Of Calimero and other stories

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De Calimero y otras historias

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Abstract

In my article, I explore the common roots of the different expressions, manifestations, politics, and embodiments of anti-black racism by examining the similarities and differences of anti-black imaginaries in Italy and the way they resonate with anti-black racism in the African diaspora contexts, including the Latin American one. While this comparative perspective reaffirms the global dimension of different forms of racism and anti-racist struggles, it also places the case of Italy, with its colonial past and postcolonial present, in direct conversation with the larger global context of racist narratives and practices.

Keywords

Racism, Immigration, Postcoloniality, Blackness.

Resumen

En este artículo exploro las raíces comunes de diferentes expresiones, manifestaciones, políticas, y encarnaciones del racismo hacia l@s Afro-descendientes, analizando las similitudes y diferencias de los imaginarios racistas en Italia y la manera en la que se articulan al racismo hacia l@s Afro-descendientes en otros contextos de la Diáspora Africana, incluido el contexto Latino Americano. Esta perspectiva comparativa reafirma la dimensión global de diferentes formas de racismo y de luchas antirracistas a la vez que pone

el caso italiano, con su pasado colonial y presente postcolonial, en conversación con el contexto más amplio de discursos y practicas racistas.

Palabras Claves

Racismo, Inmigración, Postcolonialidad, Negritud.

As many scholars and activists from around the globe have argued for decades, the different expressions, politics, and embodiments of anti-black racism, while specific to their historical, political, and socio-cultural contexts, share common roots in the history of European colonial dominations and the development of global capitalism. In my article, I explore such common roots by examining the similarities and differences of anti-black imaginaries in Italy and the way they resonate with anti-black racism in the Latin American context. This comparative perspective reaffirms the global nature of different forms of racism and anti-racist struggles, and places the Italian case, with its colonial past and postcolonial present, in direct conversation with the larger global context of racist narratives.

I would like to start my discussion with a reflection that springs from my multifaceted personal experience. Born and raised in the south of Italy, I moved to Ecuador, South America, for much longer than the duration of my Ph.D. fieldwork, to finally settled down in the USA as an immigrant, a teacher, and mother of a biracial young man. When I was a kid, Italian television offered limited programming for kids, and my parents only allowed my brother and me to watch *Carosello* broadcasting at 8 pm before going to bed. Carosello was a segment dedicated exclusively to commercial advertising[1]. It broadcasted every evening preceding the rest of the primetime shows on public TV Rai, the only one existing at that time. It lasted 10 minutes and usually had 4 to 5 spots advertising various products. Those of my generation who grew up with Carosello, still remember the gallery of characters that became the familiar friendly faces of a specific product. The spots were more like episodes with a plot in which the main character would introduce the merchandise in a series of events for which the product represented the happy and needed ending. Amidst that gallery of characters, the one that is pertinent to my discussion is the darling Calimero the black chick (*Calimero il*

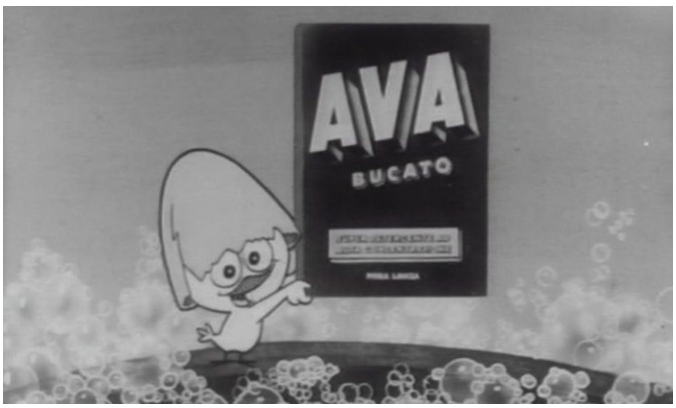
[1)] Carosello broadcasting started in 1957 and lasted until 1977 when the emergence of private TV channels revolutionized the world of TV advertising

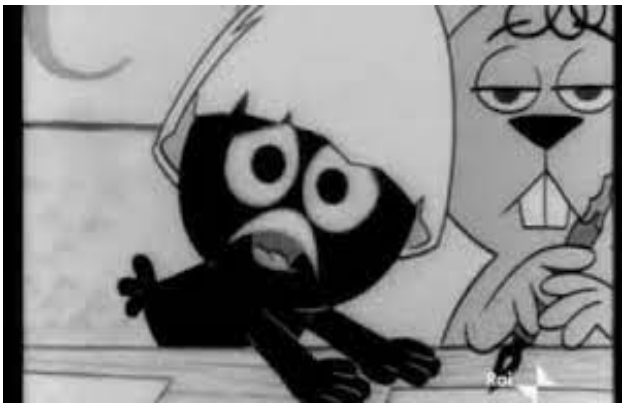
pulcino nero). In its adventures, Calimero, which is born White, ends up getting dirty, aka Black, and consequently faces troubles[2]. At the end of each spot a sort of fairy figure, wearing traditional Dutch rural clothing, offers Calimero the AVA detergent while saying "Don't worry Calimero, you are not Black, you are only dirty." After washing, Calimero recovers its original white resemblance. In one episode, Calimero, now all dirty, is looking for its mother and cannot find her[3]. Nobody pays too much attention to the chick and its quest. Upon encountering a hen, Calimero asks her if she is its mother and after her negative response a sad Calimero asks her again "if I was White, would you be my mother?" "Yes, of course" is her answer!

[2] Image 1 (fandom, n.d.); Image 2 (detergent, n.d.)

[3] To watch this episode, go to (AntennatoBC, 1963) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iVhv7TxUYDQ.

Image 1 (left): Calimero, il pulcino nero (the dirty chick) ***Image 2 (right):*** Calimero, il pulcino bianco (the washed chick)





Popular expressions derived from Calimero's spots became part of my generation's childhood memories, and we never questioned the black-and-white narrative as problematic. Fast-forwarding, as part of my pursuit of a Ph.D. in anthropology and Andean studies, I landed in Ecuador, South America in January of 1991 and lived there until the end of 1999. During all those years, I did research, worked, and taught in a country in which I came to grasp and recognize the pervasiveness of colonial legacies and their effects on the life of individuals and communities identified under a hierarchy of racial cultural constructs rooted in the history of the colonial projects of the past. My intellectual and emotional awareness journey came to full completion once I moved to the USA, a country that Italians and Europeans at large, stereotypically identify as racist and almighty. My life in the Americas made me intellectually and emotionally fully cognizant of the subtle workings of racism and brought me back full circle

to my country of origin with a keen awareness of the ubiquity of colonial legacies and their traceable and undeniable bearing in the place I still regard as home. The images of Calimero are not simply nostalgic flashes of my childhood; they participate in a larger transnational history of the commercial depiction of race in soaps and detergents' advertising purporting whiteness as racial purity. However, in Italy, any interpretation of past cultural mores as racist is perceived as presentism and therefore neglected or rejected as irrelevant.

To understand the ambiguity of Calimero's narrative, I position Italy in a transnational and comparative perspective on racism and inequality, and frame Italian anti-black racism in a wider discussion on postcoloniality, and the legacy of colonialist discourse about blackness, whiteness, and national identity (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012). My examination of the Italian case highlights the workings of a globalized narrative of racialized "otherness" deeply rooted in historical configurations of racist practices as they pertain to different colonial and imperialistic European projects and the development of capitalism on a global scale. My examination will follow the stories of different people whose experiences of racism in Italy and elsewhere, have been marked by their alleged racialized identity at the intersection of gender, class, and nationality.

The amnesia of good people

The inclusion of contemporary Italy in the debate about postcoloniality is relatively recent (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012). The Italian colonial projects in the Horn of Africa seem to have been neglected in scholarly analyses of European imperial and capitalist expansions in the African continent during the 19th and 20th centuries. They have also been absent in scholarly and public debates about Italian modern history and society in Italy. Such an instance of historical amnesia has been interrupted recently by Italian historians like Angelo del Boca (2005), whose work brought to the foreground the connection of current forms of racism with the legacy of the Italian brutal and exploitative colonial past. As several scholars have argued, the reasons for this tardy inclusion of Italy in the map of European postcolonial stud-

ies, and Italians' oblivion of their country's modern imperial past can be found in the specificities of the Italian colonial projects[4]. Ben-Ghiat (2008) cogently summarizes these major peculiarities that allowed for the understating and minimization of the legacy of the Italian racist colonial past. It is worth noting among those, the short-lived duration of both the 19th and 20th Italian colonial missions in the Horn of Africa, and the identification of the colonial possessions as a reservoir of livelihood for Italians who, especially in the South, had to turn to emigration to find a living after the unification of the country in 1861. The repossession of Abyssinia carried out by Mussolini in 1935 ended officially in 1947 when the British took over the Italian colonies of the newly founded Italian Oriental Africa (comprising of Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia) after Italy's 1941 loss of the African campaign during WWII[5]. These peculiarities of the Italian colonial undertakings led to consequences that set the Italian case apart from other European colonial projects. Italy was the only European country to lose its colonies to another colonial power despite localized resistance to the colonial ruling, hence minimizing the relevance of the Italian case in studies of decolonization. At the same time, the short-lived presence of the Italian empire in East Africa left less significant cultural marks in the former colonies, not even the adoption of Italian as the official language. After independence, much fewer ex-colonial subjects migrated to Italy compared to immigrants in other former European empires, and that modest flow ceased by the end of the 1960s when all remaining treaties and agreements between Italy and the former colonies terminated[6]. Therefore, the memory of the former imperial past bore little visible presence in modern Italian society, allowing for a supposed homogeneous portrait of Italian culture and its people. However, as Triulzi (2007) argues, the legacy of the colonial racist past reappears in different spaces and guises, especially in response to more recent immigration fluxes from the African continent. One of the displacements of such legacy has nurtured the myth of Italiani brava gente (Italians good people) according to which the Italian colonial interventions were nurtured by humanitarian intentions, and Italians moving to the colonies to find a new home for themselves did it in the spirit of peaceful coexistence. While this myth serves the purpose of minimizing the violence and the atrocities committed by the Italian army in their colonial interventions in

[4] See discussions in (Andall & Duncan, 2005), (Ben-Ghiat, 2008), (Bertella-Farnetti & Dau Novelli, 2015) (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012), (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2015), (Mellino, 2012) among others.

[5] The Italian defeat at Adwa during the first Ethiopian war in 1896 meant the loss of Ethiopia and the retreat of the Italian army.

[6] In 1950 the UN assigned to Italy the administration of Somalia, under the *Trusteeship Agreement for the Territory of Somalia,* which ended in 1960 with Somalian independence.

the Horn of Africa, they are also serving the purpose of denying the existence of racism, and its most exacerbated xenophobic expressions, in contemporary Italian society[7]. In my discussion, I follow this perspective on displacement by focusing on the legacy of other practices in the Italian colonial regime that clearly position Italy within the framework of European imperial projects and shed light on current racist discourses in that country, as well as on current debates about citizenship and italianità (Italianness). The logic and narratives that supported those practices in the colonial context highlight the historical configuration of contemporary racism despite its staunch denial and the cry for an Italian exceptionalism. The contemporary discourse on blackness, national identity, and citizenship underscores Italian kinship with and belonging to the transnational colonial projects of the 19th and early 20th centuries founded on the naturalization of racial hierarchies. Beyond its specificities, the Italian representations, and discourses about blackness place Black people, either as colonial subjects or today as immigrants, in what Góngora Mera, Vera Santos, and Costa define as "regimes of inequalities" (regímenes de desigualdad) when analyzing the subject position of Black people in the African diasporic experience across both the Atlantic and Pacific. (Leiva Espitia, 2022)[8]. The 19th century's pseudo-scientific discourse on race and racial hierarchies informed Italian social, cultural, and legal treatment of Southern Italians since unification, and of its colonial subjects in the Africa Orientale Italiana. I argue that the memory of this body of assumptions and representations emerges as flashes to respond to the perceived threat that current immigrants allegedly pose to Italian mores, society, and safety.

[7] For a discussion of this myth and the violence of Italian colonial interventions see (Del Boca, 2005).

[8] See discussion in (Leiva Espitia, 2022).

Attraction: Italian Fantasy Revisited

One of the dislocations of colonialist narratives in contemporary Italian society can be found in the visual representations of blackness, especially the treatment of Black female bodies. In my summer travels to Italy over the last three decades, I started to collect articles in newspapers and magazines that illustrated the debate over immigration. In my open-ended search, I came across some troubling images used for advertising in popular magazines such

as L'Espresso, Il Venerdì di Repubblica (The Friday of Republic), and La Repubblica delle Donne (Women's Republic), the latter two being weekly magazines sold with the Friday's and Saturday's publishing of the newspaper La Repubblica.

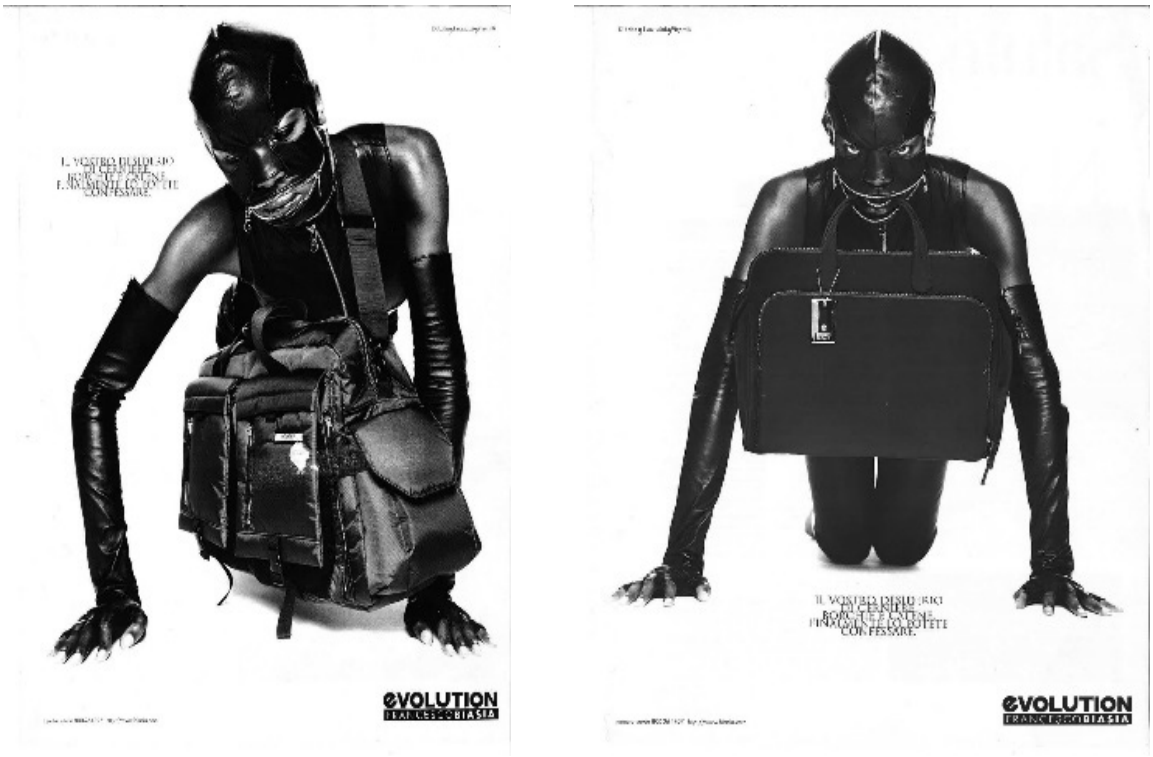


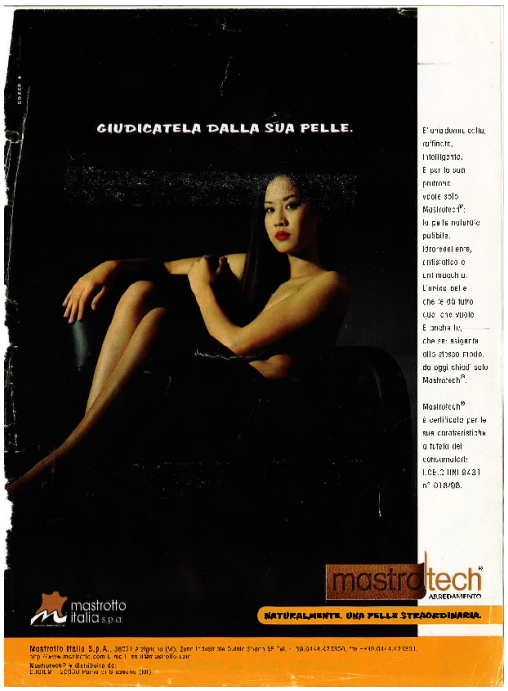
Image 3 (left) and ***Image 4 (right)***. Caption reads the same in both images: "Your desire for zippers, studs, and chains. You can confess it!." Both images are from the magazine *La Repubblica delle Donne.* (Evolution by Francesco Biasia [photograph], 1999).

Both images above advertise leather bags by designer Francesco Biasia, a collection titled *Evolution*. The captions that accompany them treat the Black woman as the object of the sexual bondage fantasy by animalizing her[9]. The Black model's stands on hands and knees in these images suggest a predator in defensive/offensive poses. In one she looks straight into the eyes of the viewer as her possible attacker/prey (image 4). In the other image, the pose insinuates domestication and rendering, with the creature's head bent, looking down in a non-menacing gaze. These animal-like representations connect also to the title of the collection, *Evolution*, suggesting blackness as the less evolved of the human races, the more animalistic one whose skin, the raw, is transformed into a sophisticated bag, the "cooked." These commercial images were published in 1999 in the magazine *La Repubblica delle Donne*,

[9] Evolution by Francesco Biasia [photograph], 1999), personal collection. Translation is mine.

a period in which the impact of immigration was beginning to emerge center stage in Italian public discourse (Colombo & Dalla-Zuanna, 2019). When compared to the treatment of white models in the mentioned magazines, these ads alongside others portraying Black men and Asian women, all distinguished themselves for their sexual innuendos and the references to the skin, aka race, as explicit incitement of the desire and passion in the targeted white clientele (see images 5 and 6)[10].

[10] Image 5 (FUJIFILM, 1999) personal collection. Image 6: (Mastrotto, 1999) personal collection. Translations are mine.



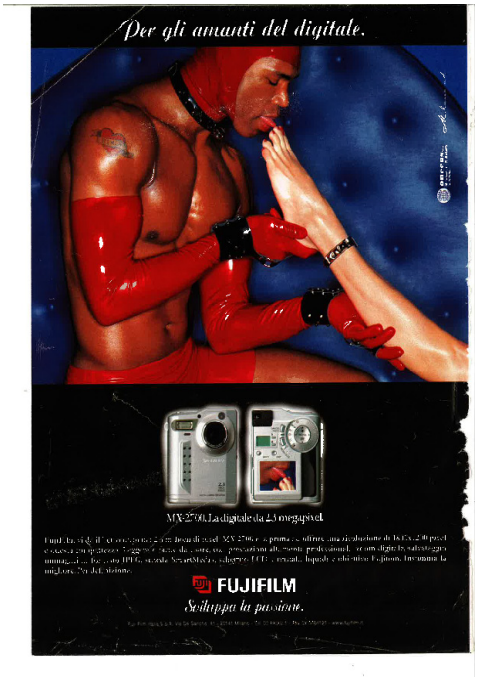


Image 5 (left): Title: "For Digital Lovers"; bottom caption "FUJIFILM *develop your passion".* (FUJIFILM, 1999).

Image 6 (right): Title "Judge her from her skin". Side Caption: "She is an educated, refined, intelligent woman. And for her armchair she wants only Mastrotech: the natural, cleanable and hydro-repellent, anti-static, and stain resistant "skin." Bottom caption "Mastrotech interior design. Naturally an extraordinary "skin." (Mastrotto, 1999)

The treatment of the Black female body in those images bares similarities in tropes and references that connect them to a transnational discourse on Black bodies and Black women. One example is the advertising industry in Ecuador, as analyzed by Rahier (2011). The ads Rahier examines present Black women in erotic and sexualized poses, offering themselves for the satisfaction and gratification of white men. As the author points out, the hypersexualization of Black Ecuadorian women has the purpose of confirming racial and gender hierarchies in two ways: first, they

reaffirm the dominant role of the white male, but also reaffirm the double standard that sets the Black female apart from their white female counterparts, whose decency and moral standard are never questioned. As I have analyzed elsewhere, such tropes about Black women's exaggerated sexuality and easy sexual mores nurture the industry of sex tourism in countries like Brazil where many Italian men travel to meet Brazilian mulattas and live their sexual fantasies on those exotic bodies (Cervone, 2021).

The legacy and kinship of these images where the Black body continues to be the object of white men's (and more recently women's) sexual desires, the trope of the Black Venus, are rooted in the colonial domination of the past in its different epochs. The very act of conquest and imposition of power by European empires was metaphorized as an act of penetration of the white man in virgin lands and territories populated by exotic others[11]. Ponzanesi (2005) cogently reconnects contemporary imaginaries of blackness in Italian advertising with the visual and discursive legacy of the colonial past. In her analysis, she puts the Italian case in conversation with other colonialist visual repertoires of the past, from the Delacroix paintings Women of Algiers in the Apartment to the renowned case of the Hottentot Venus, the Khoisan woman who in the late 19th century became the embodiment of the exaggerated and animalistic Black people's sexuality[12]. The Italian colonial predecessor of the erotic fantasies towards this engendered and racialized other can be found in the travel postcards produced during the fascist occupation of East Africa. The postcards offered photos of young African women from the colonies in half-naked poses. Following the taxonomic fashion of the 19th-century racial theories, these young girls' nudity appears as a natural feature of their customs alongside their ethnic name, and details of their dresses and hairdos. As (Bruzzi, 2017) notices, despite the pretense of their naturality, some of those images were staged by using the same girls in different poses and environments, in some cases retracted fully undressed (2017:89). These images of young girls, naked and virgin, illustrated the fantasy of Italian men in the colonies, and gave a visual content to the widespread practice of *madamato* (concubinage). It was common for Italian men to take local young women as concubines who would accompany and satisfy them during their stay in the

11) See (McClintock, 1995), (Taussig, 1987), (Vaccarelli, 2013), and (Young, 1995) among others.

12) Filmmaker Lavinia Currier evokes the animalization and feminization of the colonial subjects in her 1997 film Passion in the Desert, based on a short story by Honoré de Balzac. In the film, a French military officer, the only survivor of a doomed French mission in the Egyptian desert at the turn of the 20th century, survives thanks to the care and attention of a black panther whom he converts into his lover and companion, only to kill her at the end in an impetus of jealousy.

colonies[13]. This is another dislocation in which the Italian case participates in a wider technology of colonial power relations. As Morner (1967) discussed in the case of Spanish colonial America, Stoler (2010) in the case of the Dutch Indies, and Grimshaw (2002) for the colonial period in New Zealand, the practice of concubinage and interracial unions were common technologies in the reproduction of gender and racial hierarchies in different colonial epochs. The racial laws issued under Mussolini's fascist dictatorship in 1938 added another layer of complexity to the Italian madamato practice as they made it illegal for Italian men to bring their Black concubines and their mixed-race kids to Italy (Barrera, 2015). Whiteness and racial purity became the premise to affirm and safeguard italianità and Italian citizenship.

All these connections and dislocations speak of the transnational nature of these racist imaginaries, all rooted in the historical configurations of colonialist narratives about desire and domination. Its common roots are not only connected to the sexualized nature of colonial power relations and the racial hierarchies they established, but to their intricate and indissoluble entanglements with the development of capitalism. As Sabelli (2010) reminds us, the contemporary images of blackness in the advertising industry are reminiscent of the visual repertoire of the late colonial period used to advertise the products coming from the colonies. Black bodies and the advertised products, whether coffee or chocolate, suggested the total identification between the two via color association, commodifying in one image Black people and merchandise. In the context of capitalist exchanges and desire, the visual representations of blackness encode racialized economic hierarchies identifying both colonial and postcolonial subjects.

Repulsion: Between the Beauty and the Beast

As Young (1995) and Thomas (1994) argue, this complex realm of colonialist fantasies, desires, and entanglements, was not free from contradictions and fractures that allowed for negotiations and resistance to domination. Yet, such fantasies also established

[13] For a discussion on the practice of *madamato* (concubinage) in Italian colonies see (Sòrgoni, 1998), (Barrera, 2015), and (Trento, 2012) among others

dichotomies that produced engendered and racialized hierarchies of others. The sexual desire, which became a metaphor for conquest and domination, also reproduced criteria of beauty that did not include all "others." The attraction for the "Black Venus" was accompanied by its opposite sentiment of repulsion, which embeds the sentiment contrary to fascination and love: hate and fear. The feared and menacing other was often associated with "ugliness" and physical characteristics considered an offense to the aesthetic sensibility of the European canon of beauty (Thomas, 1994:102). Associations of indigenous and Black colonial subjects with the animal kingdom based on their alleged animalistic resemblances turned them into ugly and dangerous others, people whose physical traits evocated the savagery of their natural environment and, therefore, whose behavior was doomed to be volatile, prone to violence, and to resist submission. The extensive production of caricatures generated in Italy during fascism as colonial propaganda, for example, ridiculed and scorned local colonial populations by exaggerating their tribal, aka primitive, and racialized body features, amalgamating them into the animal kingdom[14].

[14] Image 6, translation is mine

Image 6. Even these are billy goat!...
(Abissinia under attack by Italy [photograph]).

In postcolonial societies, the dislocation of the repulsive, menacing other is attached to the body of the immigrant to safeguard the purity of the national identity and citizenship, and the privileges connected to them. The body of the "Black Venus" continues to excite the fantasies and sexual desires of many Italian men, whether of those who go to the exotic beaches of Brazil to find local juicy mulattas, or of those who use it to advertise their products. Yet, there is another version of the Black female body, one that is repulsive and subjected to ridicule. The Janus face of the Black Venus is the face of a woman whose features are scorned when compared to those of an ape. The infamous case of Cécile Kyenge illustrates this polarity between attraction and repulsion. In July of 2013, Roberto Calderoli, then Vice president of the House of Senate, during a political rally organized by his party, the Northern League, made a comparison between Minister Cécile Kyenge, an Italian citizen of Congolese origins serving as Minister of Integration in the center-left Letta government, and an orangutan. Upon exhibiting the photos of the Minister and that of an orangutan, Calderoli pointed to what, for him, was the striking resemblance between the two. Such a declaration provoked a collective and mediatic uproar from many political and social sectors, including the Vatican. Prime Minister Letta even asked for the resignation of Calderoli, which did not take place. The inquiry launched to establish whether Calderoli's remarks could be considered an incitement of racist feelings concluded in 2015 when the Senate absolved him and considered his words as a critique of immigration policies rather than an expression of racism. This vote had the approval of some senators of the center-left party Democratic Party (Fantauzzi, 2015). This type of narrative is not unique to Italy as racist associations between apes and Black people have a history that dates to the 19th-century racial theories and the representations made at the time sketching Blacks' features next to those of an ape. Yet, these representations are still ingrained in mainstream imaginaries and reappear as flashes when there is a need to reassess white hierarchies and political supremacy[15]. Kyenge's italianità, and therefore her political legitimacy, was questioned because of her race; her "ugly", alleged animalistic features became a reminder of her origins, placing her at the margins of the "imagined community" of Italians.

[15] Former First Lady Michelle Obama experienced similar treatment when Barack Obama was President of the USA

The weight of race in the discourse of national identity also affects the body of the "Black Venus" when that body conspires to represent the canon of Italian beauty at the national and international levels. In 1996 Denny Méndez, an Afro-Italian woman of Italo-Dominican origins won the title of Miss Italia and went on to represent Italy at the Miss Universe pageant in 1997. Although her election was the result of an overwhelming popular vote, it was also received amid a mediatic deluge of polemics and diatribes that questioned her body (that is, her chromatic features) as misleading in the representation of the Italian female beauty (Cerniglia, 2022). In a remarkably similar fashion, the first time an Afro- Ecuadorian woman, Monica Chalá, was elected as Miss Ecuador in 1995, her color generated a fierce debate in Ecuador about her legitimacy to represent the Ecuadorian female beauty (Rahier, 1998). Even if the background of their nationality is different for the two Misses (Chalá is an Ecuadorian citizen by family and descent, Méndez was born in the Dominican Republic to an Italian father and a Dominican mother) in these two examples, their national belonging is put into question by their race, producing a narrative according to which only whiteness (or white -mestizoness) can be associated with the identity of the nation. In the eyes of the mainstream, as it was for the madame of the Italian colonies, the Black Venus is desired as long as she keeps her subordinate place. Yet, as Denny Méndez said in a recent interview, she perseveres, and barriers keep falling (Cerniglia, 2022).

The Boogeyman and emasculation

While attraction and repulsion define the subject position of Black women in colonial and postcolonial settings, fear, and hatred warrant special treatment for Black men. In different colonial contexts and epochs, the exaggerated sexuality attributed to the Black race was also perceived as a menace, an instinct that could become uncontrollable and unpredictable. Black masculinity ended up occupying the "savage slot" of dangerous sexuality whose potential seductive power threatened the moral standard of white women and racial purity. As discussed by Stoler (2010) and Helg (2000) for different colonial and postcolonial contexts, stereotypes depicting Black men as aggressive and dangerous re-

sulted in fear-mongering paranoia over the omnipresent threat of Black men's explosive violence and their proclivity to sexually assaulting white women. The defense of racialized social hierarchies by safeguarding white women's sexuality has been a technology of colonial power in different epochs. As Morner (1967) discusses in the context of the Spanish colonies, the proscription on mixed unions was meant to preserve the purity of Spanish descent for the *castas* that oversaw the colonial administration and power. Pure-blood Spanish women's sexuality was subjected to much stricter control since their capitulation to the seductive power of non-pure-blood men would have threatened colonial social hierarchies by bringing bastards into the family[16]. In the US and Cuba, after the abolition of slavery, such assumptions and stereotypes often led to the violent killings of Black men by infuriated lynching mobs (Helg, 2000).

[16] Admiration for men's sexual prowess condoned extra-marital affairs since their potential mixed offspring would remain with their mothers as illegitimate kids.

Despite the reactivation of the myth of Italians good people to absolve contemporary Italians from the evil of racism, similar fear-mongering, and racist tropes regained life on the body of the immigrants, especially men. In popular media and social media discourses, the different attitudes reserved for the immigrants, or *extra-comunitari* as popularly called, are dissociated from any assumption of racism or reference to the alleged race of the newcomers. For some Italians, "illegal" immigrants cause problems because they resent their status and bring criminality (right-wing discourse). In more progressive discourses, Italians are concerned with the well-being of the immigrants, yet consider Italy a bad choice for them due to its lack of wealth and resources (Longhi, 2012). Success stories featuring immigrants are hailed as testaments to the no-racist myth such as the case of Tony Iwbo, an Italian politician of Nigerian origins, who gained a seat in the Senate in the elections of 2018 with the right-wing and anti-immigrant party Northern League.

However, other narratives and occurrences contradict such mythology of "buonismo" (good heartedness) revealing the discomfort, fear, and even hatred that some Italian nationals nurture towards immigrants of different nationalities, especially men. In Italian society, the presence of people of diverse cultures, colors, and ethnic backgrounds is a recent phenomenon. The very first law regulating immigration was not issued until 1990 (the Mar-

telli Law) when the immigration phenomenon had grown well beyond the magnitude of a sporadic event, posing significant questions to politicians and intellectuals about how to incorporate immigrants into Italian society. As it holds true for the current global labor market, immigrant workers, undocumented or not, fulfill the need for a cheap unskilled labor force to sustain Italian industrial and agricultural production. However, the usual cliché that immigrants steal jobs from Italians, as well as concerns about the alleged growth of criminality and deterioration of Italian mores, have relentlessly accompanied the debates about immigration, and the promulgation of the different laws aiming at ambiguously regulating the fluxes of undocumented immigrants seeking asylum or entering the country in search of jobs (see Colombo & Dalla-Zuanna, 2019). The whole universe of stereotypical judgments made on the ethnicity and the color of certain people, such as the innate propensity of Roma for stealing, of Black people for dancing and music ("have the music in the blood"), of "Africans" for rebellion abound in people's everyday conversations, interactions in public offices, and the media. Yet, they do not factor in as racist assumptions, but as common-sense knowledge learned by observation[17]. Anti-immigrant sentiments, therefore, are explained as nationalistic defenses of job sources, security, and citizenship disregarding any manifestation of overt racism and intolerance[18]. In this respect, Chile presents a parallel case to the Italian one. Built as a homogenously white, European-like nation after freezing the legacy of indigenous cultures into the past, Chilean society has grappled with institutional anti-black racism and xenophobia since it became a destination for Black refugees and immigrants from the Caribbean, especially Haitians. Labor discrimination and exploitation, poor housing, and overt demonstrations of intolerance and rejection characterize the experience of Black immigrants in Chile (Bonhomme, 2021). However, anti-immigrant sentiments are not acknowledged as racist but as legitimate defenses against the alleged rise of criminality and degradation attributed to the arrival of immigrants.

A plethora of episodes of xenophobic and racist outbursts against immigrants has troubled Italian social history over the last 30 years. They increased in conjunction with the toughening of legal regulations against immigration, of which the Law Bossi-Fini of 2002 represents the major expression. The center-

17) In many conversations I had with friends and family members over the years when dealing with domestic laborers of different ethnic origins, I was always disturbed by the gross generalizations made about the behavior of individuals as explained by their ethnicity: Ukrainian, Moldovan, Russian, and other eastern Europeans domestic workers (mostly women) are usually reported as unreliable, tough, egoistic and opportunistic, in contrast to Asians from Sri Lanka or the Philippines (either men or women) who are praised for their submissive and kind nature. In the face of such comments, I was always reminded of the noble and ignoble savage categories so dear to imperialist settings and projects of the 19th century.

18) According to a 2017 poll by Ipsos "per" Rai News-Ispi, only 16% of Italians favor the acceptance of refugees and undocumented immigrants. 38% see them as a serious threat to national security and the economy. (See (Migranti, "solo il 16% degli Italiani è per l'accoglienza. 66% critica Renzi in Ue"., 2015).

right governance of Berlusconi's party Forza Italia between 2001 and 2011, and the political victory of the Northern League in the north of the country, exacerbated anti-immigrant feelings, while also sparking reactions and concerns about xenophobia and racism among those who opposed Forza Italia[19]. In this context, racism became less of an improbable reality, and while the sexualizing of commercials started to include also images of scantily dressed white female models (an emerging preoccupation with political correctness?), violent episodes against immigrant men escalated. It is worth noting that discrimination against immigrants of different ethnicity and color happens in many spheres of life, from the workplace (which is the most common) and treatment in public offices, to everyday street interactions and exchanges[20]. While every immigrant can become a target of prejudice, mistreatment, and exploitation, the fear-mongering sentiments nurtured in different spheres of social life re-evocate the figure of the dangerous Black man, this time as the immigrant male of color, perceived as a violent menace to Italian mores, livelihood, and the honor of white women. In my discussion, I focus on two expressions of such fear-loaded sentiments and the reactions they incite.

In the 1970s the Italian feminist movement conducted a campaign to demand rape be elevated to a crime against the person, therefore to the rank of a criminal offense, and not simply an offense against the morals as it was at that time (Gli anni Settanta e la rischiesta di porte porte aperte nei tribunali., 2021). However, it took until 1996 for cases of rape to be legally considered a criminal offense. In that context, several voices from the Northern League applauded the approval of the law and took it as an opportunity to spread distorted analyses on the alleged identity of the rapists, portrayed in their high majority as immigrant men whose rage led them to assault Italian women. It is paradoxical that despite twenty years of feminist struggle pushing for the cases of rape and sexual violence to be taken seriously by the larger Italian society and political establishment, the alleged immigration status of the rapists made right-wing politicians suddenly discover the importance of that type of violence and frame it as a violation of women's honor deserving castration. Since the approval of the 1996 law, political campaigns of right-wing parties such as the League and *Fratelli d'Italia*, (Brothers of Italy) advocated for

19) The political party the Northern League, founded under the leadership of Umberto Bossi in 1991, gathered several political leagues from Northern Italy advocating for their autonomy from the southern regions and for a federalist political-administrative organization of the country. The party changed its name to the League in 2018 under the leadership of its current party leader Matteo Salvini. The name change underscored the more inclusive nationalist platform under the motto *Prima gli Italiani* (Italians first) and the shift from divisive north-south rhetoric to an anti-immigrant nationalistic one. Berlusconi founded his party Forza Italia (Go, Italy!) in 1994.

20) In ISTAT (National Institute for Statistics and Census) data up to March 2018, most of the mistreatment cases reported by immigrants are in the workplace, in public offices, related to job searches, and in interactions with neighbors. They range from verbal abuse to exploitation and lack of inclusion.

chemical castration as a punishment to be added to jail time for men convicted of rape charges[21]. In these debates, the honor of women is threatened by immigrant rapists whose perverted tendencies would not be kept at bay just by incarceration. The other paradox is that according to available statistical analyses, it is not only difficult to establish the exact figures of reported rapes by the identity of the rapist, but it is also clear that in more than 60% of the rape cases the rapists are Italian men (Non ci sono prove che il 40 per cento deli stupri è commesso da stranieri., 2022). This debate on rape, castration and immigration proposes articulations of race, nationality, and sexuality that date back to eugenics projects of the early 20th century Europe, when miscegenation was deemed responsible for the demise of the human species altogether. Quine (2012) reconstructs the debates about eugenics in the Italian context that led to the creation of Italy's first eugenics society (*Comitato italiano per gli studi di eugenica*) in 1913, nine years before the rise to power of Mussolini. The preoccupation with perfecting the Italian race, therefore, following the prescripts of eugenics, is not just a creature of fascism but an ideology that places Italy at the very core of the racist theories of the time. As Quine remarks, for the Italian eugenics school of thought the purity of the Italian race had to be preserved by insisting on reproductive hygiene that prevented reproduction among races. The preoccupation about the purity of the white Italian race reached its peak under fascism when Mussolini published the *Manifesto della razza* (Manifest of race) in 1938, which accompanied the promulgation of the race laws forbidding miscegenation and interracial unions in Italy and the colonies. Such proscriptions led to the exclusion of mixed-race offspring born from relationships of concubinage from their right to Italian citizenship, despite having Italian fathers (Barrera, 2015). The principle of *ius sanguinis* (blood law) that regulated (and still does) access to Italian citizenship had its limitations once intersected with racial classifications and was manipulated to preserve the whiteness of the Italian nationality. I consider the current debate on castration as another example of the dislocation of racist and colonialist narratives depicting the dangerous other. While in 1930 fascist and colonialist Italy the way to preserve Italian racial purity regulated Italian men's sexuality, in contemporary Italy that control is on the body of the dangerous immigrant man whose violent and animalistic temper puts at risk the honor of Italian women and therefore of the whole nation.

[21] *Fratelli d'Italia* is the political party that traces its historical descent from the fascist party founded by the followers of Benito Mussolini. Founded in 1946 as *Movimento Sociale Italiano*, MSI, by followers of Mussolini after the fall of fascism, it changed its name to *Alleanza Nazionale* (National Alliance, AN) in 1994 under the leadership of Gianfranco Fini. AN joined the right-wing political coalition named Polo per le Libertà (Pole for Liberties, PdL) with Berlusconi's party Forza Italia and eventually ceased its operations in 2009 after the PdL alliance broke off in 2000. From that scission the party *Fratelli D'Italia* (Brothers of Italy, FdI) emerged in 2012 under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni that embraced the legacy of AN, even retaining the same logo with a tricolor flame. Despite all the name changes, FdI, like t its predecessor AN, retains most of the nationalist and conservative views of its original fascist matrix.

Kill the Boogeyman

The second expression connected to the fear-mongering discourse about the immigrant man is far more literal: elimination. It would be too long to list the many acts of brutal aggression and violence directed against immigrant men by law-abiding Italian citizens that have populated the Italian news in the last 30 years. However, there is one of those acts that has gained notoriety for being one of the first blatant and unmistakable manifestations of racist violence in Italy, and as such one that caused great concerns about the possible repercussions of that type of violence. On August 25, 1989, Jerry Masslo, a Black South African refugee who worked as a tomato picker in the southern inland of Villa Literno, near Castel Volturno, was murdered by a group of masked men who irrupted at night in the apartment where he lived with other African workers and opened fire killing him. Castel Volturno is a town in the south of Italy, in the province of Caserta, surrounded by fields and agricultural businesses. As in many rural areas, immigrants usually settled down as a cheap labor force in the fields. In these areas, racism acquires its unambiguous face with violent episodes of rejection, exploitation, and segregation. Here immigrants often are caught in the dense web of local power networks in which the boundaries between legality and illegality are often inexistent. Castel Volturno is notoriously home to the Casalesi *Camorra* (mafia-style organization) clan, which has ruled over the economic and political resources of the territory for decades.

Marcel, a 30-year-old immigrant from Cameroon, told me about the history of immigration in the town, which he had come to know by reading about and living there. The first migration began in the early 1980s with seasonal fluxes of people, mostly students from North Africa, coming for the tomato harvest season. Some of them stayed and encouraged friends and relatives to join them. Little by little the spectrum of people attracted by the possibility of jobs in the area extended to sub-Saharan Africa, with people coming from Ghana, Nigeria, and Burkina Faso. Many of them, Marcel said, were coming to Italy because there was no immigration law back then, and it was easier to stay than in other European countries[22].

Like many other towns and rural centers in the country, Castel Volturno at the time was not prepared to incorporate immigrants. The local Catholic priest was the only one who helped

[22] I conducted interviews in this area in 2007 and the names used here are pseudonyms. For an analysis of immigration in Italy and Castel Volturno see (Colombo- Dalla-Zuanna, 2019), (Longhi 2012), and (Lucht, 2012) among others.

and assisted them at the beginning, accommodating the newcomers into an ad hoc camp where the first communities settled for quite some time. Yet, another element favored the growth of the immigrant population locally. By the mid-1980s, the housing complex of Villaggio Coppola built illegally at the end of the 1960s as vacation homes of Neapolitan middle classes, lost popularity, and value. This was due in part to the increasing pollution of the local coastal area, and to the decline of the power networks that had illicitly controlled the local predatory housing investments and market. By 1995 the two Coppola brothers who built the village were brought to trial for illegal appropriation of public soil, and the eight concrete towers they had built were abandoned and eventually confiscated[23]. By the beginning of 2000, seven of the eight confiscated concrete towers were demolished, leaving behind a ghost town. Yet, the remaining carcasses of the buildings have become home to many immigrants, and it is not clear to what extent they squat into those abandoned structures or pay to the local organized crime a form of "rent". Yet, the availability of jobs in the fields and housing made the area attractive to migrants. At the time of my interviews, I had not traveled to the area for 15 years and was amazed by its transformation. Black people dominated the human landscape; many grocery shops opened on the major access road advertising their products imported from Africa, in different languages. Yet, this was not a happy multicultural picture. The endemic presence of organized crime had turned the town into a drug trafficking and prostitution haven even before the arrival of the immigrants; economically, with the demise of Villaggio Coppola and the dream of a thriving tourist destination, the only resource left was agriculture, for which the exploitation of immigrant labor became paramount. The local criminal organizations saw in the newcomers a profitable source of income, either as cheap agricultural workers or as drug traffickers. It is no mystery for all those whom I interviewed that some immigrants formed their own clans to partake in the local drug trafficking and prostitution networks (Longhi 2012). Yet, as Marcel recounted, the local population was not at all ready to deal with immigrants. They regarded Africans as delinquents and bearers of diseases. Back in the mid-1980s, they created a sort of local KKK whose members would go out at night to harass and attack Black people. The murder of Jerry Masslo in 1989 is an exemplary illustration

[23] See details in (Novi, 2013); (Leonardi, 2011); (Piangiani, 2017).

of this reality, yet not too dissimilar from anti-black violence in other areas in the country where no mafia-like organizations exist. A more recent massacre qualified as racially motivated is the shooting rampage that happened in the city of Macerata, in the center of the country, on February 3rd, 2018, when a 32 -year-old man, Luca Traini, opened fire on Black immigrants from his car, killing six. The perpetrator was found guilty of a racial hate crime and sentenced to 12 years in jail. He had been a candidate in the local election of 2017 in the list of the League but was not elected. The event gained international attention and condemnation and was covered by many international news outlets. According to an article in *The Guardian*, Traini was a pro-Nazi, and a copy of the *Mein Kampf* was discovered in his apartment. In his declarations, he showed no remorse for what he had done (Italy shooting: Mein Kampf found in home of suspect., 2018).

Conclusions

The expressions of racism and anti-immigration analyzed here, place Italy in the context of a long transnational history of racial discrimination and exclusion connected to different contexts of colonial domination and capitalist exploitation. They reveal the kinship the Italian case bears with structures of inequality predicated on the intersection of race, gender, nationality, and class in all the countries of the African Diaspora. During the time I was drafting this article, Italy held new political elections on September 25, 2022, which saw the overwhelming affirmation of Giorgia Meloni's party Fratelli d'Italia, marking a shift to the ultra-right. Even if the victory of the right-wing coalition was foreseen, the electoral support Meloni received led to the absolute majority in both government chambers for the right-wing block in which she partook, gaining her the position of Prime Minister of the newly formed government. Although this outcome should be celebrated since she is the first woman ever to have been elected head of the Italian government, it is a bitter-sweet celebration. The political agenda that helped her gain electoral support has all the elements of an ultra-conservative platform: challenges to the abortion law, nationalistic rhetoric that primes Italy and the Italians and advocates for a much less prominent role for the European Community, and of course extreme measure to control and prevent immigration. However, the diversity of the current

Italian society is undeniable. Many organizations, artists, and activists are voicing their demands to fight the exploitation and the racism that immigrants experience consistently and connecting their struggle with the context of global fights for justice inspired by the BLM movement. A movement of second-generation Afro-Italians is pushing for citizenship reforms that could grant a path to citizenship to those from an immigrant background who are born and raised in Italy and to whom the *ius sanguinis* continues to deny inclusion in the national community as Italians. Culturally, a movement of Italian artists and intellectuals is rethinking the identity of Italy by reconnecting it to its Mediterranean heritage to recognize its highly diverse historical, cultural, and social roots and mixtures (see Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2015). The regurgitation of right-wing nationalism is going to represent an added challenge to the fight for equality, citizenship, and anti-racist measures in Italy and elsewhere. I just hope that increasingly more Italians when facing their memory of Calimero will finally recognize and reject the racist premises of the chick's chameleonic nature.

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