivalence and subaltern histories (Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings*; Fuller; Fogu and Re). Understanding this minority position within postcolonial studies helps to prevent postcolonial theory from becoming a new master discourse which privileges the English linguistic hegemony and the chronological ordering of responses over European colonialism along former colonial divides (Britain, France, Netherlands, Italy, etc.). It is therefore also important to study the incongruence within, and the way in which postcolonial theorizing does not fit all European contexts in the same way and needs not only be appropriated and modified but also transformed in order for the Anglophone paradigm to remain effective and alert to an internal rehegemonizing tendency (Ponzanesi, *Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture*). This way of conceiving “traveling theory,” as Edward Said did, is intended to understand how theory travels from its original point to new locations and to see whether theory acquires new force and impact in this trajectory. It also explores the way in which theory becomes transformed into something different in the new location or travels back to its location of origin with a new élan. (Said “Traveling Theory” and “Traveling Theory Reconsidered”; Ponzanesi, “Edward Said”).

### European Heresies and Postcolonial Legacies

Making sense of past colonial legacies is important when this process is linked to the recent debate on European identity. This is one way to follow Luisa Passerini's invocation to approach colonialism as a European rather than as a national experience and to rethink European identity as a cosmopolitan one—before and beyond national identities—rather than as different sovra-national identities or a common EU identity (“Europe and ‘Its Others’”).

Europe is a contested topic. In light of current multicultural debates that reenact the clash of civilizations and fear of the other, not unlike the racial taxonomies of the colonial era, it is of the utmost importance to locate the origin, development, and impact of specific debates and to establish how academia can respond to the pressure of rising populism in the public arena, a populism that severely undermines notions of hospitality and human rights. Various European thinkers, ranging from Paul Gilroy to Étienne Balibar, Iain Chambers, Luisa Passerini, Graham Huggan, Philomena Essed, Gloria Wekker, and Gail Lewis among others, are reassessing the role of Europe in its postcolonial “multitudes” (Hardt and Negri). These critics analyze how, under the banner of Europe as a unifying concept, colonial operations of inclusion and exclusion are still at work. These are resurrected in reemergent racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia, and asylophobia at comparative and intranational levels (Ponzanesi and Blaagaard). Here the accent on Europe is not simply on a shared identity and common history but mostly on the retrieval of Europe's repressed past and silenced histories, and on the integration of the Other into Europe's project of modernity (or “interrupted modernity” as Chambers claims in *Mediterranean Crossings*) and notion of citizenship.

As Huggan highlights, “[f]or Gilroy Europe has entered its ‘postcolonial phase.’ By this he seems to understand a sense of suspension or hiatus in which the social, cultural, and political divisions previously produced by Europe's historical relations with its colonies have become increasingly eroded, but are still found to operate in terms of racial phobias and phantasms rearing up—sometimes summoned up—at what he calls ‘the terminal point of European trading activity,’ disclosing both material and discursive connections to an earlier colonial world (19)” (Huggan, “Perspectives” 247; Huggan quotes from Gilroy, *After Empire* 19). Therefore, as Gilroy writes, Europe is not innocent and does not reside outside the disruptive forces of colonization: “Though that [imperial and colonial] history remains marginal and largely unacknowledged, surfacing only in the service of nostalgia and melancholia, it represents a store of unlikely connections and complex interpretative resources. The imperial and colonial past continues to shape political life in the overdeveloped-but-no-longer-imperial countries” (*After Empire* 2). This is also in line with Gilroy's incitation to rewrite history and its colonial and fascist pasts from new perspectives and with new understandings, since these protracted silences of Europe's many colonial histories are crucial to comprehend the era of postcolonial Europe. As Gilroy further writes,

The modern histories of numerous other European countries [besides Britain], particularly Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, and the Netherlands, might also be used to

construct equivalent arguments amidst the wreckage of their colonial extensions and the injustices of their inconsistent responses to immigration. These analyses would be based upon their obvious difficulties in acknowledging the pain and the gains that were involved in imperial adventures and upon the problems that have arisen from their inability to disentangle the disruptive results supposedly produced by an immigrant presence from the residual but potent effects of lingering but usually unspoken colonial relationships and imperial fantasies. (*After Empire* 109)

The quest is therefore to retrieve Europe's colonial unconscious in all its multiplicities and differences, along with the acknowledgment of the continuities between radicalized and gendered politics at the height of empires and contemporary multicultural realities, keeping the focus on the specific interaction between colonial policies and global dynamics.

Italy cannot therefore be understood outside the European perspective, and even though it has a different history, as far as colonialism and multiculturalism are concerned, this history, however, reflects and informs other European contexts. Italy's belated and repressed colonial past (coupled with the lack of a clear decolonization moment) has led to a resistance to the fluxes of immigration that significantly intensified in the 1980s and 1990s, as the promulgation of Italy's first immigration law in 1990 testifies, impeding the gradual development of a multicultural consciousness. We could state that, as far as Italy is concerned, multiculturalism has been a missed opportunity, whereas in the rest of Europe, and particularly in northern countries such as the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and France, a multicultural policy has been implemented at government level for several decades. However, the general feeling now is that multicultural policies have "failed" and these countries are facing a severe backlash.

In 2004, for example, Italy moved some of its detention centers to Libya, a country that does not recognize the Geneva Convention and therefore does not apply the protocol on refugees rights.<sup>8</sup> Given the recent turmoil in Libya and the demise of Muammar Qaddafi, the likely assumption is that this policy will not be continued. Nonetheless, this episode exemplifies the relationship that Italy has had throughout its postwar period with former colonies, privileging the managerial and opportunistic approach above an ethical relationship, thereby rendering farcical colonial ties and postcolonial responsibilities. The embarrassment of Libya, as the historical critic Nicola Labanca has defined it in a recent article, implies that the past weighs on the present, but also that if adequately acknowledged, the past can also offer opportunities for the future and inspire positive action ("The Embarrassment of Libya"). Labanca refers to recent scholarly works that focus not so much on the understanding of whether colonialism transformed the Third World or was a mere parenthesis for the "dark continent" but more on the understanding of how this parenthesis transformed Europe itself and Europeans (1). From this point of view, the Italian presence in Libya, and in the colonies at large, has had a surprising influence on the people, culture, and politics of Italy. Recent controversies reminded ex-colonial powers of their past crimes and made it clear that decolonization is never accomplished, particularly on cultural and ideological levels.

Not unlike France, Italy seems to suffer from a memory war (Stora), which implies that remembering, or forgetting, serves different national interests and cultural enclaves. It is therefore high time Italy confronted its prolonged amnesia and politics of remembering along European lines in order to learn how to transform the present starting from the past. This would lead to a more integrated understanding of what it means to live in a postcolonial European polity.

### The Postcolonial Turn in Italian Studies

Postcolonialism, though belated and controversial, can no longer be thought of as external or marginal to Italian studies. On the contrary, it is experiencing a moment of explosion and expansion, again at a time when postcolonial studies in other countries are on the wane in favor of more all-encompassing categories such as global or transnationalism studies or even world literature.

In order to assess the state of the art of Italian postcolonial studies, it would be useful to define exactly what postcolonialism is and does (see Lombardi-Diop and Romeo in this volume), in short, to define postcolonialism as a critical tool and not as a catch-all term. Postcolonialism should be understood here not as a chronological transition from a colonial to a postcolonial status, but as a theoretical tool that aims to critically assess the operations of empires and their lasting legacies and effects in present day society. As such, the postcolonial framework is not only very welcome in the Italian arena but also much needed in order to correct forms of amnesia or suspect projects of historical revisionism. However, we should ask ourselves: what exactly does the term “postcolonial” designate? And how exactly are postcolonial theory and practice related to Italian studies? For the sake of clarity, I will distinguish here three main areas for the application of a postcolonial critique and offer an analysis of how they operate in the Italian cultural context:

- Reassess and evaluate the colonial past from new critical perspectives, accounting for subaltern positions but also offering new insights into the colonial encounter.
- Acknowledge texts, voices, and images by migrants (either from former colonies or not) and other minorities; revise the literary canon and redefine the notions of cultural value and aesthetics.
- Rethink theory and epistemology in accordance with perspectives of alterity and dissonance.

We could argue that Italian studies are truly flourishing as far as the first aspects are concerned, with numerous scholars—ranging from historians to anthropologists and cultural theorists—who have carried out pioneering work in recent decades, opening up not only an obscure chapter of Italian history but also transforming the way of dealing with the colonial archive and reinterpreting knowledge production from a postcolonial perspective (Del Boca; Labanca *Oltremare*; Sòrgoni).

The second aspect is also extremely buoyant at the moment with scholars operating not only in Anglo-Saxon academia but also in Italian departments in Italy on

appraising, acknowledging, and interpreting new literary voices and artistic productions by migrants in Italy. The tension is whether to define migrant writing as postcolonial or not, but the issue here should be on the understanding of postcolonialism as a critical tool that aims to account for the operations of dominations by emphasizing and voicing resistance and more inclusive patterns of thinking about nation, language, and identity. As such, the field is catching up with its European counterparts, though it is still a fragmented field in need of more cohesive and coordinated approaches, as this volume highlights.

The last field—developing a home-grown postcolonial theorizing—is where most of the work still needs to be done. This should not only account for the adaptations of existing critical tools to the specificity of Italy and its culture but also make sure that new postcolonial tools are developed from the reality and materiality of Italian culture itself to then travel further. This is an invitation to consider that postcolonialism is not just a framework imported from American academia, but that postcolonialism and postcoloniality are inherent to every culture and society and that, as such, they are everywhere and at work in the most unexpected locations. For instance, by the way a supermarket in Milan is laid out to cater for its customers, we could analyze whether it accounts for a multicultural society with different needs and tastes or continues to provide a selection of “national identity” products that correspond to preimmigration days.

It is therefore useful to establish how and when postcolonial theory is meaningful in analyzing the Italian context, while drawing larger conclusions from a European perspective. Postcolonial critique borrows heavily from the poststructuralist theories of the holy trinity in postcolonial studies—Said, Bhabha, and Spivak—in addressing traditional postcolonial issues connected to the act of writing back, the appropriation and abrogation of language, the patterns of hyphenation and hybridization of cultural identity, and the question of race and ethnicity as connected to citizenship and belonging. However these issues, and the “poststructuralist inspired” postcolonial approach indicated previously, take on a completely different dimension, sound, and relevance when translated to the Italian context. See, for example, what we could define as the new wave in Italian postcolonial writings, which include authors such as Igiaba Scego, Cristina Ali Farah, and Gabriella Ghermandi to name a few, all postcolonial in the technical but also in the intellectual sense of the word. Postcolonial because they have one or both parents who come from Ethiopia, Eritrea, or Somalia, while at the same time being full Italian citizens and juggling different cultures and mother tongues such as Italian, Amharic, and Somali. They are also highly educated writers who have graduated in Italy and some with PhDs. As Spivak would say, this makes them the perfect “native informants,” capable of presenting the experience of the outsiders with the language of the insiders, but they are also Italian authors *tout court*. They choose to address their complex origins, identity, and language use in a postcolonial way, emphasizing issues of resistance, in-betweenness, writing back, and embracing a poetics of relations, multiplicity, ambivalence, and subversion. What makes Italian studies postcolonial is therefore not so much the technical and chronological relationship with the former colonies (Eritrea, Somalia, Ethiopia, Libya) but the awareness, and with that the consciousness, of forms of domination and resistance



within Italian culture as related to power structures that are connected to both colonial policies and new global dynamics. It is a counter-hegemonic stance that addresses issues of institutionalization, canonization, and governmentality from different subject positions, in which not just a position of marginality or subalterity is articulated, but a field of tension and translation is also created. Postcolonialism does not stand for binary opposition or for the reversion of simple power relationships. It is more than a simple talking back, but it implies the operation of transformation and contamination that affects the different agents, organizations, and ideas involved. As such, postcolonialism is a never-ending process that requires renewal and critical alertness in order not to become another dogma or empty tool.

### Conclusion: Future Directions

By way of conclusion, I would like to reflect on some possible future directions for Italian postcolonial studies that would pave the way to a truly European postcolony. The first suggestion would be to intensify the field of comparative postcolonial studies in order to account for multiple alliances and divergences. In this way Italian studies would free itself from its own national ghetto and acquire visibility and credibility by engaging with other traditions.

Secondly, intensify and expand the role of cultural studies. It has been proven to be a very fruitful tool to study culture not only in its multidisciplinary dimension but also to break down the old divide of high and low culture, which is rather persistent in the Italian context. This would facilitate the integration of postcolonial studies, and migrant literature for example, as part of a renovated understanding of “culture.” This implies connecting history with politics, gender studies and visual culture, connecting media (i.e., newspapers, television, and cinema or photography) to new technologies, but also remixing genres and escaping closed boxes as already innovatively suggested by Benedetto Croce in his polemic on artistic genres (1894).

Thirdly, analyze texts in their double-layered form of representation, both aesthetic and political. As Spivak asserts in her “Can the subaltern speak?” there are two understandings of the word “representation”: *Darstellung* and *Vertretung*. This would imply that postcolonial artifacts, and culture in general, should be analyzed both in their political aspect (and here is where postcolonialism differs from postmodernism) and in their aesthetic specificity. Postcolonialism is not just a discourse but is conveyed through specific media, genres, and voices. Therefore, even in the Italian case we should focus on the literariness and poetics of postcolonial texts (Fraser), on the aesthetics of postcolonial films (Naficy; Ponzanesi, “The Non-Places of Migrant Cinema in Europe”; Ponzanesi and Waller), and on the semiotic aspect of world press photography, advertising, and political campaigns (Zarzycka; Ponzanesi, “Beyond the Black Venus”; Cheles and Sponza; Gribaldo and Zapperi).

The fourth and final suggestion would be to capitalize on the scholarship already available and disseminate it. This would perhaps imply an old colonial

move, namely, the translation of Italian postcolonial studies (from the Italian into English) but also the further translation into Italian of crucial texts, both by theorists and by non-Italian writers and artists.<sup>9</sup> This two-way commerce, by applying Said's notion of the traveling theory, should guarantee a kind of internationalization of Italian postcolonial studies.

As Italo Calvino once wrote, in transforming the unbridgeable delay of the Italian novel as a genre with respect to the French genre into an advantage, the Italian novel had a greater capacity to adapt to new situations because it became less specialized (1995). So the marginality to which Italian postcolonial writings are often relegated as an object of sociological research or as a "separate" genre that relies on exoticism and the consumption of the other can easily be turned into a blessing in disguise (Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic*).

To close, the belatedness of the Italian postcolonial tradition can then be transformed into an advantage, meaning that its innovative and experimental character can be seen as a renewal of both postcolonial studies in general and of the Italian cultural field in particular. Though belated, the postcolonial turn in Italian studies can no longer be ignored. On the contrary, it has been embraced by academia at large, reaching not only the more traditional realms of *Italianistica*, the ivory tower of Italian studies (with many new dissertations by promising young scholars),<sup>10</sup> but also other disciplines such as sociology and political theory (Dal Lago; Mezzadra; Mellino), anthropology (Sòrgoni; Salih), history (Del Boca; Labanca; Triulzi; Barrera; Poidimani), film studies (Waller; O'Healy; Ponzanesi; Duncan; Capussotti), literature, and cultural theory at large (Chambers; Curti; Portelli; Lombardi-Diop; Romeo; Buonaiuto and Laforest; Comberiati; Coppola; Di Maio). Along with exciting new generations of postcolonial scholars emerging from various Italian universities, such as Naples, Turin, Venice, Bologna, Bari, Lecce, Palermo, Rome, and Verona to name a few, the field of Italian postcolonial studies abroad (United States, Australia, United Kingdom, Northern Europe) is continuing to flourish and create important synergies. It is only the beginning of the postcolonial turn in Italian studies across borders.

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## Notes

1. Through curriculum revision, new courses offered, readers, handbooks, manuals, introductory and advanced textbooks, plus conferences, keynote lectures, international research networks, and research projects.
2. By establishing literary prizes, festivals, film adaptations, and the star system.
3. See the pioneering work of Parati, Ponzanesi, Andall and Duncan, Ben-Ghiat and Fuller, Lombardi-Diop, Burns and Polezzi, Ponzanesi and Merolla, De Donno and Srivastava among others.
4. Though the work of Said was translated into French in 1980, it did not receive much attention (Edward Said, *L'orientalisme, L'Orient créé par l'Occident*, Paris, Le Seuil, 1980). Much better was the reception of the work by Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak (the US translator of Derrida's *On Grammatology* [1967] which appeared in translation in 1976), who are well known for their "poststructuralist" jargon and heavy reference to French thought. However, only in recent years has there been a translation of their work into French (Spivak *Les subalternes peuvent-elles parler?* and *En d'autres mondes, en d'autres mots*) together with recent translations of work by Neil Lazarus (*Penser le postcolonial*) and new editions on postcolonialism (Smouts, Bayart, Livres Groupe).
5. See the work of Jean-Marc Moura, Alex Hargreaves, and Marc McKinney, Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, and Mireille Rosello for the postcolonizing of French academia. An interesting book on the connection between postcolonialism and world literature is the volume by Alex Hargreaves, Charles Forsdick, and David Murphy.
6. I will not delve into the analysis of postcolonial studies developing in other regions in Europe, such as Lusophone studies (Chabal; Pere; de Medeiros), the development of a Nordic postcolonialism (Charpentier et al.; Loftsdóttir; Blaagaard), or the understanding of the Eastern borders of Europe as a postsocialist/postcolonial location, where the violent Balkans are constructed as the "mirror image" of civilized Europe, as Todorova argues, but also as a place where "nesting orientalisms" already existed, instrumentalized to sustain nationalist narratives (Bakic-Hayden; Imre). Although these European regions are both relevant and interesting, the analysis of their postcolonial condition would be beyond the scope of this chapter, the objective of which is not to give a comprehensive account of the various "postcolonialisms" in Europe but to focus more on some exemplary paradoxes that put the delayed development of postcolonial studies in Italy into a wider perspective. For a detailed account of the historical developments of empire in Europe and their postcolonial legacies and literature in a European comparative perspective, see Poddar, Patke and Jensen.
7. The pioneering work of scholars such as Frances Gouda, Pamela Pattynama, Elsbeth Locher-Scholten, Berteke Waaldijk, Susanne Legêne, Gloria Wekker, Isabel Hoving, Rosemarie Buikema, and Geert Oostindie should however be acknowledged here.



Again it is significant that most of these scholars are scholars of gender studies, besides being historians, anthropologists, and literary critics, who are therefore used to following an interdisciplinary and comparative approach.

8. The detention and deportation of migrants from the Lampedusa detention center came to wider public attention in the fall of 2004, when more than one thousand “irregular” migrants were transferred from Lampedusa to Libya on military aircrafts (Andrijasevic).
9. On this respect the pioneering work of the Italian publisher Meltemi in Rome should be acknowledged, as it has translated into Italian the work of postcolonial theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Édouard Glissant, Paul Gilroy, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, and Robert Young, and published the work of Italian theorists (or theorists working in Italy) such as Miguel Mellino, Iain Chambers, and Paola Zaccaria among others.
10. There has been the recent completion of a few exemplary PhDs on migrant literature in Italian university departments, which indicates that a change is taking place. Here I mention the PhD dissertations by Sonia Sabelli, “Scrittrici eccentriche. Generi e genealogie nella letteratura italiana della migrazione,” on female migrant writers (Sapienza, University of Rome); Roberto Derobertis, “Scritture Migranti. Dislocazioni e nuove configurazione letterarie,” on the theoretical and critical problems of the Italian literary discourses in an age of globalization (Bari University); Barbara De Vivo, “La letteratura postcoloniale italiana. Strategie di auto-rappresentazione in tre scrittrici africane-italiane” (Sapienza, University of Rome). Also the birth of the literary journal titled *Scritture Migranti (Migrant Literatures)* in 2007, hosted by the Italian department at the University of Bologna, signals a clear change of tendency within the academic structure itself. Two major online journals such as *Sagarana* and *El Ghibli* had already provided a platform for migrant writers and the critical analysis of their work. There are many new emergent scholars in the field along with the more established generation in Italian academia, which includes Armando Gnisci, Lidia Curti, Iain Chambers, Alessandro Triulzi, Sandro Mezzadra, and Miguel Mellino.

## The Emigrant Post-“Colonia” in Contemporary Immigrant Italy

*Teresa Fiore*

Dalla Italia noi siamo partiti. . . . Trentasei giorni di macchina a vapore, e nella Merica noi siamo arriva'. No' abbiám trovato né paglia e né fieno. Abbiám dormito sul nudo terreno; come le bestie abbiám riposa'.

“Merica Merica”<sup>1</sup>

Che citá e che bele colonie . . . che i ga fato per noi [che] adeso gavemo de tuto . . .

“Ricordarsi dei nostri bisnonni”<sup>2</sup>

The opening verses of the emigration song “Merica Merica” illustrate the condition of deprivation that Italian emigrants to Brazil found themselves in after a long voyage across the Atlantic. Composed in the nineteenth century in Venetan<sup>3</sup> dialect, this popular song depicts the struggles of northern peasants in an inhospitable country but in the end celebrates their eventual contribution to its growth. Similarly, the less well-known song “Ricordarsi dei nostri bisnonni” (1963) memorializes the achievements of the many Italian emigrants to Brazil who, by building “beautiful colonies,” have given their descendants the chance “to have everything.” The rags-to-riches trajectory of the two songs is interestingly framed within a “colonial” building enterprise that listeners are asked to interpret as a successful emigration project. In stark contrast to the images conveyed by these songs, today numerous Brazilians of Italian descent travel in the opposite direction of these colony builders, driven by economic and safety needs, as well as a spirit of adventure or the search for family roots.<sup>4</sup> In the process, they set on a *sui generis* postcolonial route.

In this essay, I address issues of Italy’s colonialism and postcolonialism through the lenses of the country’s long and geographically vast emigration phenomenon from the 1870s onwards and in light of its contemporary immigration. The starting point for this approach is the word “colonia” and its double use as referring to

both the emigrant community abroad and to the colonized territory at the time of Italy's national formation and all the way through the Fascist period. The fundamental question prompted by this coexistence is, what is the meaning of "post-colonial" for/in a country that called the destinations of its emigrants "colonies," while it was conquering new territories as colonies and populating them with emigrants from Italy? This overlap has brought me to reflect on what I will term emigrant post-"coloniality," and more specifically on the political relevance of this emigrant post-"coloniality"<sup>5</sup> in an environment of "indirect postcoloniality," by which I mean that today's immigrants in Italy come for the most part from colonies that once belonged to other countries. Through the analysis of the 2007 documentary *Merica* directed by Federico Ferrone, Michele Manzolini, and Francesco Ragazzi, who innovatively focus on the circular movement of Italian emigration to Brazil and Brazilian immigration to Italy, as seen from the perspective of Italy, the essay examines collectively repressed or partially represented experiences of human relocation away from and toward Italy. In an effort to de-center the grand narrative of Italian nationhood by putting it in motion, the essay ultimately foregrounds a more layered meaning of Italian "postcolonial" in the field of cultural studies, while investigating its political potentialities and aesthetic figurations in relation to notions of Italian transnational identity and citizenship.

The Italian word "colonia" (like the English term "colony") by definition refers to a group of individuals who relocate or are relocated to a distant area and settle in a place called "colonia" itself. According to the Devoto-Oli dictionary, in ancient times these groups had different degrees of autonomy vis-à-vis the mother cities: they were mainly constituted as commercial rural communities. Indeed, the word "colono" (colonist) comes from the Latin "colere" meaning "to cultivate." As part of the European colonial enterprise, the modern use of the term applies more manifestly to the sphere of conquest: the "colonia" is a territory acquired by force and governed by imposing a foreign system at various levels. This latter type of colony also entails the relocation of portions of the metropole's population for reasons of local management, as well as demographic and economic expansion. Colonies can then be associated with both freedom and spontaneity, on the one hand, and coercion and subjugation, on the other. In the case of Italy, the term "colonia" has been used to simultaneously refer to the emigrant communities abroad, scattered around the world, and to the lands taken from other populations in Africa and the Mediterranean within the country's colonial, and later imperial, project. In a third sphere of terminological use, the Italian word "colonia" is applied to an area and a group of people relocated within the national territory as part of the land reclamation projects of the Fascist era, which moved populations internally while recalling emigrants from abroad according to a nationalist agenda.<sup>6</sup>

By broadening Oscar Gaspari's concept of the "migratory continuum" (323) and Nicola Labanca's search for "points of closeness" (195) between migratory and colonial demographic flows, I adopt a linked reading of the two notions of territorial colony and emigrant colony with the aim of elaborating a more complex concept of Italian colonialism. Seen as a whole, the connected processes of emigration and colonialism, which developed in parallel since the inception of Italy's formation as a modern nation, effected the making of both Italy and Italians

abroad,<sup>7</sup> thanks to the transnational circulation of national (and regional) ideas, goods, and customs. Yet the original practices and current ramifications of Italy's peculiar double colonialism complicate the relatively more immediate distinction between citizen and subject that the colonial (and imperial) enterprises produced for other countries and reproduce in the metropole of today (Mezzadra 73–88). For the purpose of this essay, the semantic oscillation between these two meanings of "colonia" has important consequences not only for the formation of Italy's national identity but also for the perception of the postcolonial condition in contemporary immigrant Italy, an aspect that often remains underexamined in studies on either emigration, immigration, or colonialism.

Fundamentally, this condition marks the uniqueness of the Italian case vis-à-vis the colonial and postcolonial experience of/in other European countries. Italy's colonial legacy is not directly reflected in the composition of its immigrant population: while the Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali communities are present, they are by far numerically surpassed by other African groups and even more so by Eastern European communities.<sup>8</sup> This anomaly is responsible for the previously mentioned "indirect postcoloniality" in the Italian context—a condition also shared by Germany and the Netherlands, for instance—since some of its immigrant groups come from places that were under other European colonial powers (mainly France and England, but also Spain and Portugal).

Italy thus emerges as a site of atypical postcoloniality, in which the use of the term "postcolonial" has turned out to be more complex than in other parts of Europe on issues such as Italian as a postcolonial language,<sup>9</sup> or postcolonial as a literary category.<sup>10</sup> For this reason, Robert Young identifies Italy as a unique laboratory for the "provocative possibilities" (see Young in this volume) it yields in the field of Postcolonial Studies. He highlights the country's unique sociopolitical conditions: recent immigration-related multiculturalism; the Leftist parties' long-time cultural influence in and outside academia; a history of support of anticolonial struggles; a solid tradition of political thought, including the heavy legacy of Gramsci on international postcolonial thought; and an exploding interest in postcolonial texts.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, in Young's piece, these distinctive qualities are neither actively linked to Italy's peculiar colonialism in terms of time and geographical span, nor to its demographic and cultural diaspora.

In this essay, I instead attempt the formulation of an Italian postcolonialism that, besides reflecting the coexistence of multiple colonial legacies—both direct and indirect—carries signs of the long-lasting and profound inheritance left by its global emigration, considering that between 1876 and 1976 presumably 27 million emigrants moved to practically all five continents (Franzina 145). I am therefore interested in yet another application of the term "postcolonial," which is a reflection of this massive emigration and of its related history of exploitation and struggle. Postcolonial, I suggest, is also the condition of certain Italian descendants residing abroad who, having acquired Italian citizenship, enter a particular institutional and cultural sphere that simultaneously brings with it forms of inclusion and exclusion.<sup>12</sup> The legacy of the emigrant colony grants them a post-"colonial" status (note the intentional quotes), officially defined as a privileged position for the apparently easy access to Italy (and the "developed" world) that it provides. Yet,

in reality, they also enter the immigrant world of Italy, within which the general postcolonial (read “underdeveloped” and “developing” world) condition is hardly one of privilege.

The triangulated reading that I am here formulating is essentially at the core of the documentary *Merica* for its dynamically interconnected look at emigration, immigration, and both “indirect postcoloniality” and emigrant post-“coloniality” as fundamental elements to read Italy’s nationhood in motion. As a result, the documentary effectively deconstructs the ideologically fabricated view of emigration as a successful “colonist” project in other countries’ lands or as a successful post-“colonial” return to Italy for Italian descendants. Even more subtly, *Merica* probes the regional myths and forces at work behind the history of emigration and the present of immigration by choosing Veneto as its key setting. As a major departure point for Italian emigrants to South America between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the richest area in Italy today, the Veneto region essentially encapsulates the contradictions of modernity in Italy.<sup>13</sup>

Shot between the northern cities of Treviso and Verona and in the Brazilian state of Espírito Santo (an area of high Italian concentration), *Merica* problematizes the notion of Italian national identity through a circular approach to migratory relocations to and from Brazil, an ex-Portuguese colony with a long tradition of Italian immigration (from 1875 until the 1960s with a peak around 1887–1920)<sup>14</sup> and, as a result, one of the largest numbers of Italian descendants in the world today (about 25 million, according to the estimates quoted in the documentary). In the vast Italian and Brazilian literature on the subject,<sup>15</sup> the history of Italians in Brazil is described as very substantial in terms of size (around 1.5 million individuals emigrated there) and strongly stimulated by local immigration policies. Interestingly, this early outbound flow of Italians—the Brazilian Dream predated the American one—originated for the most part in the North, particularly in Veneto, the region that today represents one of the three main destinations for immigrants, according to the *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2011* (101).

In the popular perception, among its contemporaries as well as today, this emigration is represented as successful due to the considerable level of economic and social integration of the present community in the larger society over time; the receiving country’s need for labor after the 1888 abolition of slavery; Catholicism functioning as a shared religion; the high frequency of mixed marriages; the ample dimensions of the Italian community; and the hard work ethos of its members. Yet the cliché image of the thriving Italian immigrant in Brazil has been questioned in many respects. From the contemporary songs and letters denouncing the level of exploitation exerted on the immigrants by the government and the intermediaries, to official documents registering the toils and distress that the voyage and the settlement entailed, the thesis of the easy establishment and integration in Brazil is hardly tenable, as several historians have argued.<sup>16</sup>

*Merica* opens with a clear criticism of this legend of success and posits from the outset a less celebratory reading of that emigration experience, in anticipation of the equally complex experience of today’s Italian-Brazilian immigrants in Italy. In the opening segment, designed as an Emanuele-Luzzati-style animated cartoon, multimedia artist Giuseppe Ragazzini uses cut-out figurines of typified emigrants

carrying a cardboard suitcase. He convincingly captures the dangers and exploitation suffered by emigrants, whose lives were at risk during the perilous sea voyage, and whose destiny was that of becoming manpower swallowed up by factory-like countries, emblematically personified by a welcoming and yet devouring Statue of Liberty. Although this brief sequence is historically set in the past and geographically situated in Brazil, reverberations on the present of immigrants insensitively consumed by modern economic systems and similarly vulnerable in the course of their journeys become obvious, thus already setting the parallel emigration-immigration structure of the documentary at the very beginning.

After this incisive denunciation, *Merica* moves to the narrative focus of the documentary. While interweaving various strands of migration experiences throughout, the directors create a central *fil rouge* by following the story of the Fantin De Oliveiras, a family of Italian descendants who yield to the power of nostalgia for "their own" land of origin, albeit historically distant, and to the more understandable power of attraction for a country perceived as industrially advanced, politically democratic, and socially safe. These are the qualities hailed by the young Felipe who in the documentary's opening interview celebrates the freedom offered by Italian citizenship, speaking from the symbolic in-between space of the cage-like balcony of his family's apartment in Espírito Santo. His brother Tiago's recent decision to move to Italy after acquiring Italian citizenship has influenced Felipe's desire to leave, fueled on the one hand by his "feeling Italian inside," despite his feeble cultural ties to the country, and on the other by the support of his grandmother, seeing in this return to origins the fulfillment of a biblical prophecy.

Introduced in 1992, the new citizenship law fundamentally confirmed the right of Italian descendants to acquire the Italian passport and the benefits attached to it, but in addition to previous laws also extended the category of blood-based eligibility into previous generations, while definitively endorsing double citizenship. The ensuing worldwide response to this opportunity, particularly in developing countries,<sup>17</sup> has produced an enormous amount of applications.<sup>18</sup> Most of all, the law and the interest it has stimulated abroad, especially in connection to the new 2001 electoral law granting the right to vote to Italian citizens living outside the country, produced an even more complicated concept of Italian identity divided between "natural" rights and effective cultural integration.<sup>19</sup>

In advertising the "providential help" it provides to descendants seeking to acquire foreign citizenship, the Brazilian website *Projeto Imigrantes* reminds potential applicants that the acquisition of an Italian and hence EU passport equals the acquisition of advantages such as "easy mobility," "quick customs procedures," and the "ability to study, work, and establish residence in the EU without permits."<sup>20</sup> *Merica* documents the actual translation of these "advantages" into the Italian context, once Brazilians of Italian descent relocate. When Tiago and his wife describe life in Verona, they both underline a feeling of isolation from Italians, as well as at times an experience of open racism. Tiago vividly recounts being scolded at work as an inept *extracomunitario* by a boss who knew about his citizen status. Similarly, an Italian descendant living in Treviso, Idivaldo Francescon, shares his cultural pride in having acquired citizenship and the right to vote, but sadly registers the difficulties in securing a rental and a legal work contract since he

remains a “foreigner” in the eyes of the locals. Whether or not these descendants have taken advantage of the “return program” (programma di rientro)<sup>21</sup> offered by the Veneto region to the “new” Italians coming from the past “emigrant colonies,” they are left with a sense of disappointment for the failed promises of implicit cultural acceptance and full economic stability, which citizenship should have afforded in their views.

In placing the focus on these “recent” citizens’ sense of simultaneous entitlement as “Italians” and displacement as “Others” in a country that after all perceives them as alien, *Merica* effectively reveals the unsolved nature of the prefix “post” in Italian postcolonial dynamics. In its most paroxysmic forms, the purported privilege of these Italian post-“colonial” subjects is a blood-based and cultural supremacy, as stated by former Mayor of Treviso Gianfranco Gentilini, known as the “double-zero-tolerance sheriff” for his Northern League–affiliated anti-immigrant program. *Merica* features Gentilini’s farcical harangue in support of Italian descendants seen as desirable immigrants for the “high civilization”–based values they share with Italians, and his anathema against immigrants at large, who are portrayed as “barbarians” invading Italy. The supposed superiority of these returned Italians hinges on the false notion of easy and widespread success among Italians abroad, by which Gentilini incorrectly depicts the past emigration from Veneto as fast and effective. Yet as second-generation Italian-Brazilian Benjamin Falchetto explains in one of the first interviews contained in *Merica*, Italians went to Brazil to work the land, but after a terrible transatlantic voyage and a quarantine period on the Brazilian coast, ended up living in isolation in the forest, building everything from scratch for decades, and “spending their lives working as slaves.” Rather than being rural colonists, they were practically reduced to colonized subjects in the former Portuguese colony.<sup>22</sup>

The biopolitics-infused rhetoric of the Italian lineage so pompously and uncritically exposed by Gentilini is here radically unhinged and, if anything, redesigned by way of a heritage of suffering. The insertion of Falchetto’s powerful comments—purposefully repeated twice in the course of the documentary—points to the shared experience of exclusion felt by these migrants across time and space, which transcends even the very laws designed to incentivize these relocations, as part of national(ist) projects actually packaging labor-import programs. As Francescon’s wife puts it, those descendants who come to Italy “are so disappointed that the first thing they do is leave Italy,” since they are made to feel like job-stealing immigrants. *Merica* thus shows the constructed nature of citizenship, while denouncing the particularly convoluted artificiality of the Italian law, which promotes citizenship as natural, when it is in fact strongly controlled by the bureaucratic apparatus and is often granted to these immigrants in a cultural vacuum. The contrast between Tiago de Oliveira’s (or Francescon’s) situation and the fact that access to citizenship for nondescendant immigrants and their children residing (or even born) in Italy is not automatic, according to the prevalent *jus sanguinis*–driven policy, allows for a pointed critique of the paradoxes created by the Italian system in terms of social belonging and civic participation. In other words, in Italy the ex-emigrant colony is conceived as a legitimate place of origin for “extending” Italianness as an emigrant post-“colonial” identity and practice,

but the actual postcolonial experience of immigrants coming from ex-territorial colonies (Italy's or other countries'), or with no "blood" ties to Italy, is on the contrary a reason for institutional exclusion. In showing the aberrations of this "selective and differential inclusion" (Mezzadra 102), the directors of *Merica* fundamentally suggest that all that the law produces is not only a sense of disillusionment among the descendants but also a sense of exceptionalism, which risks generating de-politicization on their part.

Factory worker/activist Ernesto França Antunes Jr., a Brazilian immigrant with no direct tie to Italy (i.e., an indirect postcolonial subject who moved to Veneto by chance for economic reasons), cogently explains this risk in *Merica*—and does so in a refined Italian that equips him to "talk back to the colonial paradigms" (Parati 58). According to him, the Italian descendants live in the "shadow" of Italianness, namely the false conviction of having "authentic" roots from Veneto, but due to the xenophobic environment around them, fostered by that very Northern League that ironically celebrates regional roots, they unequivocally remain "foreigners" (interestingly, the Italian descendants in the documentary do not speak Italian fluently or at all). As Antunes claims, what matters is that "roots can also be found, and they spark passion" for an active involvement in society: instead of simply expecting for the government to provide for, one can forge roots and belong to a place by working dynamically to change it. His subtle understanding of the contradictions of what could be termed a neocolonial system, reinforced by his participation in public programs in defense of immigrant rights through his Protestant church, shows that individual paths of success are potential engines of change, but in a condition of subalternity they cannot lead to any sound integration unless they are supported by a united fight for rights. In a country like Italy that still largely regards the presence of first and second immigrant generations as alien to itself, the "immigrant question" requires a collective participation, involving all immigrants and locals in what is a crucial social "conflict" toward full political recognition, as Sergio Zulian from the Treviso Migrants Office maintains in *Merica*.

The novel use of the term "postcolonial" proposed in this essay shifts the application of the term to a different historical and conceptual realm. In going beyond the descriptive level (post-"colonial" as a condition successive to the emigrant colony), it provides a new critical paradigm to read citizenship, national formation and identity, and neoliberal exploitation in immigrant scenarios through an approach attentive to the legacy of emigration as well as to the metamorphosis of the colonial discourse and practices in the metropole. Italian postcolonial thought as a tool of critique against forces of oppression in the contemporary world can therefore be empowered by the memory of emigration-related mistreatment coupled with the present neocolonial condition of discrimination (under-the-table jobs, workplace harassment, etc.) experienced by Italian descendants coming from an ex-European colony.<sup>23</sup> The emigrant post-"colonia" relocated to Italy short-circuits the North-vs.-South divide and First World-vs.-Third World separation insofar as it embodies aspects of both simultaneously.

This displaced position—people find out that "home" makes them "foreign"—breaks the distinction between inside and outside and foregrounds those notions of fissure and overlap at the conceptual level that *Merica* as a cultural text also



convincingly gives shape to at the formal level, as a sort of poetics of the post-“colonia.” The skillful montage technique, which resorts to parallel interviews in Italy and Brazil, works as a clever anti-amnesia *dispositif* that, by bringing history into the present and vice versa, emphasizes the similarities shared by migrating people across space and time. The subtle structure of echoes whereby the content of the stories and the actual words spoken are often either literally repeated or refeatured in a different environment reveals the ironies of, if not the blatant lies attached to, migration accounts, as seen in the juxtaposition of Gentilini’s and Falchetto’s readings of Italian emigration to Brazil. Similarly, the systematic use of corresponding spaces in Italy and Brazil (churches for spiritual and social meetings; fairs for entertainment and political organization; bars and shops for the consumption of goods, music, games, etc. from the place of origin) draw nostalgia, cultural preservation, pride, and/or the political fight for recognition onto a common map stretching from one side of the Atlantic to the other. Finally, the innovative filmmaking techniques including the nonsynchronous use of sound (in particular of radio programs’ excerpts on politics and market goods), the inclusion of a large palette of language mixtures and dialect inflections, and the painting-like quality of the shots of alternating industrial, rural, and urban landscapes points to a visual and oral language able to reflect, if not signify, the very dislocations narrated in the film. The political impact of this migratory aesthetics, as Bal would call it (23), is made even more meaningful by the collaborative nature of the documentary—the individual contribution of the three directors is not specified. Additionally, their personal relocations, which remain untold in *Merica*, attach a meta-migratory quality to their project: Chile-born scholar Ragazzi with Italian and French citizenships, Italian Manzolini with degrees from Portugal and Brazil, and Italian film critic Ferrone, codirector with Ragazzi of a pluri-awarded short film on the multicultural French *banlieues*, continue to explore sociopolitical issues of transnational relevance through their media production company (Vezfilm).

The poetics and politics of the post-“colonia” that they have elaborated in *Merica* is captured in the final scene of the documentary. In it, Tiago, the “Italian foreigner,” sits alone in the majestic Arena of Verona, the city’s Roman amphitheatre, in whose emptiness his inner words resound. Despite his discontent and his decision to voice it to his family, he is aware that his brother Felipe will keep on dreaming of his own “return” to Italy. The superimposition of Tiago’s words in Portuguese and the subtitles in Italian over his own person, reduced to silence by his predicament, encapsulates Tiago’s paradoxical condition of presence and absence in Italy, a country symbolized by the powerful monument of Roman imperial antiquity. Despite the apparent static quality of this scene, the script suggests that the lure of emancipation via migratory routes will continue to create dynamic openings, and likewise the image evokes change. Not coincidentally, *Merica* ends, before the credits, with a shot of the arena framed by construction cranes and with the nonutterance of some dots (“but . . .”), respectively the figures for transition and suspension, and as such of simultaneous possibility and contradictions within active circuits of migration.

The postcolonial/post-"colonial" scenario in motion ingeniously drawn by *Merica* inescapably prompts the disruption and dislocation of easy assumptions about belonging. Even though the political purport of this transnational postcoloniality remains at a potential state among the post-"colonial" characters (Italian descendants) portrayed in it,<sup>24</sup> or perhaps thanks to this, what emerges forcefully is the "provocative possibility," to go back to Young's intuition, of developing a renovated postcolonial commitment to both theory and social transformation within the "laboratory Italy."<sup>25</sup> By tracing the genealogy of nations made and unmade abroad, and by inquiring into the power of memory, a new space can be imagined for unintuitive alliances within and across migrant communities along several temporal lines. The anticolonial ethos powerfully evoked by studies emphasizing "colonialism" over "post" in the term "postcolonialism"<sup>26</sup> preserves its dynamic and revolutionary force in the multiple postcolonial/post-"colonial" struggle against social inequalities that I envision in this essay. The active exchange between the emigrant post-"colonia" and the direct and indirect postcolonial subjects as well as the locals and the second generations can effectively produce a more porous conceptualization of citizenship<sup>27</sup> and more flexible forms of belonging in Italy itself, around it in the EU space, and far from it in the vast diasporic area created by its emigration.

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## Notes

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1. "From Italy we left. . . . Thirty-six days on the steamship, and we got to Merica. We did not find any straw. We slept on the bare soil; like beasts we rested." For the full text and mp3 of "Merica Merica," see website address in the list of works cited.
2. "Such beautiful towns and colonies. . . . that they built for us [and] we now have everything." For the full text and mp3 of "Ricordarsi dei nostri bisnonni" ("Remembering our great-grandparents"), see Marasca.
3. A less common adjective than Venetian, Venetan refers to the entire region of Veneto rather than just the city of Venice.
4. According to the *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2011 Caritas-Migrantes*, the Brazilian community in Italy with a population of 46,690 is the twenty-third largest immigrant group.
5. Since I have complicated the meaning of the term "postcolonial" by broadening it to embrace the Italian emigrant community abroad and to signal the overlap with immigrant experiences in Italy, this chapter employs the neologism "post-'colonia'" (and both the related adjective "post-'colonial'" and the noun "post-'coloniality'") to mark the relevant distinctions.
6. For a bibliography on the internal colonies, see note 53 in Fuller (252).
7. Initially formulated within a framework of circular dispersion by Gabaccia in her *Italy's Many Diasporas*, this notion is central to Choate's book about emigrant colonialism, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad*.
8. See *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2011*, according to which Romanians (21.2 percent) and Albanians (10.6 percent), followed by Moroccans (9.9 percent), are the largest groups, as suggested by the December 2010 data. Eritreans, Ethiopians, and Somalis combined account for 0.7 percent (94).
9. Parati offers an expanded meaning of postcolonial language by showing that the Italian language unifies immigrants across differences by providing a medium to exchange stories of colonial pasts and postcolonial struggles (60). Similarly, Burns sees it as "a language of passage" with a liberating function for migrant writers (145).
10. As part of a study on Italian postcolonialism, Lombardi-Diop considers both indirect and direct postcolonial subjects among the immigrant writers she analyzes. Ponzanesi instead investigates Italian postcolonial writings within the worldwide body of postcolonial literature and argues that they are not as privileged as Indian diaspora writings in English, for instance, due to "different colonial, linguistic, and market economies" (xiv).
11. For a rich bibliography on postcolonial studies both in Italy and the United States that is current up to 2008, see Mezzadra (155–71).
12. Viscusi has recently applied the term "postcolonial" to the US emigrant community (colony) in order to mark the colony's assimilation into "the enormous hegemonic presence" (45) of mainstream America (the metropole) in the period 1941–91. Viscusi's innovative use of the term "postcolonial" in emigration studies is circumscribed within the sphere of cultural signification rather than being used to explore the concrete relations of power prompted by the term "postcolonial."
13. Incidentally, *Merica* has been partially supported by public funds from the Veneto Region.
14. For statistics on the emigration flows to Brazil, see Trento (5–6) and Franzina (451–53).
15. See Franzina (557–61 and 612–27).

16. Trento (7–15) and Franzina (259–79) offer a comprehensive account of the complications that intervened for many Italian emigrants before they reached a respectable social position as “colonists,” thus complicating the otherwise often-glorified Brazilian Dream.
17. For an analysis of the requests submitted in Brazil, see Del Pra’ and Tirabassi.
18. In the course of an interview included in *Merica*, the Italian Consul of Rio de Janeiro refers to a 15-year wait period for the latest applications received in Espírito Santo. For the perspective of Brazilian applicants on the procedures, see the website *Imigrantes Italianos*.
19. See Tintori for further details.
20. *Projeto Imigrantes* is one of many sites of this nature (see also *Imigrantes Italianos*). *Merica* devotes an entire segment to the genealogy searches involving records offices and attracting Brazilians of European descent.
21. See “Regional Law 9, January 2003” for a full description of the Venetians in the World’s program of incentives for returning descendants, including travel funds, quotas for publicly assisted housing, job training opportunities, and so on. *Merica* does not address the program, but Pinchiorri’s interview with the directors mentions the subject as one of those that could not be included in the documentary due to space limitations.
22. Adolfo Rossi’s classic report on Italian immigration in Brazil, now available on Google Books, presents in detail this scenario of exploitation and distress.
23. It is unlikely that a similar experience would be shared by an Italian descendant from the United States, for example.
24. The documentary does not address a widely visible group within the Brazilian immigrant community, that is, the transsexuals who reach Italy (and Europe) along the postcolonial routes of international sex traffic and have no family ties to Italy. The conceptual short circuits created by their relations with the local population is even more complex than the ones considered in *Merica*, as they entail questions of race, gender, and sexuality within an economy of exotic desire and transgression that erodes the supposedly organic fabric of the First World. For an interesting treatment of the subject, see the book *Princesa* by Fernanda Farias de Albuquerque; and for a brief analysis of *Princesa*, see Bregola.
25. By borrowing Hardt’s coinage in the essay by the same title, I implicitly offer to expand the breadth of his experimental operation by including the notion of postcoloniality in the different facets so far described.
26. For a thorough analysis of the “post” in postcolonialism, which takes into account studies produced in different disciplines both in Italian and English, see Derobertis.
27. See Ruberto’s blog post on the limitations imposed by the law, but also the possibilities it has opened for rethinking citizenship. For an essay on the complex formulations of postcolonial identity among children of immigrants, whether Italy-born or brought to the country at a very young age, see Andall.

# De-Provincializing Italy

## Notes on Race, Racialization, and Italy's Coloniality

*Miguel Mellino*

### Italy and Postcolonialism/Postcolonial Italy

Writing on Italy and postcolonialism from whatever starting point of view or perspective necessarily entails a very simple and obvious—though not always fully conscious—enunciation: Italy is a postcolonial country like, for example, England, France, Algeria, and Argentina. This implicit or explicit enunciation ought to be supported by other specific epistemological assumptions, which in turn could be either openly enunciated or kept ambiguously hidden in the “white spaces” of the texts (to use Althusser’s famous phrase). Although it is as yet hard to talk about anything like Italian postcolonial studies (with regard exclusively to the national intellectual landscape), it is now not difficult to find a highly stimulating body of writings which might constitute such a field, just because they interrogate the national audience explicitly or implicitly from what it seems to me rather apparent postcolonial assumptions.<sup>1</sup>

It could be argued that, in these so-called Italian postcolonial texts, Italy is defined as a postcolonial country with reference to four broad enunciations. The first, and most clearly pronounced, has to do with its colonial past: Italy should be conceived of as a postcolonial country since it was, like nearly all Western European countries, a colonial country and hence its dominant national “interpellations” (Althusser) have always been, and are still nowadays, laden with and influenced by colonial racist discourses, representations, and stereotypes. It is important to remember that after a long period of complete removal of this issue from the Italian intellectual and public scene—apart from a very circumscribed and isolated historical body of work<sup>2</sup>—there is now a growing oeuvre focusing not only on the

brutal, pitiless, and criminal features of Italian colonialism but also on issues such as its constituent racial discourses and practices, namely the central role of this past—despite the relatively short and transient Italian colonial experience—in constructing traditional Italian national identity (from the postunification period onwards) and its ambivalent obliteration from national memory and “official” history after the defeat of Fascism (Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi*, “Racial Policies”; Labanca; Mellino, *La critica postcoloniale*; Triulzi; Chambers; Stefani; Poidimani; Mari et al.; Siebert).<sup>3</sup>

The second enunciation is that Italy’s postcoloniality derives also from its historical “Southern Question” (known as *la questione meridionale*), which can certainly be considered, as it was in the past, as an internal “colonial fracture” (Blanchard, Bancel, and Lemaire), a phenomenon that is implicitly, ambivalently, and intricately tied up with the global development of modern colonial capitalism and imperialism (Capusotti; Mezzadra, “Anti-Racist Research”). Indeed, it is reasonable to assume that the territorial socioeconomic annexation of southern territories was driven by colonial/imperial logics, and that the antisouthern racism and the rhetoric of civilization (which also entailed the thesis of the biological inferiority of southern people), woven into the national social fabric by northern élites since the *Risorgimento*, were nothing but the local translation of the Western “civilizing mission” discourse and its constitutive colonial racism. Given the strong historical premises rooted in Italian traditional radical thought (see Gramsci’s work on this very topic), it is striking that this remains the least developed topic in these new Italian postcolonial texts.

The third enunciation is perhaps the most pregnant and also the most inflated, given the increasing role of Italian contemporary racist interpellations in becoming a kind of vanguard for European postcolonial racism and segregation. From this enunciation, Italy is considered as a postcolonial country since it has become an immigration country, and therefore its social space is increasingly being segmented and hence disturbed by material and symbolic racist violence against postcolonial migrant subjectivities as well as by antiracist riots against institutional, popular, and cultural racism (Rahola; Rigo; Pasquinelli; Zoletto, *Lo straniero in classe*; Sossi; Curcio; Sciurba; Basso). What this enunciation is making highly visible then is the proliferation of what can be called “(post)colonial fractures” within the internal space of the Italian social fabric (following Blanchard, Bancel, and Lemaire). More precisely, what most of these so-called Italian postcolonial studies on migration are showing is the increasing racialization of the Italian class composition. However, if the spectres of race and racialization are clearly emerging from all of these texts, it is also true that their discursive materialization as “historical structuring structures” (to use Pierre Bourdieu’s notorious definition of “habitus”) is still very precarious and ambivalent. And this is indicative of the complexity that the question of race still carries with it in the Italian scenario.

It should be added that this enunciation has been increasingly supplemented by an opposite claim: Italy is becoming a postcolonial country since hybrid constituent collective subjectivities are now highly visible in most spheres of popular culture and politics. Obviously, these are represented mainly by second generation migrants (Queirolo Palmas, *Il fantasma, Prove di seconde generazioni*; Zoletto,

*Il gioco duro*), but also by emergent “two-tone youth urban subcultures” (Gilroy, *There Ain’t* 228), as well as by political movements gathering together migrant and native workers and students. As is well known, there is by now a growing body of Italian migrant and postmigrant writing which might be better defined as “Italian postcolonial literature” (Komla-Ebri; Kubati; Scego, *Rhoda, Italiani per vocazione*, among others). Yet given the historical and structural conditions of migration in Italy, this “postcolonial Italy”—although characterized by an increasing assertiveness—is striving to get out of the ghetto constructed daily by mainstream discourses and representations. Needless to say, the post 9/11 “anti-multicultural” rhetoric has done nothing but strengthened its minimization and ghettoization within the public sphere and intellectual landscape.

The fourth and last enunciation, drawing from the wider theoretical debate on the specificities of the present system of capitalist accumulation, sets Italy’s postcoloniality in the context of contemporary global capitalism. From this perspective, Italy is defined as a postcolonial country since its economy and national sovereignty have been steadily denationalized and disaggregated by contemporary global neoliberal capitalism, that is, by a system of capitalist accumulation which is still driven by colonial and imperial logics (although, of course, not to the same extent as in the past), and hence that it has its main roots not only in the colonial/imperial past but mainly in the colonial proliferation of—human, ontological, cultural, economic—hierarchically produced borders across the globe (Mezzadra, *La condizione postcoloniale*; Roggero; Mellino, “Cittadinanze postcoloniali”). More precisely, Italy’s postcolonial condition is inferred here from the global working of what can be called contemporary “postcolonial capitalism” (Sanyal): a system of capitalist accumulation that needs to be defined as such just because it is still based—as were the colonial/imperial governmentalities of the past—in the continuing proliferation of juridically and hierarchically differentiated zones, territories, populations, and subjects.

### De-Provincializing Italy

Though the scenario may now appear extremely promising, what needs to be examined more sharply—or at least more systematically—is the close historical interpenetration between the global spreading of modern colonial and imperial capitalism (i.e., slavery, colonialism, biological and cultural racism, nationalism, mass migratory movements, and the territorialization of sovereignty, etc. as planetary modern phenomena) and local Italian economic and cultural history. In other words, in order to develop more consistently, and with enhanced self-awareness, the field of Italian postcolonial studies (though, of course, I am not claiming here to legitimize any such label or discipline) what is needed is to “de-provincialize” Italy (to turn Chakrabarty’s famous enunciation around). More precisely, what I am suggesting is not merely to situate Italy’s economic and cultural development in the global context of the modern expansion of world capitalism (which has already been addressed by local economists and political thinkers, both Marxist and non-Marxist), but to rethink, more profoundly, its historical involvement in



the rise and spread of a capitalist modernity in which the globalization of both modern European-Christian, humanistic culture and the “color-race line” (Du Bois, *The Souls*) were complementary strategies of colonial capitalist rule over different territories, subjects, and cultures.

It could be argued that Italy’s less significant structural relationship to its historical colonies and its belated experience in becoming an immigration country might have prevented the postcolonial dislocation of Italian national and cultural history. But the main question still to be answered is, what was the historical involvement of Italian culture—as the self-celebrated cradle of Renaissance and Humanism—in the production of that kind of (liberal-humanist) Europe which, according to Fanon (*The Wretched*) and Sartre, was killing Man in every corner of the globe during the Algerian anticolonial war by fabricating the colonial Others as nothing but slaves and monsters?

The phrase “the spreading of capitalist modernity” does not mean that modernity should be approached as a global phenomenon that first occurred in Europe and then spread across the world, as world-systems theorists such as Braudel and Arrighi seem to suggest. Rather the opposite: drawing implicitly on very different schools of thought, I want to stress that capitalist modernity should no longer be conceived of, culturally or economically, as a merely intra-European affair. Assuming that the transition from feudalism to capitalism could not have happened without the development of global commerce (Sweezy), slavery (Eric Williams; Du Bois, *The World and Africa*), and colonialism (Césaire; Fanon, *The Wretched*; Amin; Frank; Rodney); that the production of modern (European) technologies of knowledge, (bio)power, and subjectification can no longer be thought of through a merely Foucauldian-Eurocentric framework, namely apart from (violent) experimentation of racist/racial governmentalities in European colonies (Viswanathan; Stoler; Spivak; Chakrabarty; Mbembe; Chatterjee; Seth); and finally, that capitalism was organized right from the outset by what thinkers such as Robinson and Quijano have called a “racial division of labor,” my purpose is simply to reaffirm the constitutive role of colonialism in the rise of capitalist modernity itself and, therefore, its intrinsic planetary and dislocated dimension.

When the self-celebratory Western narrative of “capitalist modernity” as an entirely “closed entity,” a “geo-body named Europe” (Gilroy, *Against Race* 57), is replaced with that of “colonial capitalist modernity” and “racial capitalism” (Robinson)—to stress the constitutive overlap of race and class in the historical development of modern world capitalism—the question is, what were the effects of this global system on Italian culture, politics, and economy? We need to think how this global process was materially translated inside the Italian national boundaries. De-provincializing modern Italian history in this way will show that what makes Italy a postcolonial country—like in many other cases—is the combination of all the enunciations mentioned above. These represent a set of (trans)national features and processes, which should be thought of as historically connected and not as randomly occurring and overlapping events in the Italian social space (Goldberg).

To summarize, what still needs to be done is to dislocate modern Italian history—particularly the nation-building process—and put it back into the global

context of what Peruvian postcolonial theorist Anibal Quijano has called “the coloniality of modern capitalist power”:

What is termed globalization is the culmination of a process that began with the constitution of America and colonial/modern Eurocentred capitalism as a new global power. One of the fundamental axes of this model of power is the social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race, a mental construction that expresses the basic experience of colonial domination and pervades the more important dimensions of global power, including its specific rationality: Eurocentrism. The racial axis has a colonial origin and character, but it has proven to be more durable and stable than the colonialism in whose matrix it was established. Therefore, the model of power that is globally hegemonic today presupposes an element of coloniality. (283)

Quijano’s phrase condenses effectively two powerful assumptions disseminated throughout current critical theory not only by recent critical work on the genealogies of race (Omi and Winant; Goldberg; Allen; Young; Dussel; Hannaford; Gilroy, *Against Race*; Roediger, *The Wages, How Race Survived*) but also by many classics of modern thought like José Carlos Mariategui, Eric Voegelin, W. E. B. Du Bois (*Black Reconstruction, The World and Africa*), Aimé Césaire, and Hannah Arendt: (a) the concept of race, at least in its biological-cultural-supremacist meaning, emerged with the rising of colonial-capitalist modernity; (b) it is not possible to consider the global spreading of capitalist modernity throughout the world without regard to its underlying coloniality (i.e., regardless of race) and therefore its intrinsic racialization processes and racialized systems of domination.

Stressing this undertheorization in emergent Italian postcolonial studies of what can be called “the coloniality of the Italian national formation” may be extremely significant in the wake of the official 150th anniversary celebration of Italy’s unification (1861). Taking as a necessary (postcolonial) starting point the underlying coloniality of—past and present—national formations, namely their necessary material inscription within the coloniality of modern global capitalist power, means arguing that race, racism, and racialization have fractured the Italian national space ever since the birth of the nation. It is not possible to understand contemporary Italian racism against postcolonial migrants, namely contemporary racialization processes of international migration within the national space, without taking into account the cultural, political, and economic construction (i.e., the role within historical Italian capitalism) of its main predecessors: historical racism against the southerner and the colonial Other (during the early liberal and Fascist period), the Jew (in the later Fascist period), and the southern migrant worker (in the second postwar republic).

This does not mean underestimating the specificity of contemporary logics of capitalist accumulation. It implies, however, that contemporary processes of racialization are mainly supported and enhanced by a racist and civilizationist signifying chain, which colonial and imperial national memory still renders highly interpellant: the cultural codification and stratification of Western colonialism, antisouthern racism, and imperialism in the governmental technologies of the

(Italian) national self allow racialization to reemerge every time as a viable economic and political response to capital demands and capitalist crisis. Thus, in a way, the coloniality of the Italian national formation prepared the terrain for the contemporary racialization of international migration. Since it is grounded on the ceaseless proliferation of postcolonial borders, the current European citizenship-building process (Balibar; Isin) is fueling and mobilizing (instead of weakening) what can be called the colonial unconscious of the Italian national “structures of feeling” (Williams) both in its cultural and economic dimensions.

However, it is only by de-provincializing Italian modern history that its coloniality can be brought into light to reveal all its constitutive symbolic and material violence, and that institutional, scientific, and popular racism against southern people—a constituent feature of the historical nation-building process—can emerge as a local translation of the coloniality of global modern capitalist power. In sum, de-provincializing modern Italian history means casting the shadow of race and racialization over the very act of foundation of the Italian modern nation.

This is why the terms “race” and “racialization” are here used to describe past and present Italian racist interpellations. These terms are almost absent from the Italian lexicon of social, historical, cultural, and political studies. Indeed, they are strongly resisted by the many different voices of the whole Italian antiracist movement. Nonetheless, it is time to enrich and complicate the antiracist debate in Italy by introducing the notions of “race” and “racialization” into its agenda. However, this is a difficult task, given the ambivalent status of racism and race in the politics of national memory.

### Foreclosing Race and Racism

One of the main difficulties in developing the project of de-provincializing Italy is what I shall call the “foreclosure of race and racism” within Italian postwar culture.

Although this psychoanalytical term is used here in its original Lacanian meaning, my starting point is Gayatri Spivak’s idea about the foreclosure of the “native informant” from the great texts of modern Western culture. As Spivak clarifies, all the great founding texts of modern Western culture take for granted “that the ‘European’ is the human norm and offers us descriptions and/or prescriptions. And yet, even there, the native informant is needed and foreclosed. In Kant, he is needed as the example for the heteronomy of the determinant, to set off the autonomy of the reflexive judgement, which allows freedom for the rational will; in Hegel, as evidence for the spirit’s movement from the unconscious to consciousness; in Marx, as that which bestows normativity upon the narrative of the modes of production” (6). It is obvious that even though Spivak mobilizes here the ethnographic trope of the “native informant,” what the great texts of the Western tradition have foreclosed, allowing the process of “Worlding of a World” (Spivak) to display itself as the materialization of a (colonial) philosophy of history, is the colonial Other. In Spivak’s postcolonial rereading of the Lacanian term—but we should say of the Lacanian theory of (Western) subjectivity—the “muted

letter” that invokes every single word—the “nonhistorical” trace that can evoke every single history—is not merely, as in Lacan, the *Name-of-the-Father* symbolic castration and the constitutive “absent fullness” of human subjectivity, but the foreclosure of the colonial Other. Oversimplifying, it is precisely the foreclosure of the colonial Other—its defensive rejection or expulsion from modern Western consciousness as “if the idea had never occurred to the ego at all” (Laplanche and Pontalis 169)—that has allowed the modern Western subject to emerge and narrate itself as “the name of Man” (Spivak 6).

It seems clear that foreclosure does not mean mere repression, as it is a self-defensive mechanism which, by expelling the signifier upon which it acts from the chain of signifiers (from culture, the symbolic, etc.), rejects the inscription itself. However, Spivak—following Lacan—warns us that “what has been foreclosed from the Symbolic reappears in the Real” (Spivak 5). The Real then—since it resists meaning and symbolization and thus can be neither spoken nor written nor represented—bears unavoidably and psychotically the mark (the trace) of that (violent) expulsion. In sum, what has been foreclosed—the “master signifier” that structures the whole signifying system and the social order itself—can return to the subject only from outside or in the form of deliriums, hallucinations, and other pathologies of this kind.

Drawing from Spivak (via Lacan), I will argue that (a) race and racism have been foreclosed from the current Italian public/intellectual sphere; (b) this phenomenon is intricately tied up with the historical Italian postfascist inability to mourn (Mitscherlicht and Mitscherlicht; Mellino, “Italy and Postcolonial Studies”); (c) the foreclosure of race and racism works as a necessary supplement to the increasing racialization of the Italian present national formation; and finally (d) it is only by assuming racialization as a *fundamental signifier* within the Italian contemporary social space—what Lacan has called an “operator of social meaning”—that it can become easier to de-provincialize Italy’s modern history and culture and to bring its dominant self-representation as a European nation back to race as *the* Western master discourse (Spivak; Quijano).

Focusing on some of the most recent racist aggressions in Italy and on reactions to them (expressed by social agents as well as by mainstream media and political discourses) is the best way to tackle the argument. Although nowadays there is in Italy an increasing level of intolerance at work against any kind and class of migrant people (but mainly against Muslims, gypsies, and Romanians), these symbolic and material aggressions are hardly ever recognized in the public sphere as either racist acts or popular racism, or as driven by any of the many forms and discourses of institutional racism.

Just a few examples. In October 2010, a Romanian woman was killed by an Italian man in a subway station in Rome, following the escalation of an argument they had while waiting in line. The man pushed the woman, who hit her head on the ground. He was arrested on a charge of murder. As soon as he was arrested, he apologized saying that he did not intend to kill the woman. In his neighborhood, many of his friends publicly stated their solidarity with him in the media, arguing that he was offended and challenged by the woman: needless to say that their concerns were highly influenced by popular racist conceptions and stereotypes of

Romanian migrants. The case became a *cause celebre* with right-wing politicians (mainly from Berlusconi's Party and others very close to the mayor of Rome), who demanded his release claiming that it was an accident. The minister of justice himself (from the Lega Nord Party) declared that this "incident" had nothing to do with racism: it was only a banal argument ending badly. The institutional and popular racist implications of this story can be directly inferred just by inverting the roles and by imagining what would have happened if the murderer had been a Romanian man and the victim an Italian woman.

In 2006, in the city of Padua, the local center-left government decided to build a wall (80 meters long, 3 meters high) to enclose a big public housing complex inhabited almost exclusively by migrant people. The purpose was clearly to divide the "migrant zone" from the rest of the "Italian" neighborhood and to facilitate the policing of this population, allegedly responsible for the high rates of mugging, crime, and drug dealing that, from the institutional point of view as well as that of local residents, were increasingly characterizing this city district. This scandalous decision was vigorously opposed by local and national antiracist networks. After the enclosure, the city mayor declared that his decision had nothing to do with racism, discrimination, or intolerance, as it was prompted by the necessity to maintain public order. He invited migrant people to leave the housing complex so that urban and social improvements could be initiated, but as soon as migrants left, the building was walled up to prevent any further "illegal" occupation. The whole complex is now empty.

Moreover, recent pogroms of migrant workers and of the Italian Roma community (in Naples and Padua), the brutal killing of six African people near Naples by the camorra, and the firing of shots at African agricultural workers by local employers in the small town of Rosarno in Calabria—an incident that led to one of the most important "black riots" in Italy—went unrecognized in the mainstream media and political discourses as racist attacks (see Derobertis and Romeo in this volume). Explicitly racist local and national policies faithfully promoted by the Lega Nord Party are usually described by mainstream broadcasters or opinion makers as "normal" symptoms of human xenophobia. In one of his most famous books, Giovanni Sartori, a political scientist close to the Center-Left and columnist of the Italian newspaper *Corriere della sera*, maintained that it is quite mistaken to consider the Lega Nord as a racist party because it is rather the expression of what he calls "local normal xenophobia," that is "fear of strangers or foreigners" (116), a natural feeling common to all humankind. It is therefore not surprising that in 2009 the national government passed a set of laws concerning public safety which introduced the crime of illegality (*reato di clandestinità*) for undocumented migrants.<sup>4</sup> One of the articles, if passed, would have required public employers (in hospitals, schools, etc.) to denounce undocumented people soliciting public services. Moreover, it would have promoted private surveillance of public spaces by local residents with the goal to report suspicious activities and behaviors to the police and to local institutions.

What happens then when racism or racist behaviors are reduced to the logic of other kinds of social actions and phenomena? More precisely, what happens when explicit racist practices (including racist attacks or murders) are deconstructed

and translated by social agents, the media, and mainstream political discourses as simply problems of labor, housing, migration, identity, economic circumstances, crime, or natural xenophobia?

This is the most evident symptom of both the foreclosure of race and racism on the Italian scene and the increasing racialization of its contemporary social fabric. It is not difficult to assume that this foreclosure is telling us quite the opposite: nowadays in Italy most of the main social conflicts, especially with the deepening of the global economic crisis, are expressing themselves only in racial and racist terms. The foreclosure of race and racism is what makes racialization materially possible—as economic and discursive violence—and racism culturally unthinkable—the impossibility of considering racist behaviors as such also by people who represent themselves as nonracist. More precisely, given the particular historical configuration of Italian postfascist culture, characterized, as we shall see, by the complete removal of Italian colonialism as well as by an ambivalent mitigation of the fascist criminal experience, the more evident the racial material constitution of Italian society becomes, the more violent its discursive foreclosure will be, both within and outside the institutional domain.

On the Italian scene, therefore, race and racism could emerge as fundamental signifiers, that is, as key “operators” of social meaning, practice, and subjectivity, only through (a) the “implosive violence” generated by episodes of “ethnic punitive anxiety” (Appadurai) like those described above, driven by what I define (still following the Lacanian concept of foreclosure) as “racial collective deliriums and hallucinations,” or, alternatively, (b) by the political pressure or enunciations of racialized outsider subjects.

### The (Postfascist) Inability to Mourn

Echoing Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlicht’s classical analysis of post-Nazi Germany, it could be argued that the foreclosure of race and racism from the current Italian cultural and political scene is intricately tied up with a postfascist “inability to mourn.” This has its main roots in the oblivion of the Italian colonial experience and a kind of *ambivalent* mitigation of fascism itself with both simultaneous caricaturization and increasing romanticized sanitization.

Although, as indicated above, an important tradition of critical studies on Italian colonial expansion has established itself in recent years, the question of colonial memory has been foreclosed from the Italian public sphere. Despite an increasing number of postcolonial texts stressing this Italian colonial amnesia, the general public and the intellectual sphere still seem to be impermeable. Apart from some sporadic discussion, there has been no serious public debate on the issue, and critical historical research on Italian colonialism in Africa has been subjected to numerous attacks every time it has cropped up outside the academic area. As historian Nicola Labanca suggests,

It is not just some specific historical questions that have aroused controversy, but the history of colonial expansion in general. There is an embargo in public opinion

and, more generally, in the press and in the media, against free and critical historical research on Italian colonialism. This critical historical research has been accused of denigrating the activities of “italiani brava gente.” This accusation has been made several times recently: in the mid-1980s preemptively against a work by Michael Palumbo on Italian war crimes, which in the end was not published; at the end of the 1980s against the circulation of the television documentary *Fascist Legacy*, and in the mid-1990s on the question of gassing. Even though historical research has been the most important victim, it should be mentioned that the sensitivity of the extreme defenders of the honor of Italian colonialism became particularly anxious when this research reached some popular appeal and when the formation of public opinion was at stake (or so it was feared). This was particularly evident in the case of the American film (partially financed by Libya) *The Lion of the Desert* (1979) [sic] about the struggle of Omar al Mukhtar and Italian repression, which was banned, and which to this day is shown only in private viewings, almost in secret. (462)<sup>5</sup>

Thus, apart from certain specialized sectors, the outlines of Italian colonialism seem still vague and undefined to most people, like a shadowy zone occupied by myths and subject to powerful distortions. The fact that Italy too (before and during Fascism) killed in the name of the superiority of the Western race and civilization or in the name of its Latin or Mediterranean identity is completely removed from contemporary collective “cognitive maps” (Jameson). The predominant collective attitude toward the colonial past has been indulgent and self-absolving.

The roots of this collective state of mind can be traced back to the so-called de-fascistization of fascism (Gentile) that has increasingly characterized Italian postwar culture. This process of “de-fascistization” was promoted from within by the postwar Italian political and cultural élites and from abroad by US geostrategic pressures, and it has found one of its most important supporters in historical revisionist writing (mainly by Renzo De Felice’s reinterpretation of fascist experience, which remained dominant in Italian historiography until the late 1980s). The main scope of this operation was to reduce the political trauma and liabilities arising from the deep involvement of most of the (now) Republican postfascist ruling classes in the fascist experience. It is from this starting point that fascism began to be de-fascistized, that is, increasingly purified through minimization and caricature of its most sinister and violent features, notably its constitutive murderous, racial, supremacist, and genocidal ideology. At the core of this self-absolving reinterpretation were some of the most popular assumptions promoted by De Felice’s writings (*Storia degli ebrei, Mussolini il duce*). Since there is no trace of racism in the fascist experience before Nazism, it is even quite logical to conclude that fascist racial anti-Semitic laws (1938) were adopted mainly because of pressure from Hitler and therefore racial anti-Semitic ideology was something *not* intrinsic to the nature of the Italian fascist experience. Given these premises, fascism began to be increasingly separated (as if it was a radically different experience) from the only real “absolute evil” of history, that is from (a rather deracinated version of) Nazism, and the Italian racial state (and experience) approached and studied as a mere break from the rest of Italian history. In sum, postfascist “de-fascistization”

of Italian fascism has promoted a self-absolving and indulgent deracialization of the whole Italian history.

It should be added that the atmosphere of historical revisionism and national reconciliation that has been pervasive in the country since the fall of the Berlin wall, and which tends to place the combatants of the fascist Republic of Salò and the antifascist partisan struggle on the same plane in the name of national identity and pride, has nothing but further strengthened the process of removal of the colonial experience.

This particular postcolonial condition could partly explain why postcolonial studies is still perceived as not directly relevant to Italian history and identity. More importantly, it explains the reason why bitter questions such as the Italian historical involvement in the Western idea of race and Western colonial racism have been foreclosed from postwar Italian culture. It is difficult to find any significant theoretical debate on racism anywhere in Italian intellectual history, or on its role in the formation of the modern Italian nation. It seems as if racism, even in Marxist or left-wing perspectives, is never considered as anything more than a transitory or contingent effect of other social phenomena. In sum, racism has no significant place in Italian self-reflection about its own history.<sup>6</sup> This tells us that, although the postfascist inability to mourn may be an important factor underlying the foreclosure of race from the national public sphere, its roots can be traced back to the time of the nation-building process itself, that is, to the Western modern foreclosure of the colonial Other.

### **Racialization and the Postcolonial (Counter)Politics of Memory**

What does racialization mean, and why propose race as a key term to challenge contemporary racism and racist violence in Italy? Racialization, first of all, stands for the material effects of the imbrication of capital with (fictitious and ill-founded) Western discourses of race both on social spaces and gendered social bodies and subjectivities. More precisely, by racialization I mean the effect on the social fabric of a multiplicity of institutional and noninstitutional practices and discourses oriented toward a hierarchical representation of physical and cultural—real and imaginary—differences and hence the disciplining of their material and intersubjective relationships. In overly simple terms, the concept of racialization, since it is highly saturated with the disturbing colonial and imperial legacy of race, is more suitable than others imbued with more neutral meanings (such as ethnicization or multiculturalism) when it comes to describing the economic and cultural processes of essentialization, discrimination, inferiorization, and segregation, to which certain groups are submitted in the Italian and European social space nowadays. Moreover, within the specific Italian scenario, given the foreclosure in the public sphere of historical national involvement in the making of current Western racial thinking (e.g., as the well-celebrated cradle of Renaissance and humanistic European culture itself), racialization may work as a powerful signifier in recalling the colonial heritage of the nation-building process and its hegemonic cultural narrations and self-identifications.



More precisely, in Lacanian terms, naming contemporary Italian racist interpellations (through political struggles as well as theoretical practices) by the signifiers of race and racialization unavoidably entails an extremely disruptive “counter-politics of memory” directed against what can be called the alleged natural organization of the meaning “operators” and their rules (Alemán 55). In sum, it is only by assuming race as a master discourse and hence as an open and changeable political signifier—a kind of political “surplus” or “gap” (Rancière)—that it becomes possible to recognize both the present class composition of contemporary Italian capitalism and its main forms of political recomposition, that is, the practices and movements of anti-institutional subjectivization of the last few years (the struggles of migrants, students, knowledge workers, and precarious workers) aimed not merely at the achievement of some kind of identity or race politics but mainly at what Hardt and Negri have called “the production of the common.”

In the present Italian context, with all this historical background in mind, it does not seem difficult to understand why racist interpellations—and the development of the contemporary populist securitarian state and society—must be interrogated as a response to the increasing disorder driven by neoliberal deregulation and the cultural transformation of Italian society in the last twenty years (especially with the deepening of the global economic crisis). Following Michel Foucault’s main argument in *Society Must Be Defended*, by racism (and racialization) I do not mean here merely “a simple product of an ideological operation by which the state or dominant classes are seeking to concentrate on a mythical enemy the social animosity and virulence that otherwise might be directed towards them or can afflict in an uncontrollable way the social body” (168). It seems self-evident that contemporary Italian racism cannot be considered as the effect of trivial political fabrication or as a result of mere ideological deceit aimed (only) at the production of different kinds of “scapegoats.” Racism, we could say in Fanon’s words, is always about “material violence and domination” (*Towards the African Revolution* 43) or, drawing from David Roediger’s reading of Michel Foucault’s work, it stands for a specific technology of government which has its political roots in the rising of capitalism as a world (colonial) system and hence in the configuration of modern biopower devices (Fanon, *Racism and Culture*; Roediger, *How Race Survived*).

It goes without saying that contemporary Italian racist interpellations have as their aim not only the strengthening of that state of permanent exception (“bare life,” in Agamben’s popular definition), which is always essential to the violent self-definition of the national political community, but the differential inclusion or incorporation of migrant labor in the national labor market. It is clear that this labor market segmentation supports and reinforces the racialization of social and urban spaces as well as of government practices. Fully permeated by populist and securitization discourses, this segmentation involves what we can call—turning back to Roediger’s work on racialization and migration in the United States—“racial and security management” of migration, national population, and citizenship with the aim of mobilizing cultural, gender, and race difference only to further capitalist valorization (Roediger, *How Race Survived*).

However, to avoid the conflation of the concept of racialization with that of labor market segmentation, it is necessary to reassert the fact that, what makes possible the material constitution of “racial management” as a political response to capitalist crises possible is precisely the “politics of memory”: the cultural codification and stratification of colonialism, slavery, and imperialism, as well as of the anticolonial struggles against racial hierarchization. In fact, it could be argued that the national “politics of memory” works always as the (main) “habit of hegemony” (Alemán 55). Focusing then on race and racialization as social colonial discourses and practices, and as contemporary master signifiers in the Italian (and European) social space, may be a necessary step to de-provincialize Italian capitalism and its modern (racist) history.

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## Notes

1. These writings are extremely heterogeneous in their theoretical approaches, not always openly identified as postcolonial, and mostly authored, not surprisingly, by scholars working abroad or in alternative and isolated niches within the Italian academic system.
2. I am referring to that strain of critical historical studies on Italian colonialism developed mainly by Giorgio Rochat, Angelo Del Boca (*L'Africa nella coscienza; Italiani brava gente?*), Nicola Labanca, Enzo Collotti, Eric Salerno, and Enzo Traverso.
3. See also the special issue of *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* titled *Colonial and Postcolonial Italy*, edited by Fabrizio De Donno and Neelam Srivastava, and the special issue of *Zapruder* titled *Brava gente. Memoria e rappresentazioni del colonialismo italiano*.
4. The “*pacchetto sicurezza*” is a special set of security laws enacted by the Berlusconi government in 2009 in order to “contrast those phenomena of diffused criminality highly linked to illegal immigration and organized crime” (as it is sanctioned by the law itself).
5. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
6. Two notable exceptions are Alberto Burgio’s *L’invenzione delle razze* and, above all, *Nel nome della razza*. However, Burgio’s underestimation of events such as the “discovery” of America, colonialism, and slavery in the configuration of both world capitalism and the modern idea of race, as well as his conception of Italian (and French) traditional racism as “racism without races” (*Nonostante Auschwitz* 141), and therefore still exceptionalist in its quality and range, appear quite problematic (and most of all Eurocentric) for a postcolonial analysis of Italian history.

Part II

**Shared Memories,  
Contested Proximities**

# Hidden Faces, Hidden Histories

## Contrasting Voices of Postcolonial Italy

*Alessandro Triulzi*

Postcolonial Italy is characterized today by contrasting voices coming from different corners of society. For the first time since the end of the short-lived African Empire (1936–41), a number of Italian writers are using the colonial setting in their work as a way to explore new literary genres within the frame of what is called “the new Italian epic” (Wu Ming 1–10; Pincio 13).<sup>1</sup> Parallel to this, and in contrast to it, a growing number of African Italian authors and second-generation African migrants, mainly coming from the Horn but living in Italy and writing in Italian, are producing the first specimen of an impressive postcolonial literature that reflects the contradictory facets of the fast-changing multicultural setup of the country. While these contrasting voices mark the present literary and sociocultural scene, they also appear to test in different ways Italy’s willingness to cope with her colonial past and postcolonial present. Furthermore, testimonies by recent refugees and asylum seekers from the Horn of Africa bear witness to the current plight of African migrants within Italian society and reflect the iniquities and contradictions of the descendants of old colonial subjects living in the former metropole. By analyzing these contrasting voices, I will discuss some of the contradictory aspects of multicultural Italy and the difficulties of sharing a meaningful present in today’s increasingly mixed Italian society. I will also show how migrant voices in particular, fraught as they are with painful silences and denunciations of past and present wrongs, reflect the growing difficulty of African migrants to expose the inhuman condition they suffer both at home and in their new country of residence.

I will start with a documentary film and a graphic novel, two unorthodox but significant narratives of postcolonial Italy today. *Come un uomo sulla terra* (Like a Man on Earth, 2008) is a documentary film on Ethiopian migrants recounting



their long journey to Italy through desert and sea mainly employing personal memories. It is a collective work conducted by a mixed team of Ethiopian youths and Italian volunteers led by an Italian filmmaker, Andrea Segre, and by Dagmawi Yimer, an Ethiopian migrant who was trained as a video maker through a project of archiving migrant memories initiated in 2007 around the *Asinitas* school for migrants based in Rome.<sup>2</sup> *Volto Nascosto* (Hidden Face) is a graphic novel reconstructing the adventurous lore of Italian Africa under the guise of a cartoon strip. It was written by Gianfranco Manfredi, a prolific Italian screenwriter, novelist, and musician for Sergio Bonelli, one of the most prominent cartoon publishers in Italy, and it narrates a story of love and adventure set in Ethiopia and Eritrea, and also in Rome, during the colonial period. Both narratives, which employ images rather than words, were circulating in Italy at the end of 2008, when the repressive anti-migrant “security package” was put forward for debate by the Berlusconi government to the Italian Parliament and finally passed the following summer.<sup>3</sup> Forceful and engaging as visual documents, these two texts clearly aimed at different layers of Italian society: the documentary film derived its impetus from a wide-ranging distribution campaign by a militant social network mostly composed of young people and human rights groups who adopted the film as an icon of the migrant condition in the country; the graphic novel was aimed at younger readers but ended up receiving wider acclaim by veteran families, older age groups, and established military institutions (Triulzi, *Storie e leggende* 90). For the purpose of my argument I will analyze the subtext of these two narratives as they exemplify in many ways the contrast under study.

*Come un uomo sulla terra* is a collective act of testimony against the migrants’ country of origin, Ethiopia, where “judges are put to prison for their judging,” and against the exploitative and corrupt conditions surrounding the migrants’ heading north across the Sahara in the hands of unscrupulous middlemen colluded with local authorities and security agents. Widely distributed and discussed after it received several prizes in Italy and abroad, the film became the visual icon of the protest against the repressive policies of both the Libyan and Italian governments and the exploitation and expulsion of irregular African migrants.<sup>4</sup> It was also a formative group experience, with enthusiasm and solidarity prevailing over resources and equipment: the lieu of narration and listening of the migrants’ testimonies was the kitchen of the *Asinitas* school in Rome, a bare, functional place where food and words mingled together and migrants’ sores were healed, their pain and dreams acknowledged, and the first rudiments of the Italian language taught by using the migrants’ own narrations and recollections. As in similar cases (Salvatici 15–51), narration was used as a way to go back to, and connect with, “home” in inner thoughts, feelings, and memories; narrating thus helped recreate a possible verbal home in the foreign surroundings, the only possible way to link together the “here and there” of the migrants (Sayad 12).

Yet the narrative experience went further. Migrants’ testimonies, particularly those by sub-Saharan people, are to be considered in many ways “survivor” narratives: their trekking through forest, desert, and sea to reach the southern European shores is in itself a survivor’s achievement, one for which irregular migrants who “make it” are, in Primo Levi’s words, either “drowned” or “saved.” Those who make

it only do so at tremendous human, psychological, and physical cost and, like war, genocide or drought survivors, they often come back voiceless, as did the war survivors described by Walter Benjamin in the 1930s (235). The video further shows that migrant narrations, as in Jedlowski (*Il racconto* 16), are not quite unspeakable as they are “un-audible,” the “migratory experience” being transmittable only to those who have shared it, or those who accept to share it through continued empathy and care. Thus the “speaking out” of the migrants, when it occurs through persuasion and internal self-awareness, is a consciously voiced testimony that is made possible by a listening context, which makes the actual reenacting of the experience the only possible way to elaborate it and transmit it to others.

This was the basic challenge of *Come un uomo sulla terra*, a collective work of social protest that made the Italian public aware of the gross human rights violations perpetrated against the migrants en route from the Horn of Africa and of the unholy Italian-Libyan alliance to prevent their coming through these countries’ borders.<sup>5</sup> The fact that several migrants came from the Horn of Africa—the old AOI (*Africa Orientale Italiana*)—via another ex-colonial possession (Libya) acting as a gendarme for the former metropole, obviously struck a sensitive cord in the amnesic memory of the colonial period both among the migrants and the Italian public.

To young migrants from the Horn, Italy is a barely remembered former metropole hazily suspended in collective memories made of mixed feelings and expectations. The initial benevolence, and even gratitude, toward the hosting country granting temporary refugee status soon disappears, however, as the migrants come to experience the inefficient and often racist structures of identification centers<sup>6</sup> and their alienating procedures. Somali youths detained in an asylum-seeker center near Rome told Dagmawi Yimer of their bitter delusion after arriving in Italy:

Our grandfathers told us that the Italians were good people, as they had known them in the past. We heard this with our own ears, and this is why we came to Italy. When we arrived here, we found something different (Doolii).

I arrived here, in Lampedusa, after crossing the sea. I was hooked out from the sea just like a fish. When I arrived in Rome, they gave me a plateful of spaghetti and said *buon appetito*. That was all (Aweis).

The Italian welcome can be summarized in one word, *buon appetito*. After landing, they took me to this center where I am staying now. Life is very difficult here. I expected to find a future in this country, instead they only give you a place where you can sleep and eat, *buon appetito*, after which you are left on your own. I have crossed the whole city looking for something to do. We Somali have a proverb, *qooro lusho aa qeyrka ku jira* (“only dangling testicles give you peace”), meaning that people need to move, to do things. In other European countries they give you a traveling card that allows you to go around. Here it is only *buon appetito* and nothing else (Abubakar).<sup>7</sup>

It was when similar testimonies were being collected in Italy that *Volto Nascosto* started appearing in newspaper kiosks at regular intervals. The clash between the two Italies being publicly represented was striking, although only a few appeared to be aware of it. *Volto Nascosto* was announced by Sergio Bonelli as a comic strip adventure series set against the background of Italy’s first colonial campaign

ending with the Battle of Adwa (1896).<sup>8</sup> The extended graphic novel, written by one of the publisher's best authors, Gianfranco Manfredi, was the first of its kind explicitly set in Italian Africa since the end of World War II. In announcing the series, the publisher claimed that it was Manfredi himself, under "pressure from his readers," who convinced him "to explore a period neglected by cartoonists until now."<sup>9</sup> After reminding his readers that the historical background of colonial wars was set merely to depict "an adventure of pure fantasy," Gianfranco Manfredi reassured them about the historical accuracy of his reconstruction. Thus a short historical section, titled "800," prefaced each volume, allowing the author to "footnote" carefully his African adventures by providing "relevant" bibliographic references in each installment.<sup>10</sup>

Combining journalistic accounts with scholarly interpretations, Manfredi's work creates heroic figures that fit quite well into the new postcolonial Italian imaginary. The plot revolves around four main characters: Ugo Pastore, a peace-loving trader disdainful of colonial hierarchy and mentality; his friend Vittorio De Cesari, a valiant military officer who trains local cadres to become loyal *ascari* troops; Matilde Sereni, a young woman of aristocratic descent who is the object of rivalry between them; and *Volto Nascosto* (Hidden Face), a mysterious silver-masked hero, a hard-headed Muslim who, somewhat improbably, allies himself with the very Christian Empress Taitu, Menelik's wife, who was historically the active soul of Ethiopian resistance to the Italian expansion in the region (Longobardi 61–63).

A mixture of convoluted love affairs and politico-military intrigues animates the colonial scenario and the metropolitan backstage following the ever-growing political ambiguity of the young Italian state, its bureaucratic inefficiency and military muscle flexing in the newly acquired colony. A rather restrained and hazy exoticism, coupled with brisk attention toward the social and economic conditions of the time, provides the historical background to the first Afro-Italian war and gives a realistic touch to the drawings, dialogues, and suspense of the underlying colonial adventure (Jedlowski, "La memoria"). No doubt Italian cartoon lovers must have enjoyed the colonial saga detailing love, intrigues, and military exploits set in a fictional Italian Africa made of military ambitions, loyal *ascari*, and Muslim fundamentalists. The graphic scenario for the renewed colonial encounter of postcolonial Italy is thus set in motion in a fictitious yet half-real tone which carefully avoids the country's troubled memory of the colonial past. As in similar revivals of colonial memories celebrating the "epic" of *ascari* troops,<sup>11</sup> the word "colonialism" is hardly ever used in *Volto Nascosto*, and both Italians and Ethiopians are portrayed as free, adventure-seeking individuals, caught in a drama they appear to be largely unaware of, casually ending up either as heroes or victims in the bloody yet unchallenged imperial game.

Manfredi's exploit was not an isolated case. In a much similar vein, and roughly at the same time, Carlo Lucarelli, a well-known author of detective stories, journalist, and TV personality, added to the growing enthusiasm for the "New Italian Epic" a bestselling thriller titled *L'ottava vibrazione* (2008), set in a baroquely painted yet decaying colonial society of pre-Adwa Eritrea. Here again, brilliant writing and exotic imagination dominate the "historical" reconstruction of Eritrea. As the boat

lands in Massawa at the beginning of the novel to disembark recruits and provisions for the forthcoming military campaign in the Ethiopian highlands, the reader is introduced to a gallery of odd characters who represent a casual patchwork of the recently united Italian people and of their newly created overseas frontier. Soldiers and officers speak different dialects, over-zealous *Carabinieri* and power-hungry military officers lash out at disoriented local recruits, corrupt bureaucrats and “nervy” unscrupulous women compete for favors and attention in the public arena. The well-written novel was an immediate bestseller, purposely filling its readers with emotion and suspense. Yet, the image it conveys of Eritrea and its inhabitants closely resembles nineteenth-century oleograph images of early colonial photography, a clear source of inspiration for both Manfredi and Lucarelli. Local inhabitants act merely as backdrops to the tragic unfolding of an all-Italian story. Native women are depicted either as informal wives (*madame*) of military officers or as prostitutes: like Aicha, *la cagna nera* (“the black bitch”), who walks about entirely naked throughout the novel to attract the attention of white men. Native men are either *ascari* (indigenous troops), *zaptié* (local *Carabinieri*), or colonial clerks: the colonial setup of Italian Africa appears to be a restrictive yet transgressive field of human engagement. Clearly, Italy’s overseas carried far more rights and fewer obligations than the motherland, and offered privileged status to the colonizers, even though many were poor workers or peasants from the homeland (Labanca, *Oltremare* 390–411; Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 3; Andall and Duncan, *National Belongings* 5).

It is *this* overseas that yesterday attracted lost souls and imperious men to the Italian colony in search of power and success and today invites new forms of nostalgic visions for the old freedom and institutional lure of the old colonies and their inhabitants. It is this “pining for Africa” (the so-called *mal d’Africa*) that is being revived, or revealed, in Italy today by such works, appearing quite paradoxically at the same time that irregular ex-colonials and would-be refugees from the old colonial empire are being rejected and expelled from Italian society. Asked by Alessandro Baricco why he set his new novel in Italian Africa, Lucarelli gave the following answer:

I had it in mind for a long time, I don’t know why. You know the way it happens, maybe you see a movie, a video, a postcard. Then an image came to my mind: a horseman with plumes and a spear on the ridge of a canyon, facing a red sun, being pursued by a soldier holding a sword. It could be *Fort Apache* or a film by John Ford; yet, if the horseman were a Galla instead of a Sioux, and the soldier an Italian rather than a blue jacket, the scene would be exactly the same, equally exotic, equally contradictory. I asked myself why I know everything about [General] Custer at Little Big Horn, and know nothing of Adwa, for example. We too have a Far West in our history which allows us to narrate adventurous metaphors. Colonial Italy is one of our Far Wests. (Baricco)

Indeed, *Volto Nascosto* and *L’ottava vibrazione* run both like western movies and ask for enthralled and ecstatic reading. It is no wonder, then, that the imaginary Africa they portray is quite different from the one presented by *Come un uomo sulla terra*: the first two represent a white world of *machismo* and adventure, of lost love and

renewed ambitions for glory, while the second exposes migrants' testimonies and their continuing suffering and abused human condition. *L'ottava vibrazione* portrays a strongly Italo-centric Africa, that is, one seen from the point of view of its ex-masters and playing with the "epic" genre to stimulate the Italian public's desires and fantasies rather than knowledge. The current "return" of Ethiopia and Eritrea to public attention under the aegis of the so-called *New Italian Epic* appears to be a reaction to a disillusioned Italian society fighting against the declining economic power and political identity of the nation by setting in motion dreams and fantasies bred during the colonial period (Vogliano 5). These are revived today from a no-less invented Italian Africa and its undiminished nostalgic aura.

Hidden memories of Italy's colonial past thus reemerge in various forms at present and, quietly but forcefully, provide a new arena for the heated debates over the country's destiny, past and future. The juxtaposition of different visions of the African Other and of its ambiguous interface with the metropolitan "natives" does raise the question however of such contrasting and even opposed voices surfacing at the same time within Italian society. Is the colonial amnesia of the country being suddenly lifted, or is it simply nostalgia for the old citizen-subject relationship? Are these colonial "returns" the visible signs of a changing country aware of its new multicultural identity, or are the repressive policies against African migrants a sign of an enduring Italian unwillingness to come to terms with her postcolonial heritage and responsibilities?

The sudden outburst of a vibrant postcolonial literature written by African novelists from the Horn and African Italian authors residing in Italy is the most visible sign of the new trend (Kidané 2004; Scego 2004, 2008, 2010; Garane 2005; Ali Farah 2007; Ghermandi 2007). In less than five years, a significant group of African Italian authors of Somali, Eritrean, and Ethiopian descent have suddenly appeared on the Italian literary scene, winning prizes and recognition. For the first time, a wider and widely unaware Italian public is being told in its own language of the inextricable bundle of duplicities and sorrows which marked individual lives across the colonial divide.

The fact that the new African Italian postcolonial literature is mainly expressed by women writers allows unveiled glimpses into the "interiors" of the colonial interface and their outcome. Daily life under Italian colonial rule is openly recalled and exposed to an extent that no historical account has yet disclosed. When Gabriella Ghermandi's novel, *Regina di fiori e di perle* (Queen of Flowers and Pearls) appeared in 2007, it openly questioned the ambiguities of Italy's colonial memory. With her novel, a new insight into colonial history was proposed and redirected where it belonged, that is, at the center stage in the country's history. It is Mahlet, the young narrator of *Regina di fiori e di perle*, the little girl with a keen ear for the elders' narrations of their past, who is convinced by her uncle Yacob, an old patriot (*arbegna*) during the Italian occupation, to become the storyteller (*cantora*) of that troubled period: "You promise then in front of the Madonna of the icon. When you grow up, you will write my story, the story of those years, and you will take it to the country of the Italians, so that they will not forget" (57). At the end of the novel, which links together several stories of the ambiguous encounters and continued violence of the colonial period, she is reminded of the old promise

made to Jacob and concludes, “And this is why I’m telling you his story. Which is also mine. But it is yours as well” (251).

Asked by Daniele Comberiati how the Italian presence in Ethiopia affected her individual life, Ghermandi showed no hesitation. The daughter of an Italian trader and an Eritrean woman of mixed blood, this is how she represented her own condition:

My mother too was of mixed blood (*meticcia*), she never knew her father, my grandfather . . . in order to prevent us from suffering, she wanted to raise us as if we were Italians, even if we were absolutely not considered Italian. We were seen as *meticci* . . . they called me “the daughter of the white man,” but it was just a way to pinpoint me, not an insult . . . Still, the Italians ought to say “*mea culpa*” on the miscegenation issue, for people of mixed blood went through hell . . . Italian colonialism was horrendous, but what was missed too was the subsequent decolonization of Italian culture and society. When I wrote *Regina di fiori e di perle* I was driven by anger, especially toward those people who kept telling me “We built your roads, we built your schools. . . .” (Comberiati 144)

Clearly, what is at stake in Italian postcolonial literature is not only the memory of the Italian past but the political and cultural implications for the present. Interviewing nine writers of mixed African background—all women, all coming from the colonial world, all writing in Italian—Daniele Comberiati claims that the new authors coming from the ex-Italian colonies, who write and feel Italian in some way, whether by birth, choice, or mixed blood, are helping postcolonial Italy to decolonize and, indeed, to reformulate a new definition of Italianness (*italianità*). Alessandro Portelli has recently argued along the same line. Speaking about Ghermandi’s work, Portelli locates a revealing sense of belonging in Italian postcolonial literature that, in his view, should not be restricted to labels of “exoticism” or of mere “migrant” literature:

Instead these books and these tales *are* us. Italy makes no sense if we don’t feel them to be ours. The most exciting new development of recent times . . . is that the very idea of what it means to be Italian is changing in our hands. The book by Gabriella Ghermandi, as those by Cristina Ali Farah, Igiaba Scego or Ingy Mubiayi, help us understand how Italy is unfolding and what it has been in the past, and it is because of this, and not because they [these authors] write in Italian, that this is *Italian* literature in its own right. Not *an Other* with whom we have to confront ourselves, but an “us” in which to reflect ourselves. Italy is made up of what they tell us: our colonial history, our migrations, discriminations, encounters, what it means to be young and women in this tired country, its mixing of languages and voices. (18)

The context of the transmission of colonial memory in Italy is gradually changing together with its main language and forms of expression. In less than five years postcolonial writers in Italy are going to achieve what Italian authorities and scholars have been unable or unwilling to do throughout the postwar generation.

The testimony of young migrants from the Horn who have recently landed in Italy differs considerably from the literary representations so far discussed. My

experience in interviewing them has revealed that that survival and the rebuilding of their shattered selves are their main priorities, obsessed as they are by the hostile present, and by the dire condition at home which made them leave. As in Coker, their “traveling pains” (15) are embodied metaphors of suffering. This is why there is no interest or knowledge among the migrants coming from the Horn today about the more distant colonial past. What affects them, and what they understand as being “colonial,” are the experiences of social marginalization and bureaucratic arrogance of postindependence African governments and the indifference to their forced fate they find in the former metropole. Thus, structures of silence and displaced colonial memories are frequent *topoi* in migrant testimonies and recollections.

Recent enquiries among Eritreans and Ethiopian “illegal” migrants who arrived in Italy after crossing the Libyan desert in the hands of unscrupulous mediators, often of their own nationality, report the pain and humiliations of the “unspeakable” desert crossings: the debasing of humanity the migrants have to undergo to adapt to the illegal travel conditions, the continuous shuffling between official authorities and local smugglers, the forced calls home to beg for money in order to continue the endless journey to the Mediterranean and the no-less hazardous and costly sea crossing to Sicily: all this and a lot more add to the “illegal” migrants’ painful journey and their inability to structure it into a heroic narrative they can freely boast of, as the preceding generation of political exiles from the Horn had done.<sup>12</sup> Dagmawi Yimer, the Ethiopian codirector of *Come un uomo sulla terra*, ends the tale of his journey across the Sahara and the Mediterranean to reach the small island of Lampedusa, south of Sicily, 130 miles away from Libya, with the following words:

When we arrived in Lampedusa there were many tourists sea-bathing who looked at us in surprise. I was ashamed that they should see me barefoot and so skinny, but I was also happy. A new phase of my life was starting. . . . If I could go back in time, I don’t think I would set out on this journey again. At every step I cursed my government for having thrown away the lives of so many young people, forcing them to flee; I was ashamed to belong to a generation forced to run away from its own country. On the other hand, this journey isn’t comparable to the imprisonment I might have suffered in my country as a dissenter against the present government. If I compare this journey to being in prison, I realize that if you survive prison people look at you as a witness to the history of your country, while if you survive the journey you’re nothing, except yourself, you’re just one of those who left. This journey is a worse punishment than prison. (Yimer 351–52)

The intricate web of silences and voices surfacing from the live testimonies of African migrants from the Horn, and their merging with the long-unattended colonial memory of the country and its own migratory past, testifies to the unending reshuffling of the colonial/national question within Italian society, and to the “strike back” effect provided today by the new migrants’ “irregular” presence among us. Their voices and writings are striving too to come out of the enforced “clandestinity” of their, and our own, troubled present.

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1. Since 1999, under the collective pseudonym Wu Ming, the Italian publisher Einaudi has published several metahistorical novels referred to as Unidentified Narrative Objects (UNO). See <http://www.wumingfoundation.com>.
2. The school is run by the Rome-based nongovernmental organization Asinitas (see <http://www.asinitas.org>). The project of building an Archive of migrant memories (AMM-Archivio delle memorie migranti, now a self-standing national Association) using live testimonies, participatory videos, and multimedia productions to increase public awareness of migrant conditions in Italy is supported by Fondazione Lettera 27 and the Open Society Foundations.
3. The "security package" established illegal immigration as a crime: migrants defined as "illegal" were to be persecuted by law and expelled after identification. *Pacchetto sicurezza* Law 15 July 2009 n. 94 (Ddl 733-b).
4. The film was awarded three prizes at the Salina Doc Festival in September 2008. Since then it has received several more awards in Italy and abroad. In 2009, a book by the

- same title detailing the history of the film was distributed together with the DVD (Triulzi and Carsetti).
5. On August 30, 2008, Italy and Libya signed a Treaty of Friendship by which the latter promised to condone Italy's colonial wrongs under the payment of \$5 billion in "reparations," and by the building of a highway all along the Libyan coast. The treaty also stated that Libya would provide more petrol to Italy and would prevent illegal immigrants en route to Europe to come through its territory. The Italian Parliament ratified the Treaty on March 2, 2009. For an account of its impact on migrants, see Del Grande (75–110).
  6. Asylum seekers in Italy are kept in special receiving centers run by the Red Cross (CARA) while waiting for the decision by the authorities to grant them refugee status. All other migrants are detained in identification and expulsion centers (CIE) where they can be kept up to six months. In the CARA center of Castelnuovo di Porto, near Rome, Dagmawi Yimer filmed a second video (*CARA Italia* 2009) detailing the "life in waiting" of a group of asylum seekers from Somalia. See <http://caraitalia.blogspot.com>.
  7. Extracts of interviews are drawn from *CARA Italia*'s backstage material. The title of the video plays with the Italian acronym of the asylum-seeker center CARA (in Italian "dear"). All filmed material and interviews are kept at the Archivio delle memorie migranti (AMM) in Rome. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
  8. Sergio Bonelli is one of the major publishing companies for graphic novels in Italy. The company has also an active production in comics, of which *Tex*, *Nathan Never*, and *Dylan Dog* are perhaps the best known.
  9. *Volto Nascosto* 1 (Oct. 2007) editorial at back of cover. Gianfranco Manfredi is also the creator of a highly popular comic book series, *Magico Vento* (Magic Wind), set in the Indian prairies of the American West (the series is still running).
  10. The main sources for the series are acknowledged in the first two volumes: Manfredi lists the "lively" accounts of the Italian journalist Domenico Quirico, whom he defines as an "expert in African history," and the "detailed" and critical reconstruction of the Battle of Adwa by Nicola Labanca (*In Marcia verso Adua*), a well-known military historian of the colonial period. See *Volto Nascosto* 1 (10 Oct. 2007) and 2 (10 Nov. 2007).
  11. See the exhibit titled "L'epopea degli ascari eritrei. Volontari eritrei nelle Forze Armate italiane, 1889–1941" held in Rome (16 Sept.–12 Oct., 2004) and Bologna (1 Oct.–6 Nov., 2005). The exhibit, which had opened earlier in Asmara, was officially sponsored by the Italian Army and was shown at the Vittoriano, Italy's memorial monument to the Unknown Soldier. See Triulzi (*Displacing* 439–41) and Palma (60–63).
  12. For the heroic tales of first-generation Eritrean migrants in Milan, see Arnone 2005. Recent testimonies of migrants coming from the Horn have been collected in Rome by Asinitas and the AMM. For further details see Triulzi and Carsetti (37–81) and <http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net>.

# Shooting the Colonial Past in Contemporary Italian Cinema

## Effects of Deferral in *Good Morning Aman*

*Derek Duncan*

The presence of migrants in Italy since the late 1980s has been commonly seen as a key factor in prompting some kind of revival of interest in the nation's own colonial past, an aspect of the country's history that had largely been placed under erasure. Although Italy's colonial project predated Fascism, it is indelibly associated with the invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and Mussolini's subsequent declaration of Empire. The loss of its colonial possessions after World War II meant that Italy never had to engage in a protracted period of decolonization. While it may seem inevitable that the national memory of colonialism was weaker in Italy than in other Western European countries with more ample colonial histories, this inevitability is at odds with events such as the controversy around the return of the stele to Axum in the late 1990s, which indicated that Italy's colonial past had not been forgotten at all but rather occupied a place in the national consciousness that was too painful or murky to visit (Triulzi). Yet since then, the recollection of the colonial past has featured more insistently in a range of cultural forms suggesting that Italy is perhaps now ready to begin reflecting on that past. Gabriella Ghermandi's novel *Regina di fiori e di perle* (2007) builds on earlier work by Erminia Dell'Oro such as *L'abbandono* (1991) to recall and reinterpret Italy's presence in East Africa from the perspective of the colonized. Popular detective fiction has also begun to make use of the empire as a location. Carlo Lucarelli's *L'ottava vibrazione* (2008) and Giorgio Ballario's *Morire è un attimo* (2008) are both set in colonial Eritrea. While Ballario's novel recalls Eritrea under Fascism, Lucarelli goes back to 1896 and the Battle of Adwa when Italian troops suffered a famous loss to the Ethiopian army. Adwa is also recalled in the comic book series *Volto Nascosto* that

focuses on the adventures of Ugo, a young Italian man in late nineteenth-century Africa. Volume nine of the series, titled *Pioggia di sangue*, specifically deals with the Battle of Adwa, described on the cover page as “the greatest rout in Italian colonial history.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet as Italy begins to remember colonialism, the ways in which that past is remembered still remains to be understood, and the conditions of that remembrance are subject to inquiry. To recall the past is never a straightforward enterprise, and its telling in the present will always prove symptomatic of a fraught relationship between the exigencies and priorities of diverse temporalities. This difficulty has been quite explicitly recognized by historians of Italian colonialism whose choice of terminology to describe past events and their ongoing purchase on the present implies a pathology to the process of recollection. For instance, Angelo Del Boca, the pioneering historian of this period and of its aftermath, uses the term “repression” (*rimozione*) to point to the primary mechanism that has blocked Italy’s capacity to recall a colonial heritage (xi). Yet Del Boca also indicates that repression, both conscious and unconscious, vies with nostalgia, regret, and outright denial in fostering a climate in which ignorance, misinformation, and *malafede* obfuscate the parameters of an experience that the nation found immensely involving.<sup>2</sup> The repression of the colonial past has been far from absolute, but rather is part of a complex and contradictory set of processes by means of which colonialism forcefully inhabits the present. This apparent lack of precision in the deployment of “repression” as a category of analysis and understanding in fact echoes Freud’s own deployment of the term “Verdrängung” to refer both to the process through which the unconscious is effectively constituted by the expulsion of troubling representations from the conscious, and to a broader range of defense mechanisms used in order to avoid a direct confrontation with an unpalatable past. The point of recognizing this fluidity, or perhaps inconsistency, is not to stage a corrective paradigm that would somehow resolve the issue of how Italy articulates a discomfiting set of memories. It is more simply to acknowledge that there may well be a range of ways through which the discomfort occasioned by the past can touch the present, and that a multiplicity of perspectives attend such discomfort.

In a self-consciously partial response to the question of how Italy’s colonial history is being recalled, I want to explore what structures of memory of this conflicted past are evident in Italian cinema. Film as a medium has been consistently associated with identity building, both mimetically, as a mirror, and performatively, as a national project. It is worth noting that postwar Italian cinema has shown little interest in returning to the colonial past, at least in a direct, referential manner. Only two films tackle the issue head-on: Giuliano Montaldo’s *Tempo di uccidere* (1989) and Carlo Mazzacurati’s *L’amore ritrovato* (2004). Interestingly both are adaptations of novels published in 1947 and 1969 respectively. This is not to claim however that Italy’s colonial history is not referenced at all. Gianni Amelio’s *Lamerica* (1994), one of the earliest films about migration, makes explicit a link with Italy’s invasion of Albania in 1939 and its own history of emigration throughout the twentieth century. From the outset, the film is concerned with the problems of producing a coherent historical narrative from the purview of the nation’s colonial past. *Lamerica* starts off with period *Luce* footage of the invasion

of Albania in 1939, and in many respects the film works to fill in the gap between what happened then and the neocolonialism of the early 1990s. The newsreel footage intimates a historical link, yet also provides dramatic evidence of the lack of suture in terms of historical knowledge. Gino, the main character, has to be informed of this colonial history by an Italian-speaking doctor. His relationship with the elderly Sicilian Michele is fissured by uncertainties of time, identity, and geography as Michele fantasizes about a more prosperous life in the United States, creating a rough parallel with the ambitions of the Albanians Gino encounters who aspire to migrate to Italy. These elements testify to fractured narratives that draw disparate elements of national-historical experience into proximity, yet do not allow them to cohere. These fractures also find expression aesthetically in the film's refusal of the realist conventions of Italian national cinema (O'Healy, "*Lamerica*"). *Lamerica* proceeds via an aesthetic of historical montage that combines, but does not resolve, a range of potentially competing referents rather than through the processes of continuity editing that would imply the necessary and intelligible interrelation of past and present.

In a later essay, Aine O'Healy ("[Non] è una somala") illustrates further how a sense of postcolonial temporality erupts into the texture of Italian cinema without recourse to conventional modes of historical narration. The two fishermen cast adrift in the Mediterranean in Mohsen Melliti's *Io, l'altro* (2006) dredge up the uncorrupt body of a Muslim woman whom they assume to be Somali. On one level, this discovery references the countless deaths of aspiring migrants as they cross the Mediterranean, yet like so many of these films about migration, *Io, l'altro*'s plot and its signifying elements are so over-determined that it is virtually impossible to know what it is in fact about. O'Healy argues that the drowned migrant symptomatically functions as a reminder of Italy's scarcely acknowledged sojourn in East Africa.<sup>3</sup> She draws on Derrida's notion of spectrality to suggest that the never-identified Somali woman stands in for those "vestigial elements of the past [that] perpetually haunt the present" ("[Non] è una somala" 176) and cites Homi Bhabha to place this haunting in a postcolonial key, referencing his notion of the "time lag" through which colonial spirits may force entry into the present. The question I would want to ask relates to how this notion of a "time lag" may be said to characterize the postcolonial time of Italian cinema.

The fact of colonialism's lingering presence is more playfully evoked in Cristina Comencini's romantic comedy *Bianco e nero* (2008) set in contemporary Rome. The film deals with the relationship between a black Senegalese woman and a white Italian man. Italy's humiliating defeat at the Battle of Adwa (in Italian "Adua") in 1896 is, however, a key, albeit submerged, point of reference. Adua here is the name of the male protagonist's racist mother-in-law whose uncertainty over how to negotiate the fact of blackness constitutes one of the main comic axes of the film. Adua herself appears unaware of the historical resonances of her given name that enjoyed a certain popularity in the late 1930s as Mussolini tried to wipe out the memory of that earlier defeat.<sup>4</sup> Indeed the film does not explicitly acknowledge any irony in the connotations of her name: neither Adua nor any of the other characters comment on it at all. Quite simply, the knowing spectator who recognizes/remembers the reference gets the joke, while the viewing

experience of the less historically astute spectator remains essentially untroubled. Italy's colonial past here is recalled only for those who already know it. The texture of national memory in this instance is certainly not damaged by the invocation of Italy's ignominious defeat and its resuscitation by Mussolini, although the fact that colonialism is indexed via the body of a white woman does provide a telling reversal of expectation, and a reminder that it was after all a white thing.

What is most interesting about the reference as it appears in the film is again its occluded historicity. The most unsettling element of the ironic naming of a character who is the butt of the film's self-consciously articulated racism is, I would suggest, that its deeper resonance depends on the suspended temporality that it invokes with respect to how Italy's colonial past might be remembered (and simultaneously forgotten). Adua in *Bianco e nero* finds a visual equivalent in Francesco Munzi's *Saimir* (2004) where an acknowledged but unnamed past is also recalled through a fetish object in terms of a present absence. The main character is an Albanian teenager who, like many of his compatriots, migrated to Italy in the 1990s. He keeps a photograph of a woman whom the spectator assumes to be his dead mother by his bed. Although he is seen looking at the image, no actual mention is made of it. He packs the photograph into his holdall at the end of the film. The image takes Saimir elsewhere, to a past that is tangible and potent, yet somehow beyond direct expression in a postcolonial present. As such, the photograph can be read as a synecdoche of Italy's disavowed colonial past. Like the naming of Adua in *Bianco e nero*, albeit in a different emotional register, the photograph is there for all to see. Its charge lies in the fact that it may well remain unrecognized as a vestige of a domestic, private past that is inexorably bound to national histories.

The four films I have mentioned raise unresolved questions about the formal properties of cinematic colonial memory, intimating structures that clearly resist realist modes of historical recovery. This essay begins the work of identifying models of historical narration that approximate more accurately the patterns of indirection through which the past is made palpable in these films, suggesting them to be symptomatic of more widespread structures of postcolonial memorialization in Italian culture.

The kind of temporality evinced in these films echoes that put forward by Sandro Mezzadra in *La condizione postcoloniale*: "Postcolonial time is characterized by a mode of cultural experience which appears to belong to the past. Yet precisely because of the ways in which it has been 'surpassed,' it stands at the heart of contemporary social life, with the effects of domination, but also of resistance that mark it out" (25). While Mezzadra is not interested in the issue of how his political analysis might find aesthetic form, his sense of postcoloniality's unresolved temporality can be usefully explicated by reference to David Martin-Jones's richly suggestive book *Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity*. Martin-Jones analyzes formal structures of temporal organization in a range of contemporary films from different national cultures across Europe, Asia, and the United States.<sup>5</sup> Drawing primarily on Deleuze's ideas about nonlinear temporality in art house filmmaking of the immediate postwar, he details the ways in which a range of recent, popular films challenge conventional ideas about national identity by contesting realist narrative forms and temporalities. He examines films that seem to prefer

a labyrinthine mode of temporal organization over a linear one, relating these processes to Deleuze's concepts of deterritorialization and reterritorialization that have been widely deployed in cultural criticism.<sup>6</sup> Through the use of strategies that disrupt a teleological relation between past and present, the films Martin-Jones analyzes reconfigure the space of the nation.

The key question here relates to what kind of affective relationship is established between the past and the present time in which the narrative is produced. While Martin-Jones following Deleuze is resistant to the challenges to realist temporality posed by certain versions of psychoanalysis, he also draws on Homi Bhabha's work to contend that a reemergent postcolonial history offers the greatest challenge to the pedagogical view of the nation reiterated through conventional narrative models. I would want to work more closely with the Freudian dimension of Bhabha's thinking in order to look at one particular film in which flashes from the past interrupt and disrupt narratives being worked out in the present. As will become clear, the flashes I consider do not offer the spectator direct clarification of what happened in the past, nor do they unambiguously elucidate the present. Rather, their formal opacities recall Bhabha's sense of the present as "disjunct and displaced" (4). Two Freudian concepts are especially relevant to this project which has to do with recognition much more than recovery: the "unhomely" which Bhabha refers to as "the paradigmatic colonial and postcolonial condition" (9), and "Nachträglichkeit" or "deferred action," by means of which the past spectacularly returns to unsettle the present and leave it unsettled. Bhabha translates the "unheimlich" into a distinctly postcolonial key. Working with Freud's sense that the "unhomely" is precisely that which should have remained hidden, but has somehow come to light, he argues that "the unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalences of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (11). In this vein, the naming of Adua in *Bianco e nero* intimates (or perhaps just imitates) the startling return of the past in the register of the domestic. Similarly, the idea of "deferred action" is associated particularly with traumatic modes of experience which the subject was unable to comprehend and assimilate at the time of their occurrence. The "deferral" relates to the delay in working through or revising the past prompted by a seemingly unrelated stimulus at a later date, and is dynamic not static in its operations. The politics of this mode of deferral subtends the remainder of this essay.

The psychoanalytical model Bhabha proposes is particularly apt in a context where, it is persistently argued, the colonial past and the memory of it have been subject to "repression," or to other defense mechanisms that imply a need to be protected from the onslaught of the past. What I want to focus on for the rest of this essay is Claudio Noce's first feature film *Good Morning Aman* (2009), which exhibits, I would argue, a range of structural traits that dramatize the relationship between colonial past and postcolonial present in the light of transnational migrations. The interest of this film lies in the very ill-defined openness with which it allows the past to inhabit a present in constant revision. Such narrative features, I will suggest, do not intimate that the ghosts of the past had been laid to rest, but rather that modes of making visible their uncomfortable traces have at least been found.

*Good Morning Aman* fits neatly with the type of films studied by Martin-Jones that combine “formal experimentation with narrative time” and a “meditation on character memory” (3) in order to explore national identity. It focuses on the relationship between Aman (Said Sabrie), a teenage boy of Somali origin, and Teodoro (Valerio Mastandrea), a forty-year-old ex-boxer. An ambitious but ill-at-ease Aman walks the streets of Rome day and night, and in addition to his friendship with Teodoro, the film tracks his relationships with Said (Amin Nour), another young Somali man who is moving to London, and a young woman, Sara (Anita Caprioli), whom he tries to persuade to move to Canada with him. Throughout, Aman experiences persistent low-level racism as he is fired from his job washing cars and is constantly questioned about his origins: he is never assumed to be from Rome. Although he does come into contact with white Italians, Aman’s Rome is largely a migrant one as he divides his time wandering the area around Termini Station and Corviale, the massive council estate on the southwest periphery of Rome where he grew up. Early in the film, Aman’s isolation is figured through a wide-angle establishing shot in which his dwarfed frame is set against the imposing grey mass of this vast housing block.<sup>7</sup> He sits alone at some distance from a group of apparently hostile black teenagers. References throughout the film to Somalis in the United Kingdom and North America internationalize the sense of diaspora, disavowing any direct link between Italy and its former colonial territory. Somalia is referred to on a few occasions in the film with mentions of famine, clan warfare, and remittances, but nothing is even suggested that would indicate the countries’ shared history. It is, however, through the peculiar friendship with Teodoro that a sense of the past hesitatingly emerges out of this uncertain geography.

The first time they meet, Teodoro slips money into Aman’s coat. He struggles to understand the reason for this, especially after Teodoro denies any sexual motive.<sup>8</sup> They begin to see each other regularly; gradually Aman is able to persuade Teodoro to leave the house and try to reestablish links with his estranged family. At this point in the film, no explanation is given for Teodoro’s isolation, yet shots in which the camera pans over rows of photographs in his apartment indicate that he is a man with an affective history. Aman shaves and dresses his friend in anticipation of the encounter with his wife. At this point, the spectator is quite carelessly informed through a fleeting aside that on the night the two first met, Teodoro had been about to commit suicide. At this point, the boxer embraces Aman telling him “I’m happy you’re here with me.” I will comment shortly on how this innocuous phrase returns as a flash memory later in the film.

*Good Morning Aman* is all about the question of who possesses the past, and about what claims might be made on the past from the perspective of the present. The film however does little to help the spectator interpret events with any certainty. Attribution of meaning appears constantly deferred and proffered only retrospectively as what are never more than possible connections emerge without ever being granted full narrative authority. Aman himself is posited as a distinctly unreliable narrator or focalizer. At one point, Rais, another Somali man, tells Aman about the horrific deaths of his family members. The scene segues into a conversation between Aman and Teodoro in which Aman appears to pass off Rais’s family history as his own. This structure of deferral or postponement that characterizes



the spectator's knowledge of Teodoro's putative suicide also determines a delay in viably interpreting one of the film's key scenes. As part of what seems to be Teodoro's ongoing rehabilitation, Aman accompanies him to a dinner with a group of his former boxing associates. The all-male group is clearly made uncomfortable by Aman's presence, and some of their comments encourage a sense of this as ill-disguised racism. At one point the group breaks into continued, yet nervous laughter after Teodoro says, "il negretto mi ha salvato la vita" (the black boy saved my life). No clear explanation is given at this point for their reaction to this particular remark. The evening degenerates into a brawl as the racism becomes more palpable with a further suggestion of a sexual relationship between Aman and Teodoro, who ends up being hospitalized after trashing his own apartment.<sup>9</sup>

Up until this point, the film's aesthetic strategies had been relatively conventional despite the handheld camera work and a reliance at times on sharp MTV-style editing techniques, an abundance of close-ups, out-of-focus shots, and playing with camera speed. The film's extended penultimate sequence, however, shifts radically in terms of its formal strategies and invites new but resolutely inconclusive possibilities for interpreting pasts that are seen to persist in, and give form to, a present whose own ontological status is far from certain. The sequence begins with Aman and Teodoro's wife driving to the hospital. She asks if her husband had ever mentioned how he had killed a Senegalese boy ("just like you"), just for entertainment.<sup>10</sup> Aman is soon given another version of this incident by a friend of Teodoro's, who claims it was an accident, yet this information allows the spectator to begin to interpret otherwise the response to the claim that Aman, "il negretto," had saved Teodoro's life. In fact, this information initiates a complex sequence in which various fragments of what may be the past are revisited. This ten minute sequence of complex montage is accompanied for the most part by an extradiegetic Beethoven string quartet that sutures apparently disparate images.<sup>11</sup> The first part of the sequence cuts between shots of Aman walking around his housing estate and what may be a flashback to the night of the road incident. The car apparently pursues a fleeing boy before it strikes him, yet the superimposition of Aman's face onto the image of the car window intimates that this is perhaps his subjective reconstruction of the event.<sup>12</sup>

The Beethoven quartet then bridges unexplained images of black youths fighting a group of white men, and a conversation between Aman and a policeman in which he imagines taking the policeman's gun and pointing it at the man who fired him. The ontological status of these scenes is further confused by the use of out-of-focus camera work and extreme close-ups of Aman suggesting that what the spectator sees is his subjective vision. The growing spectrality of Aman's presence intensifies as he returns to Teodoro's apartment and destroys his friend's much-loved painting of a solitary figure in a romantic wilderness. The sequence shifts to the hospital and then proceeds on an apparently dual ontological level cutting between the ward where Teodoro is confined and scenes of the two men walking in a rural landscape reminiscent of the painting.<sup>13</sup> As Teodoro finally stands on a rock surveying the empty landscape, the film cuts again and we see him standing on the parapet of what looks like one of Corviale's concrete blocks. He smiles at Aman before stepping off the edge. Aman runs and peers over the side to see Teodoro's

blood-splattered corpse on the pavement. The next cut takes us back to the rural idyll where Teodoro effectively recreates the earlier scene as he embraces Aman and tells him, “I am happy you are with me.”

The recurrence of the phrase uttered by Teodoro calls into question any progressive development of the plot, and the spectator’s knowledge of the past is certainly not enhanced by the intrusive flashes of what may, or may not, be the past. Indeed, throughout the sequence, the close-ups of Aman suggest that the spectator is sharing his delirious fantasy, conflating elements of past and present. What is produced is not a representation of the past that would lead onto a limp explanation of the present. The work of deterritorialization performed by the fragmentation of the film’s linear temporal structure takes the spectator resolutely into the labyrinthine time of postcoloniality. In *Lamerica*, the past is consciously recalled through the use in the opening and closing credit sequences of original, period news footage whose ontological status gives it substance. The past is used as a kind of framing device that both suggests a connection with the present and points to its distance from us as the film’s plot clearly demonstrates the link to have been severed: the question becomes how to mend the break of clearly identifiable elements. In *Good Morning Aman*, flashes of what may be the past erupt into the present to resist the reterritorializing impulse characteristic of realist filmmaking. *Good Morning Aman* is not directly about Italy’s colonial experience, yet I would argue that it is symptomatic of colonialism’s “disjunct” legacy.

On a final note, it is worth returning to Bhabha’s sense of the “unhomely” as the paradigmatic condition of postcoloniality and the sense that fragments of personal experience reveal themselves to be embedded in, and redolent of, broader political patterns. The film’s geographical coordinates suggest how broadly configured the postcolonial home actually is. Aman, we are given to understand, left Somalia at the age of four after the brutal killing of his parents. He appears to share an apartment on a housing estate with a disparate array of Somali migrants. As he lies in his hospital bed, Teodoro promises that his house will be left equally to Aman and his daughter. In the film’s final sequence, Aman phones his friend in London to tell him that he is coming to join him, revising his earlier expression of derision about the move to London. Aman wonders if K’Naan, the successful Canadian-based Somali rapper, is still number one in the charts. Inevitably, someone is bound to take his place. He has had no news, “nessuna traccia,” of him. Traces in fact are what this film is all about as its intimation of postcoloniality’s precarious temporalities takes the spectator insistently back to a past that is still being played out very uncertainly in the present.

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## Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
2. It is, however, worth noting that the "repression" of the colonial past is not restricted to Italy, something often forgotten in discussions about Italy's colonial memory. See for instance Gandhi (4–5, 10). Paul Gilroy draws on the Freudian valences of the term as a means of understanding fissures internal to postcolonial culture (71). In their introduction to *Italian Colonialism*, Ben-Ghiat and Fuller also use a Freudian lexis to describe Italy's ongoing, yet concealed, attachment to its colonial past. Triulzi evokes the language of trauma in his use of terms such as "wound" and "grief" (97, 98, 106).
3. O'Healy's article is more firmly focused on the representation of African women in Italian cinema, and she argues that the Somali woman also references their "relative absence" from a medium commonly attributed with a high degree of mimetic value. Apart from *Lamerica*, all the films I have mentioned to this point rely on the prism of the female body as the mechanism through which colonialism and its attendant surrogates move toward narrative articulation. *Good Morning Aman* proves another exception.

4. Nicola Labanca notes that in the lengthy campaign to occupy Ethiopia “il fantasma di Adua aleggiò sempre sulle ambe” (“the ghost of Adwa always hovered over the mountains,” *Oltremare* 191). The spectral presence of Adwa here is evocative of the never-quite-present memory of Italian colonialism that I discuss in this essay.
5. Martin-Jones uses the work of Fellini as an example of antirealist temporality. He does not, however, extend this analysis to more recent Italian filmmaking.
6. Graziella Parati also uses the term “deterritorialize” to convey a sense of the productive interaction between migrant and Italian cultures (73).
7. The estate, inaugurated in 1982, was built to accommodate a white working-class demographic that has to some degree been replaced by a significant migrant population. Its unfinished structures and inadequate infrastructure have been the subject of some controversy, although recent initiatives have attempted to address the social deprivation characteristic of the estate.
8. The repeated inference that sex subverts the relationship between Teodoro and Aman in fact recalls Freud’s own notion of repression in that sexual prohibition is constitutive of the unconscious and structurally informs subsequent (not necessarily sexual) instances of the same process.
9. I am grateful to Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo for making this connection.
10. Aman corrects the error and stresses that he is Somali, yet structurally, the misrecognition through which West African migrants are mistaken for Italy’s formerly colonized subjects offers a critique of the familiar conflation of migration, colonialism, and indeed emigration that refuses to acknowledge historical and cultural difference and specificity.
11. Ludwig van Beethoven, String Quartet No. 8 in E minor, Op. 59, No. 2 (Razumovsky) “Andante con moto quasi allegretto.”
12. Interpretation is complicated by the fact that, although flashbacks are often subjective modes of recall, their actual form is typically that of objective narration creating an unresolved tension between personal memory and historical account (Bordwell and Thompson 86)
13. The rather crudely crafted painting is reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich’s “The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog” (1818). The image may indicate here some kind of escape from the claustrophobic urban environment of the film. The interpretation of the picture was suggested by Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo.

## Italians DOC?

### Posing and Passing from Giovanni Finati to Amara Lakhous

*Barbara Spackman*

The protagonist of Amara Lakhous's 2010 novel *Divorzio all'islamica a Viale Marconi* is a "Christian," in both religion and proper name: a Sicilian who studied classical Arabic at the University of Palermo, and who, in 2005, is recruited by SISMI (Service for Military Information and Security) as part of Bush's "War on Terror." His assignment is to impersonate a Muslim Tunisian immigrant and infiltrate a purported terrorist cell in the Roman neighborhood known as "Little Cairo," home to an immigrant community made up largely of Egyptians and other North Africans. Both setting and characters contribute to a layering of migrations: Christian's true family origins link him to southern Italian emigration to Tunisia, and the topic of his undergraduate thesis—Garibaldi's sojourn in Tunisia—in turn links that emigration to the Risorgimento and its making of an Italian identity. The embedding of "Cairo" within an Italian city recalls yet other Mediterranean exchanges, both historically and geographically; the name "Cairo" itself is in fact the Italianization, on the part of travelers in the Middle Ages, of the original Arabic name of the city, al-Qāhira, and Cairo and Alexandria were home to immigrant communities of Europeans in general, and Italians in particular, in the wake of the Napoleonic occupation (from 1798 to 1801). There are resonances closer to our own moment as well. That a southern Italian should impersonate a North African immigrant plays upon and inverts recent cinematic practice that maps the itinerary of African immigrants in Italy onto the internal migration of southerners to the North and the external emigration of southerners to the Americas. Think, for example, of Michele Placido's 1990 film *Pummarò*, or Gianni Amelio's 1994 *Lamerica*, in which the historical emigrations of southerners provide the interpretive key for the contemporary immigration of Africans and Albanians

respectively.<sup>1</sup> In this essay, I want to examine these multiple and historically varied tales of migration through the lens of a topos that links nineteenth-century European migrations to Egypt and the Hijaz with *Divorce Islamic Style's* representation of the Italian infiltration of "Little Cairo": the topos of posing as Muslim in order to enter a sacred space. Lakhous himself invokes the analogy: "A Muslim who is called Christian is pure provocation. It would be like going to Mecca with a cross around your neck. It's called apostasy, and the punishment foreseen is the death penalty" (98).<sup>2</sup> The theme and possibility of conversion to Islam play a starring role in both of these two scenarios, and link the two historical moments in an embrace that conjures with Islamophobia, the historical malleability of a weak national identity in the Mediterranean and the *frisson* of entry into a forbidden space in a disguise that is in equal measure linguistic and semiotic. At stake is a contrapuntal reading of several of the multiple migrations and identities evoked by Lakhous.

I want to argue that Lakhous reprises Orientalism's practice of representation by updating and recycling the powerful nineteenth-century metaphor of the Orient as, in Edward Said's fortunate phrase, a "theatrical stage affixed to Europe" (163). The book's title winks at Pietro Germi's 1961 film *Divorce, Italian Style* and, already on the second page of the novel, Christian-posing-as-Issa underscores the theatricality of his mission: "I have no intention of playing James Bond or Donnie Brasco[.] I don't have the physique for it" (14). My interest here, however, is not primarily in this particular filmic reference, but rather in the way that both the metaphor and the medium are updated in Lakhous's novel, as the scripted, cinematic nature of the analogy is underlined from the get-go. Among the particularly rich repertoire of plays upon that stage was the practice of passing and posing as Muslim in order to enter the sacred space of Mecca, prohibited to Christians upon threat of death. In its nineteenth-century version, such passing was the sign of the extraordinary man, alone at Mecca among a sea of authentic, and supposedly "transparent," believers.<sup>3</sup> Lakhous, instead, takes up the topos in order to generalize it as the condition of postcolonial Italian identities, whether "migrant" or "Italians *DOC*," as the novel calls them: "a 100 per cent Italian, *italianissimo*" (25).

I owe the pair of terms "passing" and "posing" to Linda Williams's work on a very different historical context, that of the early twentieth century in the United States, in *Playing the Race Card*. In her chapter "Posing as Black, Passing as White," Williams contrasts the 1927 film *The Jazz Singer* and the 1927 musical *Show Boat*, arguing that "where whites who pose as black intentionally exhibit all the artifice of their performance—exaggerated gestures, blackface make-up—blacks who pass as white suppress the obvious artifice of performance. Passing is a performance whose success depends on not overacting" (176).<sup>4</sup> Another way to put this might be to say that, in the scenario Williams describes, those who pose simulate something that they are not, whereas those who pass dissimulate something that they are; those who pose insist on exhibiting their distinction and distance from a stigmatized identity, whereas those who pass cover over their difference from an identity that confers privilege. Yet already in the case of *The Jazz Singer*, Williams shows that things are more complicated than this. *The Jazz Singer* provides an example not simply of a black/white binary, but a case of an "explicit performance

of Jewishness against a foil of blackness mediated by Irishness" (141). Building on Michael Rogin's argument that blackface "became a means of white-washing the assimilating Jew," and that therefore "posing as black is ultimately a way to pass as white" (141), Williams argues that the film turned recently emigrated, assimilating Jews into objects of sympathy by associating them with "the by now thoroughly conventionalized afflictions of slaves" (148). The result is to attach "racial pathos" to more recent narratives of assimilation, as well as to allow the Jew to pass as white. I propose to "migrate" these reflections to the cases of Lakhous's novel, as well as those of his predecessors on the Orientalist "stage," in order better to explore the intricacies of national belongings and the drifting that take place in two Cairos: the nineteenth-century Cairo that was the gateway to the pilgrimage to Mecca and the "Little Cairo" of postcolonial Italy.

### **Giovanni Finati: Passing as Muslim and Albanian in Paracolonial Egypt**

The evocation of the scholarly tradition that Edward Said so compellingly and controversially characterized more than thirty years ago in *Orientalism* authorizes us to place "Christian" in relation to several of those male Orientalists, both professional and accidental, who also took up a disguise and either passed or posed as Muslim in the nineteenth century: the Italian Giovanni Finati (1787–date unknown), the Swiss German John Lewis Burckhardt (1784–1817), and the British Richard F. Burton (1821–90).<sup>5</sup> Finati's narrative is especially of interest here insofar as it is an "Italian" example whose itinerary in "paracolonial" Egypt provides a counterpoint to that of Lakhous's "Christian" in postcolonial Italy. Indeed, it is precisely Lakhous's migration of this tradition to a space within the Italian peninsula that makes a case such as Finati's newly relevant, for it allows us to resituate discussions of the making of Italian national identity by moving beyond the geographical confines of the Italian peninsula, to "contact zones" where the imaginative geographies of north and south, east and west, cross, and where nationalities may be strengthened or come undone.<sup>6</sup>

We turn, then, to Giovanni Finati who, although by no means entirely unknown in the Orientalist field—the far more famous Richard F. Burton refers to him as "our Italian Candide" (391)—has not received the kind of attention given to the British cases we have mentioned: those of Burton himself and of John Lewis Burckhardt. Finati nonetheless provides a compelling account of transnational mobility and the vicissitudes of "turning Turk," as well as a rousing tale of adventures worthy of later genre fiction, such as that of H. Rider Haggard or, closer to his original home, Emilio Salgari. In a form of coauthorship that anticipates that of the first wave of contemporary migrant writers in Italy who told their life stories to native Italian speakers, Finati dictated his life story in Italian to an unidentified collaborator in Great Britain; it was subsequently translated into English by his one-time employer William Bankes (1786–1855), an epigraphist, archeologist, and accomplished amateur artist who employed Finati as interpreter and janissary during his voyage to Egypt and Syria from 1815 to 1816. In his preface to Finati's narrative, he explains the reason for the expedient of dictation: "His long

disuse, however, of European writing (an accomplishment in which he had, perhaps, never been a brilliant proficient) had made him very slow with the pen, and rendered it probable that he would soon abandon the attempt, if he took the whole labour upon himself, which was my motive that he should rather dictate, than endeavour to put his story to paper with his own hand" (xiii).<sup>7</sup> Bankes's translation appeared in 1830 under the wonderfully expansive nineteenth-century title *The Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Giovanni Finati, Native of Ferrara Who, under the Assumed Name of Mahomet Made the Campaigns of the Wahabees for the Recovery of Mecca and Medina and Since Acted as Interpreter to European Travellers in Some of the Parts Least Visited of Asia and Africa, Translated from the Italian, As Dictated by Himself, and edited by William John Bankes, Esq.* Finati's narrative is unusual in being almost entirely free of the textual mediation that characterizes those of his more learned fellow travelers, a fact which may have exempted him from the more egregious stereotypes of Orientalist intertextuality. At the same time, his life story is representative of a passing made possible by the encounter of his own "weak" national belonging with the fluidity of identities to be found in Muhammad Ali's Egypt.

It is worth remembering that Egypt in 1815 was a modernizing state, having been wrested from the Mamluks and held at some distance from the Ottoman Porte by Muhammad Ali. C. A. Bayly has suggested that Egypt in this period should be referred to as a "para-colonial" state, engaged in building a monopoly, export trade, and an army of its own and not "a static extra-European world" brought into modernity "simply by the imposition of Britain and its allies" (228). In the wake of Napoleon's occupation of Egypt (from 1798 to 1801), and the rise to power of Muhammad Ali, many Europeans, Italians among them, found their way to Cairo and Alexandria, drawn not only by the lure of antiquities (and the possibility of their looting), but also by Muhammad Ali's modernizing projects. Muhammad Ali admired and relied upon European merchants and surrounded himself with Armenian secretaries and translators, French technocrats, British experts and merchants, and Italian physicians. After the restoration in 1815, many others came in search of political asylum. Italian political refugees often went elsewhere (England, France, or Switzerland, especially), before ending up in Egypt, and were thus doubly displaced. By 1819, the Italian population in Egypt had reached six thousand, according to at least one source, and was made up of a mixture of patriots and profiteers (Briani). Additional political immigrants arrived after the constitutional uprisings of 1820 and 1821, and Italians were part of the early nineteenth-century apparatus of power that was not strictly speaking "colonialist" (Mitchell). For example, the teachers in the first schools established by Muhammad Ali were Italians, and Italian, then the *lingua franca* of the Levant, was the first European language to be taught (quickly, however, displaced by French; Hourani 55). The result was a society in which national identities were in flux: in Cairo and Alexandria, for example, Italians could come under the jurisdiction of Austrian consuls, French consuls, or British consuls. Scholars such as Robert Ilbert have noted that this fluidity of identities was fostered by the system of capitulations in nineteenth-century Egypt, a system which allowed individuals to slide from "indigenous" status to that of foreigner, and back again, with relative ease;



indeed it was not rare for individuals of the same family to claim different nationalities (64–98).

Into this mixture enters Giovanni Finati of Ferrara. Finati recounts how he was conscripted into the Napoleonic army in 1805, and twice deserted, first almost immediately upon conscription, when he returned to Ferrara only to be apprehended and sent to prison; and a second time after he is forced to return to military service and is sent to Albania. There he and his fellow deserters, Italians to a man, find themselves welcomed by the local pasha, who “liberally supplied [them] with all” that they could want, and daily invited them to renounce their faith (1:47). The deserters’ resolve is unmovable: “Full as we were at that time of true Italian zeal, these overtures made not the smallest impression upon us; we felt indignant at the very suggestion of renouncing our faith, and encouraged one another reciprocally in a resolution rather to die than to submit to it” (1:48). Upon hearing his declaration, the pasha’s lavish welcome comes to an end; they are demoted to the status of slaves and set to work in quarries. After three months of hard labor, they find themselves reciprocally encouraging each other rather differently: “Our country was closed against us,” urges a sergeant, “we had therefore no hope as Christians. The Mahometans believed, as we do, in a God, and upon examination we might find the differences from our mother church to be less than we had imagined, or at the worst, we might still retain our own creed, and put up our prayers in our hearts” (1:52). To which Finati exclaims, “wonderful what a few bold words will do . . . we all came at once to the determination of professing to be Mahometans. . . . We were received as Mussulmen; though I believe that most of us continued in our hearts as good Catholics as we had been before” (1:53–54). There is a deep irony in this inversion of what we might call a “Jimmy Carter” strategy—they practice Islam, but pray like good Catholics in their hearts—for Finati had, as a child, been destined for religious life, and had been instructed “in all that course of frivolous and empty ceremonies and mysteries, which form a principal feature in the training up of a priest for the Romish church” (1:5).<sup>8</sup> To be sure, his British interlocutor is likely to have been the one to supply the designation “Romish church,” but Finati underlines his dislike of the profession several pages later when he admits that, if he disliked the military profession into which he was conscripted, he disliked equally if not more the profession which had been designated for him at home. In any event, there is no further reference to praying in the heart in the two volumes and more than seven hundred pages that follow. Having embraced Islam, Finati takes on the name Mahomet and enrolls in Muhammad Ali’s Albanese militia. We learn not only that he is fluent in Albanian and Arabic, but that he successfully passes *as* Albanian, and the first person plural pronoun which, in the opening pages, referred to the deserting Italians, quickly morphs into referring to the company of fellow soldiers of Muhammad Ali’s army.

The degree to which Finati-Mahomet is able to pass is remarkable. In the second volume of his *Narrative*, his linguistic abilities allow him to leave behind the military life and take up the role of interpreter and tour guide. He falls into the service of the English consul, Henry Salt; he plays an important role in the explorations of the muscle-man turned Egyptologist, Giovanni Belzoni, who refers to him only as “Mahomed, a soldier sent to us by Mr. Salt” (189). The two so-called

Italians, Giovanni and Giovanni, do indeed meet in the desert, but they do not greet each other *as* Italians in Egypt, neither in Finati's nor in Belzoni's narratives. Finati-Mahomet accompanied Mrs. Belzoni to the Holy Land; in *Mrs. Belzoni's Trifling Account of the Women of Egypt, Nubia, and Syria*, she refers to him simply as "Mr. B.'s dragoman" (interpreter) and writes that "Mahomet passed for an Albanian" (Sarah Belzoni qtd. in *ibid.* 310). The knowledge that he passes as Albanian is also knowledge that she knows he is "not" Albanian, but something else: exactly what, however, Mrs. Belzoni does not reveal. It is possible, for example, that she supposed him to be an Arab, since she knew he spoke both Arabic and Albanian.

Finati-Mahomet makes the pilgrimage to Mecca, which he "had so long and ardently been desirous of seeing," and hence can be called Hajj Mahomet. Cairo, where in his words "people of all colours and languages seem to be brought together" (1:78) has become his home: "I felt as much as any of them that I was returning to my country, so much have I been accustomed to consider Egypt in that light" (2:54). He frequents, but does not reside in, the Frankish quarter of the city. He seems to identify himself fully as Muslim, and we learn that he passes both linguistically and sartorially. In what is a topos of such accounts, Mr. Bankes wishes to enter the Temple of Solomon, whose entry by a Christian is punishable by death; Mr. Bankes must therefore adopt a disguise, and enlists Hajj Mahomet's help. Bankes "asked if a handsome new Albanian dress could be bought in the bazaar; I replied that it could, and as I always wore one, naturally conceived that it was intended for myself, so I bought one" (2:281). The dress is for Bankes of course, and the episode among the most suspense-filled. Hajj Mahomet takes care to explain that in fact, he ran a "far greater risk of life than" Mr. Bankes did, for "as a British subject, and a man of substance, they might have threatened, and extorted from" him, "but could hardly have dared to go much further, so that I should have been made the example, who was amenable to their laws, and conversant in their religion and customs" (1:286). No praying in the heart here! That his Albanian identity has been fully embraced is suggested by the final episode. Hajj Mahomet is called to England by Mr. Bankes to make a deposition in a legal case regarding a journey in 1816, whose details are well known to him. There, in some principal cities, Finati-Mahomet meets with "rude behavior," where his "dress attracted not only attention, but so many insults from boys and idle people, that I found the necessity of taking refuge in a shop" (2:428). Giovanni Finati, Ferrarese, could well have taken off his identities, both sartorial and religious, once on British soil, but Hajj Mahomet, Muslim and Albanian, preferred to wear the skirt that Lord Byron modeled for his portrait in Albanian dress, painted by Thomas Philips in 1835. It is likely that, for those "boys and idle people," Finati's gender identity had drifted along with his religious and national belonging, and their rudeness had more than a little to do with that perception of gendered identity. On that score, Finati himself, however, has no comment.

What is of interest to us here is the success of Finati-Mahomet's passing, in relation both to class subordination and to racialization. As a *renegado*, Finati-Mahomet stood only to gain by passing as a soldier in Muhammad Ali's Albanian regiment in Egypt, and dissimulation of his "Italian identity" was no doubt aided by the fact that Italian was then the *lingua franca* of the Mediterranean.

It was therefore not necessary to dissimulate his native linguistic identity since, to judge from contemporary travel narratives, it was the norm to use Italian when first encountering a stranger. When he found himself among fellow Europeans, Finati-Mahomet's Albanian identity may well have shielded him from the disrespect he could reasonably expect, as both deserter and renegade, and the power he wielded as translator may have compensated for his class subordination in relation to his English employers. In any case, his behavior in England suggests that nothing was to be gained by revealing his Italian identity, whereas his Albanian identity was, in London, his ticket to a welcome by the English aristocracy given over to Egyptomania.<sup>9</sup>

### **Amara Lakhous: Posing as Muslim and Tunisian in Postcolonial Italy**

Almost two centuries later, Lakhous reprises the topos of passing and posing as Muslim in *Divorzio all'islamica a Viale Marconi*, with its imbrications of multiple migrations in postcolonial Italy. No longer a stage external to Europe, the Orient in *Divorce* has been internalized as the multicultural call center in "Little Cairo," locus of the novel's action and site where Christian takes on his new identity as the Muslim Tunisian "Issa."<sup>10</sup> In this reversal of the centrifugal movement of colonization, Little Cairo serves as new contact zone and synecdoche for postcolonial Italy, in much the same way as did the apartment building in Rome's Piazza Vittorio in Lakhous's previous novel *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio*.<sup>11</sup> The predominantly male zone of Little Cairo is supplemented by the circle of friends of "Sofia," the Egyptian woman whose first-person narrative alternates with that of Issa, and the name of whose daughter, "Aida," evokes the nineteenth-century Italian presence in Egypt we have been discussing.<sup>12</sup> Through this combination, Egyptians, Tunisians, Moroccans, Albanians, Senegalese, Algerians, Bangladeshi, and Italians *DOC* are brought together, and passing and posing become not the exception but the norm.

Williams's argument can be helpful in conceptualizing the impersonation of a Tunisian Muslim on the part of a Catholic Sicilian in *Divorce Islamic Style* insofar as it gives us a model that takes into consideration both the tendency of a simple binary to impose itself (in the case discussed by Williams, black and white), as well as the mediation of other terms (in that case, Jewishness and Irishness). In our example, the terms are obviously different: a binary between Christian and Muslim carries the insistent and politically charged force of that between black and white, while Italianness, southernness, and the ethnicities and nationalities of the immigrant community in "Little Cairo" mediate and complicate the scenario. A Sicilian Italian who poses as a Tunisian Muslim generates multiple implications on both diegetic and extradiegetic levels. By insisting upon the performative aspect, especially in the earlier portion of the novel, Christian's posing seems to underline his distance from the stigmatized identity of Issa, the Muslim immigrant; at the same time, his pose reminds us that he is an "Italian" Christian, that is to say, it allows Christian-the-Sicilian to pass as Italian, and therefore to distance himself from his own stigmatized identity as a southerner. Christian/Issa's linguistic

disguise is particularly important in this scenario, and recalls the training in languages so important to the professional Orientalist, and so crucial to the male masquerade in Mecca. Christian, after all, is chosen for the assignment because of his fluency in Arabic, and his training as an “Arabist”: “At the university I began studying classical Arabic. . . . I was one of the best students and a lot of people couldn’t believe that my native language was Italian” (Lakhous, *Divorce* 19).

But the role requires yet another linguistic disguise: to seem credible, he must “speak a halting Italian, even a little ungrammatical.” This “halting Italian” should mimic not only the broken Italian of recent immigrants, but bear the traces of his fictional persona as an immigrant who had lived in Sicily, and thus of his “true” persona as Sicilian Italian: “The ideal is to speak an Italian with a double cadence: Arab, because I am Tunisian, and Sicilian, because I’m an immigrant who has lived in Sicily” (47; translation modified). This double cadence is produced not through mimicking the speech of actual immigrants, but rather comes into being as a fictional construct through the violation of grammatical norms: “I promptly decided to temporarily suspend a lot of grammatical rules, so no more subjunctive or remote past.” And the Sicilian in him adds, “It busts my balls to give up our beloved *passato remoto*” (47; translation modified), where the “beloved *passato remoto*” refers us specifically to the Sicilian preference for the preterite tense. His narrator’s linguistic predicament mimics Lakhous’s own: as he proclaims on his personal website, “I Arabise the Italian and Italianise the Arabic.”<sup>13</sup> Writing in both languages (his first book, *Le cimici e il pirata*, was published in a bilingual edition), Lakhous, too, speaks with a “double cadence.”

This double cadence can be heard on the extradiegetic level as well, where we can point to yet other ramifications. Christian’s posing within the diegetic world of *Divorce* is in fact an inversion of the posing and passing discussed by Williams, in which the recent immigrant group (Jews) poses as the older stigmatized identity (blacks) and accrues to itself the pathos now conventionally associated with the suffering of slaves. Christian instead is a member of the older stigmatized identity (southern Italians), posing as a member of the more recent immigrant group (North Africans). This identity has implications for the “Orientalist” stance of the fictional character: the norm to which Christian compares the North African subjects he observes is not that of a homogeneous West, as would the typical nineteenth-century Orientalist, but rather that of the experience of southern Italians. For example, when Christian/Issa looks for an apartment in Viale Marconi, a residence that would normalize his status as immigrant, he is introduced to the ways of the immigrant community, which he compares not to those of “Italy” or the “West,” but to those of Sicily. What is more, when we step out of the diegetic world to include the writer himself, we find that the scenario Williams proposes does in fact apply to Amara Lakhous as author: the recent Muslim/Algerian/Italian writer “poses,” through his narrating character Christian, as the older stigmatized identity—southerner. As a result, not only do the familiar narratives of southern Italian suffering and migration attach a domesticating pathos to the stories of the new immigrants to Italy, but, just as the Jew posing as black passed for white, Lakhous the immigrant writer posing as a Sicilian (himself posing as a new immigrant) “passes” as an Italian writer. Lakhous is able to manipulate both

dialect and standard Italian, and tracks the migration of dialects along the routes of the mobility of identities. When his apartment-mate, the Senegalese Ibrahim, explains that “there’s racism among the Italians themselves. In Milan they say ‘Hey, southerner.’” Christian/Issa comments, “Yesterday ‘Hey, southerner,’ today, ‘Hey, non-European, Moroccan, black!’ What should we do? It makes me laugh to hear the Senegalese speaking the Milanese dialect” (134). The comic effect of the immigrant who speaks in dialect may refer to Lakhous’s own literary and linguistic practice as well; in both his novels, he weaves standard Italian and dialect together in a way that has occasioned comparisons to Gadda’s “plurilingualism,” first and foremost by the author himself.<sup>14</sup> Author and narrator thus share the stance of an ethnographic observer, intent on translating Muslim practices for an Italian readership, addressed as Christian (in faith, if not in name), and in need of enlightenment.<sup>15</sup> “I continue to think with my Italian head, I can’t manage to put myself in the shoes [*panni*, literally “clothing”] of non-EU immigrants” (51; translation modified), falsely laments Christian/Issa, describing precisely the goal on the part of Lakhous: to pose as an “Italian brain” in “immigrant clothing.” The nineteenth-century Orientalist practice of adopting native dress is here updated as a figure for cross-cultural understanding, the “clothes” now both literal and figurative. A double-voiced critique is made possible through a “we” whose reference alternates between that of the “Italians *DOC*” and that of the “non European immigrants.” The double voice gives equal opportunity to stereotypes about both groups: “I don’t pay much attention to the stereotype of the Tunisian drug dealer,” says Issa, “I was inoculated long ago against these fucking prejudices: the Sicilian Mafioso, the Neapolitan Camorrist, the Sardinian kidnapper, the Albanian petty criminal, the Roma thief, the Muslim terrorist” (97; translation modified).

This authorial stance is present in both the chapters labeled “Issa” and those titled “Sofia”; both touch upon the topoi we would expect in an account of “manners and customs of modern Muslims”: the veil, circumcision both male and female, the ease of divorce in Muslim countries, polygamy, the denial of entrance to paradise to Muslim women, all are duly evoked and explained.<sup>16</sup> The alternation between chapters named “Issa” and those named “Sofia” introduces gendered spheres of public and private spaces into the novel, and both Issa and Sofia evoke mediatic forms for the roles they play: *telenovelas* are a dominant reference in the female-gendered space of Issa’s narrative while both share references to the *com-media all’italiana*, and to the pilgrimage to Mecca, in Sofia’s case a female version. Born in Cairo, Sofia migrates to Italy as a desirable consequence of her marriage: “I wasn’t happy about the idea of the marriage itself, but I liked the idea of going to live in Italy, the Mecca of fashion” (40). In this Mecca, Sofia becomes a clandestine hairdresser, forced to wear the veil by her observant husband and hide the profession she practices on the side. It is within Sofia’s private sphere that the titular question of divorce is first introduced. The facility of divorce in Muslim countries was already a topos in nineteenth-century accounts such as those of Finati; Lakhous rescripts this scenario in relation to the Pietro Germi film evoked by the title, *Divorce, Italian Style*, and updates it by transferring it to the female sphere. The plot of the film turns upon the impossibility of divorce in Italy in 1962 and the machinations necessary for a Sicilian to rid himself of an unwanted wife. In

both the male travelogues of the nineteenth century and the Italian film, however, divorce is understood to serve the interests of male desire. *Divorce Islamic Style* brings these two strands together, but with a twist: divorce is easily obtained, as it is in Islamic law, but the closing section of the novel turns upon Sofia's desire to rid herself of an unwanted husband and marry Christian/Issa, whom she fantasizes as "the Arab Marcello."

There would be much to say about the role of the *commedia all'italiana* in Lakhou's works, but for our present purposes two things stand out: the role that posing plays already in relation to southern Italian identity in the Geremi film, and the *mise-en-abyme* that is produced in the novel by the introduction of updated mediatic references.<sup>17</sup> The protagonist of *Divorce, Italian Style* is a Sicilian baron, Ferdinando Cefalù, a.k.a. Fefè, played by Marcello Mastroianni, that same Marcello whom Sofia evokes in her fantasy about Issa/Christian as "the Arab Marcello." Mastroianni poses: his performance of southernness includes an exaggerated facial tic, greasily pomaded hair, and a use of the preterite that stands out from his otherwise standard spoken Italian; it is clear that we are to observe the artifice of his performance, to delight in the distance between the star whom we know to be Mastroianni, and the stigmatized southerner, intent on exploiting article 587 of the Italian Penal Code (abolished only in 1981).<sup>18</sup> Here, too, stereotypes circulate: Fefè's wife's upper lip is darkened by more than a hint of a mustache, women are jealously guarded, and the code of honor reigns in the place of law in a sun-drenched, backward Sicily. The evocation of *Divorce, Italian Style* thus participates in the generalization of stereotypes that includes migrants and "Italians *DOC*" equally and underlines the practice of posing as characteristic of "identity, Italian style" per se.

*Divorce Islamic Style* follows the Orientalist script to the threshold of the local mosque, when Christian/Issa's supervisor, "Captain Judas," announces that it is necessary "to infiltrate the Mosque of Peace" in order to reveal the head of the terrorist cell, which Judas claims is none other than Sofia's husband, Felice. "This is a real opportunity," says Christian/Issa, "a unique experience that would enrich my résumé as an Orientalist" (140). The expected topoi of conversion to Islam and fear of its attendant circumcision are invoked *in via negativa*: "I'm not asking you to convert to Islam," exclaims Judas, who then adds, "when you perform ablutions, don't show your pecker. Remember, you're not circumcised" (139; translation modified). Farther than this joking invocation of conversion, however, the novel does not go; Christian does not cross the threshold and enter the mosque, renounce his faith, or submit to circumcision. Soon thereafter we see Christian/Issa take off his non-EU "immigrant clothes" (161) and, with them, his Orientalist pose: "The obsession with showing that I know the other well, or rather, the obsession with always having to astonish him. That's what the work of an Arabist consists of! A peckerhead's profession, precisely!" (162; translation modified). The Orientalist script is abandoned, and the boundary between Christian and Muslim is not crossed in the diegetic world of the novel.

Indeed, the novel could well have ended here; Christian has taken off the "immigrant clothes" and with them jettisons his role as ethnographic "spy." But two chapters remain, and in them not only are the plot lines regarding Sofia tied

up, but a double *mise-en-abyme* is introduced. The first is announced by Sofia soon after her husband repudiates her for the third and fateful time, thereby rendering divorce definitive. The repentant husband pleads tearfully for forgiveness in a scene that strikes Sofia as a *déjà vu*: “It’s like a scene from a very boring *telenovela*. The title could be *Divorce Islamic Style 3*” (167); an “episode” or so later, Sofia extends the title of her telenovela: “Now *Divorce Islamic Style in Viale Marconi* has surpassed all the Egyptian, Mexican, Brazilian and Turkish *telenovelas* put together” (171). This is not a classic *mise-en-abyme*, in which a miniature version of the work appears within the work itself—*Hamlet’s* play within the play—with the effect that the embedded work (the play within the play) makes the embedding work (*Hamlet*) seem to be less fictional, but rather something like its reversal.<sup>19</sup> Sofia’s *Divorce Islamic Style* recodes the novel in which it appears, making it now appear to be metafictional: Lakhous’s *Divorce Islamic Style* contains Sofia’s *Divorce Islamic Style*; the literary text embeds a *telenovela*. Such a recoding crosses previously established boundaries between fictional modes, and is given its final fillip by the revelation by Judas that the entire “Operation Little Cairo” was nothing more than a trumped-up test: “So Operation Little Cairo was all staged?” asks Christian/Issa. “Staged? Nooo. . . . You read it: it was a test, a training exercise. ‘A sort of *Candid Camera*, a *Truman Show Italian Style*.” (183–84). The more interesting reference for our purposes is to the American film *The Truman Show*, in which the character of the film discovers that he has been the subject of a reality-TV show since his birth; as Emma Kafalenos has observed, the film embeds the television show in such a way as to render the borders between the two often indistinguishable. In Lakhous’s *Divorce Islamic Style*, the revelation that the migrant reality in which Christian/Issa posed and passed was itself one big pose erodes the ground upon which any reliable distinction might be made between authentic identities and those assumed as part of a “staged scene” This sudden shift of ground finds expression in an equally sudden linguistic shift on the part of Christian/Issa, who adopts an accent (“son of a brostitute,” Christian/Issa spits at Judas) that is as likely to be Egyptian as Sicilian, and that we recognize as that of his apartment-mate Saber, who could pass for an Italian *DOC* were it not for the fact that “he can’t pronounce the letter ‘p,’ and to survive linguistically he clings, like a desperate shipwrecked sailor, to the ‘b.’ When he says the word ‘brostitute’ people think he’s Sicilian” (71). Saber’s name itself conjures up “Sabir,” as *Lingua Franca* of the early modern Mediterranean was also called: John Holm writes that the pidgin derived primarily from Italian and Provençal, and came to be called “Sabir,” probably from a phrase such as “Sabir parlar?” meaning “Do you know how to speak (*Lingua Franca*)?” (Holm 2: 607–10).<sup>20</sup> The identities of the Sicilian-Tunisian-Italian and now Egyptian Christian/Issa are thus not untangled in the final moment; instead, Christian/Issa becomes the site of the proliferation and crossing of languages and identities that is generalized as an Italian future in which it is no longer possible to say who is a migrant and who is not. At the same time, the evocation of “Sabir” entreats us to continue to reread the past of the transnational migrations of “Italians *DOC*” as we move toward that future.

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## Notes

- An early version of this chapter was published in *California Italian Studies*, 2.1 (2011).
1. I am grateful to Marco Purpura and Avy Valladares for calling my attention to the layering of migrations in these two films.
  2. Throughout the essay, I have relied upon the 2012 English translation, noting instances in which I have modified it. In this case of the passage quoted previously, I have translated the entire final sentence, which is not included in the published translation.
  3. On the supposed "transparency" of local populations, see Roy.
  4. I am grateful to Marco Purpura from bringing this work to my attention. Recent sociological work has been done on passing on the part of Albanian immigrants in Italy by Vincenzo Romania.
  5. Elsewhere I have compared Finati-Mahomet's experience to those of his contemporary John Lewis Burckhardt, and the later Richard F. Burton, both of whom also entered Mecca, Burckhardt as a convert to Islam, and Burton as emphatically not a convert, and hence the one true "Christian" in disguise. If Finati-Mahomet might be called an "accidental Orientalist," both Burckhardt and Burton were professionals who trained for their roles, which combined both passing and posing.
  6. I owe the notion of contact zones to Pratt. Such a project is in sympathy with recent work on Italian "diasporas," such as that of Gabaccia and Choate.
  7. Finati's narrative has not been the object of scholarly study for its own sake, but rather for the information it provides about William Bankes. See, for example, Lewis, Sartre-Fauriat, and Sartre. An Italian translation of Finati's narrative was published by Michele Visani in 1941.

8. In an infamous 1976 interview in *Playboy* magazine, President Jimmy Carter admitted to having looked upon many women with lust, and therefore that he had committed adultery in his heart.
9. "Egyptomania" names the craze for all things Egyptian (ranging from the Egyptian Revival in architecture to refiguring of race in the American South) that saw its most spectacular outburst in the wake of Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798. For a trans-historical overview, see Curl.
10. Lakhous's play with the identities of religious figures is quite explicit. The name "Issa" is said to be "the equivalent of Jesus for Muslims," and the official of SISMI (Service for Military Information and Security) who hires him consequently adopts the nickname "Giuda," Judas (34). On the importance of naming in Lakhous's *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* in particular, as well as in postcolonial literary practice more generally, see Derobertis.
11. On spatial representation in *Scontro di civiltà*, see Pezzarossa.
12. Remember that Verdi's *Aida* had its debut in Cairo in 1871.
13. English in the original. See <http://www.amaralakhous.com>.
14. In a 2005 interview, Lakhous compares his use of dialect to that of Gadda: "I try to use Neapolitan or Milanese, according to the language that the various characters use. This is an enormous adventure that I cannot confront alone, and I therefore need a figure like that which Emilio Gadda used for *That Awful Mess on Via Merulana*, a novel for which he needed the advice of a Roman" (Farah).
15. Here, too, there is an autobiographical link, since Lakhous himself earned a degree in cultural anthropology at "La Sapienza" in Rome.
16. I play upon the title of the classic Orientalist study, Edward W. Lane's 1836 *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*.
17. Lakhous also employs cinematic references to add to the layering of migrations his novel *Divorce* evokes; for example, Issa cites Francesco Rosi's 1959 film *I magliari*, which recounts the adventures of a group of Italian swindlers in Germany as an example of "dei vu cumprà italiani" (73).
18. Article 587 reads, "Whoever causes the death of a spouse, daughter, or sister, in the act in which he discovers the illegitimate carnal relation and in the state of rage caused by the offense thereby given to his honor or that of his family, is punishable by imprisonment of a duration of three to seven years." See "Article 587 codice penale Rocco."
19. The semiotician Yuri Lotman suggests that the play within the play "encourages the perception of the remaining space of the text as real" (381).
20. Holm writes that Lingua Franca (with capital letters) probably began with the First Crusade in 1096, and that the first-known text, written in Tunisia, dates to 1353. It is to be distinguished from *lingua franca* (uncapitalized), which has come to mean "any vehicular language" used by groups with no other language in common. What is more, Holm reports that a variety of "restructured Italian" that is used in Ethiopia, which is distinct from Lingua Franca, "uses /b/ in place of Italian /p/" (609), adding yet further geographical reach to the history of migrations and colonizations evoked by the novel.

# Pier Paolo Pasolini in Eritrea

## Subalternity, Grace, Nostalgia, and the “Rediscovery” of Italian Colonialism in the Horn of Africa

*Giovanna Trento*

[W]hen I travel to a Third World country, I do it for my own pleasure, out of mere selfishness, because over there I feel better. Sometimes I happen to be in a country and lose sight of the injustice and misery that reign there, of its ruling reactionary regime.

Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1970<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

The life and works of writer and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini (1922–75) are dotted with references to Africa, Africans, and their diaspora, starting from 1958 until his death in 1975. His constructions and representations of Africa and Africans were multifaceted and had numerous intellectual, political, poetic, erotic, aesthetic, and autobiographical goals and nuances. However, Pasolini’s “African gaze” in its entirety is deeply connected to his wider approach to alterity, subalternity, the South, and—as I will explain—to his construction of the “Pan-South” (*Panmeridione*) running through his work (Trento, *Pasolini e l’Africa*).

This chapter will first identify the tools—both national (including the centrality of the dualistic theorization of Italy’s Southern Question) and transnational—through which Pasolini’s multifaceted Africa was conceived, and will then focus on his representations of the Horn of Africa. Even though Pasolini’s Africa was influenced by Marxist, Pan-Africanist, anticolonialist, Gramscian, and post-Gramscian discourses, it was also much affected by Italy’s self-representations and the construction of a “Mediterranean Africa” that emerged during Italian colonialism,

both before and during Fascism (Trento, “From Marinetti to Pasolini”). This is particularly evident in Pasolini’s Eritrean texts, which, between 1968 and the mid-1970s, openly referred to Eritrea and the Eritreans as a former Italian colony and a colonized people.

Literary representations of Italian East Africa were very rare in Italy after World War II, with Ennio Flaiano’s 1947 novel *Tempo di uccidere* (*A Time to Kill*), set in the Horn of Africa in the mid-1930s during Italy’s military campaign in Ethiopia, representing a great exception. Pasolini is the author who, after Italy’s loss of its African colonies, most continuously and significantly approached Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa. His Eritrean texts, despite their being difficult and disturbing, provide unique and precious tools to retrace and rewrite the underlying continuity between prefascist colonialism, Fascism, and postcolonial representations of Italian colonial Africa.

### Pasolini’s Africa(s) and the “Pan-South”

In 1961, Pasolini traveled to Kenya with writers Elsa Morante and Alberto Moravia. After this first trip to sub-Saharan Africa, many others followed, so much so that in the 1960s and 1970s his many journeys to Sudan, Zanzibar, Ghana, Guinea, Uganda, Tanzania (at that time called Tanganyika), Senegal, Ivory Coast, Mali, Burkina Faso, Kenya, and Eritrea left strong marks in his work.<sup>2</sup> Already in 1958 though, Pasolini’s poems “Alla Francia” and “Frammento alla morte” prefigured many of the poetic and political goals of his “African gaze.” From 1958 onward, multifaceted characters of African descent, set in various rural, urban and transatlantic settings, are constantly present in Pasolini’s work, including dozens of poems, the script *Il padre selvaggio* (*The Savage Father*; 1962–75), the films *Appunti per un’Orestide africana* (*Notes for an African Oresteia*; 1970), and *Il fiore delle Mille e una notte* (*Arabian Nights*; 1974), as well as numerous articles, projects, short essays, and travelogues.

The African element was crucial in articulating in its entirety Pasolini’s complex “panmeridional” relations to subalternity, alterity, and the “Pan-South,” the latter being the repository of “reality”<sup>3</sup> and a *topos* that tends to include, produce, and reproduce multiple “Souths” (here “South” is not to be taken literally in strictly geographical terms). Thanks to numerous epistemological, poetic, and political tools (including the post-Gramscian discourses on Italian southern subalternity and the influence of Pan-Africanism), Pasolini was indeed able to build a deterritorialized and idealized never-ending South: the “Pan-South” (*Panmeridione*),<sup>4</sup> meaning a fluid, nongeographical *topos* where “traditional” values are used in nontraditional and subversive ways with the goal of resisting industrialization, mass-media, and late-capitalist alienation.<sup>5</sup> To articulate this “panmeridional” perspective, Pasolini was very much attracted to Africa and the Black Atlantic. He repeatedly mentioned, in Pan-Africanist terms, Négritude and Léopold Sédar Senghor,<sup>6</sup> the African American civil rights and the Black Panther movements, Malcolm X, Frantz Fanon, and the anticolonialist discourses and struggles that led most African territories to a formal decolonization starting in 1957.<sup>7</sup>

Africa and the African diaspora thus played essential political roles and, in the 1960s, provided Pasolini with the tools for conceiving one of his most *engagé* transnational works: “Appunti per un poema sul Terzo Mondo” (1968), published in 1981, which intended to delineate political continuities between India, sub-Saharan Africa, the Arab countries, and black America, and included Mediterranean and southern Italian workers and migrants. In 1970, the film *Appunti per un’Orestiade africana* referred to afro-classicism and diaspora in Pan-Africanist terms, with the aim of connecting postcolonial Africa to pre-Hellenic Greece; his poem “Sinieciosi della diaspora” anticipated the late twentieth-century wider use of the notion of diaspora (articulated by Paul Gilroy and James Clifford, among others) by referring to both the black and the Jewish conditions in transnational terms (Trento, *Pasolini e l’Africa* 169–77).

Nevertheless, Pasolini’s constructions and representations of alterity, the South, and Africa were also strongly influenced by “local” Italian cultural and historical factors and by his youth in Italy’s northeastern Friuli region and the early poetry of that period.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in spite of his Marxist sympathies, Pasolini always paid poetic attention to national narratives and the building of Italianness, thus constructing an oxymoronic “panmeridional Italianness” (Trento “Pier Paolo Pasolini and Pan-Meridional Italianness”). Consequently, the fact that he also focused on Italy’s colonial past in the Horn of Africa is not surprising, because colonialism was an important element in the building of Italianness after the unification of the country (Labanca 25) and remained such in the early twentieth century for the shaping of both Futurism and Fascism.

Starting from an early Friulian, rural, and dialectal vocation that he had previously and vigorously asserted, Pasolini’s device for the creation of the Other brilliantly, but problematically, ended up encompassing, almost by osmosis, the African interlocutor. Africa, like the suburbs of Rome, Naples, and all the so-called Third World, was indeed a variation on the elemental Italian dialectal and rural world, so much loved and frequented by the poet in his youth. But additional elements must be added in order to grasp the complexity of this picture. Many interconnected “local factors” influenced Pasolini’s approach to subalternity, alterity, and the South, and, ultimately, marked his representations of Africa. First of all, the concept of the *Questione meridionale* (Southern Question) that had risen in the 1860s because of the need to build a “comprehensible” representation of the South in a country that was finally unified. It was only after the unification of the country, though, that the image of southern Italy became homogeneous and the South was perceived as Other. Hence, the concept of the Southern Question ended up stressing the gap between North and South and, in so doing, strongly influenced Italy’s self-representations.<sup>9</sup> The North-South dichotomy, proper to the dualistic theorization of the Southern Question, finally crystallized the image of Italian alterity in the icon of “the southern peasant without land,” who became, at the same time, a carrying element of the national identity and “the Other inside the country” (Trento, *Pasolini e l’Africa* 53–94).

From 1947 onward, Antonio Gramsci’s works began to be published in post-fascist Italy.<sup>10</sup> Gramsci tackled the Southern Question in terms that provided peasantry in general, and southern peasants in particular, with some agency and

theoretical strength, not only within the plurality of Marxist discourses but occasionally also outside Marxist groups (Matteucci; Rossi). Gramsci's work led post-war Italian anthropology to focus mostly on Italian folklore, particularly that of the South. The "Italian southern subaltern" thus became the fulcrum of a vast post-Gramscian anthropological and fictional literature that (thanks to Ernesto De Martino and others) devoted much attention to southern Italy and its folklore. Pasolini's "panmeridional" constructions were also influenced by the new focus on southern peasants provided in 1945 by the publication of Carlo Levi's novel *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*)<sup>11</sup> and by the mass migration of peasants from the rural South to the industrializing North that occurred after World War II. In January 1950, Pasolini moved from Friuli to Rome, where, in the 1950s and 1960s, he had the opportunity to meet, at the edges of the city, the subproletarian fringes of this large-scale South-North migration.

The Italian postfascist, post-Gramscian "southern" debate influenced the ways in which Pasolini constructed his approach to the Other and built his representations of Africa, by starting, precisely, from Italian subalternity. Pasolini appropriated, overturned, and reinvented the dualistic theorization of the Southern Question, so much so that the "Other inside the country" became for him, alternatively, the black-African deterritorialized within the "Pan-South," or the "panmeridional" iconic figure without class consciousness but endowed with the "reality" of the "popular body"<sup>12</sup> (see, for instance, his friend and favorite actor Ninetto Davoli).<sup>13</sup> Pasolini's journey through Africa and the "Pan-South" was thus also a nostalgic journey through pre-World War II Italy, because—according to him—in postfascist Italy subaltern classes were irremediably going through a dreadful and destructive "anthropological mutation" (Pasolini, *Scritti corsari* 40–41). Pasolini's Africa could thus present itself as a mirror of the beloved and corruptible "savage native village" (*natio borgo selvaggio*, as Giacomo Leopardi put it), as it is evident in his 1962 African poem "La Guinea," which—apart from referring to Négritude in "panmeridional" terms—is first of all a homage to Italian peasantry and the village of Casarola, where poet Attilio Bertolucci liked to spend his time.

### Pasolini in Eritrea

As mentioned before, Pasolini's Africa had multiple facets and different nuances. Among them a somewhat homogeneous Eritrean *corpus* can be detected, one that is particularly far from the transnational, *engagé*, and Marxist attitudes that characterize some of his other African works, such as "La Resistenza negra" and "Appunti per un poema sul Terzo Mondo." In this chapter I will refer in particular to two posthumous travelogues and a long article that describe Eritrea and Eritreans: "La grazia degli Eritrei" (written in 1968, published in 1981), "Post-scriptum a 'La grazia degli Eritrei'" (written in 1973, published in 1981), and "Le mie 'Mille e una notte'" (1973).

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, these three rarely quoted Eritrean texts dared to openly refer to Eritrea as a former Italian colony, at a time when such openness about colonialism was unusual in Italy. "La grazia degli Eritrei" is probably the

result of Pasolini's observations during his journey in the Horn of Africa to set up his project "Appunti per un poema sul Terzo Mondo." Although this project on the Third World was not fully accomplished,<sup>14</sup> between 1968 and 1973 Pasolini kept traveling back to East Africa and the Horn to complete his films *Notes for an African Oresteia* and *Arabian Nights*. Both texts "Le mie 'Mille e una notte'" and "Post-scriptum a 'La grazia degli Eritrei'" were, indeed, connected to Pasolini's journeys to the Horn of Africa to film *Arabian Nights* (De Laude and Siti).

*Arabian Nights* should be added to this short but eloquent list (approximately one third of it was filmed in the Horn of Africa).<sup>15</sup> Moreover, Pasolini's last works—the film *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* (1975) and the unfinished novel *Petrolio* (1992, posthumous)—implicitly or explicitly referred to Eritrea and Eritreans, at least in terms of self-quotation from the three Eritrean texts mentioned above (Pasolini, *Petrolio* 125–26, 132–43).<sup>16</sup> In *Petrolio*, particularly in "Note 54" (in which he describes Italian state-controlled energy company Eni's useless investments to find oil in northern and eastern Africa), Pasolini recalls colonial Italy's efforts to find gold in the Horn of Africa.<sup>17</sup>

In many scenes from *Arabian Nights* (including the one in which the queen and the king, after exchanging bets, watch a young man and a young woman make love), the characters' clothes, hairstyles, and attitudes or even the style of some pieces of furniture clearly indicate that the film was shot in the Horn of Africa.<sup>18</sup> This basic fact has either gone unnoticed or been denied by most critics. Indeed, the critics' tendency to underplay the colonial dimension of Ennio Flaiano's novel *A Time to Kill*, as Derek Duncan highlights (110), is an aspect that also applies to Pasolini's Eritrean *corpus*.

The colonial dimension of *Arabian Nights* is particularly evident in two scenes from the film. Queen Zobeida bathes naked *en plain air* in a pool while king Harun watches her in disguise. In 1947, the main female African character in Flaiano's *A Time to Kill* had already done the same thing. Pasolini goes on to mimic the quintessential Italian colonial iconic figure of the Black Venus,<sup>19</sup> who coquettishly accepts the colonial gaze by covering her pubis with her hands. Yet the *Arabian Nights*' bathing scene could be read as Pasolini's ironic quotation of what can be considered the very first all-nude scene in mainstream Italian cinema: in the colonial film *Sentinelle di bronzo* (Sentinels of Bronze, 1937), filmed by Romolo Marcellini in Italian East Africa,<sup>20</sup> sexy, joyful, completely naked East African girls bathe in a river. Moreover, in another scene from *Arabian Nights*, Aziz (interpreted by Davoli) is pushed into the house of a wealthy black African young lady with whom he eventually has sex. Shortly after, we see her elegantly dressed, keeping her "half-caste" child close to her. This image reminds us of the late nineteenth-century colonial iconography of the Eritrean *madama*, dressed up in European fashion next to her Eritrean-Italian child, as portrayed in Italian colonial photographs of the time.<sup>21</sup>

Ines Pellegrini, a young African Italian woman Pasolini met in Eritrea in the early 1970s, plays the leading female role in *Arabian Nights*, that of the slave Zumurrud. At the very beginning of the film, Zumurrud appears on sale in a market square. She is not a passive object though, since she selects her prospective master and sells herself to an attractive teenager who then becomes her lover. As Colleen Ryan-Scheutz noted, "Zumurrud's choice of Nur ed Din can also be seen as an

autobiographical reference, given Pasolini's regular solicitation of humble young men for sex" (264). Zumurrud reads and recites poetry in this film. She is thus a self-referential figure for Pasolini, like many other artists and intellectuals throughout his work. However, the article "Le mie 'Mille e una notte'" also reveals the colonial dimension of Pasolini's encounter with Ines Pellegrini: "When I saw an Eritrean-Italian *meticcica* (who was going to play the role of the slave Zumurrud) in the PEA offices, I was so touched, as to be almost moved to tears, facing her small, somehow irregular features, and yet as perfect as those of a metal statue,<sup>22</sup> facing that twittering, questioning Italian, and those eyes of hers, lost in beseeching hesitation. I was in Asmara to look for other girls like her" ("Le mie 'Mille e una notte'" 1885). Pasolini identifies Ines Pellegrini as a *meticcica*. During colonialism the term *meticcio*—instead of *mulatto*—applied to African Italians in the Horn of Africa.<sup>23</sup> The *meticci* became the target of a preliminary set of racist norms issued from Rome during the first half of the 1930s (Gabrielli), while in 1937 the banning of colonial concubinage between Italian men and African women in the Horn paved the way to wider racist legislation enacted in the metropole in 1938 against Jews, Africans, homosexuals, and other "minorities."<sup>24</sup>

In *Arabian Nights* the slave Zumurrud is an icon of subalternity. She is a black African female slave located somewhere in Pasolini's "Pan-South." She is assertive and has some agency, being blessed with the joy and the "reality" that only belong to subaltern classes and are constitutive of the "popular body." At the very end of the film, though, in order to retain her essentialized subaltern condition, Zumurrud is happy to return to the slave-master-lover dynamics, without wishing to escape her enslaved condition.<sup>25</sup>

### Notes on Subalternity, Grace, and Nostalgia

Various texts by Pasolini pose the uncomfortable question of the essentialization of subaltern bodies and the crystallization of the "primitive" premodern condition. This is a controversial political issue that was aggressively highlighted by Franco Fortini (140), but it also has to do with Pasolini's private life, his fear of aging, and the construction of a marginalized and "different" self.<sup>26</sup> Luca Caminati rejects Chris Bongie's criticism of Pasolini's "decadent" and exotic approach to "prehistory" by highlighting that in Pasolini the "prehistory" of Africa and the Third World have Marxist connotations and must be read as the condition that precedes the revolution (47).

Caminati's observations may be well grounded, but, still, Pasolini formulated descriptions of Eritreans and Eritrea that are unquestionably disturbing and have been, so far, mostly ignored.<sup>27</sup> Let us read how the last lines of "Post-scriptum a 'La grazia degli Eritrei'" (which overturns the positive image of Eritreans outlined by Pasolini's previous travelogue) describe Eritreans, the stereotypically faithful colonial soldier (the *ascaro*), and their complete lack of agency: "Stability is their anxiety, because they are desperately unstable, and somebody's love binds them to life, reassuring them with their own presence. The loss of that love probably implies the loss of their own presence. . . . The *ascaro*'s loyalty was basically



a way not to disappear completely, not to feel reality slipping away from oneself” (“Post-scriptum a ‘La grazia degli Eritrei’” 57–58). At a first glance this description seems to refer to Eritreans and Eritrea’s colonial past and to vaguely allude to the paternalistic descriptions of *ascari* formulated by the Italians during colonialism.<sup>28</sup> However—as it often happens with Pasolini’s descriptions of Africa—it also has much to do with the Italian South. Indeed, the expression “the loss of their own presence” is a quote and, partly, a reinvention of Ernesto De Martino’s fundamental anthropological and philosophical categories, formulated in his studies of Italian southern folklore.<sup>29</sup> This element shows how Pasolini’s approach to Africa and the “Pan-South” can, to some extent, be a reference to Italy’s self-representation. However, such self-referential (or even Orientalist) aspects in his work are attenuated and complicated by the fact that the Other (the peasant, the subproletarian, the African), portrayed by Pasolini throughout his life, is also the mirror of an unreachable and unwanted image of the writer himself. Such play of roles and mirroring initiate the fruitful poetic chain of oxymorons that is at the core of his “poetry making.”<sup>30</sup>

I thus disagree with Bongie’s statement according to which Pasolini’s encounter with the Third World was infertile (191). Pasolini’s Eritrean texts had the exceptional capacity of “rediscovering” the colonial past by realizing that such past was not only untold but also unspeakable. In 1968, the first line of “La grazia degli Eritrei” stated, “Eritrea is completely different from how we imagine it.” Despite such apparent Otherness, Eritrea becomes visible through the colonial gaze: “Well, we recognize a place like this because, when we were children, we saw it in patriotic color reproductions of the conquest of Eritrea in 1895 [sic] (or maybe in some old collections of *La Domenica del Corriere*)<sup>31</sup> but certainly not because anyone with a full knowledge of the facts described it to us” (50).

In 1973, Pasolini would still be stating, “As far as I know, no words exist in Italian to aptly describe the architecture of Asmara, Keren, or Agordat: the colonial style is perfectly inexpressible” (“Le mie ‘Mille e una notte’” 1887). Despite his great intuition, Pasolini ended up providing long and beautiful descriptions of Eritrea and Eritreans by employing multiple poetic and epistemological tools, including literary and imaginary figures and anthropological and scholarly theories formulated in Italy during the colonial period and by the literature produced at the time. Here is a description of Eritreans contained in “La grazia degli Eritrei,” which is particularly rich in cross-references and echoes from different sources:

Very beautiful, indeed. . . . Their heads, with frizzy, almost shaved hair, are heads of statues. Their Semitic or Arab traits are as perfect as those of animals, and there isn’t an eye that shines without a wonderful light that has no depth, a grace that is mysteriously without mystery. . . . They are a population of peasants, but for centuries in their villages private property has not existed. The land is held collectively and the fields’ ownership rotates among families. This means that Eritreans have not been used to ownership for centuries. This probably gives them that graceful detachment from all things and the sense of natural (neither servile nor proud) equality with everybody. It is their inner beauty that is physical beauty. (53–54)

Pasolini's picture of Eritreans' "classic" statuesque beauty reveals underlying links with nineteenth-century missionary writings; in particular Giuseppe Sapeto's *Viaggio e missione cattolica tra i Mensa i Bogos e gli Habab* which, in 1857, highlighted the "classic beauty" of those East African peoples (Chelati Dirar 193). "La grazia degli Eritrei" also suggests implicit references to the influential prefascist theory of the *Homo eurafricanus* formulated by anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi; a theory according to which Eritreans, Ethiopians, North Africans, and Italians belonged to a common Mediterranean species (De Donno; Sergi). In the 1930s, although Fascism officially banned any theorization of genetic continuity between Italians and East Africans, the construction of "Mediterranean Africa" (as far as the Horn was concerned) kept operating through the emphasis on the study of Greek and Latin antiquity<sup>32</sup> (Bausi 552–57). Moreover, Pasolini's reference to the collective ownership of Eritrean lands was probably based on a 1916 study by well-known linguist and ethnographer Carlo Conti Rossini on different forms of land tenure in the region (124–36).<sup>33</sup>

Although Jonathan Miran underlined "the captivating grace that anyone who knows Eritreans recognizes instantly" (267), Pasolini's use of the term "grace" also echoes the theological concept of charisma (a divinely conferred power or talent). "Grace" is a recurrent term in his work and summarizes theological, aesthetic, and erotic elements. "La grazia degli Eritrei" (literally, "The Eritreans' Grace") presents Eritreans' physical beauty as both an ethical and aesthetic value ("It is their inner beauty that is physical beauty" 54). Eritrean bodies are the repository of the "grace," "reality," and sacredness that—according to Pasolini—are proper to the peasant, subaltern, and "popular body." Such a description persists even in Pasolini's last tragic film *Salò*: when the East African servant (interpreted, once again, by Ines Pellegrini) appears in the film for the first time, the camera briefly lingers on her delicate profile and facial features in a way that echoes the quote given above.

In "Le mie 'Mille e una notte,'" populist and Franciscan traits are evident in Pasolini's descriptions of old Coptic African priests (1897). But "Le mie 'Mille e una notte,'" "Post-scriptum a 'La grazia degli Eritrei,'" and *Petrolio* (all written around 1973) also portray some interactions between "master and slave," "colonizer and colonized," "Western and African," which either stress the total alienation of the two elements in these binaries from one another or seem to justify any abuse of power. In *Petrolio* (in "Note 41," eloquently titled "The Purchase of a Slave") Pasolini describes black African female slaves for sale on the outskirts of Khartoum who undress in front of their potential buyer (a white British journalist):

They smiled the way peasant women smile, flashing their teeth, and looked at the buyer with a certain mocking impudence (that is, as if from the heart of their blackness they considered this white man 'other,' exactly as he at heart considered them; the estrangement was so great there was no possibility of a meeting, not even a meeting of a morally negative character, dramatic, scandalous, as between the one who buys a human being and the one who is bought! Evidently those women felt so different, so *distant* from the man who was buying them that his act became nonexistent,

or at least did not concern their real life). Observing those smiling, provocative faces, Tristram thought of prostitutes. (135)

Provocative and disturbing statements of this kind are not rare in Pasolini's Eritrean texts and in his last years of work in general. This is due to many factors that bound politics and aesthetics, narration and autobiography, and to which here I can only refer very briefly. The "politically incorrect" (and probably unacceptable) radical alienation between subaltern and bourgeois statuses, "primitive" and "modern" conditions (upon which Pasolini's work often relies) is, in the first place, a "poetic device" based on his constant use of the oxymoron, the notion of "false naivety" he borrowed from poet Giovanni Pascoli ever since the 1940s (Stack 19–20), and the influence, from 1967 onwards, of a personal and nostalgic reading of Ezra Pound that stressed the relevance for the American poet of his rural background<sup>34</sup> (Cadel 33–62).

As previously stated, slaves and subjugated individuals are also self-referential figures (as in the case of Zumurrud in *Arabian Nights*). In *Petrolio*, Pasolini conferred political and erotic centrality to the phallus. Carlo (the bourgeois, dissociated, and autobiographical main character) repeatedly puts himself in the position of a slave or refers to himself as such. He voluntary subjugates himself in full to proletarian and subproletarian phalluses, thus subverting the social dynamics of power through autobiography and sex; nonetheless the play of roles in the novel can be quite ambiguous (165–95, 234–62). Provocatively, the agency of subaltern individuals (if they have any) can even reside in their most "conservative," "traditional," or "prehistoric" behaviors and conditions (as "being a slave"). Subaltern individuals' conservative traits are, indeed, meant to radically oppose late capitalism, liberalism and "fascist postmodernity" (as we will see below) in the name of "prehistory" and "premodernity."<sup>35</sup>

In an interview with Francesca Cadel, Antonio Negri noted that Pasolini's *populismo estetico* ("aesthetic populism")<sup>36</sup>—based on Franciscan ideal models and a general sense of political and personal defeat—pushed him, in the 1970s, to "invent" the tendency of Italian society to move toward a new fascism, meaning a completely negative form of postmodernity that Pasolini erroneously called fascism (or *neocapitalismo*, I would add) and summarized in his last film *Salò*<sup>37</sup> (Cadel, "Intervista a Antonio Negri," 177–89). So, starting from 1968 on, Pasolini—who was decidedly antifascist—ended up forging a nostalgic gaze on how subaltern classes and "popular bodies" lived and acted during Fascism, meaning before they irremediably started sinking into the "unreal" and alienated condition proper to late capitalism (Pasolini, "La forma della città" 2128–29). The article "Le mie 'Mille e una notte'" describes Italians who were still living in Eritrea at the beginning of the 1970s, including some "old fascists" portrayed in somehow benevolent terms: "To tell the truth, even any possible 'fascism' of those naively nostalgic 'old Italians' is not among the most detestable ones: it is a curious and quite funny fossil" (1901). Eritreans as well are dragged into Pasolini's "postmodern effort" of reinventing Fascism, as we read in "La grazia degli Eritrei": "[Eritreans] judge the wrongs done to them (for instance the Fascist ones) without getting involved in them, meaning without becoming partners in rancor" (54).

## Conclusion

Somewhere between blitheness and provocation, Pasolini operated a disturbing but fruitful collision between his “reinvention” of Fascism and his representation of colonialism. The play of roles, echoes, and cross-references in his approach to subalternity and power dynamics is extremely complex though, not only because Pasolini’s (mis)representations of Africans (Eritreans in particular) were connected to Italy’s self-representation but also because they were instrumental to the poetic and political horizons that agitated his last years of activity. Moreover, through his identifications with the Other, Pasolini claimed and built up for himself a complex and at times contradictory notion of marginality and diversity.

By first defining Eritrea as unspeakable, but then (boldly and surprisingly) openly referring to Italian colonialism in the region, Pasolini’s greatest achievement—through the use of oxymoron and contradiction—is to make evident that Italy’s postfascist and postcolonial “colonial oblivion” was indeed only apparent. By digging up tools provided mostly by prefascist and Fascist colonialism (but also by a postcolonial “colonial imagery,” such as *La Domenica del Corriere*), he thus ended up “speaking the unspeakable.” Finally, in showing a certain degree of frankness in revealing the colonial descent of his Orientalist gaze, Pasolini highlighted consistent fluidities and continuities in Italian representations of the Horn of Africa through the construction of “Mediterranean Africa,” a construction that, despite Fascism, persisted from the unification of the country in the nineteenth century until the 1970s.

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### Notes

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1. Dufflot 50. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
2. Writer Nico Naldini (Pasolini’s biographer and one of his closest relatives) reconstructed the chronology of Pasolini’s journeys to Africa (Naldini CII-CXXII). However, Naldini did not mention a trip to Eritrea in 1968 that prompted Pasolini to write the travelogue “La grazia degli Eritrei,” published in 1981 (Trento, *Pasolini e l’Africa* 153).
3. Pasolini’s notion of “reality” is very close to that of sacredness and has little to do with “realism” (de Ceccatty 56, 112). For him, “reality” is a sort of “primordial authenticity” that finds full application in popular bodies and sexuality.
4. For an accurate explanation of the concepts of *Panmeridione* (“Pan-South”) and *Pameridionalismo* (“Panmeridionalism”), see Trento *Pasolini e l’Africa*, 29–35.
5. On Pasolini’s oxymoronic “*non-traditional* use of tradition” since the 1940s, see Santato 378.
6. The Senegalese writer and politician Senghor (one of the “fathers” of Négritude) is one of the main references of Pasolini’s Africa, as exemplified by the last minutes of *Appunti per un’Orestide africana* (1970). The poem “La Guinea” (collected in *Poesia in forma di rosa*, 1964) and the article “Che fare col ‘buon selvaggio?’” (published posthumously, but written in 1970) contain explicit references to Négritude.
7. In Pasolini’s drama *Calderón* (written in 1967), African American leader Malcolm X, Caribbean American activist Stokely Carmichael, and Nigerian writer Obi Egbuna (member of the Black Panther movement in Great Britain) are basic sources of Pablo’s “revolutionary culture.” “Appunti per un poema sul Terzo Mondo” (written in 1968) mentions Frantz Fanon and other black activists; Malcolm X, interpreted by an actor, was going to be the protagonist of the episode on black American ghettos. Africa’s decolonization is at the core of Pasolini’s short essay “La Resistenza negra” (1961) as well as his sketch *La rabbia* (*The Rage*, 1963), which is part of the eponymous film co-directed with Giovannino Guareschi.
8. Among Pasolini’s numerous poems and writings either set in Friuli or written in Friulian dialect, special mention goes to his first collection of poems *Poesie a Casarsa*, published in 1942.
9. On such complex issues related to the dualistic theorization of the Southern Question, see Bevilacqua, Moe, and Schneider.
10. Antonio Gramsci’s *Lettere dal carcere* (*Letters from Prison*) was published in 1947 and afterwards many posthumous publications followed. The six volumes of *Quaderni del carcere* (*The Prison Notebooks*) came out between 1948 and 1951, reaching in 1975 their most accredited critical edition, edited by Valentino Gerratana.



11. Pasolini fleetingly mentions Levi in his essay “La Resistenza negra” (1961). On Carlo Levi’s ambivalent representation of peasantry and the impact onto Italian Left, see Alberto Mario Cirese 16–17.
12. The notion of “popular body” (*corpo popolare*)—with its blend of “reality,” “grace,” sacredness, sexiness, resistance to the establishment, and mocking impudence—is fundamental in Pasolini’s political and aesthetic approach to subalternity and the “Pan-South.” For further details on this complex matter, see my paper “*Il corpo popolare* According to Pier Paolo Pasolini: Body, Sexuality, Subalternity, Reality, Resistance, Agency, and Death,” presented at the conference *Pasolini’s Body: New Directions in Pasolini Scholarship*, held in 2011 at the University of California Santa Cruz, and still unpublished.
13. Even though paternalistic and Orientalist traits are present to some extent in Pasolini’s representations of Africa, alterity, and subalternity, his “use” of Gramsci foreshadows some “postmodern” considerations developed by Anglophone left-wing intellectuals and social scientists, including the necessity of reconsidering the “classic” Marxist concept of social class in the light of other individual and sociopolitical variables, notably “race, class, and gender,” as Edward P. Thompson first pointed out (Thompson).
14. On the work-in-progress project “Appunti per un poema sul Terzo Mondo,” see an interview with Pasolini conducted in April 1968 by Lino Peroni and published the same year in *Inquadrature* (Peroni).
15. *Arabian Nights*’ closing credits mention Ethiopia, but not Eritrea, since Eritrea was still formally part of Ethiopia when the film was shot, and it became independent only in 1993.
16. The two Italian editions of the novel *Petrolio* (the first, edited by Graziella Chiarocci and Maria Careri and published in 1992, and the other, edited by Silvia De Laude and published in 2005) are quite different from each other. For the purpose of this chapter, I will quote exclusively from the English translation by Ann Goldstein.
17. In *Petrolio* Pasolini wrote, “In Eritrea precisely ten billions were invested—around five million a day for operating the drills—without the slightest positive result” (164). This statement reminds us that, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, Italy aimed to find gold in Eritrea and Ethiopia through the mining activity of several companies, such as: Società Eritrea per le miniere d’oro (1900–1914), MIAFIORIT (1918–22), and AMAO, founded in 1936. However, most of the Italian searches for gold proved to be unsuccessful (Zaccaria 65–110).
18. In describing Eritreans, Pasolini’s article “Le mie ‘Mille e una notte’” also mentions the *futa* (1893). Pasolini here recycles a Tigrinya word found in many Italian colonial novels (before Pasolini) and used to refer to the “typical” and stereotyped garment common in the African Horn.
19. On this important colonial iconic figure, see Ponzanesi.
20. On the representations of Africa in Italian cinema—colonial films included—see Brunetta and Gili. To retrace Italian colonial fictional literature, Giovanna Tomasello’s anthologies are still helpful, despite some inaccuracies (1984, 2004).
21. On Italian colonial photography, see Palma.
22. This description of Ines Pellegrini alludes to the “classic” statuesque beauty of East African peoples reported by nineteenth-century and colonial sources, as it will be pointed out in the next paragraph.
23. The use of the term *meticcio*—as highlighted by Robin Pickering-Iazzi—is confusing: “Literally the world *meticcio* and its variants mean mestizo, indicating in Italian a person of mixed white and East Indian race. Nonetheless, the world *meticcio*, and not *mulatto*, which existed as the precise racial term in Italian, was widely used to denote

- individuals with one parent of an African race and the other of European origin” (Pickering-Iazzi 206). However—as suggested by Luca Caminati during our conversation in Santa Cruz in 2011—the Italian colonial use of the term *meticcio* could have been inspired by the French term *métis*.
24. On Italian Fascist racism, see the volume edited by Centro Furio Jesi in 1994. On colonial concubinage in Eritrea see, first of all, Giulia Barrera’s work; on colonial concubinage in Ethiopia, see my article “*Madamato* and Colonial Concubinage in Ethiopia: A Comparative Perspective.”
  25. I only partly agree with the accurate description of Zumurrud outlined by Colleen Ryan-Scheutz, who stresses this character’s subversive self-assertiveness (Ryan-Scheutz 189–93).
  26. Fruitful—at times provocative—suggestions on these topics were formulated by Marco Belpoliti, Andrea Cortellessa, and Armando Maggi.
  27. “Le mie ‘Mille e una notte’” did not have a large impact on the Italian audience because it came out in *Playboy* rather than in a major newspaper. Moreover, Pasolini’s Eritrean travelogues were published posthumously. We do not know if Pasolini (a prolific writer) judged his travelogues unpublishable or he intended to collect his African writings in a volume, since—as suggested by Gian Piero Brunetta during our conversations in 2011—“in those years Africa was for him the future of the world.”
  28. Since *ascari* tended to be very young, relations between Italian officers and African soldiers were often stereotyped by Italians as “father-son” relations, even though some homosexual aspects were sometimes involved (Stefani 121–30).
  29. On the notions of “loss of presence” (*perdita della presenza*) and “crisis of the presence and protection of magic” (*crisi della presenza e protezione magica*) in the Italian South (in Lucania in particular), ethnographer and anthropologist Ernesto De Martino wrote extensively (1948, 1958, 1959). In his anthropological studies on southern Italian magic—that were close to both philosophy and psychiatry—De Martino highlighted the protective role of the practices of magic. In *Sud e magia*, the magic of Lucania is described as a blend of socially and traditionally shared techniques, aimed at protecting the presence from “psychological misery” crisis. This happens in an existential state in which the power of negativity affects the very center of cultural positiveness—meaning the presence as working energy—and magic operates in conditions of lability of the presence (*Sud e magia* 95). On Pasolini’s readings and misreading of De Martino’s theories, see Armando Maggi (6–9). As far as the passage of “Post-scriptum a ‘La grazia degli Eritrei’” quoted above is concerned, Armando Maggi—during our conversations in 2011—outlined that in those lines Pasolini added an interesting variation to De Martino’s notions. Pasolini stated that Eritreans need “love” (*affetto*); such “love” is neither De Martino’s magic nor the Western world’s technique, but it is definitely a form of survival (*sopravvivenza*) close to De Martino’s ideas.
  30. Pasolini liked to refer to himself as the *poeta della sineciosi* (“poet of the oxymoron,” being the *sineciosi* a form of oxymoron); in so doing, Pasolini was quoting Fortini, who in 1959 had stated that antithesis and oxymoron (*sineciosi*) were at the core of Pasolini’s poetry. On Pasolini’s play of roles and mirroring, see Robert S. C. Gordon’s chapter “‘Un folle identificarsi’: Figuring the Self” (138–60). On related topics, in 2010 I presented the paper “On Pier Paolo Pasolini: Africa and the ‘Other,’” at the international symposium of Italian Studies *Tu Se’ Lo Mio Maestro e ‘l Mio Autore*, held at the University of Edinburgh, United Kingdom.
  31. Pasolini’s “Eritrean texts” repeatedly mention *La Domenica del Corriere*. Even though Pasolini did grow up in colonial and imperial Italy, the explicit references to this popular magazine are probably due to the fact that—as I was reminded by Nicola Labanca

in 2007— between September 1965 and March 1966, on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Ethiopian campaign and Mussolini’s proclamation of the empire, *La Domenica del Corriere* published weekly special inserts that Pasolini probably saw, which were explicitly titled after the Fascist colonialist song “Faccetta nera” (Little Black Face).

32. *Viaggio in Africa* was written by Giorgio Manganelli in 1970, but published “privately” in 2006 and still unavailable on the editorial market (I am grateful to Alessandro Triulzi who showed it to me). This African travel-book offers some descriptions of Ethiopia and Addis Ababa that highlight how the supposed legacies between the archetypical Mediterranean culture and the archaic Ethiopian one were still fundamental in 1970 for Manganelli’s representation of Ethiopia (Manganelli 49–50).
33. As I was reminded by Alessandro Bausi in 2011, during Italian colonialism (the period when Pasolini attended school and, partly, university), case studies on local customs, rules, and land tenure in Italian territories in Africa circulated widely in Italian society at different levels. For example, various school and university textbooks would include a chapter on Italian colonies (on diverse topics such as, for instance, “colonial law,” *diritto coloniale*).
34. Some lines by Pasolini—taken from his article “Campana e Pound” (1973) and already quoted by Francesca Cadel—are explicative: “Pound’s reactionary ideology is due to his rural background. . . . His ideology lies in nothing else than worshipping peasant values (actually revealed to him by the virtuous and pragmatic Chinese philosophy). In this sense I believe one can endorse, even politically, all Pound’s conservative verses, meant to exalt (with furious nostalgia) the rules of peasantry and the cultural unity of its Master and servants” (Pasolini 313–14).
35. On the dichotomy between Pasolini’s notions of “premodernity” and “modernity” and related topics, see Santato 15–35.
36. Franco Fortini—following Alberto Asor Rosa—mentioned Pasolini’s *populismo estetizzante*, already evident in the mid-1960s (Fortini 125).
37. Paradoxically though, Pasolini is the writer who inaugurated “postmodernism” in Italy in the early 1970s, as made particularly evident by his posthumous novel *Petrolio*.

# Southerners, Migrants, Colonized

## A Postcolonial Perspective on Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* and Southern Italy Today<sup>1</sup>

*Roberto Derobertis*

### Introduction\*

The following reading of Carlo Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*, 1945) is part of a larger project on critical reinterpretations of the Italian twentieth-century literary canon in light of the Italian colonial experience, which takes into account three elements that shape postcolonial Italy and, more generally, the global postcolonial condition: (1) the different waves of global migrations (involving both emigrants and immigrants) that have moved across southern Italy, and particularly the area encompassing Basilicata (where *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* is set), Apulia, Campania, and Calabria during the nineteenth and twentieth century; (2) the all-encompassing presence of colonial discourse in today's Italy; and (3) the movements of global capital which determine new configurations of local geographies and transnational relations.

With regard to the third point, the concluding paragraph of this essay will explore the relation between colonialism and contemporary global capitalism and how this relation plays out in the regions of southern Italy, where local peasants—the protagonists of Levi's *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*—have now been replaced by migrant workers. Given the discontinuities between the age of colonialism and contemporary times, as noted by Sandro Mezzadra, we must also bear in mind that the “relationships of power and exploitation” at the core of colonialism and imperialism have certainly not been “reduced to a ‘residual dimension.’” Rather,

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\*To Angela and Mila, and to our South

they play an essential role in shaping the profile of the world in which we live (Mezzadra, *Diritto di fuga* 87).<sup>2</sup> The transnational migrations of today can thus be read “through the lens of strong threads of continuity that link” them “to the centuries old history of the colonial rule and the rebellion against it” (Mezzadra, *Diritto di fuga* 87).

The term “postcolonial,” which appears in this essay’s title as part of the phrase “postcolonial perspective,” is therefore conceived as a strategy that frames and connects the Italian colonial past, migration from and to Italy, and the postcolonial condition, that is to say, the reappearance of elements of the colonial matrix in the current regime of global capitalism (Mezzadra, *La condizione* 23–38).

**“The war is for the benefit of those in the north”**

It seemed that schoolchildren and their teachers, Fascist Scouts, Red Cross ladies, the widows and mothers of Milanese veterans, women of fashion in Florence, grocers, shopkeepers, pensioners, journalists, policemen, and government employees in Rome, in short, all those generally grouped together under the name of “Italian people,” were swept off their feet by a wave of glory and enthusiasm. Here in Gagliano I could see nothing. The peasants were quieter, sadder, and more dour than usual. They had no faith in a promised land which had first to be taken away from those to whom it belonged; instinct told them that this was wrong and could only bring ill luck. . . . They applied for manual labour as civilians but never received an answer. “They don’t know what to do with us,” these wretched fellows<sup>3</sup> said to me. “They don’t even want us to work. The war is for the benefit of those in the north.” (Levi, *Christ* 131–32)

In reading these lines from Carlo Levi’s *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* in 2011, in the midst of the celebrations marking the 150th anniversary of Italian unification, several questions come into focus. Where is Gagliano? What is the promised land? Who are the wretched fellows with no land of their own? Why are they not included in the group of “Italian people”? Who are “those in the north”? And who are the people whose land is going to be taken away? These questions highlight some crucial issues that are part of the literary substance of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*: the presumed remoteness of Lucania<sup>4</sup>—a region in the South of Italy, between Campania, Apulia, and Calabria—and, more generally, the remoteness of southern Italy from the rest of the country; the lands of Ethiopia that are about to be occupied and their relationship with Lucania; the nature of southern Italian identity; and the relationship between poor Lucanian peasants and the colonized people in Africa. The intersection of these issues constitutes the subject matter of my essay.

The passage previously quoted refers to October 1935: Italy has declared war on Ethiopia, and news of this crucial historic event sweeps across the countryside of Lucania, where the colonialist propaganda of the Fascist regime is met with scepticism or denial. In the most striking instance, it is welcomed by peasants whose interests are being betrayed by the imperial dream of empire in a way that mirrors their earlier betrayal by the dream of national inclusion. This region constitutes a

borderland where national identity seems unstable, and the colonial articulation of the peninsula between North and South is in synchrony with the supranational colonial articulation between Italy and Africa.

Arguing for the need to bring postcolonial discourse to bear on the study of southern Italy, Pasquale Verdicchio has observed that Italian identity was consciously built on the presumed racial alterity of southerners—as articulated in a large body of work by Italian sociologists between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century—and in the geographical designation of the South as a strip of African territory on the edge of Europe. As Antonio Gramsci observes in *Prison Notebooks*, the unification project undertaken by the Risorgimento consisted of three interconnected elements: the perception of southerners as “biologically inferior beings”; the poverty of the southern masses that was inexplicable to the northern masses; the colonial choice of post-Risorgimento governments to move the potential conflict of the unemployed southern masses further south, in order to dispossess other presumed inferior populations of their own land and political autonomy (Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks* 429).

The fact that Levi was Jewish, an antifascist militant in the Italian underground resistance (1943–45), a journalist, a writer, and a painter, and subsequently an independent deputy in the *Partito Comunista Italiano* (PCI, Italian Communist Party), has prevented critics from focusing on the distinctive interweaving of two elements in the text of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, one of the classics of twentieth-century Italian literature.<sup>5</sup> These issues are the so-called Southern Question and Italian colonialism in East Africa. Although Levi’s narrative can scarcely be categorized as “colonial literature,”<sup>6</sup> since it is set in Italy rather than in the colonies and it does not focus on colonial issues or characters, his perspective is clearly anti-imperialist, as imperialism and war were among the constituent elements of the fascist ideology he sought to oppose.

As Edward W. Said argues in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), although authors are not “mechanically determined by ideology, class, or economic history,” they are “very much in the history of their society, shaping and shaped by that history and their social experience” (Said, *Culture* xxii). Similarly, in the case of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, we must be attentive to “the function of space, geography, and location” (Said, *Culture* 84) of the novel’s plot and structure, taking into account that colonialism is not a question of “dead historical facts,” but of “evident historical reality” (Said, *Culture* 89), and actual “‘structures of feeling’ that support, elaborate, and consolidate the practice of empire” (Said, *Culture* 14). As Said demonstrates in “Jane Austen and Empire,” even in places where colonialism, imperialism and related issues seem to be marginal or even unimportant, one can detect the way in which metropole and colony are profoundly linked to each other as integral parts of their respective daily lives (Said, *Culture* 86–97). To a certain extent, novels become a sort of social, cultural, and political atlas where imperialist countries and their overseas territories expose the close bonds they share with each other. As part of that atlas of culture and imperialism, therefore, *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* allows us to read, in the recesses of its literary representation, the ways in which Italian colonial discourse is intimately connected to the North/South conflict. This conflict can still be observed in new forms of the postcolonial condition: in the

bodies of migrant peasants who work in many regions of southern Italy, from Sicily to Apulia, and from Campania to Lucania; in the relocation of the world's second largest steelworks to Taranto, the most polluted area of Europe (once a public entity, the steelworks was bought by a northern company in 1995); and in the indelible southern accents of Fiat factory workers in Turin. Migrant bodies, polluted territories, and southern accents show how colonial exploitation, relocation, and translation have spilled over into today's global capitalism.

Finally, this essay will focus on the elements of colonial discourse that are scattered throughout Levi's text (and previously ignored by literary critics), demonstrating how they are intimately linked to the specific conditions of Lucanian peasants. Drawing on historical data, economics, and archival materials, it will also demonstrate the extent to which Lucania was woven into the broader Italian colonial space. Ultimately, I will show how the "aggregational structure" of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, as Giovanni Falaschi describes it (*Cristo* 471–72)—that is, travel novel, docu-novel, reportage, anthropological diary, autobiography<sup>7</sup>—has been revived in a new wave of hybrid literary writings, by briefly referring to contemporary writers who, like Levi, have traveled across southern lands, meeting up with peasants in southern Italy implicated in the postcolonial condition and narrating their lives.

### Elements of the Colonial Discourse in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*

*Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* presents itself as the record of the nearly year-long exile of the novel's protagonist and narrator, Carlo (who shares the author's first name), in Grassano and Gagliano (a fictional name for Aliano) in the province of Matera, from October 3, 1935, to May 5, 1936, the day when Italian troops entered Addis Ababa.<sup>8</sup> This period of exile was almost coterminous with the Italian colonial war on Ethiopia:

Many years have gone by, years of war and of what men call History. Buffeted here and there at random I have not been able to return to my peasants as I promised when I left them, and I do not know when, if ever, I can keep my promise. But closed in one room, in a world apart, I am glad to travel in my memory to that other world, hedged in by custom and sorrow, cut off from History and the State, eternally patient, to that land without comfort or solace, where the peasant lives out his motionless civilization on barren ground in remote poverty, and in the presence of death. (Levi, *Christ* 11)

At the beginning of the text, Carlo connects the period of writing (the year 1944 is marked at the end of the text), during which he was exiled as an underground antifascist resistance fighter, with the extremely closed world of the peasants of Lucania, a world of pain and death. As Falaschi has observed, in "*Cristo* Levi looks at both . . . the world of Lucania, which is the subject of the narration rather than the addressee, and at the civilized world that constitutes the addressee, even if it is totally unaware of the world of Lucania" (Falaschi, *Cristo* 470–71). Following the principles of European colonial discourse, the text frames the reality of Lucania

in what Said calls a “radical realism,” that is to say “the habit” or tendency to “designate, name, point to, fix what [one] is talking or thinking about with a word or phrase, which then is considered either to have acquired, or more simply to be, reality” (Said, *Orientalism* 72). This explains why, among the narrative methods used in the text, there are “scholarly quotations and ideological evaluations” (Falaschi, *Cristo* 472) that are meant to enrich the results of the field investigation, thus setting the narration in a discursive “regime” of truth” (Foucault 133). Furthermore, from a structural perspective, the text is divided into episodes that are presented out of chronological order and are independent of each other in terms of form and content. *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* seems to enclose places, facts, and characters in a space deeply marked by borders, that is, in a structure reminiscent of the classical organization of colonial spaces, based on a process of political, social, and cultural separation and reorganization under the watchful eye of the colonizer.

When the Italo-Ethiopian war materializes in the text, it becomes a key element in its overall narrative structure. Indeed, the war campaign and Africa are not simply extradiegetic elements used by the author to provide historical and temporal references to a place that is apparently outside time and history. According to Vittorio Spinazzola (100) the references to the war are just another way of representing the southerners’ distrust for everything coming from Rome and from the government. Generally speaking, Italian critics and historians have not attached any relevance to the presence of this striking contextual element, closely connected to Levi’s exile in Lucania. In *Scrittori e popolo. Il populismo nella letteratura italiana contemporanea* (Writers and the People: Populism in Contemporary Italian Literature, 1965), a celebrated classic of Italian literary criticism, Alberto Asor Rosa discusses the notion of “populism” as it appears in neorealist literature. According to this critic, populism in literary discourse implies a positive judgement of the common people, who must be “represented as a model” (13). Among all those who were active during the period of literary neorealism, including Pratolini, Pavese, Vittorini, and other “progressive” authors, Asor Rosa claims that only Levi succeeded in combining a “very strong aesthetic with an irrational dimension,” while creating literary representations that simultaneously incorporated a “serious” cultural dimension (Asor Rosa 185).<sup>9</sup> Levi’s strong subjective point of view in *Cristo* does not—according to Asor Rosa—spoil the “historic-sociological framework” of his discourse. He claims, in fact, that the categories of “Man” and “History” (Asor Rosa 188) allow the writer to describe the southern peasant as a “primitive being, outside history, outside the uninterrupted but ultimately superficial flow of conquests and wars” (Asor Rosa 186–87). It is easy to see here how, in a simple analytical move, invoking abstract Eurocentric categories, Asor Rosa obliterates the whole war on Ethiopia and the consequences of this event for the protagonists of Levi’s narrative.

But one of the most remarkable elements in the text is its sociological, historical, and anthropological framework. Indeed, these different disciplinary discourses allow Levi to put some distance between himself and the objects of his narration in order to present them as a unified whole, and hence available for study and classification. It should be noted that the reiterated use of the demonstrative adjective



in such phrases as “questi contadini” (these peasants) reminds us that the peasants are the object of his discourse and that they are somehow close to us, as readers, in the time and space of the text. Use of the deictic shows how familiar they have become to the narrator (and writer) as well as to the readers. This indexical function of the demonstrative adjective contains and stabilizes the object, thus confirming the fact that it is already familiar. And that is a kind of procedure that is part of the already mentioned radical realism of the colonial discourse.

Set against recurrent news reports from the East African front, the text tells of “the peasant world” of Lucania to which the protagonist feels a deep empathy that enables him to relate to the presence of a pagan, magical Christianity, and a certain irreducible irrationality. Far from demonizing these elements, he becomes open to them. However, the cognitive disposition that characterizes the narrator’s gaze is matched by a language that often uses metaphors, analogies, and similes related to the semantic field of animals.

Every sentence used to describe the features of women and children and their social and psychological behavior includes a reference to the animal world: “They stayed far away from my table, near the door, close to one another, all twittering together like birds. They were pretending not to look at me but every now and then their black eyes darted a curious glance from under their veils in my direction and then darted away again like woodland animals. . . . They stood erect with the stately posture of those accustomed to balancing heavy weights on their heads, and their faces had an expression of primitive solemnity” (Levi, *Christ* 37). The women’s presumed wildness, their primitiveness, and their headscarves, seem to haunt the Turinese exile who repeatedly lingers over them: “Behind their veils the women were like wild beasts. They thought of nothing but love-making, in the most natural way in the world, and they spoke of it with a licence and simplicity of language that were astonishing. When you went by them on the street their black eyes stared at you, with a slanting downward glance as if to measure your virility” (Levi, *Christ* 101). The autonomy of Lucanian women must be so disturbing to Carlo that the only way he can describe it is through reference to animality. In *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, animality, insanity, and diabolical monstrosity go together in a sort of triumph of the hybrid. Indeed, if the narrative were not set in such a leaden, bleak, and deadly atmosphere, this mixture would summon up the image of an invigoratingly liberated community. These ambivalences clearly emerge in the text of a letter written by Levi to his American publisher Roger Straus in 1963. Here he describes Lucania as “the dark adolescence of centuries poised to stir and emerge, like butterflies from the cocoon . . . the individual eternity of all this, the Lucania within each of us, the vital force that is ready to turn itself into form and life and institutions as it struggles with paternal, prevailing institutions which, despite their claim to an extensive reality, are dead and gone” (Levi, *Christ* 7). Although Levi recognized Lucania’s capacity to oppose “paternal, prevailing institutions,” the region remained essentially shapeless, something that could only be described by borrowing images from the animal world and then relegated to a sort of prehistorical immaturity.

At this point it is helpful to remember some of Dipesh Chakrabarty’s reflections on colonial India in order to translate these into the Italian context. As this

critic indicates, “developmental time, or the sense of time underlying a stagist view of history, was indeed a legacy bequeathed by imperial rule” (Chakrabarty 98). In Levi’s text, the presumably backward time of Lucania is included in the stagist and progressive development of the abstract temporality of capitalism: it is a backwardness that is considered the cause of the hopelessness of that land.<sup>10</sup> This can also help us reassess the political aspect of the class conflict—not totally absent from the pages of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*—that had taken place in that land, even if the peasants of Lucania did not organize their struggles in the usual forms of mass protest. Nevertheless, Levi recognizes the temporal heterogeneity of that land:

They sent a stream of scissors, knives, razors, farm tools, scythes, hammers, pincers—in short, all the gadgets of everyday use. Life at Gagliano was entirely American in regard to mechanical equipment as well as weights and measures, for the peasants spoke of pounds and inches rather than of kilograms and centimetres. The women wove on ancient looms, but they cut their thread with shiny scissors from Pittsburgh; the barber’s razor was the best I ever saw anywhere in Italy, and the blue steel blades of the peasants’ axes were American. The peasants had no prejudice against these modern instruments, nor did they see any contradiction between them and their ancient customs. They simply took gladly whatever came to them from New York. (Levi, *Christ* 128–29)

The technologically advanced tools that the people received from the United States show how the effects of migration from Lucania—and southern Italy in general—produce concrete consequences on people’s everyday lives. Migratory movements connect the province of Matera to New York, and the agricultural production of Lucania to the steelworks of Pennsylvania. The heterogeneity of the time of Lucania and people’s mobility—migrations and the consequent movement of technologies and commodities, narratives and new images—produce imbalances in the presumed developmental Eurocentric temporality.

### **Lucania in Italian Colonial Space: 1934–37**

I now consider the “concrete historical circumstances”—using Said’s phrase (*Representing* 300)—to which *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*’s places, facts, and characters refer and which Levi himself witnessed during his exile. Agricultural policies were at the centre of the Fascist government’s initiatives. Thus the countryside, especially in the South, literally became the battlefield of fascist political reforms. Indeed, as Piero Bevilacqua has observed, one of the main elements that constituted fascist ideology was “ruralismo” (ruralism), an idea of “social life rooted in the land, grounded in the false immobility of a rural life that was founded on work and simple domestic joys” (Bevilacqua 560). In this way, a “political power that had violently imposed itself” on the people was imagining “for subaltern classes a sound distance from political and trade-union struggle” (Bevilacqua 560). But at the same time, the Fascists had associated the rural world with war from the very beginning. Fascist ideology and policies were very popular among World War I

veterans, 75 percent of whom were peasants (Bevilacqua 562). Thus, it could be argued that peasants were some sort of reservists who, during the war in Ethiopia, would have had the capacity to develop their full potential: farmers who became soldiers in order to become farmers again in the colony. And it is not by chance that the peasants who appear in Levi's narrative are exemplary subjects at the mercy of fascist ruralist ideology. In fact, during the 1930s, southern regions were under pressure as a consequence of three different phenomena: new migration policies, the great economic crisis at the end of the 1920s, and the new agricultural policies enacted as a consequence, as well as new colonial policies.

On the migration front, the regime attempted to limit departures to some small degree. Departures were already limited, however, by new policies of border closure implemented by destination countries such as the United States. In 1927 Mussolini decided to replace the *Commissione dell'emigrazione* (Emigration Commission) with a *Direzione generale degli italiani all'estero* (Italians Abroad Head Office), and it must be noted that, after 1931, Italians were no longer supposed to be labelled as emigrants, as emigration was a condition that applied to people from underdeveloped countries. In 1931, the *Direzione generale* was transformed into the *Commissariato per la migrazione e la colonizzazione interna* (Internal Migration and Colonization Commission). Here again, that was not just a matter of taxonomy: the regime intended to shape what Donna Gabaccia has called a "fascist diaspora" (Gabaccia 141–44), creating a larger country extending far beyond its official borders, a country that could include the nine million Italians who lived abroad as immigrants as well as those who were destined to (re)populate the African colonies in the name of the fatherland and fascism. In order to follow this plan, it was necessary to shift the trajectories of the emigrants (mostly peasants from the South and Veneto), transforming them from poor emigrants into landowners and colonizers. For the same reasons, and in order to prevent excessive migration to the richest areas of the country (Milan, Turin, and Genoa) whose demographic and economic stability could thus be compromised, the regime tried to limit the movement of Italians from one region of the country to another. But too many "prospective migrants," whose ambitions to go abroad were frustrated, did decide to move elsewhere in Italy—from south and northeast to northwest, from the countries to the cities—and, despite the propaganda, an annual average of 1.2 million people migrated in the 1930s and 1.5 million in 1937 alone (Treves 126–28).

In those years, the province of Matera was confronted with endemic rural unemployment and the simultaneous impact of hundreds of unemployed peasants from the nearby province of Foggia. Here the policy of "sbracciantizzazione" (Corner), which aimed at reducing the number of peasants, never created alternative employment options for the subaltern classes. The widely advertised project of draining the Pontine Marshes (1931–39) did not really represent the golden opportunity it seemed to promise, as the regime decided to recruit people from Veneto and hundreds of repatriated Italian settler families from Romania, Yugoslavia, and France (Gaspari). According to Nino Calice, Lucania in the 1930s was the "odd laboratory of the adverse effects of regime's agricultural policy and of the contradictory claim to fix the maximum number of land workers by means of

‘sbracciantizzazione’ and the propaganda of rural myths” (Calice 403). In 1933, the rural population of Lucania was “entirely proletarianized,” as the “grain monoculture that prevailed on the mountains and on the plain, together with the blocking of emigration and [fascist] demographic policies eroded and further impoverished the rural fabric of society” (Calice 402). In this context, the war in Ethiopia was an “exceptional form of forced emigration and of painful exodus” (Calice 420) and, as we have already seen in *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, and as we will also see in the archival documents, the war was experienced with a sense of disenchantment while perceived as a necessity.

Examining the secondary sources, I discovered that studies on *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* have mostly ignored this socioeconomical situation, the conditions of the peasants—the actual subjects of Levi’s narration—and the urgent entreaties that they received from the state to migrate to the colonies. Scholarly attention has mostly revolved around the figure of the author and his exile: his movements, encounters, the visits he received from friends and relatives, and his activity as a painter. This blind spot in the Italian colonial and national memory—one of many—indicates a process of erasure that has been central to the construction of the archive of national identity.

For this reason I decided to consult the papers filed between 1934 and 1937—one year before and one year after the Italo-Ethiopian war—in the records of the Matera Prefecture and Chamber of Commerce which are now housed in the Archivio di Stato di Matera (Matera Public Records Office).<sup>11</sup> Those papers show the extent to which unemployment, employment, social policies, people’s mobility, and colonial policies were interconnected. On October 2, 1936, the executive of the Matera employment agency sent the prefect a monthly report of unemployment in all towns of the province along with the job applications statistics for the AOI (*Africa Orientale Italiana*; Italian East Africa; Executive of the Matera employment agency). Indeed, local authorities were very interested in following the connection between unemployment (mostly in agriculture and sheep-farming) and people’s willingness to leave for the colonies. The monthly summary for September 1936 reveals that there were six unemployed people among the waged peasants and shepherds of Aliano, while there were 47 unemployed men and 22 women in Grassano; and these data are limited to the two places where Levi lived as an exile. Furthermore, according to the same document, there were 2,364 job applications for East Africa: 2,010 of these were left unanswered and 354 were filed that year (Executive of the Matera employment agency). Indeed, since 1934 and long before the beginning of the Italo-Ethiopian war, letters from mayors of the province to the Matera chief of police and prefect show to what extent the colonial turmoil had already reached the “isolated” region of Lucania. The chief of police wrote to the prefect on September 20, 1934: “In reply to your note of the 12th of this month . . . I’m pleased to inform Your Excellency that in this provincial capital the voice of a coming Italian occupation of Abyssinia has actually spread” (Chief of the Matera police). In addition to these messages, the telegrams from the mayors in the province of Matera to the prefect after the rallies on October 2, 1935—held all over Italy in order to listen to Mussolini announcing the beginning of Italian military operations in Ethiopia and the challenge to the League of Nations (Mayors

of the Province of Matera)—tell the extent to which the whole Italian peninsula projected itself toward East Africa.

The projection or existence of a colonial space stretching from the Alps to the Ogaden, passing from southern Italy to Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, is fully evident in the large number of references to economic and social activities that directly involved the province and deployed its officials, workers, and commodities to the colonies. In particular, the mobilization of interest in the trade fair held in Tripoli is found everywhere. The president of the fair writes to the prefect,

I'm very glad to report to you that, after the visit of the Head of Government [i.e., Benito Mussolini] and his departure from Tripoli, His Excellency Balbo General Governor of Libya, His Excellency the Minister of Finance Thaon di Revel, His Excellency the Minister of Communications Benni, have officially visited the Tripoli Trade Fair, lingering in particular on the pavilion of your Provincial Council of Corporative Economy in order to admire how your province has participated in the XI Tripoli trade fair, first Colonial Exhibition of the Empire, in a way that is mindful and sympathetic to the problems of the colonial economy. (President of the Tripoli Trade Fair)

And yet it is worth paying special attention to the letter by Antonietta Luberto, a woman from Grassano who writes to the prefect of Matera with a precise request in August 1935:

Excellency,

The Undersigned Luberto Antonietta, 65 years old and in good health, asks your Excellency to enable her to leave for East Africa where I would like to start up a grocery store with my husband: I've been 30 years in America and I'm quite skilled in that kind of trade.

I will be grateful to your Excellency if you would let me know at your earliest convenience which documents I should prepare. (Luberto)

Ruth Ben-Ghiat suggests that in discussing the “diasporic quality of the Italian nation,” our investigation of Italian identity and imperialism must go beyond the issue of “linear exchanges between colony and metropole to include relations among the Italian metropole, Italian colonies and Italians who lived abroad under a variety of national and imperial sovereignties” (Ben-Ghiat 265). The complex reality of southern Italy and of the social and political conditions of its peasants should be added to that intricate sovereignty.

### **Southern Italy in the Postcolonial: Colonialism, Neocolonialism, Migrations**

Once *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* is read in conjunction with archival documents and from a postcolonial perspective that unsettles geographies and histories still fossilized in the persistent colonial matrix of Eurocentric disciplines, it reveals its tightly woven texture. In this texture, Rome, Naples, Bari, Turin, North America,

and Africa are entangled with Lucania, which is literally out of place as a consequence of migrations, war, and the swarm of narrations produced by these events.

In the years after the publication of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, Levi revealed his awareness of all the problems that today can be classified under the label of “global South” (Cazzato). In his introduction to the 1964 edition of Rocco Scotellaro’s *L’uva puttanello. Contadini del Sud*, Levi writes that Scotellaro is confronting “in a new way the old problems of the Mezzogiorno [Italian South]. But these problems are not only those of the Italian peasants of the Mezzogiorno, nor do they belong to a specific moment, today” (Levi, “Prefazione” XIX). This intuition prompts us to ask ourselves who are today’s peasants and what is the South now. A partial answer can be found, once again, in the hybrid form of literary reportage, in Antonello Mangano’s work:

I get into the warehouse. “I sleep here” Stephen says, pointing at the porthole of the silos that should be full of very fine Calabrian olive oil, the result of centuries of old olive trees, and is instead his room. He has arranged his blankets in the metal cylinder, and he is preparing dinner with a small white camping stove equipped with a gas cylinder. “*Lamb soup*” he specifies. Lamb simmered in tomato, seasoned with spices ground with an empty can. If this is a man, I think. Forced to sleep in a metal cylinder 20 metres high. With papers in his pocket and some extra euros he might be able to find lodging, but the law stipulates that those who rent accommodation to illegal immigrants will have their property seized.

Some are fed up with being filmed and then forgotten, feeling like objects all over again, this time like goods in the media market. Others bargain: “Ok, but print the photos and show them to us”. Yet Mohamed, also a Ghanaian, is still in the mood for jokes in this mess of warehouses with broken roofs, stoves equipped with gas cylinders, camping tents, empty silos, interrupted railways, with wake-up time at dawn, French incinerators, kilometres on the national highways, very hard workdays, mud and boots and just two reasons to have a break and hope: God and TV, sharing space in a living room set up with plastic chairs, a pulpit, and a screen with the satellite dish. (Mangano 73)<sup>12</sup>

These are the conditions of migrant peasants in Rosarno (Calabria). Since the early 1990s, to this little town, well known for the cultivation of citrus fruits, seasonal workers have been coming to work for miserable wages (about 25 euros a day), a grueling job and a life ruled by violence and exploitation. Most of these workers are Africans and Eastern Europeans who, between 1999 and 2010, were repeatedly mugged either by henchmen of ‘Ndrangheta (the local mafia) or by gang members. As Antonello Mangano and Laura Galesi point out, the lives of these migrant workers are implicated in a mobile quest for work that moves along the map of the Italian peninsula:

The harvesting year ideally starts with the passage from fall to winter. It’s time for Rosarno’s citrus fruit. The arrival of spring coincides with the [workers’] transfer to Sicily. Some work in the greenhouses . . . from Licata to Pachino, from the province of Caltanissetta to Vittoria. Others pick potatoes in Cassibile. The summer season is for tomato harvesting. And they go up to the province of Foggia and to Castel Volturno.

Some go as far as the Salento to gather watermelons and then go back to Palazzo San Gervasio, in Basilicata, for the late tomato season. At the end of the summer it's time to harvest the grapes. Many go up to Campania, to San Nicola Varco, for example, for the vegetables. But a year has already gone by, and it will be Rosarno again. For this crowd composed of thousands of foreign labourers, work is a circular journey, marked by a series of humiliations, yet sustained with a lot of dignity.<sup>13</sup> (Galesi and Mangano 17–18)

Following the 2008 global economic crisis, many migrant workers who were dismissed from the factories of northern Italy became part of this roaming crowd of workers. On January 7, 2010, in Rosarno, Aiyva Saibou, a 26-year-old Togolese citizen, was shot by local youngsters in an effort to intimidate migrant workers and prevent them from rebelling against the slave-like conditions in which they toiled. But the locals' efforts met with results that were the opposite of those intended: like Calabrian peasants in previous decades, the Africans decided to rise up against their bosses and exploiters, refusing the conditions that were imposed on them. After a few days of rioting, burning cars, and destroying shop signs, the rioters were interrupted by the police, who forced them to leave Rosarno and Calabria in an alarming sort of pogrom. Before departing, the Africans left graffiti on the walls of Rosarno with the following admonition: "Avoid shooting blacks. We will be remembered." The sentence "We will be remembered" was also pronounced by Abraham Lincoln in his message to the Congress of the United States in 1862 when he "warned his fellow citizens of their historical responsibility regarding the abolition of slavery" (Mangano 138). With these events, African peasants gave a collective response to an individual act of violence, giving new meaning to political struggles in the regions of southern Italy.

The South, then, reveals itself over time as a sensible transitional location for translated subjects: either the translated subjects of domestic colonialism or those of contemporary global neocolonialism, which is the long-term result of European colonial "epistemic violence" in Africa (Spivak 127). The Africans in Mangano's report, far from being native informants ready to "be interpreted by the knowing subject for reading" (Spivak 49)—that is, the Home Office, humanitarian ventures, academic scholars or journalists, and writers—are instead the agents of political transformations. Literary writing, in its hybrid versions, seems to suggest that, moving-from-the-South(s), resistant subjectivities are overflowing on the planet. And their hopes, myths, and cultural references are rooted in migrancy as much as those of Levi's peasants: "But what never failed to strike me most of all—and by now I had been in almost every house—were the eyes of the two inseparable guardian angels that looked at me from the wall over the bed. On one side was the black, scowling face, with its large, inhuman eyes, of the Madonna of Viggiano; on the other a coloured print of the sparkling eyes, behind gleaming glasses, and the hearty grin of President Roosevelt" (Levi, *Christ* 120). Roosevelt and the Madonna of Viggiano in the house of peasants of Lucania, like the satellite TV and the altar in the *accommodation* of African peasants in contemporary Rosarno, form a text(ure) of diasporic modernities, subaltern memories, and stories of resistance that are still to be told.

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### Notes

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1. My initial ideas on this topic were presented at *Giornata di studio sulla letteratura coloniale e postcoloniale italiana* (at Fondazione Istituto Gramsci Emilia-Romagna, Bologna, January 19, 2011); I wish to thank Professor Giuliana Benvenuti for inviting me to the conference.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own, with the exception of quotations from Levi’s *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*. These reflect the translation published by Penguin.

3. The Italian word used here is *cafone*, which literally means “boor.” It was first used to describe peasants in southern Italy and later adopted as a general derogatory term for a coarse or rude person.
4. Between 1932 and 1947 Lucania was the official name of the Italian region nowadays called Basilicata. In this essay Lucania is preferred to Basilicata in order to keep the name used by Levi.
5. From now onward, I will refer to the text as *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* to indicate the Italian original and as *Christ* to indicate the English translation.
6. This is quite an unstable concept. As Giovanna Tomasello has argued, “colonial literature” in the Italian context has been understood differently at different moments in Italian history. According to Tomasello, from the second half of the nineteenth century up to 1924, it refers to a heterogeneous group of texts, mostly written by nonprofessional authors (travelers, missionaries, or army officers) or by professionals who wrote only occasionally about the colonies (Pascoli, D’Annunzio, and Marinetti, among others). From 1924 and to the end of 1943 the Fascist regime proclaimed the need for its own colonial literature, which was expected to serve as a constituent part of a new wave of propaganda promoting colonial expansion. These literary works were intended to function as educational or edifying texts that “did not transfigure the colonial reality but represented it with a type of realism that was not devoid of a dose of evolutionary optimism” (Tomasello 13–24).
7. Falaschi’s remarks are based on his consultation of the original manuscript of *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli*, housed at the Harry Ransom Center in the University of Texas at Austin.
8. Carlo Levi was first arrested in 1934, and after a second arrest in 1935 he was exiled to Basilicata (first to Aliano and then Grassano), where he remained until 1936. He was released when the Fascist regime granted a general amnesty to mark the conquest of Ethiopia and the declaration of the so-called Italian empire.
9. Gigliola De Donato agrees with this view and, in her own critical assessment of the writer, she reemphasizes the irrational elements in Levi’s writing, noting that, by using “irrationalism as cognitive tool,” Levi was able to connect a “dated, provincial reality (Lucania, the place of his exile)” (XV) to the broader European literary debate on the crisis of values and civilization.
10. This backwardness is virtually confirmed in the publisher’s note that serves as a preface to the Penguin edition. It reads, “Because of his uncompromising opposition to Fascism, Carlo Levi was banished at the start of Abyssinian War (1935) to a small primitive village in Lucania, a remote province of southern Italy” (Levi, *Christ* 10).
11. The archival documents referred to in this essay are just a few highly representative cases of the hundreds of documents I have consulted.
12. On this topic, see also Leogrande.
13. At the beginning of this news report on migrants laboring in the countryside of southern Italy, we find the following quotation from *Christ*: “But to this shadowy land, that knows neither sin nor redemption from sin, where evil is not moral but is only the pain residing forever in earthly things, Christ did not come” (12).

Part III

**Intimations and  
Intimacies of Race**

# Postracial/Postcolonial Italy

*Cristina Lombardi-Diop*

## Postracial Italy

In the wake of the historic election of the first black president of the United States, the ex-prime minister of Italy, Silvio Berlusconi, in greeting the event, made an uncanny remark that shocked the world. Smilingly, he referred to Barack Obama as “young, handsome, and also tanned.”<sup>1</sup> Berlusconi’s ambiguous reference to Obama’s racial identity was intended as a humorous compliment, he later explained. In his view the remark, which derided Obama’s racial identity in an attempt to erase it, was indeed comical since it supposedly revealed that the power of the state cannot possibly be embodied in a black body which, by definition, the state power seeks to exclude. Consequently, Berlusconi reduced Obama’s blackness to a cosmetic trick—a blackened face, a burned face, a form of whiteness in disguise, a tan, something to be laughed at.

The following chapter analyzes contemporary Italy as a postracial society, a society where widespread racism permeates the political discourse, the societal behavior, and popular culture, yet race is often unnamed and ultimately silenced.<sup>2</sup> In today’s Italy, the interrogation on race and racial identity seems “literally ‘whitened’” in everyday consciousness (Pinkus, “Shades of Black” 135; Mellino in this volume).<sup>3</sup> As a crucial dimension of Italian colonialism in East and North Africa, race has undergone a process of removal akin to the one described by Angelo Del Boca with regards to Italy’s colonial crimes (and the memory of colonialism tout court) that he views as “a product of the total denial of colonial atrocities, the lack of debate on colonialism, and the survival, in the collective imaginary, of convictions and theories of justification” (34). Alessandro Portelli argues that Italians deny their own whiteness and such an act of denial constitutes the basis of the national discourse on race. White identity, according to Portelli, coincides with Italy’s Catholic identity. Portelli identifies in the historical lack (at least until contemporary migrations) of a sizable black community and in the forgotten

dimension of Italian colonialism some of the reasons why Italians “do not see themselves as ‘white’ but rather as ‘normal, as human by default’” (29).

While an engagement with the memories of colonialism is fundamental to the intellectual and political agenda of postcolonial criticism worldwide, in Italy such an engagement signals an attempt to counteract a distinctive colonial nostalgia that pervades contemporary literature and popular culture in works that evoke, quite uncritically, the aspirations, fears, and desires of Italian settlers in the Horn of Africa (see Triulzi in this volume). Similarly, the scholarly reevaluation of the racial dimension of colonialism and its racist practices—at least since the end of the 1980s—has been prompted by the eruption of violent, racially motivated attacks against black African immigrants in the peninsula (Balbo and Manconi; see Romeo in this volume). Initially, most scholarly attention was focused on colonial and anti-Semitic racial thinking in an effort to unearth the body of positivist theories that underpinned the institutionalization of racism against colonial subjects in the former colonies and Jewish citizens in the peninsula (Centro Furio Jesi; Burgio; Maiocchi; Sòrgoni “Racist Discourses”; De Donno; Bonavita et al.). Most recently, a new wave of scholarship has extended the study of racism beyond the Fascist period to contemporary forms of institutional discrimination and individual racist practices against immigrants (Dal Lago; Mezzadra; Curcio and Mellino, *Challenging*). In order to articulate an antiracist response to Italy’s new racism, this approach has looked at the European dimension of institutional forms of discrimination and has demonstrated an enhanced awareness of the global dynamics that link new capital mobility and labor production to immigration patterns and legal restrictions. In spite of this scholarly output, on the whole, today’s social critique of racism has dedicated little attention to the ways in which race, as a system of differentiation, “shapes those on whom it bestows privilege as well as those it oppresses” (Frankenberg 519). Moreover, studies on the construction of modern Italian identity have paid little attention to the impact of racial self-definitions and self-perceptions. Scholars, with few exceptions,<sup>4</sup> have not interrogated the racial assumptions that have structured and supported the idea of Italianness as racially coded. Yet whiteness has constituted for Italians a form of representational cohesion at different historical moments, providing an ideological and discursive tool for national identification and self-representation before, during, and after colonialism. Notwithstanding a “self-reflexive color-blindness” (Portelli 30), race has been a pivotal element in Italy’s cultural discourse. Theories on and references to the racial identity of Italians as white have cemented the project of nationhood since Unification,<sup>5</sup> while the idea of the racial superiority of Italians, in scientific and mainstream literature, has been a *leitmotif* in Italian nationalist discourse during the interwar period, as well as in colonial propaganda (Maiocchi; Labanca; Wong). This neglected aspect of national history highlights the highly ubiquitous yet invisible nature of whiteness for contemporary Italians, who often view themselves as racially unmarked and are rarely aware of their position of race privilege in relation to foreigners and nonwhite Italians. Such oblivion to race characterizes, I argue, the nonraciality of postcolonial Italy.

Following a visual and discursive trajectory, the following chapter takes into consideration the formation of the idea of cleanliness and its ideological ties to the

larger, more subliminal project of the self-representation of Italians as white. Historically, I contend, this project of identity formation in relation to whiteness and associated with beauty and modernity, was carried forth through a “redemptive hygiene” (Ross 75) that was in turn mediated by what Stephen Gundle calls the “Americanization of daily life” (“L’americanizzazione” 561–94) and the influence of its racialist models. In the postwar period, as Italy came to regard itself as clean, sanitized, homogeneously white, and ordered according to principles of modernizing rationality, many contradictory aspects of its uneven national cohesiveness were partially reconciled. In particular, the containment of southern peasantry, which bore the shame of a racial Otherness long felt as a burden; the removal of the memory of the colonial experience, marked by high levels of interracial sociality; and a certain disdainful disregard for the social transformations brought by decades of emigration and the ensuing transnationalization of Italianness, were all made possible by a modernization that promised a different temporality, a fresh and novel start, a blank slate.

Working against the grain of the perceived lack of continuity between the interwar and postwar period, my analysis draws some of its key elements from the medical discourse of the mid-1930s, moves to the reconstruction period, and takes into consideration how the dichotomy black/white is articulated in one specific advertising figure taken from 1960s television culture. It then briefly examines the influence of racialized thinking on the Italian youth of the mid-1990s, and ends with an analysis of the 2006 and 2007 video commercials titled “Happy Housewife” that advertise a specific product used for black dyes. My tentative hypothesis is that Italy’s democratic postfascist society was predicated on the consolidation of whiteness as a category of racial identification. The sense of aspiring to a privileged status identifiable with being white was—for the first time—no longer limited to the middle-class and intellectual elites (as it was during Fascism). In the postwar years, it extended to and began to affect a larger pool of average, petit-bourgeois Italians, and ultimately mass society. Under the new visual regimes of booming advertising and TV broadcasting, the consolidation of the new identity of Italians as homogeneously white facilitated the erasure from public awareness of past relations with race and blackness. The whitening up of Italians was a process of elevation to wealth, health, social privilege, access to resources, commodities, and technologies, all associated with whiteness at the expense of the exclusion, the restrictions, the marginalization, and the economic deprivation associated with blackness. In this sense, the process of race formation was also a process of class formation.<sup>6</sup>

Prior to considering the specific Italian case, it would be useful to determine the general meaning of the postracial. In the simplest of terms, the postracial (like the postcolonial) does not mean the end of something, that is, the end of race. The complexities that lie behind such terms cannot be reduced to a conception of linear time according to which the preposition “post” signals the definitive disappearance of what came before (McClintock). In the United States, the genealogy of the postracial is rooted in the extension of the legal principle of colorblindness in the post–civil rights movement era. A theorization of the postracial is particularly relevant in the US context, where the election of Barack Obama has prompted

many white commentators to affirm that the country has entered a “post-racial era” when “race is no longer a central factor determining the life changes of Americans” (Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich 191). The contradictory and paradoxical aspect of postracial America is that the so-called end of race witnesses, nonetheless, persistently high rates of residential segregation patterns, housing and job discrimination, school segregation levels, racial profiling, and incarceration rates seven times higher for blacks than for whites (Bonilla-Silva and Ray).

In Europe, the postracial is an emanation of the racial amnesia linked to the demise of the colonial state and based on the false assumption that racial homogeneity is an internal condition of the nation-state while heterogeneity is a characteristic of the past, confined to the colonial period. According to David Theo Goldberg, this picture obfuscates the heterogeneity of Europe’s continuous exchange and contacts with Otherness since early modernity and the fact that the colonial condition helped produce demographic heterogeneity. In historical accounts and official histories, however, race is invoked to deny such heterogeneity. The postracial is thus a constitutive element of the European postcolonial condition. The exclusion from legal rights and citizenship, labor exploitation, residential segregation, the public media denigration, police profiling, and educational and social exclusion, are nonetheless always imputed to economic disparities, cultural and religious differences, or the discontent emerging in Europe as a result of the new immigration, and never to racism (see Mellino in this volume).

### **The Washing Away of Blackness**

In Italy, the condition for such denial of race is rooted in the very articulation of racial difference in terms that implicitly and constantly affirm the demographic and social hegemony of whiteness. As scholar Karen Pinkus observes, race is blackness, while whiteness is the nonracialized norm (“Shades of Black”). The exceptionality of blackness is a distinction that requires a series of social reconfigurations and adjustments. In popular culture, the melodramatic and the comic genres are forms of readjustment to the exceptional disruption brought about the emergence of blackness.<sup>7</sup> In Berlusconi’s joke, for instance, the pleasure of laughter, while reinforcing social norms and assumptions about the hegemonic role of whiteness, is predicated on the whitening out of Obama’s blackness. In the history of European ideas around blackness as in the popular imagination, an original moment of comic excess—also present in the history of the black-faced minstrel shows—is often linked to the possibility of the washing away of race. Pinkus mentions a line in Henri Bergson’s famous 1900 essay on the meaning of the comic, where the French philosopher states that a Negro makes us laugh because his black face strikes the eye as “unwashed” (Henri Bergson qtd. in Pinkus, “Shades of Black” 135). The nexus between racial authenticity, blackness, and dirt is at the core of my interest in the legacy of forms of racialization which, as a result of the institutionalization of racism in the late 1930s, permeated the larger domain of Italy’s public culture and eventually spread to postwar popular culture. The connection between the “protection of race” and health prophylaxis pervaded many aspects of

Italy's racial culture of the mid-1930s, and especially the sphere of the family, of domesticity, and womanhood.<sup>8</sup>

In the mid-1930s, theories of blackness as dirt began to inform the eugenicist conception of racial abjection. Eugenics, as an academic and disciplinary discourse, gave rise to a series of "social-technical interventions" that targeted the family to secure the welfare and expansion of the population against declines in fertility and to protect the stock (Horn 66). After 1927, a series of pronatalist measures were implemented through legislation that immediately found resonance in eugenic medical and scientific literature.<sup>9</sup> While the 1930 Penal Code (also known as the *Codice Rocco*) penalized the private behaviors of Italians on the basis of a new series of crimes against the integrity and health of the stock, the expansion of the human biopolitics elaborated by eugenicist Nicola Pende in the early 1930s, inaugurated a *biologia politica* ("biopolitics") that conceived the medical practice as a form of social control and management of the domestic realm, children, and labor, as well as of women's sexuality and family life. In pamphlets, medical literature, and in the visual and written campaigns against contagious diseases such as syphilis and tuberculosis, the need to protect the Italian race against contamination and degeneration was considered dependent upon the sanitary conditions of the domestic environment, which was the ultimate domain of women (Maiocchi 41–79; Mignemi 65–89).

The battle against the contamination of the blood targeted women as defenders of the genetic purity of the Italian race. A 1936 pamphlet distributed by the *Federazione nazionale fascista* in support of the battle against tuberculosis and authored by professor Gioacchino Breccia addressed Italian women as those on whom the nation bestowed "a sublime mandate: to create the health and strength of the new generations; renovate the household, and confer upon it dignity, and moral and material healthiness" (qtd. in Mignemi, 70). Breccia, a stern supporter of medical biopolitics, gave expression to a vision that had been, at least in part, already implemented through fascist mass organizations. From the mid-1920s, the *Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia* (ONMI, founded as early as 1925) began promoting the safeguarding of maternity, social hygiene, and the health of children and women. Of major relevance were its campaigns against tuberculosis, which was considered as a highly contagious social disease. The ONMI antitubercular campaigns focused on the role of mothers as guarantors of the cleanliness of the domestic environment. Children's health highly depended on a sanitized and hygienic home. In order to achieve the goal of domestic prophylaxis, the central government relied on the medical apparatuses that operated through local and regional administrative offices.

Such bureaucratic institutions soon contributed to a fairly rigid control of public health, the household, and the management of women's domestic sphere. Yet I would like to suggest that the imperative of hygiene as a form of social control was achieved also through the consolidation of a more private and individualized idea of cleanliness, understood as a normative condition, a conception that required less institutionalized venues and relied more on consumer and commercial culture in order to reach all Italians. It is in the shift from the public to the private sphere and the realm of the daily practices of bodily care that the transition from



the political project of fascist racism to the racialized project of postwar Italy took place. Such shift also occurred for the visual tradition of hygienic messages, which from the realm of medicine spread to the sphere of the domestic as well as the realm of the body, beauty, and consumption. In the culture of advertisement of the Fascist *ventennio*, the curative and hygienic benefits of water and swimming were soon accompanied by the practice of sunbathing, which began, in the 1930s, to be separated from the idea of providing a cure against tuberculosis and various other diseases (Triani 140–73). Before the war, in advertising for skin products, paleness was still a sign of nobility, but the advertisement of lotions to protect the skin from sun rays also began to associate sunbathing and tanning with the realm of travel and pleasure, regardless of class affiliation, and thus detached from the rural and agricultural world that had characterized it.<sup>10</sup> Cosmetics for women, such as Lux soaps and Pond's skin creams, began to be manufactured and marketed as inexpensive goods, fulfilling the expectations of modern young consumers, especially in the northern urban milieu, attracted by Hollywood films, American consumer goods and brands, and organized less around geographical and regional affiliations and more around the media system (Arvidsson 19–37).

Journalist, writer, and critic Umberto Notari, famous for his commentaries on female beauty and his campaigns for a truly autarchic approach to female consumption against the corrupting effects of foreign modernity, explored the crucial nexus of whiteness, racial superiority, and femininity in his “Panegirico della razza italiana” (1939), where he praised the beauty of Italian women as transcending historical contingencies. Given its classical perfection, it was comparable to the iconic aesthetic tradition of Renaissance paintings: “It does not matter if the clothes are different, simpler or more worn. The physical nature is the same. Complexions have the same smooth whiteness, the eyes the same softness, the mouths the same sparkle, the neck, the shoulders and the bust the same design” (Umberto Notari qtd. in Gundle, *Bellissima* 102). As Stephen Gundle argues, that such classical beauty could be classified as white and Mediterranean and thus ultimately Italian and as such, superior to Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Slavic races, was functional to Notari's intended reclaiming of an antique and antimodern patriotic image of female Italianness.

But what is of interest for our argument is how Notari's emphasis on qualities of female beauty (the smooth whiteness of the complexion, the softness of the skin) diverges considerably from the stereotype of Italian female beauty as “dark, passionate, instinctive” and “antique and primitive, close to nature and uncivilised” (*Bellissima* xxiii–xxiv) that Gundle identifies as the ubiquitous trope of national femininity. It seems, rather, that Notari's “Panegyric” was coated in the language of the novel anthropological concept of an Aryan-Mediterranean *Romanità*, propagated after 1936 by racial theorists such as Giulio Cogni, in what was then a new approach to the idea of the homogeneity of the origin of Italian racial identity. As Gaia Giuliani argues, such “whitening” of the female characteristics signifying sensual fertility, which the regime attributed to *le massaie rurali* (“rural housewives”), reconfigured the particular signification of Mediterraneanness as darkness and aligned it with the fascist project of incorporating southern Italians into the nation through pronatalism and ruralization (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop).

In light of the celebration of rural, antimodern traditionalism, the value of white *Romanità* that Notari praises here mediates between the classical and the modern and as such provides an alternative to the “sterilizing” effects of the industrial city, where poor hygienic conditions and factory work were considered detrimental to the reproductive strength of both men and women (Horn 96).

After 1936, the rationalization of the household according to scientific managerial principles was extended to Italian East Africa and became intimately complicit with eugenics and particularly instrumental to segregationist policies in Libya and East Africa. While the opinion of hygiene experts resonated in the discussions for the urban planning of Tripoli, one of the centerpieces of the imperial propaganda at the time of the invasion of Ethiopia was the lack of *civiltà* of the Ethiopians, considered backward and underdeveloped on the basis of the “filth” and lack of hygiene of their dwellings and cities. The need for the isolation of the natives in their quarters was regarded, according to one urban planner, as a protection against the unhygienic life of the indigenous population (Fuller 197–99). And while in the peninsula *massaismo* (“female ruralization”) promised a new rationalization of managerial practices and the formation of a new female leadership within the household, in the colonies home economics played a key role in defying racial consciousness and divisions.

Eugenic literature continued to associate the realm of medicine and genetics to female sexual behavior, but after the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936 the application of such theories directly impinged upon the sexuality and dwelling behaviors of both Italian and African women. While the work of Giorgio Chiurco on the sanitary politics in Ethiopia advocated for the betterment of the hygienic conditions of the colonial subjects according to the principles of a *civilizzazione sanitaria* (“sanitary civilization,” Chiurco 429), eugenicist Gaetano Pierraccini’s theory of the “centralizing action of woman” (Sòrgoni, *Parole* 198) established that women’s genetic code was less prone to variations and therefore more capable of transmitting the hereditary characters of the race, a theory that reversed previously held ideas about patrilinearity as the central principle of the transmission of racial traits.<sup>11</sup> These “scientific” notions were immediately incorporated in the propaganda literature meant for all Italians, and especially for a female audience. In the 1937 manual conceived for female colonial settlers it is stated that “the most illustrious anthropologists have demonstrated that the woman represents the conservative element of the blood, as well as the link and the symbol for the continuity of the race” (Istituto Coloniale Fascista 117).

As a consequence of these new trends, African women were gradually removed from the daily practices of interaction with Italian men and children. Colonial medical manuals began to encourage breastfeeding by mothers as the best solution for Italian children’s growth and for their adaptation to the colonial environment, and discouraged the recourse to indigenous wet-nurses, considered dangerous for sanitary reasons, including the fact that milk was deemed a potential carrier of diseases (Sòrgoni, *Parole* 199).<sup>12</sup> The role of the *lettè*, that is, the Eritrean women performing domestic work and childcare for wealthy Italian families, was no longer central to the domestic economy of the colony.<sup>13</sup> The imperial domestic space had to erase the presence of African women in order to offer white women both

a frontier space and a “proper” place as they settled in it to create modern Italian homes.<sup>14</sup>

### The Moral Imperative of Whiteness

The visual tradition that associated national morality and racial identity with the power of cleaning agents continued in a similar direction when the advertising industry moved from billboards and illustrated magazines to TV commercials. In the 1950s, well-funded detergent campaigns for such brands as OMO and Sunil began to appear in the Italian illustrated press and women’s magazines, most of which were created by the big American advertising agency J. Walter Thompson (JWT) for Unilever. These ads began to instill in women the idea of “the perilous consequences of not-white-enough laundry” as a form of moral imperative (Arvidsson 67). This type of campaigns, which Unilever ran worldwide, borrowed their motivational pattern from the experience already developed for the “American Housewife” advertising market. JWT understood that detergents, products that outlined the domestic work of women as a labor power that equated the labor of men, could open the Italian market and simultaneously spread in Italy the ethical and motivational behaviors of American consumer culture (Arvidsson 67–78).

In the 1950s, with the mechanization of domestic work and the increasing use of electrical appliances, advertising found in the alliance with TV broadcasting a national resonance of unsurpassed capacity. While in 1954 only ninety thousand Italians owned a TV set, in 1955 there were nine million of them who watched TV, even if they did not own a set or did not watch it regularly (Dorfles 9). Together with the disappearing of the *bucato a mano* (“hand wash”) ritual, the idea of the opacity of whiteness and the moral imperative of a “bianco che più bianco non si può” (“white that cannot be whiter,” Dorfles 43) became one of the leading themes of soap advertising. From 1957 to 1977 *Carosello*, a hybrid TV broadcast daily on Radiotelevisione Italiana (RAI), dominated Italian TV culture, although the state-controlled channel imposed rigid codes on its format. This was made of 100 minutes of TV programming followed by 35 seconds of advertisement. While women were often absent from the main shows, they were almost invariably there in the so-called *codino*, the closing advertisement, signaling their primary role as targets of the commercial campaigns that featured laundry detergents, household appliances, furniture, and cooking ingredients.

As a dominant format of Italian state TV broadcasting, *Carosello* soon became a cultural institution in Italian domestic and advertising culture, reaching an audience of one million Italians as early as 1958 (Giaccardi). A hybrid program, made of many mini-ads within one format, *Carosello* experimented with the diversification of consumer target audiences—children, parents, grandparents—while continuing to address the family in its entirety (Scaglioni). Its end coincided with the end of state monopoly on national TV in 1976, when a Constitutional Court decision sanctioned the opening of the broadcasting sector to private investors (Pittèri).

At the beginning of the 1960s, the iconic TV figure of *Calimero, il pulcino nero* (“Calimero, the black chick”) appeared for the first time as one of the recurrent and ritualistic sketches of *Carosello* and dominated Italian advertisement for more than forty years, becoming a TV series in 1972 and nurturing the collective imaginary of Italians for generations. As its creators, the brothers Nino and Toni Pagot, explained in the weekly magazine *La Domenica del corriere*, in order to sell the product “one must stimulate women’s interest. And what interests women the most? Children and animals. So then, the prototype for a helpless child is the chick. If we make it sad and wretched, it will inspire sympathy. If we make it black, we immediately begin to introduce the idea that it needs a good cleaning” (qtd. in Di Marino, 185). Conceived as a product image for sponsoring the washing-machine detergent AVA, the *Calimero* video narrative featured a black chick in search of his putative mother, who abandoned him because of his black color. When he finally finds her, he asks “If I were white, would you like me?” Abandoned again, he eventually meets a Dutch girl (the famous *olandestina*) who assures him that he is not black, but only dirty, washes him with the AVA product, and brings him back to its pure, socially acceptable white origin. Ultimately, *Calimero* shows that the affirmation of Italy’s booming consumer economy as a gendered female economy was predicated again, as during Fascism, on the pivotal idea of the hygienic cleansing of the stigma of blackness from Italy’s household culture.

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The ubiquity of the culture of advertising explains the persistence of the moral injunction of whiteness attached to racial self-perception in the decades that followed the mass triumph of TV commercials and the dominance of *Carosello* culture in Italy. At the beginning of the 1990s, sociologist Paola Tabet conducted a national survey among Italian school children aged 7 to 13. The study aimed at understanding the legacy of Fascism on Italian contemporary society and on children’s racial perceptions. This particular generational target was, obviously, not directly exposed to Fascist propaganda and neither were, as Tabet seems to assume, their parents. They are, rather, the progeny of the children of the economic miracle whose parents grew up watching *Carosello*.

Children in Tabet’s survey were asked to respond in writing to hypothetical questions such as “If your parents were black, what would you do?” or “If your neighbors were black, what would you do?” The answers are alarming, to say the least. Fear, shame, and rejection dominate in the responses. Stereotypes, many of which seem to hark back to colonial propaganda, attribute to Africans a constitutive savagery and a pervasive lack of civility. One particular set of responses caught my attention in this study. It describes possible solutions to the hypothetical event of having black parents. These solutions are not as violent or drastic as others, but are nonetheless disconcerting and revealing. An example, among others, comes from a fourth grader who writes, “If my parents were black, I would assume that they are from Africa. I would put them in the washing machine with Dasch, Dasch Ultra [sic], Omino Bianco, Atlas, Ace detersivo, Ava, Dixan 2000, Cocolino, Aiax,

[laundry detergent name-brands] to make sure that they would return to being normal” (113). The coerced return to normalizing, epidermal whiteness in this response brings us full circle back to the fascist legacy of the societal fear of contamination and dirt associated with blackness. Yet the idea that such fear needs tons of different and equally potent name-brand detergents to be washed away comes straight out of an advertising culture that refers no longer to biopolitical categories to define race but privileges the quotidian, diffuse language of commercial name-brands in order to affirm the cleansing of its domestic, familial, and national heritage. Under neoliberalism, thus, as Goldberg aptly demonstrates, race is understood in terms of “geo-phenotypes” (7) that mark national belonging; those who do not belong are considered a polluting element of the national space that must be cleansed away with the potent products of late capitalism.

My final example of the washing away of race in contemporary Italy comes from the 2006 and 2007 video commercials produced by the Italian company Guaber (see their site “Welcome to Guaber”), which were created to advertise a specific product, marketed by Guaber’s brand *Coloreria Italiana*, used for black dyes, one among a series of sophisticated liquid dyes for fabrics. Founded in 1961, in 2006 the Guaber company signed a series of agreements that led to the creation of a large Franco-Italian holding, the Spotless Group, with branches in several European countries. The Spotless Group specializes in the sale of fabric care products, cleaning products, insecticides, and plant care products. The 2006–7 campaign, titled “Happy Housewife,” was made by Filmmaster, a dynamic and highly creative film production company based in Rome, and first released in March 2006.

The 2006 video (Part I) depicts a white Italian woman doing laundry. She is interrupted by the arrival of her white partner, in his underwear, who tries to seduce her. She is obviously unimpressed and responds by throwing him into the washing machine, pouring some of the advertised *Coloreria Italiana* product, and slamming the lid shut. Once the cycle is over, out of the machine comes an athletic black man—naked except for a tight, colored slip—flexing his perfectly shaped abdominals in front of the incredulous yet gleeful white woman. The white woman of the commercial is indeed the “Happy Housewife” of the title, who fantasizes about the potential consequences of applying the potency of the dye product to transforming her daily, uninspiring sexual partner into a hyperracialized, hypersexualized black man. His appearance from the machine as the Genie from the Wonderful Lamp is comical in its blatantly sexual and racial excess and it is accompanied by a blasting US hip hop beat that disrupts the traditional tango played on the accordion during the opening domestic scene. In its combined use of the black “masculine hero” as rapper and of the “naturalized and commodified body” of the black athlete, the video displays black heterosexual masculinity in ways similar to those conjured up in American visual culture (Gray 402). Contrary to what happened in the United States in the 1990s, though, when black rappers re-signified the masculine (hyper)sexuality of the black body with new tropes that challenged the policing and domestication of black masculinity, the hyperblack man of *Coloreria Italiana* activates an interracial sexual fantasy that is no longer menacing and disruptive as it is entirely depicted from the standpoint of dominant white sexuality and female consumerism.

By departing from past models of interracial prohibition belonging to the forgotten time of fascist segregationist policies, the 2006 video distances itself from anxiety-ridden representations of the threatened inviolability of the white female body. Its narrative fantasy displays a postracial visual variation that suppresses the more threatening aspects of a stereotypically insatiable black maleness. As the desiring subject is now the Italian housewife, the black man-out-of-the-machine provokes desire without evoking dread (Jackson). By simultaneously portraying the white woman as both the desiring subject and the dominant consumer, the Guaber video commercial validates Italy as a white consumer nation where black people can only be objects of sexual and material consumption. In the face of contemporary demographic changes, the commercial reestablishes the dominance of white womanhood as consumerism within the national domestic economy. Within this national model, the Italian housewife's fantasy strengthens rather than weakens the notion of an Italian white family by positioning black male sexuality as disruptive of heterosexual and monoracial normativity.<sup>15</sup>

The second commercial, broadcast in 2007, enacts a different narrative. This is a much more familiar terrain, at least for Italian viewers. The opening of the video recalls Part I, yet now it is the white male partner who is activating interracial fantasies by peeping through a soft-porn magazine, whose cover displays a black woman scantily dressed, while his white female partner is doing laundry. Annoyed by his behavior, she takes the magazine away from his hands. In retaliation, the white man throws her into the washing machine, adds the advertised product, and slams the lid shut. As the reversal of the first, this second commercial is the real return of the past—as the title says, “il ritorno”—that attempts to reestablish the colonial interracial model (white men/black women) so abruptly disrupted by the first. This time, it is the white woman who undergoes a punitive washing. The desired result, that is, the scantily dressed black woman of the magazine cover, is nonetheless unavailable to her white partner. In place of a black woman, out of the machine comes the same iconic black man, this time posing a visible threat to the white man's interracial heterosexual desire, as he blows a kiss to the visibly intimidated man standing in front of him. The queering of the black male body in the second commercial seems indeed meant to reinscribe within a colonial logic the process of desire and repulsion linked to the possibility of racial and sexual mixing. In this ad, interracial desire appears to reactivate, in order to refute it, one of the most silenced aspects of colonial sexuality: interracial homosociality and homoerotic desire.<sup>16</sup> This time, though, it has apparently severed its link with the colonial context, since the conditions it references have been obscured. In the face of the increasing heterogeneity of Italian society, both commercials hint at the possible mobility of racial Otherness, where race is distributed and dispersed as commodity, yet whiteness is triumphant as blackness has gained no power over its position and its representations.

Infused with apparently progressive meaning and ironic undertones, both commercials hint at the possibility of the “removal of the stigma from interracial sociality” (Goldberg 189) while leaving intact a series of distinctions drawn less from the colonial archive and more from the American popular imagination, where “contemporary expressions of black masculinity work symbolically

in a number of directions at once; they challenge and disturb racial and class constructions of blackness; they also rewrite and reinscribe the patriarchal and heterosexual basis of masculine privilege (and domination) based on gender and sexuality” (Gray 402). The first commercial, for instance, visualizes the washing away of white masculinity through the use of a product that fixes and reifies the stereotypical notion of black sexual potency while leaving free reins to white, feminine interracial desire. In the second commercial, blackness as disruptive sexuality becomes functional to the reinstatement of racial and sexual heteronormativity. Both commercials show the return to a racial framework where the visual inscription of white desire for blackness is again possible, certainly as a function of its subordination and consumption.

In conclusion, the Guaber commercials attend to one of the most salient aspects of postracial/postcolonial Italy, that is, the apparent deflection from the binary oppositions of racism such as black vs. white, colonized vs. colonizer, subaltern vs. dominant. The emphasis is on a new affectivity that takes the form of interracial/interethnic desire and stresses mixture and the creation of social intercourses linked to the arousal of new desires, all in the name of a new and global logic of exchange. While commercial culture plays with the simultaneous affirmation and prohibition of interracial desire, its display of interracial *jouissance*—confined within a national, domestic frame—is acceptable until contained, until the logic of mixture does not exceed the limits of state security and control. In the face of the racist attacks and brutal killings of black African immigrant men, accompanied by the repressive measures implemented to keep black Africans out of the southern borders of Europe, the Italian postracial is only, apparently, about the liberation from race. In our time, the obsession with cleanliness takes on another important, yet subtler, function: in washing the body in and out of race, the postracial contributes to diffusing and making invisible the many occurrences of racism in postcolonial Italy.

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## Notes

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1. This remark was made on November 6, 2008, during a political summit with the Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. For the Italian coverage of the event see "Berlusconi" in *Corriere della sera*. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
2. Miguel Mellino and Anna Curcio have recently argued that, although racism has been operating as a master discourse since the inception of Italy's modern capitalism, the

memory of its historicity is often denied and it is dangerously absent both from the individual and the political consciousness of Italians. See Curcio and Mellino.

3. I owe to Karen Pinkus the discovery of the nexus between the fading away of racially conscious thinking and Italian advertising culture. See *Bodily Regimes* and “Shades of Black.”
4. The very first articulation of whiteness studies in relation to Italy’s cultural history has arisen across the Atlantic and the Pacific from scholars interested in the emigrant and settler communities of Australia and the New World. See Guglielmo and Salerno; Guglielmo; Romeo, “Il colore bianco”; Giuliani, “Fantasies of Whiteness”; Pugliese. For a comprehensive history of the formation of the racial identity of Italians from Unification to the present see Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop.
5. For further discussion on the Risorgimento period, see Teti, Nani, Patriarca, Patriarca and Rally.
6. Goldberg describes a similar process in relation to Latin American white identity. See Goldberg 239.
7. Given the limited scope of this chapter, further research would be necessary in order to determine how the comic, as a genre, reveals itself to be highly enmeshed in the process of whitening race in Italian popular culture. For an illuminating interpretation of this crucial link in the US history of melodrama and the comedic genre, see Williams.
8. The visual linking of dark skin color with dirt and dirtiness highly affected advertising artifacts of the American post-Reconstruction period and featured predominantly in women’s magazines up until the late 1910s. Most notably, a late 1880s advertising trade card for the product Fairy Soap depicted a tattered, barefoot black child standing next to an eager, neatly dressed white child in the act of addressing him with the daunting question, “Why doesn’t your mamma wash you with Fairy Soap?” See Mehaffy 136–37.
9. For an exhaustive discussion of the relationship between science, medicine, and racism during Fascism, see Maiocchi.
10. For an illuminating reading of the relation between consumer culture and bodily perceptions, see Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes*.
11. On patrilinearity and racial identity in colonial Eritrea, see Barrera.
12. A chapter of the 1942 *Igiene del bambino e della razza* manual is entirely dedicated to the pernicious consequences of the “allattamento innaturale” (unnatural breastfeeding) and is a monitor to young women to breastfeed their children. “It is a natural law for a mother to breastfeed her child,” the manual reads, and thus the use of “mercenary” breastfeeding (50) is highly discouraged. See Sympa.
13. In her narrative of colonial and postcolonial daily life in Eritrea, Erminia Dell’Oro describes the figure of the *lettè* in great details. See Dell’Oro.
14. Studies on the domestic culture in the former Italian colonies are scant perhaps because “in contrast to nation-centered narratives, the domestic occupies a space that is neither heroic, nor particularly eventful, nor marked by the brash violences in which colonial relationships are more often thought to be located” (Stoler and Strassler 9). For a discussion of Italian women’s presence in colonial Africa, see Lombardi-Diop, Pickering-Iazzi, and Polezzi.
15. Peter Jackson describes a similar mechanism at play in the British advertisement of the mid-1980s, when athletic black bodies began to appear on television, cinema ads, and billboards as symbols of sexual prowess. See Jackson.
16. For a discussion of this unexplored aspect of colonial society, see Stefani.

# Blaxploitation Italian Style

## Exhuming and Consuming the Colonial Black Venus in 1970s Cinema in Italy

*Rosetta Giuliani Caponetto*

July 13, 2010, marked the death of director Luigi Scattini, the creator of the blaxploitation trilogy, *La ragazza dalla pelle di luna* (Moonskin, 1972), *La ragazza fuoristrada* (Off-Road Vehicle Girl, 1973) and *Il corpo* (The Body, 1974), that established Eritrean top model Zeudi Araya as an erotic icon in Italian culture. Though Scattini's success is often underrated, his trilogy exhumes the image of the colonial Black Venus, a figure deeply rooted in the Italian imagery since the nineteenth century, whose exotic sexuality had been historically portrayed alongside a sense of danger and fear of cannibalism. This chapter examines the degree to which the notion of cannibalism applies to Scattini's trilogy in terms of the associations between black femininity and anthropophagy, as well as the scopophilic relationship between Italian male spectators and the female black body.

On a larger scale, I examine the ability of Scattini's films belonging to the so-called *filone erotico esotico* (exotic soft-core cinematic cycle), starring Zeudi Araya and set in exotic places, to tap into the social and political crises of 1970s Italy. Drawing on Barbara Grespi and Vincenzo Buccheri's earlier studies, I explore how the cinematic representation of the modern Black Venus is embedded in a network of social and cultural discourses that exploit colonial imagery to disallow greater independence to women in Italy. Scattini's trilogy addresses the anxiety of change that swept across Italian society during the 1970s. Acting outside the patriarchal models of the dominant culture and the Catholic Church, Italian women rejected marriage and maternity and struggled to promote female employment, pay equity, and job advancement. Their mobilization for implementing a number of reforms led to the legalization of divorce (1974) and abortion (1978). In this climate of change fostered by feminism, Scattini's beautiful, obliging, black woman

was meant to provide a new domestic space in which to reassure the Italian male spectator of his dominant role.

Ironically, however, this is the crucial point of contradiction since, while intending to reassure Italian men, Scattini's films simultaneously incite other fears through the black female character's nudity. As the site of potential sexual contact, her body reinstates the issue of miscegenation and the place of children born to an Italian and a foreign black parent in 1970s Italy. My analysis here benefits from a comparison with fascist culture's attention to shaping relationships between whites and blacks and establishing an Italian racial purity and supremacy. Giulia Barrera and Barbara Sòrgoni have discussed how the sexual danger associated with the colonial black woman in Fascist Italy paralleled the ethnic and social threat posed by mulatto children, who were difficult to place within the rigid binary system of racial identity and superiority, and whose intermediate position straddled the border between rulers and ruled (Barrera 350–60; Sòrgoni 207–10). Given the backdrop of anxiety provoked by the colonial mulattoes, one cannot help but notice the lack of cinematic works in postwar Italy that address racial intermixing.<sup>1</sup> Among the Allied forces that liberated Italy from Fascism, there were black and dark-skinned soldiers whose liaisons with Italian women produced mulatto offspring.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, as found in the Fascist era, a concomitance of ethnic blending and efforts to deny such a social reality persisted, and Scattini's 1970s trilogy inadvertently raised new questions about miscegenation.

Blaxploitation is a subgenre of exploitation cinema, which is known for the use of distinct episodes that capitalize on specific traditions of literary or cinematographic representation. Exploitation films often forgo plot in favor of a few elementary stimuli, such as explicit nudity and violence, which provide variations on the original theme. Frank Beaver's dictionary of cinematic terms defines blaxploitation as "a commercial-minded cinema of the seventies for black audiences" (102). Indeed, the great popularity of 1970s American blaxploitation films can be attributed to the new topics and characters created for a growing urban black audience that, with the rise of the civil rights movement, no longer identified with the accommodating roles played by Sidney Poitier (Sims 58). At the same time the derogatory nature of the term points to stereotypical characters and behaviors drawn from African American culture which were eventually challenged by civil rights organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League.

In Italy, Scattini's *filone erotico esotico* can be likened to American blaxploitation films because of his exploitation of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century representations of the colonial Black Venus to build modern stories around a black female character. The young Zeudi Araya, a top model from Eritrea who was elected Miss Ethiopia in 1969, was instrumental in tracing a clear line back to Italy's colonial history and the period in which both Eritrea and Ethiopia belonged to the country's East African empire. The actress was the successor of the original Black Venus, a figure made popular as early as the 1880s when she began to appear in many illustrated pamphlets depicting the swath of Africa that had been explored by Italians. Through its extensive photographs, drawings, and written accounts on Africa, colonialism found a powerful instrument for capturing the Italian imagination, and the implications of the nude and seminude Black

Venuses went far beyond increased sales and territorial conquests (Barrera 170–71; Sòrgoni 58–59).

Anne McClintock provides insight into the representations of native women in European travel accounts that arguably provided a great source of inspiration for Scattini's trilogy. The success of the European colonial enterprise, according to the scholar, is often depicted through the possession of a woman rather than through explicit acts of conquest or colonial control (26). McClintock notes how taking control of a new land becomes an ambivalent scene where the erotic desire for possession coexists with the fear of being devoured (25–28). Sandra Ponzanesi further analyzes the relationship between colonialism and race/gender politics in discussing the structural inequality of the colonial discourse which interbred with the gender inequality about native women represented as “both inherently primitive-and-sexually available and menacing-and-dangerous” (165). In an effort to assert a difference between rulers and ruled, colonial power transformed the image of the Black Venus into the “quintessential emblem of the other” (Ponzanesi 166). The eroticization of native women stressed the inherent danger of those “prey to primordial sexual lust” while black femininity embodied “the sweetness of subjugation, something that European women had lost” (Ponzanesi 168).

McClintock and Ponzanesi's comments are applicable to the Italian colonial context as several pamphlets made explicit references to the danger represented by native women, one example being a color panel painting that appeared in the Bolognese *La Rana* (The Frog), a humorous magazine that, in an 1889 issue, depicted Prime Minister Francesco Crispi dressed in a nightshirt and uncertain as to whether or not to join a native woman, named Africa, in her bed.<sup>3</sup> Africa's hidden danger is represented by an army of black warriors lurking behind the woman's back, and the caption explains the minister's dilemma, stemming not only from his advanced age but also from the Italian public's aversion (following the Dogali massacre in 1887) to colonial expansion. The sensual appeal of the black female body during early Italian colonialism took on further significance during Fascism, when the image was revised to discourage interracial relationships. The 1930s brought changes in the depiction and perception of the Black Venus, as the 1938 race laws prevented her from continuing to play the beautiful, sensual enchantress. Enrico De Seta's famous series of commercial posters and comics collected by Adolfo Mignemi transform her into a caricature, occasionally going so far as to deprive her of human characteristics and equate her with actual consumer products or cattle. Such comic representations tried to downplay the threat she posed as a potential procreator of a mixed race that could irremediably dilute the Italian racial fabric. Other times, however, the black female's sexual appeal was exploited to reinforce the gender roles tailored by fascism (Sòrgoni 230–33). As a guardian of racial purity, the Italian woman was asked to join her man in Africa to oppose the native woman's charm with submissive and obedient behavior in order to ensure his faithfulness (Sòrgoni 230–33). This is true in the fascist propagandist film *Sotto la croce del sud* (Under the Southern Cross, 1938) where, in one of the crucial moments, the editing contrasts the sight of naked Abyssinian women performing a fertility rite with scenes of family life in which Italian settlers are seated at the table attended by their wives.

Bearing in mind the historical development of the black woman's portrayal in Italy, Barbara Grespi's comments on 1970s erotic films provide insight into contemporary manifestations of the Black Venus in Italian cinema. The critic claims that women were the true protagonists of films released between 1970 and 1976, and yet Italian cinema was reluctant to portray liberated, independent female characters onscreen, preferring to satisfy male desire by bombarding spectators with nudity and voyeuristic images of sexy female characters (116). For Grespi, the sequence of successful 1970s soft-porn films counterbalances the achievements of the women's rights movement (116). In 1971, for instance, the year that the contraceptive pill was legalized in Italy and Chiara Saraceno's *Dalla parte della donna* (On the Woman's Side) was published, the box office saw the success of *Quando gli uomini armarono la clava e con le donne fecero din don* (When Men Carried Clubs and Played Ding-Dong with Women) starring Nadia Cassini (Grespi 117). The following year, along with the first national demonstration for Women's Day and the circulation of American feminist writings in Italian translation, the films *Quel gran pezzo dell'Ubalda tutta nuda e tutta calda* (Ubalda, All Naked and Hot) and *La bella Antonia* (Naughty Nun), both featuring Edwige Fenech, enjoyed increasing popularity (Grespi 117). Finally, in 1973, while Italian feminists collected more than 800,000 signatures to legalize abortion and supported 15-year-old Gigliola Pietrobbon as she awaited trial for abortion, cinema-goers fantasized about Laura Antonelli's slender thighs in *Malizia* (Malicious, Grespi 117). The trend is unmistakable: the more relentless the struggle of Italian feminists, the more uncouth the films and the more vulgar the titles. Second-rate cinema dispelled the tension created by the demands of Italian women by exhuming extinct images of female figures (Grespi 117). One of these characters put back into circulation was the colonial Black Venus.

Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik concord with this interpretation in their discussion of how 1970s European exploitation cinema was affected by the social tensions of the time, since the genre functioned as "a site of reconfiguration" and an attempt "to explore the possibilities of reconstructing alternative cultural frameworks" (4). Not surprisingly, Scattini sets his trilogy outside Italy and exploits the Black Venus imagery to depict a lifestyle that could restore the gender hierarchy vitiated by social transformations in Italy. This is made clear in the early elements of *La ragazza dalla pelle di luna*, in which Alberto (Ugo Pagliani), an Italian engineer, and Helen (Beba Lonkar), a famous English photographer, go on a vacation to repair their marriage. Even in the exotic paradise of Seychelles, Helen is unable to relax and settle into the role of the affectionate and loving wife. Alberto's mood, instead, is reinvigorated by the new environment and the beautiful Simone (Zeudi Araya). Simone's sensuality is perceived as natural and, as Alberto explains, "without malice." Thus, she reinstates his virility without undermining his sense of self, providing him with a lovemaking that "was never before so beautiful."<sup>4</sup>

Alberto's physical relationship with the beautiful Seychellois woman is paralleled by Helen's observations and photographs of Simone. The practice of photographing colonized women in erotic poses is reiterated in Scattini's first two films in the trilogy and can be seen figuratively as a reverse form of cannibalism by which, rather than placing the black woman in the role of the dominant

man-eater, the camera lens is consumed by and consumes the black female body, cutting it into pieces and transforming it into the bait that attracted the Italian male audience to the theater. In *La ragazza dalla pelle di luna* specifically, the white woman is the “bearer of the look.”<sup>5</sup> Helen’s position as onlooker confers power upon her character, clarifying and solidifying her marital problems. What could be interpreted as a further indication of Helen’s status as an emancipated woman is nonetheless meant to protect Alberto’s masculinity. As Vincenzo Buccheri points out “the liberation promised by the new permissive society and by its cinema is indivisible from its taboos,” and forms of emancipation and transgression coincide with the fear of what they would provoke in the Italian audience (40). Barry Keith Grant’s analysis of exploitation cinema confirms the contradictory nature of this genre as both transgressive and conservative, a cinema which “reclaims what it seems to violate” (19).

The flaunting of black female nudity and the emergence of blaxploitation films in Italy are also related to cinema’s hardship during the mid 1970s. Among others, Lino Micciché and Carmine Cianfarani have pointed to the Italian Constitutional Court’s 1976 decision to permit local television broadcasts, giving private networks the opportunity to offer films nonstop, as one of the causes of the declined number of movie-goers (Micciché 9; Cianfarani 13). Even before this law was passed, new genres<sup>6</sup> had started to appear with the intention of profiting from subjects that had not yet been usurped by television (Orsitto 34). In competition with the small screen, Italian film production and distribution began splitting between a few well-financed and widely-distributed quality films and low-budget imitations of films that had achieved success at the box office (Nakahara 124). The success of Scattini’s *La ragazza dalla pelle di luna*, for example, gave way to a short-lived trend of films starring Zeudi Araya and focused on using the actress’s exotic nudity to attract spectators.

There are several important differences between American blaxploitation films, such as *Coffy*, *Foxy Brown*, and *Friday Foster*, and Scattini’s trilogy. The American films portray strong, independent black women “helping their troubled community . . . making choices in all aspects of life” (Sims 100), wielding weapons like men and using their bodies and sexual appeal to pursue their objectives (Sims 80). Although blaxploitation films were widely criticized for hardening stereotypes of African Americans and lacking artistic purposes, for Yvonne Sims, the “female audience may have thought differently and harbored fantasies of playing strong characters” such as those played by actress Pam Grier (101). On the contrary, Scattini’s titles and posters deny black female characters identity and agency. Unlike the eroticized colonial Black Venus, whose exotic sexuality enfolded a sense of danger, Zeudi Araya consistently plays a seminude seductress carrying no weapons. Stripped of what made the Black Venus a man-eater, Zeudi Araya’s character, at least in Scattini’s first two films, lent herself as a model of femininity different especially from the 1970s terrorist woman. On this score, Ruth Glyn and Marie Orton have analyzed how the Italian media during the 1970s attributed the rise in female participation in armed organizations to the rise of feminism. Orton focuses particularly on the media’s emphasis on women within armed groups, even if the number of female militants was far below their male counterparts (282). The



presence of female terrorists actually corresponded to a greater participation in Italian social and political life in general and revealed how the Italian media vilified women's increased political involvement by focusing only on extreme manifestations, such as terrorism (Orton 282). The violence used by female terrorists, unlike that of their male counterparts, was stripped of ideological meanings, and spun as detrimental to the female's nurturing nature and to the security of traditional gender roles, as women were coming to occupy the traditionally male domain as aggressors (Glyn 65). Within the sketchy plots of Scattini's *La ragazza dalla pelle di luna* and *La ragazza fuoristrada*, black female characters were not only unarmed but also lacked depth and development in order not to be a threat to the viewer-voyeur.

In *La ragazza dalla pelle di luna*, the vacation to Seychelles initially seems to bring Helen and Alberto closer ("See Helen, it did you well to be here. You seem more beautiful. You're like you were in the old days"). However the experience on the island and Alberto's affair with Simone ultimately widens the gap between them. The film concludes with a final line ("Tomorrow we return home, on our island, and we will say that it was only sunstroke") marking the inevitable death of marriage and family as a whole. Scattini's next cinematographic project, *La ragazza fuoristrada*, confronts the same theme, this time giving more weight to Zeudi Araya's character, Maryam, who marries an Italian advertising agent named Giorgio (Luc Merenda).<sup>7</sup> While *La ragazza dalla pelle di luna* was set entirely in Seychelles, this later film begins with Giorgio's business trip to Egypt and then the story unfolds in the city of Ferrara. The decision to transfer the black woman from the exotic location to Italy and transform the romance into a conjugal relationship provides insight into the current state of marriage and family and illustrates Scattini's strategic use of a black beauty to reposition Italian women in their traditional sphere.

In *La ragazza fuoristrada* Maryam's reputation as a Black Venus precedes her arrival to Italy. Everyone knows her from the advertising posters spread throughout Ferrara that portray her standing seminude next to an off-road vehicle accompanied by a slogan that reinforces Maryam's role as the vehicle's poster girl. When Giorgio comes up with the slogan (*la ragazza fuoristrada*) for the first time and asks Maryam to be the cover girl for the vehicle, it is she who explains the double meaning of the term *fuoristrada* which, aside from the literal meaning of "off-road" could also mean "on the side of the road." She initially refuses the offer, explaining however that she is not offended by the play on words because "girls 'on the side of the road' have a social function, at least for you men."

Maryam's social function, drawing on an additional meaning of *fuoristrada*—out of the ordinary—is soon revealed within the provincial environment of Ferrara, populated by male professionals who marry out of boredom and women who carelessly change husbands and do not aspire to establish a household. The film constantly emphasizes the ways in which Giorgio benefits from his relationship with the beautiful Egyptian whose unconditional love challenged his dim skepticism of marriage and renewed his faith in women. Her beauty and submissiveness are the qualities that Giorgio most appreciates, and Maryam appears to be the prototype of the perfect wife until she becomes pregnant and the feared prospect

of a polluted racial fabric risks becoming a reality. Her selflessness in agreeing to have an abortion, despite the fact that in her culture “a woman that is not a mother is not a woman,” is a final act of love for her husband. Highlighting the difficulty of Maryam’s decision, the film alternates between scenes of the abortion and a fertility rite in which she had participated in Egypt, and the ending suggests that Giorgio’s selfishness and his community’s prejudice have violated her body. In another reversal of the association between cannibalism and the black female, the woman’s body is consumed by the Italian community and deprived of the right to motherhood.

For a period of time, Scattini was able to draw on the ménage of the Black Venus to create the illusion of a safe paradise for contemporary male viewers, but he was eventually forced to rework the relationship between the Italian male protagonist and the black woman. Zeudi Araya’s absolute submissiveness in the two aforementioned films provided a model of femininity to be imitated, but the initial solution offered by her character eventually raised in *La ragazza fuoristrada* the more dangerous question of the existence of offspring of mixed black and white parentage, a delicate topic at the heart of Italian identity. Could a black be Italian? Drawing on Giulia Barrera and Barbara Sòrgoni’s studies on Italian colonial mulattoes, I have discussed in *Fade to White* how children born to one Italian and one African parent rarely appear in the fascist propagandist repertoire, since making them visible would raise the problem of their classification in a society heavily invested in solidifying its membership in a white race.<sup>8</sup>

That postwar Italy responded ambiguously to the question of legal and ethnic racial belonging is portrayed in films like Francesco De Robertis’s *Il mulatto* (1949).<sup>9</sup> By focusing on a child born to an Italian and a foreign black parent during the occupation of Allied troops, De Robertis indirectly comments on the problematic past of colonial miscegenation as well. After having been denied Italian citizenship as a result of the fascist race laws, children of interracial unions regained their status as citizens in 1947, but their actual integration into Italian society remained to be determined. The dark-skinned protagonist of *Il mulatto*, Angelo, whose Italian mother was married to an Italian man, is legally a citizen even though his biological father was African American. The conclusion of De Robertis’s film, in which Angelo is entrusted to his black uncle, reflects both the invisibility of citizens of black descent in postwar Italian culture as well as the Italian society’s reluctance to embrace individuals who cast doubt on its “whiteness.”

Shelleen Greene arrives at similar conclusions, interpreting the film as an attempt to illustrate Italy’s cultural vicinity to the United States, the country’s new ally and abettor during the period of postwar recovery and the Marshall Plan (27). The topic of miscegenation not only guaranteed *Il mulatto*’s distribution in the American market but also put the critical issue of national belonging and Italian citizenship to rest, at least on a fictional level (Greene 27–29). The film makes use of “Christian universalism and the American constitutional democracy, particularly the logic of ‘equal, but separate’ . . . [to] first reconcile, then eject the biracial body from the Italian nation” (Greene 29). Bearing in mind that, following its defeat in World War II, Italy could not claim rights to its colonies, and therefore no politically driven artistic movements within intellectual groups of the former

Italian colonies ever took place, and that a full-scale historical inquiry into Italian colonialism had been delayed until the 1970s,<sup>10</sup> it is no surprise that ethnic crossings between different groups still caused anxiety within Italian society. This explains why Scattini's 1974 film *Il corpo* transfers the ménage à trois back into an exotic setting (Trinidad), eliminates Italian characters from the cast, and deprives the beautiful black woman (again played by Zeudi Araya) of her previous social function.

By placing the fear of black femininity (which had its roots in the earlier colonial discourse) back at the center of the narrative, *Il corpo* distinguishes itself from the earlier films that had used the image of the seductive, submissive Black Venus as a means of countering the historical reality of the emancipated Italian woman and reassuring male spectators of their dominance. The film stars Araya as Princess, whose fatal charm destroys a French couple's marriage and transforms the husband, Antoine (Enrico Maria Salerno), into a restless drunk. A "prostitute" who cannot be loved or trusted because she can "devour a man," Princess also seduces Antoine's young employee, Alain (Leonard Mann), who resolves to kill his rival in love. Princess and her young lover die as they attempt to escape from Trinidad after Antoine's accidental drowning. In the end, physical contact with Princess does not catalyze a positive change in the lives of either of the white male characters, a theme which has been emphasized in the plot of the previous two films. On the contrary, the black female protagonist presented here is merely a "body" which exposes the most negative aspects of Antoine and Alain's personalities, and it is this relationship with Princess that does eventually cost them their lives.

*Il corpo* creates a template for subsequent films, such as Domenico Paolella's *La preda* (The Prey, 1974) and Ludovico Pavoni's *La peccatrice* (The Sinner, 1975), that capitalize on Zeudi Araya's exotic beauty to insinuate the dangers associated with her body.<sup>11</sup> Bitto Albertini further associates black female sexuality with violence and death in the series *Emanuelle nera* (Black Emanuelle), whose 1975 debut stars the Indonesian American actress Laura Gemser as its black heroine. The romantic love affair of earlier films in the *filone erotico esotico* is replaced by macabre episodes of casual sex and death which, as in the case of director Joe D'Amato's films, add "horror and mutilation to the eroticized text" (Mendik 147). Thus, the *Emanuelle nera* films abandon the earlier function of the Black Venus as a means of providing an alternative to the emancipated Italian female, and Laura Gemser's character evolves from "porn diva" to "horror queen" (Mendik 147).<sup>12</sup>

In conclusion, Scattini's trilogy is ingrained in the cultural renewal of the 1970s and is a useful aid in understanding how the erotic genre of this period becomes inadvertently focused on Italian society's struggle with its own cultural liberalization. While sex and nudity onscreen are symptomatic of greater cultural freedom, they also expose the disquieting course of that liberty, just as the reappearance of the Black Venus in 1970s Italian culture leads to the problematizing of her figure as soon as the question of offspring is raised. Scattini's trilogy does not intentionally comment on interracial unions because such relationships were not part of Italy's new cultural practices. In the early 1970s, the presence of foreign immigrants in Italy was a relatively unknown phenomenon, and seeing a person of color was unusual in the Italian social panorama. It would take another decade for Italy—in

response to the arrival of thousands of immigrants, initially from Africa—to assume a defensive posture toward different ethnicities living in its territory. Thus, the docile femininity and sensuality of beautiful exotic female characters emphasized in Scattini's films are not initially intended as commentary on the fear or reverence of black women, but rather were intended to pose a challenge to the model of the emancipated *Italian* woman. His black female characters, effective on one hand, become problematic only once their presence challenges the view of the Italian society as homogeneously white.

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## Notes

1. For representations of racial intermixing in contemporary Italian cinema, see O'Healy in this volume.
2. *Tammurriata nera*, a famous song about a Neapolitan woman who gives birth to a black boy, is a testament to the presence of interracial unions in postwar Italy. As Shelleen Greene discusses in "Il Mulatto: The Negotiation of Interracial Identity," the song reveals an ambiguous stance toward miscegenation (41–44). *Tammurriata* is sung by several voices, some of which acknowledge the mother's union with a black man, while others attempt to protect the mother's reputation by attributing the boy's skin color to popular superstition and suggesting that a black man's stare frightened the pregnant woman to the point of changing her child's skin color.

3. The color painting, which appears in Gianluca Gabrielli's *L'Africa in giardino*, p. 27, illustrated *La Rana*'s issue number 17 dated April 26, 1889.
4. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
5. The famous expression belongs to Laura Mulvey's *Visual and Other Pleasures*, where the critic argues that the cinematic codes of classical Hollywood cinema reflected patriarchal society's ways of looking at and desiring (3–31). Films traditionally presented men as active subjects, as “bearers of the look” and women as passive objects of desire for men both in the story and in the audience, denying women a look and desire of their own.
6. In his *Post(National) Italian Cinema* Fulvio Orsitto argues that the 1960s had already born witness to cinema's movement toward the subdivision into genres (spaghetti westerns, Bava's horror films, the musical comedies with Gianni Morandi and Caterina Caselli; 27–38). Such division was amplified in the 1970s with many new genres being adaptations of cinéma d'auteur. The cycle of decamerotic and incarceration films, inspired by Pasolini's *Decameron* and *Salò*, belong to an extreme genre based on sexuality and explicit violence that came into being out of Italian cinema's desire to offer something that could not be shown on television, at least not yet.
7. Although *La ragazza fuoristrada* makes some explicit references to Italy's colonial past (Giorgio's grandfather reminisces about an affair with an Abyssinian woman during the Ethiopian campaigns and Giorgio compares himself to his grandfather in boasting of having brought his conquest “back with him”), Scattini oftentimes overlooks the actual historic and cultural backdrop against which his story develops, capitalizing instead on the love story and the allure of the black women. Real historical facts are sometimes contradicted by incongruous or simplified elements, such as the film's partial setting in Egypt (which was never an Italian colony) and its nonchalance in casting Araya, a famous Eritrean actress, in the role of an Egyptian. Scattini's films are thus correctly collocated within the subgenres of the 1970s exploitation films that, as Tamao Nakahara suggests in “Barred Nuns,” are characterized by the reduction of the topic of interest to basic elements (126–27).
8. I found only three literary works which speak openly of interracial unions during Mussolini's rule. Guido Milanese's short story *Jane la meticcica* (The Mulatto Jane, 1929) is about a girl born to an English man and a native of the Caribbean Islands. Maria Volpi [Mura]'s novel, *Sambadù, amore negro* (Sambadù, a Negro Lover, 1934), also describes an interracial relationship, this time between a white woman and a black man. The novel was bitterly contested and then confiscated by Mussolini. Finally, Arnaldo Cipolla's children's book *Balilla regale* (Royal Balilla, 1935) tells the adventures of young Omar, whose ambiguous racial background turns out to be only a sunburn. When a female mulatto character appears in Guido Brignone's 1938 film *Sotto la croce del sud*, it is only to stigmatize interracial union and to justify the legal measures that would take away her right to citizenship in 1940. On the subject see also Palumbo (“Orphans”), Pickering-Iazzi, and Ben-Ghiat.
9. Pamela Ballinger's “Borders of the Nation, Borders of Citizenship” focuses on the ambiguity of Italian citizenship in the immediate postwar period. The article comments on Italy's loss of colonial possessions in Africa, the Balkans, and the Julian territories, and the arrival of former colonial subjects (such as mulattoes) and repatriated Italian nationals from Italy's previously owned or annexed territories, which turned Italian identity into an extremely challenging ethnic and cultural prism.
10. Among others, Angelo Del Boca and Nicola Labanca have extensively debated how, unlike other European countries that came to terms with their colonial past, Italy

dismissed uncomfortable discussions of colonialism and gradually silenced crimes committed in Africa. On the same subject see also Daniela Baratieri.

11. In her later films, Zeudi Araya's roles are limited to erotic and deadly, or fantastical characters. Films such as *La peccatrice* (in which an Ethiopian woman's relationship with an Italian soldier during the 1950s leads to his death and to her being lapidated by the women of his Sicilian town) and Giulio Paradisi's 1979 comedy *Tesoro mio* (in which Araya's character, Tesoro, has magical powers) provide examples of how, in the years following Araya's collaboration with Scattini, her characters are denied the possibility of developing a positive or realistic relationship with an Italian man.
12. The *Emanuelle nera* series, which exploited the success of French director Just Jaeckin's *Emmanuelle* (1974), followed an American journalist (Laura Gemser) in her travels and sexual encounters around the world. As the cycle progressed with Joe D'Amato's *Emanuelle in America* and *Emanuelle and the Last Cannibals*, both released in 1977, references to the protagonist's ethnicity disappeared from the title, and the extreme violence and depravity in the plot transformed these works into hardcore horror films.



## Screening Intimacy and Racial Difference in Postcolonial Italy

*Áine O'Healy*

Over the past twenty years, Italy has produced a substantial corpus of feature films centered on narratives of transnational migration, articulating a complex and often ambivalent commentary on the country's shift from emigrant nation to the receiver of millions of aspiring immigrants. Among the growing number of studies dedicated to this phenomenon few have acknowledged the postcolonial implications of the construction of racial difference in these films.<sup>1</sup> While the legacy of colonial attitudes casts a long shadow on contemporary articulations of alterity, the racializing tropes deployed during colonialism and adapted for various uses over the intervening years are not always readily identifiable as such. Rather, they constitute an archive of images and attitudes that have been naturalized, domesticated, and internalized as "common sense" in a culture where the historical experience of colonialism is to a large extent disavowed.

It is often argued that Italy was a comparatively minor player in the vast enterprise of imperial expansion. Yet contemporary Italy, like Europe more generally, is undoubtedly a postcolonial space, inhabited by immigrants or the descendants of immigrants hailing from multiple formerly colonized nations, including those territories once occupied by Italy. It is also a space that is fully implicated in the neoliberal/neocolonial regime of global capitalism (or "Empire," to use the term proposed by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri), a system whose borders are both more ubiquitous and elusive than those of historical colonialism, but whose modalities of exclusion and marginalization are no less insistent. Indeed, as Sandro Mezzarda and Federico Rahola have argued, the "metaborder" between the metropole and the colonies which characterized the colonial era has given way to a vastly altered geographical disposition, as the mechanisms of domination and

subordination inherited from colonialism are currently being reproduced within the space of Europe itself.

In this article I shall examine the symptomatic staging of the postcolonial in a cluster of Italian films foregrounding an intimate relationship between an Italian citizen and an immigrant from sub-Saharan Africa. Though most of these scenarios ostensibly set themselves in opposition to the patently xenophobic responses to immigration found in other Italian media sources, their varied attempts to construct narratives of cross-cultural encounters in a sympathetic manner are often subverted by narrative or visual stratagems that convey contradictory impressions of the viability of the immigrant's claim to a foothold in the national space. My objective is to probe how these narratives of interracial intimacy may simultaneously resist and reinforce racial, ethnic, and national boundaries. Why, for example, do Italian dramatic feature films offering scenarios of interracial intimacy so often involve violence, expulsion, or even death, despite the apparently sympathetic depiction of the African characters within the diegesis? Or, in those films marked by a comedic tonality, why is the outlook for the interracial couple always presented as uncertain at best? The thematic element that seems to unite this cluster of films as a whole is the issue of incommensurability, or what Rey Chow has described as "mutuality without reciprocity" (82). Grounding my approach in the understanding that race, gender, and sexuality are socially constructed, and acknowledging that racial, ethnic, and national boundaries are also sexual boundaries, I aim to explore the persistence of narrative ambivalence and disavowal, linked to the recurrent trope of incommensurability in the overall cinematic representation of Italy's changing demographic profile. In the process, I shall consider the enduring influence of the Italian colonial legacy on contemporary understandings of ethnoracial difference.

Since the early 1990s depictions of heterosexual romance between Italians and African immigrants have appeared in an increasing number of films, notably in *Pummarò* (Michele Placido 1990), *Teste rasate* (Claudio Fragasso 1993), *Sud side stori* (Roberta Torre 1999), *Bianco e nero* (Cristina Comencini 2008), *Good Morning Aman* (Claudio Noce 2009), *Billo il Grand Dakhaar* (Laura Muscardin 2009), and *La nostra vita* (Daniele Luchetti 2010). In some of these films the development (or unraveling) of the interracial relationship occupies the narrative foreground; in others it is peripheral to the central plot. In almost every instance the issue of ethnoracial difference is more or less explicitly construed as a threat to the viability—or even the realization—of the desired romance.<sup>2</sup> As I will also show, in two of the most recent of these films (*Good Morning Aman* and *La nostra vita*), the emotional ties between Italian characters and their African counterparts are configured on a continuum of affective relationships of broader scope, allowing for a more complex reflection on the kinds of tensions that present themselves in intimate interracial encounters. In order to examine how Italian filmmakers variously point toward a problematic of incommensurability, I find it useful to group the films in question according to the gendered discourses through which the African character in each couple is constructed, rather than in light of the ethnonational provenance or specific postcolonial history to which these characters are linked.

*Teste rasate*, *Sud side stori*, *Bianco e nero*, and *La nostra vita* dramatize with varying levels of emphasis a romantic or sexual involvement between an African woman and her Italian suitor. It is striking the degree to which these films re-deploy, problematize, or ambivalently engage the colonial stereotype of the so-called Black Venus, upon which earlier configurations of the desire of an Italian male for a black African woman most often hinged. The image of the fetishized black female body is hardly unique to Italian iconography, as it has been put to use over the years in a wide range of national, colonial, and commercial contexts. Within Italian colonial history, as elsewhere, the image of the African woman emerged as a symbol of the territory to be conquered, and the colonial encounter was thus conjured up as a scene of desire.<sup>3</sup> By virtue of the passivity attributed to the colonized subject within this scenario, the population of the distant territories was symbolically gendered female. In this way, the image of the alluring black woman came to stand metonymically for the conquered lands and peoples whose willing subjugation would enable the fulfillment of the colonial project.

Bound up with the erotic lure of the racialized other in the colonial territories, however, was the fear of interracial reproduction. Anxieties about hybridity and contamination were consolidated through the concepts of racial difference formulated in Europe and America throughout the long history of slavery and its racist consequences from the early seventeenth century to the second half of the twentieth century. As Robert Young has noted in his analysis of nineteenth-century theories of race, this discursive process was fraught with ambivalence: “Racial theory, which ostensibly seeks to keep races forever apart, transmutes into expressions of the clandestine, furtive forms of what can be called ‘colonial desire’” (8). Young also observes that, from the outset, constructions of racial difference were linked to fantasies of “interminable, adulterating, aleatory, illicit, inter-racial sex” (181). The legacy of race theory has meant that in virtually all colonial discourses and, indeed, in many postcolonial contexts—including Italy’s contemporary experience of immigration—discussions of racial difference, whether connoted positively or negatively, are shot through with sexual implications.

The image of the African woman has had a complex history in the iconography of Italian political culture, where it was linked at various junctures to the territorial allure of the distant colony and to the negatively imagined possibilities of “interbreeding.” Yet hegemonic representations of the black female body did not adhere to a uniform pattern but oscillated between images of exotic beauty—which were encouraged when young men were being recruited to participate in Italy’s expansionist projects—and those evoking repulsion.<sup>4</sup> Even in the latter case, however, which was exemplified most dramatically in the Fascist-era revival of the image of the so-called Hottentot Venus as a deterrent to interracial unions in the African territories, the visualized black female body retained its erotic charge through the more or less explicit inscription of a sadistic (white) gaze.<sup>5</sup> In other words, despite the diversity of contexts and imagined objectives, images of African women in Italian visual culture both before and during Fascism were almost always erotically charged.

The eroticization of the African woman that consolidated into the Black Venus stereotype has not been entirely superseded in contemporary Italian cinema

(O'Healy). Since Italy did not undergo a formal decolonization process, there has never been a widespread interrogation of colonial-era attitudes and their ongoing legacy in the era of mass migrations. Nonetheless, in those recent films that include the configuration of a romantic relationship between an Italian male and a woman migrant from Africa, traditional images of black femininity are subverted by competing discursive constructions.

In the first of these, *Teste rasate* (1993), the central female figure is Zaira, a young Somali immigrant who works as a housekeeper in Rome, where she becomes involved in a romantic relationship with the 22-year-old Marco, the film's protagonist. Not long after meeting Zaira, Marco befriends a charismatic neo-Nazi leader and joins a group of skinheads. While concealing his involvement with Zaira from his comrades and vice versa, he is obliged by the group to participate in violent attacks against immigrants sleeping in the streets.

The film's designation of Zaira as Somali is not without significance in relation to Italy's colonial history. Karen Pinkus observes in her study of visual culture during the Fascist era that Somali women were considered the most desirable of all women encountered by Italians in the territories of Italian East Africa (Pinkus 54). The stylized image of the Somali beauty, whose features purportedly bore a resemblance to those of Italian women, appeared in adventurers' photographs, postcards, advertising, and travel writing. Presented as an enticing siren, she embodied the promise of passionate, if illicit sexuality. Alluring as this exotic figure may have seemed when imagined against the backdrop of her native land, taking the Black Venus home to the metropolitan hearth was scarcely the focus of colonial fantasy. *Teste rasate* thus undertakes an interesting narrative experiment in transplanting her to contemporary Rome.

In recent Italian cinema African women are typically represented as sex workers (involved specifically in street prostitution), housekeepers, or providers of personal care. In other words, they are almost always engaged in types of labor that Italian women have for the most part abandoned over the past twenty years. Though Zaira is ostensibly presented as a housekeeper, the film's visual codes construct her as shifting between the two dominant stereotypes, morphing from the hard-working, accommodating figure seen in the initial encounter with Marco to the image of an enticing seductress, and back again. The script nonetheless provides her with a briefly sketched personal history by alluding to her impoverished family in Mogadishu and to the money she has set aside in the hope of alleviating their difficulties. These details are introduced, however, not to endow Zaira with any meaningful agency, but as a pretext for the film's climactic sequence, where she inadvertently delivers a fatal stab wound to Marco while trying to prevent him from stealing her savings. Since the real focus of *Teste rasate* is Marco, once she has performed this act of violence, she literally vanishes from the scene. Marco's slow and gruesome death, by contrast, unfolds in vivid detail, involving a final, dramatic encounter with his neo-Nazi comrades. Zaira's presence, which fulfills a purely instrumental role in his drama, is thus erased in the film's final moments. Like her colonial-era prototype, she is ultimately no more than an alluring image on the horizon of a masculine *Bildung*, to be summarily forgotten as soon as her symbolic function is fulfilled.

Though offering radically divergent approaches to the comedic deployment of interracial romance, both Torre's *Sud side stori* and Comencini's *Bianco e nero* reveal a slightly greater degree of self-reflexivity in portraying the sexual pursuit of an African woman by an Italian suitor. Torre's film—a satirical musical loosely inspired by *Romeo and Juliet* and its most famous twentieth-century adaptation, *West Side Story*—stages the improbable tale of star-crossed love between an amateur Sicilian singer, Toni Giulietto, and a Nigerian sex worker named Romea. With its violent conclusion already guaranteed by these tragically resonant names, the plot unfolds against a backdrop of the racial tensions set in motion by the arrival of a cohort of African sex workers in Palermo. Playing these characters are Nigerian women recruited from the city streets by the casting team—a daring strategy that gives unique energy to the film while at the same time jeopardizing the very terms of its fictional coherence.

Foregoing any hint of pathos, *Sud side stori* adopts an aesthetics of excess and deploys stereotypes in parodic fashion to make fun of the Sicilian community through whose eyes the Nigerians are perceived. In one of the opening scenes the approach of several colorfully dressed African women through the city streets is focalized through the perspective of local onlookers, who project onto the newcomers preposterous images of barbarity and exoticism. The manic exuberance of the scene is soon intercut, however, with gritty video footage shot in the city at night, recording an apparently real-life exchange between a local man and an African woman he propositions from his truck. By inserting this encounter into the carnivalesque fabric of the evolving love story between Romea and her Italian suitor, the film achieves a sense of a chilling dissonance. A somewhat similar effect is obtained in a subsequent scene where the Nigerian performers restage their routine practice of handing over their night's earnings to the African madam. Here the film offers a brief, sanitized glimpse into the conditions in which many women who are trafficked to Italy are obliged to live, conditions described by various commentators as tantamount to slavery (Achebe).

In contrast to Torre's violent tale of doomed interracial desire, Cristina Comencini's *Bianco e nero* unfolds as a romantic comedy set in a privileged middle-class environment in Rome. Unlike the struggling, poorly educated African women presented in *Teste rasate* and *Sud side stori*, the principal African characters in Comencini's film enjoy a remarkable level of economic well-being. At the center of this narrative we find Carlo, an Italian computer specialist married to a humanitarian activist, and Nadine, a diplomatic employee from Senegal, whose husband is a colleague of Carlo's wife. The couple's first meeting occurs at a fundraiser organized by their respective spouses. Though entering the *mise en scène* through Carlo's gaze as if summoned up by his unspoken desire, Nadine immediately asserts her status as a defiant subject, cheekily inviting him to acknowledge the fact that she is black, while at the same time expressing distaste for the images of African misery on display at the fundraiser.

At several junctures in *Bianco e nero* stereotypes of "Africanness" are pointedly brought into focus with allusions to (white/Western) constructions of race in popular representations, ranging from children's literature and Barbie dolls to cyber porn, and even to the cinema of Fellini. This attention to the power of the

stereotype underscores the ambivalence of racial discourse, the principal signifying component of which is visibility (Bhabha 25). In an emphatically self-reflexive moment, Carlo decides to offer a corrective to the Trevi Fountain scene in Fellini's *La dolce vita* by gathering Nadine in his arms and wading into the fountain, blatantly substituting the spectacle of her body, which is clearly reminiscent of the phantasmatic Black Venus, for that of the blonde Swedish bombshell played by Anita Ekberg. As this scene powerfully suggests, the visibility of "race" is not a given; it is not offered by "nature." Rather, it has to be constructed, acknowledged, and repeatedly reperformed.

The film's most explicit send-up of the disavowed racism inherited from colonialism occurs in a sequence that unfolds at Carlo's daughter's birthday party, where his wife's well-to-do parents, Alfonso and Adua, are positioned as the target of satirical critique. Still obsessed with the memory of a Namibian woman with whom he enjoyed an extended tryst during a business trip to Africa years earlier, Alfonso attempts to seduce Nadine upon her arrival at the party, steering her toward the privacy of his study while regaling her with outrageous clichés. Played out in broadly comedic terms, the scene suggests an implicit parallel between historical forms of colonialism and current modalities of empire, hinting at the exploitation of subaltern women through sex tourism and similar practices undertaken by the representatives of a new, transnational class of professionals from the global North.

Although *Bianco e nero* raises important social issues, it offers a very limited challenge to the dominant discourse on race and immigration. The social circles inhabited by Nadine and Carlo are scarcely dissimilar from each other, as each of them enjoys obvious financial security and middle-class comfort. Nadine's sister, a hairdresser, and her unemployed husband occupy a more conventionally delineated environment. Living in a modest apartment, these characters are noisy, quarrelsome, and aggressive. The comic turmoil of their domestic scene not only reiterates timeworn stereotypes of Africanness, but also serves to underline the exceptionality of Nadine's privileged social circumstances and cosmopolitan tastes. And yet, for all of her intelligence, poise, and warmth, the narrative remains undecided about the ongoing viability of Nadine's relationship with Carlo.

*Bianco e nero* has two endings. In the first—which marks the narrative's apparently logical if pessimistic conclusion—the errant couple ultimately recognize the folly of their romantic quest and are soberly reunited with their families. Then, as the screen goes black, the film appears to end. Nonetheless, after a brief pause an epilogue unfolds, constructing the couple's unexpected reunion during an outing to the park with their respective children some months later. Connotations of the fairy tale mark this sequence, which opens with a lively performance by an actress dressed as a wood sprite, presumably for the benefit of the children visiting the park. Evoking the magical world of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the actress's words set the stage for Carlo's chance encounter with Nadine in the nearby gift shop. Here, after some initial moments of awkwardness, the reunited lovers acknowledge that they can no longer bear to be apart and are soon locked in a tender embrace. Audible in the off-screen space, however, is the clamorous hostility of the children, who are quick to resume a fight initiated months earlier

at the birthday party. The children's quarrel thus signals to the viewer that this is no fairy tale. As the film ends, the couple kiss passionately and publicly, with Carlo reassuring his beloved Nadine that the children, despite their antagonism, are simply going to have to get used to things the way they are. Though *Bianco e nero* clearly attempts to move beyond the violently pessimistic scenarios of interracial romance depicted in earlier Italian films, it stops short of indicating how the enamoured couple will find the capacity to deal with the many obstacles that remain unresolved, including the racial tensions already internalized by their own children.

*La nostra vita*, a more recent film featuring an intimate relationship between an African woman and an Italian male citizen, reveals a shift with respect to earlier configurations of interracial intimacy. A relatively minor character in the script, the Senegalese Celeste is involved in a tempestuous relationship with her longtime domestic partner Ari, a disabled Italian drug dealer and the father of her three-year-old son. While her screen time is limited, Celeste's role in the social world created by the film is not insignificant, and on two occasions her actions have an important impact on the film's protagonist, Claudio, who lives in a neighboring apartment.

After his wife's sudden death in childbirth, Claudio entrusts his infant son to the care of Celeste, despite the scandalized protest of his sister who claims that she—"the black one"—is a prostitute. While the viewer immediately recognizes the sister's attitude as unapologetically racist, it gradually becomes clear from Claudio's behavior that he too harbors a level of casual racism, which does not prevent him from exploiting Celeste's willingness to take care of his children. Later, however, Celeste decides to abandon her childcare commitment in order to remove herself from Ari's life and from the violence unleashed by the shady dealings to which both he and Claudio are privy. As she hands the infant boy back to Claudio's addled care, she becomes, to some extent, the moral voice of the film, stating that she cannot remain among Ari's circle of lawless associates without becoming racially biased against white people. Yet she does return several months later. Her surprising reappearance in the film's concluding moments is preceded by a scene in which Claudio's older boys engage in a kind of séance, attempting to summon up the presence of "someone who is gone." Perhaps assuming that the person they have in mind is their deceased mother, Claudio joins in. Yet, to the children's apparent satisfaction—and to the viewers' astonishment—Celeste soon appears in the doorway, having decided to return to her partner Ari and to resume her childcare commitment.

Celeste is thus a relatively complex figure in the world envisioned by *La nostra vita*. Though designated as a former sex worker, she is never eroticized by the film. The fact that she is the domestic partner of an Italian citizen (albeit a petty criminal) and the mother of a biracial Italian child (in fact the first biracial Italian child to appear in recent cinema) gives her a unique profile in the context of recent cinematic representation. Yet the script does not give special emphasis to these factors. Rather, it focuses on her function as the provider of both childcare (to Claudio's children) and invalid care (to her paralyzed male partner). In other words, Celeste's role within the film's narrative is primarily that of the *badante*, or



**Figure 13.1** Celeste and Claudio  
*La nostra vita*, Dir. Daniele Luchetti, 2010

caregiver, who responds to the complex emotional and physical needs of the Italian characters without ostensibly taking care of her own.

In recent years the foreign-born caregiver has become increasingly visible in Italian society, offering the type of work that falls within the category described by neo-Marxist theorists as “affective labor” (Hardt; Hardt and Negri; Mezzadra). The *badante*’s work is both material (requiring physical effort) and affective (requiring the demonstration of concern), and it is meant to remedy some of the affective deficiencies in a social landscape that has been transformed by market forces, employment practices, and the breakdown of traditional family structures. Although the status of the global care worker has been the subject of scholarly discussion in the Anglophone world for the past decade, thanks to the pioneering research of scholars such as Bridget Anderson, Barbara Ehrenreich, Arlie Hochschild, and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, it has only been in recent years that theorists of globalization and labor politics in Italy have begun to highlight the importance of this figure. Acknowledging the earlier studies on care work carried out by Anglophone scholars, Sandro Mezzadra points to the *badante* as the affective laborer *par excellence* in the neoliberal arena. His intervention draws on Anderson’s insight regarding the primacy of the caregiver’s personality—her capacity to produce and “sell” affects—in the current delineation of domestic labor. For Mezzadra, it is precisely in the field of tensions occupied by the *badante*—shaped by affects as diverse as racism and manifestations of care—that specific forms of subjectivity are forged, transforming the meaning of the roles of wife and mother in the process. While the *badante* is a distinctive figure within the contemporary composition of living labor, he argues, she embodies services and values comparable to those offered by a range of other figures occupying a continuum that extends from



prostitutes to “good wives.” The novelty constituted by the delineation of Celeste in *La nostra vita* is that she makes visible this continuum, having progressed from prostitute to care-worker to wife and mother against the backdrop of transnational migration and neocolonial labor practices. Celeste’s return in the closing moments of the film to the situation she had previously felt impelled to abandon suggests that, in the prevailing social order, there is simply no “elsewhere” in which to find refuge.

I now turn to those films offering representations of intimate encounters between Italian women and migrant African men, films that implicate a discursive legacy quite different from the visual tradition that underpins representations of desire between Italian men and African women. As in other colonial contexts, the sexual union of white women and “native” men was never presented as a desirable prospect for Italian colonialism, nor indeed was the black male body constructed in mainstream discourse as a seductive icon during the colonial era. Instead, the image of the black man as a sexual predator or otherwise dangerous presence was imported more or less fully drawn from dominant racial discourses in Britain and the United States. The most clamorous incident of censorship during the Fascist era was triggered by the publication in 1934 of the work of popular fiction, *Sambadù, amore negro* by Maria Volpi (Mura), the cover of which was embellished with the image of a white woman in the arms of her African suitor.<sup>6</sup> Coincidentally, when *Pummarò*, the first mainstream film depicting a romantic relationship between an African migrant and an Italian woman, was released on DVD in 2005, the cover photograph depicted an erotic embrace between a black man and a white woman uncannily reminiscent of the transgressive Fascist-era image, with the difference that in the contemporary illustration both figures appear to be nude. Yet the sexualized showcasing of the black male body in the new millennium is more indicative of the influence of the global commercialization of the black male body as an icon of athletic masculinity than a specifically Italian tradition of fetishizing black men.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, despite the liberal mindset suggested by the provocative repackaging of *Pummarò* more than 15 years after its initial release on cinema screens, the film’s implications regarding interracial intimacy are not as distinct from colonial-era attitudes as might be expected.

The directorial debut of well-known actor Michele Placido, *Pummarò* recounts the story of Kwaku, a young doctor from Ghana who arrives in Naples as a stow-away with the objective of finding his missing brother. His quest leads him up through the boot of Italy and eventually to Frankfurt. Focalized through Kwaku’s perspective, this is not only the first film to foreground a relationship between an Italian woman and a migrant from sub-Saharan Africa, but it is also the first to visualize the sexual consummation of an interracial romance. Kwaku, however, is no ordinary migrant. Though short of cash, lacking appropriate travel documents, and dependent on the kindness of strangers, he is an educated and courteous young man, already en route to Canada to pursue his studies in surgery. In an apparent effort to avoid the negative associations often projected onto African men, the film gently prepares its audience for the sex scene by emphasizing Kwaku’s good manners, cultural sophistication, and personal charm. Hailing from a former British colony, he appears to model himself on the ideal of the English

gentleman. Though eventually forced to relinquish his relationship with his Italian lover after the couple are attacked on the streets of Verona by a band of thugs, Kwaku is rewarded by the narrative for his adept (post)colonial mimicry. Despite the tragic discovery of his brother's death, it seems clear that he will succeed in his goal of moving to Canada for further study. In contrast to Kwaku's good fortune, the less gifted, more typically "African" brother, who attacked an abusive Italian foreman, hijacked a truck, and impregnated a sex worker, is killed off by the narrative, unwittingly reflecting society's negative attitudes to undocumented immigrants who struggle to survive at the edge of the law.

Made more than 15 years after *Pummarò*, Laura Muscardin's *Billo il Grand Dakhaar*—an independently produced comedy about the adventures of a Senegalese youth who migrates to Italy—raises similar issues, though it does not attempt to smooth over the social conflicts that complicate sexual relationships between individuals of contrasting ethnoracial backgrounds. Partially based on the experiences of the film's leading actor Thierno Thiam, the script dramatizes the difficulties experienced by an immigrant who, after his initial clandestine journey to Italy, manages to carve out some modest success in the fashion industry as a designer of sports clothing. In the process of charting the protagonist's trajectory, the film offers an opportunity to viewers familiar with *Pummarò* to contemplate some of the changes that have occurred in Italy in the intervening years.

The most pressing challenges faced by Muscardin's protagonist, Billo, arise from his efforts to negotiate the contrasting imperatives of his native culture and Italian custom, particularly through his relationship with Laura, the petit-bourgeois Italian woman with whom he becomes romantically involved. Although racial discrimination, harassment, and the exploitation of African migrants are not absent in the social landscape portrayed here, the film also highlights the often awkward and sometimes sincere attempts of the Italian characters to come to terms with the intimate alliance forged between Billo and Laura.

The principal conflict portrayed in the film arises within the couple, when Billo and his lover confront their divergent needs and worldviews. As their relationship progresses, Laura reveals to Billo that she is pregnant. Panic-stricken, he leaves for Senegal, where he marries his childhood sweetheart and impregnates her on their wedding night. Returning to Rome, and still unaware of his new wife's pregnancy, he eventually agrees to marry his pregnant Italian partner as well. Although Laura is initially devastated to learn of her lover's marriage in Senegal, she decides to go through with the wedding. What enables her to enter this polygamous arrangement is the awareness of her own father's extramarital affairs. Realizing that sexual fidelity is not a behavioral standard accepted by all Italian men, she decides she would rather be involved with a man who acknowledges his multiple conjugal commitments than with one like her father, whose extramarital relationships are hidden behind a veil of hypocrisy. Laura's insight functions within the film as a call for a more tolerant, open-minded attitude to unfamiliar cultural practices. It is also worth noting that *Billo il Grand Dakhaar*—like the subsequently produced *La nostra vita*—explicitly gestures to the reality of biological reproduction between African immigrants and Italians in the contemporary context. In the concluding sequence, which is set in Rome's iconic Piazza del Campidoglio on the wedding

day, Laura's protruding belly clearly draws attention to the imminent arrival of a new, racially mixed Italian citizen, thus defying the longstanding occlusion of mixed-race marriage and reproduction in Italian feature films.

It is Claudio Noce's *Good Morning Aman*, however, that provides the most complex configuration of interracial intimacy in recent Italian cinema. In effect, Noce's film interrogates the articulation of race and racism in a postcolonial context by probing the ways in which "racism constructs 'racial' difference" (Brah 11). It also foregrounds the imbrication of racial discourses with those of gender, sexuality, and desire in an intersubjective context positioned outside the framework of a conventional heterosexual scenario. Set in contemporary Rome, the film offers a striking representation of the ambivalent matrix of attraction and repulsion that historically structured the encounter of the colonizer and the colonized other, and points to the uncanny endurance of colonial desire in the postcolonial era.

Aman, the film's twenty-year-old protagonist, moved to Italy with his relatives at the age of four, following the outbreak of civil war in Somalia. Despite the fact that he hails from a country that was once occupied by Italy, neither he nor any of the other characters in the film allude to the history that links the two nations. What the narrative exposes, however, is the difficulty, if not unlivability, of Aman's racialized, postcolonial status in a social environment that refuses to acknowledge or confront its racist legacy. Though he grew up in the sprawling Corviale housing project in the Roman periphery and speaks Italian with a marked local accent, all of his Italian interlocutors perceive him as an outsider, a foreigner, and offer persistent reminders of his racial difference.

The affective relationship at the heart of *Good Morning Aman* is not the unsummed romance between Aman and the attractive Italian woman he vainly pursues in the streets of Rome, but rather the complicated bond he establishes with a reclusive Italian ex-boxer named Teodoro. Though the nature of this relationship is not explicitly construed as homosexual, a significant level of libidinal tension emerges in the scenes the two men share, a tension that is linked to the asymmetrical power relations between them and the unspoken underpinnings of their apparent need for each other. They clearly constitute an unlikely couple, as Teodoro, who is twice Aman's age, displays an attitude of unabashed racism. Even as he regales the young African with gifts of cash, he goads him about his blackness, his poverty, and his lack of prospects.

Aman's initial encounter with the middle-aged loner occurs by chance on the rooftop of Teodoro's home in Piazza Vittorio, just as the Italian is contemplating the possibility of jumping off the roof (though his suicidal state is not revealed to Aman or the viewer until much later in the film). Teodoro subsequently invites the youth into his apartment and surreptitiously places a substantial wad of money in his pocket. Far from a gesture of selfless generosity, this gift suggests that Aman is expected to provide some form of service in exchange for money. Yet Teodoro reveals nothing of his expectations and Aman, who has recently been fired from his job, returns regularly to the apartment, tacitly accepting additional bundles of cash. As a friendship evolves between the pair, the film's visual style points to the tensions that simmer under the surface of their puzzling alliance, which is focalized exclusively through Aman's perceptual frame. Through the use of handheld

camera, elliptical editing, and the virtual absence of establishing shots, the narrative unfolds in a disorienting manner, denying Aman and the viewer a fuller awareness of Teodoro's unspoken agenda.

The motive that originally impelled the Italian to bring the young Somali into his life is revealed in the course of an encounter between Aman and Teodoro's estranged wife in the film's third act. The woman suggests to Aman that Teodoro perceives him as a kind of fetishistic replacement for a Senegalese youth he had run over and killed three years earlier in a moment of drunken folly, an event that precipitated the collapse of his marriage. The absurdity of Teodoro's hope that his wife and daughter will allow him back into their lives if they witness the bond he has created with a young black man is evident both to the wife and the film's viewers. Hence it does not fully explain the intensity of the relationship already established between the men.

Arguably, Teodoro's attachment to Aman is held in place, not by any explicit sense of remorse for the act of racially inflected violence that led to his estrangement from his own family, but rather by the ambivalence of colonial desire broadly understood. The psychic stakes involved in the relationship begin to find expression in a crucial scene early in the film, which could be described as the staging of seduction. Here, Teodoro suddenly pulls Aman close to him and kisses him on the mouth. The young Somali recoils, suspecting a homosexual come-on, but Teodoro mocks his reaction with the rhetorical question, "Do you think I take it up the ass?" He then turns around and raises his shirt, revealing an elaborate tattoo covering most of his back—a stylized image that depicts a nude woman from the rear. As she is leaning forward, her buttocks are raised in the direction of the viewer, apparently inviting penetration. "This is my woman," he tells Aman enticingly. "One day I'll let you get to know her."

As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has argued in her widely cited study on the representation of male friendships in English literature, the trope of two men involved in the sexual pursuit of the same woman is one of the defining elements of the male homosocial bond. Since the assertion of intense male-to-male attachments on the part of heterosexual men might raise the suspicion of homosexuality, the disavowal of homoerotic desire becomes a compulsory component of such bonds. The disavowal is enacted through the introduction of a woman as the third term in an affectively charged triangle, a woman who becomes the ostensible object of desire for both men (Sedgwick 21–27). The introduction of a female figure as the third party in the relationship between Teodoro and Aman appears to instantiate the kind of triangle that Sedgwick describes. In this case, however, the process of triangulation is particularly complex, since the "woman" that Teodoro, the white protagonist, proposes to share with the disenfranchised black youth is introduced into the *mise-en-scène* as part of Teodoro's own (white) body. This uncanny displacement implicitly queers the ex-boxer's gender affiliation and heightens the erotic and racial ambiguities already present in the scene.

On the surface, however, the meaning of Teodoro's promise is quite conventional: he is implicitly offering Aman the possibility of participatory citizenship in the male, heterosexual, working-class social circles in which he once moved with ease, but from which the younger man, by virtue of his racial difference, would

generally be excluded. Admission to this environment appears to implicate a specific set of shared values and practices, including an instrumental and fundamentally misogynist attitude toward women. When Aman is eventually introduced to Teodoro's social world, however, it becomes evident that his racial identity constitutes an immediate barrier to the possibility of easy acceptance by the group. Like his earlier efforts to participate as an equal in the Italian workplace and to initiate a relationship with a young Italian woman, his attempt to transgress the exclusionary protocols of group conversation during a dinner with some of Teodoro's former associates provokes hostility and rebuke. It is evident that Aman's symbolic assertion of belonging is perceived as inappropriate to the identity attributed to him by his interlocutors.

Rey Chow's astute commentary on the stakes underpinning the central relationship in David Cronenberg's *M Butterfly* provides useful insight for an understanding of the seductive scenario—and its eventual unraveling—in *Good Morning Aman*. Drawing on both Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and Lacan's theory of the phallus, her analysis exposes the processes of projection and disavowal at work in Cronenberg's representation of the bond connecting the French protagonist to the Chinese opera singer who is posing as a woman. Chow's formulation of the psychic structure of seduction is particularly compelling in this context: "What seduces . . . is not the truth of the other—what he or she really is—but the artifact, the mutual complicity in the weaving of a lure, which works as a snare over the field of encounter, ensuring that the parties meet at the same time that they miss each other, in a kind of rhythmic dance" (82). The dynamic of simultaneous "meeting and missing" at the heart of the seductive dance suggests a parallel quest for illusory wholeness by the parties complicit in the scenario. Chow describes the process as "mutuality without reciprocity," a term that may be productively applied to the libidinal dynamic at work between the two main characters in *Good Morning Aman* and perhaps, more generally, to other scenes of (post)colonial desire.

In Noce's film the lure that sustains the relationship between the perpetually frustrated, immobilized black youth and the remorseful, yet candidly racist Italian recluse is the fantasy that some form of wholeness or redemption can be achieved through the affiliation with the racialized other (a recurrent theme in narratives of Orientalist awakening). In *Good Morning Aman*, the men's shared condition of need constitutes a kind of mutuality. At the same time, the asymmetrical power relations underlying any exchange between them, aggravated by Teodoro's apparent inability to interrogate his own racism, forestall the possibility of reciprocity. Despite his relative wealth and apparent generosity, the unrepentantly racist Teodoro cannot and will not enable the racially marked Aman to claim full symbolic citizenship in the contemporary metropolis—the kind of citizenship that would allow him to move through and participate in Italy's social landscape with the ease and freedom that can be accessed by his white Italian counterparts. Nor indeed can the mere presence of Aman at his friend's side serve to convince Teodoro's estranged wife to forgive him for killing the Senegalese youth three years earlier. As the former boxer's illusory hopes collapse and his behavior becomes increasingly destructive, the film adopts a forked narration, leading to two contrasting endings.

The grim details of Teodoro's last days alive and his eventual suicide, along with Aman's reactions to these events, are intercut in fragmented fashion with a contrapuntal sequence that constructs an imaginary trip the two men take to the mountains. This journey unfolds against a rugged landscape whose contours are inspired in Aman's fantasy by a painting that hangs in Teodoro's apartment, a kitsch rendition of elements found in Caspar David Friedrich's iconic canvas "Wanderer Above the Sea of Clouds." Though linked to the image of the man looking out over a lonely valley previously seen in the crudely executed painting, the ascent of Teodoro and Aman toward the summit (which is accompanied by the melancholy *andante* movement from Beethoven's third Razumovsky Quartet) evokes a powerful sense of pathos. In this way, the seduction fantasy, or the dream of phantasmatic wholeness, continues to unfold in tandem with the demonstration of its ineluctable futility.

Although the films I have discussed here do not include direct references to Italian colonialism, their narratives unfold against a backdrop that implies the emergence of new forms of empire linked to the globalizing process. Constructions of race and racism in this transnational, mass-mediated terrain draw on an immense repertoire of discourses and images, where the specific legacy of Italian colonialism remains a lingering if covert presence. While it can scarcely be claimed that contemporary Italian cinema contributes in a substantial way to the overcoming of embedded racist discourses, these films participate in the reformulation of the national imaginary by foregrounding the kinds of intersubjective encounters in which the ongoing effects of the colonial legacy can be interrogated and possibly transformed.

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## Notes

1. These studies include D'Arma; Duncan "Italy's Postcolonial Cinema," "Loving Geographies," and "Kledi Kadiu"; O'Healy; Zambenedetti.
2. In a recent article Derek Duncan describes how the romantic relationships between Italians and migrants envisioned by Italian filmmakers seem inevitably bound to fail. He points out that according to the overarching vision offered in films featuring migrant characters, the immigrant is envisioned as a *productive* body—a body willing to labor—not as a reproductive one ("Loving Geographies").
3. According to Gabriella Campassi and Maria Teresa Segà, "The black woman becomes the symbol of Africa . . . and the relationship between the white man and the black woman is symbolic of the relationship between the imperial nation and the colony; the man offers his stimulating, life-giving virility; the woman is thereby enriched in her self-fulfillment as the complement of masculine ego-expansion" (Campassi and Segà 55, my translation).
4. See, among others, Barbara Sòrgoni and Sandra Ponzanesi.
5. Sòrgoni observes how the image of Sara Baartman (the so-called Hottentot Venus), which was initially circulated in the early nineteenth century, was republished in the inaugural issue of the fascist bi-weekly *La difesa della razza* in August 1938 to reinforce the prohibition of miscegenation.
6. For an analysis of the events surrounding the suppression of *Sambadù* by the Fascist government see Bonsaver, 103–5.
7. The fetishization of the black actor's body for advertising purposes is also evident in one of the publicity shots for Vittorio De Seta's *Lettere dal Sahara* (2006), a film in which the Senegalese protagonist's pious adherence to his Islamic beliefs stands in contrast to the seductive photograph included in the promotional material. For a critique of the appropriation of the image of the black male body—as well as black culture more generally—by the contemporary image industries see Gilroy 177–206.



# Racial Evaporations

## Representing Blackness in African Italian Postcolonial Literature

*Caterina Romeo*

Racism rests on the ability to contain blacks in the present, to repress and to deny the past.

Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack*

### Introduction

The image evoked by the title of this chapter is borrowed from David Theo Goldberg, who emphasizes that race is not a biological feature, nor does it merely constitute “a set of ideas or understandings”; rather, it is a “social fiction”<sup>1</sup> that “represents, more broadly, a way (or a set of ways) of being in the world, of living, of meaning-making” (“Racial Europeanization” 334). Goldberg focuses on a phenomenon that he defines as European, which I employ here to analyze the Italian context: the evaporation of race as a critical category both in contemporary cultural debate and in the analysis of national identity construction processes in Europe, which are based on the Otherization and racialization previously enacted in the colonial context (Goldberg, “Racial,” *The Threat of Race*).<sup>2</sup> As Goldberg states, “Race has been rendered invisible, untouchable, as unnoticeably polluting as the toxic air we breathe. Unseen yet we still suffer the racist effects” (“Racial” 339).

The term “evaporation” evokes the presence of something that has momentarily become invisible but has not disappeared. Race—historically a constitutive element in the process of Italian national identity—has “evaporated” from the cultural debate in contemporary Italy as a result of the necessity to obliterate “embarrassing” historical events (Italian colonial history and the racial/racist politics enacted by the Fascist regime, intranational racism, racism against Italian

emigrants in the United States, Australia, and northern Europe). The presence of race, like the presence of steam, saturates the air, rendering it heavy, unbreathable. Moreover, there is the constant threat that race could change its status back if challenged by new forces (social tensions caused by racist attitudes, discriminatory immigration politics, state racism), thus becoming visible again.

Goldberg also reads the continuous episodes of racism in contemporary Europe as the traces of what European societies would rather conceal, but which has been improperly buried and now “refuses to remain silent” (“Racial” 37). Portuguese German intellectual and artist Grada Kilomba, whose family originates in the West African Islands of São Tomé and Príncipe, utilizes the same metaphor of improper burial. Drawing from Jenny Sharpe’s idea that the ghosts of slavery haunt present history and everyday racism, she writes,

Our history haunts us because it has been improperly buried. Writing is, in this sense, a way to resuscitate a traumatic collective experience and bury it properly. The idea of an improper burial is identical to the idea of a traumatic event that could not be discharged properly and therefore still exists vividly and intrusively in our present minds. Hence timelessness, on the one hand, describes the past co-existing with the present, and on the other hand describes how the present co-exists with the past. Everyday racism places us back in scenes of a colonial past—colonizing us again. (137)

I believe that only through the acknowledgment that slavery and colonialism have been systematically removed from US and European history can continuous manifestations of racism be understood not as extemporary and sporadic but rather as systemic and systematic events that share a common origin and shape contemporary societies.

Creating a connection between the postracial and the postcolonial and underlining how the prefix “post” signals an operation of removal, Cristina Lombardi-Diop asserts that Italy, unlike the United States, has moved to a postracial phase without ever going through a racial phase, that is, a time in which race is a privileged category of analysis in theoretical and critical debate. The prefix “post” in both terms thus signals the longed-for liberation from racialization and colonialism, projecting both of them outside Italian history and contemporary culture (see Lombardi-Diop in this volume). Blatant episodes of racism have occurred in Italy in recent years, including the mass-murder of six African immigrants in Castel Volturno, the shootings of black workers in Rosarno and the subsequent riots in the Calabrian town, the killing of Abdul Salam Guibre, and the racist chants addressed at Italian black athletes such as Mario Balotelli and Abiola Wabara. The fact that the media have not denounced any of these incidents as racially motivated shows that Italy has yet to acknowledge that colonialism and the racialization of internal and external Others were crucial steps toward the construction of its national identity. It also suggests that, in the national collective imaginary, the national space of Italy has always been and still is a white space.<sup>3</sup>

Strategies that occlude the category of race from critical and theoretical debate range from the evaporation of race (by means of which episodes of racism are

minimized or labeled as something else) to the automatic assimilation of race discourse with other discourses (illegal immigration, citizenship, class, religion, and, more in general, cultural differences).<sup>4</sup> In order to counteract such tendencies, not only is it crucial to keep race and blackness visible, it is also necessary to avoid analyzing them *in vacuo* and to intersect them with other determining factors such as gender, class, religion, and sexual orientation. Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti point out that critical whiteness studies that developed in Europe in the early 1990s concentrated mostly on the inequality existing between white women and women of color in the United States rather than in European countries.<sup>5</sup> Although they remark the necessity to analyze the intersection of race and gender in the European context, Griffin and Braidotti partially revert to a culturalist approach. Emphasizing that the exclusive focus on whiteness is not sufficient to analyze European racial crimes such as the extermination of “communists, homosexuals, gypsies and Ashkenazi Jews” (226) in concentration camps and ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, they ask, “Does ‘white’ actually stand for the colour white or is it invested with meanings that do not impinge on colour so much as on what one might term ethnic or cultural differences? Diversity is not merely or exclusively about colour. This is what European anti-Semitism demonstrated. There are black and white scenarios where colour is key but in many instances of discrimination and oppression colour is not the (only) determining factor. It is this complexity that the whiteness debate in Europe needs to address” (227). When applied to the Italian context, Griffin and Braidotti’s notion appears both necessary and problematic. If it is true that race and color are social fictions, that color is only one of the categories on which racism is founded, and that it has not played a key role in the above mentioned genocides, it is also true that, by obliterating race from the critical and theoretical debate and substituting it with ethnicity, one runs the risk of erasing a crucial category in the analysis of European colonial history. The “externality” of colonialism (Goldberg, “Racial”) does not imply that it is less European a phenomenon: it is a foundational moment for many nation-states and its consequences deeply and radically inform contemporary Europe. It is crucial, therefore, to keep the category of blackness visible and to develop a racial analysis of the relationship between colonizers and colonized, for it is this examination that reveals the continuity between European (and Italian) colonial history and contemporary racism and processes of racialization.

### **Representing Race and Blackness in African Italian Postcolonial Literature**

The evaporation of race has become increasingly difficult to sustain in contemporary Italy due to the growing presence of black immigrants and black Italian citizens. Italian blackness has been represented with growing frequency and complexity by African Italian authors (De Vivo). In the writings that I examine, the problematization of race and color goes far beyond the binary oppositions white/black, racist/racialized, and racism is not denounced only when it surfaces through blatant episodes of violence. Here racism, even when it is not overtly criticized, is revealed as a systematic structure that is all the more insidious as it is invisible,

concealed under seemingly innocuous and benevolent attitudes (Orientalization, exoticization, tolerance).<sup>6</sup> In their narratives, moreover, migrant and postcolonial writers give life to characters who are simultaneously black and Italian, thus creating a rupture in the Italian collective imaginary, which has historically associated the population of Italy with whiteness as an absence of color or, as Alessandro Portelli points out, with normality (“Color Blind”).

The methodology I employ for my analysis in this chapter combines a chronological approach (aimed at observing how representations of race and blackness have changed in the past twenty years) with a thematic one (aimed at acknowledging the centrality of issues such as the intersection of race and blackness with gender, the questioning of the notion of global sisterhood, the fraught relationship between black bodies and social space, and interracial relationships).

\* \* \*

In two seminal texts theorizing the way in which the occupation of space is always constructed along racialized and gendered trajectories, Nirmal Puwar and Sara Ahmed underline how masculinity and whiteness are always assumed as the norm. Puwar coins the term “somatic norm” to indicate the implicit rule that regulates the right bodies have—or lack—to occupy both symbolic and physical space. Describing the spaces in which whiteness is *implicitly* codified, Sara Ahmed maintains that the whiteness of a given space is constructed through the phenomenological reiteration of such a norm (that is, in the original meaning of the word “phenomenon” in ancient Greek, through the way in which white bodies manifest themselves). A discursive reiteration, on the contrary, is undesirable as it would weaken the white privilege embedded in that space: “I want to suggest here that whiteness could be understood as ‘the behind.’ White bodies are habitual insofar as they ‘trail behind’ actions: they do not get ‘stressed’ in their encounters with objects or others, as their whiteness ‘goes unnoticed.’ . . . Spaces are orientated ‘around’ whiteness, insofar as whiteness is not seen. . . . The effect of this ‘around whiteness’ is the institutionalization of a certain ‘likeness,’ which makes non-white bodies feel uncomfortable, exposed, visible, different, when they take up this space” (Ahmed 156–57). Puwar and Ahmed show that the prohibition against the presence of certain bodies in certain spaces *implicitly* regulated around whiteness is often not codified in language, rather it functions through the reiterated (and almost exclusive) presence of white bodies in those spaces. The lack of verbalization makes the prohibition stronger, as it equates whiteness with transparency, thus implicitly endowing it with the connotation of normativity.

The editorial market, as well as the Italian academia and the media, have constructed the nation’s literary and cultural space as white precisely through a process of naturalization of native authors’ whiteness. When African Italian postcolonial writers in the early 1990s started infusing this space with their blackness—by becoming the subjects, rather than only being the objects, of representation in the Italian literary space, and by telling stories from the migrants’ perspective—resistance to this intrusion was mainly enacted through the delegitimization of their writings (to which a sociological value was attributed, but not a literary one)

and their confinement within the nonliterary space of autobiographical writing.<sup>7</sup> By “taking the floor” (Khouma, Interview 115), migrant and postcolonial black writers have infringed and rewritten the somatic norm of Italian literature’s symbolic space.

The date that conventionally marks the beginning of the so-called *letteratura italiana della migrazione* (Italian migration literature) and postcolonial literature is 1990, which saw the publication of three autobiographies by immigrants in collaboration with Italian editors: Pap Khouma’s *Io venditore di elefanti* (Senegal), Salah Methnani’s *Immigrato* (Tunisia),<sup>8</sup> and Mohamed Bouchane’s *Chiamatemi Ali* (Morocco). Central in these texts is the social marginalization of illegal immigrants. Issues of race and color present themselves in these autobiographies, signaling the different subjectivities of the writers, the different ways in which they perceive themselves and are perceived by others from a racial standpoint, and the ways in which they perceive both Italians and other immigrants based on their degree of divergence from what I define as the “chromatic norm.”<sup>9</sup>

In the new introduction to the second edition of *Io venditore di elefanti*, issued in 2006, editor Oreste Pivetta reflects upon racism:

In the end Pap pointed out to me that we had never used the word “racism.” I do not know whether this happened by chance or if his story was such as to exclude something which might have seemed a bit ideological: what happened is that we had left it to the story itself to say it all, to teach us how to be able to tell the good guy from the bad guy, the generous one from the cruel one, to distinguish between the arrogant cop who confiscates the goods you’re selling and the one who shows some understanding. (8)<sup>10</sup>

This reflection reveals an inability to acknowledge that racism is not a matter of voluntary action but rather a pervasive structural principle that informs Italian society and culture. What is missing in Pivetta’s statement is the awareness that in binaries such as good/bad, generous/cruel, understanding/arrogant, racism may lurk in the first term as much as in the second. Although the text produced by Khouma and Pivetta is not directly concerned with the racialization of the Senegalese and other black Africans in Italy in the 1980s, the issue of the social invisibility of black people—as critiqued by Ralph Ellison in *Invisible Man*—is constantly combined with that of their excessive visibility, which is the result of their divergence from the chromatic norm (as Khouma states, “a black guy in Rimini or Riccione is out of place” 33). Sara Ahmed defines the moments in which a body is perceived as “out of place” as highly political: “When we talk about ‘a sea of whiteness’ or ‘white space’ we are talking about the repetition of the passing by of some bodies and not others, for sure. But non-white bodies do inhabit white spaces; we know this. Such bodies are made invisible when we see spaces as being white, at the same time as they become hypervisible when they do not pass, which means they ‘stand out’ or ‘stand apart.’ You learn to fade into the background, but sometimes you can’t or you don’t” (159). Pap Khouma claims he wants to “take the floor” in response to black immigrants’ social invisibility and their exclusion from the symbolic space of self-definition.<sup>11</sup> Khouma’s text, moreover, shows how

forms of racialization and racism are enacted through processes of stereotyping and essentializing, as the reader observes in the scene where a policeman asks the narrator to break dance, or in another scene where some potential customers ask him to show his sexual attributes (an incident that resonates with the discursive hypersexualization of black bodies).

The articulation of racism in Mohamed Bouchane's *Chiamatemi Ali* is closely connected to the specific way in which the protagonist (and author) perceives his own racial identity (thus introducing into the text the racialization of sub-Saharan immigrants by North Africans). When his boss defines all African immigrants as "Moroccans," the narrator wonders, "I told him, if there are Moroccans from Pakistan and Moroccans from Algeria, then what am I? A Moroccan from Morocco? Or, more precisely, a *white* Moroccan from Morocco?" (98, my emphasis). The presumed racial superiority of North Africans with respect to sub-Saharan Africans also inhibits the author's criticism of Italian racism vis-à-vis North Africans. The narrator often states that in Italy he found "ignorance, rudeness, but not racism" (157). Alessandro Portelli aptly remarks that ignorance is one of the reasons most often evoked to justify racism ("Color Blind"). As Audre Lorde reminded the audience at the Second Sex Conference in New York City in 1979, making the oppressed feel guilty for the oppressors' ignorance is an ancient mechanism to keep the oppressed preoccupied with the oppressors' well being, rather than with their own (113).

In both Bouchane's text and Methnani's *Immigrato*, racism against immigrants is intertwined with intranational racism, thus complicating the social interplay between whites and nonwhites in the chromatic norm.<sup>12</sup> Southern Italians and immigrants are often marginalized since they share a condition of economic and social subalternity. However, as one of the interviewees states in Dagmawi Yimer's documentary film *Soltanto il mare* (2011), northern Italians racialize dark-complexioned immigrants even more than they discriminate against southern Italians due to their skin color ("They can't stand us, let alone you guys with dark skin").

Methnani's text also shows how Avtar Brah's notion of "differential racialization" illuminates not only "how different racialised groups are positioned differentially vis-à-vis one another" (Brah 15), but also how they position themselves and one another differently in the social space. In a scene in which the protagonist encounters a group of sub-Saharan immigrants in an "African" restaurant, the narrator notices, "Inside there are Nigerians or Senegalese. Everybody is looking at me because, I think, they don't see me as a black man. I feel I'm the object of an unusual type of racism" (Fortunato and Methnani 40).

Khouma, Methnani, and Bouchane's texts often evoke the dynamics of colonial racism, such as the feminization of the Arab male, who becomes an object of desire for Italian men, and the infantilization (Fanon) of nonwhite immigrants. The three authors also show how the process of imitating the behavior of Italian natives is always expected of migrants (Bhabha's mimicry), but it must always remain incomplete, signaling an approximation that never becomes total identification ("*almost the same, but not quite*" 86). Significantly, the protagonists and other characters in the three texts are expected to address Italians in Italian ("the same"), but they are also expected to do this in broken Italian even if they speak

the language perfectly (“but not quite”): Italians fear an excessive proximity that might blur physical, social, and political borders, thus depriving them of their privileges.

The colonial legacy of contemporary racism is central in Maria Abbebù Viarengo’s *Andiamo a spasso*, a memoir (mostly unpublished) of which a short part was published in 1990. Here the author represents how her blackness was perceived in Turin at the end of the 1960s at a time when the city was the destination of intranational migrants coming almost exclusively from southern Italy. To an even greater extent blackness is the turning point in Nasserah Chohra’s collaborative autobiography *Volevo diventare bianca* (1993), centered on the construction and perception of blackness and its intersections with gender, class, and religion.<sup>13</sup> In the first chapter, where the author discovers her own blackness as a child, color differences recall colonial images and ethnocentric representations in which the colonized are associated with nature, lack of civilization, and a chronic incapacity to organize themselves.<sup>14</sup> Space is mapped around the (post)colonial dichotomy center/periphery, as the text stages the narrator’s constant sense of dislocation and estrangement in relation to Marseille, the Sahara and the Saharawi community to which the protagonist’s family belongs, the postcolonial metropolitan space of Paris, and finally Italy from where the author writes. Nasserah Chohra distances herself from both her Algerian-Saharawi culture of origin and her French culture of adoption: her refusal of the postcolonial language and her use of Italian as the language of her writing, along with her marriage to a man of Italian origin and their life together in Italy, provide the author with access to a privileged social space. After recounting her numerous attempts at passing, the writer appears to have achieved a satisfactory degree of social whitening. This leads her to claim that “black and white are only nuances” (133) and prompts her to define a Senegalese street vendor (“a poor boy as black as ebony” 132) as genetically inclined to commerce (“he must be Senegalese, I thought. They have this trade in their blood” 132). Chohra’s racialization of the Senegalese immigrant seems to originate from a combination of factors: her privileged social status derived from her French citizenship and her marriage with an Italian national and her presumed racial “superiority” as a North African with respect to sub-Saharan Africans.

Blackness is at the core of Geneviève Makaping’s *Traiettorie di sguardi. E se gli altri foste voi?* (2001), a unique text in Italian literature and culture. This book reverses the point of view of Eurocentric ethnography that traditionally positions Africans as the object of observation. Here it is the Cameroonian Italian anthropologist who observes the Italian population in their environment and denounces their racism.<sup>15</sup> Even more importantly, Makaping is the first black Italian writer and intellectual to claim that racism is one of the latent mechanisms on which Italian society is articulated (“Racism cannot be considered as equivalent to aggressiveness and violence; not all aggressiveness is racist, not all racism is necessarily aggressive. Moreover, racism can even have a positive value; don’t we hear all the time that black people can dance, that Italians can sing, and that Jews are good at business?” Danielle Juteau-Lee, qtd. in Makaping 29).<sup>16</sup> Makaping also underlines how damaging the internalization of racism can be for black people, while at the same time claiming their need to rename and redefine themselves by revealing the

pitfalls of the chromatic norm (“I am not a woman of color. I am a Negro” 38)<sup>17</sup> and addressing the issue of whether to adopt a colonial or a precolonial language (Ngũgĩ). Following bell hooks, Makaping also denounces white women’s position of power vis-à-vis black women, thus questioning the notion of “global sisterhood” still so resistant in Italian feminism and the lack of awareness white women have of their own white privilege (Makaping 56). The relationship between white and black women, especially within the globalization of domestic and care work, is central in Christiana De Caldas Brito’s “Ana de Jesus” (1995), Ingy Mubiayi’s “Documenti, prego” (2004), and Gabriella Kuruvilla’s “Colf” (2008). De Caldas Brito’s short story exposes “global sisterhood” as a white notion, as does Nkiru Nzewgwu’s poem “Sisterhood,” in which a white woman instructs her housekeeper on feminism’s core issues after ordering her to scrub the floor on her knees. Significantly this poem opens with the word “sisterhood” and closes with the word “sisterarchy.”

Ingy Mubiayi’s ironic denunciation of the exploitation of black women by white female employers in the short story “Documenti, prego” prompts the reader to consider that Italian women’s access to public space—a core issue of Italian feminism in the 1970s—has not been facilitated by the redistribution of domestic work between men and women within the family. In patriarchal Italy the liberation of women has been and still is in part dependent on the exploitation of immigrant women and their labor.<sup>18</sup>

Differences in color among nonwhite women intersect with issues of class in Gabriella Kuruvilla’s short story “Colf.” The first encounter between two women immediately becomes problematic when the Indian housekeeper realizes that her employer is a black woman whose national origin is left unspecified. The protagonist feels racially superior to her and calls her “negra” while fantasizing that she would not accept an offer of sisterhood from her (which is not volunteered by the black woman in any case). The short story clearly reveals the exploitation of the South Asian domestic worker by her black employer, and this is later juxtaposed with the orientalizing of the Indian woman by her neighbors, who have reduced India to an exotically spiritual place and turned it into a commodity (as is often the case, Kuruvilla argues, in liberal, middle-class environments in Italy).

Ingy Mubiayi and Gabriella Kuruvilla, together with Igiaba Scego and Laila Wadia, are the authors of the short stories in the collection *Pecore nere* (Capitani and Coen 2005). Though the questionable title highlights how the four writers’ skin color confines them to the margins of Italian society, “‘black sheep’ also suggests,” as Clarissa Clò points out, “that while the authors are of a different skin color, they are, nonetheless, already members of the family, and by extension the nation, and contribute to Italy’s culture in ways that complicate common sense understandings of it” (see Clò in this volume). The short stories included in the collection articulate the difficult relationship between past and present, problematizing the authors’ divergence from the chromatic norm (all of them, except for Wadia, are second-generation, and all of them are black Italians) and the way in which this interferes with their access to public space. In Mubiayi’s short story “Concorso,” the black, Muslim Italian protagonist’s desire to become a policewoman contrasts with her physical features, more often associated with those who break the law



rather than with those who defend it. In Gabriella Kuruvilla's two short memoirs included in this collection, racialization and postcoloniality intersect in the protagonist's difficult relationship with the past, represented by her Indian father. This is how the author recounts her parents' first encounter: "She, white, Italian, brown hair and green eyes. He, black, Indian, black hair and black eyes. Monochrome. The only whiteness he had were some stains on his face, around his chin. Vitiligo. Caused by stress. The encounter with the West had impressed on his skin little light stains. A strange form of integration" ("Ruben" 84). Vitiligo here, as the whitening of the protagonist in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, is a hint of mimicry that symbolizes the desirability of a white identity and the impossibility of assimilation within the chromatic norm.

The issue of interracial relationships (see O'Healy in this volume) is at the core of another collection of short stories titled *Amori bicolori* (Capitani and Coen 2008). In Igiaba Scego's "Identità" and Ingy Mubiayi's "Nascita," the constant need felt by black women to defend their position as partners and wives of white men combines with their fear of being rejected by their own children once the latter have internalized the negative implications associated with the color they have inherited from their black mothers.<sup>19</sup> In Scego's "Identità," Italian Somali Fatou is trapped between Orientalizing images of black women and the traditional roles invoked by her sister Nura. If, on the one hand, Fatou witnesses the exoticization of black women in the media and the colonial past even materializes one day in the apartment she shares with her white Italian partner in the photo of a bare-breasted Black Venus, on the other her sister tries to persuade her to move to the United Kingdom and satisfy the Somali men's "hunger for Somali women" (16).

In Igiaba Scego's memoir *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010)—as also in the short story "Salsicce"—the author struggles with the difficulty of imagining herself as a black Italian, since the Italian collective imaginary is still very resistant to considering the intersection of blackness and Italianness as a viable possibility. In an excerpt that reminds the reader of Kym Ragusa's memoir *The Skin between Us*, Scego wonders,

What am I? Who am I?  
I am black and Italian.  
But also Somali and black.  
Then am I African Italian? Italian African? Second generation? Uncertain generation?  
*Meel kale?* A nuisance? A black Saracen? A dirty Negro? (Scego, *La mia casa* 31)

Alessandro Portelli highlights the necessity to transpose the DuBoisian question on the possibility of being both black and American into the Italian context of the twenty-first century, and to ask if a black Italian identity is imaginable ("Sulla linea" 2010). On this issue, in 2009 Igiaba Scego aired a program on Rai Radio Tre titled *Black Italians* in which she reconstructs the life stories of black Italians who have been successful in different fields (in sports, such as Egyptian-Italian athlete Ashraf Saber and boxer Leone Jacovacci; in politics, such as deputy Jean Leonard Touadi; in cinema, such as actress Ester Elisha; in music, such as pop singer Saba Anglana) and who have contributed to the making of Italian history, past and

present (such as the Italian Somali partisan fighter Giorgio Marincola), and still contribute to Italy's urban culture (such as the black Italian Youth Group "Comitiva Flaminio"). Through the celebration of these black Italians, Scego creates an ideal community and underlines their contribution to Italian history and culture. By asserting their right to visibility, she reverses negative perceptions of people of color while simultaneously questioning the presumed chromatic homogeneity of Italianness both in the past and in the present.

The intersection of blackness and Italianness and the difficulty in defining one's identity is addressed by Pap Khouma in his article "Io, nero italiano e la mia vita ad ostacoli" (2009). In *Noi italiani neri. Storie di ordinario razzismo* (2010), Khouma denounces the resistance to include people who do not conform to the Italian chromatic norm among those identified as Italian. Khouma examines episodes of everyday racism and the way in which they are systematically downplayed; he analyzes interracial friendship among soccer players and soldiers in World War II; but he also denounces state racism:

If real integration requires a change in people's consciousness, it is also true that politics can encourage it, indicate a route, and somehow *educate* people about it—if I may use this term. It is a serious problem when Italians who are different are threatened by people who are part of public institutions and have powerful means to exacerbate the frustration of those already alarmed by the social changes brought about by the presence of millions of immigrants who have arrived here from all over the world within a few years. (155)

State racism, Khouma argues, is produced by and articulated through discriminatory legislation. This, in turn, ignites what Alessandro Dal Lago has defined as a "tautology of fear" (2004), tapping into people's insecurity about their precarious lives.

### Conclusion

Italian African postcolonial writers represent race and blackness in their work—both through their authorial position and through the presence of black characters in the monochromatic Italian literary space—allowing the legacy of the colonial past to surface in the theoretical and cultural debates as well as in the social and public space of contemporary postcolonial Italy. Paraphrasing Paul Gilroy, one could say that Italian African postcolonial writers are creating a space for blacks in the *tricolore* (the tricolor flag). Enacting resistance strategies can attenuate racism, but it is necessary first and foremost to acknowledge that racism is a pervasive element in Italian society and a constitutive factor in the process of national formation. It is crucial, therefore, not only to condemn blatant acts of racism, but also to uncover and make visible all those subtle mechanisms that strengthen the racist structures of Italian society. A strong boost in this direction could come from a feminist critique of everyday practice and an analysis that considers and fights gender oppression in its intersection with other categories of oppression (such

as race, class, sexual orientation, religion, and so on). To this aim, Italian feminists need to acknowledge and question their white privilege—which for the most part they have not yet done—in order to develop alliances with nonwhite women. Finally, it is crucial to denounce and fight state racism produced by governments and their legislations.

For more than twenty years, migrant and postcolonial writers in Italy have denounced racism as a pervasive element in Italian society, articulated through exoticism, patronizing attitudes, microscopic and macroscopic racist acts, systematic marginalization, and state racism. They have pointed out how symbolic space in literature has historically been constructed as a white space. They have actively contributed to the rewriting of Italian colonial history, producing what David Theo Goldberg calls a “new racial counter-history” (“Racial” 356). They have represented Italian social space as diversified, a space in which the juxtaposition of terms such as “black” and “Italian” does not constitute an oxymoron. African Italian postcolonial authors have conjured up plural identities within the Italian national space (the way in which postcolonial writers have done in other European countries). Their work has contributed to open a breach in the national collective imaginary, thus making possible new conceptions of Italianness.

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## Notes

Some of the ideas in this chapter were first presented at the conference *Leggere il testo e il mondo. Vent’anni di letteratura della migrazione in Italia*, held at the University of Bologna on October 14–15, 2010. I would like to thank Fulvio Pezzarossa for inviting me to the conference. An early version of this chapter was published in Pezzarossa and Rossini.

1. I borrow the term “social fiction” from Matthew Frye Jacobson. I employ it here and elsewhere instead of the commonly used term “social construction” to underline how the notion of race as a biological category is distant from reality.
2. The notion of racial evaporation is already present in Goldberg’s essay “Racial Europeanization,” which was subsequently revised as chapter five in *The Threat of Race*.
3. On September 13, 2008, Abdul Salam Guibre, an Italian citizen originally from Burkina Faso, died in Milan as the result of being struck with a metal bar by two Italian shopkeepers for stealing a pack of cookies with two other black friends. Following this tragic event, major Italian newspapers such as *La Repubblica* and *Corriere della Sera* published reassuring articles discounting racial motives for the murder. *La Repubblica* also published an interview with Andrew Howe in which the long jump champion declared that Italians are not racist (<http://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2008/09/15/mai-subito-episodi-di-razzismo-ma-ora.html>). The interesting choice of the subject to interview (a light-skinned black man, formerly a US citizen and now a naturalized Italian, a long jump champion rated the sexiest man in the Italian line-up for the 2008 Olympics) reveals how race cannot be considered in a vacuum. Rather, it needs to be examined in its intersections—in this case—with geographical origins, social status, class, and aesthetic norms of beauty and attractiveness. Some days later, on September 18, 2008, six immigrants from Ghana, Liberia, and Togo were brutally killed in Castel Volturno. The slaughter was framed as a settling of accounts between the Camorra and African drug dealers. Subsequent investigation proved that the victims were not linked to the drug trade or to the criminal underworld. Although the Italian media failed to denounce the event as racially motivated, the African community perceived it as such.

The largest riot by black immigrants in Italy started in Rosarno (Calabria) in January 2010, when three immigrant orange pickers were shot by some local men for no apparent reason. The factors motivating the (subsequent) outburst of violence are to be found in the exploitation of African immigrants in this part of Italy, the inhuman conditions in which they are forced to live, and the racially discriminatory legislation enacted by Silvio Berlusconi's government. Local citizens in Rosarno reacted violently against the uprising of the black community, and the police intervened to prevent a pogrom by expelling all African immigrants from the area. For information on these events, see Andrea Segre's documentary film *Il sangue verde* (2010) and Nicola Angriano's *Il tempo delle arance* (2010). See also Mangano; Galesi and Mangano; Derobertis and Mellino in this volume.

There have been numerous episodes of racism on Italian soccer fields, among which those involving the black Italian soccer player Mario Balotelli are the most widely known (banners would appear at games which read "There are no Italian Negroes"). The insults directed at Balotelli have always been justified by the player's own alleged aggressiveness (rather than the other way around). Abiola Wabara, an Italian basketball player of Nigerian origins, does not display any aggressive behavior; however, in April 2011 she was shouted and spat at by an angry audience. The Italian Basketball Federation stood by Wabara, but no measures were taken against the team whose fans had insulted and harassed her.

4. I find it surprising, for instance, that in an article such as Alessandra Di Maio's "Black Italia: Contemporary Migrant Writers from Africa"—which analyzes African diasporas to Italy, including complex issues such as the African presence in Italian culture (from Hannibal to "Faccetta nera"), multiculturalism and contemporary Italian literature, emigration and immigration, national unification, Europe and globalization, and so on—the critical categories of race and blackness are conspicuously absent.
5. Until very recently, the terms "whiteness" and "blackness" in the Italian debate have been employed in the English language, which has reinforced the idea that these issues and the discourse around them do not pertain to the Italian cultural context. On the circulation of this terminology and on the recent use of terms such as "bianchezza" and "nerezza" in the Italian context, see Romeo ("Rappresentazioni di razza e nerezza").
6. This, of course, does not imply that Italian postcolonial literature does not include conventional and stereotypical representations of blackness. In Younis Tawfik's *La straniera* (2003) and Igiaba Scego's *Rhoda* (2004), for instance, the protagonists are black prostitutes whose sacrifice is exacted by the narration.
7. Salah Methnani's *Immigrato* (in collaboration with Mario Fortunato) was written as a novel but accepted for publication as an autobiography. This, according to Alessandro Portelli, signals that "an immigrant cannot give us anything other than his raw experience and he does not have the right to elaborate on it imaginatively" ("Le origini della letteratura afroitaliana" 78).
8. Methnani's text is listed in the works cited under "Fortunato and Methnani" because their names appear in this sequence on the cover of the book; however, in this chapter and elsewhere I refer to the text as Methnani's. This is because, although I am aware that in collaborative texts both (or all) parties are entitled to a certain degree of authorship and that the "collaborator" cannot be confined to the editorial role, I believe the "narrator" should always appear as the main—if not the only—author.
9. My definition, based on Puwar's "somatic norm." While Puwar's somatic norm accounts for differences of race and gender, the chromatic norm takes into consideration only issues of color as related to matters of visibility. I find this notion especially

useful when we analyze how space is constructed as white through the erasure of non-white bodies.

10. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
11. See Khouma (“Interview” 115).
12. The proximity between Italian southerners and North Africans and the racialization of both in Italy are central issues in the documentary movie by Dagmawi Yimer, Giulio Cederna, and Fabrizio Barraco, *Soltanto il mare* (2011). Dagmawi Yimer landed on the island of Lampedusa in 2006 as an undocumented immigrant from Ethiopia. In 2009 he went back to the island to shoot his documentary on the people of Lampedusa, some of whom he interviews in the film. Many of the interviewees speak about the lack of government concern with issues on the island and about the racialization they suffer at the hands of northern Italians—an attitude expressed even more intensely toward dark-skinned immigrants. A young man interviewed by Yimer, for instance, asserts, “On the map we are Italians, but we are not Italians. We are Lampedusans, we are Africans.”
13. See my analysis of Chohra’s text in “Il colore bianco.”
14. On the dichotomies order/disorder and white/black in Chohra’s text, see Parati (“Looking Through”). For an interesting reading of this autobiography, see Parati (*Migration Italy*) and Portelli (“Le origini”).
15. See my analysis of Makaping’s text in “Il colore bianco.”
16. Ribka Sibhatu (*Il cittadino* 2004) aptly expresses how manifestations of racism include a spectrum that goes from open violence to essentialization when she recounts that her four-year-old daughter once said that “one of her classmates had defended her against a child who had told her she smelled badly (like African fish) by saying that instead she had a good mother who could dance well” (23).
17. As I have already argued, translating racial terms from the American context into the Italian one and vice versa is problematic, and the problem is more cultural than it is linguistic. Since the racial histories of the United States and Italy are different, racial terms assume different values. See Romeo’s “Nota della curatrice.”
18. For a racial and postcolonial analysis of the relationships between Italian women and immigrant care workers, see Andall (“Women Migrant Workers”; *Gender, Migration*), Marchetti (“Paid Domestic Labour”; *Le ragazze di Asmara*), and Biidu and Hagos. On the relationship between white feminists and black immigrant women in contemporary Italy, see Pojmann, Merrill, and Bonfiglioli.
19. On the shame for their parents’ origins that black children internalize, see Portelli (“Le origini”) and Sibhatu.



Part IV

**Postnational Aesthetics,  
Transcultural Production**

# On the Periphery of Nollywood

## Nigerian Video Filmmaking in Italy and the Emergence of an Intercultural Aesthetics

*Alessandro Jedlowski*

The Nigerian video industry, internationally known as Nollywood,<sup>1</sup> has rapidly developed in the past few years becoming, according to the survey published by the UNESCO Institute for Statistics in April 2009, the second largest film industry in the world in terms of the sheer number of films produced.<sup>2</sup> As Jonathan Haynes has underscored (“The Nollywood Diaspora”), after the broad popular success achieved by video films such as *Osuofia in London* (2003) and *Dangerous Twins* (2004), videos shot in a foreign context (and therefore able to appeal to a particular kind of exoticism) and dealing with the experience of migration (an experience lived or dreamed about by many Nigerians), started to become very popular in Nigeria. As a consequence of this popularity, while many Nollywood production companies based in Nigeria began to finance film projects set in the diaspora, Nigerian expatriates began to see the economic potential of investing in filmmaking and started to set up their own production companies abroad. Among these ventures, two video production companies, directly connected to the Nigerian system of production and distribution, emerged in northern Italy: IGB Film and Music Industry based in Brescia and GVK (Giving Vividly with Kindness) based in Turin.

IGB and GVK shoot their films in Italy to sell them mainly within the local immigrant communities<sup>3</sup> and on the Nigerian video market, locating Italy on the periphery of the Nigerian production system. The position of marginality in which these two companies found themselves had an important role in shaping their narrative choices and their commercial strategies. To be on the margin constitutes an ambiguous position, which simultaneously creates vulnerability and freedom. When it comes to filmmaking, such marginality imposes difficult

economic and infrastructural conditions but it also allows for unexpected opportunities of experimentation. As this essay will argue, IGB and GVK adopted different marketing and aesthetic choices, which produced different representations of migration. The first section of the essay sketches the historical and theoretical context in which the work of the two aforementioned companies is inscribed; the second and the third sections offer an in-depth analysis of the story and the work of IGB and GVK; finally, the fourth section proposes a critical analysis of how the representation of migration is constructed in the films.

### Mapping the Context: Italy in Nollywood and Nollywood in Italy

The history of Nigerian migration to Italy developed in two main waves. The first began in the mid-1970s, during a period in which Nigerian economy was enjoying the benefits of the oil boom. The people migrating at this stage were mostly wealthy youngsters coming from the southern part of Nigeria to study and work in Italy. The second wave started in the mid-1980s, following the economic crisis that affected the Nigerian economy at that time. Compared to the first one, the second wave saw the migration of more disadvantaged people, and it was characterized by a large percentage of women, mainly from Edo State, forced to work in the sex work market (Cingolani 122; Santanera 112).<sup>4</sup>

Back in Nigeria, the video phenomenon started approximately during the same years of the second wave of migration to Italy. As for the phenomenon of migration, one of the elements that contributed to the insurgence of the video industry was the economic crisis that affected Nigeria in the mid-1980s, after the application of the Structural Adjustment Program under the regime of General Ibrahim Babangida. The economic restrictions due to the crisis determined the cut of the national television budget (with a consequent reduction of investment in the production of television programs), drove to the progressive privatization of cinema halls (most of them became churches or shopping centers), and contributed to increase the level of social insecurity throughout the country. In this context, the introduction of the video technology allowed for the production of a new form of entertainment to be consumed safely at home. Actors, directors, and other professionals of the entertainment sector, who lost their job because of the economic crisis, converged into the emerging industry, determining its quick and spectacular success (see also Haynes, *Nigerian Video Films*).

Interestingly enough, in some of the most successful videos produced in the early years of the Nigerian video industry, such as *Glamour Girls II: The Italian Connection* (1996) and the Ghanaian series *Mamma Mia* (1995, 1998, 2000), the phenomenon of migration to Italy was stereotypically represented and some plot lines were established, which later became illustrative of what Jonathan Haynes has defined as the “Africans Abroad” genre (“Africans Abroad”). Furthermore, Kenneth Nnebue’s *Glamour Girls II* addressed the business of prostitution and sex trafficking and participated in the construction of some established imageries about Italy in Nigerian popular culture.<sup>5</sup> Compared to other migration destinations, in fact, Italy appears in Nigerian videos mainly in relation to plots developed

around sex trafficking and drug dealing, generally inducing Nigerian people to consider the peninsula as a second-class migration destination.<sup>6</sup>

While Italy became part of Nollywood's imagery from the beginning of the industry's existence, at the same time Nollywood films were distributed and consumed in Italy from the first days of the industry. The selling of Nigerian video films, for instance, is well established in northern Italian cities like Turin, one of the Italian urban centers with the highest number of both legal and illegal Nigerian residents, and where one can find more than ten video stores that sell original copies of Nigerian videos (besides a countless number of unofficial pirate copy vendors). A network of distribution of both original and pirated copies of Nigerian videos thus existed in Italy from the beginning of the industry and became more established in the last few years, following Nollywood's successful growth and the increasing number of sub-Saharan African migrants in Italy. Furthermore, as in other parts of Europe and in the United States, Nigerian films are also consumed by non-Nigerian Africans and circulate in dubbed versions for the Francophone African audience. For instance, Kone Inza, an Ivorian producer and distributor based in northern Italy, has invested in the distribution of Nigerian videos dubbed in French for the Francophone audience, and claims that there are about four hundred stores all over Europe (including northern Italy) that sell the videos distributed by his company (Inza).

The birth and growth of Nigerian film production companies in Italy should thus be understood within the framework of the context sketched above. Acknowledging the growth of the potential market for Nigerian videos in Italy, IGB and GVK tried to replicate the economic model of early Nollywood (low budget, light and inexpensive technological equipment, informal system of distribution, reduction of production expenses through networks of social capital—which means no location expenses and the use of nonprofessional actors). To do so, they applied different strategies, the analysis of which will be the object of the next two sections. However, before developing a closer analysis of the work of these two production companies, it is useful also to contextualize their activity within an apt theoretical framework.

Arjun Appadurai's well-known identification of "mediascapes" as one of the constitutive features of a "modernity at large" is important in trying to understand the role that media production and consumption play within diasporic contexts.<sup>7</sup> As Appadurai extensively discusses in his book, media are playing a determining role in redefining notions of identity and belonging in the era of globalization. Various studies have shown how media production and consumption can participate in maintaining, creating, or inventing the relationship with the home country.<sup>8</sup> At the same time, the media have a key role in redefining collective identities, critiquing aspects of the culture of origin and initiating a process of demythologization of the homeland (Aksoy and Robins 95).

The existence of diasporic mediascapes, which crisscross the landscapes of contemporary "global cities" (Sassen), is often the result of what Smith and Guarnizo have called "transnationalism from below," a form of transnationalism that, despite its being grounded in practices that are "neither self-consciously resistant nor even loosely political in character" (5), tends to be charged with oppositional

potentialities. This form of transnationalism, in fact, usually develops due to a high level of informality, which is based in “rhizomatic” networks (Lionnet and Shih, quoting Deleuze and Guattari) and “porous legalities” (Liang) that inevitably transgress central economic and political control. However, as underlined by Ravi Sundaram in his analysis of the electronic modernity of urban India, the implicit oppositionality of these forms of transnationalism is the expression of a survival strategy more than the manifestation of an explicit political choice. As Sundaram suggests, this is a phenomenon “that is everyday in its imaginary, pirate in its practice, and mobile in its innovation” (61).

Together with Appadurai’s concept of “mediascapes” and Smith and Guarnizo’s formulation of “transnationalism from below,” Hamid Naficy’s work on exilic cinema can help in understanding the operations of the two Nigerian production companies under analysis here. According to Naficy, because of the context in which they operate, diasporic filmmakers are obliged to adopt what he defines as “interstitial or artisanal modes of production,” which “operate both within and astride the cracks and fissures of the system, benefiting from its contradictions, anomalies and heterogeneity” (134). These alternative modes of production, as Naficy emphasizes, “encourage the development of an accented and deterritorialized style that is driven by its own limitations, that is its smallness, imperfection, amateurishness, and lack of cinematic gloss” (131).

Nigerian filmmaking in Italy emerged from the overlapping of all these elements: the increase of the number of Nigerian and, more generally, sub-Saharan African migrants in Italy; the consequent development of informal and transnational networks of circulation of media products to bring local content to diasporic audiences; and the growing desire, within migrant communities themselves, to produce their own media. Consequently, Nigerian filmmaking in Italy can be described as transnational, informal, and interstitial. It originated from a position of double marginality—in regard to both the Nigerian film industry and the Italian film tradition—and for this reason it oscillates between Nigerian and Italian audiences, between intercultural and stereotypical aesthetics and narratives, between media activism and commercial strategies.

### **Nollywood Melodramas Abroad: The Films of IGB Film and Music Industry**

IGB Film and Music Industry was created by Prince Frank Abieyuwa Osharhenoguwu in Brescia in 2001. As reported in a recent interview (2009), Prince Osharhenoguwu used to work for a local television in Benin City before setting up his own production company in 1994 to produce films in the Edo language for the local market. His first three films<sup>9</sup> were shot in Nigeria and distributed mainly in Edo State. When he managed to move to Italy in 2000, he decided to try to continue his business abroad. Prince Osharhenoguwu settled in Brescia and, while keeping his video store in Benin City open to maintain a connection with the Nigerian market, he started to invest both in music and film production, and in a few years released another four video films, this time shot in English to appeal to a wider audience.<sup>10</sup>

Involved in the industry before moving to Italy, Prince Osharhenoguwu decided to keep the melodramatic narrative and aesthetic style of most of Nollywood's films, and he did not try to address the Italian market. This attitude is demonstrated by the fact that only one of IGB's films has been subtitled in Italian (*The Only Way After Home But It's Risky*), and this because it had to be presented during a thematic retrospective on Nollywood in Verona. As with most of the other films directed by Prince Osharhenoguwu, this film narrates an intricate melodramatic story, whose location in Italy seems to be almost incidental. The central elements of the plot are the multiple love affairs of the main character, Benny, who easily moves from one partner to another, eventually provoking the anger and jealousy of his previous girlfriends and leading one of them to take revenge on him.

As this example highlights, most of IGB's productions fit into the "Africans Abroad" genre (Haynes) within the Nollywood canon. IGB's films, in fact, "are located in an expatriate African subculture, with strictly limited interest in the surrounding white culture; usually there are one or two white characters important enough to have names . . . in general, the problems the plots are built around are generated from within the African community" ("Africans Abroad" 24). The audience can understand that the story is actually taking place in a foreign location mainly through what Carmela Garritano has defined as moments of "cosmopolitan spectacle" (qtd. in Haynes, "The Nollywood Diaspora" 8) and what Jonathan Haynes has called "tourist sequences" ("The Nollywood Diaspora" 8). In these kinds of sequences, the protagonists are placed in iconic foreign landscapes,<sup>11</sup> usually walking around and doing shopping, filmed on long-take shoots, and accompanied by stereotypical soundtracks. Thus, targeting the Nigerian and more generally the African diasporic audience, Prince Osharhenoguwu focused on what he considered to be popular plots (marriage problems, issues of infidelity and infertility, jealousy over a neighbor's wealth), often used within the Nollywood mainstream production. The fact that the films are produced through a network constituted of the director's closest friends (mainly Nigerians) contributes to create a remarkably Afrocentric atmosphere.<sup>12</sup>

### **Toward the Construction of an Intercultural Aesthetics: The Work of GVK**

GVK (Giving Vividly with Kindness) was created in 2006 by Vincent Omoigui and Rose Okoh, both coming from the southeastern part of Nigeria. Before moving to Italy in 2003, Omoigui had no experience in the video industry. He was studying criminology at the University of Benin and had only little experience as an actor with the university's theatre company. However, through his studies, he cultivated a particular sensibility for sociological observation, which later became useful in developing his skills as a scriptwriter and film director.

The activity of GVK began in 2006 with the production of a video film in Edo language, *Efe-Obomwan*, directed by Omoigui and produced by Okoh. The film, which was distributed in few copies in Nigeria and throughout the diasporic communities in northern Italy, did not achieve the economic result that the young couple was expecting. Acknowledging the fact that Vincent's lack of training as a

director played an important part in the unsuccessful result of their first production, the couple decided to look for a more expert codirector. When they met Marco Perugini, a light and sound technician based in Turin, and Simone Sandretti, a video artist and anthropologist who studied partly in Austria and partly in Italy, GVK turned into an Italo-Nigerian association, whose aim became the production of cross-cultural videos and performances, targeting both the Italian and the Nigerian market. If Okoh and Omoigui were interested in improving the technical quality of their productions, Sandretti and Perugini were fascinated by what they knew about Nollywood, and by the possibility of applying the Nollywood informal production and distribution system to the Italian context. From this point on, GVK has produced another four films, two of which have not yet been completed.<sup>13</sup>

Compared to the work of IGB, GVK's films openly try to address issues related to the experience of migration, at the same time preserving the cinematic style which made Nollywood films so popular. Thanks to his insider's perspective within the Nigerian community, Omoigui tried to mix into his work as scriptwriter both his own personal experience and the analysis of the situation of Nigerian migrants in Turin, aiming to produce what he defined as "docu-fiction films" (2009). *Efe-Obomwan*, for instance, addresses the relationship between new and already settled migrants, underlining the way the latter often exploit the lack of experience and the precarious condition of newly arrived Nigerians. *We Are Not Slaves* gives voice to the frustration that many migrants feel toward the never-ending and often pretentious demands for remittances from relatives and friends back home. It is interesting to notice that, despite what the title suggests, the film uses the term "slavery" mainly to address the exploitation of labor that occurs within the Nigerian community itself, while it confines the larger question of the exploitation of migrant labor within the Italian context to the background.

Of all GVK's films, *Akpegi Boys* can be regarded as the one in which the complex balance between social critique and a popular cinematic style is best established. The film is a Nollywood-style gangster movie, set in underground Turin, where the situation that many Nigerians experience once they arrive in Italy is colorfully represented. Drug dealing and prostitution, violent fighting between different Nigerian gangs, Italian police corruption, and racism are all issues that the film touches on, mixing them with traditional Nollywood-style narrative elements, such as the intervention of supernatural powers and the determining role of religious belief. In this film the two directors of GVK, Omoigui and Sandretti, tried for the first time to address both Nigerian and Italian audiences and thus took the first steps toward the construction of what could be defined as an "intercultural aesthetics." As the two of them have emphasized in interviews (Sandretti; Omoigui 2010), it is in fact during the shooting of this film that the first conflicts about different ways of conceiving of filmmaking emerged, prompting the directors to find original compromises. The debate they had over the choice of the soundtrack is a clear example of this process. Sandretti, for instance, contrasted the use of a typical Nollywood-style soundtrack (usually computer-made music, often melodramatic and continuous) and pushed for the introduction of an Afro-beat-style soundtrack, inevitably resonating with Italian audiences, who

are familiar with musicians such as Fela Kuti and Tony Allen and who could thus better respond to this type of music.

The trend GVK started with *Akpegi Boys* was consolidated through the production of *Blinded Devil*. While on one side the film keeps a popular and entertainment-oriented style, at the same time it engages in a social realism type of narrative, inspired by the Italian filmmaking tradition of neorealism and politically engaged documentary.<sup>14</sup> The film focuses on the problems that a young Nigerian couple experiences in Italy while trying to settle down and obtain regular documents. The bureaucratic difficulties the protagonists encounter, the obstacles created by the language barrier, the consequent impossibility to find a job are all elements that make them fall into illegal business. While the man is arrested and repatriated, his wife is forced to become a prostitute to raise the money she needs to feed their child. At the end she is also arrested and put into a temporary detention center, while the child is adopted by an Italian family.

Compared to the early GVK's productions, whose criticism was mainly directed toward the Nigerian community itself, the story told by *Blinded Devil* is mainly a brickbat of the Italian migration policies and the racism connected to them. Through this narrative, Omoigui and Sandretti address the Italian audiences, inviting them to analyze the transformation that Italian society is undergoing. However, they do so through the prism offered by the experience of a young couple of Nigerian migrants, thus addressing also the Nigerian audiences through a critique of the narrative of success often connected with the phenomenon of migration.

In terms of production and distribution strategy, the work of GVK introduced some original features compared to what has been done by other Nigerian production companies based abroad. If for films like *Efe-Obomwan* and *Uwado*, both shot in the Edo language, the targeted audience was quite small and limited to the Edo community (both in Italy and in Nigeria), for films like *Akpegi Boys* and *Blinded Devil* the strategy applied was more ambitious. For *Blinded Devil*, for instance, GVK tried to mix both Nollywood production techniques and Italian independent cinema, thus attempting to target both the Nigerian and the Italian markets. The film is in fact supposed to be progressively released first as a web series, mainly for the Italian and European market, and then as a DVD for the Nigerian one.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, to appeal to the Nigerian audience, a very well-known Nigerian star, John Okafor (popularly known as Mr. Ibu), was added to the cast.<sup>16</sup> The same principle was used also to appeal to the Italian audience, and a well-known Italian television actor, Pierfrancesco Diliberto, cast member of the Italian television program "Le Iene," was included in the project. The budget for the film was raised both through the private support of the producer, Rose Okoh, and through Italian public funding (Piedmont Film Commission). Finally, the production of the film was also used as the subject of an exhibition, and the shooting of some scenes was staged as a performance in a contemporary art exhibition ("Artissima," November 2010, Turin, Italy). In this way, GVK tried to attract the interest of the Italian media and funding institutions by staging itself as a "cross-cultural" media laboratory.



### On the Margin: Between Media Activism and Marketing Strategy

The narrative and marketing choices analyzed in the previous sections should be understood as a consequence of a condition of both marginality (in relation to both Nigerian industry and the Italian filmmaking tradition) and convergence (between different styles of filmmaking—on the one hand, a popular cinematic style and, on the other, a politically committed cinematic style as the one that characterizes migrant cinema). This specific condition can be related to the above-mentioned attributes that characterize Nigerian filmmaking as transnational, informal, and interstitial. Within the framework of this precarious condition, IGB and GVK took different paths, which led to them representing the liminality of migrant experience in different ways.<sup>17</sup> The chosen modalities of representation depended on directors' personal ideas and ambitions, but were also significantly influenced by the target audience/market to which each production company oriented itself.

In films such as *The Only Way After Home But It's Risky*, IGB gave voice to a sort of *Eldorado* narrative about migration, in which the elsewhere is socially Africanized (there are almost only African characters in the film and white people speak English with a Nigerian accent) and aesthetically exoticized (through stereotypical images of beautiful buildings and large shopping malls). The protagonists' lives embody the common African dream about Europe, a place of success and quick money where the problems affecting the characters are, like in most Nigerian melodramas, due to family intrigues and love affairs. This kind of narrative tries to follow the formula applied in popular Nigerian melodramas, adding to it just a bit of exotic flavor through the foreign setting. This formula, even if it seems plainly commercial in its nature, has its own implicit potential for social critique, because it literally puts Italy (and in general Europe as an elsewhere) on the periphery of Nollywood, dislocating it from the position where it is usually located by Eurocentric discourses. For an average European audience, the experience of watching an Afrocentric film of this kind may be compared to looking at one of those maps in which Europe is not located at the center of the image but on its margin. The near absence or evident marginality of white characters, the stereotypical or inaccurate representation of European settings, and the Africanization of the plot and of its structure (even within a European setting) are all elements that potentially push the European viewer to perceive the partiality of his/her own perspective, and have an experience of non-European forms of centrism, in which Europe is a province rather than the center.

In GVK's films, on the contrary, the decision to target both Italian and Nigerian audiences pushed toward a different kind of narrative and aesthetics, which shares some elements with what Grassilli identifies as the emerging migrant cinema in Italy, a "guerrilla cinema" which draws inspiration from the experience of Third Cinema directors and postindependence filmmaking manifestos (1244–45). Within this tradition, represented in Italy by experiences as diverse as those of Theo Eshetu, Dagmawi Yimer, and Hedy Krissane,<sup>18</sup> films tend to be charged with strong social and political messages that are expressed through hybrid and experimental film languages. In these films the condition of marginality due to the experience

of migration and exile becomes the place from where to question the rhetoric of identity and belonging that constitutes the modern idea of nation-state.

What radically differentiates GVK's production from this tradition is the fact that its main cinematic reference remains Nollywood, a film tradition based on an entertainment-oriented style of filmmaking. GVK's productions combine thus a strategic mixture of politics and popular appeal in which, as discussed above through the example of *Blinded Devil*, the use of the two registers has the objective of enlarging the potential audience of the films produced. For GVK to produce a film that could appeal to an Italian audience meant to move toward a more politically explicit register, in which the issue of migration had to be openly discussed and problematized.

As Paul Gilroy suggested in his analysis of black British cultural production, cultural policies and public funding strategies deeply influence migrants' cultural production. Even in a country like Italy that, as Grassilli has emphasized (1238), still lacks coherent and impactful cultural policies to support emerging experiences of migrant cinema, the influence of cultural policies on migrants' cultural production is a factor that can assume a significant relevance. For GVK to access Italian institutional funding (for instance, from the Piedmont Film Commission) and eventually reach the Italian audiences, its films had to become socially relevant. Moving toward an inclusion into the Italian market meant entering an arena in which in most of the cases stories of migration have to be dramatic and films about them have to be political. While IGB's films will hardly be screened in Italian festivals and on Italian televisions because of their Afrocentric contents and their entertainment-oriented style, GVK's films (and especially its last project, *Blinded Devil*) are likely to be able to receive funding and distribution in Italy thanks to their specific approach to migration and their strategic alignment with some aspects of migrant cinema aesthetics.

### Conclusion

As the title suggests, this essay is constructed around and plays with the idea of marginality. But, inevitably, "when we say marginal, we must always ask, marginal to what?" (Ferguson 9). The case of the production and distribution of Nigerian videos in Italy imposes to look at a complex interaction of multiple levels of marginality. The two production companies analyzed above occupy a peripheral position within both the Nigerian video industry and the Italian cultural environment. Their being peripheral allows them to experiment with new aesthetic and commercial solutions, a combination which may become influential in the future development of both the Nigerian and the Italian film industries. At the same time, however, this marginality often imposes specific choices, which are, as underlined above, the expression of survival strategies more than the result of explicitly political choices.

IGB's films put Italy at the periphery of their universe, and their Afrocentric narrative challenges Eurocentric discourses. But they do so mainly because they have to please the already established taste of Nollywood popular audiences, thus

confirming the existing exotic representation that characterizes Nollywood's imagery of the elsewhere. GVK's films, on the other hand, problematize the experience of migration and challenge Italian policies around this issue. But this is partly the result of a strategy not eminently political but commercial, devised to access Italian audiences and public institutions' funding.

The position occupied by the work of these two production companies reveals that notions of centrality and marginality rearticulate themselves constantly, in a process of never-ending negotiation. As argued throughout this essay, this process is characterized by both freedom and constraint. It is thus in the space given by the articulation of these diverging tensions that unexpected forms of syncretization can (and do) happen. The activity of the production companies analyzed here is an example of the emerging migrant popular culture that grows in the suburbs of Italian cities, where everyday reality is a creative response to the challenges of globalization and of transnational migrations. As shown by this essay, the analysis of such forms of popular culture offers an important insight in what can be defined as the process of emergence of intercultural aesthetics within the Italian context.

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## Notes

1. The term "Nollywood" appeared for the first time in 2002 in an article by Norimitsu Onishi in *The New York Times* to define the Nigerian video phenomenon which is considered to have begun in 1992. In Nigeria the term was initially rejected, but now it is largely used by Nigerians. For a general overview of the history, the economy, and the aesthetics of Nollywood, see Barrot, and Haynes (*Nigerian Video Films*).
2. The 2009 UNESCO report on feature film statistics is the latest available. Although dated, it is still relevant because it is the first official report to internationally acknowledge the importance of the Nigerian video industry and its regional and continental influence.
3. As underlined by many scholars, the word "community" to define groups of migrants of the same geographical provenance has often been used to reify entities which are flexible and dynamic (see Bauman and, for the Italian context, Cingolani). While I am critical of this term, I elect to use it because it is commonly used in the field, both by Nigerians and by Italians working on migration-related issues.

4. In the last thirty years Italy has progressively changed from a country of emigration to one of immigration. As shown by recent statistics, of its total population Italy today has 7.5 percent of immigrants (4,570,317) legally resident on the national soil, thus reaching the European average percentage. Within this immigrant population in Italy, the number of Nigerians is relatively low (53,613), even though Nigeria is among the twenty most represented nationalities in the country. These statistics consider only the people owning a formal visa (data from the *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione* 2011). The number increases at least by 20 percent when one also considers migrants without formal documents (see Amato 15).
5. It is important to observe that Kenneth Nnebue and his crew never traveled to Italy to shoot this film; they set half of the film “in an Italy constructed in Lagos with derisory means” (Haynes, “The Nollywood Diaspora” 2).
6. The Nigerian director Obi Emelonye, based in London, told me during a conversation, “You come from Italy? The Nigerians you find there are not the same you find here. People do not go to Italy to study or to make a career, they go there to make money quickly and go back home” (2009). Approaching the issue from a different perspective, Vincent Omoigui, a Nigerian director based in Italy (see the third section of this text), underlined that he does not want his child to grow up in Italy. “There is no future for him if he studies in Italy and learns Italian as his first language,” said Vincent, “it is better for him to study in England, the US or Nigeria” (2010).
7. The debate about the definition and the use of the term “diaspora” is large and complex. I agree with the definition proposed by Paul Zeleza, who suggests that diaspora “simultaneously refers to a process, a condition, a space and a discourse: the continuous processes by which a diaspora is made, unmade and remade, the changing conditions in which it lives and expresses itself, the places where it is moulded and imagined, and the contentious ways in which it is studied and discussed” (41).
8. See the collections of essays edited by King and Wood, and by Karim. For an analysis of the consumption of Nigerian videos in Italy, and specifically in Turin, see Santanera.
9. *Arohavbegbe* (1995), *Omo-sigho* (1997), and *Ukpokpouwa* (1999).
10. *Kiki marriage* (2003), *Abroad Wahala* (2005), *The Only Way After Home But It's Risky* (2007) and *The Hard Nut To Crack* (2008).
11. In IGB's films, for instance, there are recurrent shots of Milan central station, of the Arena in Verona, of a pretty path along Lake Como, and, inevitably, of the shopping area around Via Montenapoleone in Milan.
12. For instance, in *The Only Way After Home But It's Risky* the only two white characters in the film have very marginal roles (one is a taxi driver and the other one is the private secretary of a Nigerian entrepreneur) and one of them speaks English with a remarkably Nigerian accent. See also Haynes (“The Nollywood Diaspora” 9).
13. *Uwado* (2008), *Akpegi Boys* (2009), *We Are Not Slaves* (unreleased), and *Blinded Devil* (unreleased).
14. The personality of the Italian director Vittorio De Seta and his last film *Lettere dal Sahara* (2006) can be considered examples of this tradition.
15. This distribution mode allows GVK to maximize the visibility of its work and the use of the available budget. Each time that a small amount of money is available, a short episode is filmed, immediately released, and then used as an advertising tool to raise funds for the continuation of the project. Until now only two episodes of the series have been released and the production is currently interrupted because of budget problems.
16. This strategy is widely applied in Nigerian productions both in Nigeria and in Nigerian communities in other countries. For the use of Nigerian stars in films shot in diasporic context, see Samyn.

17. It is relevant here to consider the concept of “third space” suggested by Homi Bhabha and the idea of “double absence” suggested by Abdelmalek Sayad.
18. As an example of this tradition, see Theo Eshetu’s *Il sangue non è acqua fresca* (1997) and *Africanized* (2001), Dagmawi Yimer’s *Come un uomo sulla terra* (2008) and *Soltanto il mare* (2011), Hedy Krissane’s *Colpevole fino a prova contraria* (2005) and *Ali di cera* (2009). See also Jedlowski.

## Envisioning Postcolonial Italy

### Haile Gerima's *Adwa: An African Victory* and Isaac Julien's *Western Union: Small Boats*

*Shelleen Greene*

In the face of contemporary migration, there are frankly far too few willing to listen to those phantoms that constitute the historical chains that extend from Africa five hundred years ago to the coasts of southern Italy today and which link together the hidden, but essential, narratives of migration in the making of modernity.

*Iain Chambers, "Adrift and Exposed," 12*

Within the last three decades, Italy has become a European center of “transnational migration” (Mellino 462). As Iain Chambers reminds us, contemporary debates concerning immigration to Italy and other Western European countries have not fully considered the longer trajectory of migration, resettlement, and cultural hybridity that constitute modern Europe. Although scholars have identified the many ironic parallels between Italian emigration at the turn of the twentieth century, the internal migrations of the postwar period, and contemporary immigration to the European Union, Chambers advocates a fundamental rethinking of the relation between the “West” and “non-West,” one that reveals that the very cultures against which the West defines itself are at the core of modern European identity.<sup>1</sup> The “Mediterranean” is a space of linguistic, religious, and artistic hybridity where north and sub-Saharan African, Middle Eastern, and Asian cultures have for centuries merged with and influenced what is presently known as the “West” (Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings* 131).

Excavating the cultural hybridity of modern Europe is not accomplished by way of a linear narrativization, but rather by new modes of storytelling that bring together what appear to be disparate and unrelated networks of movement, communication, and interaction. Members of diasporic communities residing in



Western European countries enact strategies for “talking back” to hegemonic host cultures that relegate non-Western subjects to the role of an Other or as Alessandro Dal Lago argues, a “non-person.”<sup>2</sup>

On the level of cinematic representation, Hamid Naficy has described an “accented style” used by diasporic, ethnic, and exilic filmmakers that is characterized by a hybrid use of dominant (linear narrative) and marginal (experimental, non-Western modes of representing space and time) cinematic traditions. These works “accent” dominant narrative cinema by undermining cinematic realism and using alternative modes of production, storytelling, and spectatorial address (Naficy 10–19).

In this paper, I examine the work of two filmmakers who chart alternative geographies of Africa, the Mediterranean, and Europe in order to write new histories of migration and African diasporic identity formation. Haile Gerima and Isaac Julien set their explorations in the Italian peninsula, a country that is, in many ways, representative of the cultural heterogeneity at the core of Western modernity. As a space of racial, cultural, and linguistic hybridity extending as far back as Roman Africa, Italy is perceived as a country that threatens the boundaries which separate Europe from Africa and the Levant.

Italy’s colonial endeavors of the late nineteenth century, including the 1895–96 Italo-Ethiopian war, further attempted to construct Italy as a European nation-state through imperial conquest. However, due to its late unification process, its defeat in 1896, its racialized North/South division, and massive emigration, Italy’s status as a European nation-state remained ambivalent, even after its postwar economic recovery and full entrance into the First World bloc. The contemporary period of African immigration to Italy has revealed not only the contingent nature of the nation-state formation, but also, as theorist Étienne Balibar suggests, that Europe is and has always been “multiple,” neither pure nation-states, nor unmixed population (Balibar 6–7). The work of Gerima and Julien recontextualize current debates surrounding African immigration to Europe, placing the history of Italian unification, colonialism, and emigration in conversation with the legacies of Roman Africa, the Arab conquest of the peninsula, and the transatlantic slave trade. Through the use of experimental formal and narrative strategies, the work of Gerima and Julien illustrates the continuities between Italy and Africa that have been excluded from official histories, posits Italy as a significant center of the African diaspora, and locates Italy as a site upon which larger discussions regarding immigration to the European Union must take place.

*Adwa: An African Victory* (1999) begins with panoramic views of the Ethiopian landscape, sites that become charged with historical memory through Gerima’s use of voiceover narration. Sung in Amharic, the narrator’s initial words, “*Adwa, Adwa? The Italians’ Adwa?*” already places the question of narration at the forefront of this retelling of the 1895–96 Italo-Ethiopian war. One of the first major Italo-Ethiopian conflicts, this war started over a dispute regarding the Treaty of Wuchale, a document that in its Italian form gave Italy absolute authority to represent Ethiopia (Abyssinia) in its diplomatic relations with Europe. The subsequent war resulted in the first major defeat of a European country by an African nation (Zewde 81–85). For Italy, the 1896 defeat hampered the country’s attempt

to establish itself as a European empire and thereby increase its prestige after its unification process. A little more than a century removed from the event, *Adwa*'s opening sequence offers another means of conveying the historical significance of the war by way of an oral tradition that makes the century-old victory alive and present for living descendants.

Central to Gerima's project is documenting the ways in which historical memory is retained from one generation to the next. *Adwa* contrasts "official history" (both Ethiopian and Italian) with the historical memory preserved in folklore, songs, and epic poems. For Gerima, these methods of transferring historical knowledge offer a separate "narrative logic" from the dominant versions of the event. For instance, when gathering interviews for the film, Gerima relates, "The logic of the old folks' answers could not be represented by a straight line joining A and B, but seemed to draw a spiral. It is this narrative logic that I think we have to take as a basis to reclaim our thought. That's where our aesthetic sense lies buried" (Speciale 78). The reclamation of traditional narrative modes also becomes a formal imperative of the documentary and a principal means of bringing to the fore stories that have not been incorporated into official histories.

In an early sequence of the film, Gerima describes overcoming his skepticism about the Ethiopian victory by listening to his poet/playwright father's works based on the event. We then see archival footage of his father singing "A Bell of Torment," a poem about the Italian colonial aggression in Ethiopia. The film then transitions to present-day Rome, where we see Gerima finishing the poem's verses as he sits in *Piazzale dei Cinquecento*, a Roman square whose name is a memorial to the five hundred Italian soldiers killed in the 1887 Italo-Ethiopian conflict at Dogali. In this sequence, Gerima forces a reevaluation of Italian colonialism, shifting from the traditional narrative of Italians as *brava gente*, to one of Ethiopian resistance to Italian colonial aggression.

*Adwa* also challenges the image of the Italian nation created in the historical epics of its cinema's "golden era" (1910–19), a vision that is specific to the country's imperial aspirations of the liberal period, yet resonates today in Italy's postcolonial relations with Ethiopia, Eritrea, and Libya. One of the most renowned examples of the use of cinema to imagine Italy as past and future imperial power is the film *Cabiria* (1914). Set in the third century BCE during the Punic Wars, *Cabiria* narrates the story of a young Sicilian girl of the landed aristocracy who is sold into slavery at Carthage (in present day Tunisia) and eventually rescued by the Roman patrician Fulvius Axilla after the defeat of Carthaginian military leader Hannibal. The film marked not only the recent war and colonization of Libya (1911–12), but also the fiftieth anniversary of Italian unification. The Libyan conquest was viewed as a response to the 1896 defeat, and the narrative of a unified Italy (represented by Rome and Sicily) conquering North Africa, constructs a national history that imagines liberal Italy as the reemergence of the ancient Roman Empire.

The belief that film, particularly historical epics such as *Cabiria*, could be an aid to constructing a unified national identity became prevalent as the cinema transitioned into its early narrative period. As Maria Wyke comments, "Historical films . . . became ideal vehicles for addressing the nation's sense of its own identity. In the years preceding the First World War. . . Italian historical films

began to prosper as an instrument of cultural hegemony” (20). The creation of a shared national identity was also assisted by *romanità*, or the establishment of a connection between the Roman Empire and liberal Italy through the circulation of images and symbols of the ancient period (Wyke 18). By incorporating an oral history of the war as told to descendants of those who took part in the original conflict, and narrating across locations in Italy and Ethiopia, *Adwa* undermines the representational power of linear narrative and continuity editing as deployed for colonialist propaganda in the silent historical epic film.

Gerima is particularly cognizant of the signifying power of the monument and its resonance in the contemporary postcolonial period. In her study of Italian colonial memory, Krystyna von Henneberg argues that official monuments erected to commemorate Italian colonial endeavors are laden with “political and iconographic anxieties” (71) stemming from both the country’s inconsistent nation-building process and failed imperial endeavors. Public spaces devoted to war memorials are legible only as generalized tributes to those who lost their lives in any number of conflicts and do not specifically relate Italy’s history as a colonial aggressor. With the influx of African immigrants over the last three decades, many of these sites, such as the *Piazzale dei Cinquecento*, have become centers of what von Henneberg describes as “a new kind of diverse, transnational Italian public” (von Henneberg 76).

In *Adwa*, we see Gerima at the *Piazzale* speaking with descendants of those who fought in the conflict. The Dogali monument, as read by Ethiopians within Italy, is made to signify a postcolonial consciousness, one that dispatches the notion of the Italians as “good” colonizers, and relates the devastating legacies of invasion and colonial occupations throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At the time of filming, the Axum Obelisk, looted by the Italian Fascist government after its victory in the 1935–36 Italo-Ethiopian war, was still located in Rome. The obelisk is not prominently featured in *Adwa*, perhaps due to Gerima’s decision to film a second documentary, *The Children of Adwa: Forty Years Later*, to detail the events of the 1935 invasion (Speciale 80). However, in 1997, two years prior to *Adwa*’s release, Italian President Oscar Luigi Scalfaro made the first official visit to Ethiopia to atone for the Italo-Ethiopian conflicts, and the Axum Obelisk was returned to Ethiopia in 2005 after almost sixty years (Triulzi 439–40).

*Adwa* ends on a foreboding note, returning to Gerima’s voiceover as he relates events that will occur forty years later in the Italo-Ethiopian war of 1935–36. However, the 1896 victory is contextualized as a transformative moment in the Pan-Africanist movement, resonating across Africa, Europe, North and South America, and the Caribbean. While the film reminds us of the most significant victory against a European power by a sovereign African nation, there still remain many unresolved conflicts in the postcolonial era. *Adwa* was released in the midst of the disintegration of the Ethiopian-Eritrean peace alliance forged seven years prior in the ashes of the Mengistu dictatorship (Iyob 659). As Ruth Iyob and Alessandro Triulzi explain, the Ethiopian-Eritrean peace alliance ended over a dispute concerning the former colonial borders established during the Italian Fascist era (Iyob 666–68; Triulzi 435–38). According to Triulzi, the 1998 conflict marks a turning

point in postcolonial relations between Italy and its former colonies, one that still fuels tensions between Ethiopia and Eritrea (435).

As will be discussed in the following section on Isaac Julien's *Western Union: Small Boats*, Italian cinema has offered its own revisionist histories of the nation's unification process and colonialism during the liberal and Fascist eras.<sup>3</sup> However, the full import of Italy's colonial legacy, its relation to the nation-building process, and its impact on post-Cold War global migration and European immigration policy remain for the most part unacknowledged.

*Western Union: Small Boats* (2007) is the third part of Isaac Julien's *Expedition Trilogy*, which includes *True North* (2004), a film about African American explorer Matthew Henson, believed to be the first person to reach the North Pole, and *Fantôme Afrique* (2005), a visual journey through modern-day Africa shot in Burkina Faso. As a meditation on contemporary African immigration to Europe, *Western Union: Small Boats* (henceforth called *Western Union*) engages the history of modern Italy, its national formation, its North/South divide, and the nation's history of internal migration.

*Western Union* is structured around the appearance of the "survivor" (performed by Vanessa Myrie, the lead actress of the *Expedition Trilogy* films), who witnesses migrant passages among various locations, including the *Palazzo Gangi* in Palermo, Sicily, the eighteenth-century baroque palace where the final ballroom sequence of Luchino Visconti's *The Leopard* (1963) was filmed; the *Hotel Orientale* in Palermo; and the Turkish Steps, the white, ridged cliff formations on Sicily's southern coast.

Although a consideration of African diasporic identity formation by way of immigration to Europe, *Western Union* also reflects upon the current status of "art" cinema and its capacity to produce alternative histories of modern Europe. For Julien, this includes not only nonnarrative and experimental form but also installation and display (Kudláček 72–73). Julien's use of multiple screen installation for *Western Union* allows viewers to move through space as a means to construct the story of contemporary African migration to Europe and is closely aligned to Julien's exploration of time and memory. Multiple projection and a transformation of architectural space creates a rupture in linearity that can bring together and overlap what are ordinarily viewed as disparate histories, including those of Italian unification, contemporary migration, and the transatlantic slave trade.

Julien's reference to Visconti's *Leopard* is significant not only as a reflection on "art" cinema, but also as a revisionist history of Italian unification. Set between 1860 and 1861, Visconti's adaptation of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampadusa's 1958 novel narrates the vast social and political changes brought about by the unification process through the eyes of Prince Salina, a member of the Sicilian aristocracy. In *Western Union*, Julien suggests an analogy between the Sicilian bourgeoisie's encroachment upon the aristocracy and the contemporary presence of African migrants, whom he refers to as the "new people" (Julien, *Art Newspaper* interview).

*The Leopard* is Visconti's second historical film adaptation set during the Italian unification period, released nine years after *Senso* (1954; Nowell-Smith 80). Visconti's Marxist politics, informed by the early 1960s circulation of works by Antonio Gramsci, influenced his revisionist approach to the Italian unification in

both films. In *The Leopard*, Visconti highlights Lampedusa's critique of the *Risorgimento* and post-Unification period based on Gramsci's concept of *trasformismo*, or the appropriation of a radical politics by a political elite (Marcus 48). For Millicent Marcus, *The Leopard's* retelling of the *Risorgimento* not only demonstrates how a popular "revolution" resulted in the maintenance of power for the Italian political and economic elite, but also challenges "the notion of national unity on which all Italian historiography is based" because it deconstructs the belief that a "unified" Italy and an "Italian" people existed prior to foreign invasion (49).

Like *The Leopard*, *Western Union* is a revisionist history of modern Italy, one that further challenges the idea of a homogeneous Italian nation-state and those who may be included or excluded from the national body. In this sense, Julien draws upon *The Leopard's* role in the construction of what James Hay refers to as "national-popular history," or the role of cinema and other mass media to reformulate the conditions under which history is told and transmitted to its assumed "national" audience (37). Visconti's adaptation is placed into a field of competing interpretations of Italian unification as historical "event," not only as represented in the Italian historical epics of the 1930s, but as circulated over time in television, popular journals, and national and international film festivals. Hay writes,

To discuss "a national past" . . . is not to refer simply to a sequence of events whose chronology is somehow unmediated by discourse and outside the modes of cultural production. In this sense, the past is deeply embedded in a memory of previous and existing cultural formations activated through each public performance of history.

To remember/to record (*ricordare*) springs not only from a larger process of cultural conservation or conservatism but from an inability to decipher and a need to remake traditional or existing implotments of history. (38–39)

In this way, *Western Union* is another "public performance of history," this time deployed to reconfigure the idea of the "nation," which now constructs a history of the Italian imagined community inflected by postcolonial discourse, one that also includes members of the African diaspora.

*The Leopard's* revisionist history of Italian unification can also be read alongside several films released in the early 1960s that reflected upon Italy's North/South division during a period of postwar economic recovery and internal migration. Films such as Luchino Visconti's *Rocco and his Brothers* (1960) and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962) examined the social, cultural and political transformations that took place as Italy entered the First World economic bloc. During this period, southern Italians began to move north to take advantage of industrial jobs in urban centers such as Turin and Milan. Southern migrants were often not welcomed in the north and experienced racial discrimination. By referencing two formative moments in Italian history, the *Risorgimento* and the postwar republic's economic recovery period, *Western Union* points to the fact that Italy, prior to the massive wave of non-European migrants in the last thirty years, already had a history of race relations that ironically informs the country's and the European Union's immigration policies and the response of EU citizens to migrants from the developing world.

Although *Western Union* makes relevant comparisons between contemporary African immigration and Italian southern external and internal migrations during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Derek Duncan cautions that such parallels between the cinematic representation of Italian intranational migrations of the past and transnational present-day migrations threaten to diminish the “material differences involving questions of citizenship, mobility, and rights of settlement” between southern Italians and non-European migrants (Duncan 196).

If the migrants in *Western Union* can only loosely be read as analogous to southern Italian migrants, then what in Julien’s film can be read as a significant intervention in debates concerning present-day immigration to Europe? As with Gerima’s *Adwa*, Julien’s *Western Union* uses Italy and its history as a vehicle for narrating African diasporic identity in the present era. In *Western Union*, the Mediterranean Sea is both a space of movement and a temporal *locus* that joins contemporary African migration to the transatlantic slave system. Drawing upon recent scholarship on the role played by major Italian city-states in the transatlantic slave trade beginning as early as the fifteenth century, Cristina Lombardi-Diop demonstrates how African-Italian writers invoke the Middle Passage and the “cultural memory of oceanic crossing” as a way of speaking to the abject conditions experienced by clandestine immigrants attempting to reach Europe (162–63). Similarly, *Western Union* links contemporary migration to Italy to the transatlantic slave system through the use of the survivor-witness (Vanessa Myrie) who salvages remnants of lives lost at sea in the all too frequent boating tragedies that occur during the Mediterranean crossings. In *Western Union*, Julien unveils Italy’s multicultural past by recovering the migrant body and allowing it to inhabit geographical and architectural spaces that bring together disparate and often hidden histories of contact and hybridity. This occurs most forcefully in the sequence filmed in the *Palazzo Gangi*. In *The Leopard*, the ballroom sequence represents the passing of an older generation, represented by Salina, that must make way for the new, modern Italy, represented by his nephew Count Tancredi’s marriage to the commoner Angelica. It is the decisive moment in the film when Visconti stages Salina’s abnegation of the Sicilian aristocracy (Marcus 53).

The *Palazzo Gangi* ballroom serves as a transitional space for Julien, who also uses dance as a vehicle for political and social commentary. As opposed to the disciplined, “proper” bodies that move within the opulent space in Visconti’s recreation of the mid-nineteenth-century Sicilian aristocratic society, Julien’s migrants are unruly. In *The Leopard*’s ballroom sequence, the only moments we see undisciplined bodies are when Salina contemplates the demise of his class. The connection between class disintegration and the ungainly body is forcefully made evident toward the end of the ballroom sequence, when, after Salina’s final mirror reflection, the camera pans left to reveal a toilet room with pots filled to the brim with human waste. The full weight of class compromise is rendered as the exposure of the most abject of bodily functions.

Not having mastered the waltz for entrée into the upper classes, the migrants in *Western Union* squirm, writhe, and eddy upon the *Palazzo Gangi* floor. Decorated with ocean motifs reminiscent of the mosaic designs of ancient Roman Africa, the palazzo floor becomes a “sea” in which the migrants “swim” and “drown.” The

migrant dance performance is scored to the sound of turbulent waters, and the sequence is intercut with images of the dancers/migrants recreating the same gestures in water. The migrant body is an intruder in this space and constitutes a breach in historical time that places the twenty-first-century migrant in the space of eighteenth-century Baroque architecture. The movement between the palazzo and bodies in actual water link *The Leopard* to the contemporary issue of migration and death, a condition that subtends *Western Union* and which Julien specifically contemplates in the last sequence of the film. The metaphorical death of the Sicilian aristocracy, realized in a mode of somber desperation through Burt Lancaster's performance, creates a cruel irony when juxtaposed to the "actual" dead bodies strewn upon the Sicilian shore.

The final sequence of *Western Union* returns us to small vessels floating on the sea, bodies circulating in waters, the Turkish Steps, and the survivor, now recovering articles of clothing from those lost in what is often referred to as the "Sicilian holocaust" (Kudláček 73). In a recurring frame, the survivor stands in front of an iron gate at the end of an underground passageway. The survivor as witness connects the present-day tragedies of attempted migration to Europe to the transatlantic slave trade of the first period of global capitalism. As representations of the complex terrain of contemporary global migrations, both Gerima's *Adwa* and Julien's *Western Union* use Italy's nation-state formation, its ongoing North/South division, colonial legacies, and history of internal and external migration, as a departure point for "writing" an Italian postcolonial history, opening a space for members of the African diaspora to insert narratives of migration and survival that ultimately destabilize the "West/non-West" dichotomy.

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## Notes

This chapter is the re-elaboration of material that has already appeared in Shelleen Greene, *Equivocal Subjects: Between Italy and Africa—Constructions of Racial and National Identity in the Italian Cinema* (New York: Continuum Press, 2012).

1. For discussions of the parallels between nineteenth- and twentieth-century Italian migration and contemporary non-Western European immigration to Italy, see Bullaro, Dal Lago, Chambers (*Mediterranean Crossings*), and Parati.
2. See both Graziella Parati's discussion of transmigration literature in Italy and Dal Lago.



3. These include revisionist histories of the *Risorgimento* such as Luchino Visconti's *Senso* (1954) and *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*, 1963), but also Moustapha Akkad's *Lion of the Desert* (1981), which details the Libyan resistance to Italian occupation led by Omar Mukhtar, and Gianni Amelio's *Lamerica* (1994), a reckoning with the legacies of Fascist Italy's occupation of Albania.

## “Roma Forestiera”

### A Project on Migrant Music in Rome

*Alessandro Portelli*

#### Migrant Music Is Rome’s Contemporary Folk Music

A classic Roman song of the 1940s, written by Armando Libianchi and Luigi Granozio, complained that music had all but vanished from the public space of Rome: “How good were the times when in the streets / you could always hear the sound of a barrel organ / arpeggios of guitars and mandolins.” The song went on to complain that “Nannina,” the eponymous young woman from the popular neighborhoods, has forgotten that she’s a Roman, no longer sings *stornelli*, and has fallen in love with this newfangled American music. The song’s title was “Roma forestiera,” something like “Rome the stranger,” “Rome the foreigner,” “Rome estranged.”

Ironically, it is precisely the strangers and foreigners that have come to Rome with the recent waves of immigration that have brought music back to the streets, the buses, and the subways of Rome. Streetcar number 8, from the Trastevere station to the central Piazza Argentina, is a veritable music laboratory: in the space of half an hour, one day, I recorded a driving Romanian string band waiting at the bus stop, a virtuoso Roma violinist bringing Brahms’s *Hungarian Dance no. 5* back to its folk roots, and a guitar player—probably Romanian—singing very competently and in good Italian a pop song by Nicola Di Bari aptly titled “Vagabondo”—roamer, nomad. The lyrics of the song—where a nomad sings about trading his shoes for a mile of freedom and the winding of the road is compared to the aimless flowing of a river—acquired a whole new set of connotations through that context and that performer.<sup>1</sup>

Once we reached piazza Argentina, I could hear an Eastern European sax player on one street corner, and an African woman beggar on the opposite side who

bore a sign in English that read “I am poor but happy” and occasionally lifted her voice in gospel sounds. Much later, I recorded her improvising in both Ibo and English—“I wonder why people hate me, I wonder why people are jealous of me.”<sup>2</sup>

The rich and variegated sounds of music that have arrived with the migrants are one of the most significant and visible aspects of the development of Rome as a multicultural metropolis. Just as migrant literature is one of the most fascinating strands of contemporary Italian literature, the music of this new “Roma forestiera” is the true folk music of the city today—the music of the streets, of the peripheries, of the marginal and “subaltern” communities.

If we think of it as a form of contemporary folk music, then, we cannot limit our analysis to the professional and successful groups that have appeared on the public scene of folk revival, popular, and “world” music, like the early militant Palestinian group *Handala*, the *Taraf della Metropolitana* (a group of talented Romanian musicians that record producer Erasmo Treglia found playing in subway stations in Rome, and whose records and concerts were produced by the *Finisterre* label), and the internationally recognized multiethnic *Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio* gathered around Rome’s most multicultural square. We must look for the deeper layers of cultural memory and creativity, even below the many professional and semi-professional bands and groups that play for their own communities around the city. We need to look into the everyday music lore and expression of individuals and communities in private and public spaces: what songs did the Ukrainian *badanti* bring with them into the homes of the old people of whom they take care? What do people sing in Latin American festivals, in Filipino churches, in Senegalese families, in protest marches and antiracist demonstrations? What do Roma musicians play when they play for themselves, and what do they play when they play for others?

### The Home, the Street, the Community

“Roma forestiera” is now the ironic title of a project launched in 2010 by the Circolo Gianni Bosio—an independent activist cultural organization working in the fields of folk music, oral history, and people’s cultures—to collect, study, and encourage the musical expressions of migrants, mainly but not only in Rome, where the organization is based.<sup>3</sup> The project looks at three spaces: the home, the street, and the community.<sup>4</sup>

#### The Home

In the first few months of the project, we have recorded the personal repertoire of migrants from Bangladesh, China, Columbia, Ecuador, Romania, Kurdistan, the Philippines, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Somalia, Brazil, Morocco, Ukraine, Nigeria, and Kenya. The performers range from “everyday people,” like the mother-daughter couples from Columbia, Romania, and the Philippines—who gave us children’s rhymes, Christmas songs, lullabies, ballads, topical songs—to the semi-professional African musicians, like drummer Anatole Touzahouin Tah from Ivory

Coast, who gave us his own family and village songs about the life cycle and the year's rituals.<sup>5</sup> While these repertoires hark back to the respective homelands, some poetry and music was also created in and about the process of migrations—such as the radical rap pieces about confrontations with fascists, composed by Diamante Souza, or the sung poem "Istranyeri" ("stranieri," "foreigners," as pronounced by East Africans, who insert a vowel at the beginning of words starting with s + consonant and between all consonant groups) by young Somali refugee Geedi Kuule Yusuf: "I'm a foreigner, I'm a stranger, I'm a guest in Italy. I run, run to school, to learn Italian. I am African, I am running from the beasts who bear arms. We're not Africans, we're not Europeans, what are we all?"<sup>6</sup>

### The Street

The street is the public space in which migrant music meets the general population of Rome and is therefore the most syncretistic, problematic, and confrontational. The project began with the encounter with a talented husband-and-wife Ecuadorian couple playing in the subway station at Piazza della Repubblica.<sup>7</sup> As we have already seen, the spaces of transportation are a favored venue for migrant musicians—as if they had to keep moving even within the city that is their (often temporary) destination. Thus, we have recorded a number of musicians, especially from Eastern Europe, on buses, streetcars, and trains. Musical proficiency is uneven—from highly skilled artists to teenagers strumming a few guitar chords or struggling through a couple of accordion tunes—but, just as was the case with the early stirrings of migrant writing, the fact itself of playing music in the public space is at least as important as the quality of the music itself.<sup>8</sup> However, some groups and musicians were truly excellent, such as the Romanian street singer Jani Urlazanu recorded by Fiorella Leone in Piazza Farnese, or the band that call themselves *Taraf della Transilvania*, that we first met as they were playing in Piazza Santa Maria in Trastevere and then recorded and videoed in a space provided by the local parish.<sup>9</sup> This group is very well known in Romanian communities in Rome, and they also claim a following in their own country, but they make more money playing in the streets of Rome than they ever did at home. This highlights an aspect I will discuss more in detail later: for street musicians this is work, a way of making a living, not just a form of expression.

The street, however, is also the space of public protest, in which migrants march for respect and rights. We have recorded and filmed three major demonstrations against discrimination and racism, in which the sounds of music—among them, African and Kurdish drumming and chanting, Moroccan vibrato singing, and Brazilian berimbau—played a major role.

### The Community

Abdurrahman Ozel is less than fifty years old, but looks much older and worn out. He has been a political exile in Rome for eight years, but speaks no Italian at all. He lives in a rundown building that the Kurdish community has been

grudgingly allowed to use as a community center and living quarters. And he is a great artist, a master singer and *saz* player,<sup>10</sup> and a poet. He sings pieces by the great poets and musicians of the Kurdish tradition and struggle, and his own compositions that combine the memory of his own native village with the story of his exile and migration. One song describes a bird's flight between two Kurdish cities divided by the Turkey-Iran border, and he expresses the hope that they will one day be reunited.

When I recorded his music for the first time, I was aware of the ambivalent attitudes of his countrymen and neighbors: on the one hand, he was clearly recognized and respected as a "mamosta," a master and teacher; on the other, there was a sense that he did belong to another world, another time and experience than that of a migrant and exile community in which the majority are much younger than him (I later saw again many of these younger people—including Abdurrahman's sister, who had performed for me at our sessions—at one of the antiracist demonstrations, and recorded their chanting and drumming). The encounter with Abdurrahman Ozel, then, on the one hand confirmed the extraordinary wealth of musical culture that exists in migrant communities, but also indicated that "community" can itself be a deceptive term if we ignore the many differences and stratifications inside each of them. On the occasion of the Newroz—the Kurdish New Year celebration—the featured musicians were a couple of young rappers (who sang in Kurdish) as well as a traditional dancing group.<sup>11</sup> When the Circolo Gianni Bosio arranged for Abdurrahman to give a concert at a club in Rome, however, he was joined on stage by Hevi Dilara, a young woman in her thirties, who speaks perfect Italian and is an officer in an Italy-Kurdistan solidarity organization. Hevi told us then that she had been a member of a group back home, and they were all arrested by the Turkish authority (and at least one member tortured and killed) for singing in Kurdish. She had been in Italy as a refugee for eight years, and had never sung since she left home. She sang again for the first time that night.

Another type of intracommunity expression is that of rituals and religious festivals. One example is the huge *Igreja ni Cristo*, a Filipino Protestant Church and community center, perched on the very edge of town, on a hill at Casal del Marmo overlooking the *Raccordo Anulare*, the beltway around the city. The service is patterned after that of Evangelical churches everywhere, with long sermons (in Tagalog with inserts in English and Italian), communal prayers, and hymns performed by a robed mixed choir of sixty singers (with no participation from the congregation). Hymns are sung in Tagalog at the 7 a.m. Sunday service, and in Italian at 10 p.m.; bilingual hymnals are provided in the pews. On the day of my first visit, a children's choir was also rehearsing in one of the outbuildings.<sup>12</sup>

Though large and densely populated, the *Igreja ni Cristo* is almost invisible to the eyes of the city at large, and not only because of its very peripheral location. In fact, before I heard about it from a friend's home helper, I was not even aware that there were any Protestant Filipinos in Rome. Ironically, these are both public spaces (I was welcomed as a visitor and there was no objection to my recording the service), and self-enclosed ones, inhabited only by the members of the community and separated from the public space of the city at large as well as from the public spaces of other communities.

I was equally welcome at the Senegalese Mourid "Dar-el-Salaam" (House of Peace), a community center and mosque in Ladispoli, where the congregation sings impressive choral and antiphonal performances that set to music the poetry and teaching of the community's spiritual leader, Cheikh Amadou Bamba.<sup>13</sup> It was an extraordinary piece of Africa less than thirty minutes north of Rome—a piece of Africa in which, however, I was also able to interview eight-year-old children who spoke with a rich Roman accent and rooted for all the Italian soccer teams. And the music was unforgettable.

One fascinating encounter between a community's ritual and the open space of the city took place on the day the Ecuadorian community celebrated its protector, the *Virgen del Quinche*, with a procession along Via Merulana, one of the busiest commercial thoroughfares in Rome, starting from the Basilica di San Giovanni in Laterano and ending at the Basilica di Santa Maria degli Angeli in Piazza della Repubblica.<sup>14</sup> One could perceive the sense of estrangement and surprise in the eyes of the Italian onlookers. On the one hand, a Catholic procession is a familiar, if perhaps old-fashioned sight, steeped in Italy's Catholic tradition<sup>15</sup>; on the other, this familiar sight was bedecked with unfamiliar signs, such as Ecuadorian flags, and displayed unusual images of the Virgin, and the procession prayed, chanted, and sang in a foreign language. It was a very symbolic moment, in which a migrant community appeared to the general population as both "like us" (they are Catholic, they march in a procession) and "not like us" (they bear different colors, sing in a different language, and observe rituals we modern urbanites have left behind). Onlookers seemed at a loss as to whether identify or distance themselves.

Syncretism culminated as the procession reached Piazza della Repubblica and entered the Basilica di Santa Maria degli Angeli. The Mass was accompanied by communal singing led by a guitar band composed mainly of women. Most of the songs (whose texts were distributed among the congregation) were clearly of clerical rather than folk origin, and expressed the standard, rather tame religious sentiments and themes of standard Catholics everywhere. The tunes, however, came from a globalized stock of mainly North American music: Our Father's prayer was sung in Spanish to the tune of Simon and Garfunkel's "The Sound of Silence," and other songs used the tunes of "Red River Valley" and "When the Saints Go Marching In."<sup>16</sup>

### Violeta, Jeaneth, and the Subway

Another fascinating encounter—very different from that with Abdurrahman Ozel—has been with Romanian subway singer Violeta Joanna. Violeta is in her late thirties, lives in a Roma camp in the far periphery of Rome, has five children back in Romania, and makes a living singing every morning in the subway trains.<sup>17</sup> We first recorded her at a friend's house (a Roma rights activist) who had heard her on the train and told us about her. Violeta showed up with all the tools of her trade: her portable sound system and the prerecorded bases she downloaded from the web and used to accompany her singing. When we suggested that it was not necessary for her to use her microphone, since we liked the sound of her own

natural voice better, she was taken aback and insisted on doing things the way she does them “at work.” Indeed, after she sang her first song, she concluded with a “thank you,” just as she does when she sings in public (she did the same when we met her again at a neighbor’s home in the camp).

Violeta is one of the best singers I have ever heard. Sara Modigliani, one of Italy’s finest singers of folk music, who was at our recording sessions, was not off the mark when she likened her voice to that of the great Portuguese fado star, Amalia Rodrigues. However, Violeta does not think of her voice as a way of expressing herself, but only as a tool for making a living: singing in the subway is not art or any such thing, but work (she observes very regular hours); and the voice is to her what a needle may be to a tailor or a lathe to a vase maker.<sup>18</sup> Her repertoire consisted exclusively of the pop songs that she thinks her commuting audience likes best, the ones that are more likely to elicit contributions. It includes Neapolitan standards, songs from the Sanremo song festival, American and Latino pop hits, which she sings in carefully reconstructed accents. A consequence of the fact that she learns her songs from the web rather than the radio or recordings is that her performances are very personal, never imitative. Thus, her rendition of the Italian standard “O Sole Mio” is the finest, the most soulful and least bombastic I have ever heard.

The most extraordinary fact that emerged from our first encounter was that Violeta did not know any Romanian songs and could not figure out why we were interested in those rather than in her working repertoire (which of course we also recorded in full). However, she offered to learn some and sing them for us at another time, which she did—once again, not because she had any cultural stake in them, but because learning and singing them for us was, again, work.

Now, the question we might ask is, in what sense is this “folk” music? After all, technically, much of the migrant music we have heard falls into the category of the popular, rather than folk, and the sources are not necessarily in the oral tradition (even the hymns sung by the Ecuadorian congregation or by the choir at the *Igreja ni Cristo* are not of folk origin and are learned from church hymnals or broadsides). In the first place, however, this distinction is not as clear-cut in some cultures as it is defined in traditional folklore studies. For example, when singers like Roxana Ene or Jani Urlazanu perform the songs of Romanian stars like Maria Tanase or Marie Lataretu, their sources are recordings and the radio; on the other hand, Lataretu was “discovered” and promoted as a traditional singer by the great Romanian ethnomusicologist Constantin Brăiloiu, and her songs are perceived as folk music by other singers.<sup>19</sup> Liviu Stan, a professional musician, said in an interview that one reason for leaving Romania was that his folk-oriented music was being superseded by more pop-oriented “world music” styles: as is often the case, migration and the margins are the places where traditional cultural traits survive longer.<sup>20</sup>

More compelling is the argument of social subjects and spaces. To modern folklore studies, the origin of a given cultural artifact is less important than its current use and function, and there is no doubt that the social subjects and the social spaces in which this music is being heard are as close as possible, in a contemporary urban setting, to those of traditional folk music: marginal and working

people and minorities on the one hand, and the streets, the squares, the ritual and domestic spaces on the other.

Finally, Violeta Joanna provides us with another insight. Folk music has always been functional, and her music is functional with a vengeance: it is a means of survival. Like other street singers, she does not just sing *while* working, or to help with work<sup>21</sup>—singing *is* her work just as begging is for other members of her community, or working as home help for many migrant women. In fact, we might recognize her performances as *work songs* not unlike those of the African American convicts recorded by Alan Lomax in the 1930s. That music is work, however, does not mean that musicians may not pour their souls into it. Violeta sings whatever will please riders from whose donation her livelihood depends; but, whatever she sings, her voice is always filled with a deeply personal intensity and passion. Likewise, the Ecuadorian singing couple of Sergio and Jeaneth, who play at the metro stations of Piazzale Flaminio and Piazza della Repubblica, take visible pride in the way they perform a repertoire of Latin American standards that most passersby will recognize and reward. On the other hand, they were elated when I asked them to record music that was closer to their roots. One of the songs they recorded was a clear statement of identity and pride: "I am the descendent of Atahualpa and the sun, a noble land and the seed of a better homeland." As Jeaneth explained,

I worked from Friday nights to Monday mornings assisting a lady who had Alzheimer. It was the first job I found here, and it frightened me. It was only from Friday night to Monday morning, and it was almost driving me out of my mind. I met with Sergio to play music, and at that moment I sang to free myself of all that stress, all that negative stuff that I had felt in those days, and this made me value even more what I was doing.

One day I called my mother and my mother was crying over the phone, and she said, Jeaneth, come home, you have a bite to eat here and you have a place to sleep, what are you doing there, begging? I said no, mama. I am not begging. I am making music. And this, what I am doing, is beautiful. Because people like it, because I don't beg for money, I present my music and they give me money. And I am happy, I am proud of what I do, because it makes me feel important. And it's a wonderful feeling.<sup>22</sup>

### Encounters

As the case of Violeta Joanna shows, we would be very much off the mark if we were to look at migrant music for the uncontaminated roots of authentic identities or any such things, rather than change, syncretism, dialogue. For instance, Jani Urlazanu started out with a song about nostalgia of his home village, but went on to sing a song learned from a Greek sailor and the Neapolitan standard "Mala-femmena"; the street singer who only gave his name as "Mario" also had a song about his mother left back in the village, but the first song he sang was another Neapolitan standard, "Carmela," and he described his life of roaming and hoboing across half of Europe in terms that made the words of "Vagabondo" come true.<sup>23</sup> Thus, music has often been the ground of encounters and exchanges that, at a



time when xenophobia and racism are ominously on the rise, suggest at least the potential of an alternative. I will conclude by describing a few such experiences.

In 2009, a Romanian Roma community that had been expelled from an unauthorized camp in the southeast periphery of Rome occupied an abandoned industrial building near Via Tiburtina and turned it into a makeshift living space. The Circolo Gianni Bosio was invited to celebrate the inauguration of this new space, and the whole evening was filled with the music of violins, guitars, and snare drums by an incredible number of skilled musicians of all generations, and the back and forth swapping of music between the Roma and the Italian musicians.<sup>24</sup> This was not the first time we had recorded music in a Roma camp: in 1988, after a flood had all but wiped out a camp on the banks of the river on Via Ostiense, our group and the radical Christian community led by Dom Giovanni Franzoni were invited to a solidarity day in which the local musicians played and sang music from Albania and Bosnia—and a rousing fiddle version of the Italian partisan song “Bella Ciao.”<sup>25</sup>

Both encounters testified to the fact that migrant music is not merely a matter of roots, of nostalgic survivals from the home countries, or of self-enclosed, jealous, ethnic identities and traditions. Rather, in those cases, music was a way in which borders were crossed and communication was established among different groups. As Werner Sollors has shown, migrant cultures are defined less by their separate national roots than by the shared experience of migration and by the conditions they find in their new country.<sup>26</sup>

Thus, the meaning of our project is not only to document the heritage that the migrants brought with them, in order to reinforce their sense of identity, but also—indeed, primarily—to follow and facilitate the changes, the dialogues, and the syncretism that take place here on Italian ground. The singing of “Vagabondo” by the Romanian guitarist on streetcar no. 8 or the delightful rendition of the anarchist anthem “Addio Lugano Bella” by Letizia Yando, a young Central African woman (whose memory of her own culture has been all but erased by the traumas of war and exile), the playing of “Bella Ciao” by the Yugoslav Roma musicians of Ponte Marconi—all these are as meaningful as Abdurrahman’s consummate traditional artistry.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, an integral part of the project has consisted in bringing musicians and singers from different backgrounds in touch with one another. For instance, when the city government asked Circolo Gianni Bosio to organize a Christmas event at the Casa della Memoria e della Storia in Rome in 2009, we brought together Abdurrahman Ozel with his *tambur* and his songs of resistance and exile, three Ukrainian women singing their country’s Christmas songs with silver voices and perfect pitch (we later had them sing for us also the protest songs against the Soviet regime—as well as the songs the regime taught them to sing), and an Italian master bagpipe player.

In cultural and political terms, our most important work, however, is the collaboration with teachers and students of the elementary and middle-schools in the southeastern periphery of Casilino 23, an area characterized, along with the adjacent neighborhoods of Torpignattara and Centocelle, by a high concentration of immigrant population that is reflected in the student bodies of the local

schools. Progressive teachers and educators in the local school district have long been at the forefront in the movement for multicultural education and cultural dialogue, and migrant rights and music have been a primary vehicle. The teachers of the Iqbal Masih Elementary School (named after the 12-year-old Pakistani factory worker murdered for asking for his rights in 1995) have created a multicultural children's choir—composed of children from the Philippines, China, the Middle East, Columbia, Romania, and other countries including Italy—that has performed even for the President of the Republic.<sup>28</sup> Some of the songs the choir sings have been brought with them by the children themselves, others were composed or selected by the teachers. One song is based on the children's own writings on migration, set to music by the composer Carlo Siliotto.<sup>29</sup>

The success of this project has led to the creation, at the neighboring secondary school Romolo Balzani,<sup>30</sup> of a choir composed initially of the children's parents and later on extended to all comers. Under the musical direction of Sara Modigliani and Felice Zaccheo, and with the collaboration of the Circolo Gianni Bosio (and the later addition of drummer Anatole Touzahouin Tah from Ivory Coast), the Romolo Balzani Choir has become a major venue for cultural dialogue and integration. While the majority of the members are still Italian (migrants have less time, more volatile employment, and more irregular hours), yet the migrant element has been significant, and its contribution crucial. All choir members learned to sing songs from other countries and in languages other than their own—the signature pieces are a Romanian ballad that features a moving solo by another extraordinary "migrant" (or second-generation Italian) singer, teenage Roxana Ene, and the singing of Rabindranath Tagore's songs by Sushmita Sultana, a young woman from Bangladesh who accompanies herself on the harmonium and has a degree in music and dancing from the university of Kolkata. On the other hand, citizens of many countries learned the Italian songs of emigration, such as "Mamma mia dammi cento lire," Alfredo Bandelli's "Partono gli emigranti," or the exile anthem "Addio Lugano Bella." Often, the choir's performances culminate with Manu Chao's international anthem "Clandestino." The latest addition to the group is in fact an undocumented *griot* just off the boat from civil-war torn Ivory Coast, who showed up at rehearsal and sang a song in French about the hope for Africa's resurrection.<sup>31</sup>

As a conclusion, in March 2012, I played the recording of Geedi Yusuf's *Istaryeri* at the Black Heritage Festival in Lagos, as part of a workshop on migrations from Africa to Italy across "The Black Mediterranean." The great Somali writer Nuruddin Farah objected that this was a very, very poor specimen of Somali poetry: Geedi clearly did not know the subtle uses of alliteration and metaphor that make Somali oral poetry so distinguished.

I had the opportunity to discuss this with Nuruddin Farah later and suggested to him that while this might have been bad *Somali* poetry, it was a very interesting *Italian* song—a suggestion to which he readily agreed—and ought be valued more for what it meant in the new context than for how it compared with the models and standards of the culture of origin. Just like the early stirrings of African Italian literature a couple of decades earlier, artistic proficiency might not for a while be as urgent as the fact that new subjects are seeking their voices in multiple

languages, changing the cultural space of Italy and Europe and our understanding of it. For instance, Geedi's ironic use of some Italian words in his Somali composition is more than just a case of linguistic syncretism, or the adoption of new words to express new experiences. Rather, it places these familiar (to us) words in a new light, in a critical process of estrangement. Thus, Geedi's use of "ospite" ("guest") alerts us to the fact that, while Italy may be congratulating itself on the "hospitality" tendered to migrants, calling them "guests" implies that they are only here temporarily and on sufferance, with no permanent rights and, as the song says, nowhere to belong. A supposedly benevolent word reveals its malignant underside and the many ambiguities of a familiar language are revealed—which, ultimately, is the work of all poetry, wherever it comes from and wherever it sings.

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### Notes

1. These recordings were made on September 9, 2007. All recordings discussed in this article are in the Archivio Sonoro "Franco Coggiola" of the Circolo Gianni Bosio, at the Casa della Memoria e della Storia (House of Memory and History) in Rome. All recordings were made by the author, unless otherwise noted. That songs acquired new connotations in the migrant experience was also evident in earlier recordings of migrants to Rome from the rural South of Italy (see Portelli).
2. Lucy Rabo, recorded on December 15, 2010. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
3. For more information on the Circolo Gianni Bosio, see <<http://www.circologianibosio.it>>.
4. *Roma Forestiera* is now also the title of a CD series that was inaugurated in June 2011 with a CD titled *Istaranyeri*.
5. Joanna Flores, from Columbia, recorded at the Iqbal Masih School, July 7, 2009; Anatole Touzahouin Tah, recorded at the Circolo Gianni Bosio, March 25, 2010
6. Geedi Kuule Yusuf, recorded at the Asinitas school of Italian for immigrants in Viale Ostiense 152, February 16, 2010; Diamante Souza, recorded in Terni by Alessandro Toffoli, April 2010.

7. Sergio and Jeaneth, from Ecuador, recorded at the Piazza della Repubblica subway station, May 2009.
8. The journalist and writer Laila Wadia (a migrant herself) noted that the right-wing mayor of Trieste recently announced that only "highly qualified" musicians will receive a permit to play in the streets of the city's historic center. "Juraj Berky, a Slovak violinist who is a member of Trio Berky, claims that unskilled foreign trumpet and violin players are the cause of the problem for everyone." Others, however, find that the recorded pop music that blares out of some public places is much more of a nuisance. See Wadia.
9. Jani Urlazanu, from Bucharest, recorded by Fiorella Leone at Piazza Farnese, February 23, 2010, and at the Archivio Sonoro "Franco Coggiola," April 13, 2010; Taraf della Transilvania, recorded in the Church of Santa Maria in Trastevere (filmed by Enrico Grammaroli), April 7, 2010.
10. The *saz* (in Turkish, *tambur*) is a traditional string instrument.
11. Recorded at the Casa dell'Altra Economia (House of Alternative Economics), April 21, 2009, and at the Kurdish exile and migrant center in Testaccio, November 11, 2009.
12. Religious service at the *Igreja ni Cristo* and children's choir rehearsals, June 27, 2010.
13. My visit took place on April 16, 2011.
14. Feast of the *Virgen del Quinche*, November 22, 2009.
15. Religious processions, however, are hardly ever seen in the center of Rome, so that it looked like something from an older, deeply familiar but almost forgotten time and space.
16. Friends with a more recent Catholic education told me that these tunes are also used in Italian Catholic parishes.
17. Violeta Joanna, recorded at a friend's house on via Taranto, March 11, 2010, and at the Magliana Roma camp, April 18, 2010.
18. Of course, like other professional street musicians, she expected to be paid for her work and time, and we did pay her.
19. Indeed, Laturetu is featured as a folk singer singing a traditional *doina* in *The Alan Lomax Collection Sampler*.
20. Interviewed at Santa Palomba, near Pomezia, July 27, 2010. A number of performances by the Liviu Stan band are available on YouTube: for one, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOs2CQcCrkI>>.
21. Ivorian percussionist Anatole Touzahouin Tah usually introduces his song "Kaye Nudé" ("What are we to do?") with these words: "Before we had all these machines that work the land, we used to dig and hoe. So this is a song they sing in Africa, when our peasants, our parents, our loved ones who are no longer with us, [work the land], and it says, come on, my boy, keep on working. And since the Italian Constitution, article 1, is based on work. . . . And there's work at home, too, and when we have housework to do, if we sing, it comes easier." Recorded at the Piadena (Cremona) Culture League Festival, March 27, 2011.
22. Jeaneth, recorded at the Casa della Memoria e della Storia, January 14, 2011.
23. "Mario" was recorded by Fiorella Leone in Campo de' Fiori, May 30, 2010, and at Casa della Memoria e della Storia, June 7, 2010.
24. This encounter took place and was recorded on February 14, 2009. A moment of ironic play on racist stereotypes took place when some ladies picked up my small grandbaby and took him into one of their rooms to change his diaper. The community leader laughingly warned, "Do not steal that baby—we already have plenty of our own!"
25. Recorded on March 6, 1988.

26. Romanian musician Liviu Stan, for instance, who plays at weddings and other communal events, told us that one reason why he moved to Italy was that, in his own country, his more traditional brand of music was being superseded by more fashionable sounds.
27. Letizia Yando, recorded at the Iqbal Masih School, July 7, 2009.
28. The choir's name is *Se . . . sta voce*, a word play between "sesta," Rome's "sixth" municipality that includes Casilino 23, and a line from the Neapolitan standard "Voce 'e notte": "se 'sta voce te sceta 'nt'a nuttata," "if this voice awakens you in the night." One of their performances, on the Capitol Hill Square, on the occasion of an international "glocal" festival, is available at <[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_yEQiUtOnk0&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_yEQiUtOnk0&feature=related)>.
29. We have heard of a choir of Bangladeshi women from the adjacent neighborhood of Torpignattara, whose repertoire included Italian popular songs like "Roma nun fa' la stupida stasera" ("Rome, don't be silly tonight"), another song that takes on other connotations when sung by migrants to Rome. By the time we started our project, the group had dissolved. We were able, however, to trace and record one of their members, the accomplished singer and harmonium player Sushmita Sultana.
30. The school happens to be named after a musician: Romolo Balzani was the author of the most beloved and popular Roman vernacular songs.
31. A concert of the two choirs, performing separately and together, as well as solo performances by Roxana Ene, were recorded at the Iqbal Masih School, December 17, 2009.

# Hip Pop Italian Style

## The Postcolonial Imagination of Second-Generation Authors in Italy

Clarissa Clò

Is there a postcolonial imagination in Italy today, and if so, what does it look like? The last two decades have witnessed a growing body of literature produced in Italy by migrant writers from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Eastern Europe. Since the 1990s, they have enriched Italian culture and language with their contributions, even though their input has not been without contention.<sup>1</sup> Yet this production has continued to grow with an increasing degree of experimentation in a variety of genres and media, including critical interventions in online journals, forums, blogs, and websites.<sup>2</sup> This essay focuses on the literature of second-generation postcolonial writers collected in the anthologies *Pecore Nere* (Black Sheep, 2005) and *Italiani per vocazione* (Italians by Vocation, 2005), as well as on the creative work of the network Rete G2. While illuminating the impact and flaws of the current immigration and citizenship legislation, these authors offer an alternative, multiethnic, and multifaceted representation of Italy through astute aesthetic choices rooted in hip hop and popular culture.<sup>3</sup> They are “experts” who transfigure their “street knowledge” into literature and art and are perhaps the best suited to critique the legal system because, unlike Italian (white) citizens, they have a first-hand knowledge of its workings and material consequences. Their analysis of Italian culture is particularly insightful because they access it from the vantage point of a diasporic sensitivity, one that is simultaneously Italian and international.

While some second-generation youths are already Italian citizens, for the majority citizenship is a distant mirage. Italy has a very restrictive citizenship legislation based on *jus sanguinis* (i.e., blood, lineage, and race) so that, even when they are born and raised in Italy, children of immigrants are considered by law immigrants themselves.<sup>4</sup> The extent of the prejudice of this legislation based on descent

and ethnic belonging is evident in the restrictions that immigrants from the so-called Third World have to suffer as opposed to others born of Italian or European origins. Whereas “foreigners with Italian origins only have to wait for three years” and “EU citizens can become Italian after four years’ residence . . . non-EU citizens on the other hand must be able to demonstrate that they have been living in Italy legally and uninterruptedly for at least ten years” (Marchetti 50–51). This situation is all the more severe for second-generation children who must demonstrate that their parents lived legally in Italy since they were born and that they themselves have been legally living there and have never left the country until their eighteenth birthday, when they can finally apply for Italian citizenship, but not after the age of 19 (Marchetti 51).<sup>5</sup> For these reasons, one of the main battles of the second generation is for the approval of a new citizenship legislation that would modify the obsolete law No. 91 passed in 1992 in favor of a more flexible one that would shorten and loosen the current requirements to become a citizen for all second-generation youths.<sup>6</sup> In the absence of a mature political environment on which to conduct such struggles, the cultural terrain seems to provide a fertile ground upon which some of these institutional contradictions are expressed and new identities and relations are explored.<sup>7</sup> Paying attention to these voices makes it possible to bridge the distance between the abstract text of these laws and the material, racialized, and gendered effects on those who are subjected to them.

### Second Generations and the Postcolonial Question

If the first wave of migrant literature in Italy could be more easily defined as “immigrant,” the production of the second generations compels us to discuss it more precisely as “postcolonial.” The term “postcolonial” better connotes many of these authors, some of whom come from former Italian colonies like Somalia, Eritrea, and Ethiopia (i.e., Igiaba Scego, Uba Cristina Ali Farah, Gabriella Ghermandi). “Postcolonial” forces a shift in the understanding of Italian culture and society, making Italy accountable for its history of colonialism and capitalism (Mezzadra 7–19) and its present role in this stage of globalization, an inevitable postcolonial phase with specific “epistemological,” and not simply “chronological,” implications (Ponzanesi 26). As Stuart Hall remarked, “what the concept [postcolonial] *may* help us to do is to . . . identify what are the new relations and dispositions of power which are emerging in the new conjecture” (246).

On account of the population movements that were produced during and after colonialism and decolonization, historical processes that must continue to be among its objects of inquiry and investigation (Hall 249), the term “postcolonial” also invokes that of “diaspora.” In this sense it may be helpful in linking the contribution of these new cultural producers in Italy to that of other “diasporic” writers of color around the world, as well as to Italians abroad, whose experience and work has often been discounted.<sup>8</sup> Even when Italy did not experience “diasporas” in the same way that colonized countries did, it may, in fact, be “heuristically helpful,” as Donna Gabaccia suggests (9), to think about Italian mass migrations in these terms, for it allows us to see the links among only apparently

distinct experiences and to point out “forms of *relationality* within and between [different] diasporic formations” (Brah 183). These connections are not missed by second generations themselves. To underscore the importance of understanding their struggle as related to that of other Italians, in the first episode of its weekly program on Radio Popolare Network, “OndeG2,” Rete G2 broadcast several interviews with second-generation children of immigrants in Italy and second-generation children of Italians around the world discussing the differential impact of the present citizenship law on the two groups.<sup>9</sup>

If the postcolonial question in Italy is complexly layered by its ambiguous national, colonial, and emigrant past, the very term “second-generation” is also a contested one, which designates different realities in different countries and for which there is not a clear consensus.<sup>10</sup> Nonetheless, this is the expression that in Italy many children of immigrants themselves have adopted to define their own experience, and it is thus used in this essay. These youths do not identify as immigrants, even when they are treated as such by the law and by many Italian citizens. “Second generation” is employed as a descriptor to indicate those children who had no choice but to follow their parents’ decision to migrate. As such, they may have been born in Italy or may have arrived at a very young age.<sup>11</sup>

Besides the accuracy of the sociological definition, it is the potential of the term to capture a significant change in Italian society that I believe holds the most relevance in this discussion. Second generations constitute, in fact, “a strategic turning point” for immigrants and receiving societies alike, and it is by observing their integration and adaptation that the experience of immigration as a whole can be fully evaluated (Demarie and Molina xi).<sup>12</sup> Engaging second generations and paying attention to their work is crucial in order to understand them and their situation, but more critically, it is central to comprehend contemporary Italian society at large, its changing demographics as well as its shifting identity, perhaps never so contested as on the 150th anniversary of the Italian unification (1861). “Generation” is the key term in a country that has always been reluctant to alter its customs and is presently facing an unprecedented crisis of ideals and values, not to mention of numbers if we consider that Italy’s declining birth rate is supplemented precisely by the immigrant population. Maurizio Ambrosini’s eloquent statement that “the case of second generations dramatizes the relation between youth groups and adult society” (20) seems particularly cogent in the context of an aging Italy.<sup>13</sup> With its postcolonial cultural activism and ingenuity, the second generation embodies the future that Italy cannot afford to ignore.

### Cultural Representations of “New Italians”

What characterizes second generation authors in Italy and their work? In her “Relazione” to the 2004 Eks&Tra Forum, Igiaba Scego explains that many second generation writers were born in Italy, received an Italian education and are familiar with all the Italian cultural references that pertain to their peers. Scego, born in 1974 in Rome of Somali parents, jokingly explained that “we are Italians in each and every possible way. . . . We have seen Italy win the World Soccer Cup in 1982,



we have had a healthy overdose of Japanese cartoons like every respectable Italian child (from Capitan Harlock to Lady Oscar, including the inevitable Lupin and the curly-haired Candy Candy), we have seen singer Tiziana Rivale win the Sanremo music festival before she disappeared from the radar.”<sup>14</sup> These examples of Italian low-brow trivia used to underscore her knowledge of Italian popular culture are not simply nostalgic revivals from the 1970s and 1980s. They are perhaps the most significant markers of the experience of growing up in Italy at that time when a common heritage of pop images was being established as a result of the emergent hegemonic role of television—especially the rise of Berlusconi’s private channels which consolidated in the early 1980s—and of global consumerism. Scego’s references to Italian popular culture, which she and other second-generation writers often mobilize in their literature, are, indeed, evidence of her very Italianness.<sup>15</sup> The difference with Italian children born in Italy of Italian parents and these writers is their migrant background and hybrid identity (Scego, “Relazione”). Yet, these aspects, far from evincing a lack, a threat, or the inability to be fully citizens, should be perceived as an enrichment of what it means to be Italian in a newly complex global world.

Two recent anthologies like *Pecore Nere* and *Italiani per vocazione* illustrate the cultural work of second generation authors. *Pecore Nere*, which collects short stories by four Italian “black” women writers—Igiaba Scego, Ingy Mubiayi, of Egyptian and Zairian origin, Laila Wadia, and Gabriella Kuruvilla, both of Indian descent—reveals up front the racial background of the authors and capitalizes, perhaps too fetishistically, on this difference. Yet “black sheep” also suggests that while the authors are of a different skin color, they are, nonetheless, already members of the family, and by extension the nation, and contribute to Italy’s culture in ways that complicate common sense understandings of it. *Italiani per vocazione*, edited by Igiaba Scego herself for a smaller publishing house, is driven by a different cultural politics. The book title moves away from mere skin color and emphasizes, instead, the agency and choice of these writers. “Vocation” entails an innate quality or predisposition that in order to thrive must be pursued and cultivated. The authors in this second collection include veterans of the first generation of migrant writers, like Syrian Yousef Wakkas and Italian-Togolese Kossi Komla Ebri, as well as emerging second-generation authors like Uba Cristina Ali Farah, born in Italy of an Italian mother and a Somali father, and Jadelin Mabilia Gangbo, born in Congo but raised in Italy from a very early age. Striking in many of the stories in both collections is the age of the protagonists, between adolescence and thirty-something, thus belonging to up-and-coming generations.

The short stories featured in both collections condense some of the most evident traits of the literature of second generation authors: the skilled manipulation of Italian language, local dialects, and youth jargon, the pungent use of irony, the savvy deployment of popular cultural references, the representation of characters with hybrid identities, the dramatization of the intergenerational conflict, and the complicated confrontation with Italian institutions.<sup>16</sup> For example, Igiaba Scego’s story “Salsicce” (“Sausages”), winner of the 2003 Eks&Tra literary prize and reprinted in *Pecore nere*, tackles the cultural shock experienced by the young Muslim female protagonist, holder of a regular Italian passport, who agonizes over

eating pork sausages to prove that she is a “true Italian” despite her skin color and religion. The story takes place a few days after the Bossi-Fini immigration law went into effect, requiring fingerprinting for all non-EU immigrants. Uncertain of what her fate will be in a newly reconfigured legal scenario in which everybody not conforming to mainstream Italianness (i.e., Catholic, white) is considered a migrant, and where every migrant is a potential criminal, the protagonist wonders about her supposedly split identity and allegiance: “Am I more Somali or more Italian? Perhaps  $\frac{3}{4}$  Somali and  $\frac{1}{4}$  Italian? Or perhaps the opposite is true? I don’t know the answer, I never ‘fractioned’ myself before” (28).<sup>17</sup> The absurdity of such questions belies, as Scego skillfully hints, profound racist implications by invoking the specter of blood purity, a politics practiced during colonialism and Fascism, and still lingering in Italian citizenship law, anachronistically based on “legal familism” (Zincone).

The resolution of the story, and of the narrator’s identity crisis, is fittingly provided by a film appearing on the TV screen: Ettore Scola’s 1968 comedy *Riusciranno i nostri eroi a ritrovare l’amico misteriosamente scomparso in Africa?* (Will Our Heroes Be Able to Find Their Friend Mysteriously Disappeared in Africa?), about an alienated middle-class Italian man who unsuccessfully tries to rescue his brother-in-law from the heart of Africa. In the face of the grotesque representation of the worst Italian traits provided in the film, the story’s protagonist decides to embrace the multiplicity of her own self in spite of outside pressures. The irony is that such a realization is provided by a popular culture parody that reveals the many flaws of Italy’s relationship to itself and the African Other.

Irony is at play in all the other stories in the collection. “Documenti, prego” (Documents, please) by Ingyi Mubiayi also features a first person narration by a young black Muslim woman fully educated in Italy who revisits the surreal odyssey through several public agencies, each with its own inconsistent and arbitrary set of rules and regulations, that led her family to become Italian citizens. The story is playfully framed by references to the German TV police drama “Detective Derrick” (97), a popular series in Italy. The cold, rational, and matter-of-fact style of the show is mockingly compared to the indifferent attitude pervasive in the often-inefficient Italian bureaucracy. Laila Wadia’s “Curry di pollo” (Chicken Curry) and “Karnevale” (Carnival) similarly mobilize popular culture to portray the uneasy relation of the stories’ young female protagonists, both from the Indian diaspora, with their traditional parents.<sup>18</sup>

While references to Italian popular culture remain prevalent, two short stories in *Italiani per vocazione*—Cristina Ali Farah’s “Rapdipunt” and Jadelin Mabilia Gangbo’s “Com’è se giù vuol dire KO?”—focus on adolescent characters who draw from the postcolonial hip hop culture of the African diaspora to create a distinctively transnational black sense of self in opposition to the oppressive and racist Italian state they perceive around them. Both authors paint their characters and the world they inhabit with a mixed dose of skepticism and seriousness. Farah’s “Rapdipunt” fittingly combines in one word hip hop’s emergent and residual characteristics whereby contemporary “rap” is associated with “Punt,” the name used by ancient Egyptians to indicate Somalia (Scego, *La nomade* 8). The story is a monologue inspired by a group of Afro-Italians known as the Flaminio Maphia

from their meeting place in Rome's Piazzale Flaminio (Morosetti 127).<sup>19</sup> Like many other stories in these two anthologies, it is narrated in the first person by a female protagonist who joins, despite their obvious sexist attitude, an all-male crew with all the traits of an urban gang.

While the local upbringing of this youth is evident in the Roman-inflected accent, their cultural context of reference is far wider, spanning from their own ancestral land, presumably Somalia, of which they seem to know very little, to the Americas, from Canada to Cuba. Without dismissing the institutional racism these boys suffer on account of their African origin, the narrator is wary of their seemingly uncritical embrace of rap culture only because it is produced by "brothers who know how to get respect from whites" (37). Instead, she reflects on the material conditions of black women in the diaspora, who often support entire families with their underpaid domestic labor, and displays a spiritual awareness of her African roots ignored by the rest of the group.

If Farah's story exposes some of the potential dangers associated with separatist and masculinist black subcultures who define themselves exclusively by the skin color of their practitioners and function in a nationalistic manner, Jadelin Mabiala Gangbo takes a different approach by denouncing police brutality against young immigrant men. "Com'è se giù vuol dire KO?" (What if down means KO?) explores the hip hop scene in Italy through the adventures of two 19-year-old young men walking the streets of Bologna at Christmastime. As in Farah's story, the specificity of the location is carefully mapped out with explicit references to the city center's streets and to the regional dialect occasionally used by the main characters to underscore their local belonging. During the course of one Sunday afternoon the two protagonists, native Bolognese Antonio and Moroccan-born Aziz, engage in a surreal conversation about the state of society. Their reflections on the nature of work and leisure, triggered by the flood of consumers they encounter, capture well the pervasiveness of capitalist exploitation in every aspect of contemporary life. According to Antonio it is necessary to gain a different perspective to address this situation, perhaps through a "subversive act" (140), since from his point of view Sunday "is not the concession of a day of freedom, but the theft of an entire week" (141).

As in Farah's story, the characters' oppositional identity is marked by the style of their clothes, typical of rappers, and by their attitude, like the insistence on calling each other "B" for brother or B-boy (Break-dancing boy). Hip hop culture for them is not a fad; rather, it carries a political significance, like their baggy pants, which are not just fashionable but represent a militant history of resistance: "There is a difference between your pants' crotch and that of others. Your crotch has a history, B. You should be proud. Beware of posers" (144). While their fashion has been assimilated into the mainstream through a "process of commodification" (142) whereby entire families now dress like branded rappers without any sense of their clothing style's origin and meaning, Antonio and Aziz have a clear awareness of the revolutionary legacy of hip hop culture. For them, hip hop evokes musical contributions by "Public Enemy," "Run-DMC," "De la Soul," "Beastie Boys," "Zulu Nation," "Afrika Bambaataa," and "A Tribe Called Quest" (143), most of whom were, as George Lipsitz noted, "part of a generation of inner-city youths

who found themselves . . . unwanted as citizens or users of city services by municipalities imposing austerity regimes . . . and unwanted as consumers by merchants increasingly reliant on surveillance and police power to keep urban ‘have-nots’ away from affluent buyers of luxury items” (26). Against such odds, these artists “used the conduits of popular culture to bring their isolated and largely abandoned neighborhoods to an international audience” (26).

Similarly, Antonio and Aziz are not just avid consumers of hip hop culture, they are also producers of it and are well versed in its Italian transmutation. The title of the story, hummed by one of them, is a line from “Solo fumo” (Only Smoke), a song by Neffa, one of the most famous Italian rappers of the 1990s, hailing from Bologna.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the entire narrative, as Gangbo noted in an interview, flows like a rap, with “short sentences following the tempo and rhythm of hip hop music.”<sup>21</sup> When they are stopped and harassed by the police on the way to check out an occupied theater hosting immigrant families evicted from their residences it is with a freestyle session that Aziz tries to counteract the impending violence: “*This fine fine Moroccan—this boy with big Muslim balls—is a killer B-Boy with a style like a Shaolin kung fu kid. . . . Arab Movement of Jah people you see, Haile Selassie in a Salam alek version. It is an easy karate*” (178).<sup>22</sup> Aziz’s virtuoso hip hop “*spaghet-tiflow*” (178) is local and transnational at once, and it encapsulates a vast spectrum of Mediterranean cultural and political references, from the use of northern and southern Italian dialects to allusions to liberation movements and icons of the African and Arab diasporas.

### Rete G2: The Second-Generation Network

A similar strategy of cultural syncretism, both rooted in Italian pop culture and simultaneously informed by global black hip hop is used by Rete G2, an organization founded by children of immigrants and refugees in Rome in 2005 and dedicated to both supporting second generations and raising awareness about their legal limbo.<sup>23</sup> In an effort to promote their social and political work, Rete G2 has devised a series of cultural initiatives meant to bring their concerns to the attention of their peers. In 2008 G2 adapted one of the most popular and recognizable forms of Italian postwar print entertainment, the *fotoromanzo*,<sup>24</sup> a romance-driven pulp subgenre of comics in which drawings are substituted by photographs, to their cause. Created by Italian-Filipina Maya Llaguno Ciani and a team of second-generation female collaborators, the project was sponsored by the educational office of Rome’s municipality and distributed free of charge in all the high schools of the capital (Mari 11).

In the G2 version, the *fotoromanzo*, titled “Apparenze” (Appearances), became a visual educational tool that codified in graphic terms the differences and similarities of this generation with their Italian peers. The plotline involves a group of second-generation youths who meet in Villa Borghese for a drink. While some take a romantic interest in others, they all acknowledge their diverse origins. The most hilarious moment happens at the beginning, when Lucia, a black girl, is approached by Adriano, an Italian guy who addresses her in broken English only

to find out that she, noticeably irritated, speaks perfect Italian because she was born and raised in Italy (Figures 18.1a and 18.1b).

Later Adriano also acknowledges that some of his relatives emigrated to Australia thus linking the history of immigration in Italy to that of Italians in the



Figure 18.1a Mistaken identities (*Fotoromanzo* “Apparenze”)



**Figure 18.1b** Mistaken identities (*Fotoromanzo* “Apparenze”)

world. With an appealing and ironic style, the *fotoromanzo* introduced Rete G2 to their Italian peers and discussed in an accessible manner the situation confronted by second-generation youths. It illustrated their campaign to change the current citizenship law, providing a glossary with definitions of the most important

legal terminology, such as “citizenship,” “jus sanguinis,” “jus soli,” “naturalization,” “nationality,” “residence permit,” “family reunification,” and “second generation” (31). In sum, it entertained, informed, and educated.

If “Appearances” tapped into a distinctly Italian feminine cultural genre, in 2008 Rete G2 also produced a CD titled *Straniero a chi? Tracce e parole dei figli dell’immigrazione* (Foreigner to Whom? Tracks and Words by Children of Immigration) collecting songs by male second-generation artists who used hip hop, but also punk, reggae, and soul, to spread their message in several languages: Italian, English, Arab, Portuguese, and local dialects. Their names and aliases were Nasty Brooker, Mike Samaniego, Karkadan, Amir, Wahid Efendi, Zanko El Arabe Blanco, Intiman and the Dojobreakers, Diamante & Skuniz, Linea di Massa, Natural Disastro, Maztek, and Taxi, and originally they all came from a variety of countries around the globe.<sup>25</sup>

Like the characters in Farah’s and Gangbo’s stories, these young artists specifically draw from the music of the African diaspora to denounce the discrimination they face due to their skin color and immigrant status. While their lyrics attest to the urgency of their situation in Italy, the postcolonial imagination they display in their songs through rhythm and sound evokes a community that transcends national boundaries and origins. In the album’s opening song, called “In ostaggio” (Hostage), Nasty Brooker (a.k.a. Claudio Magoni), Italian-Haitian-Cape Verdean, raps, “I am of a second generation, my name is savage, I come from a bad situation, society keeps me hostage, my ancient African origins, I can only remember them today, meanwhile people are dying there, [and] they treat me like a dog in the Western world.”<sup>26</sup> In “Prospettive” (Prospects), Mike Samaniego, born in Italy of a Filipino father and a Chinese mother sings, “I have endless dreams to change my life, but I only have prospects, [with] those papers in my hands. . . . I was born in this state . . . I know the culture, the language, and I am right when I ask for rights but no distinction.”<sup>27</sup> The legal limitations imposed on this generation is brought up also by Natural Disastro, who in “100% hip hop” raps, “I had a dream, I had a passport and I traveled around the world . . . I am an Italian foreigner, a freak of nature.”<sup>28</sup> In “Umano normale” (A Normal Human), Zanko, born in Milan of Syrian parents, appeals to people’s common humanity and to the cosmopolitanism of second generations: “I am Palestinian, I am Sicilian, I am Albanian, I am African, I am Chinese, I am Latin American, I am Neapolitan, I am the Syrian from Milan, metro-cosmo-politan, I know I am a human being.”<sup>29</sup> It is also noteworthy that one of the album’s songs, by Italian-Egyptian Wahid Efendi, is a cover of a famous Italian pop song, “Con il nastro rosa” (With the Pink Ribbon) by Lucio Battisti and contains a line that has entered Italian common phrases: “Who knows what will be of us, we will find out only by living.”<sup>30</sup> All these authors are aware of and attentive to the global postcolonial cultural scene as well as its local and vernacular manifestations in Italy. In this sense, they may be called “cosmocitizens” following Moroccan scholar Fatema Mernissi, who identifies as such “all those who across the world are fighting for the same ideas and believe in the same dream of a planet in which all citizens can interlace thousands of dialogues” (14).

## Conclusion

If in the past few years articles in *The New York Times* (Fisher) and *The New Yorker* (Mueller) have unflatteringly portrayed Italy “in a funk” struggling to renew and regenerate itself, this is also the result of the ruling elite’s inability to read a situation that is not as static as it seems, but already inevitably in motion: that of a nation undergoing profound changes, which second-generation postcolonial artists might be better equipped and qualified to confront. As George Lipsitz reminds us, “the populations best prepared for cultural conflict and political contestation in a globalized world economy may well be the diasporic communities of displaced Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans created by the machinations of world capitalism over the centuries. These populations, long accustomed to code switching, syncretism, and hybridity may prove far more important for what they *possess* in cultural terms than for what they appear to *lack* in the political lexicon of the nation state” (30–31). One aspect that this emergent second-generation postcolonial production illuminates is the failure of Italian institutions, cultural as well as political, to perceive the limits of certain models of national representation, including immigration and citizenship laws. In this sense, the work of these authors is relevant precisely in its attention to underaddressed questions in Italian culture and history, from the colonial past to the postcolonial future. As Antonio says to Aziz in Gangbo’s story, urging him to rap against the police, “you are fundamental to the cultural evolution of this country. You deserve respect, not loads of shit” (177).

Ultimately, these authors are already altering Italian culture and society and helping to place Italy in a global perspective. Not only the field of Italian Studies, but the very notion of Italian identity is being affected by works that challenge and trouble the definition of what it means to be “Italian” today. In particular, the use of hip hop and popular culture by second generation postcolonial authors should be taken seriously as both a marker of integration and dissent. As Jenkins, McPherson, and Shattuc noted in *Hop on Pop*, “‘popular’ was originally a legal term” and “began with a political connotation referring to a country’s citizenship, or to a political system carried on by the whole” (27). While today popular culture is often interpreted as mass consumption and commodification, it is also a powerful “site for cultural intervention” (28) when others are precluded. In this sense, the connection between popular culture and politics has not been missed in the work of second-generation authors born or raised in Italy. What the political and legal spheres deny, the cultural one supplies.

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## Notes

1. See Gnisci, Parati, and Portelli (“Mediterranean Passage”).
2. Among such virtual realities are *El Ghibli*, *Kumá*, and Eks&Tra. On the issue of thematic and formal experimentation of this new generation of writers see Portelli (“Fingertips Stained”).
3. By “hip pop” in my title I refer to the creative syncretism of hip hop and popular culture used by the authors discussed in this essay.
4. According to the latest 2011 report by Istat, the Italian National Institute of Statistics, the number of foreigners residing in Italy was 4,570,317 or 7.5 percent of the entire population. In 2010 children born of immigrants in Italy were 13.9 percent of the total of all newborn babies.
5. On Italian citizenship see also, among others, Codini, and D’Odorico, Colombo, Domaneschi and Marchetti, Pastore, Rossi, and Zincone.
6. This is especially the case for the members of Rete G2, who, on the Manifesto available on their website, define themselves as “Italians with a residence permit.” See <http://www.secondegenerazioni.it/g2-nel-2011>.
7. On the relevance of the cultural terrain for minorities’ struggles, see Lowe (22).
8. On this topic see, for instance, Gabaccia, Giunta, Guglielmo and Salerno, and Verdicchio.
9. See <http://www.secondegenerazioni.it/2008/02/15/onde-g2>.
10. The label “second generation” originated in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century when it was used by sociologists of the Chicago School who were then studying the extraordinary transformations in the demographics of their city and country as a result of the massive migration from Europe, including Italy. The term meant to indicate the period deemed necessary for immigrant groups to assimilate

to the nation, which would have occurred under certain circumstances, like upward mobility, only from the second generation on (Celli). It is also important to note that if assimilation did not take place, “second generations” were considered not only at risk, but more prone to social deviance and criminality (Ambrosini 21; Sollors 213). While in the American context “second generation” is now used in a more nuanced manner to account for the racial shift occurring in immigration patterns since the 1960s, predominantly from Asia and Latin America, and to indicate a variety of experiences which include children born in the United States or abroad with different levels of socializations and schooling (Rumbaut, qtd. in Ambrosini 5–6); in Europe, particularly in France and the United Kingdom, “second generation” tends to have a negative connotation on account of these nations’ histories of colonialism. The term has been criticized for imposing a prescribed identity on children of immigrants or racial Others often born in Europe, and therefore already citizens, but conveniently marginalized when not rejected altogether (Ben Jelloun 98; Gilroy 90; Wihtol de Wenden 110). Unlike in France or Britain, the term “second generation” in Italy encompasses experiences and ethnicities that may or may not be related to the history of Italian colonialism. In Italy, the majority of those identifying as “second generation” are children of immigrants themselves affiliated with the Rete G2. For a critique of the use of the term in the Italian context see Thomassen. Recalling the French model of assimilation, Italian Algerian writer Tahar Lamri has also expressed an opposition to its use in Italy in his intervention in *Trickster*.

11. On second-generation children of immigrants in Italy, see also Colombo, Leonini, and Rebughini.
12. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are my own.
13. On this point see also the open “Letter to second generations” by the editorial board of *Tricksters*: <http://tricksterici.wordpress.com>.
14. See <http://www.eksetra.net/studi-interculturali/relazione-intercultural-edizione-2004/relazione-di-igiaba-scego>.
15. Italian experimental writing collective Wu Ming summed up this point in an interview with Henry Jenkins: “if you don’t know pop culture, you don’t know your culture, thereby you do not know the world around you.” [http://www.henryjenkins.org/2006/10/how\\_slapshot\\_inspired\\_a\\_cultur\\_1.html](http://www.henryjenkins.org/2006/10/how_slapshot_inspired_a_cultur_1.html).
16. For a discussion of some of these traits, see Pezarossa, Ciampaglia, and Scego (“Relazione”).
17. See also the published English translation of Scego’s story by Giovanna Bellesia and Victoria Offredi Poletto.
18. The stories in *Pecore nere* have been discussed by several scholars. See Curti, Hanna, Portelli (“Fingertips Stained”), and Quaquarelli.
19. Farah’s story was printed first in Morosetti’s *Quaderni del ’900* 4 (2004): 127–30, then it appeared in Scego’s *Italiani per vocazione* (2005) and subsequently it was translated into English in a slightly abridged version as “Punt Rap” by Giovanna Bellesia and Victoria Offredi Poletto and published in *Metamorphoses* 14.1–2 (2006): 276–80.
20. On the relevance of Bologna as a fertile site for hip hop and other urban subcultural productions, see Pacoda (17–26) and Magaouda.
21. See <http://guide.dada.net/multiculturalismo/interventi/2005/03/204439.shtml>. Gangbo himself was in a rap group and wrote their lyrics (Bousquet 300).
22. “Questo marocchino fino fino—‘sto cinno con du’ palle da saracino—è un B-Boy assassino dallo stilo shaolin u’ guaglioncin’. . . Mouvement arab all Jah people ‘ve—Hailè Selassie in versione Salam alek. Vien da sè giù di karate.” Italics in the original.

23. See <http://www.secondegenerazioni.it>. This association has rapidly become one of the major points of reference for second generations, Italian institutions, and researchers. See, for instance, Andall, Marchetti, and Zinn. From Rome the association expanded to several other Italian cities. Rete G2 has collaborated with the previous center-left government, with local administrations, and was received by the President of the Republic Giorgio Napolitano who recently has been advocating a change in the current citizenship law to accommodate the position of second generations.
24. On *fotoromanzo* see McMillan.
25. See Fabiani as well as the CD press review on the site of Rete G2 <http://www.secondegenerazioni.it/forum/viewtopic.php?f=5&t=973>.
26. "Sono di una seconda generazione, il mio nome 'selvaggio,' vengo da una brutta situazione, la società mi tiene in ostaggio, le mie origini antichissime africane, oggi giorno le posso solamente ricordare, intanto lì la gente muore, mi trattano come un cane, nel mondo occidentale."
27. "Ho dei sogni senza fine, cambiare la mia vita, ma ho solo prospettive, quel foglio tra le dita. . . Sono nato in questo Stato . . . conosco la cultura, questa lingua ed ho ragione se vi chiedo dei diritti ma nessuna distinzione."
28. "Ho fatto un sogno avevo il passaporto e giravo tutto il mondo . . . sono straniero italiano, contro natura."
29. "Son palestinese, sono siciliano, sono albanese, sono africano, sono cinese, sono latinoamericano, sono napoletano, sono il siriano di Milano, metro-cosmo-politano, so di essere un essere umano."
30. "Chissà che sarà di noi, lo scopriremo solo vivendo." Lucio Battisti was one of the most popular and influential Italian singer-songwriters of the 1970s, and his songs still maintain a special place in the Italian collective imagination.

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