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Images of whiteness. Exploring critical issues

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The Construction of Italianness: race and whiteness in Liberal and early Fascist Italy

In my paper, I will discuss the complicated process of the early 20th century construction of the multifaceted, certainly controversial and mostly unspoken, idea of Italian “whiteness”. In order to capture the wide range of representations and self- representations that converged in the first decades of the 20th century in racial politics, I will analyse the intertwined and continuous re-articulation of the two processes of the racialisation of the self and the racialisation of the Other (Guillaumin 1972) that occurred in Italy. Their composite articulation changed the self-representation of Italian identity from that of poor and non-white migrants (unable to constitute a Nation) to a construction of racialised “nationhood” in terms of “Mediterraneanness” (that was considered Fascism’s highest achievement). In particular, I will pay attention as continuities and discontinuities between the two historical phases of late Liberal Italy and early Fascism (so my analysis will stretch between 1880-1936). I will do this in order to grasp the peculiarities of a construction of Italian-ness in terms of ‘unspoken whiteness’. The ‘unspoken’ character of this version of *Italianità* derives from the altero-referential nature of both Liberal Italy and Fascism’s racialisation. I refer to altero-referential racism as a system of racialisation centred on the Other. Quoting from Ruth Frankenberg, “a fundamental trait of such a system is the occultation of the Self”. My point is that in both cases of Liberal Italy and Fascism, the assignment of a precise colour (from a darker nuance than white, to black) to the internal and

colonial Other implicitly produced the racial identity of the Self.

In particular, my paper focuses on the early Fascism's construction of Italian femininity as a fundamental element of the conception of Italian whiteness in opposition to the black colonised femininities. This understanding of femininity was functional to an idea of the "uomo fascista" as a superior and virile white dominator and no longer compelled to migration, misery and blame.

From the political unification to the Italian race

At the beginning of 20th century, the project of a unified Italy was far from being accomplished. Not only because Italy still needed to establish its borders and organize its power over the peninsula's territories and populations, but rather because it lacked a strong and universal "national identity". In fact, it lacked both a commonly accepted and legally sanctioned idea of national belonging and, most importantly, a cultural and, very often formalised, racial identity.

Discursively, the failure of the project of a unified country was blamed on rural areas that needed a cultural, social and technological revolution in terms of capitalist organisation and production, and on the South being difficult or impossible to absorb. Many Italian politicians, intellectuals and scientists like Pasquale Rossi, Cesare Lombroso and Alfredo Niceforo, believed that the South's social organization, habits, and forms of production were the result of a different civilization (allegedly pre-modern, related to Borbonic Kingdom of the Two Sicilies) and/or a different "temper or character" [defined by transnational raciologies as attached to the influence of "Arabic" or "Black" races].

The implicit or explicit reference to Southerners as belonging to a different racial stock reflected in Social Darwinist theories against the South, was globally confirmed by the

classifications of immigration officials. As in a tautological circle, Southerners' racial inferiority/social dangerousness produced their inadaptability to the Italian laws. In turn, this inadaptability produced the emigration of subjects that were considered by receiving-States as dangerous to their own social system and inadaptable to their social values and organization. The forms of discrimination and segregation that Italian 'black' Southerners experienced, consisted in an impediment to Southerners' representation and self-representation as *Italian* and *white* both at home and abroad. This obstacle came to be further reinforced since the Italian colonial endeavour started: the description of the irreducible Southerner, unable to bend himself to the Liberal idea of Italian-ness and join the larger racial identity the imperial endeavour creates, was predominant in Italian and international Social Darwinist literature (1880s) and presented the same stereotypes used to describe the African colonized.

As the Italian historian Michele Nani has outlined (2006, 17), the Southerners' impediment was not accidental: it was, instead, at the very core of post-unification national identity, grounded on a 'restrictive' idea of national belonging primarily obtained "by contrast". The sovereign subject was 'deduced' as superior (whiter) first through its opposition to the domestic other (Southern; Jewish) and then the external Other (the colonised).

Referring to the external Other, as the three Italian women historians and anthropologists Barbara Sòrgoni, Sandra Ponzanesi and Giulia Barrera have outlined, since the very beginning of Italian colonization (1870s), the racial self-representation had operated through a sharp distinction between the coloniser and the colonized, the latter signified as coloured and backward. This distinction was articulated through the crucial scientific purport of Italian positivism: anthropological, ethnological, and literary studies played a crucial role in defining the internal Other (*the South*). In the case of the internal colour line, the *whitening process* "by contrast" corresponded mostly to the line dividing urbanised petit-bourgeoisie and rural pre-

capitalist peasantry. Consequently, it entailed a moralising and civilizing mission towards rural and Southern populations to introduce them to the capitalist mode of production and the State's Law, necessary to the emancipation process from backwardness and brownness. Those doomed to backwardness and brownness were seen as non-absorbable and needed thus to be expelled or contained as (potentially) dangerous subjects. In this imaginary, the stereotypical Southerner functioned as the necessary term that defined the superiority of the Northerners and their belonging to "Europe". Quoting from Alice Wong, "the racial superiority of the North depended on the inferiority of the South. The self was defined in relation to the other", where the North resulted more and more attached to a North-European idea of Europe, as Nelson Moe and John Dickie remind us. As opposed to the whitening strategies adopted by the previous Liberal government, which aimed to select true Italians (that is Northern, urbanized and middle-class) from the mass of mixed and degenerate people (poor or less white) inhabiting the Peninsula, Fascism operated a black-white "oppositional" strategy that rehabilitated less-white Southerners, making them white. The opposition between black and white, where black is located outside the national boundaries, actually allowed Fascism to eventually whiten the internal black.

The inclusive project of unifying the country in cultural, political and even racial terms became stronger (at least discursively) under the Fascist regime. If the military colonial enterprise (1880s-1920s) had first spread an idea of homeland amongst Southerners employed as colonial soldiers, it was Fascism that shaped an all-inclusive idea of national belonging. Fascism reinforced the mentality of common people as well as intellectuals and politicians towards an idea of nationhood that included the South as an inherent part of the national project.

The peculiar contribution to the "cultural unification" that Fascism provided was

constructing and spreading a strong nationalist ideology focused on anti-urbanism, pro-birth and virility, patriarchy, obedience and faithfulness to the regime (binding together family and nation, masculinity and rurality).

The new (male) citizen was to be of “*stirpe proletaria, maschia, rivoluzionaria e patriottica*” (of a proletarian, male, revolutionary and patriotic stock), but his colour is never explicitly mentioned.

To consolidate this view, Fascism needed to wipe out the evidence of Southerners’ “brownness”, from both a symbolic, and a political point of view (stopping mass emigration, investing in infrastructures, anti-poverty reforms, and mass sanitization).

The long way from brown to white

In order to discursively legitimise this “whitening” project, the regime needed to build up a strong, double-featured, racialised identity at once able to describe Italians as white and Mediterranean. Against all predominant assumptions on the physical or genetic distance between North and South, the Fascist whitening strategy needed to reappraise the existing transnational stereotypes against Italians and forge a completely new one that would be palatable for nationals and internationally acceptable, that is coherent with internationally spread *raciologies* that depicted Italians as belonging to a differently-white race.

Amongst many theories, the ideas of the important scientist (endocrinologist) Nicola Pende (who got great importance in the 1930s as a theorist of the idea of an Italian “race”; he wrote the important book *Bonifica umana razionale* published in 1933) met all the requirements: his theories, at once, included and framed all typological differences internal to the “*razza italica*” into the theory of the “human bio-typology” and provided a scientific foundation to the government project of “racial clearing” (*bonifica della razza*) based on the

Fascist principle of the primacy of the national community over single individuals. At the same time, it offered a scientific foundation to the idea of the “Italic race” as “intrinsically and historically Mediterranean”.

Pende formulated a key Fascist idea of *stirpe*/*stirpi* that corresponded throughout the 1930s to a composite group of people supposed as descendants of the populations subjected by the Romans and corresponding to the local component of the ancient empire. This group was considered racially self-consistent by virtue of its common story. The terms *stirpe* and *stirpi* (singular and plural), that could be translated in “stock” or “kinship”, were variably deployed in Fascism’s racist discourse, referring to a set of *stirpi* unified in one *stirpe*, the latter sometimes substituted with the term *race*.

Following Giuseppe Sergi’s articulations, this theory inaugurated the subtle distinction between kinship and race that allowed the latter to be seen as an unifying term including all differences and neutralizing their disaggregating power: the theory of “race as a set of kinships” would make Italy a “biologically” unified country; and, at the same time, it would have invoked that great Roman ancestry that would have safeguarded Italians against that “excess of civilisation” and progress in terms of mentality and mores, that the regime feared. Italy would no longer be divided in countryside and cities, North and South, and their corresponding racialised representations: all these identities would have been positive elements of the same panoply.

This bio-politics included a precise idea of masculinity – as outlined by Mia Fuller and Ruth Ben-Ghiat –, and a corresponding material and symbolic construction of a new model of femininity. The Fascist model of Italian femininity, that of the “maternal woman”, was surely consistent with a traditional and patriarchal idea of family, sexuality and reproduction, claimed by the Church and reinforced by the Fascist regime, but it was also a “constituent moment” for

a discursive strategy aiming at fully confirming male superiority to women (Bellassai 2005, 326). The image of the “Italian female” was meant to both represent women as “the inferior companion of man in the past, present and always” (*Ibidem*) and describe her as the repository of the “Italian kinship’s integrity and soundness” (“integrità e sanità della stirpe”).

Officially, since 1922, Italian women become the object of a series of policies and welfare institutions (amongst which the Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia created in 1925) aimed at preserving their health and procreative capacity, and restricting and severely punishing any misconduct or so-called indecent behaviour. The white female body was to signify the boundary separating purity and impurity, morality and immorality, nation and race’s re-generation and de-generation, and this is confirmed by the existing differences in Fascist policies in matters of female sexuality, marriage and reproduction approved in Italy and its colonies. While for Italian white women these policies were becoming more and more restrictive, colonised black women could be still legally kept as concubines and “madames” until 1937.

But, if the boundary between the white woman and the black colonised was meant to separate superiority and inferiority, nonetheless it connected them – as Randhika Mohanram argues for other cases –, including them within a sort of circular line that encompassed national and colonised women by virtue of their alleged common *nature*: that of being vehicle of both decadence and grandeur. To women’s sexuality and genes is ascribed both the bio- physical attitude to diseases typical of inferior races (the woman as disease-carrier) and the psychological, physical and genetic well-being of the “razza italica”. In that sense, national and colonised, white and black women belong to a common species whose whiteness was continuously threatened, in the case of white women, or whose brownness-as-blackness was always a threat, in the case of darker women.

To reappraise Italian women's "dark" nature so that it could fit into the Fascist idea of the Italian "racial superiority", their Mediterranean-ness, intended as uncontrolled passions and sexual appetite, was to be transformed in a positive feature of the national identity.

The Italian woman was thus constrained in a rigidly disciplined patriarchal and matrimonial, reproduction-centred and eugenicist model of life (de Grazia 1992, 154-166), and in so doing, civilised. To both intransigent Catholics and Fascist eugenicists, sexual habits in the countryside and rural communities' closeness, together with a "qualitative and quantitative model of reproduction", made the peasant society a perfect model. It appeared as opposed to the corrupted (and infertile) metropolitan communities as well as so-called primitive (colonial) societies, where decreasing birth-rates, *de facto* marriage, free sexual habits, concubinage, and prostitution were prevalent.

This polarised model of the rural woman vs. the colonisable would support the so-called 'youth's revolution' *la rivoluzione dei giovani* (following Corrado Gini) that transformed Italy into a virile, rural, healthy, strong and dynamic nation, prolific both at home and in the overseas colonies.

In this particular articulation of white-Italianness as Mediterranean-ness, rural and Southern housewives (*le massaie rurali*), were particularly important. Symbol of sensuality and fecundity, in Liberal Italy they were considered symptomatic of backwardness and unmasterability. Now, they are both domesticated and celebrated as part of the Italian sexual/racial identity as both white and Mediterranean. The conjunction with the despised rural Southerner darker Italian of the Liberal period is thus maintained, but a sharp new distinction is also made. The difference between white and black women lies with the fact that Italian darkness assumes a sort of archetypal character evoking a particular model of beauty and femininity that can be traced back to the iconography of Roman goddesses. In this imaginary,

the direct link to the Roman past elevated the Mediterranean-ness of Italians by connecting rationality and force as archetypical Roman.

The regime's discipline over bodies and behaviours, encamped into a national project, together with the colonial expansion and the related racialisation of the colonial Other, framed and strengthened the idea of Roman-Italian superiority over other Mediterranean populations. Through the appeal to ancient Roman-ness and the regime's discipline, Italian darkness is 'de-epidermalised' in a way that allows a distinction between 'epidermally' dark Mediterranean races and 'archetypical' Mediterraneanness, that of Italians as Romans. This abstracted darkness allows Italian women (or 'kinship's mothers') and the Nation as a whole to be represented as definitely white-and-yet-Mediterranean.

Italian women's whiteness is thus the result of a double form of racial construction: it is the result of a connection to a mythical past of grandeur, and instancing at once a (phenotypical) difference to black bodies. Moreover, the form of self-definition or *self-referential racialisation* (that refers to the Roman mythical past) that is ingrained in this peculiar intersection between gender and colour, is not separable from the creation of an Italian racial identity as a combination of different, although abstracted, racial elements.

In conclusion

In the construction of Italian *whiteness*, the *self-referential racialisation* is deployed to eliminate racial discontinuities and differences within the national borders (denying Italy's internal "brown spots" (in the case of Liberal Italy: we, Italians, that is middle-class urbanized Northern men, are all Europeans; in the case of Fascism: we, as Fascistized Italian People, men and women, are all Mediterraneans and heirs of Rome); the *altero-referential racialisation* to discipline women's bodies and behaviours at home and, within the colonised space, to remind

Italians about the classless whiteness they achieved (in the case of Liberal Italy: as European we are superior to Mediterraneans; in the case of Fascism: as Mediterraneans we, men and women, are superior to Mediterranean black races).