(Un)making the myth of *Italianità:* on the relationship between imagery and song in Fascist colonialism and its heritage

Alessandra Ferlito

Independent Researcher, Torino

ABSTRACT

Interviewed as part of the project *Listening to Italian Colonialism*,[1] artists and musicians Zamua and Medhin Paolos stated that the 1930s songs of the fascist colonial repertoire reminded them of certain propaganda images that were widespread over the same period. Together with Gianpaolo Chiriacò, author of the project, the two artists raise questions on how to take the dust off that musical repertoire in order to deconstruct collective colonial imagery. Starting from their observations, the first part of this contribution deals with the relationships between colonial imagery (mainly illustrations and postcards) and music, and aims to identify themes and narrative strategies common to both media, which made the manufacturing of a "coordinated image" of the empire (Mignemi 1983) possible. This confrontation is essential today in order to identify new questions and new counter-narratives. How can we use the colonial heritage to unmake whiteness and the myth of *italianità*? Is it possible to work on the melodies and words of these songs without replicating their violence? What follows in the second part of this essay is an attempt to answer these questions, looking at how contemporary art in Italy is dealing with the Italian colonial archive. The case studies that will be analyzed challenge both the myth of *italianità* and the stereotypes that still weigh on the people who are considered 'other'. Within them, sounds and images constitute critical tools which take on an evocative purpose, but what they evoke are anti-nostalgic images that dismantle collective Italian colonial imagery. These are works that provide useful methodological directions for those who wish to "work the archive" (Cianelli 2015) of colonial music, the political potential of which remains unexplored to this day.

Keywords

Coloniality, whiteness, decoloniality, arts-based research, antiracism

Introduction

An analysis of the relationship between the images and songs of fascist colonialism can start from those examples in which both the propagandistic scope of the regime's cultural products and their coordinated and conjunct construction are explicit. One of the most apparent instances is the work of Aurelio Bertiglia, an illustrator from Turin who celebrated the Italian occupation of Ethiopia during the second Italo-Ethiopian war (1935-36) with a series of pictures in which young *balilla* (members of the fascist youth movement) are shown as determined to 'liberate' Ethiopian children from slavery and teach them fascist culture. In particular, one of his postcards features five young Italians in military apparel, chubby-cheeked and straight-faced, teaching "Faccetta Nera," the most famous song of Italian fascist colonialism, to an

Ethiopian peer so that they can sing along. One of the *balilla* plays the guitar, another holds sheet music with the lyrics, and another one leads the choir while following the musical scores.[2] Their dominant role is accentuated by the presence of an Italian flag waving on top of a *tucul*, depicted in the background. Colonial music is presented here as a means by which to civilize and subjugate the colonized people, who are represented as peacefully 'integrated' within fascist culture: they do not rebel against the colonizers but instead wish to learn from them.

The main function of this kind of representation is not only to show the difference between 'us' and the 'others' (visible in the clothing of the characters portrayed, in the specificity of the landscape, in the architecture of the overseas lands), but above all, it is to stage a theme that was central to colonial fascist rhetoric: the natural predisposition to being subjugated, together with the natural predisposition of the colonized to barbarism and cannibalism.

As this first example proves, the relationship between music and imagery within colonial propaganda may be explored along various lines and perspectives. In order to understand the process of subjugation, manipulation, and appropriation of the other – both in material, cultural, and symbolical terms – looking at the images showing Ethiopian musicians and their traditional musical instruments could be equally significant. Musical rhythms and dance moves were, in fact, among the most characterizing elements of colonies and their inhabitants from the European perspective.[3] However, we know that musical ethnography in the *terre d'oltremare* (overseas lands) was scarce and hasty, both during the liberal era and during fascism.[4] Furthermore, musical instruments from the colonies – often included within ethnographic sections of colonial exhibitions – were frequently exposed "within performative contexts that emphasize [...] the rudimental component, therefore reinforcing the racist ideology towards populations in occupied territories" (Abbonizio 2011, 178).

Such issues are also to be found widely within songs. Although visual representation has been largely investigated,[5] the musical repertoire of fascist colonialism – despite a diffusion as widespread and forceful as that of imagery, and despite the fact that its memory has been alive for decades within popular culture – has scarcely been investigated (Chiriacò 2021). To understand such a relationship, one has to cross a somewhat patchy terrain, one that requires numerous excavations, observations, and distinctions. This is particularly true when the object of investigation is the work produced over a period of time close to the proclamation of the empire (9 May 1936), as the Italian collective imaginary at the time was redefined on the basis of the needs of imperialistic fascist ideology (Labanca 2002).

Building on this preliminary reflection, the following analysis will deal with the relationship between songs and imagery produced around the 1930s, while paying particular attention to the discourse shared by the two expressive means and observing strategies and methods through which the main themes of colonial rhetoric were shaped in order to build the empire. More precisely, on the one hand, I will focus on the illustrations published in the most popular

Italian colonial magazines and on the colonial postcards promoted over that period. On the other hand, I will focus on the most debated themes by multimedia art practices that have emerged over recent years in Italy: the 'civilization' of the black racialized individual and the myth of *italianità*.

This contribution draws on numerous works in the field of art history and iconography in order to expand some of the intuitions provided by the project *Listening to Italian Colonialism*, in which historical research and musicology are combined for a critical reflection on the neo-colonial present and on the possibility to "work the archive" (Cianelli 2015) of colonial music with the instruments and the methods of interdisciplinary research within contemporary art. Therefore, this contribution aims to provide some preliminary reflections on an area that needs further exploration.

The 1930s

In the years that preceded the second Italo-Ethiopian war, the communicative potential of music and visual arts was fully exploited in keeping with the expansionistic policies of the regime. The main themes of many songs and illustrations were the 'civilization' of the black, racialized individual and the consolidation of Italian identity – *italianità* – in a supremacist and nationalistic sense. They revolved around the presumed superiority of Italians, whom Mussolini considered direct descendants of the ancient Roman Empire, and thus also focused on the presumed inferiority and backwardness of 'African' people. Besides the main themes, there was something else that connected songs and imagery: the same strategy of representation, based on mystification, invention, fantasy, and sheer lies. This is the strategy that ushered in the construction of a "colonial epic" (Labanca 2002).

By combining these two aspects, we may identify the kind of relationship established between imagery and songs. A suggestion in this sense is offered by the musician Zamua. Listening to the song titled "Gambette nere," the lyrics of which have a strong descriptive component, he suggests that songs like this on refer to scenes that are visual representations and thus may be considered 'sonic images'.[6] The lyrics of the song describe, on the one hand, "little black legs of dark dolls [...] proud to be protected" and happy to be able to dance the *tarantella*. On the other, they depict the male legs of Eritrean *ascari* and place them in contrast with those of Ethiopian soldiers, represented as "legs of bunnies" that prefer to dance *tango* and "flee through the mud" in the face of open fire from the enemy. Like in many illustrations and postcards, in the song, we find Ethiopian soldiers jumping in front of the advancing enemy. Again, as in the aforementioned postcard by Bertiglia, the Italian musical tradition is included as an additional element signaling superiority.

However, in many other cases, the relation with imagery diverges from the previous example. When we compare songs with illustrations of that era, it may be noted that there are

various ways to build and portray the opposition between ‘us’ and ‘them’. More precisely, in some instances, song and image seem complementary: when the former evokes colonial stereotypes, the latter describes them visually. In other instances, songs and imagery adopt similar communication strategies. If we listen to songs such as “Inno dell’Africa Orientale” or “Etiopia”[7] while looking at the most popular colonial magazines of the same period, it appears that – while the songs only allude to barbaric conditions and lack of civilization – the images aim to make them visible. The refrain of “Inno dell’Africa Orientale” states: “Italy, beautiful Italy, […] in your imperial name you will bring Roman virtues to Eastern Africa, amid its barbarism and slavery.” In the march that bears the title “Etiopia,” “the fertile work of the settlers will make the whole of Ethiopia bloom,” thanks to the civilizing intervention of the Duce, who “breaks chains, suppresses slavery,” beats the “slave-trader” and gives “freedom.” On a different note, in the illustration titled “Barbarie etiopica” (Ethiopian Barbarism), authored by Achille Beltrame, barbarism is not just evoked but graphically shown. Here, male characters with nervous gestures and angry expressions aim at a man tied to a pole, at the center of the scene. The clothes and physiognomy connote them racially. A description completes the image, contextualizing and suggesting that what is represented is the brutality of emperor Selassie himself.[8] This scene also speaks of the colonized people’s natural predisposition to submission.

The artistic works where the subject is the Ethiopian emperor, whose presence is quite an “obsession,” especially in the musical repertoire (Chiriacò 2021), are examples of such strategies. After 1935, his figure was discredited in order to attack Ethiopian culture as a whole and to legitimize the occupation of the entire country. Discredit is often achieved through derision and satire. Recurrent themes focused on what was presented as his predisposition to maneuver and conspire. Therefore, in many images published in colonial magazines, the emperor Haile Selassie is presented as a distracted or duplicitous person (“La distrazione del Negus” or “Le astuzie del Negus,” 1935). In other instances, slavery and barbarism appear as the main themes, and the emperor is presented as a slave-owning cannibal (“Banchetti ufficiali,” 1935). There is also an example in which the emperor himself depicts his people as unable and barbarous (“La radio di Addis Abeba non funziona più,” 1935).[9] Finally, the emperor surrenders to Italian soldiers (“La situazione del Negus,” 1936). Following a similar pattern, in songs such as “Stornelli al Negus Neghesti,” the Ethiopian emperor is denigrated with violent tones hidden behind a playful attitude: “you look worse and worse, dear Negus, but we are not afraid. From now on, our Selassie, we will call you the big chimpanzee.” In the song “Stornelli africani,” the derision goes hand in hand with menace: “If the Negus does not stop bothering us, with his speeches full of lies, then we’ll make him learn a few nostalgic things [...]. Oh, dear friend, we still have our batons.” The song “Ti porto in Italia” provides an example in which the detraction is constructed as if it were the talk of an Ethiopian woman: “Farewell, Mr. Negus, I

am leaving and going to Italy, don't be sad, I will not come back anyway." One more example is the song "Stornelli al signor Tafari," in which the lyrics present the main character as an odd coward. While narrating his defeat, the tone is ironic, and the lyrics mention his crown as a symbolic element around which a "stereotype of the Negus" is constructed[10]: "where did he go? They want to see him, with the crowned head and the mantel of a warrior; he found no place, the king of kings with his hat he quickly puts on his head, the one that was hidden under the bed." Furthermore, this is one example where sonic imagery bears a direct correlation with satirical illustrations.

Shifting from the Negus to another pivotal figure in the colonial narrative, the African woman, we may see that the contrast between the ruler and the ruled provides the general frame of many songs and images inscribing fascist racism within a sexist logic and erotic exoticism. In these cases, female and black bodies become metaphors of psychological and material conquest; once again, discredit of Ethiopian people is achieved through derision and satire. In these songs, subjugation begins with titles. "Africanina" describes a "little oriental flower," a "little black doll," with "fat lips," which "thanks to the legionnaire who brings freedom" will learn to "give Garibaldian kisses." A similar tone may be identified in the aforementioned song "Ti porto in Italia," in which an Italian soldier invites a "little moor girl" to follow him to his homeland, where she will "taste pizza, clams and *panettone*." In "Morettina," another such song, the presumed desire of Ethiopian women to be conquered by the colonizer is explicitly linked to their presumed desire to be sexually possessed. The same stereotype is repeated in the song "Africanella," where – yet again – a black woman is the object of a promise according to which she will be "more beautiful" once she becomes an Italian woman. The rendition of the song "Africanella" is particularly fascinating as the singer is a woman, the famous actress Emilia Vivaldi: her participation seems a way to make the promise even more reliable. After listening to it, the artist, musician and activist Medhin Paolos commented on the ambiguity of such songs, whose "colorful, playful, hopping melodies" appear to be purposely orchestrated in order to hide the violence of the lyrics. The light melodies play a role that is similar to that of comedy in visual representations.[11] This is an ambiguity that supports almost the entirety of the visual repertoire. The quoted pieces of music present numerous links with fascist colonial iconography, in which the "othered woman" is a crucial presence in the construction of "the exotic as an area of experimentation in sexual and cultural sovereignty" (Poidimani 2009, 127).

The representation of female bodies was complicated by the construction of the ideology of the 'pure' Italian race, which found formal recognition in the initial regulation in 1933 and in the 1938 racial laws. Italian colonial imaginary of the fascist era as well as of the previous period was inspired by the iconography of the black Venus and the Hottentot Venus, as they may be considered "symbolic depictions of the dualism within the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, marked by a conflict between desire and fear of the Other,

attraction and repulsion" (Manfren 2019, 188). According to the racial laws, it was necessary to transform the "beautiful Abyssinian woman" – heir to the exotic-erotic imaginary of the stereotypical black Venus – into a repulsive individual, closer to the stereotypical Hottentot Venus of the nineteenth century. The ban on the popular song "Faccetta Nera" was driven by a similar purpose: the aim to redefine the collective imagery of the previous century so that the interest in the exotic might be replaced by a racial stereotype with extremely negative components.[12] However, the general support of the new guidelines appeared partial and heterogeneous; likewise, the ban on "Faccetta Nera" resulted in failure, as the song was already too popular. The new tendency was explicit in newspapers, official discourse, and legislation, but it was less evident in the images that appeared in magazines or songs.

A comparison between songs such as "Sul mercato di Macallè" and some satirical illustrations shows the complexity and ambiguity of various attitudes towards that specific area. When the song ironically depicts the "major sale" of wares – including women – on the Tigrayan market, it is reminiscent of the illustrated postcards authored by Enrico De Seta and produced for the use of Italian troops in Eastern Africa. The well-known visual representation depicts a group of naked women; from the sign next to them, we learn they are "slave girls on sale." A short text under the image informs us that we are "at the marketplace," and that two soldiers are summing up the offer while saying to each other: "let's go halves and share them…"[13]

Just like many illustrations dedicated to Selassie, images of this kind show the female individual as a visual translation of the bantering approach presented in many songs. The adoption of the ironic-satirical register both in imagery and song raises interesting questions today regarding the effects of the ironic appropriation of racist stereotypes by racialized individuals. The case of the rap song "Non pago affitto" by Bello FiGo, criticized by right-wing politicians and anti-racist activists alike, shows how the (re)signification of this representational strategy can generate multiple conflicts (Scacchi 2018, 54).

Looking at the present

The connections previously analyzed confirm what much historical research has underlined: that coordination and organization were important factors within fascist propaganda. Its ability to persuade Italian population through "coordinated imagery" aimed at the formation of a single stance for Italian society (Labanca 2022; Deplano 2015). Once World War II ended, marking the end of fascism and the loss of the colonies, the decolonizing process was not led by Italian politicians, but rather it was just taken for granted both by the political class and by the general public. The colonial experience was removed, generating an institutional "amnesia" (Palma and Triulzi 2011; Deplano and Pes 2014) that has proved particularly persistent. In the post-fascist historical phase, a general taboo placed on racist utterances "made the production and

reproduction of power relations that define various degrees of racialized social hierarchies culturally invisible" (Giuliani 2015, 167).

In the specific context of present-day cultural and artistic production, the majority of Italian institutions maintain an ambiguous relationship towards a colonial heritage that has never really been challenged.[14] In the words of the art curator Johanne Affricot, "the political, social and cultural agenda in this country is in the hands of an intellectual elite exclusively interested in the slogan of the moment, [...] or in media strategies to dominate the market of the *status quo*, the *consensus*" (2022, n.p.). The artist Alessandra Ferrini specifies that the amnesia persists and favors "white solidarity practices decoupled from scrutiny of white privilege and accountability" (2020, n.p.). In agreement with both positions, this contribution aims to emphasize the importance of analyzing the past in order to provide questions and answers regarding its legacy. It is even more indispensable in order to identifying possible methodologies for decolonizing whiteness.

Fundamental practices that move in such a direction started out in recent years and are gaining recognition, both inside and outside academia.[15] Within contemporary arts, a central component of the critical discussion is the idea that the visual sphere is particularly potent. In other words, it is acknowledged that "what it is removed from, or solved within, the official historiography at the level of verbal communication continues to survive within the images and organizes the daily life, in terms of cultural, political and legislative practices of a nation" (Scacchi 2018, 49). On the other hand, there is an ongoing discussion around the ways in which critical analysis of the neocolonial gaze is expressed while considering that "visuality itself constructs race" (Scacchi 2018, 50).

Like the visual sphere, music and sound maintain enormous political and poetical potential, and may therefore be considered not only as the object of analyses but more aptly as critical configurations (Chambers 2020). It is therefore interesting to identify the ways music and imagery now come to terms with the colonial past, the types of relation they construct around the two spheres, the reflections we can extrapolate from these reflections, and how we can use these reflections to unmake whiteness and the myth of *italianità*.

The unmaking of *italianità*

In this section, I will focus on some artistic experiences that have emerged in Italy over recent years and that aim to "work the archive" of Italian colonialism through a range of approaches. The artistic experiences are "acoustic histories that offer a persistent background 'noise' that disturbs the institutional silence of the historical archive" (Chambers 2020, 11). They use sound as a critical tool to deconstruct the official memory and stimulate new imagery. The function of sound is evocative, and what it evokes are images, memories, and stories that dismantle the Italian colonial collective imaginary. While presenting the results of these artistic practices, I

will elaborate on the following question: is it possible to work on melodies and words of songs without replicating their violence?

The removal of colonialism from collective memory is one of the main themes elaborated by artist Alessandra Cianelli over a decade of activity. She has been digging into the Italian colonial archive since 2012. Her work gravitates around familiar memories as well as the traces that can be found in Naples, her city, in order to build an exploration of "wonder."[16] Her 2017 work titled *Il paese delle terre d'Oltremare (corrispondenze e souvenir archeo-tecnologici e radio sonici sulle tracce del nonno scomparso*) is a live radio performance. Closely connected to the film titled *All'aldilàdiqua* (2020) – directed with the artist and director Opher Thomson –, it is a visionary-sonic essay that started out from an exploration of her family's photographic archive. The artist's voiceover and the voices of some of her research companions overlap with musical pieces from the colonial repertoire and various audio materials in which the repertoire resounds even decades after its publication.[17] The narrative of Cianelli's work is based on a structure of "words that hide themselves" and "forbidden questions": Libya, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Bengasi, "where did Princess Taitù end up?" Those are the words that return and run along a hidden course, made up of personal stories that cannot be confessed, shared or elaborated (Ferlito 2018). The audio sequence is underpinned by question marks related to her family past, one that has been deliberately forgotten, and to the various omissions from official history. The artist's grandfather left Italy for Libya as a soldier in 1940 and never came back; no relative ever wanted to talk about it. He did not want to participate in that war, like many other soldiers, despite what the propaganda stated. The plot of the narrative is continuously interrupted and restarted, constructed through overlaps and mixes of different materials, including sound, words, phrases, speech, language, and tones. Part of this mix is made up of colonial songs, some of which tell of the colonial experience in southern Italy. The triumphant tones of these songs and texts create a rift from the artist's delicate words, her quiet voice, measured breath, and the words of other more recent music and speeches that represent a 'voice of resistance'. Here, the sonic element is an instrument of reconciliation with (missing) memories and histories, both on a personal and a collective level. But more than anything else, it is a way to disrupt any interpretation of official history as a linear and concluded tale.

The 2021 sound installation titled *Tra due rive straniere* works with similar material, although on a different register. It is the work of artist, researcher, and educator Alessandra Ferrini, together with the researcher and activist Mackda Ghebremariam Tesfaù and the sound producer Marco Stefanelli, created for a collective exhibition at the Valentino Park in Turin.[18] In this work, the sonic element is the vibrational body of a critical recreation of the official history. The sonic materials dialogue with the surroundings, question the buried memory, and mine its symbolic stability. The park was used in the past as the main building for national and

international expositions: in 1884, 1911, 1928, and 1961. On those occasions, it was one of the many spaces exploited by the colonial governments to construct and manipulate the notion of *italianità*. It was also the location of 'human zoos' that often functioned as the exhibition of bodies which populated displays of individuals who were "othered" and subjugated, presented as both desirable and despicable (Levra and Roccia 2003; Abbattista 2013). Ferrini positioned four audio tracks in symbolic points within the space: the place where the "Bay of Assab" – the reconstruction of a Dancalian village – was set up in 1884 for the Italian General Exhibition; in front of the "Monumento all'Artigliere" (1930), dedicated to the heroes of Italian wars, from the Risorgimento to WWII, via the colonial wars; before the statue of Paolo Thaon di Revel, the grand admiral who took part in the 1911 Italian-Turkish war, the occupation of Libya, the bombing of Tripoli and many other offensive military actions; and at a point on the bank of the river Po, from which the pavilions of the Italian colonies could be admired at the 1911 International Exhibition. The voiceover reconstructs episodes and historical facts that link the story of the specific park in which the exhibition took place to colonial history and contemporary racism. The evoked images tell us about devices and methods of representation. The musical background creates a meditative and therapeutic dimension. The voiceover is sometimes interrupted by musical elements from the music archives. The various tracks invite the listener to stop, breathe, observe, listen, and question. The voice brings the removal to the surface; it unveils the colonial lie, shaking neocolonial hypocrisy. In the mind of the listener, a new political and poetic landscape is shaped. The sonic elements in Ferrini's work have transformative power. Her sound installation alters the perception of the surrounding space: the public place where colonial authorities wrote their history becomes the critical space where conflicting memories emerge to underline the contradictions of current Italian institutional policies.

The 2015 documentary film *Asmarina*, directed by Alan Maglio and Medhin Paolos, is inspired by sonic memories and colonial visions. The title of their audiovisual work creates the framework for an exploration of the human relationships between Italians, Ethiopians, and Eritreans. This exploration is led by the voices of the Habesha community, which has been based in Milan for decades. Thanks to one of the interviewees of the film, we learn that "Asmarina" is a song written in 1930 by an Italian in Eritrea and dedicated to the beauty of the women of Asmara. In the 1980s, the song was translated into Tigrinya by Wedi Shawl, a well-known Eritrean singer, who transformed the original lyrics into a celebration of Asmara, his hometown, whose liberation (from Ethiopian government control) was yet to come. In an interview, Paolos explains that "almost every Eritrean remembers the song, although everyone puts different emotions and memories into it" (Camilli 2016). Similarly, the film hosts a heterogeneous group of voices in order to reconstruct the different phases of the Eritrean diaspora in Italy, as well as the different ways in which one can feel like a foreigner in Italy. Albeit the central theme of the documentary is the city of Milan, as seen through the eyes of

the Habesha community, music is used as a means by which to reactivate the collective memory and move it in an anti-nostalgic direction, towards a form of re-appropriation that is “affirmative” (Braidotti 2017). A perfect example of the use of music in the documentary is the portrayal of the artistic practice of Million Seyum, or “DJ Milly,” who improvises a DJ set in a public park in the city of Milan, seconds after his ironic declaration that he is “a true *Milanese*.”

A few years after the release of *Asmarina*, the cultural and political vitality of the Eritrean community in Italy is portrayed in the work of artist and performer Muna Mussie. ጎዳና ቦሎኛ اينولوب عراش *Bologna St. 173* is the title of a 2021 work created as part of an artistic residency at the space Archive in Milan.[19] Mussie’s work is inspired by the combative feelings shared at the Eritrean political festivals and conferences that took place between 1974 and 1991 in Bologna – the city where the artist lives. These events supported the fight against the military regime and the independence of a new nation. Of those moments, Mussie largely remembers “the stubborn political resistance that was passing through sharing, music and dances” (Colah 2021). The sonic memory that Mussie explores in this project is an unofficial one, created through the emotional involvement of those events. The curator of the exhibition, Zasha Colah, explains that the visitor is brought into the emotional impression that the festivals left in the artist’s sensorial imagination: “within a pervasive war context, the archive of what is left of the fight, of its symbols, of its iconography, of its acronyms, is crossed by an artistic imaginary that is fluorescent, made of neon lights, hallucinatory, psychedelic, trembling and stroboscopic” (2021). The voice of the artist delivers another layer to the imagery, as she reads the list of abbreviations, acronyms, organizations of workers, women, and students, and the names of the various associations that supported the resistance movement. The work was also displayed in Rome in 2022, although in a slightly different version and with a slightly different title, *Bologna St. 173 (Riverberi Roma)*.[20] In the new version, an audiovisual excerpt of a festival in Bologna is accompanied by the voice of a young Eritrean woman who remembers living on Bologna Street, a street in Asmara named after the Italian city, in order to celebrate the fundamental role the city played for Eritreans in the years of the fight for liberation. In Mussie’s work, the sonic element is a thread used to reconnect with the experience of a resistance, whose memory is at stake as it survives only in the memories of those who were there or those who still resist.

From a similar perspective, we may investigate how these themes are presented and interpreted musically. Writer and singer Gabriella Ghermandi, the author of *Regina di fiori e di perle*, elaborates a critique of *italianità* and the colonial past through the staging of songs of the Ethiopian resistance against the fascist army. The re-use of such songs was made possible by the work of a band made up of Italian and Ethiopian musicians, the Atse Tewodros Project, which the artist herself founded in 2013. While writing in Italian and singing in Amharic, Ghermandi aims to reconcile her two souls (Chiriacò 2018, 105). For her, re-staging a partisan

song today is a fundamental means to remember that Italian racism is both structural and institutional. As Italy was celebrating the anniversary of its liberation from Nazi-fascism, Italian representatives never mentioned the contribution of Ethiopian partisans. Likewise, they do not recall the dates of events related to the invasion of Ethiopia, which Italian society constantly tries to eradicate. As Ghermandi stated in a conversation (Chiriacò 2018), they are all signals of a colonial way of thinking that has not been canceled and has been dragged into today's Italy, albeit often unknowingly. Music archives, in this instance, become "a question of the future, the question of the future itself," for music is a "source of a critical perturbation" (Chambers 2020, 11) that allows for the outlining of decolonized imagery.

Future imageries

Art curators and researchers Lucrezia Cippitelli and Simone Frangi recently stated that critical work on Italian colonialism in the arts has often emerged in Italy as an "out-of-focus," diluted or attenuated phenomenon (2022, 14). It has made rare appearances in the concerns of certain artists, particularly in the 2000s, often as a theme, sometimes as a method, but rarely as an ethic (Cippitelli and Frangi 2022, 14). This is why there is still work to do at a systemic level. As showed in this contribution, contemporary arts and music can reveal contents and methodologies. What has emerged in recent years is a multiplication of critical proposals, thanks to increasing attention towards positionality (both of racialized individuals or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, of individuals who understand their own white privilege). It is pivotal to focus on opening new spaces of critical discussion and activism in order for the discussion to reach areas of the society beyond what is traditionally considered as the world of art. It is pivotal to focus on schools and streets. In this sense, the experiences presented here promote an agenda akin to that promoted by the project *Listening to Italian Colonialism*. To facilitate connections among these experiences seems to be the most reasonable thing to do.

Notes

[1] Started in 2021, the project explores the relations between Italy and Ethiopia through the lens of Italian popular music: https://tamuedizioni.com/%23daqui=listening-to-italian-colonialism.

[2] In both cases, the title of the song is written in capital letters, and it is quite visible. The image is published in Alsona Bertazzi 2010, 224.

[3] An example of art illustration is *Giro dell'Africa Orientale* (c. 1935), a tabloid with 44 illustrated cells. Two of them display a lyre player and a 'phantasy': a dance scene where a woman dances surrounded by other women who clap, and a drummer (Manfren 2019, 90-91).

[4] The first research with an academic scope was published in 1941, when musicologist Guglielmo Barblan confronted the lack of reliable information regarding Ethiopian music.

[5] About the colonial photographic archive, see Del Boca and Labanca 2002, Mancini 1996, Triulzi 1995, Palma 1999. On the postcards, the illustrations from colonial magazines and paintings, see Manfren 2009 and Marrocu 2017.

[6] The interview may be found online at: https://vimeo.com/640282940/ed821d42c6.

[7] This song as well as the other songs commented on in this paragraph are available from the website of the project *Listening to Italian Colonialism* (https://www.afrovocality.com/ethiopia-in-1930s-italian-popular-music/).
[8] This is the original text: “The *fitaurari* Sciaffara, who could not defend Gorrahei from the assault of Italian army, was personally condemned to torture by the Negus, as hundreds of soldiers looked on. A dozen impromptu executioners pricked the poor man with swords, while two soldiers gave him 50 lashes. Eventually, Sciaffara was put in prison and dressed in women’s clothes”; illustration in *La Documenica del Corriere* (1935). Republished in Manfren 2019, 512.
[9] The images may be seen in Mandren 2019, 573, 576, 588.
[10] Manfren analyzes the elements that contributed to create “the stereotype of the Negus”: his head cloth (the imperial crown, the little helmet or the hat), the umbrella, and the lion (2019, 140-166).
[11] The interview may be found online at: https://vimeo.com/661225452.
[12] Medicine and anthropology played a fundamental role in the construction of the stereotype of the African woman as carrier of sexual diseases (Poidimani 2009, 126-127; Scego 2015).
[13] The series of postcards was not approved as it promoted the image of a woman who was still desirable; likewise, many of the songs discussed here were given ever more restricted circulation.
[14] The literature on the subject is very substantial. In addition to the articles already quoted, more strictly related to the contemporary art scene, see also Andall and Duncan 2005, Bovo Romœuf and Manai 2015, Castelli and Laurenzi 2000, Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012.
[15] It is interesting to note that several artistic works emerged around 2015, the year of the Venice Biennale curated by Okwui Enwezor, the first curator of the Biennale of African origin. His appointment in 2013 arguably encouraged other institutions to deal with postcolonial issues, therefore giving more opportunities to artists dealing with similar themes. Ever since then, the relationship with the Other and with the colonial past has become more and more explored (Ferlito 2018).
[16] The artist’s blog may be found at: https://ilpaesedelleterredoltremare.wordpress.com/.
[17] Examples: “La Festa Del Marabutto” (1911), “Surdato campagnolo” (1936), “Tripoli bel suol d’amor” (1911), and “I misteri della giungla nera” (1990) by Pino Donaggio; “Battle Of Adowa” (1997) by Ras Ibi & The Soldiers; “Lion of Judah War with Ethiopia 1935-1936” (1975) by Lutz Becker; “Il leone del deserto” (1981) by Omar Mukhtar; “Riusciranno i nostri eroi a ritrovare l’amico misteriosamente scomparso in Africa?” (1968) by Ettore Scola; “O Tripulino Napulitano” (1926) by di Raffaele Viviani. The works may be found online at: https://soundcloud.com/user- 232255629/il-paese-delle-terre-doltremare.
[18] *Memory Matters*, Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo and Biennale Democrazia, in collaboration with Black History Month Florence, October 6-November 7, 2021, Turin: https://fsrr.org/mostre/memory-matters/.
[19] The website of the space *Archive* is online at: https://www.archivesites.org/milano/.
[20] *Sediments: After Memory*, curated by Spazio Griot, Johanne Affricot and Eric Otieno Sumba, June 30th-September 4th 2022, Mattatoio, Rome: https://www.mattatoioroma.it/mostra/sediments-after-memory.

References

Abbattista, Guido. 2013. *Umanità in mostra. Esposizioni etniche e invenzioni esotiche in Italia (1880-1940)*. Trieste: EUT.

Abbonizio, Isabella. 2011. “Etnografia musicale e colonialismo italiano: contributi sul folclore dei territori d’oltremare dall’epoca liberale al fascismo.” *Ethnorêma* 7: 27-42.

Affricot, Johanne. 2022. “Alika Ogochukwu: How Systemic Racism in Italy Pollutes Our Right to Imagine Ourselves as Us.” *Griot*, August 2. https://griotmag.com/en/alika-ogochukwu-how-systemic-racism-in-italy-pollutes-our-right-to-imagine-ourselves-as-us/. Accessed August 13 2022.

Alsona Bertazzi, Giulio. 2010. *Le cartoline di A. Bertiglia. Regionalismo, paesaggistica, commemorative, politiche, pubblicitarie*. Torino: Effebi.

Andall, Jacqueline, and Duncan Derek. 2005. *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*. Oxford: Peter Lang.

Bovo, Romœuf Martine, and Franco Manai, eds. 2015. *Memoria storica e postcolonialismo. Il caso italiano*. Bruxelles: Peter Lang.

Braidotti, Rosi. 2017. *Per una politica affermativa. Itinerari etici*. Roma: Mimesis.

Camilli, Annalisa. 2016. "Asmarina, l'album di famiglia degli eritrei in Italia." *Internazionale,* March 11. https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/annalisa-camilli/2016/03/11/asmarina-eritrea-documentario. Accessed August 20, 2022.

Castelli, Enrico, and David Laurenzi, eds. 2000. *Permanenze e metamorfosi dell'immaginario coloniale in Italia*. Napoli: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane.

Chambers, Iain. 2020. *Mediterraneo Blues*. Napoli: Tamu.

Chiriacò, Gianpaolo. 2018. "'Today you have day off': un'artista etiope-italiana e il mondo dell'arte postcoloniale." *From the European South* 3: 99-114.

——. 2021. "Chissà il Negus che cosa dirà. La memoria sonora del colonialismo italiano." Daqui. https://tamuedizioni.com/%23daqui=la-memoria-sonora-del- colonialismo-itali. Accessed August 20, 2022.

——. 2022. *"Chillu soldate, come chiagneva.* La questione coloniale negli archivi sonori italiani." *ATeM*, 07 (2), 1-21.

Cianelli, Alessandra. 2015. "Lavorare l'Archivio (A cosa servono gli archivi?)." https://ilpaesedelleterredoltremare.wordpress.com/pagina-1/. Accessed August 20, 2022.

Cippitelli, Lucrezia, and Simone Frangi, eds. 2021. *Colonialità e culture visuali in Italia. Percorsi critici tra ricerca artistica, pratiche teoriche e sperimentazioni pedagogiche*. Roma: Mimesis.

Deplano, Valeria, and Alessandro Pes, eds. 2014. *Quel che resta dell'impero. La cultura coloniale degli italiani*. Roma: Mimesis.

Deplano, Valeria. 2015. *L'Africa in casa. Propaganda e cultura coloniale nell'Italia fascista.* Milano: Mondadori.

Del Boca, Angelo, and Nicola Labanca. 2002. *L'impero africano del fascismo nelle fotografie dell'Istituto Luce*. Roma: Editori Riuniti.

Di Barbora, Monica. 2018. "Colonizzare la bellezza. Fascismo ed estetica femminile tra razza e classe (1935-1941)." In "Tavola Rotonda. Visualizzare la razza e costruire la bellezza in Italia (1922-2018)", edited by Gaia Giuliani, Monica Di Barbora, Vincenza Perilli, Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh, and Goffredo Polizzi. *Italian Studies* 73 (4): 432-460.

Ferlito, Alessandra. 2018. "Le prospettive postcoloniali e le pratiche curatoriali: il caso Italia". PhD diss., Università degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale.

Ferrini, Alessandra. 2020. "White Tinted Glasses: on the 'difficult heritage' of Italian colonialism." *Journal of Visual Culture & Harun Farocki Institute*, June 17. https://www.harun-farocki-institut.org/en/2020/06/17/white-tinted-glasses-on-the-difficult-heritage-of-italian-colonialism-journal-of-visual-culture-hafi-31-2/. Accessed August 20, 2022.

Giuliani, Gaia. 2015. "Mediterraneità e bianchezza. Il razzismo italiano tra fascismo e articolazioni contemporanee (1861-2015)." *Iperstoria* 6: 167-182.

Labanca, Nicola. 2002. *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Levra, Umberto, and Rosanna Roccia, eds. 2003. *Le esposizioni torinesi, 1805-1911: specchio del progresso e macchina del consenso*. Torino: Archivio storico.

Lombardi-Diop, Cristina, and Caterina Romeo, eds. 2012. *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mancini, Maria. 1996. *Obiettivo sul mondo: viaggi ed esplorazioni nelle immagini dell'Archivio fotografico della Società Geografica Italiana (1866–1956).* Roma: SGI.

Manfren, Priscilla. 2019. *Icone d'Oltremare nell'Italia fascista: artisti, illustratori e vignettisti alla conquista dell'Africa*. Trieste: EUT.

Mignemi, Adolfo. 1983. *Immagine coordinata per un impero. Etiopia 1935-1936*. Torino: Gruppo Editoriale Forma.

——. 1995. "Fotografia e ideologia coloniale nell'esperienza italiana degli anni Trenta." In *Fotografia e storia dell'Africa*, edited by Alessandro Triulzi, 51-58. Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale.

Marrocu, Luciano. 2017. "La pittura coloniale italiana tra orientalismo e propaganda di regime." In *Sardegna d'Oltremare*, edited by Valeria Deplano, 13-34. Roma: Donzelli.

Palma, Silvana. 1999. *L'Italia coloniale*. Roma: Editori Riuniti.

Palma, Silvana, and Triulzi Alessandro. 2011. *Colonia e postcolonia come spazi diasporici. Attraversamenti di memorie, identità e confini nel Corno d'Africa*. Roma: Carocci.

Poidimani, Nicoletta. 2009. *Difendere la razza. Identità razziale e politiche sessuali nel progetto imperiale di Mussolini*. Roma: Sensibili alle foglie.

Scacchi, Anna. 2018. "Mettere in scena la razza. Visualità, autenticità e performance razziale." In *Visualità e (anti)razzismo*, edited by InteRGRace, 47-59. Padova: Padova University Press.

Scego, Igiaba. 2015. "La vera storia di Faccetta nera." *Internazionale*, August 6. https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/igiaba-scego/2015/08/06/faccetta-nera-razzismo. Accessed August 20, 2022.

Triulzi, Alessandro, ed. 1995. *Fotografia e storia dell'Africa*. Napoli: Istituto Universitario Orientale.

Alessandra Ferlito holds a PhD in International Studies from the *Università degli Studi "L'Orientale,"* Naples (2018). Her research focuses on contemporary art curating in Italy and analyzes how, through exhibitions, Italy is confronting with coloniality, the postcolonial question and decolonial instances. She is a member of the Centre of Postcolonial and Gender Studies and of Technoculture Research Unit ("L'Orientale," Naples). As an art curator and independent researcher, she collaborates with artists, cultural associations, and interdisciplinary research groups. She is currently part of the interdisciplinary research projects *Listening to Italian colonialism*, and *Research as Vocality. Tracing the African Presence in Naples*, both conceived by Gianpaolo Chiriacò and based at the University of Innsbruck.