

Edges of Empire: Italy's Postcolonial Entanglements and the Gender Legacy

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Abstract

This essay explores the rather neglected case of Italian colonialism, and in particular, the ways in which colonial traces still linger on in Italian contemporary representations, reconfirming or transforming stereotypes and prejudices regarding issues of otherness, ethnicity, and sexuality, which are specific to the Italian case. Although Italian colonialism is subject to denial and oblivion, it is important to account for a growing postcolonial awareness, both in the scholarly field and in the wider cultural context, to better understand current issues of migration that are affecting Europe and challenging its global role as a democratic institution. The focus of the essay is on colonial photography and contemporary visual culture, pertaining to the fields of media, art, and politics. The goal is to detect the specificities of the Italian colonial legacy in contemporary culture, analyzing contemporary art production as well as figures such as football star Mario Balotelli and Italy's first Black minister Cécile Kyenge, while also accounting for the larger European dimension, connecting and drawing parallels with transnational debates on postcolonial representations of gender and race.

Keywords

Italian colonialism, postcolonialism, photography, visual art, Europe, advertisement, gender, race

It is often forgotten, or often removed from Italian national memory, that Italy ventured into the colonial enterprise with great verve. The consequences and legacies of these operations are clearly resonant and visible in today's contemporary scene in Italy, both in its political ramifications and in its visual representations. This essay proposes to explore the ways in which colonial traces still linger on in Italian contemporary representations, reconfirming or transforming stereotypes and prejudices regarding issues of otherness, ethnicity, and sexuality. The focus will be mostly on colonial photography and contemporary visual culture, pertaining to the fields of media, art, and politics. The goal is to detect the specificities of the Italian colonial legacy in contemporary culture, while also accounting for the larger European dimension, connecting and drawing parallels with transnational debates on postcolonial representations of gender and race.

The Italian colonial empire is often considered as something insignificant or limited in reach, both time-wise and geographically, in comparison with other European empires. The British and French empires and their aftermath, for example, are amply debated in the postcolonial scholarly field. Italy is only now emerging as one of those smaller empires whose colonial legacies need to be accounted for and rewritten from a different historiographical consciousness (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012; Mellino, 2005, 2006; Mezzadra, 2008; Ponzanesi, 2004). This reassessment is needed to make sense

of racial and gender shifts in Italian contemporary society, to be understood not only at the national level but also within a wider European context (Ponzanesi, 2012b). Therefore, Italy's postcolonial awareness must be put in relation to current issues of migration that are affecting Europe and challenging its global role as a democratic institution (Balibar, 2016; Gilroy, 2016; Ponzanesi, 2016).

The genesis and development of Italian postcolonial studies are that of a recalcitrant discourse. It emerged with great delay, facing difficulty and resistance from mainstream scholarship in Italian studies. It is therefore important to identify the specific dimensions of the Italian empire, its roots, and configurations that are in step with, and dissonant with, many other policies and practices of colonization and domination in Europe. Although the historical details of the Italian imperial expansion are often easy to ascertain, the widespread implications of their impact on contemporary Italian society are still the subject of much discussion and disagreement. These disagreements are, for example, noticeable in the different right-wing and left-wing political takes

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in Italy on the role of the colonial expansion, its memories, legacies, and postcolonial responsibilities. The right-wing constituency celebrates the gestures of empire as part of Italy's past grandeur, in line with the greatness of the Roman Empire. This nostalgic memorializing denies, or sweeps under the carpet, the interlinked histories of oppression, extermination, and defeat (Italy had to renounce its colonies in 1941 when the British took over the region). The left-wing constituency emerges as more uncertain on how to account for the colonial past, so deeply implicated in the Fascist mission, while trying to adhere to a national consciousness liberated from the clutches of Fascism. The disagreement is, however, also between different disciplinary fields—such as Italian studies, history, gender studies, sociology, anthropology, religious studies, migration studies, media studies, and visual studies—which, in Italy, still remain entrenched in one-sided disciplinary accounts of the colonial experience that rarely connect to the wider comparative and interdisciplinary European perspectives (Ponzanesi & Colpani, 2016). Therefore, a multidisciplinary approach is needed that would allow the complex terrain of Italian colonial legacies to be charted from different viewpoints including from a transnational perspective.

This article aims therefore to put forward a postcolonial studies approach that foregrounds the visible intersections between the political and the aesthetic through the analysis of popular culture and other visual performances in the Italian public sphere. It seeks to detect the inevitable connections between past patterns of domination and oppression, often linked to racial taxonomies, and the contemporary gendered grammar of empire. This refers, for example, to representations in popular culture in Italy, such as in the realm of sport, fashion, television, cinema, and advertising, as well as in politics and public institutions. This requires the use of frameworks that allow connections to be created between past and present temporalities, as well as the promotion of dialogue between different disciplinary fields, as mentioned above, which rarely speak to each other in the Italian context, to advance the understanding of complex contemporary realities. The postcolonial paradigm is, therefore, not only the most apt and suitable tool for articulating these patterns of dissonances, but also a tool that needs to be revised and relocated according to the geopolitical context in which it is situated or applied, such as in the Italian case. This is because, to recall Stuart Hall (1996), we should always be aware that different colonial aftermaths

are certainly not post-colonial *in the same way*. But this does not mean that they are not “post-colonial” *in any way*. (p. 246, emphasis in original)

It is, therefore, imperative to position the Italian postcolonial field within its own lineage and specificities while also accounting for the interconnections at the European and

global level. As Arjun Appadurai so cogently argues in his book *Fear of Small Numbers*, the idea of a stable national identity, stable territory, and transparent categories has become unglued in the era of globalization, creating anxieties about the clear boundaries between us and them and blurring boundaries across large spaces and big numbers:

Globalization exacerbates these uncertainties and produces new incentives for cultural purification as more nations lose the illusion of national economic sovereignty or well-being. This observation also reminds us that large-scale violence is not simply the product of antagonistic identities but that violence itself is one of the ways in which the illusion of fixed and charged identities is produced, partly to allay the uncertainties about identity that global flows invariably produce. (Appadurai, 2006, p. 7)

This affirmation needs to be kept in mind when analyzing the Italian postcolonial condition in the wave of global shifts. We are all familiar with images of stranded migrants on the southern shores of Italy—Lampedusa more specifically—which continue to abound in public media. They are proof of political incapacity as well as of cultural unwillingness to face human tragedies that are global in scale—caused not only by postcolonial dislocations and consequent ethnic strife and civil wars (see Syria, Libya, Eritrea, Sudan and so forth) but also by push-and-pull factors created by globalization, which causes flows of labor migrations from the South to the North. Whereas, on one hand, there is a desire in Europe to accept highly skilled migrants to work (operating in information and communication technology and care sectors) and fund the welfare state shortfalls, on the other hand, there is also an outspoken rejection of “the migrant other,” perceived as a threat, because they are seen as being potentially unemployed, criminal, or adherents of Islam and therefore (seemingly) prone to radicalization and fundamentalism. The issue is what can the postcolonial paradigm do to address these crises, which are not just numerical and political but also ideological? The acuteness of these integration issues foment new forms of civilizational binarism between the West and the Rest, as predicted by Samuel Huntington. Such civilizational narratives undermine the role of Europe as a democratic space subject to the rule of the Geneva Conventions in relation to the rescuing and safeguarding of refugees in need.

The article proposes therefore to outline how the colonial past, and its racist and stereotypical representations of the Other, still permeate the cultural representations of the Other in the present time. I will do so by focusing on some examples from the Italian case, which is still rather undertheorized, while setting them within a larger European context to not only provide the evidence of the Italian postcolonial belatedness, on one hand, but also to reject, on the other hand, the idea of Italian exceptionalism. The latter refers to the idea that Italian colonialism was limited in

scope and scale and therefore more benign and less pernicious in its contemporary legacies. The article argues that it is exactly this prolonged denial and silencing of the colonial impact and responsibilities that explains Italy's late arrival and late acceptance of the postcolonial framework within Italian studies. This has led, as a consequence, to the "unchallenged" reproduction of racist and gendered stereotypes along colonial lines, as is manifested in the realm of politics and popular culture, as I will argue in the last section of this article. Yet, it is through a European and transnational connection that the reading and interpretation of these representations need to be placed to account for the role of Italy within a globalized and transnational reality, both in its past colonial engagements and in its present contemporary role within Europe and the world. The permeability of these histories and legacies becomes especially evident when we critically analyze colonial representations and their postcolonial resignifications, especially through photography and cultural icons, as the following section demonstrates. To do so, however, I need to offer a quick overview of Italian colonial history to situate its specificities and anomalies within a wider European context. I will then move to a close reading of popular representations in Italy that confirm or challenge those specificities and deviancies of Italian colonialisms in relation to the wider European milieu.

Italian Colonialism: Aphasia or Forgetfulness?

The Italian colonial enterprise began when most of the other European empires were collapsing. This is due to the late formation of Italy as a nation (1861) and the difficulty of creating an imaginary community that could include both North and South under the same government after years of foreign domination that profoundly divided the country into different compartments: the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the North, the Papal States in the middle, and Spanish Bourbon rule in the South, with peasants kept under feudal conditions by powerful landowners. Under the leadership of the kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, ruled by the House of Savoy, Italy was liberated from foreign influences. The unification was realized thanks to the heroic role of Garibaldi and his Expedition of the Thousand (in 1860), which landed in Sicily, conquering the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies ruled by the Bourbons. The expedition created collective ambiguity and misunderstanding: for Garibaldi, the action was meant to achieve a united Italy; for the Sicilian bourgeoisie and aristocracy, it meant an independent Sicily as part of the kingdom of Italy; and for the mass population of farmers, it meant land distribution and the end of oppression, which resulted instead in the exploitation of the South at the hands of new rulers in the North.

Therefore, colonialism was seen as a necessary solution to create unity within by projecting the myth of Italy as a

nation through an expansion that would give new opportunities, jobs, and land to many disenfranchised and unemployed new citizens. The demographic explosion, stagnant economic development, and social unrest had to be countered by creating new possibilities under the sun in African territories. However, most of northern Africa had already been colonized by France (Morocco, Tunisia) or Britain (Egypt). With the opening of the Suez channel in 1869, new possibilities opened up around the Red Sea, and Italy joined in the scramble for Africa. The Italian shipping company Rubattino purchased the port of Assab in 1882 and after several negotiations, conflicts, and treaties with the local rulers, founded the *colonia primogenita* (first colony) in 1890, giving the colony the new name of Eritrea. From that moment on, further expansion into the Horn of Africa led to the battle of Adwa (in 1896) which became the first crushing defeat of a European power by African forces during the colonial. This caused the subsequent war of Ethiopia (1935-1936). The conquest of Libya (1911) led to various resistance movements (see Omar Mukhtar in Libya, 1911-1931). These colonial experiences would characterize the relations between Italy and these (now) former colonies for decades to come.

Despite all such motivations leading up to colonization, Italian colonialism was still the effect of an unplanned solution to internal economic issues (an *imperialism straccione* [tramp colonialism]). It was engineered by the northern government as a solution for southern Italians in particular, who would escape poverty and social unrest by enrolling in the military campaigns in Africa, unaware of what the full implication would be of their drafting into the military. Finally, Italian colonialism has been generally perceived as disorganized given that it lacked a structured ideology of superiority based on racial hierarchies (hence, the myth of *Italiani Brava Gente* [the nice Italians]; Del Boca, 1976-1984; Labanca, 2002; Ponzanesi, 2004). For example, the relative proximity in race and class between the Italians in Africa (originating primarily from southern Italy)¹ and the relatively light-skinned people of East Africa, where a mix of races and religions coexisted, was generally not perceived in Italy as a real dichotomy. On the contrary, this situation of territorial, as well as racial, proximity between Italy and East Africa was even theorized by anthropologists such as Giuseppe Sergi (1895/1901) as a sign that they all actually belonged to the same group. According to such racial theories, Italians were part of a Mediterranean race and therefore naturally connected to Africa (1895/1901). Sergi controversially placed Ethiopians and Mediterraneans within the same racial stock (*stirpe*). According to him, the Mediterranean race is the greatest race in the world and was responsible for the great civilizations of ancient times, including those of Egypt, Carthage, Greece, and Rome. They were quite distinct from the peoples of northern Europe (Canavan, 2001; Sergi, 1895/1901). These theories

were developed in opposition to Nordicism, the claim that the Nordic race was of pure Aryan stock and naturally superior to other Europeans. The common origin suggested between Italians and Africans implied the absence of repulsion between the peoples of the two areas (Africa and the Mediterranean) and suggested a desire for union. This view was censored and denied, however, by the state with the rise of Italian fascism. Legal attempts were made to establish an opposition between the colonizer and the colonized through a racial model of superiority that penalized forms of *madamismo* and *meticciato* (interracial relationships), with imprisonment of up to 5 years, after the introduction of the apartheid laws of 1937.² Despite the legal constraints, the practice of *madamismo* remained immensely widespread and popular, especially during the war with Ethiopia in 1935-1936, when many new Italian soldiers were posted in Africa. Nonetheless, the racial laws contributed to the creation of a distinct national identity, constructed through its opposition to Black people in Africa, marked as Other, in which the gender dimension and the politics of sexuality were key to the articulation of the Self and the Other. Italian Fascist virility was much predicated on this idea of masculinity and conquest, as Barbara Spackman (1996) has argued in her analysis of Fascist virilities, as connected to a reappraisal of Fascist ideologies and gender. This also implied that the colonial territory was the ideal arena to articulate models of Fascist virility and superiority over the local women, who were often perceived as bait for the exploration of colonial fantasies and sexuality. This complex territory of desire and repulsion was widely portrayed in literary, visual, and popular representations of the time, as discussed below, with uncanny resemblances or replications in contemporary Italian culture.

Popular Media and Photography

Part of the Italian colonial enterprise was achieved through a meticulous propaganda campaign of representation of colonial life that involved all mass media, ranging from photography, painting, and travel accounts, reports by explorers and ethnographers, and songs. An example is the famous colonial song "*Faccetta nera. Bell'abissina*" ("Little black face. Beautiful Abyssinian"), created during the invasions of Ethiopia in 1935, which corroborated the idea of the superiority of the virile Italian blackshirts who would save the beautiful local women from slavery and bring them to Rome under a new flag and a new king.³ This testifies that colonial authority and racial distinction were implicitly structured in gendered terms. At the height of the Italian colonial empire, the black female body became an icon for sexuality in general, and sexuality became a metaphor for domination. Colonial ideological discourses effectively interpreted the voyeuristic representations of the black female not only as both inherently primitive and



Figure 1. Images from colonial Italy.

Source: Palma (1999, p. 18).

sexually available but also menacing and dangerous because of its atavistic otherness.

These colonial representations still remain intact in contemporary culture (Figure 2), where black female bodies continue to be represented as "petrified in nature as flies in amber" (Hall & Sealy, 2001, p. 39) and Black Venuses (Ponzanesi, 2005).

The image of the Black Venus, or Sable Venus, came to embody the most archaic, secretive, and untamed drives of nature, coming to epitomize the collective unconscious fantasy of colonial exploration, modeled on the idea of charting the unspoiled and virgin soil of Africa, to be permeated by the virility of Italian men and the gift of a superior civilization. There were countless representations, mostly in the form of photographs, postcards, and paintings, that circulated officially and unofficially to communicate the image of the empire to the audiences back home, as shown in the colonial pictures in Figures 1 and 3 (Goglia, 1989; Mignemi, 1984; Palma, 1999). These representations offered a powerful means to give visual form to colonial culture and to forge a link between the empire and domestic imagination in Italy. They also allowed the imperial spectacle to be displayed through portable images that could be carried in private wallets or used as pin-ups. These representations often entailed the very ambivalent portrayal of local women,

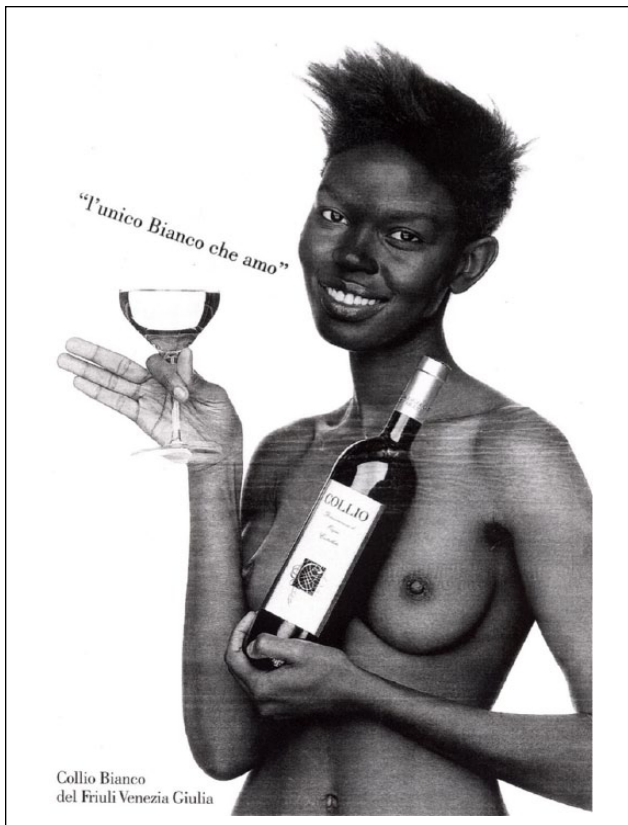


Figure 2. Note. Advertisement for Italian white wine, taken from the national newspaper *La Repubblica*.

often bordering on the pornographic with the excuse of ethnographically informed reportage. The documented nudity was considered to be a truthful and accurate portrayal of the local women in their “natural” environment.

Yet, many of these postcard images were posed or made in a studio, staged with unidentified ethnic garments and sophisticated hairdos, exhibiting unusual rituals that were meant to convey the idea of realistic portrayal of the native, immortalized in their authentic environment. The emphasis on tradition, authenticity, and naturalness obviously already shows the deceptive effect of the photographic image, believed to be a transparent medium that merely fixed reality as it was encountered (Figure 3). Needless to say, all these representations were filtered through a particular Eurocentric gaze, despite claiming to only convey the reality-effect of the image. As Stuart Hall and Mark Sealy (2001) have written, “The Photographic image is not a ‘message without a code’ . . . the image is always implicated in a politics of truth as well as a politics of desire” (p. 38). Hall, who has long theorized about how the image is coded and needs to be decoded, warns that it is when the image is declared to be transparent that its ideological apparatus is most in place; for example, Hall states that it is “when photography disavows its status as cultural practice, passing itself off as ‘nature’s paintbrush’” (p. 38) that it is most ideological.



Figure 3. Note. This picture was part of a series of postcards of *donne bilene* (women from Eritrea). Edizioni Baratti, Asmara, and were reprinted in Mignemi (1984, p. 106).

Many of these images can still be found nowadays in secondhand markets all over Italy, in colonial archives that are open and available to the public, in private family picture collections, and in museums. They were part of the ethnographic material, which offered information about local traditions and ethnic groups during Italian colonialism. However, they were also part of colonial paraphernalia, whose often “improper” circulation, bordering on the pornographic gaze, still confers feelings of imperial nostalgia and sexual prowess across time and space. Although the orientalist content of colonial photography has been analyzed in several contexts (Ali Behdad and Garland, 2013; Alloula, 1986; Mignemi, 1984; Palma, 2002), the enduring legacies of these representations in contemporary Italian popular culture have received less attention.

An attempt to link such colonial representations with postcolonial readings is possible by analyzing the effect of the famous series made by Marc Garanger in 1960 and their contemporary circulation and impact. Marc Garanger’s portraits in regroupment villages are strong reminders of the power of the photograph as a historical record. Garanger’s commanding officer decreed that the villagers must have identity cards: “Naturally he asked the military photographer to make these cards,” Garanger recalls.

Either I refused and went to prison, or I accepted. I understood my luck: it was to be a witness, to make pictures of what I saw that mirrored my opposition to the war. I saw that I could use what I was forced to do, and have the pictures tell the opposite of what the authorities wanted them to tell. (Naggar, 2013)

The women that Garanger portrayed came from neighboring villages in Algeria. Berber and Muslim, they had never before come into contact with Europeans. Now they had no choice in the matter. They had to appear without their veils, exposing their disheveled hair and their protective tattoos



Figure 4. Marc Garanger, *Femmes algériennes* 1960 (Paris: Contrejour, 2003 [1982]). © Courtesy of Marc Garanger.

(Figure 4). Their lined faces reflected the harshness of their life. The intensity of their gaze signified their resistance and the silent but fierce protest against their violation. The women's defiant look may be thought of as an "evil eye" that they cast on their enemies to protect themselves from immodesty and violation of their religious codes. The pictures were only published in 1982, in the volume that appeared with the title *Femmes Algériennes* 1960 (Garanger, 2003) something that enables a different critical engagement with colonial representations. Garanger's photographs were featured in the "Bodies in Question" exhibit, curated by Fred Ritchin, at the New York Photo Festival (May 12-16, 2010).⁴ Ritchin sees obvious, uncomfortable parallels between these photographs from half a century ago and the current conflict in France over Muslim women appearing fully veiled in public. "This work is very important because of the visual rape of the women who were forced to appear uncovered," said Ritchin (2008), the author of *After Photography*. "You feel a distress, a defiance, an anger, a vulnerability because they're not used to showing their face outside their immediate family" (Estrin, 2010).

Such images have not only fixed societies peripheral to the West as modernity's "others" but also associated the idea of an unchanging primordial tradition with that of "othered" female bodies whose colonial representations need to be not only resignified but also compared, contrasted, and deconstructed in contemporary society. Garanger challenged such colonial representations by accounting for the violence of the camera on those women, though always filtered through his White male presence.

The violence of the lens is an important issue when considering how to account for these colonial representations today. Is it good to reproduce them, analyze them, show them at

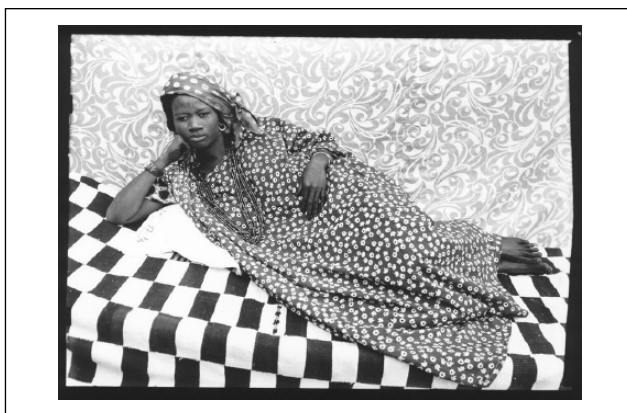


Figure 5. 'Untitled' (*Odalisque*), 1957. Credit Seydou Keita/SKPEAC. Source Teju Cole. Portrait of a lady. On photography. *The New York Times* (2015, June 24)

conferences, and reprint them in new critical articles and books? Or does it indirectly reconfirm the violence of the colonial moment, reproducing the voyeuristic encounter, although under the aegis of postcolonial analysis? Where is the borderline between accounting and replicating, retrieving and reimposing?

Teju Cole has stated that recent African photographers have taken up the task of responding to the anthropological images of "natives" made by Europeans in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, countering the violence of colonial photography and reversing the gaze:

Those photographs, in which the subject had no say in how they were seen, did much to shape the Western world's idea of Africans. Something changed when Africans began to take photographs of one another: You can see it in the way they look at the camera, in the poses, the attitude. The difference between the images taken by colonialists or white adventurers and those made for the sitter's personal use is especially striking in photographs of women. In the former, women are being looked at against their will, captive to a controlling gaze. In the latter, they look at themselves in a mirror, an activity that always involve seriousness, levity and an element of wonder. (Cole, 2015)

Teju Cole refers in particular to contemporary Malian photographers like Seydou Keita and Malick Sidibé, the Senegalese photographer Mama Casset, and Joseph Moise Agbodjelou of Benin—all photographers who are artists and take great pride in their dignified portraits and panoramas of life in Bamako, Dakar, and Porto-Novo. Cole points out that many of these photographs of West African women of an older generation often involve women with a university education, choosing professional careers or wanting to remain single. It shows women in charge of their lives, conveying a different take on traditional Western colonial photography, which is overwritten and often coded through orientalist and fetishizing images of objectified young black bodies. Cole refers also to Seydou Keita's (1957) most famous black-and-white picture (Figure 5, the *Odalisque*, showing a woman in a long dress, with a polka-dot scarf on

her head, reclining on a bed with geometrical patterns in contrast to the floral background.

She has a scar on her face, and her delicate hands and feet are exposed:

Her look is self-possessed rather than seductive. She's looking ahead but not at the camera. It is the look of someone who is thinking about herself, simultaneously outward and inward. The image challenges and delights the viewer with its complicated two-dimensional game. (Cole, 2015)⁵

Cole also refers to the role of more contemporary photographers such as the South African Zanele Muholi, one of the most prominent contemporary African photographers, who challenges discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. She has a project called *Faces and Phases* that focuses on the portraiture of Black lesbian and transgender people, mostly from South Africa, where transgender people have often been raped and even murdered despite the fact that the constitution protects them from discrimination.

To look at the faces, in portrait after portrait, is to become newly aware of the power of portraiture in a gifted artist's hands. Muholi doesn't grant the sitter independence—they are independent—but she makes their independence visible. (Cole, 2015)⁶

It is no coincidence, therefore, that Muholi's work (Figure 7) featured prominently in the recent exhibition "ReSignification," curated by New York University (NYU) professors Awam Amkpa and Deborah Willis in Florence (May 30–August 29, 2015) in tandem with the conference "Black Portraiture[s] II: Imaging the Black Body and Re-Staging Histories," organized by Deborah Willis (Florence, Villa la Pietra, May 28–31, 2015).⁷ The first conference of "Black Portraiture[s]: The Black Body in the West" was organized in Paris (January 17–20, 2013),⁸ also by Deborah Willis and Awam Amkpa.⁹ These series of conferences and unique exhibitions are clearly meant to be an intervention in the historical way in which black bodies have been represented and the need for resignification in the arts as well as in the public debate. Through the organization of academic panels as well as two wonderful exhibitions with artists ranging from photographers, painters, sculptors, filmmakers, and video artists to conceptual artists, the goal was to tackle the "Resignification" of Western representations of blackness and otherness and to challenge/return the gaze of Western representations, proposing a new way of conceiving the art of representation, of portraiture, and engaging with a new way of looking. As the curator Awam Amkpa has stated,

My curatorial vision includes bringing into unusual artistic dialogue, famous and emerging artists who not only aesthetically reference each other but participate in developing visual mosaic of a specific historical phenomenon. (*The International Review of African American Art*, 2015)



Figure 6. Zanele Muholi

Somnyama I, Paris, 2014

Somnyama III, Paris, 2014

credit: © Zanele Muholi courtesy STEVENSON Cape Town and Johannesburg

The idea behind the "Black Portraiture[s] II" conference organized in Florence was to focus on a new take on the many Blackamoors contained in Villa La Pietra, statues and representations of Moors as servants, which also adorn Florence and are still used worldwide as figures holding trays and lamps or are reproduced in jewelry without being perceived as racist or awkward, but just as decorative. This protracted White innocence reminds one of the Black Pete debate in the Netherlands, where Black helpers, of Moorish origin, accompany the entry of Saint Nicholas (Sinterklaas) in what is considered a traditional children festivity. The repeated portrayals of these blackface Petes have unleashed hefty controversy in recent years in the Netherlands and beyond over colonialism and racism, moving the debate beyond the innocence of folkloristic tradition that safeguarded White privilege (see Wekker, 2016). Ellyn Toscano, executive director of NYU Florence, co-organizer of "Black Portraiture[s] II," and executive producer of "ReSignifications," said that

NYU's campus at Villa La Pietra is the ideal backdrop for international discourse on imagining the black body, in part because of the "Blackamoors," but also because African diaspora is very much at the forefront of debate here in Italy and across Europe. (*Routes. A Guide to African-American Culture*, 2015)

The "ReSignifications" exhibition, which was held in the very classic Museo Stefano Bernini and Fondazione Biagiotti Progetto Arte, showcased artists from all over the world to deconstruct the meaning of these blackamoors and offer new representations of blackness. The list of international artists included the Malian Omar Victor Diop, whose amazing self-portraits testify to this reversal of the gaze in which the



Figure 7. Omar Victor Diop, *Jean-Baptiste Belley* (1746-1805). Original painting by Girodet. © Courtesy of Omar Victor Diop.

subject and object of representation are collapsed. His famous *Diaspora* series (Diop, 2014; Figure 7) consists of self-portraits, pictures of himself wearing historical Western costumes, holding quirky contemporary sport items such as multi-colored footballs, keeper's gloves, or football shoes, juxtaposed with a painted background¹⁰ (Kirchgaessner, 2015).

It is important to notice that the conference took place in Italy, where the images of the blackmoors have remained undisturbed for quite some time. This is a symptom of the fact that Italy's postcolonial consciousness is still dormant and a confirmation that Italy's postcolonial awakening comes from a connection of scholars, disciplines, and networks that are European and global. Scholars in cultural studies, often operating outside of Italy, in North American universities or northern Europe, bring a critical take to Italian studies, where migration and the visual repertoire generated by it is not only studied as a sociological phenomenon but also for its aesthetic qualities.

My intervention focuses on the unfolding of the colonial discourse in Italy, and in particular, the way in which the black body became an icon for sexuality and for visual

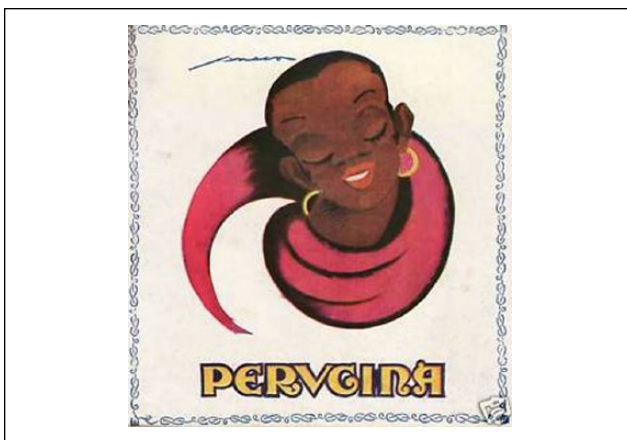


Figure 8. Advertisement from 1926, Perugina candies moretto f. seneca. Abyssinian Girl.

consumption. More specifically, I am interested in how the colonial dimension still resonates in our postcolonial times and in exploring how these hegemonic graphic representations still connote “visualizations” of the black female body in contemporary Italian culture. Especially in politics, sports, and fashion, these images seem to have undergone little resignification despite the increasing impact of postcolonial theory and cultural studies within academia, but as Stuart Hall (1996) reminds us,

It is only too tempting to fall into the trap of assuming that, because essentialism has been deconstructed *theoretically*, therefore it has been displaced *politically*. (p. 249, emphasis in original)

This is mostly true, Hall continues, with respect to colonial representations because people and societies peripheral to the West have routinely been represented as modernity's Other: cast forever in an unchanging tradition.

Such representations discussed above have also resulted in the consumption of the “other” through popular campaigns and advertisements from the colonial period until now. Images of blackness have always been metonymically incorporated in the representation of racially connoted products, such as coffee, chocolate, candies, or liqueur (Pinkus, 1997; Ponzanesi, 2005). This is unfortunately still true for more recent advertisements. Jumping from the 1930s to the 1990s and beyond, we still see many tropes and stereotypes unchanged and unchallenged. Advertisements, which are usually the perpetrators of not only cultural stereotypes but also of the dominant changes in mass culture, show that the black body is still crystallized in its immutable otherness, stuck in passive, solitary sensuality, as demonstrated by the recent advertisement for white wine shown in Figure 2. This is indeed the exoticization and eroticization of the black body, where it is very much entrapped by the Orientalist gaze, not unlike in the Fascist period (Figure 3).

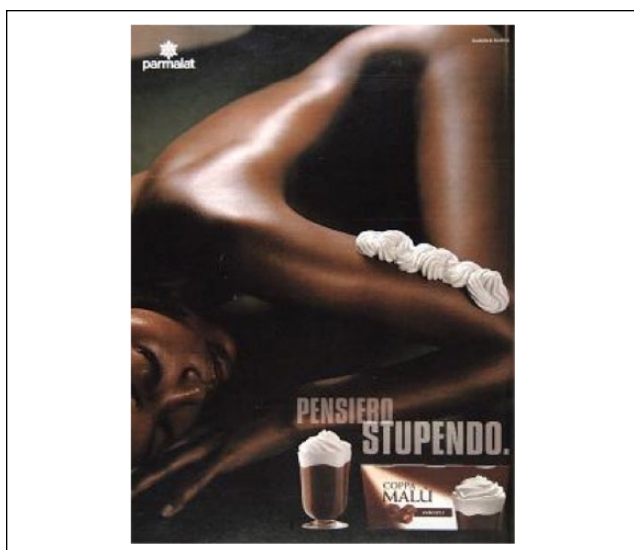


Figure 9. Recent advertisement for Parmalat.

Part of it is ethno-marketing, such as the Benetton united colors advertisements, part is pure exoticization, such as Parmalat (see Figure 9) and its promotion of chocolate, and part is the branding of “otherness” for cosmopolitan purposes, seen, for instance, in alcohol marketing such as grappa Frattina and bitter Ramazzotti or other such products (Pinkus, 1997; Ponzanesi, 2005).

The intervention offered in this essay is meant to demonstrate that colonial constructions still resound in contemporary stereotypes and clichés in Italy—expressed in both linguistic and graphic signs signifying the complex relation between language and image, between perception and conception. The images mentioned above illustrate that racist thinking still holds, though it resonates differently in the 21st century. The ways of representing otherness, what Stuart Hall (1997) has called the “spectacle of the other,” may have changed, but the ideological presuppositions have often remained intact. What fuelled colonial conquest is still pervasive in contemporary society, especially in the Italian case, which seems to suffer, after a belated colonialism, from a belated awakening to the postcolonial discourse. Grasping how the elaboration of contemporary racial stereotypes depends on past ingrained legacies is overdue because of Italy’s earlier denial and removal of the colonial chapter from its dominant history.

The Postcolonial Predicament: Transcoding Negative Images With New Meanings

These images of Black otherness and exoticization persist not only in fashion, advertising, and popular culture but also in more respectable settings, such as the Italian parliament.

This brings us to a couple of contemporary examples—that of Italy’s first Black minister, Cécile Kyenge, and of the

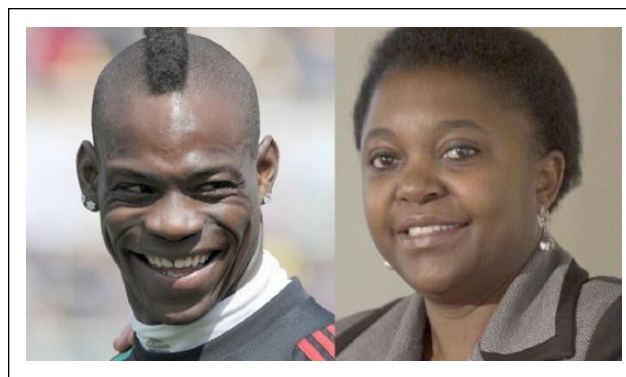


Figure 10. Mario Balotelli and Cécile Kyenge.

Source. <http://qn.quotidiano.net/politica/2013/04/27/880224-lega-ministro-kyenge-di-colore-opposizione-totale.shtml>

internationally acclaimed Black Italian footballer, Mario Balotelli (Figure 10). Both these new role models in the Italian public sphere have faced racial hatred and abuse because of their different racial background and for challenging Italy’s national homogeneity.

An Inconvenient Woman

In April 2013, Italy installed its first Black cabinet minister, who also happened to be a woman. Cécile Kyenge, an ophthalmologist by profession and a longtime local council member from the northern province of Modena, was thrown into national politics when the then Prime Minister Enrico Letta appointed her Minister of Integration in his newly formed centre-left coalition government. From that point forward, Kyenge, a naturalized Italian citizen born in the Democratic Republic of Congo, has endured repeated racist and sexist slurs, fuelled by proclamations of right-wing politicians maligning her looks: “She seems like a great housekeeper, but not a government minister,” said Mario Borghezio, a member of the European Parliament for Italy’s anti-immigration Northern League (Faris, 2013). His fellow party member, Roberto Calderoli, stated at a rally that Kyenge’s facial features reminded him of an orangutan. A short time later, an unidentified aggressor hurled a bushel of bananas at a stage where Kyenge was speaking, an act presumably motivated by Calderoli’s monkey metaphor. This reflected “[b]ehaviours that would have led to prosecution for provoking racial hatred in other neighbouring European countries but which in Italy were seen as ‘folkloristic’” (Levy, 2015).

Within 30 years of her arrival in Italy, Kyenge managed to occupy a public office of tremendous significance, not only for Italy’s future, but also for Europe’s, in her role as Minister of Integration. In April 2015, during the 46th annual session of the Commission on Population and Development, UN (United Nations) Secretary General Ban Ki Moon emphasized, “Migration offers challenges we

must face and benefits we can harness,” and described migration as “a fact of life in our globalizing world.” It was not a question of “whether to halt the movement of people across borders,” which was impossible, but of how to plan for such movements and make the most of them, he said (Maiello, 2013).

Kyenge was clearly a “space invader” in the Italian parliament. That notion, explored by Nirmal Puwar, refers to bodies usually marked as Other—Black, gendered, and minorities—occupying elite positions in the institutions of the state and the public sphere. The concept captures the pernicious, subtle but, nonetheless, widely held view that certain bodies are naturally entitled to certain spaces, while others are not—making the presence of male and whiteness the norm. As Puwar (2004) asks,

What happens when women and racialized women take up “privileged” positions which have not been “reserved” for them, for which they are not, in short, the somatic norm? (p. 1)

In addition to her race, it is Kyenge’s stance on citizenship that has brought her disfavor from conservatives. She pushed forward a bill, “Dispositions on the Conferral of Citizenship” (*Disposizioni in Tema di Acquisto della Cittadinanza Italiana*), to grant immediate citizenship to the Italian-born children of immigrants based on the principle of *jus soli*. Currently, citizenship in Italy is determined not by birth on Italian soil but by *jus sanguinis*, or “blood.”

At present, Kyenge is a member of the European Parliament and its rapporteur on migration. Moreover, Italy has a new government, formed on February 22, 2014, that seems to parade equality by having more female ministers than ever before (the first government in which the number of female ministers is equal to the number of male ministers), under the leadership of the left-wing Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, sidestepping the issue of race in the name of gender balance.¹¹

An Unmanageable Talent

Balotelli is another example of Italian citizenship, othered because of his skin color and provenance. Balotelli is of Ghanaian parentage but was fostered from the age of 3 by a Jewish-Italian family that migrated from the south of Italy to the north. His troubling connection of blackness and Italianness reflect an Italian version of Gilroy’s (1987) famous slogan “there ain’t no black in the Union Jack,” pointing to the incompatibility of European nationality, either British or Italian, with blackness. Balotelli supported minister Kyenge in her many campaigns for the recognition and respect of multicultural Italy against protracted and intractable forms of racism, either on TV or in the media, or in football stadiums, or in Parliament for that matter. Considered an *enfant maudit*, a maverick, and a loose cannon of international football, Balotelli has endured several

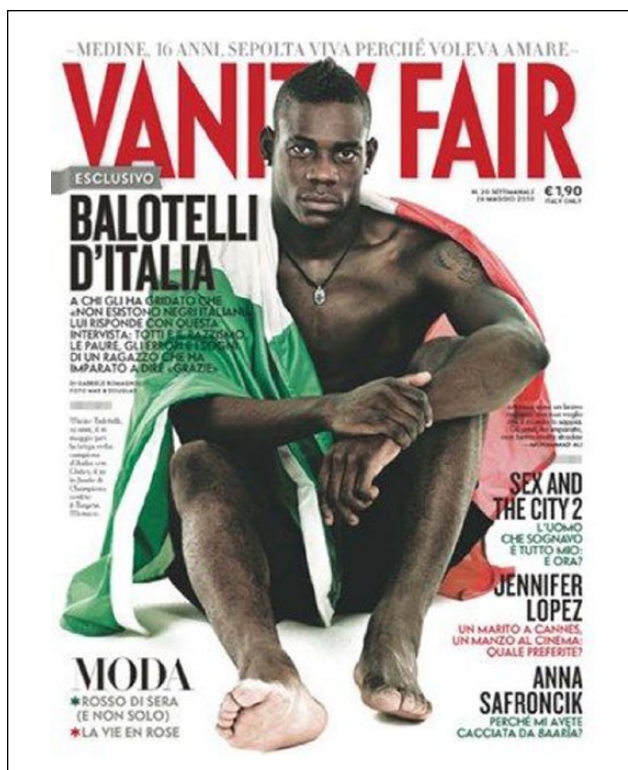


Figure 11. Balotelli on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in 2010.

racist attacks, both within the football stadium and outside, in social media and the public sphere. He received monkey chants not only from Roma fans at the San Siro stadium in May 2013 (Bandini, 2013) but also on many other occasions, including when training with the national team at the World Cup training camp.¹²

He has faced intolerance all his life. The Italian striker has been one of the most abused players, not only in Italy (where he played for Inter Milan and A.C. Milan and still plays for the national team) but also in Britain (playing first for Manchester City, later for Liverpool). Certainly, he is not only one of the most colorful and controversial figures in the football world but is also considered an anomaly because of the supposed mutual incompatibility of Italian citizenship and blackness.

He was on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in several editions, his blackness always prominent. On one cover (see Figure 11), in May 2010 when he was only 19 years old, he is photographed sitting totally naked with a pendant around his neck and the Italian tricolor flag over his shoulders, with the caption “Balotelli d’Italia” (Balotelli of Italy), paraphrasing the Italian anthem, which starts with “Fratelli d’Italia.”

He comments that he is always at the centre of attention because,

Whatever I do, they’re always talking about me. I don’t read what they write but they keep at it nonstop. Balotelli here,

Balotelli there. Why?' Because he is black, and Italian. The bleacher bums yell out, "there's no such thing as a black Italian," but here he is, documents on sight proving the contrary. (Romagnoli, 2010)

The continuous comments in the media are not always favorable. They refer to his physical presence on the field, with pictures of him on the football field, taking off his shirt and showing off his extremely muscular black body or adopting Hulk celebration poses, his hair style, with a crest like a cockerel, often bleached, his eye-catching clothes off the football pitch, his outrageous sense of style, and his brash attitude toward criticisms and always being in the spotlight. His renowned recalcitrant behavior and prima-donna attitude, thought to drive his coaches to desperation, have also often created a stir in public opinion, as if his impulsive and unprofessional reactions were dictated by a lack of rational control like a spoilt child. Labeled Super Mario, like the videogame hero, Balotelli seems to be constantly in the midst of a controversy.

He has recently been accused of being a racist himself, despite all his own campaigning against racism. This time it was after having posted a picture on Instagram of Super Mario, the videogame hero, with the comment "He jumps like a nigger and grabs money like a Jew."¹³ The football association considered suspending him after a storm of reactions and polemics. The post has been removed from Instagram. Balotelli defended himself on Facebook by saying,

I apologize if I've offended anyone. The post was meant to be anti-racist with humour. I now understand that out of context it may have the opposite effect. Not all Mexicans have moustache, not all black people jump high and not all Jewish people love money. I used a cartoon done by someone else because it has Super Mario and I thought it was funny and not offensive. Again, I'm sorry.

On Twitter, he further commented: "Even my mother is a Jew. So just shut up."¹⁴ However, British tabloids have gone after him again with headlines such as "Super Stupid Mario"¹⁵ and given him a reputation that persecutes him for being naïve and damaging his career through wayward behavior.

Balotelli continues to be an unmanageable talent because of his continuous challenge to the idea of national identity and idea of Italian masculinity, based on the connection between hypervirility and primordial black bodies. His Hulk-Urango poses (Figure 12) during the European Championship match against Germany in 2012 and the football hooligans' rejection of his "blackness" as part of the Italian identity resuscitates many of the Fascist codes (Burgio, 1999; Poidimani, 2009; Spackman, 1996) without accounting for societies' radical transformation, both in racial and in cultural terms (Derobertis, 2012).

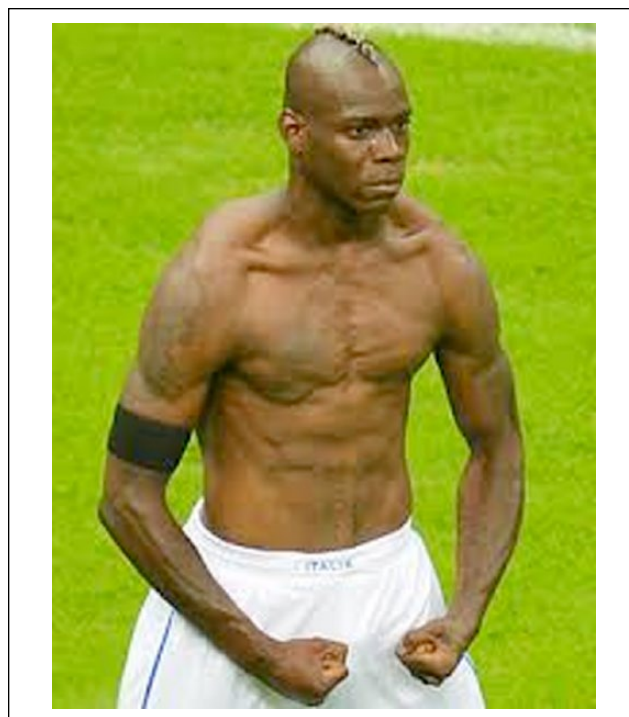


Figure 12. Balotelli in Hulk position, European Championship match against Germany, 2012.

Conclusion

All these representations are indicators of Italy's awkward or reluctant transition from a monocultural to a multiracial nation. At the same time, these inconvenient truths and space invaders shockingly demonstrate how racism, bigotry, and sexism can also affect those in power who stand out from the perceived norm of whiteness. In Kyenge's case, these trespasses are often executed by political equals, who should know better than to attack citizens who operate so tremendously as positive role models.

What is needed is an exploration and subversion of the idea of Black identity not as biological and genetic, but rather as articulated in the continuous play with history, culture, and power. The confrontation and deconstruction of Italy's colonial discourse should be encouraged, as recent scholarship is trying to do (Giuliani & Lombardi-Diop, 2013).

There are recent resignifications that have attempted to create alternative and more nuanced representations. These have been made not only by Italian as well as African and immigrant artists (Adrian Paci; see Figure 13) but also by writers (Gabriella Ghermandi, Pap Khouma, Igiaba Scego), columnists (Mohesen Melliti), and filmmakers (Andrea Segre, Vittorio de Seta, Gianni Amelio, John Carpinano, Roberta Torre). Their work has allowed us to resignify colonial, racist, and prejudicial representations. These artists also



Figure 13. Adrian Paci's *Home to Go* (2001) (plaster, marble, dust, tiles, rope, 165 × 90 × 120 cm). © Courtesy Adrian Paci.

operate within a wider European context, deprovincializing Italian culture. Within the European context, “Italian” becomes a signifier to be renegotiated, neither stable nor fixed, but open to new interpretations and requalifications. Often these resignifications come from critics and artists living outside of Italy, such as in the case of the Florence exhibition. Or from foreign artists such as such as Vik Muniz's installation during the Venice Biennale (see Figure 14).

Yet, these rearticulations of representation and signification should be regarded as part of a continuum with past histories and current geographies, where Italy's paradoxical belatedness also manages to generate a new debate that accounts for the backlash against multicultural politics.

Though there is a very belated postcolonial awareness in Italy, which is showcased in the racist discourses against a member of the national parliament and a sports celebrity that would not be tolerated or even admissible in other European countries, Italy is undergoing a slow but irreversible transition. These figures, Kyenge and Balotelli, are perceived as exceptional because of being the “first blacks” in the public arena. However, migration to Italy is increasing and unrelenting. Children of third-generation migrants are being born in Italy and they are to stay. Primary schools are highly multicultural, and Italy is part of a larger European discourse where identity and nationality do not overlap anymore along traditional lines. Despite being continuously relegated to otherness, in media and political settings, the new highly mobile, transnational, and cosmopolitan class of migrants confronts Italy with its immobile and recalcitrant resistance to future intercultural scenarios. They initiate changes and transformations that are slow but irreversible. Such changes are in sync with the transnational decoding and recoding of race and gender that are occurring through exhibitions such as “ReSignification” in Florence or Teju Cole's new takes on African photography.

This essay has addressed the root sources of Italy's current form of racism and sexism, trying to articulate how colonial ties still influence and inform contemporary



Figure 14. Vik Muniz, *Lampedusa, floating boat*, 2015. The Lampedusa installation is a floating protest against migrant deaths off the Italian island of Lampedusa. Placed outside the Venice Biennale (2015).

Source: My Art Guides.

representations. Yet, acknowledging those colonial roots and traces, what Ash Amin (2010) has called the “remainders of race,” helps not only to reconstruct the specific genesis of public insurgencies of xenophobia and gender discrimination but also to offer new, resignified images and forms of representations that not only mark a connection to the past but also constitute its rupture.

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Notes

1. John Dickie (1999) analyzes the stereotypical representation of the South in the post-unification period. The Mezzogiorno was widely seen as barbaric, violent, and irrational, an “Africa” on the European continent, while paradoxically integrated into the imaginary of the emerging nation.
2. *Madamato* or *madamismo* was the Italian term for the consorting of Italian men with local women through which Eritrean women effectively considered themselves married while there were no legal implications for their Italian counterparts. See Barrera (1996), Sorgoni (1998), and Ponzanesi (2012a).
3. For a text of the song and its English translation, see the following links: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PuFdYJa7DNc> (for the music and Italian text); https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Faccetta_Nera (for the English translation).

4. For a link to the New York exhibit "Bodies in Question," see <http://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2010/07/14/bodies-in-question-photography-exhibition-at-the-tisch-school-of-the-arts-to-go-on-view.html>.
 5. To see the picture, go to <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/seydou-keita-sans-titre-odalisque>.
 6. "Faces and Phases" was an exhibition on view at the Brooklyn Museum as a part of a show of Muholi's work (May 1-November 1, 2015): See https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/zanele_muholi/. See also, for more information on the display of her work at The Photographers' Gallery, London, April 7 until June 7, 2015, where she was shortlisted for the Deutsche Borse Photography Prize (Bidisha, 2015).
 7. <http://www.blackportraits.info/>
 8. <http://africanastudies.as.nyu.edu/object/IAAA-Black-Portraiture.html>.
 9. Deborah Willis is a New York University (NYU) professor and chair of the Department of Photography & Imaging, Tisch School of the Arts. Awam Amkpa is professor of social and cultural analysis, also at NYU.
 10. For a look at Omar Diop's website and his work, go to <http://www.omarviktordiop.com/#!home-omarviktordiop-photograph/c11fh>. To see the poster of the "ReSignification" exhibition in Florence, also by Omar Victor Diop, see http://www.blackportraits.info/?page_id=594 (the image is titled *Jean-Baptiste Belley, (1746-1805), révolutionnaire français, membre de la Convention nationale et du Conseil des Cinq-Cents*). This is part of a series titled *Diaspora*, a series of self-portraits inspired by Spanish paintings in which the photographer embodies Africans who became important personalities in Europe during colonial times. See Sabine Cessou, *Omar Victor Diop dans la peau d'un Noir* (November 10, 2014). *La Libération*: http://www.liberation.fr/photographie/2014/11/10/omar-victor-diop-dans-la-peau-d-un-noir_1140450.
 11. See, for a photo of the composition of the Renzi's formation, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renzi_Cabinet#/media/File:Renzi_cabinet_with_Giorgio_Napolitano.jpg.
 12. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/worldcup2014/article-2635044/Mario-Balotelli-suffers-racist-abuse-Italy-fans-World-Cup-training-camp.html>.
 13. "Salta come un nero e afferra soldi come un ebreo."
 14. "Mia madre è ebrea, quindi statevene ziti."
 15. See <http://sandrosabatini.com/2014/12/02/super-stupid-balotelli-accusato-di-razzismo/>
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