

Boogiemen and Black Madonnas of Post War Italy

Rosetta Giuliani-Caponetto
Auburn University, U.S.A.

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Abstract

This article examines ways in which male Blackness was associated with the phenomenon of *i figli della Madonna* born to Italian women and African American GIs during WWII. Even at times when the Italian plural 'figli' linguistically references daughters, *i figli della Madonna* is mostly intended as 'the Madonna's sons.' This phenomenon is exemplified in post-war Italian songs (1944 *Tamurriata nera*), cinematic works (1949 *Il mulatto* by Francesco De Robertis; 1967 *Il nero* by Giovanni Vento), and novels (1980 *Nero di Puglia* by Antonio Campobasso), all of which bear witness to the phenomenon, and feature a male biracial child as protagonist. I discuss the Madonna's sons in light of studies on the iconography of the Black Virgin Mary. The cult of the dark-skinned Virgin Mary, particularly revered in Italy, redeems Black femininity in Enrico Emanuelli's 1961 *Settimana nera*, a novel set in Mogadishu during Italy's Trusteeship Administration in Somalia. Emanuelli's novel is emblematic of post-war literary and cinematic practice, inspired by a verse from the Song of Songs ('nigra sum sed formosa,' 'sono nera ma bella'), of bestowing beauty on Black female characters through a title of nobility, or the name of the Virgin Mary. The verse from the Song of Songs ('I am Black but beautiful') fundamentally influenced the rising popularity of Black Madonnas. The oldest dark Virgin Mary statues carried the royal title of 'majestas' (majesty) largely owing to the fact that they were portrayed sitting on a throne.

In this article, I thus examine the ways in which Emanuelli draws a parallel between the Somali protagonist of his novel, who is named Regina (Queen), and the woman in the Song. In doing so, the author casts a Black femininity, originating in a biblical text, against the imaginaries shaping male Blackness within the metropole.

Keywords: *Italy, gender, language, linguistic anthropology, Black Madonna, Regina*

Introduction

In a June 2020 article in the publication, *La Voce di New York*, Italian American scholar Anthony Tamburri commented on the removal of confederate monuments and the controversy surrounding memorials honoring Christopher Columbus and Italian journalist Indro Montanelli, whose statue was first targeted in 2019 and then defaced in 2020 in the city of Milan, Italy. Eventually, the statue appeared holding a Black female doll wrapped in a white sheet in an ‘installation’ by Italian artist Cristina Donati Meyer. This holding was a reference to the Madonna and Child, or the Pietà iconography, in a deviously altered version of that tradition.

The Montanelli ‘installation’ constitutes a powerful point of departure for my discussion on the conflation of past and present, linguistic gender marking, Blackness, and the Madonna as represented in Italian literary and cinematic works from 1960 to 1980. More specifically, this article examines the 1980 autobiographical novel *Nero di Puglia* (A Black Man from Apulia), in which author Antonio Campobasso narrates his life experience as a biracial child born to an African American GI and an Italian mother, in 1946 in Italy.

My analysis throughout this paper builds on previous scholarship on Italian mixed-race offspring, to evaluate ways in which male Blackness was associated to the phenomenon of *i figli della Madonna* born to Italian women and African American GIs during WWII.¹ Even at times when the Italian plural ‘figli’ linguistically references daughters, *i figli della Madonna* is mostly intended as ‘the Madonna’s sons.’ This phenomenon is exemplified in post-war Italian songs (1944 *Tamurriata nera*) cinematic works (1949 *Il mulatto* by Francesco De Robertis; 1967 *Il nero* by Giovanni Vento), and the autobiographical novel which I examine in this article (1980 *Nero di Puglia* by Antonio Campobasso), all of which bear witness to the phenomenon, and feature a male biracial child as protagonist.

In this article, I examine the Madonna’s sons in light of studies on the iconography of the Black Virgin Mary. The cult of the dark-skinned Virgin Mary, particularly revered in Italy, redeems Black femininity in Enrico Emanuelli’s 1961 *Settimana nera* (Black Queen),² a novel set in Mogadishu during Italy’s Trusteeship Administration in Somalia. Emanuelli’s novel is emblematic of post war literary and cinematic practice, inspired by a verse from the Song of Songs (‘*nigra sum sed*

formosa,' 'sono nera ma bella'), of bestowing beauty on Black female characters through a title of nobility, or the name of the Virgin Mary. The verse from the Song of Songs ('I am Black but beautiful') fundamentally influenced the rising popularity of Black Madonnas. The oldest dark Virgin Mary statues carried the royal title of 'majestas' (majesty) largely owing to the fact that they were portrayed sitting on a throne (Bernardi 2010; Scheer 2002). This article examines the ways in which Emanuelli draws a parallel between the Somali protagonist of his novel, who is named Regina (Queen), and the woman in the Song. In doing so, the author casts a Black femininity, originating in a biblical text, against the imaginaries shaped by colonial tradition.

To develop this study, I am particularly indebted to the scholarship of Liliana Ellena, Gaia Giuliani, and Cristina Lombardi-Diop, who examine discourses of race in Italy through the lens of a 'color line' in the transition from post-unification to the fascist and post war periods.

Literature Review

In post-unification Italy, the color line separated 'real' Italians (the urban petty bourgeoisie of the North) from the supposedly less-White rural populations of the South (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2012). Fascism lumped Italians together and proclaimed the Whiteness of the intranational Black (the South) by contrasting it with the Blackness of colonial Africans (ibid.). Finally, in post war years, Whiteness became a commodity made accessible by will, or by the adherence to a culture of hygiene in which Blackness was associated with abjections, impurity, filth, and sickness (Lombardi-Diop 2011). Here, Whiteness stood for the opposite, a symbol of both a physical and moral cleanliness (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2012; Lombardi-Diop 2011). Italian women became the linchpin of a culture dedicated to 'whitening' Italians; it was their responsibility to rearticulate the nation's identity, not from a standpoint of race in a biological sense but by serving as a channel for "a more intimate and private understanding of the position of each person in the moral and national project" for whiteness (Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop 2012, p. 110; Lombardi-Diop 2011, p. 12).

When the Allies liberated Italy from the grip of fascism and Nazi Germany between 1943 and 1945, among them were African American soldiers whose relations with Italian women produced mixed-race offspring. As in the previous era, when Italy had several colonies in Africa, post war Italy persisted in its efforts to deny the social reality of ethnic blending. This denial led to a reluctance to integrate the children born of these wartime blended unions into Italian society, making them regular targets of abuse and neglect. Antonio Campobasso is one of these war biracial children, born in the aftermath of World War Two and into a new Italy that in 1946 became a Republic. His novel reflects on and lays bare the treatment that he, and others like him, experienced. Campobasso's painful journey through catholic orphanages and correctional institutes reveals Italian society's attempts, on one hand, to redeem Italians who procreated dark skinned babies, and on the other hand, to remedy their error by making it disappear.

Post war Italy attempted to reject its heavy fascist legacy, by cleansing the institutional language of words such as race and racism (Giuliani 2015). In reality, the act of renouncing everything Fascism purportedly stood for allowed for the “figures of race,” a repertory of images that reflected former “discriminatory power relations and racialized social hierarchies,” to slip in undetected and take hold of post war Italy’s culture and language (Giuliani 2015, p. 167). As Giuliani and Ellena (2015) understand it, the new hierarchies that became embedded in the culture of post war Italy drew from colonial racial ranking, and on an American understanding of race along the Black and White color line (Ellena 2015; Giuliani 2015). By adhering to a colorist tradition that defined race, Italians were able to wash their hands of fascist notions of race and racism biologically intended, and were able to present themselves as a White monolith (Ellena 2015; Giuliani 2015). The ‘color of the nation,’³ this social and cultural construct, tinged in invisible, neutral white, was not a phenotypic feature, but a multilayered status that came to legitimize social belonging, institutional citizenship, and daily privilege (Giuliani 2015). This article builds on the work of these scholars to investigate representations of Italian Blackness through the language of ‘racecraft.’

Methodical Framework

My analysis relies on the definition of racecraft by Karen Fields and Barbara Fields (2012) to investigate the intersection of racial discourse, linguistic gender marking, and folklore in the cinematic and literary works of post war Italy. Drawing a parallel with witchcraft, Fields and Fields (2012) coined the neologism ‘racecraft’ to shed light on the practices of crafting race as “phenomena [that] are not open to objective demonstration” but are instead the fruits of imagination and language (p. 203). Both witchcraft and racecraft reference things that are “imagined” and then “acted upon,” by speaking and spreading these so that “the outcome is a belief that presents itself to the mind of imagination as vivid truth” (p. 19). In the liminal space that is created by racecraft, “race becomes apparent” through routine acts of storytelling that utilize anecdotes, legends, allegorical stories, folk tales, gossip, and rumors, to convey images that get stamped on the mind (Fields and Fields 2012, p. 207). Racecraft performs its magic by turning imagining to imaging as storytelling traditions of racecraft generate images that are accepted as real.⁴

In my analysis, I also draw on a series of interviews by author Antonio Campobasso (1946-), journalist Enrico Emanuelli (1909-1967), and by actor Giorgio Albertazzi (1923-2016), whose literary work and acting roles I examine against racecrafted representations of male and female blackness in post war Italy. As such, I also situate the discussion of the Madonna’s sons in Campobasso’s *Nero di Puglia* and the iconography of the Black Madonna in Emanuelli’s *Settimana nera* in a broader transnational perspective.

My examination shows the permeability of past and present, between Emanuelli's references to the Black Madonna tradition and those by contemporary African American artists who tap into the Marian iconography to respond to the racial killing of black youths. Similarly, my analysis exposes the impact of 1960s and 1970s African American activism in Campobasso's novel. An orphan of the war entrusted to the care of the Virgin Mary, Campobasso relies on Black Power and Black Aesthetics traditions in order to challenge the racecraft stories he carried imprinted in his skin since the time of his birth. This article hence examines the historical reality of Italian women who entered into relationships with Black American soldiers in juxtaposition with the racecraft of male Blackness, the fantastical making of *nero*, during this period.

Discussion

Among many, Shelleen Greene, Cristina Lombardi-Diop, Silvana Patriarca, Penelope Morris, and Marisa Escolar argue that the desire to display a homogeneous image of Italy and Italians was particularly important in the immediate post war period, a desire influenced by the fact that Italian society was entrenched in the country's difficult period of reconstruction. The Italian population's lack of ethnic homogeneity was made glaringly obvious in the skin of the illegitimate offspring of Italian women and African American soldiers, their darkness blighting the dream of the newly formed Italian Republic. The popular culture of the time, such as cinema, informed the Italian public's perception of Blackness in many ways. In their respective works, these scholars examine Neorealist cinema in particular, and the ways it affected views of male Blackness during the post war years. Shelleen Greene's *Equivocal Subjects*, readings of Penelope Morris's *Women in Italy: 1945-1960* and Silvana Patriarca's *Fear of Small Numbers*, shed light on how negative perceptions of male Blackness were used both to unite White Italy against an invading Blackness, and to re-stabilize the Italian family unit by mitigating hostility to Italian mothers of illegitimate children.

With the word *nero*, which translates from Italian not only as 'black man,' but also as 'boogiemans,' male Blackness appears as an allegorical figure embodying the looming concerns of the newborn post war Italian Republic; the birth of biracial identities, women's growing freedom to express and act upon their sexual desires, and their expectations for public societal emancipation for their commitment in the liberation of Italy from Fascism. A 1799 aquatint print by Spanish artist Francisco Goya vividly conveys the unravelling anxieties that surrounded some of the most common beliefs about 'l'uomo nero.' In *Que Viene el Coco* (Here Comes the Boogiemans), Goya portrays two children who diligently attempt to avoid looking directly at the boogeyman, while their mother stares at him with a smile. Goya's Boogiemans scene is commonly interpreted as a rebuke targeting women who led children to believe in things that did not exist in order to indulge undisturbed, like in this case, in clandestine conduct such as adultery (Prado Museum Website n.p.). The mother's reaction in this scene exemplifies the recurring anxiety toward representations of race and racial blending in post war years, at a time when Italian society attempted to construct a woman complicit both in the liberation of Italy and in its muddying.

Much in the same way, the song *Tamurriata Nera* (1944, Black *Tamurriata*), describing a Black baby born to a Neapolitan woman in post war Italy, shows racecraft working at its best. For Sheeleen Greene (2012), *Tamurriata Nera* is sung by several voices, some of which acknowledge the mother's union with a Black man, while others attempt to protect the mother's reputation by attributing the boy's skin color to popular superstition, and suggesting that a Black man's stare frightened the pregnant woman to the point of changing her child's skin color. In her analysis of Francesco Robertis's film, *Il mulatto*, which features *Tamurriata Nera*, Greene (2012) underlines the ambiguity surrounding *Ciro's* birth where the verse sung by the female voice (*a volte basta una guardata* - "sometimes all it takes is one glance") neither clarifies who is responsible for initiating the gaze nor explains whether it suggests the woman's desire for the black man or her fear of him that led to the birth of her biracial child (p. 137).

Francesco De Robertis's 1949 film *Il mulatto* exonerates the Italian biological mother of the mixed-race protagonist, *Angelo*, by keeping her off screen: We learn that she died in childbirth. The film opens with the character *Don Gennaro* serenading an American tourist with *Come faccette mammata* (1906, *How Your Mother Made You*), a classic Neapolitan song about a little girl named *Concetta* growing into a beautiful blonde, fair-skinned woman. Foreshadowing the events surrounding *Angelo's* conception and birth, the song portrays *Concetta's* mother as she mixes milk and roses in the shape of her flesh and blends strawberry from the garden with cinnamon, apples, and sugar, so as to create her daughter's lovely mouth. This Neapolitan mother eventually goes broke in order to purchase filigrees to change her daughter's tresses to appear as gold. This opening song anticipated the anomalous nature of *Angelo's* family, in which the presence of a biracial child contrasted with the predominant image of post war society as White, while also revealing the meticulous, fantastical crafting of Italian Whiteness.

In her literary exploration, *Allied Encounters*, *Marisa Escolar* (2019) discusses literary and cinematic representations of women as embedded in a network of cultural and political discourses aimed at crafting the image of the "fallen Italian women" in need of redemption (pp. 1-5). Italian women were denied involvement as liberators and partisans, and were instead relegated to forced medical check-ups, and to strict social mores, as they were perceived as 'damsels in distress' or as seductresses (p. 6). This "ubiquitous [discursive] sexualization of Italian women" is for *Escolar* the primary factor that obliterated other "female wartime experiences," and resulted in the linguistic, ideological, and more so socio-political construction of the fallen Italian woman (pp. 6-7).

Penelope Morris (2006) confirms this view in her analysis of wartime Italy, during which Italian men were stolen from their homes, pushing women to poverty and prostitution as a means to provide for their families. In contrast to the pervasively romanticized image of a wife anxiously awaiting her husband's return, the truth of wartime conditions signified the commonality of extramarital affairs for the women left behind (*ibid.*). After the war, the Republic scrambled to reconstruct a stable Italy (*ibid.*). In order to present a unified family after the ravages of war, *Morris* argues that the public was required to uncover a way to forgive those Italian women who had

strayed. Return to normalcy required an act of forgiveness for the transgressors (pp. 6-7). In attempting to redeem these women, Italian society intended to redeem itself, performing both the Latin interpretation of *redimere* ('to buy up') and the Christian meaning of the term ('salvation from doom') (Escobar 2019, p. 2). The racecraft of the Republic aimed at supporting Italy's cleansing by means of buying up the diverse roles that Italian women had experienced during the war and replacing them with a single story: The fallen woman asking for forgiveness (pp. 2-7).

Cristina Lombardi-Diop's 'Spotless Italy' continues the discussion of redemption for women in post war Italy. Lombardi-Diop (2011) views the omnipresence of ideals of physical cleanliness in post war Italy as allusive to a process of figuratively removing all things associated with the condition of looking black: Poverty, sickness, error (p. 2). Through their intense attention to the cleanliness of home and family, Italian women allowed themselves to be redeemed and accepted into society as sanitized, clean, and sparkly White (pp. 2-3). Since women were largely responsible both for rebuilding the family unit and for cleansing dirt, error, and blackness, their penance naturally included the erasure of their own illegitimate dark-skinned children. Disclaimed by their mothers, these children were left to the care of religious orphanages who, as Silvana Patriarca (2015) eloquently explains, failed to provide real assistance and instead removed them from the sight of an Italy attempting to scrub itself clean.

Italian society attempted to reclaim its innocence after colonialism and fascism, by constructing a villain from darkness. A mirror opposite to the birth of Concetta in the Neapolitan song *Come faccette mammeta*, mixed-race children of the war were portrayed as being conceived in fantastical circumstances that removed their Whiteness and highlighted only their paternal Blackness. Here, as Fields and Fields (2012) point out, racecraft is not about "the outward, visible color of a person's skin but the presumed inward, invisible content of that person's character" (p. 207). These children, like Concetta, found that their soul was presumed to be projected through their faces. The invisible traits attributed to the *figli della Madonna* belonged to the gendered myth of the male 'Black brute' of the American Reconstruction (Smiley and Fakunle 2017), where the legacy of racecraft disseminated this fabrication of White imagination.

Patriarca (2015) builds on this argument in arguing that the "stereotypical representations of Black soldiers" found in Neorealist cinema did not rebut fascist propagandist portrayals of African American troops (p. 538). However, the purposes of such representations changed in post war Italy as it served to exonerate women who mothered biracial children during the war. Depicting Black GIs as "physically imposing, often drunk, oversexed, and thus always a kind of menace" (p. 538) promulgated the idea that the children they left behind were the consequence of sexual assault on helpless Italian women, rather than the result of free will and consensual attraction.

In Italian bedtime stories, 'l'uomo nero,' or boogiemans, is a character who appears in the night, dressed in black and ready to steal away defiant children who refuse to go to bed. In Italy's racecraft spaces, l'uomo nero refers interchangeably to both the African American GIs and their mixed-race children. Leonardo De Franceschi's examination of Giovanni Vento's film *Il nero* reviews several rough screenplays that preceded the one that was eventually utilized by the director for his 1967 movie. *Il nero* follows the life of two full-grown 'Madonna's sons' in the city of Naples, Italy. Most of the tentative titles (*Negro*, *Adamo negro*, *Lo schiavone*, *Caccia al negro*) of the draft screenplays reiterate the idea that Black children of the war became boogiemans for the newborn Italian Republic, their fates inextricably linked to the public perception of their African American fathers (De Franceschi 2020; Patriarca 2015). The racecrafted image of the boogiemans explains the linguistic intersection of race and gender in these male, biracial protagonists: 'Il Mulatto' (the Mulatto boy), in the homonymous film by Francesco De Robertis and "Nero" (the Black man) in Vento's film *Il nero* and Antonio Campobasso's novel *Nero di Puglia*.⁵

Racecraft is a game where Blackness stays in plain sight and within which Whiteness is removed from view. However, in racecraft, there arises a situation-to-situation practice in which race is visible and invisible, "now you see it, now you don't" (Fields and Field 2012 p. 25). In one way, Italian mixed-race children were required to be visible, their existence and treatment serving as a reminder of the consequences of lascivious behavior. The tainting of and derision for their biracial children allowed for a control and monitoring of Italian women vis-à-vis their desire for emancipation. However, biracial children of the war needed to be forced into invisibility for fear that they would undermine the innocence of an all-White Italian citizenship that was so eagerly sought in post war Italy.

i figli della Madonna

Being a minority rendered *i figli della Madonna* quite harmless.⁶ They were a quantifiable minority, a small group of dark-skinned children outnumbered by the surrounding majority of presumably White Italian community. However, under the spell of racecraft, even a small number can pose a threat (Fields and Fields 2012). Consequently, Black Italians, as illegitimate children and improbable citizens, were othered and distrusted in their own country. The protagonists of *Il nero*, *Nero di Puglia*, and *Il mulatto* carried imprinted in their skins the stories of racecraft. *I figli della Madonna* were abandoned metaphorically to the care of the Virgin Mary as children without parents who were entrusted to Catholic orphanages that were sure to keep their upbringing clandestine (Patriarca 2015). Early Black Italians, like author Antonio Campobasso, were citizens by law and blood, and were forced to leave no trace of their existence in the cultural space of the nation (*ibid.*).

Antonio Campobasso starts writing his 1980 autobiographical novel about six years before its publication (Patriarca 2022). Abandoned by his mother at an early age, Campobasso is raised by his elderly Italian grandmother and eventually ends up in the orphanage in the town of Giovinazzo, near Bari. He soon learns that there is no place for children like him who carry constant reminders of the war indelibly imprinted on their bodies. In *Nero di Puglia*, Campobasso laments the crisis of identity that accompanies this recognition as well as the weight of history and prejudice placed upon him at the moment of his birth. Campobasso recognizes his position in Italy as tenuous, and writes of his sense both of belonging, by chance of birth, and also of complete Otherness.

The Giovinazzo orphanage is where Campobasso's eighteen-year journey through reformatories, high security prisons, and asylums begins. The novel is more than a merely testimony of his eighteen years spent in Catholic and state institutions. It's a piercing dagger with which Campobasso strikes the individuals in charge of the Catholic and state institutions that victimized him. His account is meant to fill the gaps left silenced by the skillful racecraft Italian Republic with which Campobasso shared a day of birth. With a sharp tongue, he spits, vomits, and curses at those who made his Blackness a disgrace. His language resorts to blasphemy, curse, and swear words to decry, one by one, the Italian authorities who deployed the racecraft language to mark him as a reject because of the color of his skin. The list of culprits is long and does not spare anybody, from the prostitute-esque Italian Republic itself to human traffickers taking advantage of the orphanage, including so many figures of authority—priests, guards, hospital workers—who see Campobasso and children like him as less than human.

An interview with Silvana Patriarca (2022) reveals the indebtedness of the shaping of Campobasso's identity as Black man to the Italian translation of readings that leftist activists would slide into his cell: Franz Fanon's essays, Malcolm X's autobiography, and books and articles on the Black Panther movement. This literature made him aware of alternate ways of being Black, of an identity drenched in Black aesthetics and political activism that became his shiny armor against Italian racecraft. With new understandings of his Blackness and connection to the South that, like him, was another of Italy's rejects, Campobasso turned to writing his own narrative. He was pulled from despair not just by the readings of African American activism, but also by local customs of an impoverished South, reimagined through memories of his elderly grandmother. He reacted to the condition of invisibility and violence thrust upon him with a prose and poetry that countered the racecraft storytelling intended to denigrate him. A South steeped in magic and fairytales came to the rescue to soothe his pain by summoning memories of his grandmother. Campobasso's *Nero di Puglia* is replete with images of this South and the rituals that give it life—he remembers his grandmother's spell work, the rituals and gestures she used to remove *il malocchio*, the evil eye (p. 28). He recalls generations of townspeople gathering around the Saint Joseph Day bonfires, the vibrant explosion of sparks matching the frenetic dance of the children chasing the flames, and the elders gathered in a circle, faces glowing. Among the sharing of folk stories, Campobasso describes a feeling of complete belonging and equality, finding space for himself within the oral tradition of the South (p. 28).

Settimana nera

Whereas Nero di Puglia sheds light on post war Italy's practices of racecraft that doomed male Blackness within the metropole, Emanuelli's (1961) novel *Settimana nera* focuses on representations of Black femininity in Italy's former colony of Somalia. The novel examines the impact of Italy's return to Somalia in the new role of Administering Authority of a Trust territory that used to belong to the country's 1936 East African Empire. Following its defeat in the Second World War, Italy lost its colonial empire, and its Trusteeship Administration in Somalia (1950-1960) intended to facilitate or even prepare for the country's self-government and economic growth. For Shelleen Greene (2012), the novel blurs post war present and colonial past by focusing on the sexual violence against young Somali female characters as a strategy to re-enact the cruelty and structural disparity of colonial practices.

More specifically, *Settimana Nera* concerns an Italian protagonist's obsessive sexual attraction for Regina, a young Somali woman in the home of an Italian banana grower, Farnenti, whom he lends for recreational purposes to several Italian suitors along with his house. When asked as to the genesis of the story in *Settimana nera*, writer Emanuelli explained in an interview with Lino Ferrero (1963) that while the characters were fictional, the story was built around his personal experience of travelling to Somalia in the aftermath of World War Two (p. 234):

I asked myself when these images that have been carrying inside of me could come out to the surface. I mean, the memory of one of the first trips that I took to Africa: I was 22 and I found my way to Tripolitania where there were some small forts: from one of these forts I remember seeing some of our men leave with local girls whom they had bought for a few hundred liras, a very legal thing in those times, and they were holding them like little dolls, like living dolls with hearts. I remember that this made a very strong impression on me. In the last trip that I made to Somalia, to Mogadishu in the days of liberation, I found myself immersed in that world [...] you could see it right away, you just had to open your eyes. After liberation, you could not say that everything changed in Somalia; cynically, you could say that little had changed. The Farnentis were still there; though hidden, they didn't change their actions, but only the trappings of their actions, while beneath it all they still did what they had been doing. The idea I had inside of me for years bubbled to the surface when I realized this growing deceit and from this, I found the drive to write the book.⁷

This interview, together with his wartime resignation from a job as envoy covering the colonies for the Milanese newspaper *L'Ambrosiano*, speak for Emanuelli's political views and unrelenting loyalty to journalism. Emanuelli refused to compromise his ethics so as to conform to and serve Mussolini's grandiose imperial dreams. Importantly, Emanuelli's interview reveals a conduct in sharp contrast to that of his fellow journalist Indro Montanelli who, in several public interviews including one on state television aired in 1969, prided himself as having purchased a 12-year-old wife while stationed in Eritrea during his 1930 volunteer service in the Italian army. Emanuelli's

non-conforming conduct and view of the women he met during his service in the colonies provided a basis on which to ground his narratives, as his own counter-racecraft. Emanuelli set his novel outside of Italy's national soil, beyond the metropole where male Blackness has been marked as a threat, in order to redeem Black femininity.

Here, I should include the fact that *Settimana Nera* was adapted into a 1963 film titled *Violenza segreta* (Silent Violence), directed by Giorgio Moser. Aside from few episodes in the novel that are missing in the film, *Violenza segreta* is a literal adaptation of *Settimana Nera*, with author Emanuelli having developed the screenplay. Shelleen Greene's (2012) insightful analysis of the film describes Moser's adaptation of the novel as one caught up in a tension between the desire to break free from the mold of imaginaries linked to Italy's colonial past, and the inevitable tendency to fall back in the same trappings. For Greene, despite the honorable intentions of reporting an unflattering picture of Italy's Trusteeship Administration in Somalia, *Violenza segreta* falls prey to the practices of representation of "African women as sexual objects" (p. 85) without providing a countering image. In addition, Greene points out that "the erasure of Black female agency is reiterated in the press representation of Maryam" (p. 85), the Somali lead actor about whom cinematic archives have left no trace. More often than not, Moser's intentions to denounce the "sexual fantasy that sustains" the violence described in the film are undermined by the spectacularization of Regina's body (p. 87).

In an effort to disclose information about Somali lead actor Maryam, I met Giorgio Albertazzi in summer 2015 for an interview regarding his performance as the protagonist in the film *Violenza segreta*. A prominent theater actor, Albertazzi launched his career after he was pardoned for joining the Republic of Salò when he was in his early twenties. Our conversation had the primary goal of responding to the themes of the script. These questions included the following: What drew Albertazzi to the script and why he accepted a role in this film? How was he able to place himself in the position of his character, Enrico? How did he manage to define and understand the character, and which aspects of Enrico, did the screenplay attempt to express?

Several questions sought to investigate the professional career of Somali lead actor Maryam and the circumstances of her casting. From the interview, it appears as though Maryam was a beauty pageant contestant about whom Albertazzi had no further recollections other than her natural gift for acting. Moser's choice of an unknown Somali actor credited only by her first name alongside a high-profile Italian actor as protagonists is an example of the tension between the colonial past and post war present whose continuity and disconnection, according to Greene (2012), are never fully resolved in the film. Other questions emerged, though remaining unasked, such as the following: Why did Moser select a reformed actor in the main role of a film that portrayed the Italian presence in Somali, this choice being at odds with the very mandate of its Trusteeship Administration? Why was the identity and career of the Somali lead actor covered in mystery?

These tensions, between the awareness of colonial violence and the inability to escape its legacy of racecraft, appear throughout Emanuelli's novel. Emanuelli's use of the famous verse "I am Black but beautiful" highlights the juxtaposition between colonial imaginaries and post war discursive practices of Blackness. While Albertazzi's memory of Maryam's background was faded, the actor discussed her character, Regina, with impressive clarity. In the interview, Albertazzi shared vivid memories of Emanuelli's input on the screenplay and the novelist's instructions about the character of Regina, who was to resemble the woman in the Song of Songs, someone "who moves with an ancient respect, as if she must never reveal herself," with a "secrecy that defines her, a covert, mysterious way of carrying herself" (Albertazzi 2015, n.p.). This characterization stands starkly against the reality of Regina's naked Black body, constantly on display, feeding the sexual fantasies of Enrico.

In *Settimana nera*, the association of Regina to the woman in the Song, evidenced by the verse "sono nera ma bella (I am Black but beautiful)," does not seem to be imbued with the same significance. It is Enrico's climatic revelation of his passion for Regina that prompts him to pay compliments to her legs, her belly, her breast, and then to recite the verse "sono nera ma bella," in first person, as if Regina was speaking that line herself (p. 91). Later in the same passage, Enrico dismisses the possibility that Regina would understand the meaning of the line. I therefore ask the following questions: Why was the verse recited by Enrico, one of Regina's abusers in the novel? What do Emanuelli's screenplay instructions about Regina's characterization tell us? How did the novelist think to resolve the contradiction between the imaginary about Somali womanhood as object of sexual desire and Regina's depiction as the epitome of stateliness and unattainability? Why was Emanuelli referencing a biblical text that lent itself to endless interpretations from late antiquity to present day?

Ilana Pardes (2019) and Hannah Matis's (2019) analyses of the Song of Songs may assist in responding to these inquiries. Pardes engages with the work of "rabbis, church fathers, mystics, poets, writers, musicians, scholars, artists, and readers" who have participated for centuries in both an allegorical interpretation and literal reading of this biblical text (p. 2). The allegorical exegesis of the Song that proliferated since late antiquity was "a decisive tool by which Jewish and Christian communities defined themselves" (Pardes 2019, p. 23). Matis (p. 4) notes that:

allegory acted as a route by which the bewildered exegete could find a way back to the familiar home truths, offering a means by which the patchwork quilt of scripture could be harmonized.

For medieval Christian exegetes, allegory constituted a powerful tool with which to craft new meanings for texts as they tried to circumvent the "potentially unpleasant or challenging" literal reading (ibid.).

In the many transitions of Christian reception, Catherine Rowe (2019) points out, the courtship and amorous exchange between the two main characters in the Song were allegorically defined as externalizations of divine love in which the bride and the bridegroom assumed the roles of, respectively, the Catholic Church and God, the faithful and God, and the Virgin Mary and God. Among many, Claudio Bernardi (2010) notes that the medieval theological debate regarding the verse from the Song of Songs ('nigra sum sed formosa') played a fundamental role in the rising popularity of Black Madonnas. The verse transformed the subalternity of the dark-skinned Madonna, that is, her being Black and woman, into a state of light, perfection, and grace, through God's incarnation (ibid.). As Monique Scheer (2002) notes, the Black Madonna confronted traditional religious depictions of Blackness, where Satan and demons were often shown with dark skin. Through the biblical appearance of this 'Black but beautiful' woman, Christian exegetes were able to reconcile Blackness and virtue (ibid.).

Much like the Song of Songs, the origin of the Black Madonna is also wrapped in mystery, her Blackness for centuries open to interpretations. One of the most popular legends, Ethan Malveaux (2015) notes, claimed the "first-century pagan convert" known as Luke the Evangelist as the creator of a statue and a painting resembling the Virgin Mary as a woman of non-European descent (p. 143). Upon Luke's death, the statue was carried to Rome and eventually to Spain where it was retrieved in the fourteenth century and renamed Our Lady of Guadalupe, who eventually became the "forerunner of other dark-skinned image of Mary from the Americas" (p. 144). The painting made its way from Jerusalem to Poland and is known today as Our Lady Czectachowa (ibid.). The proliferation of Black Madonnas is believed to have stemmed from copies of these two original molds. During the counter-reformation, this legend became the bedrock for an "invention-of-tradition" narrative to support the historical legitimacy of the Marian cult, in order to counter the iconoclastic war waged by the Reformation (Scheer, p. 1433).

Refuting the Blackness of the Black Madonnas

Some sources have claimed that Black Madonnas were not created Black from the start, but rather, were originally White and underwent a process of blackening. The blackening of the Madonna is also a disputed terrain, with sometimes contrasting interpretations, as the worship was predicated on the Virgin Mary "being talked about as Black," and of which there is more evidence than there is of artists being commissioned to deliver a Black Madonna (Scheer 2002, p. 1428). Among many, Claudio Bernardi (2010) and Xavier Barral (2010) describe the practice of the blackening of the Madonna's face as very common in thirteenth and fourteenth century Europe, when many artists drew inspiration from figures in Byzantine icons, the Eastern origin of which would grant them a certain prestige. However, in response to accusations of idolatry put forth by Protestants during the Counter-Reformation, the Catholic church maintained that the dark color of Marian icons and statues was the visual evidence that attested to their antiquity and claimed black to be the original skin color of the dark Madonna (Barral 2010; Bernardi 2010; Scheer 2002).

Whether Emanuelli was suggesting the cult of Black Madonna while referencing “nigra sum sed formosa” cannot be known with certainty. Nevertheless, the interviews with Lino Ferrero and Giorgio Albertazzi point to the Song of Songs verse as a narrative trigger in the novel, and a crucial performance instruction in the screenplay. However, *Settimana nera* does not offer a counter story or counter imagery that enables agency for Black femininity, the line from Song of Songs standing out as the exception that proves the rule. Overall, Regina’s Blackness exists in a place of violence. She is the successor of the Black Venus, a figure deeply rooted in the Italian imagery since the nineteenth century whose exotic sexuality is later exhumed in Italian soft porn films of the 1970s. A domesticated Black femininity will provide a stage on which to discuss Italian female emancipation and a space in which to allow for the emergence of colonial imageries to circumvent the anxiety of change sweeping across the Italian society during the 1970s. The beautiful, sensual black women played by Eritrean actor Zeudi Araya in 1970s films of Italy are made to embody a set of exceptional qualities that enable them to stand up to the Italian emancipated women.⁸

Examining the iconography of the Black Madonna as a source of empowerment for Black women, visual art scholar and artist Theaster Gates presents some interesting comments that may advance my investigation of Emanuelli’s use of ‘sono nera ma bella.’ In a 2018 interview with BBC reporter Alaistar Sooke, Gates discusses the history of Black Madonnas, and speculates on motives for the adornment she received. His Black Madonna exhibition travelled across Europe to establish a dialogue with well-known examples of this iconographic tradition. As entry artwork, his exhibition displays Maerten van Heemskerck’s 1530 ‘Virgin with Child in front of a Landscape,’ a painting which Gates renames as ‘Ghetto Madonna’ or ‘Octoroon Madonna’ (Sooke n.p.). As Gates describes the unconventional elements informing this dark-skinned Virgin Mary, he wonders why she is unclothed, sexualized, and made to hold a naughty baby Jesus. Then Gates poses the questions: “Do Madonnas mature towards Blackness because something bad happening? Could a Black Madonna simply be a White Madonna with a trauma?” (Sooke n.p.).

Gates’s interview points to the chameleonic nature of the Black Madonna, i.e., her ability to blend into her surroundings. The late 17th and mid-18th centuries mark an apogee for the Black Madonna, at a time when the dark color of her skin revamped the Marian worship, and more Virgin Marys found their skin darkened (Scheer 2002). With her fame declining in the late eighteenth century, her skin was un-blackened, as her Blackness became a signifier for race (ibid.). Black Madonnas were said to be White all along, their dark complexion justified as a reaction to the environment or to the silver-colored foil around their faces (Bernardi 2010; Scheer 2002). Gates’ comments motivate our consideration of other aspects of the Black Madonna’s camouflage. The long history of racecrafted attitudes toward her affected not only the color of her skin but also the perception of her as a figure half-way between a chaste White Virgin Mary and the sinner Eve.⁹ As it would appear from Maerten van Heemskerck’s Madonna, the shift from White to Black or Black to White affected the perception of the Virgin Mary, and any shades of Black decreasing her chastity.

Gates's interview poses interesting questions, as he wonders what worshippers saw in this Black Madonna in times of fortune. If the Black Madonna intended to maintain a unified Christian worship, and as the counter-reformation sent out a unifying message by means of her dark skin, how did worshippers interpret her? Did the Black Madonna reach worshippers outside of the message imprinted on her? Gates's exhibition intends to motivate a reflection on the historical reception of this Marian cult, prior to the adoption of its iconography by artists linked to the Black Lives Matter movement. More recently, artist Titus Kaphar recreated imagery of the Black Madonna in his 'Analogous Colors' painting, to describe the pain of African American mothers who lose their sons to racial discrimination and systemic incarceration, her appearance and meaning shifting yet again.¹⁰

The interview with Gates also brings to mind the celebration of the verse 'nigra sum sed formosa,' which in the 1960s inspired the Black Is Beautiful movement in the United States. According to Sheer (2002), the 'nigra sum sed formosa' verse did not only enhance Blackness, it also empowered Black femininity, because "it is no longer a Black image of Mary that [was] spoken of but an image of a Black Mary," the visual revelation of Mary as a Black woman (p. 1436). In the 1960s, the Black is Beautiful ideal promoted positive conceptions of the Black body, and offered a Black standard of beauty and elegance, epitomized by the patterns of clothing and hairstyles presented on the seven models that became the symbol of this cultural movement. In addition, as Pardes (2020) astutely notes, the activists of the movement were the first to envision the conjunction 'but' for 'and,' a possibility bolstered by Hebrew, in which both translations are acceptable. The new motto 'I am Black and beautiful' crafted the stepping stone for a perception of Black women as beautiful, an aesthetics narrativized in the novels of Tony Morrison, and in the blogs of BLM activists (ibid.). For these new writers, those such as Onleilove Alston and Mickey ScottBey Jones, the verse becomes a call to prayer, to honor African American women killed in police custody (ibid.).

Although Emanuelli's *Settimana Nera* seems to foreground the Black Is Beautiful movement, his connection to the 'impegno nero' cultural campaign is not substantiated. Supported by intellectuals such as Calvino, Rèpaci, Del Bo, Caproni, Pavese, Vittorini, and Piccioni, Charles Leavitt (2013) notes, the 'impegno nero' cultural aesthetics tried to introduce "Italian readers to the African-American literary tradition as well as to the African-American struggle for equality" as a way "to motivate social reform in Italy" (pp. 7-9). There is no mention of Emanuelli partaking in the 'impegno nero' movement of cultural engagement in his biography and collection of private letters edited by Luciano Simonelli in *Enrico Emanuelli: Mai Rubare un Pensiero*. Therefore, Emanuelli's reference to the 'sono nera ma bella' verse cannot be interpreted as a tongue-in-cheek hint to the Black Is Beautiful movement that was concurrent with the release of his novel.

While *Settimana nera* did not provide a literary counter to the representations of the colonial Black female body, the novel did rely on religious iconography, elevating the Black body to a place among centuries of religious devotion. The *Song of Songs* lent itself to many interpretations, which enabled the novel to thoroughly investigate the fantastical fabrication of Blackness, through which the Madonna's skin was blackened and un-blackened throughout the course of time. Emanuelli's reliance on a tradition consisting of legends and allegorical readings rendered Blackness a fruit of imagination, an interpretation, and a tale with a code to be cracked. *Settimana nera* was not able to counter the colonial imaginaries that fixed Somali femininity; nevertheless it unpacked blackness to show the workings of racecraft in which black skin was valued and disparaged for ideological reasons that were independent from the color of the Madonna's complexion. *Settimana nera* can be seen as an attempt to eradicate racecraft by unwinding its game.

Conclusion

This article has focused on the language of tales and legends that equated race with skin color that cast Blackness as the epitome of difference, shaped gender within Blackness, and enabled a fantastical imagination of male and female Black bodies, thus building a semantic terrain in which they became real. My analysis throughout the paper was prompted by the installation of Italian artist Cristina Donati Meyer that staged journalist Indro Montanelli's statue in Milan, Italy, to resemble a *pietà* or a Madonna and Child scene. The *pietà* normally features a Virgin Mary grieving the death of an adult Jesus whereas the Madonna and Child tradition shows the Virgin Mary holding baby Jesus.

The installation aimed to provoke the viewers by staging Montanelli's statue in a scene where the controversial male intellectual stands in for Mary, while a Black doll draped over his lap represents his Eritrean child bride. This unsettling display paid homage to both victim and victimizer and elevated a male abuser to a Marian figure, in order to urge reflection on the hidden violence, racial oppression, and patriarchal power structure that slipped into post war Italy from the Fascist era. My reading of post war literary and cinematic works foregrounded racecraft, examining the workings of race storytelling, its narrative threads intersecting with the legacy of the Madonna's iconography.

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Endnotes

- ¹ In my monograph, *Fascist Hybridities* (Palgrave 2015), I address more extensively some of the topics I discuss in this article, such as the treatment of mixed-race children in post war Italy and the representations of black femininity in Italian culture. I am thankful to the publisher for allowing me to use in this article a few excerpts coming from my book.
- ² Peter Green's 1964 *Black Dove* is the only translation of *Settimana nera* in print. The novel title is also commonly rendered as *Black Queen* to reference the Somali main character whose name is Regina (Queen).
- ³ The expression is also the title of Gaia Giuliani's edited volume *Il colore della nazione* (Mondadori, 2015).
- ⁴ I had the fortune to attend a lecture featuring author Karen Fields at Auburn University in spring 2014, in which the scholar presented her co-authored book *Racecraft*. Since then, I had forgotten I had a signed copy of her insightful book until I sat in on the webinar "Black Italian Lives across the Centuries" hosted by Colorado University Bolder in April 2021. The seminar presentations by Michela Ardizzoni, Suzanne Magnanini, and responses by Shelleen Greene and Vetri Nathan have enriched my understanding of Karen and Barbara Fields' *racecraft*.
- ⁵ In his volume, *Il nero di Giovanni Vento*, Leonardo de Franceschi (2020) touches upon the title of 1967 film *Il nero* that seems to capitalize on the skin color of the two male biracial characters. In examples in which a 'child of the Madonna' is depicted as a young woman, as in the films *Campane a Martello* (1949) by Luigi Zampa and *Faustina*, (1968) by Luigi Magni, a female-gendered description of their skin color does not appear in the title. *Campane a martello* and *Faustina's* titles shy away from referencing the skin color of their biracial female characters, respectively, Connie and Faustina. On this topic, Silvana Patriarca (2022) notices how *Faustina's* skin color is metonymically replaced by Vonetta McGee's blackness in newspaper coverage of the movie. The Californian actor playing the role of *Faustina*, Vonetta McGee, enjoyed a brief moment of stardom in Italy (ibid.). Newspapers headlines focused on her licorice-looking skin, sometimes referencing her as "a negro angel" (p. 155). For Patriarca, "her color [...] had little to do with the color of the nation" (p. 155). She was harmless to Italian moviegoers and readers who were accustomed to the rhetorical language surrounding representations of the colonial Black Venus, and her status as "a negro angel" (p. 155) carved a biblical role for her.
- ⁶ Patrizia Patriarca in "Fear of Small Group" provides an estimate of Italy's biracial children of the war.
- ⁷ This excerpt of Lino Ferrero's interview with author Enrico Emanuelli was translated by Rachel Perry to whom I am indebted also for the editing and conversations on the topics addressed in this article, all of which have enriched my writing on and appreciation of the subject.
- ⁸ On this topic, see my articles "Blaxploitation Italian Style," "Zeudi Araya, Ines Pellegrini, e il cinema italiano di seduzione coloniale," and Gaia Giuliani book chapter "Zeudi Araya and Laura Gemser. Black Venuses of 1970s Italy."
- ⁹ See also Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum's analysis of the Black Madonna as a figure half way between the Virgin Mary and Eve in her two monographs *Black Madonnas* (1993) and *Dark Mother* (2001).
- ¹⁰ For most recent developments of the Black Virgin cult, see also Joseph Sciorra's article "Black Madonna on East Thirteenth Street".