"Historical Forgetfulness" in Post-Unification Italy: Black African Migration in Politics and Performance

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were back home. In this little Galicia, my father would sometimes stroke my head in between sentences and call me Conchiña.” This new name sounded warm and nostalgic as if he were referring to someone he had already lost.

I began to treasure these outings. Mainly, I relished the food: I watched as the cook lifted the steaming “pulpo” from a monstrous pot and chopped it up into bite-size morsels. My mouth salivated as I watched her first drizzle pure olive oil on the octopus, and then sprinkle it with red pepper. At the Center, I could also order chorizo, boiled red crabs, and my favorites: “minchas.” I still don’t know what to call these tiny sea snails in English. I used to spend hours digging into the wet, dark spirals with a pin and inevitably emerge surprised at my reward: a curlicue of flesh that looked much like a cooked worm. These little shells were delicious and salty like the sea, and such a meager reward for my efforts that I was driven to attack the next shell with redoubled energy. I didn’t know then that what I was tasting and craving at the same time was the flavor of home. It was as if all of Galicia was contained in those little shells and it was up to me to rediscover it and make it mine again.

Years later, when I was about thirteen and had already established my lifelong friendship with a Swiss girl named Danielle, I had another encounter with Galicia. We were still living in Switzerland, but by then my parents had divorced and my mother was working in a department store much like Bloomingdales. She had befriended a janitor who was also from Galicia. I don’t remember his name, but I can see him in my mind: short, with a little potbelly, black hair that was beginning to recede although he must have been in his mid-twenties, and light blue eyes that bulged out like a frog’s. He insisted on giving me books of Galician poetry.

Unfortunately, as a teenager I was not interested in questions of identity or culture. I was too busy trying to blend in and avoided anything that would make me stand out; particularly anything that identified me as a foreigner. So I did not profit much from this unexpected mentor. His image is still with me, though, so I guess he did reach me after all.

The year that library book fell into my life and gave it a new direction was 1998. Since then, I have felt driven to write about Galicia in order to understand myself. The rediscovery of my people, language, and culture has been a miracle of sorts. By researching the history of my people, I have found myself.

Raffaele Furno


Researching the archives to build a grounded historical framework on the discourse of blackness in Italy, I came across very few critical studies in Italian that covered the presence of African immigrants in the country prior to the 1970s. The absence of any extended analysis of the topic speaks to what Linda Hutcheon calls historiography’s primary characteristics - its gaps, lacunae, and missing traces - making the writing of history dangerously similar to fiction1. This article aims to address the genealogy of inter-ethnic relations in contemporary Italy, recovering those geopolitical and performative elements that have brought blacks and whites to face one another. Supplementing the reading of history with a closer look at popular cultural forms - songs, jokes, advertisements - I hope to demonstrate that Italians deal with African migrants within a framework of “historical forgetfulness.” The lack of a serious conversation on the colonial past, the erasure of a long history of cross-Mediterranean exchanges, a pervasive self-representation of Italy as a land of emigrants rather than immigrants, and the internalization of a racial discourse that depicts linguistic, religious and cultural differences as insurmountable barriers, all contribute to the idea that immigration in Italy is a recent phenomenon, a fast-paced multi-directional invasion, and a national emergency.

Before dwelling into the specifics of my argumentation, allow me to address the archival and ethnographic methodology of research that led me to the current state of my work. In the discussion below, I will engage a tradition of performance activism, one that connects de Certeau’s notion of the difference between “the presence and circulation of a representation” and “its manipulation by users who are not its makers”2 and Dwight Conquergood’s groundbreaking study of “street youth suffer[ing] from both too little visibility, and too much visibility. Either they are willed to disappear or they are rendered hypervisible within the scopic regimes of power.”3 Notwithstanding the fact that we function within a cultural system that emphasizes hierarchical relations among people and their commodification through a division of labor, performance as activism reclaims the innovative ways in which “the ordinary man” a-la-de Certeau...

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2. de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 35.
finds space for creativity by refashioning “mainstream symbols for subversive ends.”

My invocation of performance as a methodology as well as an epistemological tool for research pays homage to Kirk Fuoss’ contextual use of the term in an agonistic setting, as a site of contestation among competing interests that consequently negotiates the boundaries of a community by means of aesthetic enjoyment, intellectual inquiry, affective play, cultural memory, participatory ritual, social commentary, political action, or psychological probe. I intend performance in two fundamental ways. On the one hand, I refer to the scholarly debate that argues about the boundaries of the definition as an open ended problematic, a space in which people and their subjective understandings of reality come together to question and enrich each other. On the other hand, I think of performance as suspended between the textual and the inter-textual. As Baz Kershaw notes, the context makes it possible for a performance to communicate and create community among actors, in the Greek sense of the word - doers, and spectators. Instead, the inter-textual facilitates the diffusion of meaning by linking each single performance to a chain of texts, not necessarily theatrical ones. Hence performance lives in the community that produces it, or for which it is produced, in so far as it is related explicitly or implicitly to legends, myths, oral tradition, dances, musical expressions, stereotypes, and social or identity markers. Likewise, blackness is contextual to the culture that produces it and inter-textual in relation to the culture that receives it through migration. Here I will focus on this dynamic within the national boundary of Italy.

Migration is never a one-way street, and hardly ever an individual decision. It pertains to personal and collective expectations, initiating a circulation, at times a commerce, of bodies, goods, ideas, beliefs, and feelings. Italians have historically dealt with their neighbors in the Middle East and Northern Africa following a pattern of crisis. The clash between the Ottoman Empire and the Catholic world, the Crusades, and the invasion of Sicily by the Arabs have left traces in popular culture that contributed to the consolidation of a feeling of emergency towards black bodies. “Mamma li Turchi!” (The Turks are coming!) or “Sono preso dai Turchi!” (Turks hold me hostage) are still commonly used expressions denoting a situation of stress or conflict from which one does not foresee an easy way out; parents still try to obtain their children’s obedience by warning them that if they do not behave “l’uomo nero ti porta via” (the black man will take you away). These expressions constitute day-to-day forms of speech containing small seeds of much larger public worries. The debate over whether or not Turkey is an appropriate candidate to join the European Union builds on the difference with which Italians look at the descendants of the Ottoman Empire as much as on the fear of Islam that seems almost inevitable since the post-9/11 rhetoric has equated Islam with terrorism. Many conservative politicians and commentators suggest an inevitable clash of civilizations between Catholicism and an invented form of a monolithic and intolerant Islam.

I do believe that these forms of speech belong to the group of speech acts theorized by J. L. Austin. They do not simply communicate a fact, but they constitute performative interventions, in so far as they instill in every day conversations, from an early age, a subconscious notion that black equals evil and danger. Seemingly innocuous sayings, they construct a mental map of race relations and shape them along colored splits. For a full account of speech acts, see: Austin, How to do Things with Words.

While I was writing this essay, former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi was the last politician in a long tradition of right wing exponents that warned the country against the rise of a dangerous Islam. On August 25, 2006, while speaking at the National meeting of Comunità e Liberazione, he said that the Italian Left is aiming at a multicultural and multiethnic society. Opposing this political agenda, he believes that Italy should belong to those who embrace the creed of the Catholic Church. Right wing parties are not new to declarations of this kind, with Lega Nord’s exponents being probably the most outspoken and racist participants to the campaign to save the purity of Italian culture. The idea of the impossible coexistence of different cultures on
The lack of a serious historical criticism on Italian relations with Africa has created the space for many forms of contemporary misrepresentations of blackness and immigrants. The Italian colonial presence in Africa lasted from 1869 to 1943. As a latecomer in the group of European countries that pursued the dream of an overseas empire, the recently unified Italy saw colonialism as a means to reduce internal social strains by creating employment, and generate a sense of national unity through the army and the export of surplus farm workers to the fields of Ethiopia, Eritrea and Libya. Once Fascism had risen to the stage, the regime expressed the desire of complementing the internal authoritarianism with a colonial structure that would push Italy forward in the competition with other European nations. Historians though often pass unto silence that Mussolini simply widened a geopolitical plan initiated by the previous liberal governments led by Crispi and Giolitti. The fascist war campaigns in Africa constituted the fourth phase of a national imperialist policy. The first intervention in Africa had already happened under the Depertis and Crispi governments, ending with the disastrous military defeat of the Italian army at Adwa, in Ethiopia. There then followed a phase of diplomatic preparation for the Libyan war. The third phase coincided with World War I during which Italy showed a clear hegemonic design over the Adriatic and the Mediterranean.

The political mission of Risorgimento went beyond national borders. It contained a universal claim. The Mediterranean and Africa were, in the mind of Mazzini, Gioberti, and Balbo, a natural extension to Italy’s independence and unity. Since the 1870s the exploration of Africa had created a quasi-pathological interest in the topic: many magazines were born out of the fascination for the exotic; the “ethnic” artifact-collection mania developed as a cross-class and cross-generational phenomenon; Italian explorers became national superstars, often producing intentionally distorted representations of the “black continent” in order to feed the audience’s appetite, to the detriment of scientific reliability; a huge circulation of diary publications and pseudo-scientific conferences developed around the exploration business. Africa and Africans usually appeared as a series of types and situations, a spectacle: rituals and performances; sunsets and wide-open spaces. Everything contributed to the spectacularization of the continent and its inhabitants. Written reports, visual recordings, and live experiences did not present blacks as human beings but as objects of curiosity, fascination, rejection, and morbid feelings. The “savage blacks” were always a little more bizarre and wild, the African landscapes always more breathtaking or insidious.

I am not interested in judging the (un)successful outcome of the Italian imperialist experiment. I will instead focus my attention on two general considerations relevant to my larger goal of tracing the roots of contemporary Italian feelings towards black Africans. National colonialism underlines a historical continuity between democracy and totalitarianism. In 1882, a group of intellectuals and prominent figures in the economy and policy-making field founded the Società Africana Italiana (African Society of Italy). Its constitutive act claimed that the goal of the Society was to encourage research expeditions to Africa to gain a deeper understanding of the continent, and to work with any means to gather geopolitical knowledge at the service of the homeland’s commercial and industrial progress. Much of the imperialistic penetration in Eastern and Northern Africa found its source of investments in private capitals. Exponents of the nobility and the most rampant bourgeoisies formed the governmental elite at the turn of the century. They possessed undeniable interests in the economic commissions coming from the army and the construction of colonial infrastructures. The newly born liberal democracies of the 19th century did not consider the enlightenment of those at the margins as a priority in their agenda. They constituted elitist forms of government, made for the rich and the well-to-do; they rarely engaged national poverty or civil rights issues. Even less had they any interest in the wealth of colonized communities abroad. Italian politicians were no different and looked at what was left of a free Africa as a land of economic expansion.

Fascism inherited this line of thinking, adding to it the systemic institutionalization of a world view that divided people into races with different degrees of civilization: a mixture of nationalism and demographic policies that justified colonialism as a tool to move a large number of people from depressed areas in the South and North-East of Italy to the open African spaces described as rich and prosperous lands. The demographic
reasoning was one of four major arguments circulating in the imperialist discourse. Along with it, the regime defended an economic, a political, and a religious principle. If Italy continued to be excluded from the partition of Africa, the nation was doomed to become a political lightweight. Likewise, a strong economy, able to absorb internal and international crises, required the possibility of using the empire’s resources. Finally, there was a moral duty to bring the Catholic civilizing mission as far as possible into the “black continent.” Race made its appearance as a juridical category in the “Organic Ordainment for Eritrea and Somalia” law enacted in 1943 to keep under control the frequent phenomenon of mixed unions and children, which at first had been tolerated but had also raised a political issue of purity versus disorder. Those who equated mixed unions to a form of genocide, because it polluted the integrity of a biological Italian type, acquired visibility against those who maintained that human beings have always had the will to regenerate themselves through hybridity. Fascism applied a conceptual racialization of the space, classifying peoples of the world in hierarchical order. This classification responded to a geopolitical logic, which is made clear by looking at how the Japanese or the British moved up and down the ladder in reaction to changing military alliances. Race was a concrete characteristic of an individual’s natural status which determined whether a person belonged to a nation. In 1937, an article on the newspaper La Stampa defined all the children born of a colonial encounter between an Italian man and a black woman “an error of the past”. They polluted the white race, were in contrast with the law against concubinage, created an abnormal third social class, and contributed to social disorder because many of them were abandoned, fitting into neither community. In 1939, mixed unions became illegal with the promulgation of a new law “Penal Sanctions for the Defense of the Prestige of our Race against the Natives of Italian Africa.” Italians, having inherited the enduring spirit of the Roman Empire, were at the top of the socio-cultural ladder, possessing the right to bring civilization to those who still lived into darkness. Europe had reached modernity not by freeing itself from its past, but because it recast this same past, and manipulated it to meet present needs and future perspectives. By means of this passage, European nations appealed to what Jean Pouillon calls “camouflaged retro-projections,” the conscious recuperation of the past as a representation of a more or less authentic cultural inheritance - not so much tradition, but traditionalism. Fascism built a complex ritualistic spectacle that perpetuated the separation among peoples of the world up to the point of enacting overtly racial laws in 1938. Not just black Africans, but Jews and many other internal and external enemies of the highly masculinized Italian regime suddenly turned into targets of persecution. Race, as a manifestation of cultural unity, became an object of political action in the moment in which it was defined, brought to public attention and inscribed in a “camouflaged retro-projection.” Yet the 1938 racial laws were not an aberration of a previous healthy system, but rather a step based on racist seeds pre-existing in the Italian political debate of the late 19th century.

The institutionalization of race as a scientific category happened in perfect timing with the euphoria for the possibilities expressed by the nation-state in terms of power-building strategies. As Hannah Franzi...
Accompanying this proto-political view, there was also a predominant religious approach that worked against the institutionalization of race as the defying element of human relations. On the one side, the Catholic Church had a general acceptance of black Africans because the evangelical project was a fulfillment of the Gospels preaching that the word of God would reach the end of the earth (Matt. 28:19) and that there be but one flock and one shepherd (John. 10:16). Moreover, Saint Augustine’s City of God assured that any human being could enter into the grace of God by his/her faith in Christ. Any difference, race included, could be overcome by entering in the superior realm of true Christianity. No separation was cast in stone, neither was it inscribed in physical features. Against this theoretical universal equality of all beings, the Church often conducted its missionary task with methodologies that disregarded the Gospels’ word. Local priests and high Vatican hierarchies worked in unison with or tolerated the enslavement of black Africans. I argue, though, that these practices were a result of economic interests rather than an ideological subjugation of racially marginalized people.\footnote{The Vatican resisted slave commerce only when converted Africans were sold to Islamic traders. But more often than not, local priests suggested that the Vatican keep a low profile. Few general condemnations dealt with the cruelty of enslaving practices, but not with slavery itself. See: Gray “Fra Girolamo da Sorrento, the Congregation of Propagnada Fide and the Atlantic Slave Trade.”}

In Renaissance Italy, the heuristic encounter with the Other came out of a stratified tradition merging Aristotelian theories about the marvelous, in which imagination precedes the actual knowledge, and classic and Christian approaches to the unknown.\footnote{On the topic of imagination and wonder in the encounter between Europeans and Native Americans, from which I borrowed this analysis, see: Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions, and Todorov, The Conquest of America.} Proof of this would be that Alessandro de’ Medici, first Duke of Florence from 1529 to 1537, was very likely the son of a member of the powerful Florentine family and a black woman, showcasing visible physical features that would mark him the progeny of a métissage. In fact, it was only later in time that a Catholic justification for racial distinctions joined the scientific ideology of immutable ethnic characters. The Church faced some embarrassment when the diversity of physical types and colored skin seemed to question monogenesis, the faith in a single and primary source for all human kind descending from Adam and Eve. To resolve the conundrum, the Vatican constructed through the Gospel the myth of blacks as the cursed descendants of Noah’s son. The transformation of race into the unchangeable, natural categorizations of human beings was a utilitarian project to protect the interests of European nations in unison with the constitution of nation-states and world colonization. The construction of difference selected superficial elements to discern proper behaviors from wilderness: the way one dressed; the presence of body ornaments; physical features that were linked to mental and moral deformity. Blackness became synonymous with ugly, funny, or backward.

The visual representation of blackness changed accordingly. Whereas Renaissance Italy could produce the portrait of a Florentine Duke with visible black features, and Mantegna felt free to paint a black female figure along with white ladies in the fresco of the cupola of Mantua’s Communal Palace, artists of the late 19th and early 20th century offered a different perspective on blackness. The three most common tropes were: the former emancipated slave of the Antilles and the Americas; the savage African; the civilized butler at the service of Europeans. Analyzing hundreds of advertisement campaigns, from hand-painted postcards to contemporary photographic representations, Raymond Bachollet individuates a temporal continuum in which blackness seems immutable within a certain European sensibility. Blacks are dehumanized and reduced to the role of product-selling tropes. The graphic sign very often parodies blackness by emphasizing a physical element (exaggerated lips or noses), juxtaposing the dark black bare-footed body with immaculate European-style clothes, or placing Africans in their “natural setting” of banana trees and coffee beans. Black bodies do not communicate flesh and blood, but rather volumetric geometries that often deform their physical features, by the act of enlarging it or substituting it with the advertised goods. Capturing a double psychological reaction of attraction towards that which is exotic and repulsion for that which is abnormal, physical deformity embodies also moral deprivation. In Italian advertisement campaigns, the tension between morbid fascination and denial was used very keenly by “the Fascist regime’s program to create a classless consumer, one who would identify his or her needs with a national economy rather than with a class-affiliated commodity culture.”\footnote{Pinkus, “Shades of Black in Advertising and Popular Culture”, 135.}
When photography became predominant, constructed realism substituted parody. Yet lips, noses, sexed bodies and bananas did not disappear from the picture. Advertisement reached out for the audience with an immediate, clear, and simple communication act. It excluded the possibility of any hybridization: it rather represented race in a codified and easily accessible fashion. Blacks were servants: slaves, porters, or handymen. Blacks were a synecdoche for the product they advertised. Blacks were the opposite of what is straight, clean and right, as when they were used to advertise soap and cleaners to wash away the dirt from their own skin. Blacks were a part for the whole: a huge smile or big dancing feet. The visual continuity determined a dangerous permanence of racial constructions within the business-oriented common sense of European consumers.

This excursus on visual representations of blackness is intimately linked with the discussion on African presence in Italy, and mostly with the fascist rhetoric justifying the colonial experience. Mussolini often referred to black Africans as minors who had to be taken care of by the developed Italian civility, or as savages whose backward utilization of their potentials required a strong intervention so that precious resources would not be wasted. Mussolini’s contribution to the racial debate started when the young politician still embraced a Socialist ideology as a journalist of the newspaper Avanti. In that context, much of the talking around a common race was useful to the search for a direct participation of the people in the Socialist agenda. Two brief interventions of Mussolini on the notion of the Italian race clarify the quick trajectory that pushed him out of the Socialist milieu and into the creation of the fascist party. In 1908, he argued that “Italy is not one. It is a community of different people poorly amalgamated under a ferociously unitarian administration. The moral links uniting a Piemontese and a Sicilian are very dubious. The racial links even more so.” In 1920, a mere 18 years later, Mussolini wrote: “Among all nations, Italy is the most ‘clearly’ individuated, by any means. Her connotations are categoric. The wide sea separates her on three sides from the world, and in the North the Alps divides her from the continent. Within her borders, the ‘autogenous’ groups are small and assimilated.” Not a minor shift in the politician’s thinking. A very utilitarian one, indeed. The Duce needed race to create a sense of “us” against “them” - “them” being not just the Africans but any other people, Europeans included, who could not praise themselves for descending directly from ancient Romans.

On July 14, 1938, a document signed by ten preeminent Italian scientists appeared in the newspaper Giornale d’Italia - “Fascism and the Problem of Race.” This document became the programmatic manifesto of the state ideology about race. Four major points constituted its backbone: 1. The objective, biological existence of different races; 2. The superiority of the pure Italian race; 3. The need for Italians to be openly racist; 4. The problem of the Jewish community, composed of non-European elements which could not be assimilated. Even though the manifesto in itself did not launch a crusade against blacks, the ideological structure of its reasoning was easily translatable from the Jewish community to any other group. First and foremost, the myth of a pure Italian race, already acknowledged by Mussolini in 1920, closed the door to any possible policy of integration and/or assimilation of black people coming from the colonized world. Moreover, stressing that the problem of the Jewish community was its non-European heritage, blacks did not have any hope to be looked at as proper citizens.

The psychological phenomenon of collective “historical forgetfulness” has a complex nature. On the one side, it finds justification in the post-World War II reconstruction period and the logic of the Cold War. Much of the former fascist establishment did not disappear from the public sphere. The American occupation forces reinstated many of them in positions of power because an alliance with certain moderate exponents of the fascist regime was a good strategy to contain the spread of the Red Scare in Italy. The Resistance movement, which was fundamental to liberate the North from the Nazi-Fascist control, had a strong socialist and communist constituency. The American administration could not allow for the new Republican government to endow the Communist Party with too much operational space. Former fascists found a second life not only in policy-

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20 Fabre, Mussolini Razzista, 157. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.
21 Ibid, 275.
making but also in educational centers and the media, nullifying the possibility for a mature, healthy discussion on the downside of Fascism. In 1952, for example, the Foreign Affairs Ministry launched the publication of fifty volumes entitled *Italia in Africa*. Allegedly this work should have provided an exhaustive analysis of the colonial presence in Eastern and Northern Africa. Yet fifteen out of the twenty-four members of the Scientific Committee of the Ministry were former colonial administrators, and all the others were Africanists who had already praised the Italian intervention in Africa. Far from being an objective study of the relationships with the black continent, *Italia in Africa* came to be “il più colossale e dispendioso sforzo di mistificazione” (the most colossal and expensive attempt to mystify) the national colonial history and its legacies.

Moreover, leftist intellectuals and political leaders had to pay the price for mistakes committed by their predecessors. They were caught in a sort of intellectual repentance, because the Socialist party had not expressed a harsh condemnation of national imperialism. These commentators only moved ideological attacks against the economic elements of the colonial experiment. Socialists accused the liberal governments of Depretis and Crispi of engaging in expensive cross-Mediterranean enterprises to conquer lands that were little productive, if at all. The Italian Left up to World War II seemed unable to take an ideological stand to condemn imperialism outside of the canons of a capitalistic logic. This is a historic guilt that liberal, leftist intellectuals and politicians carry with them in contemporary debates over migration. The economic reasoning and the logic of the market rule over any other form of humanist approach. According to this point of view, Italy needs migrants to feed her work force. National economic interests reduce immigrants to a *homo economicus* figure, and their market value becomes the status for which they should be accepted within national borders.

A dangerous outcome of “historical forgetfulness” is the fact that racist and anti-racist groups alike missed the chance to intervene on blackness with proper analytical tools, instead using ideology and indoctrination as working parameters. The lack of a serious critical thinking on the convolute and painful intersection between Fascism and the Resistance movement, gave to racist groups the opportunity to subsume the values of the Resistance itself, interpreted not as a class or civil war but as national war of liberation. This ideological claim constitutes a form of legitimation for a series of restrictive approaches against the alleged black African invasion, since Italy has to be “liberated” by foreign invaders for the second time in fifty years. The impossibility to use discourses of biological inferiority forces contemporary anti-immigrant organizations to find their own sanctification in the historic revisionism of the Resistance ideology. Racist arguments, in fact, tend to focus on the fear derived by equality and sameness, emphasizing that policies of integration pollute the country’s culture and its essential purity. Such claims pay respect to a racial philosophy that criticizes the possibility for blacks to be emancipated under the rubric of racial integration. The racist discourse stigmatizes difference for bearing unwanted tensions within the national compound and for creating spaces of highly contested hybrid exchanges which are not easily classifiable and hence produce panic and anxieties.

On the other hand, anti-racist groups suffer from one of two diseases that David Ward defines as “psychoanalytic racism” and “easy anti-racism”. Quoting the scholar: “while the former tends to exorcize the racist and transform racism into a question of sickness, madness, or ignorance, the latter - in the manner of Benetton clothes, Mulino Bianco cookies, Barilla pasta, and Philadelphia cheese advertising campaigns - tends to see the anti-racist struggle as a twenty-four hour multicultural party and completely ignores [...] inequities of power, command, privilege, and language.” This multicultural superficial veil, which resonates with Karen Pinkus’ claim of blackness as a product co-opted by young and not-so-young white consumers, creates a safe virtual space of commodity, a make-believe trick of inter-, cross-, trans-, multicultural co-existence that allows Italians to enjoy the on-screen perfect world and to ignore black vendors on the streets. Fault lines between the imagined and the real mark the territory of racial relations in a country whose identity politics have been built on a monolithic cultural origin. Confuting the presumption that gaining more visibility is the key to a community’s step towards integration and social acceptance, the Italian case demonstrates a not-so automatic consequent outcome. There is no necessary political empowerment in being represented, transformed into commodities, or used as standards of multicultural encounters. The image of the black person in advertisement campaigns, movies and so on cannot erase the tropes of marginality attached to those who live side by side with Italians in their streets. To paraphrase Peggy Phelan, reading physical resemblance is not a way of identifying community.

When the reconstruction period ended, and the time seemed mature for a retroactive criticism, Italians were experiencing the real first

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24 Del Boca, _L’Africa nella coscienza degli italiani_, 115. Giorgio Rochet shares a sharp negative judgement against the Ministry’s enterprise. See: Rochet, "Colonialismo.”

25 Ward, “‘Italy’ in Italy.”, 88-91.

26 Pinkus, Karen. “Selling the Black Body.”

27 Phelan, Unmarked, 7.
economic boom since the beginning of the century. The new myths of the average family were the television set, the Vespa and the washing machine. Consumerism took by storm a population that had long lived off the economic remissions coming from millions of migrants to the Americas and Northern Europe. Increasing wealth worked against the need to understand and remember the responsibilities that Italians bore towards their former colonies. Last but not least, "historical forgetfulness" came about as a result of stereotypes that had already been at place during the fascist regime. Giorgio Fabre blames much Marxist historiography for developing and perpetuating the myth of an Italian colonialism with a human face, very different from the racist forms of abuse implemented by other European countries28, "Italiani brava gente" (good-hearted Italians) became the made-up phrase with which the colonizers produced a self-representation so powerful and consistent that still nowadays, in Ethiopia or Eritrea, one may find locals addressing Italian tourists with that apppellative. Italians, being latecomers in the colonial rush, perhaps had fewer chances to create an exploitative rationalized system as the French or English regime had done before. Nonetheless, the war of conquest was fought without much civility29. Still, the notion of italiani brava gente carried on in the postwar era suggesting that after all Italian colonialism had a real humanitarian intention, inclined towards the development of the African horn region.

I acknowledge that my discussion opens up the question of memory as a selective act which involves personal experiences as much as collective modes of interpretation. Between 1935 and 1941, one million Italians went to Eastern Africa. Many were young men on the first trip outside of their region or city. The colonial experience produced in them a mysterious fascination which the fascist regime had previously built up to a large extent on the travel narratives of the first scientific and religious missions to the black continent. Adult men and intellectuals also constituted a big part of the army. This latter constituency shared a less naive approach to its involvement in the construction of an overseas empire. Then of course, many were peasants coming from impoverished rural areas to whom the regime had promised fertile lands to improve their socio-economic status.

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28 Robert Michels defined the Italian intervention, poor people-style imperialism. Lenin spoke of straccione imperialism (miserable imperialism).

29 Many historians still negate that the Italian army used venomous gas in Africa. Indro Montanelli, one of the most experienced Italian journalists, always defended the participation of many Italians, including himself, to the Ethiopian campaign. From the pages of the newspaper Il Giornale, which he directed for many years, Montanelli always insisted that Italians never used gas or poisons during the war, and had true respect for Ethiopians' human rights.

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Mario Isnenghi claims that historical removal was due specifically to a collective need to process the loss of the African dream. Very soon the encounter between Italian colonizers and the black continent revealed its true nature. Whereas the government had promised wealth, colonizers faced desert areas and diseases. With the end of the war and the decolonization process, thousands of Italians who had invested everything in their across-the-sea lives had to return to their homeland with little or no reparations. The fascist regime constructed Africa as the somewhere else, the adventurous and exotic challenge, the frontier to be conquered and domesticated. Many had to process the subsequent sense of loss and betrayal30. Fascist rhetoric constituted the framework accompanying Italians when they occupied East Africa and encountered black people, and within which each colonizer placed his/her own modality of selective remembering and forgetting.

The italiani brava gente trope hid an erotic background in the male-centered world of colonial conquest. The sexualization of black women can commonly be found in many folkloric tunes of the time such as Tripoli bel suol d'amore (Tripoli, beautiful land of love) and Faccetta nera (Little black face). The latter stressed the missionary role of the Italian colonial army as freedom and enlightenment bearers, which bridged the fascist ideology with a certain Catholic world view. A catchy tune, with a march-like rhythm, sung of a black woman longing for Italian soldiers to arrive by sea, free her, and bring her back to Rome to become a true Fascist31. Following Umberto Eco's theorization, one of the core elements of a mass culture production is to entertain the audience without revealing anything new. Rather the opposite: its goal is to reiterate what we already know and that which alone amuses us. When repetition happens systemically and systematically the formula replaces the form32. Fascist entertainment and state ideology got married under the easy-listen swing of the truest Italian rhythms. The italiani brava gente stereotype is not the only one that has persisted over...
The notion of the *vuoi cumpra* (wanna buy) has also crossed the years. The first literary use of the expression appears in a poem by Neapolitan poet Raffaele Viviani in 1925, *O' tripolino* (The man of Tripoli). The text narrates the hardship of the life of a man from Napoli who migrated to Tripoli to sell clothes and other little handmade objects on the street. Those were the times when thousands of Italians from the depressed South, but also from Veneto or Liguria, had to leave their homeland to look for fortune abroad. The *vuoi cumpra* in Viviani’s poem is only one of the many incarnations that migrants have had in performance. Yet the expression found linguistic fortune decades later. When African migrants moving to Italy replaced Italian emigrants choosing a life of street vending abroad, autochthonous people attached the *vuoi cumpra* stereotype to black vendors as a second skin. The appellative was a projection of a self-imposed marker onto foreigners. A social type linked the personal experience of Italian fathers and grandfathers to the presence of African migrants in the peninsula. As such the *vuoi cumpra* belonged to a form of popular historic memory, and did not have in and of itself a pejorative meaning. It acquired though an offensive connotations when, starting in the 1980s, the number of African street vendors, especially from Morocco and Senegal, increased vertiginously and the media fomented a public opinion’s shift towards the dangers and social annoyance deriving form *vuoi cumpra*. Along with *marocchino* (Moroccan), an umbrella term encompassing any African migrant, *vuoi cumpra* came to enclose a number of social negative markers: the inability to speak proper Italian (from the grammatically correct invitation to buy a product - *vuoi comprare* - to its distortion); the inability or lack of desire to find stability within the host society; the reproduction of models of intellectual and cultural backwardness; the alleged criminal milieu in which street vendors necessarily live because of their ethnic origins.

In the post-World War II era, blackness disappeared from the public domain and collective worries. Italians were too concerned about reconstructing the country’s infrastructures and normalizing their life style. In less than fifteen years, newly found wealth took the shape of electric home appliances, cars and long summer vacations, all contributing to a general sense of well-being that lasted throughout the 1960s. Blackness recessed to the level of folklore: swing music and lascivious dances imported by the American allied forces; sexual encounters among black soldiers and Italian girls. *Tammurriata Nera (Black Tammurriata)*\(^{33}\) is an ironic song still

\(^{33}\) *Tammurriata* is a dance from Southern Italy so called because its rhythm comes primarily from the *tammorra*, a disk like percussion instrument made of wood and leather. People traditionally used to perform *tammurriata* and *pizzica* during religious rituals, as acts of devotion, or in festivities related to the lunar calendar and the fieldwork.

very popular nowadays. It narrates the incident of a baby born in Napoli by an Italian unmarried woman. The baby belongs to the category of *figli della colpa* (sons of the sin) but his guilt is accentuated by an uncannily dark skin. Yet, despite his obvious mixed race, his mother decides to call him Ciro, a quintessentially Neapolitan name for boys. The un-matching relation between the name and the skin color creates an unusual identity that is fertile soil for parody and social stigmatization. The euphoria that followed the end of the war, and the need to obtain rare goods that only American troops possessed and distributed, turned objectively into a baby-boom phenomenon of mixed origins. The *figli della colpa* born since the very first day of the Italian colonial enterprise were usually the fruit of a white man and a black woman. Now, not only did the births happen on national soil but also the two terms of the couple were inverted. The female body was a sacred space, a product of political and religious indoctrination who bore life along with all the pure values that constituted the essence of Italianess. The proper fascist woman was “compagna fedele del colonizzatore e custode delle più sacre e genuine tradizioni della stirpe.”\(^{34}\) Songs like *Tammurriata Nera* had an exorcizing power, releasing through laughter that which was a national and cultural emergency.

The rush towards a post-World War II national healing process took the shape of a cultural refashioning of the Italian spirit, in the form of Benedetto Croce’s assertion that Italian Fascism had not been born out of authoconous roots, could not be compared to Nazism for its historic guilt, and could not be used as the symptom of a national racism. In this philosophy, Italians were innocent victims inhabiting a peninsula that had been a bridge of cultures for many centuries\(^ {35}\). The apparent inability for Italians to be racist explains the pendulum-like movement of blackness within the country’s social consciousness; its emergence as a hot topic of parliamentary discussion at the turn of the 19th century and then again starting from the 1980s; and its disappearance from public worries in the post-war period. Methodologically, invisible racism is a useful analytical tool to understand why Italy came so late in instituting an immigration law that would replace the 1931 fascist law. It was only in 1986 (law 943, 30 December 1986) that the Parliament discussed a serious legislative proposal. By then, the country’s migratory history and its human landscape, to borrow

\(^{34}\) “Faithful companion to the colonizer and keeper of the most sacred and genuine traditions of the race.” From: Altini, “Una piaga sociale: il meticciato.” On the topic, see also: de Grazia, *How Fascism Ruled Women*.

\(^{35}\) Croce, *Pagine Politiche*.
Sharon Zukin’s term, had changed drastically. Politicians were only trying to cope with a legislative gap that gave the media a further motivation to embark on the emergency crusade against immigrants. As David Ward points out

“summed up in the expression ‘Fortress Europe’, government and European Community immigration policies are a striking example of the refusal to recognize the racism that is latent within European societies. It was only after serious outbursts of racist violence in several countries that European governments began to tighten up their immigration laws and restrict the rights of immigrants or asylum seekers to cross their borders and establish residence. The implicit effect of this policy was to see cause of the violence not in the European racists, neo-Nazi, and thugs, but in the immigrants themselves. From victims of racist violence, immigrants found themselves as its cause.”

Including in his discussion a wide post-colonial critique of European Community policies, Ward’s claim hits the target very poignantly. Forced to face situations of social unrest and violence, Italian public consciousness rediscovered the presence of black immigrants in the country. All the dormant tropes resurrected: Italians as genuine victims of a barbarian invasion; the black body as a site of danger and fear, carrier of social or physical diseases; and the clash between purity of the Italian spirit and the polluted and polluting Other. Identities in crisis stepped out of the realm of mental categories and were lived as a practice. Should one manage, control, or shape the migratory phenomenon? Block immigrants from landing? Send them back home? Keep only the useful ones? How to discern one form the other? The 1986 legislative act acknowledged a series of rights for foreign workers: parity on the job market; the right to family reunions; same conditions of access to jobs, housing, medical assistance for Italians and immigrants alike. Unfortunately, due to an endless series of bureaucratic limits and attempts to change parts of its legislative structure, the Parliament never reached a final vote and the law remained only a hypothesis. Yet the text contained an insurmountable limit, that would be reproduced endlessly into subsequent immigration laws; it took in account only dependent workers and stressed emphatically the economic role of immigrants that will soon turn into a synecdoche - the homo economicus trope. What about the

36 Zukin, Landscapes of Power.
37 Ward, “Italy’ in Italy”, 88.

rights of the many workers forced into a submerged parallel market? And of those who do not perform dependent jobs?

In his critical essay on race in movies, Richard Dyer assesses that on screen white is always normal, devoid of any meaning, while black pertains to difference, Other, and has historical and geopolitical limitations. The conundrum of that which is visible vs. invisible, marked vs. unmarked is embedded within theoretical reasoning around race and ethnicity, in a space that puts issues of political power, agency, and representation in dialogical tension. As the fascist project demonstrates, racial encounters exist as a mediation between the real and the imagined where the image is already a construction or a transposition of stereotypes or utilitarian inventions. With this reasoning, the presupposition on which gaining access to visibility is built contains an original sin, a source of deviated reality that perpetuates a lie. Both progressive and conservative commentators alike believe that "representations can be treated as "real truths" [...] Both sides believe that greater visibility of the hitherto under-represented leads to enhanced political power." I agree with Peggy Phelan that this is not necessarily true, if visibility requires that a minority community bows in front of an externally-imposed representation of the self. Visibility, which the scholar equates with a phallocentric regime of fetishization of the Other, is the armed hand of neoliberal and capitalistic needs for new consumers and markets. To see something fashioned in a glamorous style is to desire it. And desire moves the focus of the consumer’s attention from the presence of the Other to the fetish of the Other, whether it is ethnic clothing, hairstyles or exotic traveling.

Starting in the 1980s, black immigrants to Italy increased exponentially. The pre-existing tensions merged with an integrated economic world system in which Italy pretended to play a guiding role. Recasting the national economic system under a crisis agenda, and dealing with a diffuse black market economy whose work force was increasingly of foreign origins, led to serious discussions around immigrants and their needs. The psychological reaction to the newly re-discovered black presence was also due to a number of international factors. First and foremost the oil crisis in 1973 changed for good the immigration policies of many European countries. Facing the danger of economic recession, France, Germany, and

38 Dyer, “White”, 44-64.
39 I think here of the multidisciplinary discourse that sees many scholars approach the issue from merging perspectives. Along with Phelan, see: Manning, Modern Dance, Negro Dance; Conquergood, “Life in Big Red.”; and Butler, “The Force of Fantasy.”
40 Phelan, Unmarked, 2.
Great Britain, historically more receptive of post-colonial migration waves, decided to restrict access to their homelands. Many immigrants targeted Southern European nations. Italy became an immigration site at the very end of a fortunate economic conjunction which had lasted for about two decades.

Two other phenomena aggravated the situation: the problem of the North-South split, and the experience of Italians migrants abroad. The latter seems to me an unconscious reaction to the hardships that national emigrants had to face when they moved in great numbers to the Americas and North Europe. Speaking about Italian workers in the United States, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge declared in 1891 that “Italians are migratory birds. They are not interested in becoming American citizens. Their goal is to accumulate, through a rigid and dangerous economy, a sum of money that will allow them to return home richer. They live as beasts in miserable conditions. What they eat is so repulsive that any American worker would be nauseated by it.”

41 Italians see their own blackness in this description and see themselves looking at African immigrants to Italy today, projecting onto them exactly the same short migratory plan, sub-human living conditions, and rejection for their odors and tastes. When the Other is the Same, it rarely creates community. The Other has to remain different, unacceptable and hence corrosive in its un-attainability. Narcissus fell in the lake because he was too attracted by his own image: likewise recognizing oneself into the Other pertains to the realm of death, socially and culturally inscribed. Then again, we see ourselves in the ways in which others represent us, and real problems arise when the image that the mirror gives back is humiliating or limiting.

43 The dialogic opportunity for an immigrant to (re)construct his identity within the migratory trajectory crushes against high walls.

The migratory friction is also troubled by the internal geopolitical condition of a pseudo-homogeneous Italianess that in reality has always been characterized by a North-South split. Southerners were the blacks of Italy, the working immigrants, backward, smelly, and uneducated, who invaded the Northern cities of Milano or Torino in search for jobs. They

41 Cited in: Giadresco, Dai magliari ai vu’ cumpra’, 23. I believe Italian cuisine has come a long way from being considered repulsive in the United States.

42 In Tristes Tropiques Lévi-Strauss writes about his uncomfortable feeling while traveling in Islamic countries because he recognized too many similarities with Western culture. He re-found in those places his own universe and defined Islam as the West of the East.

43 On this many have written. See: Charles Taylor, Multiculturalism and the Politics of Recognition; Fanon. Les damnés de la terre.

In sociology, Thomas’ theorem explains that if men define something as real, its consequences will be real. Likewise, if men choose to forget something, that same something will lose authenticity. Few Italians are aware that long before North African migrations towards Sicily, there had been a conspicuous Sicilian migration towards Tunisia in the 1920s and 30s; or that Radio Bari, a local radio station, inaugurated its broadcasting programs in Arabic years before the more famous BBC service. In his book on contemporary Italian Islam, Stefano Allievi gives numerous examples of roots & routes.

were once again Same and Other, equal and different. Yet, in this case, the appearance on the horizon of a darker enemy, whose religious and linguistic characters could not harmonize with the Catholic monolith, turned Southern Italians into less black and more Italian. In less than twenty years such move has completely transformed inter-ethnic relations in the country, carrying with it a complex identity issue of self-recognition. Internalized racism has gained an emergency escape, the possibility to be projected onto those who are invisible in social terms but clearly visible as objects of violence and fear. Here I feel indebted to Dwight Conquergood’s theory of the paradox for which Chicago gang members have either too little visibility, young lost souls whose social costs outnumber any possibility of redemption, or too much visibility, constantly vexed by policemen and put under a Panopticon-like system of control and punishment. In either case there is an unbalanced attitude that questions the right for these young boys to exist in any given space and time. Similarly, the white gaze acts a unidirectional erasure of African immigrants in the streets, at the most looking at them with annoyance, while police forces constantly monitor them equating blackness with illegality and crime. The racial problem activates always a notion of contiguity, demonstrating that ethnicity is a symbolic level of tension between spatially and socially similar groups. There is nothing objective in the ethnicity discourse, which is not to say that ethnic differences do not exist. They may be constructions or images, but from the moment they are projected outside they have a performative effect, meaning both that they create representations and reproduce an image of the codified real which becomes embedded in individual and social consciousness. Members of each group take rational decisions based on this embedded knowledge.

In mid-September 2006 local newspapers in Roma reported the news that a number of tourists in Piazza Navona wanted to take a picture of the famous Bernini’s fountain, but their view was blocked by too many street vendors. When they refused to remove their goods, the tourists called the police; and the picture was finally taken. The white gaze acknowledged the Other only as a disturbance in its entertaining plan of image consumption.
how past relations between people from Islamic countries and Italians were somehow more peaceful and integrated compared to the cultural resistance that Moroccans or Senegalese find nowadays when trying to exercise their right to religious freedom. Before the year 1000, integration seemed more accessible: many Italian cities had burying sites for Islam believers; Catholic masters often entitled Arabic slaves to become their heirs; conversions of servants to Catholicism were not unusual. Many historians and commentators argue that the problem of racial differences and ethnic encounters / clashes are coterminous with the constitution in Europe of the nation-state. Massive migrations of people obviously place a huge burden on this bourgeois concept; they put into question the social contract that binds Western citizens to one another and to the State. They also affect inerably the collective consciousness of European countries whose populations tend to grow old while feeling the pressure of a younger and restless African continent. Veiled under religious and cultural uncompromising separations, the emergency reaction towards migration shows a deep fear of losing one's own privileges made more acute by the neo-liberal mode of production, a widening split among rich and poor and a sense of impoverishment of the middle class, and world-terrorism.

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45 Allievi, *Islam italiano*. Italians show discomfort towards the visible presence of Islamic communities in their cities because they fear mass conversions and the disruption of the Catholic way of life. It is interesting to note that in a series of interviews conducted in Torino in 2000, only 2.4% of the Islamic population declared an interest in converting Catholics to their religion. This is also confirmed by the fact that most of the authors and editors of books on Islam in Italian are authentically people converted to Islam, not immigrants from Africa or the Middle East.


