

Reversing the Gaze:

Image and Text in the Public Debate over Italian Colonialism

“No doubt about it: looking is power, but so also is the ability to make somebody look.”

(Holly 90)

Recently I came across a disquieting photograph taken in Edinburgh, the city where I live. As part of the famous Marine Gardens exhibition which opened in 1909 in the suburb of Portobello, an entire ‘Somali village’ was recreated as a tourist attraction, composed of straw huts inhabited by seventy individuals who had been transported from Africa and were then displayed in traditional dress and weaponry for the pleasure and curiosity of the Scottish public (see McLean).¹ The fact itself is uncomfortable to absorb, but what concerned me more was how best to respond to the image *in that moment* in a way that would bypass a new form of ‘racializing vision’ on my part as a spectator.² Looking at something is not synonymous with understanding it, and as Lingis states: “we can see without necessarily seeing things” (21). My aim in the present article is therefore to use this photograph, and my own affective response to it, as a way to construct a model of “countervisuality” (Mirzoeff,

¹ It is crucial to exercise caution when discussing the agency of performers of this period, to avoid replicating a victimizing narrative which can risk flattening experiences. From the 1880s onwards there was a growing professionalization in the field, and most performers had contracts with recruiters, which offered improved wages and conditions. Performances were seen more as salaried work rather than coerced labour, with some village elders flying back and forth from Europe to Africa to ‘manage’ various villages. Blanchard et al. estimate that 2,000-3,000 ‘native performers’ were employed in a dozen or so countries in any one year at a time (14).

² Mirzoeff discusses precisely the “ambivalence and undecidability” that affects both black and white spectators of colonial photographs (*Bodyscape* 140). And going back to the initial dynamic of spectatorship, Qureshi explains how the village installations constructed performers as visual objects: “For consumers, indigenous villages and their inhabitants were able to function as three-dimensional object lessons that could be touched, looked at, talked to, and critically walked around and through.” (255).

The Right 5) that can be applied to other contexts, a reversal that is capable of bestowing visual ‘traces’ and cultural remnants with the power to disrupt the present through active debate and “embodied practices” of engagement (Al-Saji 162).

The specificity of this particular image is important, and functions here not only as a means to open a debate around the dynamics of spectatorship, power and knowledge that habitually mediate the reception of colonial and post-colonial imagery. As the photograph of a group of Somali nationals photographed far away from Africa just one year after their homeland had been officially re-named ‘Somalia *italiana*’, its subjects operate within a postcolonial framework that highlights the transnational complexities of the contemporary diaspora. Since my aim is to privilege the diverse nature of diasporic expression, the present article will look at engagement with colonial imagery in texts by three women authors of the East African diaspora based in different countries: Nadifa Mohamed (who was born in Somaliland and brought up in the United Kingdom), Maaza Mengiste (an Ethiopian-American writer now based in New York), and Igiaba Scego (born to Somali parents in Rome and raised in Italy).

What I will argue for in each case is the importance of the contextualization of primary sources, the active construction of a link between past and present, and the subsequent elaboration of contributions within a wider public debate. I want to suggest that employing the sort of ‘hesitation’ that Al-Saji suggests in looking at images: a process of waiting, imagining, and remembering that allows for affect, for one to “feel one’s way tentatively and receptively” (142) is key. Through employing a set of critical pauses in my analysis of the three writers’ work, I will identify a sense of progression that takes us from the exposure of a racializing vision seen in the visual pleasure taken in exploring the Black body in *Black Mamba Boy*, to the white colonial body becoming photographic subject, reversing the position of being nameless and faceless in Mengiste’s comments on *The*

Shadow King, to the photographs inserted with Scego's *Roma negata*, which see diverse postcolonial subjects looking back at the viewer. This reversal of the gaze allows for a "claim to autonomy, political subjectivity and collectivity" (Mirzoeff, *The Right* 1). And this is where the initial image becomes so crucial to illustrate my argument. In the 'afterimage' of Brett Bailey's re-evocation of 'human zoos' that I will draw on in my conclusion, the disruptive power afforded to Black subjects through the opportunity to 'look back' allows us to map out the importance for the public debate over Italian colonialism of reversing gazes, and looking from the far-flung places of diaspora and the marginalized space of gendered voices back to the original cultural and political metropole.

*

The Italian colonial adventure in the Horn of Africa had actually started forty years before the Edinburgh photograph was taken, in 1869, when the shipping company Rubattino acquired the rights to use the port of Assab, in neighbouring Eritrea. Assab was taken over by the Italian government in 1882, and after military intervention, the area was formally declared an Italian colony in 1890. Almost simultaneously, Italy began its takeover of the territory comprising present-day Somalia. They were sub-let four ports in the environs of Benadir by the British in 1889, and went on to declare a protectorate in the zone, slowly expanding their control to legally proclaim a second colony by the name of 'Somalia italiana' on the 5th April 1908.³ It is often erroneously assumed that the Italian colonial mission in East Africa started

³ On the Italian colonial history in the Horn of Africa, see, for example, Angelo Del Boca, *Gli italiani in Africa orientale*, Milan: Mondadori, 1992; Nicola Labanca, *Oltremare: Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002; and Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Mia Fuller, eds., *Italian Colonialism*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. On the afterlife of Italian colonialism, see Jacqueline Andall and Derek Duncan, eds., *Italian Colonialism: Legacy and Memory*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005 and Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, eds., *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

and ended with the Fascist period itself, though it should be clear already from these initial dates that this is not at all accurate. In many cases, Italian domination in East Africa, both physical (by 1935 there were over 50,000 Italian settlers living in Italian Somaliland alone, constituting 5% of the total population) and cultural, lasted for generations. Indeed, although Italian control over the Horn of Africa officially came to an end with the defeat of Mussolini's troops by the British in the region in December 1941, a protectorate was again established in Somalia after the war, and the Italians were asked to continue to administer the country as a Trust Territory (the Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana della Somalia), a state of affairs that lasted until 1960. And Italian influence in the area spread beyond Somalia – as already mentioned, there was an even longer-standing colonial presence in Eritrea, but also military invasions into other countries, most notably Ethiopia and Libya. This is a chapter of Italian history that is too seldom remembered within the colonizing country itself, and when discussed, it is more often seen as part of a distant, 'foreign' context, one that has had little long-lasting impact or effect on Italy or on Italian culture at large.⁴ But this partially submerged history is now being reclaimed by certain ex-centric female actors in the public sphere as part of a diverse, multi-voiced conversation which directly links these past events to issues regarding race, racism, and migration in Italian society today. That these are *women* writers as well as second generation or diasporic subjects themselves might perhaps mark them as doubly marginal, yet their engagement with original visual material and their insistence on linking past to present through the interface of text and image in fiction

⁴ This distancing of the Italian colonial enterprise from Italy itself could be seen to function in much the same way as the 'human zoo' phenomenon, in its creation of 'elsewhere' spaces composed of curiosity and fantasy. See Blanchard et al. 2. It is also important to remember that such 'living ethnographical exhibitions' were a popular feature in Italy itself too – the first was held in 1884 in Turin, and featured natives of Assab, then in Palermo in 1891-92 (exalting the 'civilizing' Italian colonial enterprise in Eritrea), Milan in 1906, Turin in 1911, Genoa in 1914 (celebrating the conquest of Libya), Turin in 1928, Rome in 1931, and lastly in Naples in 1940. See Abbattista & Labanca 341-352.

narratives and social media presences allows them to reappropriate history through a process of reversing “the epistemological impotency of vision” (Smith, “Looking” 589).

Mohamed, Mengiste and Scego have all been visibly active in their attempts to re-ignite public awareness and international debate around Italian colonialism, as well as to relate it to problematic present-day attitudes to migrants and black Italian citizens. All three use a variety of public media to ‘talk back’ to a traditionally held silence about the horrors of the Italian colonial mission in East Africa: fiction and non-fiction writing, debates, interviews and events, and Twitter and social media. Since the three authors share nearly 16,500 Twitter followers between them, and often re-tweet and respond to each other’s messages, I will argue that it is precisely the public nature of the dialogue between the three authors and their works that holds the most power in terms of re-inserting the multiple stories and images of Italian imperialism into a wider cultural economy.⁵ As Ethan Zuckerman points out, our social contacts now act as “disseminators of content” (106), and stories are amplified by their circulation between friends and followers on social media much more than through traditional methods. This in turn recalls both Hannah Arendt’s view of the importance of the *plural* nature of the human condition: “in so far as they live and move and act in this world, [men] can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves” (4), and Jürgen Habermas’ notion of the public sphere as a “theater [...] in which political participation is enacted *through the medium of talk*” (qtd. in Fraser 57, emphasis added). Both, then, emphasize the importance of relational interaction, which leads us towards Paolo Gerbaudo’s more recent construction of social media platforms as a sphere of “collective and emplaced experience” (39).

⁵ Mengiste (@MaazaMengiste) has 9,268 followers, Mohamed (@thesailorgirl) 3,399 and Scego (@igiabas) 3,801. Cf www.twitter.com, accessed 31.12.15. The frequent dynamics of re-tweeting and responses between the three thus ensure a wider (and more international) network of visibility and legibility.

In the analysis that follows I will look at web-based journalism, social media comments and recent fictional writings by all three authors, paying particularly close attention to Mohamed's 2010 novel *Black Mamba Boy*, Mengiste's *The Shadow King* and *Granta* short story 'The Madonna of the Sea' (2012),⁶ and Scego's 2014 volume *Roma negata*. I will argue that their action of laying claim to a shared history within the public domain establishes a wider, more inclusive notion of collective memory and thereby also works toward establishing a shared ethos. This is achieved by envisioning literature as a form of visual culture in which the "afterimages" of colonialism function as residues or traces of history that force the reader-spectator to 'remember' a shared legacy (see Smith, "Afterimages"). Such visual imprints remind us that it is the 'afterlife' of the colonial mission in East Africa that needs to be contextualized within different interpretative frameworks in order to disrupt the "passivity of spectators, denaturalizing images and viewing positions" (Smith, "Looking" 586).

*

Nadifa Mohamed was born in Hargeisa, Somaliland, in 1981, and moved to the United Kingdom when she was four years old. Her debut novel, *Black Mamba Boy* traces the true story of the arduous journey her father makes across East Africa and the Middle East as a youth following the deaths of his parents, spanning the period between 1935 and 1947. Although richly autobiographical, Mohamed inserts fictional elements into her father's account, making it a hybrid tale of multiple displacement, where family and cultural traditions are woven through the disruptions caused by colonial wars in order to forge new

⁶ Mengiste's second novel, *The Shadow King* tells the story of the Fascist invasion and occupation of Ethiopia and the resistance the Italian army encountered there. In recent correspondence, Mengiste has said there is no formal publication date set yet, so I will not be able to include an in-depth, sustained analysis of this work in this essay.

transnational futures. The most shocking episode included in the novel recounts the torture and murder of a young boy by Italian troops that Mohamed's father's witnessed during his stint as an *ascari* (a local soldier serving in the Italian colonial army). The boy, Shidane, lost his life for committing the pettiest of thefts, and it is notable that Mohamed takes care to insert the full names of the three Italian perpetrators in her harrowing description of their reprisal. Whether fictional or not, there is the sense of retributive shaming in this act of explicit naming, a call for individual and collective acknowledgment of such colonial-era crimes.

They were relentless; they toiled over him, like mechanics pulling a car apart for scrap, vandals destroying a masterpiece, they dissected Shidane. They needed to see how his strange, beautiful body operated, so they tore it up, raided it, it took hours but they were dedicated. (175)

The fascination with the black body that Mohamed emphasizes here cannot help but recall the “underlying visual pleasure in the exoticism and/or strangeness” (Blanchard et al. 3) that the subjects displayed in theatre and village installations would command in their spectators. Indeed, Blanchard et al. remark that the “*body* of the ‘savage’ was the key element in the shows (25), bodies that straddled perceptions of the erotic and the monstrous to achieve complex and ambivalent reactions of both reverence and disgust.

But Mohamed's attention to the “mechanized, faceless slaughter the Italians would bring to Africa” (156), goes beyond the single episode of Shidane's murder to broach the more general enlistment of child soldiers (157),⁷ widespread reprisals and atrocities, as well as the sexual exploitation and the proliferation in births of unacknowledged mixed-race

⁷ Mohamed also dedicates *Black Mamba Boy* to the nine thousand boys who “foolishly battled on the mountains of Eritrea” and died for Mussolini (1-2).

children (161). This background of colonial barbarism and the lacerating after-effects of war in the region form a context to her father's later migration journey as well as parallels with other contemporary refugee trajectories (namely the displaced Jewish survivors of Nazi persecution in Europe attempting to immigrate to Palestine on the 'Runnymede Park' steamship in 1947) and more recent human mobility from Africa to Europe.

And all around us the other vagabonds still pour in. Underneath lorries, stowed away in boats, falling out of the sky from jumbo jets [...] Whatever Pharaoh says, they will not be tied down, they will not be made slaves, they will make the whole world their promised land. (Mohamed 4)

It is this *connection* between images of past colonialism and present African realities that I believe Mohamed wants to emphasize in *Black Mamba Boy*, and indeed this is something that she speaks specifically about in a gmail-chat interview she jointly gave to the *Warscapes* online journal with Maaza Mengiste.⁸

Within the interview, both authors are highly critical of a perceived ignorance within Italy about its colonial past, and voice a rejection of the idea of Italians as 'good' colonialists, "not racist like 'northern Europeans'": Mohamed states "in fact the apartheid of that era in Italian East Africa went beyond what the British and French practiced" (Shringarpure). And she also makes clear that the horrifying torture and murder of Shidane mentioned above, was included in the narrative not just to counter this ignorance, but also "to connect it with ongoing violence against the poor and the vulnerable" (Shringarpure). There seems to be, in both cases, a strongly felt imperative to use fictionalized narratives as a way of spreading

⁸ Indeed, the important point here is that Mohamed has *succeeded* in highlighting this reality, whilst a book such as Gebreyesus Hailu, *The Conscript: A Novel of Libya's Anticolonial War*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 2013, though now translated into English, does not enjoy the same visibility. It is also notable that whilst Mohamed's book is available in Italian translation, Hailu's is not.

information and maintaining a public dialogue around the topic, through talks, festivals and events – many of which have been held in Italy itself and which have provoked strong reactions in audiences and interlocutors.

This gaze on the Black body is powerfully reversed in Maaza Mengiste's upcoming second novel, *The Shadow King*. Inspired by a series of photographs of Ethiopian girls taken by Italian colonial soldiers that she found during archival work,⁹ Mengiste tries to reimagine the hidden histories behind these photos, both of the women featured and the men who took them. As such, Mengiste occupies a critical cultural position that allows her to “unsettle the authority” of the original photographer's gaze and affirm her own right to gaze back (see Smith, “Introduction” 3). As she states in a recent interview on the subject:

I was looking at old photographs of Italian soldiers once, and I found this one photo of a soldier sitting in front of a tent. The top buttons on his uniform have been unbuttoned, and he's disheveled. He hasn't shaved in a little while. His hair is a bit messy. But his eyes looked so worn out and tired. Just tired. Like he just wants to go home. And I kept coming back to that and not knowing why. I kept writing all these Ethiopian characters, and I kept looking to him – that picture – and then I realized he was a character in the book. (Ewbank)

In this way, Mengiste recuperates the Italian colonial soldier *as an image*, employing active imaginative work in order to reverse the habitually dominant dynamics of the colonial gaze.

In the same way, after her year's work in Italy, Mengiste has become involved in trying to

⁹ On the subject of colonial photographs taken by Italian settlers and military personnel in East Africa, see the chapter entitled ‘Colonies’ in Forgacs' *Italy's Margins*. In particular, Forgacs identifies the use of photographs of women as part of a dynamic that links sexual desire to territorial appropriation, one that uses the “anchorage of the real to strengthen the fantasy of possession and the idea of control” (78).

use her writing and her public voice in order to reinsert the colonial past into a collective Italian imaginary and also to address attitudes of racism that she encountered during her stay.

Mengiste points not only to the strict physical apartheid system that Mohamed also mentions in their joint interview, but pauses, too, to reflect on a sort of *cultural* apartheid that was implemented in order to deliberately debase indigenous peoples:¹⁰ “Italians only allowed three years of schooling, and the Italian language taught in the schools was deliberately bastardized – a kind of pidgin Italian meant to make East Africans sound illiterate when they spoke it” (Shringarpure). What Mengiste is specifically interested in exploring is how this sort of attitude permeates and affects current thinking around race and migration in contemporary Italy. As she says: “The memories are there, and what I’m realizing is that this moment in history affected Italy as much as it did East Africa. There’s still a lot to unearth” (Shringarpure)

For if Italy functions as a transit point in Mediterranean migration routes, it also sometimes provides a familiar language and culture that speaks of a colonial afterlife, a proximity of which Italians themselves are often ignorant.¹¹ It is this that Mengiste brings attention to in an opinion article she wrote for *The Guardian* in September 2013. Published with the rather stark title ‘Italy’s racism is embedded’, Mengiste’s piece is a denouncement of the widespread discriminatory treatment suffered by Cécile Kyenge, Italy’s first black minister. Displaying a familiarity with Italian history and modes of self-perception, she challenges the myth of the ‘*Italiani brava gente*’ by charting the violent reactions to Kyenge’s appointment back to the Fascist invasion and occupation of Ethiopia. But her main interest is not in re-hashing the atrocities of the imperial campaign, but rather in the silence that has followed it in the public sphere – a silence that she now looks to address:

¹⁰ See also Forgacs 81.

¹¹ “Eritreans are now the third biggest group of people embarking on the risky Mediterranean crossing to Europe, with an estimated 5,000 leaving each month, behind only Syrians and Afghans” (David Smith).

It was not until 1996 – 60 years after the fact – that the Italian ministry of defence admitted its use of mustard gas. If Germany had its Nuremberg trials and South Africa its Truth and Reconciliation Commission, then what is missing in Italy is the kind of postwar accountability that forces harsh truths to light and begins the difficult journey towards reconciliation. (Mengiste, “Italy’s racism”)

And, interestingly, Mengiste has linked this “absence of a national reckoning” with contemporary difficulties in accepting both first and second generation migrants as well as a resistance to Italy’s role as transit point in recent migratory movements, something that she deals with in more depth in her *Granta* short story “The Madonna of the Sea”.

The story recounts Mengiste’s trip to the island of Lampedusa, and is framed around the figure of the island’s protector-saint, the Madonna of Porto Salvo, which she also uses to re-tell the migration journey of her friend Dagmawi Yimer.¹² By highlighting the human horrors of an individual story, Dag’s fight to “regain his humanity, to step onto Italian soil as if he belonged”, Mengiste joins her friend’s struggle to “tell the story of all those still left behind” (Mengiste, “The Madonna”), and to urge Italians (and Europeans in general) to apply those same parameters of care that the Madonna promises to Sicilian fishermen to migrants arriving on her shores as well. Mengiste’s connection of an individual, personalized narrative with a much larger scale situation is important and effective, for as Zuckerman has stated, the stories that get amplified or circulated in the media are predominantly those “that fit into larger, ongoing narratives” (113).

¹² Yimer is now a renowned film-maker resident in Rome, active within the organizations of the Archivio delle Memorie Migranti, Asinitas and ZaLab. He has made the films *Come un uomo sulla terra* (with Andrea Segre, 2008), *Soltanto il mare* (2011), *Va’ pensiero. Storie ambulanti* (2013) and *Asmat – Nomi per tutte le vittime in mare* (2014).

This is also a strategy commonly employed by the Italian-Somali writer Igiaba Scego, herself an active and frequent interlocutor over all forms of social and written media with both Mohamed and Mengiste. Notably prolific, Scego has posted more than 12,000 tweets over the last two years, and often tweets the same messages in Italian and English to ensure visibility. Similarly, her frequent contributions to journals and newspapers such as *La Repubblica* and *Internazionale* often seek to privilege a more diverse and inclusive view of Italy and Italian identity. One such article is entitled “Siamo ancora pecore nere”, and discusses the situation of so-called ‘second generation’ Italian migrants. Summarizing the changes in the Italian context over the past ten years, Scego concludes her piece with a call for a strengthened and expanded notion of citizenship based on shared values that will unite the country and the continent, including rather than excluding the children of migrants. Significantly, because she places herself both within the camp of second generation activists (“*Noi figli di migranti [...] abbiamo lottato, scritto libri, postato video su YouTube, composto canzoni, organizzato flash mob*”, Scego, “Siamo ancora,” emphasis added) as well as in the wider category of Italian citizens that she exhorts towards a more inclusive ‘convivenza’ (“*Dobbiamo costruire un paese*”, “Siamo ancora,” emphasis added), she allows her voice to function as a “crucial emotional conduit” capable of condensing “individual sentiments” and transforming them “into political passions driving the process of mobilization” (Gerbaudo 14).

Scego firmly situates the place and role of migrants not only within the living present of Italy, but also within the less audible and visible traces they have left in the country’s past. This is the aim of her most recently published book, *Roma negata*, which takes the form of a guided walk about Scego’s hometown. Pausing at recognizable landmarks and squares, Scego goes beyond the existing physical content and layout of places in order to uncover the hidden histories and stories of colonialism that re-insert seemingly ‘foreign’ chapters into Italy’s

shared history. For example, starting her journey in Piazza di Porta Capena, Scego is perturbed by the memorial there to victims of 9/11, which replaces any tangible trace left of the former presence in the same space of the ‘Stele di Axum’, an ancient obelisk removed from Ethiopia during the Italian occupation, in 1937, and which was only dismantled to be returned to Ethiopia in 2003. Scego is troubled by the thought of existing hierarchies of memory (“C’erano memorie di Serie B e serie C. Memorie che nessuno voleva ricordare, perché troppo scomode, troppo vere”, Scego & Bianchi 17), where certain gaps and silences will lead to only a partial understanding of contemporary phenomena like global terrorism and migration tragedies at sea. While these are important observations, what becomes critical here is Scego’s ability also to reference the transit of the removed obelisk through Ponte Galeria, where it lay for years in a police warehouse. Ponte Galeria, she reminds us, is also the site of a large CIE (Centro di Identificazione ed Espulsione), where at Christmas 2013 several inmates confined there sewed up their own mouths in protest at the length of their detainment. “Erano muti, ma parlavano lo stesso. A parlare era la loro sofferenza, le privazioni, le loro storie rubate, la libertà negata” (Scego & Bianchi 95). A self-imposed silence which Scego sees as echoing certain institutional and cultural silences which linger in Italy over colonialism, in new and horrifying ways.

Roma negata thus functions not only as a re-insertion of colonial stories within Italy’s history, but also as a re-insertion of multiple pasts into its *present*, through the physical presences that already inhabit the national space. This is especially noticeable in the accompanying photos taken by Rino Bianchi, which show present-day migrants in the same multiply inflected sites that Scego narrates – for example, in front of Stazione Termini, Viale Libia, and the old Cinema Impero. In this way, Bianchi and Scego manage to highlight the afterlife and afterimages of the colonial mission in Italy and link them effectively to present-day migration and multi-culturalism. “L’Africa [...] è stata una parte importante non solo

della storia, ma anche della vita quotidiana degli italiani.” (Scego & Bianchi 69) What is more, the photographs themselves reverse the entrenched dynamics of the colonial gaze, challenging the reader through their insistence on achieving an acknowledgment of the significance of their presence, claiming – as Mirzoeff would have it – the “right to look” *back*. What we can learn from such an entanglement of (hi)stories through the interface of text and image is a lesson that needs to be replicated in other contexts too, and one that leads me back in conclusion to the image of the Somali village exhibited over one hundred years ago in Edinburgh. Because this too records an event that requires contextualization, and is an image that also needs to be mediated through a similar public debate around the colonial and expansionist pasts of Europe.

*

In this spirit, purportedly, the South African artist Brett Bailey staged a controversial theatre installation piece entitled ‘Exhibit B’ at the Edinburgh Playfair Library as part of the International Festival in 2014, with the aim of re-presenting the spectacle of human zoos and their ability to degrade and objectify human subjects in a present-day context. The subversion was supposed to function not only through displaying images of the horrors of colonialism, but also through contemporary tableaux that Bailey calls ‘found objects’. “These are representations of refugees and asylum-seekers that link today’s ‘deportation centres, racial profiling and reduction of people to numbers’ to the dehumanizing ethos of the human zoos” (O’Mahoney). In this way, Bailey aimed to personify the link between past archetypes and present racism and attribute modern discrimination to colonialism in the same way as Scego does, both in *Roma negata* and elsewhere. In a recent article entitled “Quando gli italiani non erano bianchi” she states: “il colonialismo è essenziale per capire questa divisione della

società [...] vessava i suoi sudditi umiliandoli e mettendoli in condizione d'inferiorità" (Scego, "Quando"). To counter-act this, and in an attempt to restore agency to the performers in 'Exhibit B', Bailey paid special attention both to the nature of the gaze with which they would challenge the spectators (albeit with compassion, not anger), and indeed their interaction with the audience was deemed a crucial part of the conversation. As Mirzoeff states, this gaze must be mutually enacted, since "the right to look is strongly interfaced with the right to be seen" (*The Right*, 4). Yet many critics and audiences were baffled, unable to see the difference between a subversive re-presentation and a mere re-enactment. What couldn't these spectators see? Or what could they not look at? Was the risk of submitting themselves to the creative gaze of the other, and entering into a collective dynamic that identifies the other as a key constituent part (in which "you, or your group, allow another to find you, and, in so doing, you find both the other and yourself", Mirzoeff, *The Right* 1), too much for some to accept?

It is easy to see how this kind of recreation of traumatic tableaux might risk another objectification of, rather than mediated challenge to, the staged material itself, and yet Bailey's stated objective was precisely to start a potentially productive conversation which links past and present. As Rich Juzwiak says, "the worth of Bailey's work is evident in the dialogue it has provoked [...] It has made so many people think so much, and to discontinue it is to disallow thought" ("Outrageous") This is a dialogue that surely takes us back to notions of the importance of communication and agency in those well-known formulations of the public sphere by thinkers such as Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt mentioned above, but also in relation to newer networks of social media communication. As Tatiana Mazali has stated, such sites are "primarily organized around people", and allow individuals to "perform" within "constructed social and relational spaces where identity is created, and where, above all, we act" (290).

It is these same practices of “dynamic sociality” and “nomadic mobility” (Mazali 290) that will allow for a sustained and multi-voiced debate around the afterlife of European imperialist practices in Africa, the kind that public such as Maaza Mengiste, Nadifa Mohamed and Igiaba Scego are enacting today through their use of colonial imagery in their writing and social media presences. And it is my contention that without this image-led dialogue that fuses past and present, we will not succeed in achieving a balanced response to contemporary challenges of migration, multiculturalism and racism in our societies. Their acts of expression within the public sphere represent the kind of action which in Arendtian terms creates not only the conditions for “remembrance, that is, for history” (Arendt 9) but also holds the potential for the creation of a new society, “the beginning of something new on our own initiative” (Arendt 176). Speech itself is necessary to maintain the “revelatory nature” of action, as the performative nature of communication guarantees the involvement of a human element. So in the establishment of this kind of public discourse analysed above, a conversation born both of plurality and of action, we can see the germs of that famous Arendtian notion of natality, in which power can spring up as if from nowhere when people begin to “act in concert” (Arendt 179). And it is precisely the interface between text and image in Mohamed, Mengiste and Scego’s work that further succeeds in creating a form of “disruptive countervisuality”. As bell hooks writes:

Photography has been, and is, central to that aspect of decolonization that calls us back to the past and offers a way to reclaim and renew life-affirming bonds. Using these images, we connect ourselves to a recuperative, redemptive memory that enables us to construct radical identities, images of ourselves that transcend the limits of the colonizing eye. (64)

Works cited:

- Abbattista, Guido, and Nicola Labanca. "Living Ethnographical and Colonial Exhibitions in Liberal and Fascist Italy." *Human Zoos: The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West*. Ed. Pascal Blanchard, et al. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 2008. 341-352. Print.
- Al-Saji, Alia. "A Phenomenology of Hesitation. Interrupting Racializing Habits of Seeing." *Living Alterities: Phenomenology, Embodiment, and Race*. Ed. Emily S. Lee. Albany, NY: SUNY Press. 2014. 133-172. Print.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press. 1958. Print.
- Blanchard, Pascal, Bancel, et al. eds. "Introduction" to *Human Zoos: The Greatest Exotic Shows in the West*. Ed. Pascal Blanchard, et al. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press. 2008. 1-49. Print.
- Ewbank, Madeline. "Envisioning Good and Evil: An Interview with Maaza Mengiste." *North by NorthWestern*. 14.05.15. Accessed 31.12.15. Web.
- Forgacs, David. *Italy's Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation since 1861*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2014. Print.
- Fraser, Nancy. "Re-thinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." *Social Text* 25/26. 1990. 56-80. Print.
- Gerbaudo, Paolo. *Tweets and the Streets: Social Media and Contemporary Activism*. London: Pluto Press. 2012. Print.
- Holly, Michael Ann. *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*. Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press. 1996. Print.

hooks, bell. "In Our Glory: Photography and Black Life." *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*.

New York: The New Press. 1995. 54-64.

Juzwiak, Rich. "Outrageous Art Exhibit of Caged Black People Shut Down by the Outraged."

Gawker. 29.04.14. Accessed 31.12.15. Web.

Lingis, Alphonso. *Body Transformations: Evolutions and Atavisms in Culture*. New York;

London: Routledge. 2005. Print.

Mazali, Tatiana. "Social Media as a New Public Sphere." *Leonardo* 44: 3. 2012. 290-91.

Print.

McLean, David. "Lost Edinburgh: The Marine Gardens." *The Scotsman*. 10.09.13. Accessed

31.12.15. Web.

Mengiste, Maaza. "The Madonna of the Sea." *Granta* 118: Exit Strategies online. 30.01.12.

Accessed 31.12.15. Web.

---. "Italy's racism is embedded." *The Guardian*. 10.09.13. Accessed 31.12.15. Web.

Mirzoeff, Nicholas. *Bodyscape: Art, Modernity and the Ideal Figure*. London; New York,

Routledge. 1995. Print.

---. *The Right to Look: A Counterhistory of Visuality*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

2011. Print.

Mohamed, Nadifa. *Black Mamba Boy*. London: Harper Collins. 2010. Print.

O'Mahoney, John. "Edinburgh's most controversial show: Exhibit B, a human zoo." *The*

Guardian. 11.08.14. Accessed 31.12.15. Web.

Qureshi, Sadiya. *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire and Anthropology in 19th-Century*

Britain. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 2011. Print.

Scego, Igiaba. "Siamo ancora pecore nere." *Internazionale*. 21.01.15. Accessed 31.12.15.

Web.

---. "Quando gli italiani non erano bianchi." *Internazionale*. 18.07.15. Accessed 31.12.15.

Web.

Scego, Igiaba, and Rino Bianchi. *Roma negata*. Roma: Ediesse. 2014. Print.

Shringarpure, Bhakti. "Conversation with Maaza Mengiste and Nadifa Mohamed."

Warscapes. 29.01.12. Accessed 31.12.15. Web.

Smith, David. "Inside Eritrea: conscription and poverty drive exodus from secretive African state". *The Guardian*. 23.12.15. Accessed 31.12.15. Web.

Smith, Shawn Michelle. "Looking at One's Self through the Eyes of Others: W.E.B. Du Bois's Photographs for the 1900 Paris Exposition." *African American Review* 34: 4. 2000. 581-599.

---. "Afterimages: White Womanhood, Lynching and the War on Iraq." *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 20. 2006. 72-85.

---. "Introduction: Visual Culture and Race." *MELUS Multi-Ethic Literature of the U.S.* 39: 2. 2014. 1-11.

Zuckerman, Ethan. *Rewire: Digital Cosmopolitans in the Age of Connection*. New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company. 2013. Print.