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8: Beyond the Black Venus: Colonial Sexual Politics and Contemporary Visual Practices

Brief survey of the grammar of empire

It is a striking fact that colonial authority and racial distinctions were implicitly structured in gendered terms. These taken for granted constructions seemed obvious, and were eventually reinforced in the heyday of empire by eugenics, the gathering and collection of scientific and ethnological evidence which made scientific racism, one aspect of which involved the reduction of women to their biological essence, an undoubted axiom.

This paper is a case study of the unfolding of this colonial discourse, the way the black body became an icon for sexuality in general and how sexuality became a metaphor for domination. More specifically, I will look at how colonial ideological discourses effectively coordinated the voyeuristic representations of the black female as both inherently primitive-and-sexually-available and menacing-and-dangerous, and how these hegemonic graphic representations still connote 'visualizations' of the black female body in contemporary culture.

The representation of the racial sexual other was first seen in orientalist paintings, and reached its apogee in the colonial era. Racial diversity, invented at the height of European empire to create a cultural divide between colonizers and colonized, was also forcefully implemented through rigorous social-scientific scholarship. The research on women's bodies went hand in hand with the colonial production of knowledge of race and alterity. This literature not only documents the highly asymmetrical form of interaction between Western imperialist discourse and colonized subjectivities, but also questions the inherent

universalising and essentialising nature of scientific knowledge when based on biased racial assumptions. In many cases, the results of ethnographic fieldwork or clinical trials obtained in the colonial settings journeyed back to the European heartland where they achieved the status of pristine scholarly findings. These cultural technologies of domination, as the American anthropologist Nicholas Dirks (1996) has labelled them, demonstrated European innate superiority over indigenous people, and colonized the space of representation of the Other for many decades to come.

For example, the image of the black Venus became a forceful trope for expressing the contaminated and yet highly asymmetrical relationship between the ruler and the ruled. It allegorically rendered and vindicated the position of the white male colonizers expanding their authority and property over the virgin soil of the imperial territory, of which the black Venus is the quintessential emblem of the other, both in racial and in sexual terms. The appropriation and subjugation of the female exotic body was sustained by a meticulously constructed racial grammar in which the Other was represented as infantile, irrational and prey to primordial sexual lust, and consequently as mysterious and inherently subversive. The representation of local women as black Venuses by Western colonizers was strongly eroticised and often overtly pornographic, though often disguised as ethnographical work aimed at classifying and categorising the different races of the empire. As Ann Laura Stoler (1991: 54) wrote, 'sexual images illustrate the iconography of rule, not its pragmatics'.

Here, I attempt an analysis of the roots and lingering influence of these visual representations which for centuries have petrified colonial women in their essentialized and fixed otherness. I do so in order to map the various imperial networks of knowledge that have been made visible by recent postcolonial analyses. These offer insights into the causal relationship between colonial legacies and subsequent processes of ethnic and gender relations in contemporary multicultural societies. I start with the orientalist portrayals of the Arab woman in French paintings along with the more pseudo-scientific debates around Sarah Bartmann, the famous Hottentot Venus, who was displayed around Europe as a *cause celebre* of black sexualized and deviant Other. These representations will help to place and explain the various

representations of the Black Venus during the Italian colonial empire. I will close by addressing the persistence as well as subtle transformation of these representations in our times, specifically in Italian advertising.

Orientalist representations

Delacroix's famous painting *Women of Algiers in their Apartments* represents a milestone for Orientalism in the arts, and for the construction of the eroticised, voyeuristic male gaze. It offers a good opening to an understanding of the genre of exoticism in photography which reproduced Orientalist ideologies. The term Orientalism of course is based on an improper geographical reference, since Orientalism mainly concerned the representation of the Arabic world (today's Middle East), or of African settings, rather than of the Orient as commonly understood, i.e. China and Japan.

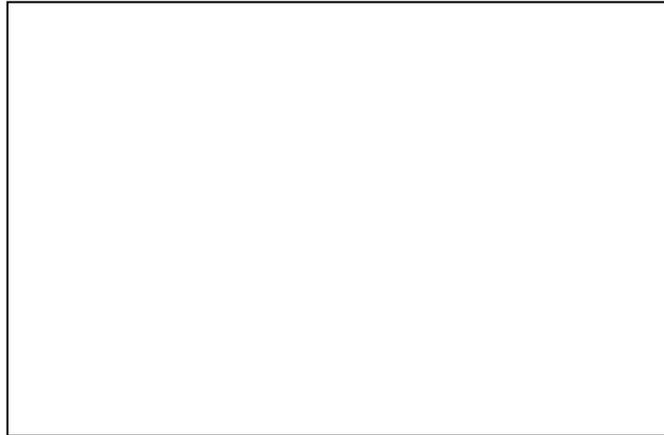
Orientalism does not refer to specific artistic forms, but representations that emphasize local costume, settings of pictorial fascination, and these quite often have an explicit erotic charge. Delacroix's painting became famous because it claimed to make a faithful representation of a female harem, a secret location banned from the sight of men, and certainly from foreign men. Delacroix went to North Africa in 1832 and managed after much negotiation to visit the house of a local *rais*. It turns out to be a proper Harem, with women and children bathed in gold and silk. He drew several sketches and collected textiles and other materials which aided him in creating a vivid characterization of three languishing women who are rendered anatomically present in the flesh yet noticeably detached and enigmatic. He accentuates the secluded interior space to which women in the Orient were relegated and kept under lock and key. The painting's title is indicative of seclusion, luxury and eroticisation. In his emphasis on specific colours, black and gold, violet and red indigo lacquers, and embroidered materials, lazy and passively reclining women, static and in an enclosed setting, Delacroix deployed all indexes for triggering otherness. It is an inebriating and voluptuous representation, a feast for the eyes and senses. Women are portrayed as trophies, as the fetishist

impulse for detail and superfluous objects demonstrates in the painting. In his feminine Orientalism women embody the sweetness of subjugation, something that European women had lost, as Delacroix himself declared.

In a later version of *Women of Algiers* (1849) the women are portrayed from a greater distance, the characters are less focused, the strokes less precise. It emphasizes the women's loneliness and in perennial waiting, an illusionary reality suddenly less regal and more imprisoned. The women in the painting maintain no relationship to the spectator. They are strangers to themselves, absent from their bodies, their sensuality and their happiness but also very present in the airy atmosphere of enclosure. They do not abandon themselves nor do they reject the gaze. This painting represents a stolen gaze; it puts us in front of women that we have no right to look at. The gaze represents the trespassing of the threshold. So this stolen gaze is inherently dramatic – the gaze of the thief, the spy, and the voyeur. It is a stolen gaze because it belongs to the foreigner, not however so much to establish a dialogue but only to fulfil the voyeuristic desire of the beholder.



Eugène Delacroix. *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*. Oil on canvas, 1834.¹



Eugène Delacroix. *Women of Algiers in their Apartment*. Oil on canvas, 1849.

From the Hottentot Venus to the Black Venus

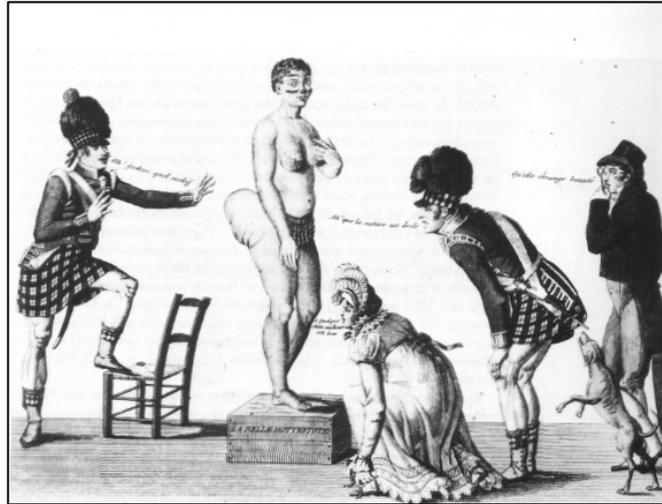
The imagery around the Black Venus in European literature has a long pedigree. As T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting writes in her *Black Venus. Sexualized Savages, Primal Fears and Primitive Narratives in French*, the religious scholar Abelard wrote in his letters to his beloved Heloise, written between 1119 and 1143, that

As far as the Ethiopian [is concerned] such a wife prefers hidden pleasures. Besides it so happens that the skin of black women, less agreeable to the gaze, is softer to the touch and the pleasures one derives from their love are more delicious and delightful (Sharpley-Whiting 1999: 1).

It is men who write most of these sexualized narratives of the black Venus in French literature, art and popular culture.² The most famous case is Charles Baudelaire and his relationship with his mulatto mistress Jeanne Duval, captured in *Les Fleurs du Mal* with tangential reference to Sarah Bartmann, the Hottentot Venus. Sarah Bartmann is frequently referred to as an example *par excellence* of the representation of Black female sexuality at the height of European empires. Sander Gilman's (1985) much quoted chapter 'The Hottentot and the Prostitute: Towards an Iconography of Female Sexuality' describes

the story of the black female Sarah Bartmann (Hottentot or Bushman woman) who left South Africa in 1810, never to return in her lifetime. She was transported to Britain and France to be scientifically studied as a *cause celebre*. She was exhibited in Europe because of her anatomical abnormality. The hyper development of her genitalia was considered an aesthetic embellishment in her Khoikhoi culture (to use the name used by the people themselves) and her protruding buttocks were part of the unique build of her people. However, the Europeans' fascination with the enlarged buttocks, or steatopygia, and an elongated vagina had more to do with the product of western male sexual fantasies than with any serious study of physiology. It was argued that her so-called 'primitive genitalia' mirrored her 'primitive sexual appetite'. The woman was transformed into a spectacle, which constructed black female sexuality as pathologized, deviant, and degraded. This show was one of the most successful in London at the time. She was exhibited much like a wild beast in a cage.³

The white male gaze desires to unveil the female body but also fixes the black woman in her place, 'steadies her, in order to decode and conformably recode her into its own system of representation' (Fanon 1968: 110–11). The gaze is always bound up with power, domination and eroticisation. It is a voyeuristic, fetishized, white male gaze. The crowd gazing upon Sarah Bartmann as the essential primitive, as the underdeveloped savage unable to measure up to European standards, is undercut by her practically *au naturel* representation: 'From a purely ethnographic standpoint, her unveiling, the essential nude exhibition, except for the apron that covered her genitalia, allows one to "best size" her remarkable formation' (Sharpley-Whiting 1999: 34). As Laura Mulvey (1993: 19) writes in the 'Woman as Image/Man as Bearer of Look' the female caught in the male gaze will always signify male desires. Male European writers and artists constructed an image that is centered on one core narrative: that of the Black Venus – 'Black females as perpetually ensnared, imprisoned in an essence of themselves created from without' (Sharpley-Whiting 1999: 10).



A French print entitled 'La Belle Hottentot', depicts the Khosian woman standing with her buttocks exposed on a box-like pedestal.

These misleading representations created the scientific conviction that Sarah Bartmaan incarnated the missing link in evolutionary classificatory discourses. This not only affirms black inferiority but also expresses the white patriarchy's construction of the black female body and her genitalia that stems from a fear of female sexuality in general. The psychosexual and cultural implications of those representations are a key to understanding the complexities of race, class, gender, sexuality and imperial culture.

In their desire to illuminate the dark continent of black femaleness, of racial and sexual alterity, male European writers and artists constructed one of the predominant narratives around the Harem and Black Venus. The advent of photography as a modern medium particularly intensified and popularized the images of *La Belle Algerienne* or of the Black Venus. It created a link between the presupposed scientific construction and the artistic representation of the racialized female body; between the aestheticized gaze of Orientalist paintings and the racialized reading of the Hottentot Venus.

Italian colonial sexual politics: the construction of racial gendered stereotypes in visual practices

The ideological construction of the colonized Other as different and subordinate was also at the heart of Italian fascist propaganda, which utilized the emergent mass media which created a new popular culture. In order to create a clear binarism between colonizer and colonized, Italy had to construct an image of itself in direct hegemonic opposition to that of the locals. As Edward Said wrote in *Orientalism* (1978) the creation of the Other was not only an invention, a fabrication of the non-European subject necessary to create and define European sovereignty and superiority but also a projection of the West's internal fears and unconscious desires. He describes Orientalism (Said 1978: 207–8) as an 'exclusively male province' in which 'women are usually the creatures of a male power-fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing'. According to this ideological representation the Orient is not only penetrated, silenced, possessed (to sustain the metaphor of the colonial rape) but also 'static, frozen, fixed eternally'.

Italy constructed its ideological apparatus no differently from other colonial powers, though the modalities were obviously specific to the Italian cultural tradition and highly coordinated under the fascist rhetoric of Mussolini's bombastic regime. Italy ventured into the colonial late, at a time when the major European empires were in decline. The expansion into Africa served to instil national cohesion but also to project the image of a greater Italy to the outside world. However, Italy's close proximity to the black continent was not only motivated geographically and culturally, but according to many scholars also genetically.⁴ This contributed to the creation of a distinct national identity constructed through its opposition to black people, marked as Other. This capillary campaign of representation involved all mass media, press, films, radio programs, advertisements, songs, posters, maps, photography, painting and travel accounts, and reports by explorers and ethnographers. The portrayal of Italian grandeur as echoing the mythic and majestic role of Ancient Rome was in distinct

contrast to the portrayal of the natives as closer to nature. This closeness to nature made them unpredictable, irrational and history-less, with an inferior rank as the earliest human beings on the evolutionary scale. The exotic and alluring representations of the native served the purpose of inciting the virile and adventurous Italian soldiers and workers to venture into the unknown, uncharted and virgin soil of Africa. The inscriptions of the local women – as ‘black Venus’ – beautiful, docile and sexually available – corroborated the most important aspect of the rhetoric of empire which used the sexual metaphor as a way of fusing the public discourse with the private.

At the beginning of colonialism sexual encounters between single white male colonizers and the local black beauties (defined as black Venus or sable Venus) were considered normal because there were few European women available in the far-flung territories of the motherland. The commonplace practice of concubinage and to its nefarious degenerating effect, miscegenation, was reflected in a vast literature on interracial relationships in the colonies which in the Italian case acquired the label of *madamismo*. At first *Madamismo* was not only tolerated but also encouraged because it was considered to have a stabilizing effect on political order and colonial health – a relationship which according to Stoler (1990: 40) ‘kept men in their barracks and bungalows, out of brothels and less inclined to perverse liaisons with one another’.

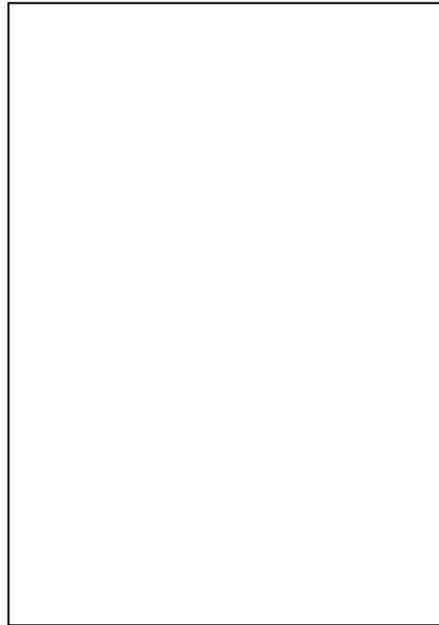
Only at a later moment did the visible creation of a class of *métis* children confront colonial authority with a menacing form of Otherness, closer than the black colonized, yet not white enough. The fact that many *métis* children could pass as white led to acute insecurity about the concept of racial purity. While at the beginning of the twentieth century both the Dutch and the British banned concubinage in their colonies, the Italians only followed suit with the declaration of their own apartheid laws of 1937.

Despite the new punitive attitude of the regime towards interracial relationships, the fascination with the seductive beautiful ‘*faccetta nera*’ continued. At the height of the Italian colonial empire (1920s–30s) a vast quantity of images of the ‘Black Venus’ were made by photographers. These arrived back home in the form of post-cards and private photos which were often published in magazines.

Photography was a powerful medium to give visual form to colonial culture and to forge a link between Empire and domestic imagination. It created a portable space for displaying the imperial spectacle. These voluminous representations conveyed the very ambivalent territory between the artistic portrayal of the aestheticized exotic female body and the pornographic look, a blurred thin line justified by the reputed closeness to nature of the women framed. Their documented nudity did not express indecency or immodesty, a falling away from the Western mindset which idealizes shy and chaste feminine – but rather was recognized as a truthful and realistic portrayal of the native women, immortalized in their authentic environment, ‘petrified in nature as flies in amber’ (Hall and Mark 2001: 39) as demonstrated in the extra attention for details concerning costumes, traditional items and hair style. The claim of ethnographic reportage versus voyeuristic gaze is that it can distinguish professional photography from the amateurish, as Barbara Sòrgoni (1998) has pointed out in her study *Parole e Corpi*. However, even these so called ‘serious ethnographic photographic studies’ of native rituals, costumes, and other anthropological features are constructed from a particular Eurocentric perspective, despite claiming to be empirically informed and only conveying the ‘reality effect’ of the image. The ethnographic gaze close to nature is culturally overwritten. As Stuart Hall has written:

The photographic image is not a ‘message without a code’. Reality cannot speak for itself, through the image in an unmediated way. Its ‘truth’ is not to be measured in terms of its correspondence to some objective reality out there beyond the frame. But the image is always implicated in a politics of truth as well as a politics of desire. Paradoxically, its apparent transparency to ‘reality’ is when it is at its most ideological – for example when photography disavows its status as a cultural practice, passing itself off as ‘nature’s paintbrush’ (Hall: 2001: 38).

This is mostly true, Hall continues (36), with respect to colonial representations since people and societies peripheral to the West have routinely been represented as modernity’s other: cast forever in an unchanging tradition.



These series of postcards of 'donne bilene' (women from Eritrea) were part of the edizioni Baratti, Asmara and were reprinted in Mignemi, A. (ed.) (1984) *Immagine Coordinata per un Impero. Etiopia 1935-36*, Gruppo Editoriale Forma, Turin.

In one selection of photographs taken by Italian colonizers for their private use⁵ we can see a consistent Orientalist look which positions women not only in a static a-temporality, but also as 'primitive' and desirable. Garbed in colourful adornments, exhibiting unusual, rituals and customs or religious practice they are immersed in descriptive sensorial details not unlike those of Delacroix's painting of the *Women of Algiers*. The difference between portrayals of the Islamic secluded women, kept under lock and key, is that in these African women are depicted as sexually loose, inviting the beholder to look at them as beautiful objects that can be possessed and fulfil unconscious desires. Although the photos taken resemble many photographs of European divas of silent movies, the accent on semi-nudity and the claim to be faithful images of local beauties as they naturally appear in everyday life only reinforces the ideological implications of sexual exploitation. The thing you notice is that these women are obviously naked, since this nudity is patently not their habitual garb. The shot is full length, reclining, lying on animal skins or with a demure attitude – inviting the camera's lens to appropriate them for Western voyeuristic consumerism – and fixes the black female body in her atavistic difference, available for visual pleasure but trapped in her biological and genetic reduction.

Black Venus embodying the most archaic, secretive and untamable drives of nature has a dual role: she becomes the epitome of the collective unconscious fantasy and equally of the primordial fear of the Other.

The postcolonial predicament: trans-coding negative images with new meanings

This psychoanalytic reading takes account of the difference gender makes in fantasies of the exotic frontier (adventure, conquest, and desire), and leads us to grasp the reason why this racialized gendered difference has lingered for so long in the colonial unconscious and is still present in contemporary post-colonial society.

Even in recent publications such as that by David Longo, *Un mattino ad Irgalem*⁶ the image of the Black Venus reappears with virtually the identical connotation it had in the colonialist period. Admittedly this work of fiction is set in Ethiopia in 1937 and it is therefore meant to recapture the ideology of the period. However, other contemporary Italian writers, such as Erminia dell'Oro and immigrant writers from the Horn of Africa have tried to subvert rather than reproduce those dominant patterns of representation. *Un mattino ad Irgalem* is constructed around the character of the Turin lawyer Lieutenant Pietro Baillo who is sent to Africa to solve an obscure and unpleasant legal case that everyone wants to forget. It concerns Sergeant Prochet accused both of having massacred indigenous people and slaughtering the Italian soldiers sent to rearrest him.

The novel echoes *Heart of Darkness* and its critique of colonialism and the merciless injustices committed on African soil. It blurs the line between Europe and Africa as standing for civilisation and barbarism. Marlow the narrator in Conrad's novel undertakes an arduous journey into the deep Congo in search of Kurtz, who is the Belgian company's most successful ivory agent and who has fallen ill and has hidden himself in Darkest Africa. This voyage into the heart of Africa becomes a metaphor for travelling back towards the beginning of humanity. When Kurtz is found it appears that he has acquired ascendancy over the natives by perpetrating barbaric rites and human sacrifices without the restraint imposed by his society. The implication that there is barbarism in all of us is also at the heart of David Longo's novel. Pietro Baillo has to defend Sergeant Prochet at his trial, although he is a man whom everybody wants dead because he has

allegedly committed atrocious crimes in Africa. In this adventure David meets Teferi, a splendid woman of amber complexion and begins a sexual liaison. The way the relationship is described overlaps with many colonial stereotypes of the black Venus. Told from the male point of view the woman is not only silent but also impenetrable, her moods and feelings unreadable: 'Her hair fell onto her shoulders, and the reflected blue of the *sciammà* gave it a raven tone. Her face was a perfect and luminous oval shape, with the triangular design in which her thin plaits were styled' (p. 67), 'The sweat formed a black body armour over her skin, it tasted like coffee and rice' (p. 117) or 'he had never seen her smile' (p. 127). 'She stared at him with her eyes, which in the darkness turned white. She breathed slowly raising her breasts with its black nipples' (p. 143). 'He liked the silence into which she forced him, it was a long pleasure' (p. 144). 'Pietro could not see but felt her lips which from dark turned red round her teeth' (p. 144). Apparently taken by *il mal d'africa*, Pietro Baillo goes unexpectedly to visit his black mistress during the day, though he knows that she will be with another Italian soldier, Sancho, with whom he shares Teferi. While he spies them making love Tefari notices him but 'There was nor fear, nor surprise in her eyes'. Subsequently in an unexpected plot twist Pietro slits Sancho's throat, a murder in cold blood reminiscent of the techniques used by sergeant Prochet during his massacres. For Pietro it is *Time To Kill* as well, as in Flaiano's (1948) novel. To this unexpected turn of events and macabre scene Teferi remains resolute: 'Her eyes were the same ones as before' (p. 163). This crime assumes an almost naturalist tone. It is meant to confront us with our internal barbarism which the colonial adventure and the unreal African context awakens in the white unconscious. The way in which Teferi is still portrayed in 2001 with all the rhetoric of the colonialist racialized discourse is dismaying. The static description of her as native black Venus; her simultaneous availability, silence, blackness, impassability, impenetrability confirm and reproduce all the Orientalist discourses about racialized and gendered differentiations. This family of Conradian accounts participate in what Said calls the Orientalist discourse.

There is therefore the need to rectify in Italian culture that stolen gaze as the French-Algerian writer Assia Djebar did with her novel

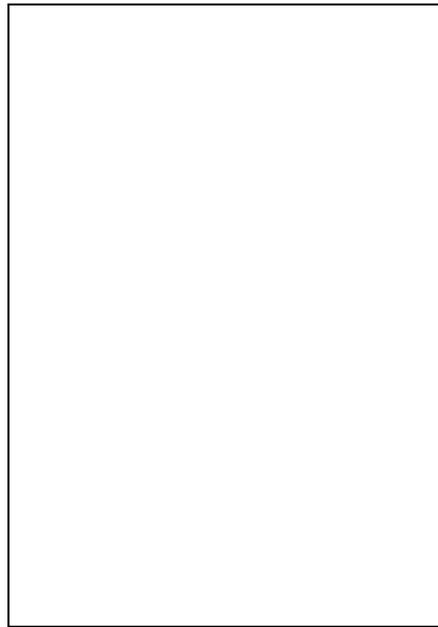
Femmes d'Alger dans leur Appartement, 1980, (*Women of Algiers in their Apartment*). Djébar's reading of Delacroix's painting, as a stolen gaze, underlines the fact that it does not imply reciprocity or dialogue but assumes the hierarchical position of the male colonial discourse upon the feminine native as easy and available prey. Her novel reverses and retakes possession of this gaze, by using the standpoint of the Algerian women's bodies, their voices and their silences, which was interpreted as consent. Women's participation is recorded, despite history's determination to erase their contribution and existence, through their diaries, letters, and unpublished accounts.

Whereas the post-colonial debate in the British and French cultural context has sought to reverse and respond to the hegemonic and stereotyped constructions of the colonizers, in the Italian case there has been a long period of general amnesia, both at historical and literary level. This predicament has hindered the transition from the images created by the fascist propaganda – that contributed to the production of the 'factory of consensus' – to those of contemporary modern culture. However, a significant shift has taken place during the last decade.⁷

It is impossible to deny that the colonial images are extremely important for an analysis of the colonial sources of the Italian imagination and representation of the Other. They are however rather dated, racist and the fruit of a specific rhetoric of expansion. There is thus a clear need to search for new and less biased representations which could help to assess the multiple subject positions that black identities now occupy both in their diasporic figurations and more specifically within Italian contemporary society. The new agenda must do more than acknowledge, it must highlight and assess the counter-representations proposed by immigrant writers themselves who through their narratives turn the gaze to the colonizers and write back, re-narrating the colonial encounter from new standpoints and through diverse representational practices.

The few texts available by immigrant writers from the Horn of Africa show the emergence of a significant Italian post-colonial tradition (Ponzanesi 2004). This work, though not comparable to the French and British, in hindsight clearly indicates an irreversible process of transformation, which redefines Italian national identity

according to a new cultural, linguistic, and religious pluralism. However, if within the postcolonial literature there is a counter-representation taking place, mostly reversing the gaze of the colonizer and reterritorialising the space of representation, this cannot be said for visual culture. Advertisements, usually the perpetrators of cultural stereotypes but also the indicators of changes in mass culture, show that the black body is still crystallized in its immutable otherness, stuck in passive, solitary sensuality. This is indeed an exocitization and eroticization of the Black body, where it is very much entrapped by the Orientalist gaze, not unlike during the fascist period. The few detrimental images that are collected here are clearly examples of analogous contemporary sketches with wide appeal.



Advertising photo for the Italian grappa Frattina.

In Frattina's advertisement, blackness is to be analysed in its vertical positioning in the picture. It is low on the evolutionary ladder, if we note the blond on top, Mediterranean in the middle and then

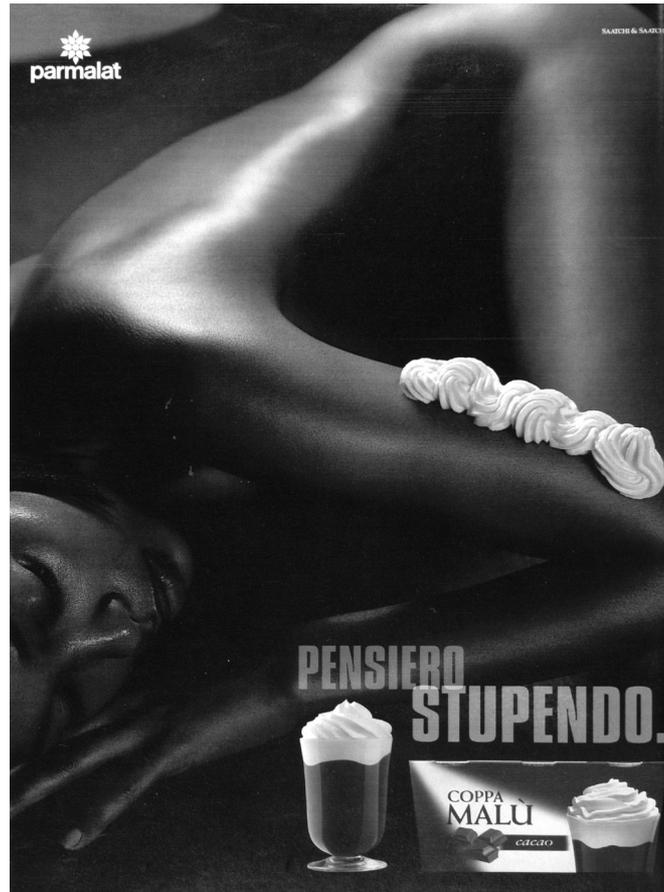
black at the bottom. The blond Madonna is transversing the order of male classifications. However, blackness here is also implicitly used to express cosmopolitanism, the blending of differences for the creation of a sophisticated taste that surpasses conventional expectations and ordinary manners. It implies the use of blackness as an exotic commodity to enhance transgression of the mundane to present a product which though clearly Italian is also international. Thus the black body is fixed in its difference, but it is a difference that in global culture stands for ethno-marketing.



Advertising photo by Oliviero Toscani for the United Colors of Benetton.

Benetton's famous photo of the angelic blond girl and devilish black girl is part of the company's multicultural advert campaign, which focuses on diversity and the critique of social taboos (using the provocative photographs by Oliviero Toscani) that in this case are against racism. Is this an effective use? On the one hand, it aims to disrupt stereotypes of black and white, by showing the innocent and friendly embrace between the two girls, which demonstrates the absurdity of seeing a black girl as devilish. On the other hand, this merely reinforces the cliché by reproducing fixed and biased images of black and white. It presupposes, and thereby confirms, the existence

of these essentialized black and white concepts before engaging with its dismantling.⁸



Advertising photo for the Italian dairy industry Parmalat.

The Parmalat advert fully confirms colonial stereotypes about blackness. Chocolate is associated here with blackness, due to a literal effect of epidermalisation in connection with blackness (Fanon 1968). There is also a metaphorical shift which reads chocolate as sensual, hot and smooth like black skin, a metaphor for sensual pleasure as suggested by the naked female black body. The ad offers a modern

framing of the black body, but it is totally in line with colonialist ideologies which used black bodies to market coffee and other exotic products (McClintock 1995).

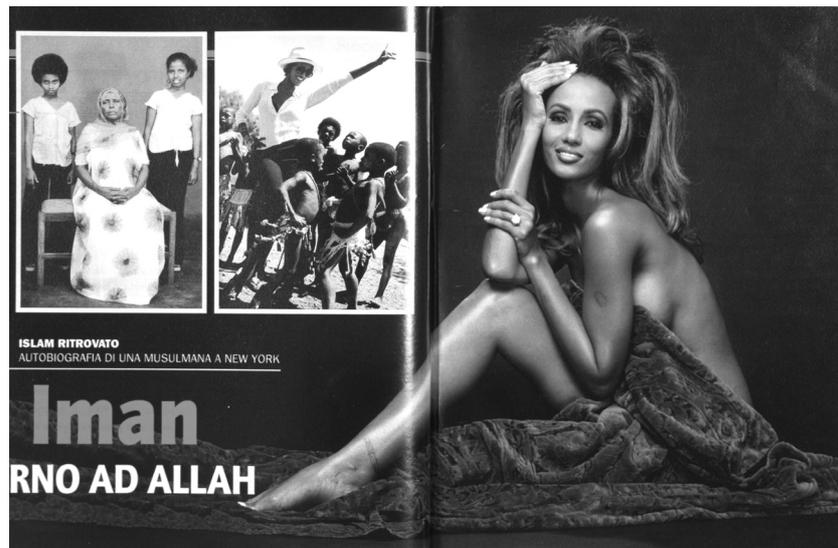
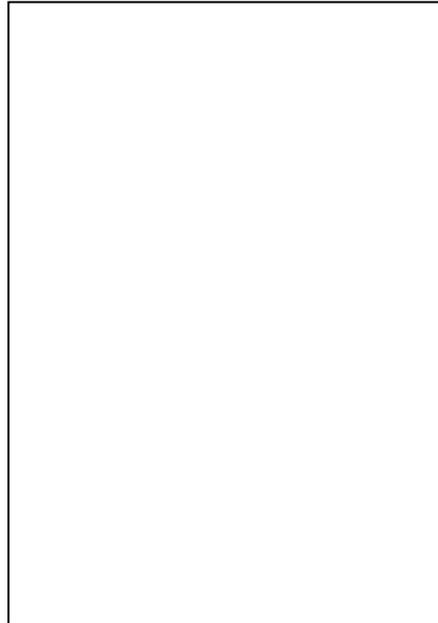


Photo of the Somali top model Iman for the Italian weekly magazine, L'Espresso.

In this picture we have Iman as the modern Black Venus. First portrayed with her Somali family, very much a colonial portrait, and then in her shift from local beauty to Western top fashion model. In this picture she is captured in her nakedness on a blanket of synthetic fabric that replaces animal skins of colonial pictures of Black Venus, not unlike the pictures of the *ragazza bilena* in the photos of the 1930s. However the advert displays a new awareness coming from the model herself who plays with the role attributed to her, partly reversing the stolen gaze of colonialist photography.



Advertising photo for the information technology company Tiscali.

Tiscali, 're-start your thinking' can be read as a reference to Martin Bernal's (1987) controversial book *Black Athena*. Bernal argues that the development of Greek civilisation was heavily influenced by Afro-Asiatic civilisations. Moreover, he argues, that this knowledge was deliberately obscured by the rampant racism of nineteenth-century Europeans who could not tolerate the idea that Occidental civilization had its origin in Africa and Southwest Asia. The reclining, but candidly dressed Black Venus in this Tiscali advert, suggests a new way of thinking, in which the discourse on the origins of knowledge is revisited. It offers a vision of the technological future of the mind, celebrating new gender and ethnic potentialities, which is innovative and surprising. Here blackness is strategically exploited for its emancipatory content and an interpretation of new communication technologies as dismantling prejudicial categorisations is offered.

This reading is meant to demonstrate that colonial constructions still resound in contemporary stereotypes and clichés expressed in

both linguistic and graphic signs and thus in the complex relation between language and image, between perception and conception. All the images analysed show that racist thinking still holds though it resonates differently in the twenty-first century. The ways of representing Otherness, what Stuart Hall has called 'The Spectacle of the Other' may have changed but the ideological presuppositions have often remained. What fuelled colonial conquest is still pervasive in contemporary society, especially in the Italian case. Grasping how the elaboration of contemporary racial stereotypes depends upon past ingrained legacies is overdue, because of the earlier removal and denial of the Italian colonial chapter. This makes it, therefore, all the more urgent to challenge and question representations of Otherness which easily reproduce the features of colonialism and imperialism for right wing purposes, for example when new rigid immigration policies are naively embraced.



Deborah Willis, 'Tribute to the Hottentot Venus' (1994). Included in Stuart Hall, *Different*, London, Phaidon Press, 1999, p. 153.

Finally, I want to emphasize Deborah Willis's fascinating work of art, 'Tribute to the Hottentot Venus' (1994). It is included in Stuart Hall's latest book *Different*, a collection of photographs by black people, which aim to deconstruct the fixed and essentialized image of black bodies in white photography and to enhance alternative diasporic identities. Willis was born in Philadelphia and is a leading

scholar and historian of African-American photography. She shows a diagonally intersected-fringed fabric. She uses pictures from archives and family history and then sews and weaves them into bits of fabric and patterned cloth to make narrative quilts that constitute 'fabric-ated histories' and 're-fashion' hidden histories. The image of the quilt is very important for African-American feminism, what Alice Walker has called 'Womanism' to differentiate it from white feminism where quilts represent the passing of tradition from one woman to another and the collective experience of black womanhood. Here Willis re-fashions the story of Sarah Bartmann and counter-represents her nineteenth-century representations by placing a crimson tulip shaped image at the centre of the quilt: it is based on the anatomical sketch of women's labia in Cesare Lombroso's infamous sequence in *La Donna Delinquente* (1893).

Images like this collectively produce new ways of understanding the identity politics at work in the making and reception of visual culture. They also correct blindness regarding the intersecting dynamic of race and gender in popular culture which for the fascist regime was the arena in which bias and prejudices had a powerful impact in the language of universal truths. Willis' image pins down the slow but inevitable de-centering of Western-based cultural models, and detaches the black subject from its fixed inscription into a variety of radical new positions.

Given the rapid process of globalisation, the future will no doubt not cease to create a plentitude of non-Western references. What is needed is the exploration and subversion of the idea of black identity not as biological and genetic, but rather as articulated in the continuous play with history, culture and power. This refusal to accept what at the very start we called biased colonial discourse should be encouraged, particularly in Italy.

Endnotes

- 1 Reproductions are taken from Italian magazines and permissions were sought in all other cases.
- 2 For a critique of those representations, see Lewis (1996) and Yegenoglou (1998).
- 3 Sarah Bartman died in Paris, 1 January 1816, a prostitute and alcoholic. Her skeleton, preserved genitals and brain were placed on display in Paris's Museum of Mankind. The State President of a newly democratic South Africa, Nelson Mandela issued a formal request to the government of France for the return of Sarah's spoil. The legal and political debate came to an end on 6 March 2002, with the authorized return.
- 4 The prominent Italian scientist Giuseppe Sergi promulgated at the turn of the nineteenth century his notion of the 'Mediterranean race' in which he claimed that both East and North Africans were the progenitors of the greatest and most accomplished of races which from the pre-historic times inhabited the Mediterranean basin. Sergi's definition of the consanguinity of Italians and North Africans – and defiance of the imperial eugenics surrounding skin colour, skull measurements and white supremacy – would be seriously challenged by new race theories during the fascist period. For a detailed discussion of these ideas, see Canavan (2001).
- 5 See Mignemi (1984). These postcards of 'donne bilene' (women from Keren, an hour from Asmara in the direction of Sudan) were part of the edizioni Baratti, Asmara.
- 6 Milan: Marcos Y Marcos, 2001.
- 7 See among others: Del Boca, (1986); Burgio (1999); Labanca (2002); Palma (1999).
- 8 For an analysis of the politics of representation in advertising, see Smelik and Meyer (1999).

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