

APPROACHING THE ARCHIVES OF ITALIAN CINEMA

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It is not uncommon to encounter absences and silences within an archive, especially as they pertain to film archives and the histories of African descent peoples. More than a passive repository of documents, the archive is an “active, regulatory discursive system”, as curator and theorist Okwui Enwezor has written, which structures knowledge production but can also be “appropriated, interpreted, reconfigured, and interrogated” (Enwezor, 2007:11). These archives register the broader histories of Italian colonialism, racial discourse and hierarchies, often leading to the marginalisation of African descent and other racialised people. This erasure manifest itself in ‘gaps’ and ‘absences’ – for instance, in the difficulty locating actors who remained uncredited on screen.

My research emerged from a desire to address these erasures and disappearances in the canon, to acknowledge the presence of African descent people in the Italian national cinema, and to address what I then perceived as the neglect not only to study these representations but to consider the theoretical and methodological tools by which to undertake such an examination. Drawing upon primarily cultural studies, critical race and postcolonial studies, then emergent in the field of Italian Studies, and in consideration of Italy’s so-called ‘delays’ – in terms of its national unification and its colonial enterprise – as well as the country’s internal racialised north/south division (its ‘Southern Question’), I argued in my book *Equivocal Subjects*, that through the trope of racial mixture, discourses of race and nation are evident throughout, from the silent historical epics, to the fascist colonial cinema, to the neorealist period, and the cinema of the 1950s and 1960s. More recently, there are artists such as Haile Gerima and Isaac Julien, who, through their cinema, have offered counter-histories of the Italian

colonial legacy and further, of the Mediterranean slave trade, as it is manifest in the current necropolitical borders of the Mediterranean (Greene, 2012).

It is an active investigation that Janell Hobson advocates in her essay, 'Viewing in the Dark: Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film' in which she invokes Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, specifically, Morrison's "critique of the absence-presence of blackness" – or the "Africanist presence in American culture and literature". In terms of film, Hobson writes that we "must also incorporate an analysis of the invisible, or the dark presence" and soon after, states: "I advocate a feminist film theory inclusive of race, class, and gender analysis that integrate an examination of 'looking relations' with a search for the invisible but felt presence that frames the visual and cultural scene" (Hobson, 2002:47-48). I want to heed Hobson's call for a reading practice that attempts to subvert the ways in which the African descent presence has traditionally been read on screen. Thus, I find it important to identify Black women film scholars, or perhaps re-insert them into the canonical scholarship on colonial and postcolonial Italian film, one from the United States and the other from Nigeria writing in Italy during the late 1960s, who first turned this critical eye to the Italian cinema, and created a corpus that speaks back to this canon, prompting inquiries into its silences.

During my initial research, I encountered a scholar with a similar inquiry, a shared interest in exploring and contextualising these images. Chandra Harris's 'Who's Got the Power? Blacks in Italian Cinema and Literature, 1910-1948', is a pathbreaking intervention in the study of racial discourses in Italian film and literature. Her ranging work covers the silent to the immediate post-war era, and stands as one of the first studies of the presence of the African American GI in Italian neorealist films. At one point, Harris recalls the experience of sitting in a theatre and encountering African and African Americans in these films, posing questions to these images, deciding to examine "their potential significance in Italian culture" and the dynamics of race and power implied by these images. This critical viewing practice is suggested in bell hooks' "oppositional gaze" in which the process of looking upon and interrogation opens: "Spaces of agency [that] exist for black people,

wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see” (hooks, 1994:116).

This kind of oppositional gaze can also be found in the work of Joy Nwosu, who in 1968, wrote *Cinema and Africa: The Image of the Black in White Cinema and African Cinema Today*. Originally from Nigeria, Nwosu, then a student first at the Conservatory of Santa Cecilia and then at the International University for Social Studies (Pro Deo/LUISS), completed her thesis as part of her degree studies in Mass Communications. Nwosu wrote *Cinema and Africa* at a moment of heightened decolonial struggle, antiwar movement, and student activism. The text conveys the passion and conviction of its time. International in its scope, *Cinema and Africa* examines the early cinemas of France, the United Kingdom, the USA, and Italy, becoming one of the first texts to examine the continuities between the colonial era films and the cinema of the 1950s and 60s. As Italian film scholar Leonardo de Francheschi, editor of the 2014 reissue, writes, Nwosu’s text points to the “continuity between the colonial cinema of the Thirties and Forties and the [then] most recent productions from [traditional] genre films to the auteur cinema” (de Francheschi, 2014:113). In an interview, Nwosu states of her groundbreaking text, “The fact is that, I was speaking the truth. I know what I saw in the films I watched, and I aptly interpreted what I saw. That was one aspect of my writing that I was not ready to compromise, interpreting the truth” (de Francheschi, 2014).

Perhaps we can also turn to a concept of archival retrieval. In ‘Venus in Two Acts’, theorist Saidiya Hartman directs us to the absences in the archives of slavery, and to the desire “to recuperate those lost to history” (Hartman, 2008). While I do not suggest a direct correspondence or analogy between Italian film archives and the archives of slavery, I do want to contend with the ways Italian colonialism has structured the archive (Greene, 2021). Indeed, African descent actors and film scholars are actively retrieving these histories and there are projects, such as educator and filmmaker Fred Kuwornu’s *Blaxploitalian: 100 Years of Blackness in Italian Cinema* (2016) and Maria Colletti and de Francheschi’s digital archive *Cinemaafrodiscendente*, which speak to these legacies in the present. Archival retrieval, as it pertains to returning to, working within and against the colonial archives, are appearing in various forms. For instance, moving briefly outside the

context of Italian film, we can look at author Maaza Mengiste's *Project3541: A Photographic Archive of the 1935-41 Italo-Ethiopian War*. This archive, developed from Mengiste's personal collection of photographs of Ethiopians that fought against the Italian invasion, is "a memory project and an act of reclamation that seeks to transcend the static nature of the archive" (Mengiste, 2019). This ongoing work offers the possibility of retrieving the histories of those misremembered or forgotten, and to move towards the creation of new archives.

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