

Forgotten and popular. Sonic memory and colonial imagery in today's Italy

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ABSTRACT

Listening to Italian Colonialism is a collective research project, first developed in 2021-2022 by the scholar Gianpaolo Chiriaco to foster debate around a collection of popular songs about Ethiopia, which were produced as gramophone records and broadcast during the Italian invasion of the country.¹ This paper aims to contribute to the debate that originated within that project by proposing reflections on how to approach these colonial songs, and to problematize sonic memory as a conceptual framework within which to critically deal with the re-activation of this historical repertoire in the present.

Keywords

Italian colonialism, sonic memory, embodiment/disembodiment, sonic whiteness, racial inequality, listening practices

“In the shadow of our flag, you’ll be more beautiful” means “cancel everything you are, cancel the place you are from, your name, your culture, the way you have your hair done. Do what I do!”

Medhin Paolos on the song *Africanella*
Listening to Italian Colonialism 2022

My opening reflections build upon the dichotomy proposed by Aleida Assmann between stored (or uninhabited) memory and functional (or inhabited) memory, and consider this dichotomy as a useful starting point to articulate the central premise of *Listening to Italian Colonialism*. This premise consists in seeing the colonial repertoire in question not only as a historical source, worthy of investigation within academia, but also as a tool to foster critical thinking and change in relation to present issues of (anti-)racism and social (in)justice in today's Italy and beyond. I will then discuss the sonic character of the memory represented by this repertoire, by focusing on the performativity of the songs and on listening as the practice within which this performativity unfolds. In other words, I will try to circumscribe some aspects of what these songs *do*, the performative strategies through which they afford certain emotions, dispositions, and associations in the listener, most specifically regarding categories of race, colonial domination, and subjection. Against this background, I will briefly discuss the role played by

the Italian soldiers in these songs, the troops being one of the main fictional narrators embodied by the singing voices in this repertoire. I will also touch upon sources which provide fragmentary clues to the actual musical experience of real soldiers involved in the Ethiopian campaign, and the processes of forgetting that it underwent. Finally, I will argue that a critical approach to these songs today can shed light on the topicality of the archival and thus supposedly disembodied memory they preserve. Consequently, I will also argue that re-activating this archival memory and eventually re-embodiment it in a conscious and critical manner via collective listening practices allows us to acknowledge and subvert the racist nature of imagery and discourses inherent to national identity and policies in today's Italy.²

My attempt to articulate an ongoing reflection on these issues is of course shaped by my personal history and position. I am a male researcher and an Italian citizen, and I am writing this paper in my early thirties. Both my parents and I are perceived as white and were born and raised in Italy. I have never been to Ethiopia, and I do not understand any of the languages spoken by the Ethiopian population. My paternal grandfather Carlo served as a lieutenant in the Ethiopian campaign, was captured by the English Army in 1941 and deported to India, where he spent five years as a prisoner of war. He died in 1963 in Italy. In 1997 my father Alessandro published *L'onore delle armi* (Bompiani): a fictional novel inspired by a journey he undertook in Eritrea following the little information available about his father's movements around the Horn of Africa. The awareness of a private memory of colonialism in my family has contributed, alongside my studies on vocality and migrant sound cultures, to nurture my interest in colonial history and postcolonial discourses. These notes are not meant to suggest any causal relation between my family history and the content of this paper. I consider my personal history as worth mentioning not for its exceptionality but rather as an example of the impossibility to observe this matter from an outside perspective. The musical sounds to be discussed here make memories of colonialism present to the body and mind of the listener, as well as to any social and physical space in which they resonate. In doing so, as foreign and as disturbing as they may sound today, they relate to imagery and realities which were clearly already there, affecting the listeners in different ways within the racialized world they inhabited.

Sonic memory and the archive

While systematic research about the historical circulation of these specific songs has not been undertaken yet, many clues suggest it was quite broad. Their labels show that they were mass-produced as gramophone records, and thus embedded in the thriving music industry under the fascist regime – a fundamental part of which consisted in radio broadcasting. The Italian radio was managed by the state through the EIAR (*Ente Italiano per le Audizioni Radiofoniche*) monopoly. In its early years, EIAR broadcast mainly live music, but it turned to recorded music in 1933.³ In terms of record production, the music industry of fascist Italy was dominated by

the state-run company Cetra, established by Mussolini in 1933. Cetra took over as the primary Italian distributor for most foreign record labels. This meant that well-known international companies like *La Voce del Padrone* (the Italian branch of His Master's Voice), Columbia, Odeon and Parlophon could only sell records in Italy under contract with Cetra (Harwell 2017, 104). All of these companies produced several songs from the colonial repertoire discussed here.

The issues of *Radiocorriere*, the weekly magazine of EIAR, are an important source to understand the role played by music in fascist society at large. Here, it is important to note that the issues from the years 1935-1937 regularly hosted contributions and news related to the colonies and the Ethiopian campaign. Advertisements for records and radio sets, news from the military front and the colonies, and articles covering the whole spectrum of everyday life were seamlessly merged across its pages during that period. For example, an advertisement for a radio by the Aprilia brand features a map of Africa and an Italian soldier, accompanied by the caption: "Be close to them! Follow the glorious achievements of our brave soldiers in Eastern Africa, with a perfect radio" (n. 50, 8-14 December 1935, 16). On page 2 of another issue, published in June 1936, we find an advertisement for:

the most recent recordings of "La Voce del Padrone". Songs of Africa: songs of victory! More than 100 songs which recall the glorious endeavor, recorded by the finest artists and by the most famous orchestras. Faccetta nera – Adua – Macallè – Amba Lagi – Addis Abeba – Carovane del Tigrai – Serenata a Ginevra Sanzionismo – Leggenda eroica – Africanina, etc. etc". (n. 25, 14-20 June 1936)⁴

The songs to be discussed here were thus 'popular', as part of the mass production and consumption of music in industrial and post-industrial nations. They were both entertainment products and part of the broader effort by the regime to build consensus on the ongoing occupation of Ethiopia, and to portray it as a successful civilizing mission. Sometimes they would be labeled as "canzoni di attualità," which means "songs on topical issues" (Chiriaco 2021a). As Japoco Tomatis states, they were necessarily popular because they were the products of a media industry monopolized by the regime, so people "didn't listen to anything else also because there wasn't anything else" within the Italian music industry. At the same time, that industry was permeable to musical influences from abroad, and the expectations and tastes of Italian consumers developed accordingly (Tomatis, LIC 2022). They were bought and consumed by a vast Italian audience which had become familiar with the international genres thriving at the time, and with US-American jazz above all (Harwell 2017).⁵ Today, in 2022 in Italy, most of these songs are unknown to the broader public, and the researchers who started paying attention to them approached them as archive material, preserved, digitalized and made accessible for research by the ICBSA (Istituto Centrale per i Beni Sonori e Audiovisivi).

Against this background, the distinction between stored (or uninhabited) memory and functional (or inhabited) memory by the cultural historian Aleida Assmann provides a useful

conceptual framework to discuss the status of this repertoire. I will summarize it here and build upon some of the parameters through which she articulates that distinction.

Uninhabited memory may be understood as an amorphous mass which, having lost its vital connection to the present, remains stored and thus potentially available in the background. It separates the past from the present and the future, and is not claimed by individuals, groups, or institutions as a constitutive element of their identity. Inhabited memory, on the other hand, plays a role in the identity processes of individuals, groups, or institutions, generally taking the form of a ‘story’ or narrative. It is steeped in values, it is highly selective, and provides meaning and orientation for present action. Therefore, it bridges past, present, and future, and most importantly, it is necessarily an embodied form of memory (Assmann 2009, 134). It is worth noting that Assmann articulates this distinction to summarize a canon of discourses about memory and history, rather than to provide a tool capable of capturing the mechanisms of how memory and history actually work. Thus, the main purpose of proposing such a distinction here is to better visualize both actual and potential processes and phenomena which call that very distinction into question.

As I will discuss in greater detail in the next paragraph, the musical repertoire in question here started off as an embodied, inhabited memory. Today they are being rediscovered in an archive, an institution which – drawing on the definition adopted by Krzysztof Pomian – stores and preserves things by keeping them out of economic circulation, i.e. depriving them of their original status as purchasable goods and eventually makes them accessible only under specific rules (Pomian 1990). Copies of original shellac recordings are scattered around the Italian peninsula and beyond. Some of them were reissued on vinyl in the decades after WWII, and many of them are available on YouTube as well as on the online portal of *Canzone Italiana*. Still, they remain unknown to the public at large, and the only place where they are all preserved and catalogued as a collection of material objects, to my knowledge, is the above-mentioned ICBSA archive in Rome. Therefore, this repertoire now seems to be placed on the other side of the spectrum of embodiment, falling under the category of disembodied, uninhabited memory.⁶

This article does not deal with the task of tracing the reception history of these songs in the period between the collapse of the fascist regime and the present. Consequently, I make no claims about the specific processes which constituted the transition of this repertoire from popularity to oblivion, nor about the specific paths taken by related racist imaginaries over that timespan. Instead, my inquiry here gravitates around the act of listening to these songs today, and it aims to offer a reflection on how they resonate with our postcolonial present. In order to do so, however, it is important to deconstruct the internal mechanisms of this sonic memory, and thus to take the colonial context of their production and first reception into account. A key aspect of this memory lies precisely in its sonic, musical, and performative character.

The relationship between memory and sound has been given attention in many different academic and artistic contexts over recent years.⁷ Instead of trying to propose a general definition of sonic memory as a comprehensive concept, in the following paragraph I will deal with some specific questions and problems connected to the sonic nature of the specific historical repertoire, and to the imagery that it sonically conjures up.

Singing and dancing colonization

Something that all of the songs have in common is that they touch upon topics related to the Italian invasion of Ethiopia, and thus to the colonial domination of its land and people. Some focus on specific places (*Sul mercato di Macallè*, Trinchieri, Fonit 1936), some glorify the Italian military as a civilizing force (*Adua*, Serra, Grammofono 1935), and many thematize Black women, usually depicting them as sexualized objects dispossessed of any form of agency (*Gambette nere*, Trinchieri, Fonit 1935).⁸

But is there a concept which can summarize what this repertoire is about as a whole? A good starting point to deal with this question is the rejection of the idea that these songs are just ‘propaganda’ in the narrowest sense of the term, i.e. a discrete object created with a specific persuasive goal by a power which fully controls its form and function. Such a definition runs the risk of passing them off as a byproduct of a declining political regime. This article tries to move along another path by showing how the imagery and discourse conveyed by these songs may prove to be much more long-lived than the regime of Benito Mussolini and the fascist occupation of Ethiopia. This awareness – and the deliberate attempt to bring these songs out of the archive and create new listening contexts for them – leads us to mobilize the concepts of memory and oblivion, along with their processual counterparts of recollection and forgetting, to tackle social and individual experiences and struggles in the present. Therefore, the leading question here is not merely what these songs are about but rather what they try to do with the listener, and at the same time, what we – as listeners – can try to do with them.

The presence of many pieces of “dance music,” or *musica da ballo* within this repertoire shows how these songs were very much part of the everyday lives of Italians, and in keeping with musical tastes that were trending in the music industries across the Western world at that time. Sometimes labelled with names of specific dances and steps (*one step, two step, rumba, foxtrot*) on their original covers, these pieces were decidedly located within the sphere of entertainment. Further research would be required to trace down in which precise contexts those songs were played and danced to, and how. These labels and the rhythms they refer to, however, are clear references to musical patterns and listening practices in which the rhythmic movement of bodies is involved. Although those songs may certainly have been enjoyed by single individuals in the solitude of their homes, they were produced with a view to achieving the status of a social practice. Other than some more solemn hymns and marches, the kind of

complicity they seek to establish with the listener pertains to the highly playful and socially crucial practice of dancing (Tomatis 2019, 87). Therefore, it may be argued that these pieces did particularly well at producing and reproducing discourses by inscribing them in people's sonic and thus bodily memory: a mechanism that may be considered operative in all the songs of this repertoire.

The very concept of performativity aims to suggest that the song “does something” to the listener – or that something happens within the listener through the relational listening act. As a listener, I recognize the singing voice, alongside the presence of rhythmic, danceable patterns, as a central performative element in this repertoire. “Vocality always brings forth corporeality” (Fischer-Lichte 2010, 34), and as the sound of a human body, voice touches and affects other human bodies. This relationality lies at the core of its persuasiveness and sensuality, of its capability to afford emotions, and to express power as well as powerlessness.⁹

In popular music, the agency of voice becomes inseparable from the discursive power of speech, and both entertain a constant dialogue with the structure and development of rhythm and orchestration. The catchiness and smoothness of this dialogue, perceived as such by a specific audience in each given historical context, lend authority, credibility, and a certain effect of authenticity and rightness to that specific union of speech and music, which can in turn lead listeners to perceive the music as an index of the community they imagine themselves to be part of. The singing voice, as the sound of the human body *par excellence*, makes a major contribution to this mechanism with the physical presence and eloquence that pertains to it. I'm thinking here of the notion of the “theater of the mouth” coined by Donald Meltzer and used by Brandon Labelle, as a useful tool to explain how the sociopolitical power of orality relies upon the materiality of its bodily source. This notion interestingly stresses the mouth as a space where dichotomies, oppositions, and forms of inclusion or exclusion between an inside and an outside, i.e. of differentiation and othering, are enacted.

Meltzer understood the mouth as a stage upon which a number of essential performances are enacted. His notion of the “Theater of the mouth” proposes the mouth as the pivotal site for negotiating a relation between the inside and the outside of the body (leading to the making of boundaries). (LaBelle 2014, 9)

The notion of the mouth as a theater can help us to imagine the singing voice – which involves the whole body, yet whose main place of articulation and projection lies in the oral cavity – not merely as a channel which delivers verbal information or abstract musical forms, but rather as a socially charged space in which certain acts, through the very coupling of music and speech, are deployed. As the philosopher Adriana Cavarero argues in her exposition of a philosophy of the voice, the bodily and relational character of vocality comes across even when it is entrusted to speech (Cavarero 2005). Starting from this assumption, I would suggest that the corporeality of voice, entrusted to speech and song, endows text with a posture, a gestural

character. The rhythm may then further choreograph these messages as movement, eventually aligning specific dramaturgical and emotional punctuation with choreography in the most literal sense.

But what kind of acts do these songs enable or foster? What kind of differences do they produce, and what boundaries do they mark? What kind of relations between which subjects and objects do they project? In most of the lyrics of these songs, Black bodies are to be found. In many of them, they are even the main topic.

Listening and the sonic production of whiteness

The gramophone disc of *Gambette nere* (Trinchieri, 1935) was published by the Fonit company in 1935. Not only is it a 'brano da ballo' and a piece where a very specific discursive production comes into play, but it is also a song about Black dancing bodies.

(First verse)

Black little legs of dark-skinned dolls

Once you were tied with iron and ropes

Who freed you was beautiful Italy

*And now you can dance tarantella.*¹⁰

In his extremely punctual analysis of the song, the singer-songwriter Zamua observes: "The lyrics are interesting. As I was reading them, I realized there is a thread. As the title suggests, the thread is the body, the relationship to the body and the representation of the body" (Zamua, LIC 2022). The song is structured in three parts, he explains, and each mentions a particular dance (*tango*, *tarantella* and *marcia reale*) that signals the passage from disorganized movement to some form of colonial order.

The organization of the movement of bodies through dance is indeed the thread running through the piece. Now, recalling the notion of "the theater of the mouth" mentioned above, it is striking how the singing voice, in this song, creates a relation with the listener in order to differentiate and articulate categories of colonized bodies along the repetition patterns of the three verses, the specificity of which is marked by a particular dance.

I want to draw attention to the fact that the narrator of the song, i.e., the protagonist to which the singing voice is attributed, is also the plurality of a group: a 'we' to which the other three groups of Black women, Black men and Ascari are opposed to. There is one specific line in which this collective entity is located as intradiegetic: "just one look at our helmets." This attribution of the singing act to a group is confirmed and sustained on a performative sonic level, since the last part of every verse is repeated by a male choir.

*Black little legs, but those of men
black little legs of generals and Degiacs,
just one look at our helmets,
and you ran away as if you had wings.¹¹*

What I wish to point out here is that this ‘we’ is central in the performativity of the song, for it allows for an identification process in the listener with the white soldiers on the battlefield in Ethiopia. The strength and the almost cinematic framing of the images evoked by the song invite the listeners to adopt the point of view of the soldiers, thus allowing for a form of participation in the scenery conjured up by the song. This sense of participation is here clearly deployed to mark power dynamics, to operate differentiations between the white colonizers and the Black people to be colonized, and to create order in the colonial imaginary by internally separating the colonized into several subjected groups upon which colonial power is exercised through music and dance.

Since controlling and subduing them is the ultimate thread of the songs’ narrative, the humanity and agency of these Black bodies is strategically neglected on two different levels. The first is their reduction by means of metonymy: the song does not refer to whole bodies, but only to the “little legs,” which are indeed the anatomical part that the disciplinary dance is supposed to affect. The second is their de-humanization by means of comparisons with non-human entities, eventually charged with powerlessness – “dolls” for the women and “bunnies” for the men. All these attributions postulate the fact that the white performer/listener and the depicted “blacks” own a body capable of performing the same dances. However, the concession of this similarity is propaedeutic to the control and subjection, via dancing, of the people to be colonized. That is to say that the whole operation is based on the preliminary step, underlined in the title of this song, of assigning a concrete body to the colonized within the colonial imagery, making them just visible enough to appear interesting and funny. A fundamental element to understand this mechanism emerged from a dialogue between Medhin Paolos and Gianpaolo Chiriaco, who sums it up as follows:

In other words, one defines the “others” as different in order to confine them and to keep them away. But at the same time, while I am defining them, I am making them interesting enough, so I am interested in acting in their space. (Medhin Paolos, LIC 2022)

This quote comes from a dialogue about *Africanella* (Simi-Martelli-Neri, Columbia 1936) another danceable piece which, like *Gambette nere*, performs a process of identification of the listener with the white soldier, again accompanied by their differentiation from a Black body.

This process is activated at several levels. The first is again the identification with the plural 'we': "our Italy." The second is the design of the refrain as a meta-song within the piece, one that is sung by "every heart":

*The victory sings,
just like every heart,
its love song.*

Beautiful flower of Abyssinia

*Africanella,
under the shadow of our flag,
you'll be more beautiful.*

*Our Italy will be your new homeland
that will protect you...*

The burning flame of your love,

Africanella,

will unchain

your enslaved heart,

and a song of "Giovinezza"

will resound in your heart,

an eternal glorious chant

that is a cry of freedom.¹²

Within the dramaturgy of this song, the first three lines may be considered a perlocutionary act (Austin 1962), for the voice utters a call for the chorus to rise, giving body to the same "song of freedom" that it announces. The persuasiveness and efficacy of such an event within the listening experience may be interpreted as another example of how the interplay between verbal content and sound is achieved in these songs. Vocality and rhythm establish the synergy between the corporeality of sound and the colonial discourse provided by the lyrics. And again, this colonial discourse is largely concerned with creating a divide and designing proxemics between Black and white bodies, and in providing the listener with guidelines on how to interpret it. Thus, *Africanella* represents another example in which the bodily practice of listening becomes the performative space where white listeners are supposed to imagine Black bodies and construct colonial relations to them.



Fig. 1. *Africanella* (Simi-Martelli-Neri, Columbia 1936)

Further questions arise about the correlation of emotions, colonial discourses, and physical movement as performed by these songs. How should we understand and describe the way the sonic elements of voice and rhythm allow for the participation of the listener in the lyrics of the song? And how precisely does this participation interact with the stimulation of physical postures and movements? A thorough discussion on these matters would go well beyond the aims of this paper. However, I would like to suggest that this kind of popular music encourages participation in the listener that is at the same time emotional, kinetic, and discursive, and that these elements intersect and concur in the creation of the listening act as a performance of social attitudes and ideas. In the case of the songs discussed here, the production of white subjects – and the correlated colonial subjection of Black bodies – is sonically imagined and performed. These processes afforded by music bypass the verbal sphere, and at the same time they imply and reproduce whiteness as a form of racial superiority shared by those who lay claim to it. Such processes may be referred to as constitutive of a functional, embodied sonic memory.

Sonic memories and sonic oblivion

Writer, journalist, and playwright Ennio Flaiano (1910-1972) went to Ethiopia to serve as a lieutenant in the fascist army in 1935.¹³ During his stay in the Horn of Africa, he wrote a fragmentary diary text. The manuscript was found among his papers with the title *Aethiopia: appunti per una canzonetta* (“Aethiopia: notes for a ditty”). Some of the short and bitterly ironic notes of this diary are devoted to the relation that soldiers had with songs, and with singing, on the battlefield.

The songs that the soldiers like are the ones that the superiors do not want to hear, and vice versa. All it takes is for an officer to order singing for everyone to fall silent. This is a perfectly understandable phenomenon, singing being, along with smoking and drinking, the soldier's little vice; a vice that it is best not to control. [...] No soldier will ever sing the songs that professors write for him, songs full of helmets and plumes like old tenors. [...]

The Libyan campaign was successful because of "Tripoli, bel suolo d'amore," the prototype of mobilization ditties.

And in this war? I have the impression that "Faccetta nera" has greatly contributed to filling the hospitals with the "love-wounded."¹⁴

These short observations from Flaiano provide some fragmentary but important clues about the musical life of the colonial soldiers in Ethiopia. They confirm that singing was a common practice among the troops, that it was tolerated by the superiors but represented a sphere of misalignment between the official prescription and the actual conduct of subordinates. At the same time, they refer to *Faccetta nera* (Micheli-Ruccione, Odeon 1935) as a song which had a particular grip on the sexual fantasies of the soldiers.¹⁵ Flaiano attributes the spread of sexually transmitted diseases among them to the song. In another note, he addresses even more clearly the topic of the sexual fantasies of possession and domination which accompanied the colonial endeavor through music: "The influence of songs on colonial enlistment. Underlying all expansion: sexual desire" (Flaiano [1947] 2020, 147).¹⁶

This insight fully resonates with the repertoire of popular songs that we are dealing with here.¹⁷ In two episodes of *Listening to Italian Colonialism*, Alessandro Triulzi and Medhin Paolos both pointed out how the narrative of the fascist conquest of Ethiopia portrayed Africa as a savage and virgin land, and how it sought to create a precise parallel between the military penetration of a land and the carnal penetration of Black women. Flaiano's notes, as one who observed the situation as an actor on the field, match the observations that these scholars make about this repertoire today.

The interest in the passages quoted above does not lie solely in the fact that they prove sexual desire, violence, and abuse to have played a key role in the colonial conquest of Ethiopia. Despite the relative scarcity of primary historical sources, the brutalities of institutionalized and systematic sexual violence perpetrated by Italian colonizers have been documented by researchers beyond any doubt.¹⁸ I believe these notes by Flaiano to be of interest here for two other reasons. The first is that they confirm how deeply the imagery conveyed by these popular songs was embodied, and how concrete and visible the consequences of this embodiment were to the eyes and ears of a direct witness of the Ethiopian campaign. The second is that they also address the existence of singing practices among the troops, which remained undocumented. What did the colonial soldiers actually sing? What other songs, what other imagery was tolerated besides *Faccetta Nera*, and which

were prohibited and punished? Was there an alternative account of the war, alternative sonic memories which found their expression in music and singing?¹⁹

In the pages of *Aethiopia*, Flaiano noted down the lyrics of a song he had heard from a company of soldiers. I transcribe and translate a verse from it here.

Goodbye beds pillows and sheets

No more the thrill of your warm kisses

But only birds of prey there

*And from afar the cannon's roar.*²⁰

These lines defy the glorious image of the war that was so important to the regime to convey, and that can be found in many songs of this repertoire. How many of such songs circulated at that time, and how critical were they of the war and the rhetoric of the regime? It is extremely difficult to gain insight into how the experience of the Ethiopian campaign entered and was elaborated by oral history in Italy. In terms of field research that has been carried out, we are confronted with a lack of studies and with a subsequent sonic oblivion of the colonial experience, which widely intersects with the general removal of Italian colonialism, the delay of historiographical research into it, and the widespread reluctance of public opinion to deal with the memory of colonialism in today's Italy. The relevance of this sonic oblivion is best shown by the very few available examples of an alternative sonic memory of colonialism within the oral tradition. Gianpaolo Chiriaco recently recovered a recording which is particularly relevant in this regard.

In 1972 ethnomusicologists Diego Carpitella and Rudi Assuntino recorded Teresa Zarano in the town of Marcianise, near Caserta. The 49-year-old woman sang some verses of a song that tells the story of a young soldier who comes back from Africa only to discover that his mother is severely ill. The verses—as Zarano already knew—use the same melody as *Faccetta nera*, a song composed during the preparation of the Ethiopian invasion and that later became a hymn of the regime and a symbol of fascist nostalgia. (Chiriaco 2021)

This is the English translation of the song:

In Benevento there was a mystery,

A young man returned from Africa,

He found his mother was ill,

And there was no way to save her.

That soldier

How he sobbed

He was calling his mother

*And she didn't answer.*²¹

The recording represents a rare document of an alternative sonic memory of colonialism within Italian oral culture. It forces us to remember that, while in many houses in Italy there is a drawer or a trunk with an album, a photo, or a diary where private memories of the Ethiopian campaign are stored, most of the sound recordings available today are those that were 'popular' in the industrial, hegemonic sense of the term. Therefore, they and the violence they sonically reproduce should not be considered representative of the musical experience of Italians during the war at large. These songs must have had a strong influence on the experience of Italian soldiers who took part in the invasion, and on the civilians who stayed at home or moved to Ethiopia after 1936, but they were not written, performed, and recorded so as to narrate their real experience. The reinvention of songs and the subversiveness it may have expressed was not recorded, nor was it massively reproduced on gramophone discs. More importantly, the oral tradition of Ethiopian resistance and of Italo-Ethiopian communities have not been thoroughly researched, and historiography has yet to reckon with what those forms of sonic memories have to say.

Afro-descendant artists and activists have articulated their memories and perspectives about Italian colonialism and the postcolonial experience in many forms, often at the margin of and against dominant historical narratives. I would like to reference here two works of this kind: the documentary film *Asmarina. Voices and images of a postcolonial heritage* (2015), by Alan Maglio and Medhin Paolos; and the novel *Regina di fiori e di perle* by Gabriella Ghermandi (Donzelli 2007). *Asmarina* is an audiovisual journey into contemporary Italo-Eritrean and Italo-Ethiopian identities, titled after a nostalgic song written by Pippo Maugeri in 1956 (Cetra). The movie "traces the complex networks of colonial legacies, transnational migrations, family ties, and diasporic politics" (Hawthorne 2016). Music, relevantly present both in the soundtrack and in the everyday life of the characters, is one of the main threads running through the interviews and encounters of the movie.

Regina di fiori e di perle is a fictional work largely based on the life of the author. Ghermandi was born in Addis Ababa in 1965 by an Italian father and an Eritrean mother. She then moved to Italy at the age of 14 (Dolp and Ferraro 2016, 416). The pivotal event of the novel is the protagonist's investment as the keeper of her family's oral memory, specifically the memory of the resistance against Italian occupation. Ghermandi is also the leader of a music collective, the Atse Tewodros Project,²² in which she is equally engaged in sharing the oral and musical memory of her Italian-Ethiopian identity.

The urge to uncover the historical memory of the Italian invasion of Ethiopia has obsessively shaped her individual quest and her writing and oral narratives. She has arrived at a new sense of reconciliation during her first performance in Addis Ababa with the Ethiopian and Italian artists of "Tewodros," who

reinterpret the songs of those who have courageously sacrificed their lives for Ethiopia's freedom. (Dolp and Ferraro 2016, 425)

By exploring oral histories and memories as a form of social activism, the work of these artists brings to our attention the plurality of the sonic memory of Italian colonialism. It speaks of a complexity that is largely unrecorded, overheard, or shrouded in silence. The awareness of this silence should convey a deeper understanding of how partial the archived memory of the colonial time is. It also speaks of the inadequacy of any historical source to provide an exhaustive account of how the communities involved imagined and narrated the traumas of war and colonial violence as both perpetrators and victims. The traumatic character of this fragmented memory allows us to conceive "the house of history" as ruin, rather than as an incomplete building which it would be theoretically possible to finish (Chambers 2008, 27).

Silences, resonances and spectrality

In her work titled *Black Spaces: African Diaspora in Italy*, Heather Merrill deals with several questions and concepts that are of importance in order to frame the persistence of colonial imagery and structures in today's Italy. She addresses how the colonial processes of *othering*, which lie at the heart of Western modernity, imply the repression of histories, not only of 'others' but also of the West itself.

As a structure, modernity requires an Other and an Elsewhere. Parts of humanity are dropped off the path of progress, silencing not only histories of the colonized but also of the West as it is subsumed in an imaginary construction and narration of itself against which the rest of the world is evaluated. (Merrill 2018, 28)

In fact, the final object of the processes of repression which Merrill summarizes with the sonic metaphor of "silencing" seems to be the very intertwinement and correlation of Blackness and whiteness in history and memory, and more specifically of the violent yet intimate nature of colonialism, rather than the colonial past as such, which after WWII has never ceased to periodically re-emerge on the political agenda, albeit mainly in the form of highly partial and selective narratives (Deplano 2021). In public discourse, the colonial past of Italy has mostly been promoted with an approximate and euphemistic tone, within a rhetoric centered on the notions of a 'brief', 'proletarian' or even 'humane' or 'kindly' colonialism. This rhetoric, which lies at the core of the neo-colonial myth of *Italiani brava gente* ("Italians are good folk"), resonates with the idea of a civilizing mission which was central to colonial discourse both in liberal and in fascist Italy (Labanca 2002 and Del Boca 2005). In general, the attempt to defend Italian colonialism as a positive experience is an attitude which can only be accompanied by the conscious or unconscious attempt to minimize, overhear, or even censor any embodied form of its memory, and of the memory of its violence. It could be argued that the persistence of this

rhetoric didn't offer Italians any instrument or stimulus to deal with colonialism in their private family histories in a critical way, and ultimately prevented the whole society from elaborating an understanding of national belonging that would not be implicitly based on whiteness and on its power to subordinate and silence its subjected 'others'.

The operativity of racial segregation and discrimination in Italian culture and society is what makes the colonial imagery which we find performed sonically in this repertoire to be forgotten and at the same time still popular. The repression of colonial memory is also a removal of the role that non-white people played, and still play, in the making of modern Italy. Thus, there is a degree of complicity between forgetting the colonial past and the re-production of racial difference and inequality. The reasons behind processes of forgetting may be stratified and irreducible to the explicit goals of a specific social group or class, but they ultimately nurture neo-colonial discourses and interests. Coherently, the social injustice exercised in relationship with neocolonial racial imagery has its most severe and violent effects on the daily lives of non-white Italians and those of migrants from African countries who seek better living and working conditions in Europe.

Italy is part of a European social formation with a lengthy commercial historical relationship with the African continent, and Africans have been in Italy for centuries. Today, Africans are doing the vital domestic and agricultural labor that Italian youth are rejecting. They are picking tomatoes and conducting social care work including taking care of the elderly and children, cleaning and hauling, and working on Sunday. (Merril 2018, 76)

The colonial roots of Italian migration politics are made visible also in the exploitative system of Black workforce within the economic and industrial infrastructures of the country. The following passage by the researcher Irene Peano clearly indicates the depth of this colonial legacy, which she analyses by focusing on the exploitation of Black labor as part of the infrastructure of the agricultural industry.

While African presence has become a reality, materializing one of the fascists' (and more generally of racists') worst nightmares, the underlying premises of colonization are still very much alive, marking spaces and bodies according to notions of civilization, hygiene, and appropriateness that resonate with past projects and rhetoric. The genealogy of current spaces and discourses for the containment of migrants, many of whom are employed in the farming sector, shows how the spatial, legal, and symbolic-affective dimensions that create and reproduce such devices partake in a racist, biopolitical logic—one that has been repeatedly disavowed but continues to survive in spectral form. (Peano 2021)

The notion of spectrality is indeed a useful instrument to describe the effects of the disembodiment of colonial memory. These processes, against the background outlined here, seem to be better graspable in their concomitance with the re-production of colonial imagery and power dynamics. In this context, I refer to "the spectral form" i.e. that of ghosts, as the hallucinatory shape taken by a memory which, having been disembodied and alienated from the life of a community, does not cease to be present and operative on a sociocultural level.

Instead, it maintains an influence over what the community itself imagines and feels to be its cultural identity. The processes underlying cultural identity are imaginary and often unconscious, in the literal sense of the subjects being unaware of the role these processes play in the making of their own subjectivity. Still, such processes always have real, material, and symbolical implications and effects (Hall 1990, 226). Thus, the sonic memory of this colonial repertoire, in which explicit racist violence is combined with *topoi* that are still very much part of the Italian affective dictionary, may eventually have a hallucinatory and revelatory effect on the present of Italian society. I intend both hallucination and revelation as the ability of the songs of this repertoire to make power dynamics and patterns of racial inequality visible – or hearable – in new ways.

Contemporary Italian imagery and the affective vocabulary of *Italianità* represent a key field of inquiry in this regard. In the song *Ti porto in Italia* (Crivel, Columbia 1936), for example, the male singing voice embodies the role of the Italian soldier who exalts “la pizza, le vongole ed il panetton,” i.e. three items still ubiquitous in Italian popular imagery. They are listed in the song as dishes that a Black Ethiopian woman, represented by a singing female voice and addressed in the song with the term “morettina,” will taste if she goes back to Italy with him. Among other things, the lyrics of the female voice include the enthusiastic affirmation that she will be going to Italy to become civilized. While the celebration of Italian hospitality culture seamlessly coexists with explicit racist mockery and explicit racist violence in this repertoire, the coexistence of a rhetoric of integration and hospitality with politics of racial segregation and discrimination in the social reality of today’s Italy appears to be a consistent white supremacist logic rather than a contradiction or a contrast between opposing social phenomena.²³

Another example of the spectral, revelatory effect of colonial memory may be made concerning practices of sonic stereotyping and vocal mockery. The song *Il bottone del legionario* (Feldman-Rastelli, year unknown, Odeon), for instance, offers a racially stereotyped imitation of a Black female voice speaking Italian, assigned to the character of a submissive Ethiopian woman who converts to the fascist cause. I believe most people who have been socialized in Italy have witnessed forms of vocal racial mockery in recent times, be it in the form of intentional micro-aggressions to racialized subjects or in the form of jokes circulating among white people. The awareness of their colonial precedents may help to unmask the racist logic underling the playful appearance that is sometimes associated with sonic stereotyping. These forms of mockery re-enforce sonic whiteness, and that racial division that Jennifer Stoever conceptualizes as “the sonic color line.” The concept acknowledges the existence of a racial white-Black dichotomy within the sonic sphere, as well as “the historical relationship between sonic and visual racial regimes” (Stoever 2016, 7).

Re-embodiment memory through collective listening practices

Over the previous paragraphs, I argued about the resonance of racial discourse and policies in today's Italy with the imagery performed in these songs. The separations violently enforced by border politics – as well as the racial inequality to be found within the Italian borders – entertain a mutual relation with imagined, embodied geographies and spaces, such as the racial relations sonically constructed in this repertoire. The attempt to find new ways to listen to colonialism may be understood as a way to deal with its legacies at an aesthetic level. Such enquiries in the aesthetic sphere ultimately represent important steps towards acknowledging and dealing with the racial injustice perpetrated within political realities such as border regimes.

Thus, in terms of the dialectic between a functional, inhabited, and embodied memory and a stored, uninhabited, and unembodied memory, outlined at the beginning of this article, listening to this repertoire means re-embodiment an archived cultural memory in a conscious and critical manner, making unconsciously embodied narratives and imagery visible, and questioning them through a practice which may ultimately open up some space for alternative narratives and imagery to emerge.

Against the background outlined above, while it is true that Italian audiences have now mostly forgotten the songs of this colonial repertoire, the imagery they convey resonates quite vividly with the present. To translate the metaphor of spectrality into plain words, the idea that this archival memory is disembodied and uninhabited proves to be no more than a half-truth. The concept of disembodiment surely applies to the form of this memory, i.e. to the specific recorded sounds and patterns which arguably no longer accompany any dance in the everyday life of Italian people. And it applies to its archival materiality, i.e. the gramophone records and the giftware surrounding them, products of an outdated technology and of a listening culture which no longer exists. On the contrary, the racist imagery performed by these sounds is reproduced in today's society and politics, possibly even by virtue of its historical colonial forms being forgotten.

As long as concepts and feelings of *Italianità* coincide with the identity of a collective white subject, and racialized realities of economic and social segregation persist in a democratic country under the aegis of neo-liberal universalism, this forgetting should also be considered a strategic one. It is accomplice to the exploitation of racialized subjects, and of Black individuals and communities in particular. Conversely, bringing these archived sounds to the critical attention of audiences and communities, while claiming its relevance to the present in the social sphere, may lead to the emergence of alternative practices and policies which have social justice and antiracism on their agenda. In such contexts, these songs may be collectively listened to, among other sources and testimonies proposed by the participants, ultimately becoming a tool for listening to ourselves and to others with regard to sensitive

matters of racism, identity, and community. A public session of *Listening to Italian Colonialism*, which took place in June 2022 in Rome, set an important precedent in this regard.

The event, organized by *Spazio Griot*, was moderated by the researcher Gianpaolo Chiriaco and the journalist Francesca Moretti, who engaged in a dialogue with the musicians Luca Neves and Karima 2G. During the event, which filled the space of “Mattatoio” (a cultural space established in the ex-slaughterhouse of the capital), excerpts from the sonic repertoire discussed here were played and listened to collectively. Karima 2G and Neves reacted to the listening by sharing personal experiences and reflections about the negotiation of their multiple, plural identities as Afro-descendant and Afrodiasporic Italians. Chiriaco and Moretti, the latter also being of African descent, helped the speakers and the public to contextualize this repertoire from a social and historical perspective. The collective listening of these songs became a means by which to share memories of racism and resistance in a safe space, and to publicly address the complex array of emotional and sociopolitical struggles involved in the experience of Black Italians and of people of color in Italy.



Fig. 2. A public session of *Listening to Italian Colonialism* at Spazio Griot in Rome (June 2022)

The public, engaged both by the dialogue between the speakers and by the listening to the songs, participated not only with questions but also by sharing personal experiences and reflections, variously related to the presence of multiple cultural and ethnic identities in their own family histories or social backgrounds. Thus, the collective practice of listening to this repertoire went beyond the recollection of the Italian colonial past and its burden of racial violence. It ultimately became an opportunity to listen to the complexity and plurality of identities in postcolonial Italy, and to challenge unilateral and linear conceptions of national

belonging and citizenship. As part of the audience, I found it encouraging to note that these songs, which are indeed disturbing for their racist and violent content, were criticized and subverted by the speakers also through the exercise of humor. The testimony of people who had been directly affected by racism, and the creation of a safe context in which it was possible for them to share it in their own terms, proved to be two fundamental elements underlying that collective listening session. Their vocal presence endowed the event with a ritual and cathartic significance, thus allowing for its transformative power to emerge (Fischer-Lichte 2010).

The experience shows that involving this colonial repertoire in collective listening practices bears some potential with respect to raising awareness and fostering the debate from within the groups sharing a space in the very act of listening. This potential arguably relies on the capacity of sound to affect the listeners, involving them and calling into question their own positionality in relation to the issues at stake, and most importantly, in relation to the others with whom they temporarily share both a bodily practice and a sonic space. Many forms and settings could be experimented in this regard, eventually including other musical and oral sources alongside this repertoire. Experimental collective listening may be practiced for educational purposes in secondary schools, as well as in any public context suited to fostering dialogue on questions of (post)coloniality and racism in contemporary Italy and beyond. Ultimately, the sonic memory of Italian colonialism might also represent inspiring material for artists interested in the reactivation of this memory and in alternative, subversive re-embodiments of its narratives.

Notes

¹ As a preliminary step, Chiriaco listed and catalogued all the songs produced by the Italian music industry in relation to Italian colonialism in Ethiopia. This operation made it possible *a posteriori* to identify a series of very diverse songs as a single “repertoire.” It also made it possible to locate several threads within it by using a system of hashtags which took the two parameters of ‘theme’ and ‘musical style’ into account.

² I will linger on some aspects specific to the Italian geopolitical space, but I assume the matters in question, like any phenomenon related to European (post)coloniality, to have an intrinsically transnational and transcultural character.

³ Founded in 1927, EIAR ceased to exist in 1944, when it was converted into RAI (*Radiotelevisione italiana*). On the executive continuity between EIAR and RAI (see Tomatis 2019, 48).

⁴ “Le ultime incisioni de ‘La Voce del Padrone’. Canti d’Africa: canti di vittoria! Oltre 100 pezzi che ricordano la gloriosa impresa, incise dai migliori artisti e dalle più note orchestre [...]” The digitalization of all the issues of *Radiocorriere* are accessible online at www.radiocorriere.teche.rai.it (accessed: September 15, 2022).

⁵ In her well documented work titled *Jazz Italian Style: from its origins in New Orleans to fascist Italy and Sinatra* (2017), Harwell provides evidence of how Mussolini himself appreciated jazz and contributed to allowing for its popularization in Italy. Despite the opposition of some individuals and groups within the fascist intelligentsia, the interest in jazz by Italian artists and orchestras and its success among the national audience grew strong. After the promulgation of the racial laws in 1937-38, the regime focused on the attempt to ‘Italianize’ jazz music, which had become ubiquitous across the Italian soundscape (Harwell 2017).

⁶ Neo-fascist circles and people nostalgic of the fascist regime represent a significant exception in this regard. Comments posted under the versions of these songs available on YouTube express nostalgia for the fascist era or invoke its return. These specific individuals and groups inhabit and embody that

sonic memory by claiming it as their own. For the matter of this paper, I use the terms ‘embodied’ and ‘inhabited’ as synonyms, with the specification that I consider the concept of ‘embodiment’ to place the accent on the corporeal and performative character of a functional memory, and the term ‘inhabitant’ to address the existential aspect of it.

⁷ For a monography on the connections between sound and memory in relation to radio and other electronic media, see Street 2015. For a collection of contributions around the role of sensory and aural knowledge for historical research, see Damousi-Hamilton 2017. For a reflection on the relation between sound and the Mediterranean space as a counterculture to modernity, see Chambers 2020. The concept of *memoria sonora* (the equivalent of sonic memory in Italian language) was used by the archivists and historians Antonio Cavallari and Antonella Fischetti in their book about the history of recordings of the former *Discoteca di Stato*, today I.C.B.S.A., in which gramophone discs of the repertoire in question here are stored (Cavallari and Fischetti 2014).

⁸ I capitalize the term Black, in line with the current practice of many scholars and writers, to signal respect for individuals and communities of the African diaspora who historically re-validated their Blackness in reaction to white supremacy and racism across the globe. I decided to use the term ‘white’ in the lower case because it is proudly claimed mainly by white supremacist and racist groups, and because the populations that have been historically identified by these two categories did not experience race and racism in the same way. However, I use neither of the terms to refer to any univocal indicator of race or ethnicity, but to address the social construction of race which makes certain bodies, groups and spaces internally and/or externally perceived and understood as Black or white. Also, I leave the term ‘Black’ in lowercase when I quote from sources in which it is not capitalized. For a critical overview on recent debates on capitalization of initials in relation to race, see Appiah 2020 and Coleman 2020. My understanding of Blackness is mainly influenced by the reading of Fanon 1952 and Mbembe 2017.

⁹ My main reference concerning the concept of voice and the bodily foundation of its relational power is the philosophical articulation of the political philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2005). For an introduction to the topic of voice from a cultural perspective in the Germanophone *Kulturwissenschaften*, see Kolesch and Krämer 2006. For an exploration of the intimate power of vocalicity within and beyond the sphere of human vocal expression see Pettman 2017.

¹⁰ “Gambette nere di bambole brune / un di legate con ferro e con fune / vi ha liberate l’Italia bella / ed or ballate la tarantella.”

¹¹ “Gambette nere ma quelle dei maschi / gambette di Degiac e generali / che solo nel vedere i nostri caschi / voi fuggivate, mettevate le ali.”

¹² “E la vittoria canta / come canta ogni cuor / la sua canzone d’amor // Fior d’Abissinia bel fior, Africanella / all’ombra del tricolor sarai più bella / l’Italia nostra la nuova patria per te sarà / che ti proteggerà // l’ardente fiamma d’amor, Africanella / la schiavitù del tuo cuor spezzar saprà / e la canzone di giovinezza / nel tuo cuor risuonerà / canto di gioia grido di libertà.”

¹³ In 1947, drawing upon that experience, Flaiano would publish the only novel of his career: *Tempo di uccidere* (“Time for Killing”). The novel, whose title is a biblical reference to the Ecclesiastes (or Qohelet), provides an extremely bitter and distressing narrative of the colonial experience, seen from the perspective of an Italian officer in Ethiopia. The role that the sonic sphere, and more specifically music, play in it, would merit an in-depth study on its own.

¹⁴ “Le canzoni che piacciono ai soldati sono quelle che i superiori non vogliono sentire, e viceversa. Basta che un ufficiale ordini di cantare perché tutti tacciano. È un fenomeno perfettamente comprensibile, essendo il canto, insieme al fumo e al bere, il piccolo vizio dei soldati; un vizio che è bene non controllare. [...] Nessun soldato canterà mai le canzoni che i professori scrivono per lui, canzoni piene di elmi e di pennacchi come vecchi tenori. [...] La campagna di Libia sortì buon effetto per via di ‘Tripoli, bel suolo d’amore’, il prototipo delle canzonette di mobilitazione. E in questa guerra? Ho l’impressione che ‘Faccetta nera’ abbia molto contribuito a riempire gli ospedali di ‘feriti in amore’” (Flaiano [1947] 2020, 14).

¹⁵ Composed in April 1935 with lyrics by Renato Micheli and music by Mario Ruccione, the song “Faccetta nera” became popular in Italy and at the front shortly before being officially opposed by the regime. In fact, the song was considered as incompatible with the racial laws of 1937, which prohibited any form of “honored relationship” between “whites” and “blacks,” basically allowing only for forms of exploitative, depersonalized sexual interaction, whereas the lyrics of “Faccetta nera” prophesize to a Black woman that she will be integrated to the point of “becoming Roman” and a “camicia nera” (i.e. a fascist). On the history of “Faccetta nera,” see Sciego 2015 and Barrera 2022.

¹⁶ “Influenza delle canzonette sull’arruolamento coloniale. Alla base di ogni espansione, il desiderio sessuale.”

¹⁷ See the songs “Africanella”; “Africanina (pupetta mora)”; “Bella abissina”; “Canterà (Faccetta nera)”; “Cioccolatino”; “Faccetta nera”; “Fiore del Tigrai”; “Fiore imperiale”; and “Ti porto in Italia.”

¹⁸ See Volpato 2009 and Forgacs 2014, among others. Flaiano himself, in *Aethiopia*, writes a note about the brutal gang rape and killing of an Ethiopian woman in the context of a massacre carried out by Italian troops.

¹⁹ I formulate these questions drawing on the experience of my research on a collection of sound recordings of Italian prisoners of war, recorded in German prison camps during WWI. Dated 1918, that particular collection showed the musical culture of Italian soldiers to be extremely rich, varied and unlike any repertoire supported by the military and political elites (Macchiarella and Tamburini 2018).

²⁰ “Addio letti cuscini e lenzuoli / Non più l’ebrezza dei caldi tuoi baci / Ma là ci sono gli uccelli rapaci / E da lontano il rombo del cannon.”

²¹ “A Benevente è stato nu mistero, lo giovane dall’Africa è turnate / ha truate a mamma sua che stea malate e non ce steva ‘e mezze da salva’. // Chillu soldate / come chiagneva /chiamava mamma sua / e non rispondeva.”

²² <https://www.gabriella-ghermandi.it/music/>. Accessed: December 9, 2022.

²³ I think of the song *Topolino va in Abissinia* (Crivel-Stefer, Columbia 1935) as a striking example of explicit racist violence within this repertoire.

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