

“Those are memories that must be sung”: introducing the sonic legacy of Italian colonialism

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“Those are memories that must be sung”¹: with these words, historian Alessandro Triulzi concluded an online meeting that turned into a particularly dense event. Organized by the *Centro Studi Postcoloniali e di Genere* at the Università l’Orientale in Naples on February 19, 2021, the meeting was aimed at commemorating the infamous massacre of Yekatit 12. The massacre was carried out by Italian soldiers and volunteers on that same date in 1937, by way of reprisal for the attempted assassination of Governor Rodolfo Graziani.

Although Italian recollections of the massacre are almost entirely absent, the Ethiopian people remember and commemorate it every year. This memorial asymmetry represented the starting point of a discussion on coloniality, to which many scholars and activists were invited to contribute with short interventions. However, as writer and singer Gabriella Ghermandi was about to start her contribution, an unknown troll interrupted her, making use of screams, curses, and particularly offensive epithets. The troll, betting on winning the battle of speaker volume, played a loud techno-like version of the song “Faccetta Nera,” preventing Ghermandi from continuing her intervention. Within a matter of seconds, the virtual chaos generated by the interruption escalated, as everybody who was attending the meeting readily identified the song as a nostalgic fascist hymn. The troll could play such a song only with the intention to (re)affirm the motivations and visions that had fueled the Italian colonial endeavor. Reactions from the participants varied from shock to panic. Some of the panelists, who were used to provocations of that sort, responded quickly and screamed back, trying to defeat the troll on his own level. In a matter of minutes, the organizers decided to change the virtual room and give access to the panelists only. The audience could follow the discussion on a streaming platform, and the troll disappeared. The sonic aggression remained.

One of the two authors of this introduction, invited to participate in the discussion, played a sound clip with the aim to help the participants to process the trauma of the event.² It was a song, performed by an Italian woman in 1974 and recorded by two ethnomusicologists, that featured the same melody as the song played by the troll, “Faccetta Nera.” The text, however, tells the story of a soldier who comes back after fighting in Africa, only to discover that his

mother is sick and is going to die (Chiriaco 2022, see also Tamburini in this issue). The collective listening to another version of the same melody created the chance to rethink the violent interruption in musical terms, and this new perspective inspired the words that Alessandro Triulzi then delivered in his closing speech during the online event, used here to open this introduction. His words resonate within each contribution of this Special focus of *From the European South* (Issue 11), as the two main questions faced by the authors are: how can we bring songs and sounds into play from the time of European colonialism in order to address issues related to its legacy? And how can we listen to voices that have been silenced and erased from history?

These questions are not new. The idea that sounds maintain a profound connection, both material and relational, with history and politics has emerged as a strong element in contemporary scholarly literature across several disciplines. The interest in in-depth investigations of such elements is effectively summed up by Steven Feld with the expression “listening to histories of listening”: “Listening to histories of listening is one methodological approach to making connections between acoustics and epistemology” (2015, 93). Within the field of music and sound studies, attention has recently shifted towards power relations and the ways the hermeneutic weight of centuries of Western universalism and colonialism reverberates through the act of listening. The emergence of indigenous sound studies thus teaches us what scholar Dylan Robinson defines as “critical listening positionality”: a practice that “involves self-reflexive questioning of how race, class, gender, sexuality, ability and cultural background intersect and influence the way we are able to hear sound, music, and the world around us” (2020, 10).

It is the entire field of music studies that, over recent years, has undertaken a process of profound transformation. Two pivotal moments were Philip Ewell’s talk “Music Theory’s White Racial Frame” at the Society for Music Theory Annual Meeting in 2019 (then published as an article, Ewell 2020), and Danielle Brown’s “An Open Letter on Racism in Music Studies” (2020). After these public interventions, debates around “decolonizing ethnomusicology” and “decolonizing musicology” abounded not only in official and unofficial meetings but also in papers and online. The discussion is now wide-ranging, as many recent publications show. To give but two examples, the 2021 issue of the scholarly journal *Ethnomusicology Forum* titled “Decolonizing Music and Music Studies” and the 2021 special issue of the journal *The World of Music* titled “Postcolonial Sound Archives: Challenges and Potentials.”

What we offer in “How do we listen to Colonialism? (Italy and Beyond)” is therefore part of an ongoing, significant discussion within music and sound studies. At the same time, it aims to expand this discussion beyond the boundaries of these disciplines and along two main lines. On the one hand, it seeks out interplay between artistic and academic practices. This choice reflects our belief that listening to colonialism and de-colonizing our listening require both

analytical de-constructions and aesthetical re-constructions. On the other hand, it proposes a focus on the specific case of Italian colonialism's sonic sphere and its legacy. This interest includes both the use that the Italian colonial project made of music and media, and the repercussion of Italian colonialism on the public discussion around issues related to citizenship and race.

The preparation of the Ethiopian occupation was accompanied by an intense use of media through which a vast repertoire of songs became ubiquitous during the 1930s, only to disappear from the Italian soundscape a few years later. Yet, the music persisted in several forms – as gramophone discs, as written scores as well as in people's memory. Today, we are confronted with these different materials as different faces of the sonic dimension of Italian colonialism. Such traces and survivals constitute a plural, fragmented and complex memory, as the opening anecdote reveals. The reactivations of these memories disturb the widespread tendency to remove or minimize the Italian colonial past, which also creates specific resonances within our present time and with its 'post-' and 'neo-' forms of coloniality. Not only do investigations into this sonic memory concern historical analyses of music production under the fascist regime, but they also raise questions related to the role of those sounds in our present time.

Such questions appear almost inescapable to us at the time in which we write this introduction. On the one hand, the international resonance of the Black Lives Matter movement brought the topic of racial inequality to the attention of European and Italian audiences with renewed urgency. On the other hand, recent political elections in Italy have brought into power a coalition and a new government led by a party which is known to be connected to fascism via a solid and documented genealogy of symbols, characters, and policies. The main parties of the coalition, besides fostering sentiments of fear and anger in the Italian population against Black migrants, make wide-scale use of a nationalistic rhetoric.

If these political forces were to show interest in revitalizing memories of Italian colonialism, it would most probably be in a nostalgic tone, to praise the traces left by the Italian presence in Eastern Africa. Against this background, the sonic memories that this Special focus asks us to theorize and analyze, but also to re-activate, appear even more clearly as elements which deserve the utmost attention in our sociopolitical present.

"How do we listen to Colonialism?" is also an intellectual and artistic instrument to continue a discussion started by the project "Listening to Italian Colonialism."³ The genesis of this project lies in the attempt to create a catalogue of songs that thematized Ethiopia in Italian popular music of the 1930s. From this search, more than a hundred songs emerged, all composed, published, performed, recorded, and broadcast during the preparation of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia. This operation made it possible to identify *a posteriori* a series of very diverse songs as a 'repertoire'. It also made it possible to locate several threads within it by

using a system of hashtags, taking the two parameters of theme and musical style into account.⁴

The second phase of the project “Listening to Italian Colonialism” consisted of the organization of a series of dialogues with several artists, researchers, and activists on this repertoire. The audiovisual documentation of the dialogues was later edited and published in the form of a video series. Each dialogue, which took place online during the COVID-19 pandemic, involved a live listening session of one or two songs. Each song goes through a dialogical process of deconstruction of its musical and lyrical elements, highlighting elements of continuity with present-day Italian society.

The audiovisual series was developed to be watched online, but it also aspires to become a tool for public education and outreach events. The fact that the ‘Ethiopian’ repertoire may appear extremely unpleasant and insulting for any person of colour – and indeed for anyone sensitive to topics of race and racial discrimination – certainly represents a delicate challenge. In this regard, listening to colonialism requires spaces which are perceived as relatively safe by the participants. For this reason, “Listening to Italian Colonialism” started as an attempt to imagine and create relational situations and contexts, involving Afro-diasporic activists and musicians as well as other subjects variously affected by the imaginary conveyed through this repertoire.

At the same time, it is not convenient and maybe not even possible to conceal the irritating nature of these songs, with their combination of racial violence and upbeat catchiness, since their capacity to irritate is inseparable from the transformative power they may unleash on listeners. One specific instance of a public discussion that was able to re-signify the irritating nature of these songs is the event held in July 2022 and staged as part of the SpazioGriot Festival in Rome (see Tamburini in this issue).

When referring to musical objects and experiences, we use the broader term “sonic” to stress that we place our inquiry in the epistemological realm of sound production and perception. It implies that the intersections between coloniality and the sphere of sound are as broad as the latter and as pervasive as the former. Song lyrics, musicians’ biographies, sound technologies, infrastructures and industries, urban soundscapes and the relation of sound with non-sonic media are all of interest to this interdisciplinary line of research. Moreover, this Special focus doesn’t consider sound merely as a subject but also as a method. It shares the assumption that listening is a cultural practice, and as such can be uncritically performed as well as consciously learned and exercised. What is more, it holds that making and sharing sounds in social spaces is a form of knowledge production and a performative practice which may be imbued with a certain transformative power. This approach is indebted to the insights of several disciplines, from sound studies to anthropology, from musicology to cultural studies.

This partially explains the heterogeneity of the contributions, which offer one possible path, among many, in the exploration of the relationship between sound and colonialism.

The Special focus opens with an article by Francis Sosta and offers an overview of recent contributions to sound and listening from the fields of critical race theory and feminist postcolonial studies. The up-to-date examination of relevant literature and debates carried out by Sosta acknowledges critical theory as the shifting and yet indispensable horizon for historical research and writing. Some of the concepts used by Sosta – such as listening as a performative practice – also inform the case studies about Italian colonialism. This applies to the contribution by Emilio Tamburini, which focuses on listening as a tool to investigate the way in which colonialism was historically performed through songs, as well as their relation to the racism of our postcolonial present. The interest in re-activating forgotten sounds from public and private archives also lies at the core of the contribution by Gianpaolo Chiriaco. The article, which features an anthropological account of a field research in Addis Ababa, represents a scholarly inquiry into a collection of Ethiopian songs recorded by Italians during their occupation of the country. While these articles are somehow concerned with the colonial imaginary in its broadest sense, the article by Alessandra Ferlito deals with the specific and crucial question of the relation between sonic and visual racial regimes. Against this background, it discusses the role and meaning of some major artistic interventions which worked with Italian colonial archives.

“Listening to Colonialism and Hearing Liberation” by Napoleon Maddox conflates the main lines of analyses of this collective inquiry and Maddox’s own musical works, in order to bring the reader’s attention to voices that have been silenced but can still be heard. Finally, Melanie Garland closes the issue with a sonic essay that is also an artistic intervention. By shifting from theory to action and claiming the complementarity of both across all its contributions, this Special focus aspires to participate in dismantling traditional boundaries between the arts and the production of scientific knowledge. It also advocates for a situated knowledge of colonialism, and it explores some of the possibilities opened and challenges posed by sonic materials in this regard. A further, related aspect which runs throughout the proposed interventions is the centrality of memory. Given that memory is understood as neither opposed nor equal to history, the focus on sonic forms of colonial memory implies an awareness of the role of archives, of unarchived experiences, and of the meaning that both have, or may acquire, in the social and political lives of people, especially of marginalized and racialized groups. Doing research on the question of how to listen to (Italian) colonialism means confronting a space of conflict and negotiation that is not just a matter for historians. Sounds and memories of sounds profoundly affect the way in which individuals, communities and societies make sense of and narrate their co-presence in the postcolonial modernity they inhabit.

Notes

¹ The original words used by Alessandro Triulzi were: “Queste sono memorie che vanno cantate.” The title of the event was “Yekatit 12. Il massacro di Addis Abeba: tra rimozione e colonialità del presente.”

² During an email exchange, in the days that followed, one of the organizers referenced the traumatic effects of the interruption.

³ The project may be consulted online at <https://www.afrovocality.com/listening-to-italian-colonialism/>.

⁴ The result of this cataloguing work is available online at <https://www.afrovocality.com/ethiopia-in-1930s-italian-popular-music/>. The titles of the songs are linked to the digital platform *Canzone italiana* (<http://www.canzoneitaliana.it/>). The 78 rpm shellac records of most of these songs are preserved by the Istituto Centrale per i Beni Sonori e Audiovisivi in Rome (ICBSA).

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