POSTCOLONIAL ITALY
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Contents

List of Figures ix
Acknowledgments xi
Introduction: Paradigms of Postcoloniality in Contemporary Italy 1
  Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo
1  The Italian Postcolonial 31
  Robert J. C. Young

Part I  European and Global Trajectories

2  The New European Migratory Regime and the Shifting Patterns of Contemporary Racism 37
  Sandro Mezzadra
3  The Postcolonial Turn in Italian Studies: European Perspectives 51
  Sandra Ponzanesi
4  The Emigrant Post-“Colonia” in Contemporary Immigrant Italy 71
  Teresa Fiore
5  De-Provincializing Italy: Notes on Race, Racialization, and Italy’s Coloniality 83
  Miguel Mellino

Part II  Shared Memories, Contested Proximities

6  Hidden Faces, Hidden Histories: Contrasting Voices of Postcolonial Italy 103
  Alessandro Triulzi
7  Shooting the Colonial Past in Contemporary Italian Cinema: Effects of Deferral in Good Morning Aman 115
  Derek Duncan
8  Italians DOC? Posing and Passing from Giovanni Finati to Amara Lakhous 125
  Barbara Spackman
CONTENTS

9  Pier Paolo Pasolini in Eritrea: Subalternity, Grace, Nostalgia, and the “Rediscovery” of Italian Colonialism in the Horn of Africa 139
   Giovanna Trento

10  Southerners, Migrants, Colonized: A Postcolonial Perspective on Carlo Levi’s *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* and Southern Italy Today 157
    Roberto Derobertis

Part III  Intimations and Intimacies of Race

11  Postracial/Postcolonial Italy 175
    Cristina Lombardi-Diop

12  Blaxploitation Italian Style: Exhuming and Consuming the Colonial Black Venus in 1970s Cinema in Italy 191
    Rosetta Giuliani Caponetto

13  Screening Intimacy and Racial Difference in Postcolonial Italy 205
    Áine O’Healy

14  Racial Evaporations: Representing Blackness in African Italian Postcolonial Literature 221
    Caterina Romeo

Part IV  Postnational Aesthetics, Transcultural Production

15  On the Periphery of Nollywood: Nigerian Video Filmmaking in Italy and the Emergence of an Intercultural Aesthetics 239
    Alessandro Jedlowski

16  Envisioning Postcolonial Italy: Haile Gerima’s *Adwa: An African Victory* and Isaac Julien’s *Western Union: Small Boats* 253
    Shelleen Greene

17  “Roma Forestiera”: A Project on Migrant Music in Rome 263
    Alessandro Portelli

18  Hip Pop Italian Style: The Postcolonial Imagination of Second-Generation Authors in Italy 275
    Clarissa Clò

List of Contributors 293
Index 297
Introduction

Paradigms of Postcoloniality in Contemporary Italy

Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo

Defining Postcolonialism

In a seminal essay that emphasizes the “dubious spatiality” and “problematic temporality” of the term “postcolonial,” Ella Shohat asks, “When exactly, then, does the ‘post-colonial’ begin?” (103). This question is particularly relevant for Italy, as the beginning of the decolonization process did not coincide with the beginning of the postcolonial era. In the period between 1890 and 1943, Italy claimed colonial rights over Eritrea, Somalia, parts of Libya, Ethiopia, the Dodecanese Islands, and Albania, but the postindependence period did not begin simultaneously for these territories. Italy officially renounced its colonial empire with the Paris Peace Treaty in 1947, but the colonies had already been lost following its defeat by the British Army in East Africa in 1941 and in Libya in 1943 and the take-over of the Italian colonies in Albania and the Dodecanese Islands by the German Army in 1943. Italy, however, sustained new kinds of colonial relations even after the loss of the colonies, both at a political level, as in the case of the Italian Trusteeship Administration in Somalia (Amministrazione Fiduciaria Italiana della Somalia, AFIS) from 1949 to 1960, and at an economic level, as occurred in Libya up until the mass exodus in 1970. Finally, the process of decolonization was not the outcome of colonial wars of independence, in which the periphery rebelled against the metropole; rather, it was the result of the weakening, and later the defeat, of Fascism. For all these reasons, the case of Italy—as a national paradigm rarely understood within a postcolonial framework—compels us to evaluate postcolonialism under a new light.

This volume addresses the Italian postcolonial condition as one of the main factors that affects lives and shapes cultures in contemporary Italy. In particular, it identifies the common, postcolonial context in which a wide array of discourses, social practices, and forms of cultural production are finding expression in contemporary Italy. The way in which the volume addresses the field of postcolonial
POSTCOLONIAL ITALY

studies is not limited to the exploration of the relationship between former colonizers and colonized, nor is it confined to a rereading of colonial history and culture; rather, it considers how the postcolonial paradigm formulates new epistemologies produced by previously voiceless subjects, while at the same time highlighting and examining the relationships of power created by colonialism and reproduced and reinforced in contemporary postcolonial societies.

The term “postcolonial” has always been highly contentious both at a political and a theoretical level: if, on the one hand, it homogenizes spatial and temporal specificities, thus reproducing a Eurocentric position, on the other, it renders invisible the continuity existing between colonial and neocolonial relations of power. In line with critics who have argued that the prefix “post” followed by “colonialism” evokes the end of a phase, thus erasing the existing continuity in postcolonial times between colonialism and its effects into the present (Shohat; McClintock; Loomba), our notion of the “postcolonial” is grounded in the assumption that the economic and cultural effects of colonialism are still present in many countries, including Italy, predominantly in the way by which the imbalance of colonial power is reinstated in today’s global world through the unjust treatment and exclusion of migrants from developing countries who are often denied access to human rights and the privilege of global citizenship (Loomba). Starting with the awareness that the “post” in “postcolonial” signals continuity rather than fracture, our volume adopts a postcolonial perspective on contemporary Italy in order to redefine its cultural history and national identity.

The volume’s idea of postcolonialism is broadly defined as to include the processes of racialization, gendering, and cultural transformations engendered within contemporary Italy by the legacy of colonialism, emigration, and global migrations. As a condition that exceeds national borders, the Italian postcolonial, we argue, situates itself not in relation to the British and French histories of empire, in which the migratory fluxes were almost exclusively coming from previous colonies, but rather to the post-Cold War reconfiguration of Europe and its emerging postcolonialities (see Ponzanesi in this volume). In the Anglophone world, the term “postcolonial” is generally used to define both a critical and theoretical approach as well as a historical period that begins with decolonization and extends to contemporary migrations from Asia, Africa, and Latin America to Europe and North America. In the Italian context, the term is beginning to be employed to explore the historical continuum and cultural genealogy that link the colonial past to contemporary Italy. In this sense, our volume adopts the term in order to reposition colonial history and its legacy at the center of the debate on contemporary Italy. Additionally, by incorporating emigration, the Southern Question, and immigration as phenomena closely intertwined with the postcolonial condition, the volume moves beyond the national and colonial context.

Colonialism, the South, and Emigration

The volume is loosely structured along two axes, one temporal and the other spatial, which stress continuity and proximity. On the one hand, the notion of Italian
national identity and culture is shaped in a historical continuum that connects the postcolonial present to colonialism, to the subaltern position of the South, and to international and intranational migrations; on the other, the postcolonial perspective emphasizes a transnational spatial continuity, in that it reinforces the idea of diasporic communities in Europe and around the world which share the common experience of colonization.2

Italy has had a long history of both transatlantic and trans-Mediterranean migrations. Between 1876 and 1976, approximately 26 million Italians left their nation, thus establishing a record for international migration (Choate, Emigrant Nation 244, note 1). The fact that emigration became a mass phenomenon in Italy (1870s) soon after Unification (1861–70), and that a decade later Italy started acquiring coastal territories on the Red Sea (1882), soon to become the first Italian formal colony of Eritrea (1890), underlines the transnational nature of the newly unified nation-state, a state that found a sense of national identity and culture while projecting itself far beyond its territorial borders. Italy’s history of emigration and colonization has not only created “a circulation of individuals and families, but also of capital, traditions, and ideas” (Choate, Emigrant Nation 1). In turn, emigration has de-centered the sense of national belonging3 and disseminated linguistic and cultural features inherent to the concept of italianità, a concept that is now crucial to a definition and an understanding of the postcolonial condition in contemporary Italy.

Since the turn of the new millennium, migration studies with regard to Italy have focused on the continuity existing between international and intranational migrations (Gabaccia; Gaspari) as well as transoceanic and trans-Mediterranean migrations. Emigration and the colonization of Africa have recently been analyzed as interrelated phenomena (Labanca, “Nelle colonie,” Oltremare; Choate, “Tunisia,” Emigrant Nation) that were prompted by the necessity of the newly born nation-state to establish transnational economies in support of the national one. Nicola Labanca has underlined the need to analyze the emigrant nature of Italy’s colonization in Africa—rather than limit the study of colonial history to politics, military strategies, and diplomacy—so as to understand the social implications of the phenomenon both in Italy and in the colonies and to examine the continuities and discontinuities between emigration and colonization. Mark Choate remarks that the word colonia was used to refer both to Italian possessions overseas and to communities of emigrants around the world (see also Fiore in this volume), although the Italians living in colonized lands and those who had emigrated elsewhere found themselves in opposing positions vis-à-vis the native populations (Choate, Emigrant Nation 2). Robert Viscusi assumes the same starting point—the double meaning of the word colonia—in order to deploy the notions of “colonial” and “postcolonial” in a different history and geography—namely, to analyze the development of Italian American studies in the United States. Although re-signified, this vocabulary is borrowed from postcolonial discourse in order to underline the centrality of the condition of double cultural subalternity characterizing Italian American culture in respect to both Italian “metropolitan” and US mainstream cultures. Placing core issues in postcolonial studies—the strategic use of language, the spatial articulation of the dichotomy metropole/periphery,
the question of cultural hegemony, transnational trading and commercial routes, and the processes of exoticism—at the center of his analysis of Italian emigration to the United States, Viscusi creates a discursive continuity between diaspora and postcolonial studies’ critical and theoretical frameworks, thus complicating notions of subalternity and hegemony, as well as the very definition of Italian postcolonialism.

Although the propaganda of the Liberal and Fascist eras delivered the message that the African colonies, once acquired, would become an extension of the national territory and would accommodate the masses of Italian emigrants (Labanca, “Nelle colonie,” Oltremare; Choate, Emigrant Nation 7), colonial emigration never reached the numbers of the Great Migration to the United States. Moreover, the “indirect” nature of Italian colonialism in countries such as Tunisia, for instance—a former Roman colony and a country that at the turn of the twentieth century had a population of eighty thousand Italian emigrants (Choate, “Tunisia,” Emigrant Nation)—bespeaks the complexity of colonial relationships as well as of trans-Mediterranean migrations and introduces a connection between “indirect colonialism” and “indirect postcoloniality” in contemporary Italy, a country that has not experienced mass immigration from former Italian colonies.

Before Viscusi’s article appeared, Pasquale Verdicchio had noted that the Italian context offers an example for postcolonial studies to enlarge its scope beyond limiting dichotomies, given the position of the Mezzogiorno as a colonial extension of the North of Italy at the time of Unification. Italy’s internal colonialism provides an example of how postcolonial discourse may emerge not only as an emanation of the colonial periphery but as an expression of subalternity from within the nation-state, and therefore away from traditional geographies of power (first vs. third world) and racial underpinnings (white vs. nonwhite). As a socioeconomic project that failed to fully incorporate southern Italians within the unified nation, the Risorgimento coincided historically with Italy’s reterritorialization beyond its national borders through colonial expansion and emigration. When Italy’s internally colonized subjects began to emigrate, nationalist literature readily coopted the plight of the emigrant laborers in order to further an imperialist agenda and thus implement the expropriation of Eritrean agricultural lands, as well as the occupation of the territories of Cyrenaica. Verdicchio thus contends that, given the historical and ideological link between southern Italians and other colonized people, “Italian immigrant writing, as it has emerged in Canada and the United States, is an expression of that postcolonial condition” (204). Such a position highlights the transhistorical and geographically expansive nature of postcoloniality in the Italian context.

Adopting a position similar to that of Verdicchio, the interdisciplinary collection edited by Jane Schneider, Italy’s “Southern Question” (1998), addresses the essentializing and racializing nature of the political and cultural discourse on the Italian South from Unification to the present. Building on Edward Said’s critical analysis of the representation of the Muslim world and the Middle East, Schneider’s volume demonstrates how the discourse on the Mezzogiorno was based on mechanisms akin to those inscribed in the disciplinary and discursive practice of Orientalism, such as the imposition of simplistic dichotomies and the adoption of
a Manichean vision of the North/South divide. While Schneider’s path-breaking work translated Said’s colonial discourse analysis into a critical reappraisal of Italy’s internal colonialism, it did not extend its argument to an evaluation of Italian colonialism.

What these critical views on the South share is their common genealogy in Antonio Gramsci’s important work on the Southern Question and the concept of subalternity. Gramsci’s relevance for postcolonial thinkers such as Edward Said, Partha Chatterjee, and the Indian Subaltern Studies Group founded by Ranajit Guha stemmed from the application of Gramsci’s reflections on common sense, cultural hegemony, and political consciousness from the Italian context to the colonial one. Yet, the publication of Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* from 1948 onward did not compel any significant debate on the impact of colonialism on national history and cultural identity in postwar Italy. In spite of the international interest in Gramsci as a postcolonial thinker, Gramsci’s thought has not stirred a conspicuous and consistent theoretical debate on Italian colonialism and postcoloniality among Italian scholars. Only very recently have postcolonial theorists begun to examine Gramsci’s legacy in relation to Italian imperialism. What emerges from their analysis is that Gramsci understood beforehand that Italian capitalism (unlike capitalism elsewhere in Europe) pursued a colonial agenda predominantly for ideological purposes in order to attain national unity at the expense of the Mezzogiorno. More importantly for postcolonial scholars, Gramsci also understood that the antislavery, anticolonial struggles were a necessary condition for achieving the political maturity needed for any liberation (Srivastava and Bhattacharya). Since the focus of Gramsci’s analysis moved outside the borders of Italy to the imperial world, his writings constitute a useful tool for a definition of postcoloniality as an intranational and transhistorical category of analysis.

The temporal and spatial axes that link colonization, emigration, and immigration set Italy apart from other European contexts. This is evident in the uneven formation of its history as a postcolonial country. In the postwar period, while other former imperial nations in Europe were receiving immigration flows from their previously colonized territories, Italy was still an emigrant country sending its own citizens abroad to Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, with the support of bilateral agreements. Southern Italians who migrated to other European countries were part of a process of labor recruitment across the Mediterranean basin of large numbers of industrial workers from Southern Europe, Turkey, Morocco, and Yugoslavia. This recruitment was not always linked to postcolonial ties. As guest workers, they received temporary visas and some form of social protection. Another migration flow was made up of those who moved to the industrialized regions of the North of Italy from the South, and who could indeed be considered internal “colonial migrants” insofar as they shared some of the privileges of citizenship with northerners, yet were often discriminated against as second-class citizens in the labor and housing market. The fact that their racialization functioned also as an effect of colonial discourse is clearly rendered in a telling scene in Luchino Visconti’s 1960 film *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (*Rocco and his Brothers*), in which the Parondi family first arrives at a Milanese apartment building to take up
their sordid basement accommodation and are designated by their new northern neighbors as “those from Africa.”

**Uneven Decolonization**

Unlike Britain, France, and the Netherlands, Italy did not experience large-scale spontaneous immigration from its former colonies after decolonization. In the United Kingdom, the population of New Commonwealth origin increased rapidly after 1951, reaching 1.2 million in 1971 and 1.5 million in 1981. By 1970 there were more than 600,000 Algerians, 140,000 Moroccans, and 90,000 Tunisians in France. The Netherlands had two main inflows from former colonies. Between 1945 and the early 1960s, immigrants arrived from the former Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), and after 1965, increasing numbers of immigrants came to the Netherlands from the Caribbean Suriname. Most of these colonial migrants arrived in Europe as citizens of the former colonizing nations (Castles and Miller).

In Italy, by contrast, no major influx of migrants came from the ex-colonies, apart from the sporadic arrival of young Ethiopian intellectuals and Somali students sent to receive their university education in Europe as part of their formation as the new elite class in their home countries (Del Boca, *Nostalgia* 77–78). In the 1960s, Eritrean women followed the returning Italian families to Italy to continue employment in the domestic service, while in the 1970s, it is estimated that Eritreans were the largest immigrant group in the peninsula, a consequence of the influx of refugees who fled the Eritrean liberation war with Ethiopia (Andall, “Immigration” 288).

Italy was confronted with the question of how to engage with its ex-colonies as early as 1944, and by the end of World War II, the official Italian position was in favor of maintaining control over all the colonies acquired before Fascism, with varying degrees of sovereignty, while obtaining a protectorate in Somalia. Amid the national debate preceding the 1947 Paris Peace Treaty, almost 20 percent of Italians believed that losing the colonies would be a most painful “mutilation” (Del Boca, *Nostalgia* 32). After the treaty, when Italy was obliged to renounce all of its colonies, the “colonial question” returned as one of the major issues in Italy’s foreign policy. The motivations for Italy’s claim over Eritrea, Libya, and Somalia had a strong nationalist bent, resembling the arguments expressed at the inception of colonial expansion. The government declared the country’s need for a demographic outlet in order to control its population excess and valued these territories as a base for investments not only of capital but also of “white populations” on African soil (Rossi 302). Thus, the Italian establishment continued to protect the security and privileges of the coloni (settlers), particularly in Eritrea (Calchi Novati, “Italy and Africa”) and Somalia, where Italians managed to maintain their hold on many sectors of the administration at least until the 1950s (Del Boca, *Nostalgia*).

During the Italian Trusteeship Administration in Somalia (AFIS, 1949–60), postcolonial Somalia remained, in many respects, an embodiment of the colonial legacy (Morone). In the face of the growing demands of Pan-Somali nationalism
and the gradual establishment of an independent government, Italy’s reaction was one of nostalgic attachment to colonial values (Del Boca, *Nostalgia*) and sheer protectiveness of its economic interests. The protection of Italianized sectors of the Somali economy, such as banana cropping, was of crucial importance to the activities of the AFIS (Tripodi). The anti-Italian position of the Somali Youth League (SYL) during the early years of the AFIS was a direct reaction to the colonial period, when Somalis were prevented from actively participating in the government and administration of the colony (Lewis). One of the main tasks given to Italy by the UN mandate during the AFIS period was to remedy the lack of a system of secondary schooling, another consequence of the Italian colonial legacy. From 1950 onward, secondary and postsecondary institutions were created in order to fulfill this goal, while a few selected Somali youth were chosen to travel to Italy to acquire a university education. For most of the duration of the Italian trusteeship, Italian nationals remained, however, the administrative cadres of postcolonial Somalia and were instrumental in drafting the constitution of the new democratic Somali state (Tripodi).

Italy’s political and economic involvement in the Horn of Africa, characterized by incoherent and often ambivalent measures and initiatives (Calchi Novati, “L’Italia e il Corno”, *L’Africa d’Italia*) reflects the ambivalence and contradictions of a faltering postcolonial consciousness. The fact that Italy did not receive significant numbers of immigrants from the former colonies during the period of decolonization corroborated its self-perception as a demographically and culturally homogeneous nation. Moreover, the impact made by widespread and protracted colonial resistance and anticolonial wars, as experienced, for instance, by Britain during the Mau-Mau Rebellion in Kenya (1952–60) and by France during the Algerian Revolution (1954–62), had no equivalent in Italy. These factors prevented Italian society from processing the meaning and import of the colonial experience, thus deferring the development of a postcolonial consciousness.

Historian Angelo Del Boca has defined the process of silencing, omitting, and concealing evidence regarding the violent acts perpetrated by the Italian army against the colonized people as a deliberate attempt, on the part of the Italian government in the decade following decolonization, to rehabilitate the national image that had been damaged by the events of World War II. Italy’s colonial campaigns involved land expropriations, the forced removal of masses of people, the creation of internment camps, the ruthless and inhuman military retaliation against resistance movements, the use of poison gas against civilians, and the enforcement of apartheid measures between Italians and Africans. “The lack of debate on colonialism and the failure to condemn its most brutal aspects have promoted Italy’s denial of its colonial faults” (Del Boca, “The Myths” 19). With the complicity of the media and the cultural establishment, Italian civil society has, until recently, been kept in ignorance with regard to its colonial past, as this part of Italian history has been absent from school textbooks and from the general public domain. In spite of such distinct processes of deferral, forgetting, and denial, Italian colonization left visible traces of its presence in the architecture, the built environment, the economic and political structures, as well as in the language and food culture of the Horn of Africa (Calchi Novati, “Italy and Africa”; Fuller). Colonial traces
are everywhere in Italy, as Mia Fuller suggests, “if one knows where to look.” In
the public arena, monuments and place names dedicated to pivotal events, figures,
and places from the colonial period are disseminated in the cities of Italy and espe-
cially in the capital. The colonial archive, hidden and invisible for years, is just
beginning to open up to the general view. Yet, as Alessandro Triulzi has observed,
“Italian postcoloniality is no less anomalous than its colonial precedent as it con-
tinues to produce, sixty years after colonialism’s end, ambiguous displacements of
memory in the politically volatile and unresolved public arena of both metropoli
and colonia” (Triulzi 441). For this reason, postcolonial criticism also means relo-
cating colonial memory at the center of cultural debates in today’s Italy. Part of the
work of this volume also involves looking for colonial traces in contemporary Ital-
ian literature, cinema, music, and popular culture, including the exotic soft porn
movies that flourished in the 1970s (see Caponetto in this volume) and Pier Paolo
Pasolini’s significant “Ethiopian” works (see Trento in this volume).

While the traces of colonialism are relegated to a time and place that are else-
where in relation to the here and now (see Duncan in this volume), historian Nic-
ola Labanca recognizes at least three distinct phases of colonial memorialization:
first, an immediate postcolonial phase between the 1940s and early 1950s, dur-
ing which colonial memories were constructed by those who had direct contact
and experience with the ex-colonies; second, a period of decolonization at the
international level between the 1960s and 1970s, during which Africa, for Ital-
ians, no longer meant only the ex-colonized territories; third, a period of great
world transformations between the 1980s and 1990s, in which contested claims
over the memory of the colonial past diverged from revisionist accounts, initiating
the development of new scholarship (Labanca, “History and Memory”).

It is important to add a more recent phase to this periodization, one in which
Italy finally witnesses the consolidation of a shared postcolonial memory emerging
from literary and cultural works by writers and intellectuals from both Italy
and the formerly colonized countries. Writing the memory of the colonial archive
in literary form has been, predominantly, a female project, and its preferred genres
have been the memoir and other kinds of autobiographical writing. Whether
written from the perspective of the settler—as in the case of Erminia Dell’Oro’s
Asmara addio (Farewell to Asmara; 1988) and Luciana Capretti’s Ghibli (2004)—
or the perspective of the formerly colonized subject—as in the case of Shirin Ram-
zanali Fazel’s Lontano da Mogadiscio (Far Away from Mogadishu, 1994), Marta
Nasibú’s Memorie di una principessa etiope (Memories of an Ethiopian Princess,
2005), and Gabriella Ghermandi’s Regina di fiori e di perle (Queen of Flowers
and Pearls, 2007)—all of these works participate in the reelaboration of a col-
lective memory and the rewriting of a counter-history of colonialism from the
perspective of individual subjectivities that are intimately entwined with the fate
of successive generations. It is indeed by virtue of the extremely rich literary and
cultural output produced by postcolonial citizens that Italy is now being urged to
revise its national memory and cultural identity.

At the opposite end of the spectrum from these narratives by women we find
a series of novels by Italian male authors, such as Andrea Camilleri’s La presa di
Macallè (The Siege of Macallè, 2003) and Il nipote del Negus (The Negus’s Nephew,
PARADIGMS OF POSTCOLONIALITY IN CONTEMPORARY ITALY

2010), Carlo Lucarelli’s *L’ottava vibrazione* (The Eighth Vibration, 2008), and Enrico Brizzi’s *L’inattesa piega degli eventi* (An Unexpected Turn of Events, 2008). These texts all adopt vividly exoticized colonial settings shrouded in nostalgic and quasi-elegiac atmospheres where their (for the most part male) protagonists reenact major events of colonial history (in Camilleri and Lucarelli), or imagine a different postcolonial future (in Brizzi). The sardonic humor of these narratives serves to remind readers of their authors’ emancipation from colonial rhetoric (see Triulzi in this volume). Yet the parodic mimesis of the colonial past is more redemptive than critical; salvaged from oblivion, its memory is rescued less for the sake of ironic distance than for its aesthetic and sensual enjoyment. Different from both these sets of narratives is Wu Ming 2’s latest novel *Timira. Romanzo Meticcio* (*Timira: A Meticcio Novel*, 2012), in which the protagonist this time is a black Italian woman, Isabella Marincola, and her point of view is placed within a historical framework as the novel combines personal memory, archival material, and fiction. What all these narratives stress is the appropriation of colonial memory as one of the most important bases for Italy’s redefinition of its identity as a postcolonial society.

**Immigration and Postcolonial Consciousness**

Without ceasing to be an emigrant nation, in the 1980s, Italy became a destination for global migrations. Multiple trajectories characterize Italy’s geopolitical position as one of the Mediterranean countries that provide a passageway for southern and eastern migratory flows. The North/South duality, so central to Italy’s self-identity, was matched from the postwar period onward by an East/West divide. During the Cold War and the polarization of Europe by the Iron Curtain (1945–91) Italy, under the leadership of the Christian Democrats, positioned itself on the side of Western liberal democracies. After the fall of the Berlin Wall (1989) and as a consequence of both southern and eastern migrations, Italy has become again, as it has been in antiquity, a multidirectional passageway in the Mediterranean. The recent reconfiguration of Mediterranean migrations began after the 1973 oil crisis, when France, West Germany, and the Netherlands put a halt to the recruitment of guest and “colonial” workers, and Italy became an alternative destination. By the end of the 1990s, Italy had one of the most diverse immigrant populations in Europe, with migrants from Europe, North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, China, and Southeast Asia, a heterogeneity that creates possibilities and challenges for a diverse type of multiculturalism, as Russell King observes.

Such heterogeneity also poses distinct challenges to an idea of postcoloniality that is informed neither by a universalist, assimilationist culture (as is the case for France) nor by a particularist, integrationist culture (as is the case for Britain and the Netherlands). It also creates distinct possibilities. In the case of Italy, the persistence of the principle of *jus sanguinis* has, on the one hand, contributed to maintaining the idea of *italianità*, despite the historical dispersion of Italians through emigration. On the other, its critique has made possible the sharing of a sense of belonging for postcolonial migrants of diverse origin. This belonging is not linked to legal status, but rather to new ways of being Italian, whether by virtue of being
born in Italy, through everyday experiences and practices, or through participation in the educational system and a dynamic use of the national language. Hence it is not the legal principle of descent that holds the truth of the migrants’ sense of belonging, but rather the shared cultural practices that transcend the biologically determined (and historically over-determined) idea of the nation, and which could be better identified as postnational, rather than simply postcolonial.

For this reason, our understanding of Italian postcolonialism in the present volume emphasizes how the postnational, migratory dimension is an essential component of the postcolonial condition in Italy. Migrants to Italy both from former Italian colonies and from other formerly colonized territories are today articulating the shifts of meaning in the processes of signification that subtend postcoloniality. Central to this process is the shift from the historical categories of racism to a new conceptualization of blackness that invests the very idea of Italianness. The work of writers such as Pap Khouma and Igiaba Scego, of Senegalese and Somali origins respectively, exposes the sense of uneasiness generated for (white) Italians by the association of blackness with Italianness. These terms are often conceived as incompatible and therefore as mutually exclusive (see Romeo in this volume). As we see in the work of first- and second-generation writers, _italianità_ seems unattainable for black Italians precisely because national belonging is generally understood in terms of specific traits (both cultural and biological) that cannot be simply acquired by a perfect mastery of the language and of the Italian way of life (Andall, “Second-Generation”; Clò in this volume). Postcolonial writing in Italy is often haunted by the denial of political and cultural citizenship, as the legal principle for its acquisition is still caught in the ambiguity of racialist and biologist definitions of Italianness.

The reassessment of the project of _italianità_ in light of a postcolonial consciousness underlines the need for a reassessment of the Italian cultural and literary canon, especially if one considers the unquestionable (and unquestioned) contribution of Italian civilization to Western culture since antiquity. In ways similar to those pursued by Said and others with regard to the British literary and cultural canon, a postcolonial critique of Italian cultural modernity reveals the complicity of the national culture with imperialism. Such a critique helps to unravel the cultural assumptions of a Eurocentric perspective that have shaped Italian modern cultural history and casts light on the way in which the colonial experience in Africa marked the accession of Italy’s national culture to modernity. In _Culture and Imperialism_, Said argues that, from the middle of the nineteenth century onward, imperialism and the novel were mutually reinforcing. The English novel, Said states, had no real European equivalent precisely because its position mirrored the unquestionable strength of the British empire. If we bring this idea to the Italian context, it could be argued that Italy had no meaningful tradition of the novel because it was, after all, a “minor empire.” From the 1880s onward, however, Italian literature saw the flourishing of a series of Orientalist and Africanist texts by highly influential writers such as Edoardo Scarfoglio, Matilde Serao, Gabriele D’Annunzio, Giosuè Carducci, Giovanni Pascoli, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Edmondo De Amicis, Enrico Pea, Giuseppe Ungaretti, Riccardo Bacchelli and, in the immediate postwar period, Carlo Levi (see Derobertis in this volume) and...
Index

L’abbandono (Dell’Oro), 115
abortion, 191, 194, 197
activism and social movements, 94
anticolonial, 7, 32
antiracism, 47, 88, 264, 265, 266
hybrid, 84–85
women’s liberation movement, 191–92, 194–96, 198–99, 208
workers’ protests, 41–42, 43
“Addio Lugano Bella” (anarchist anthem), 270, 271
advertising, 18, 180, 182–86, 190n8, 220n7
Adwa, Battle of (1896), 254–55
Bianco e nero and, 117–18
spectral presence of, 124n4
Volto Nascosto and, 105, 113n10, 115–16
Adwa: An African Victory (film, Gerima), 254–7, 259, 260
affective labor. See domestic service
Africa Italia (Matteo and Bellucci), 11
African gaze (Pasolini’s), 139, 140
Agamben, Giorgio, 32, 94
agency, 141–42, 144–45, 147, 195, 208, 278
Ahmed, Sara, 224, 225
Akkad, Moustapha, 262n3
Akpegi Boys (film, Omoigui and Sandretti), 244–45
Albania
Finati’s passing as Albanian, 129–31
Italy’s invasion/occupation, 1, 116–17, 262n3
postcolonial relationship with Italy, 12
Albanians as immigrants in Italy, 32, 118
parallels with Italian emigrants, 117, 125–26
passing of, 131, 137n4
populations, 28–29n20, 81n8
Albertini, Bitto, 198, 203n12
Alemán, Jorge, 94, 95
Alexandria, Egypt, 125, 128
Algeria, 7, 32, 33, 86
Algerians as immigrants, 6, 27n4, 131
Ali, Muhammad, 128
“Alla Francia” (Pasolini), 140
Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance), 37
Allen, Beverly, 11
alterity. See otherness and others
Althusser, Louis, 83
Ambrosini, Maurizio, 277
Amelio, Gianni, 116–17, 122, 123n3, 125–26, 262n3
AMM (Archivio delle memorie migranti), 112n2, 113n7, 113n12
L’amore ritrovato (Mazzacurati), 116
Amori bicolori (Capitani and Coen, eds.), 229
“Ana de Jesus” (Brito), 228
Andall, Jacqueline, 11, 15
Anderson, Bridget, 212
Andiamo a spasso (Viarengo), 227
Anglana, Saba, 229
anti-Semitism
Fascism and, 92, 176
legislation, 41, 92, 144
as racism, 40, 87, 223
Antonelli, Laura, 194
Antunes, Ernesto França, Jr., 77
AOI (Africa Orientale Italiana), 105, 165
Appadurai, Arjun, 91, 241
“Apparenze” (Ciani/Rete G2), 281–84
Appunti per un’Orestiade africana (film, Pasolini), 140, 141, 143, 152n6
“Appunti per un poema sul Terzo Mondo” (Pasolini), 141, 142, 143, 152n7
Apter, Emily, 33
Arabian Nights (film, Pasolini), 140, 143–44, 147
INDEX

Araya, Zeudi, 191, 192, 203n11
Il corpo, 198
La ragazza dalla pelle di luna, 194, 195
La ragazza fuoristrada, 195, 196, 197
Arrighi, Giovanni, 86
article 587 (Italian Penal Code), 134
ascari (colonial soldiers), 106, 107, 144–45, 154n28
Asinitas school for migrants, 104, 113n12
Asmara addio (Dell’Oro), 8
Asor Rosa, Alberto, 155n36, 161
autobiographical writing, 8, 227
exclusion from literary space, 224–25, 235n7
in hybrid literature, 160
La mia casa è dove sono (Scego), 28n12, 229
Petrolio as, 147
Axu Obelisk, 115, 256

Baartman, Sara, 220n5
Babangida, Ibrahim, 240
Bacchelli, Riccardo, 10
Bal, Mieke, 78
Ballario, Giorgio, 115
Baartman, Sara, 220n5
Babangida, Ibrahim, 240
Bacchelli, Riccardo, 10
Bal, Mieke, 78
Ballario, Giorgio, 115
Belzoni, Giovanni, 129–30
Ben- Ghiat, Ruth, 11, 51, 123n2, 166
Benin City, Nigeria, 242
Benjamin, Walter, 31, 105
Bensaâd, Ali, 44
Bergson, Henri, 178
Berlusconi, Silvio, 175, 178
Berlusconi government, 90, 104, 235n3, 278
Bertolucci, Attilio, 142
Bevilacqua, Piero, 163
Bhabha, Homi, 31
as foundational postcolonial thinker, 60, 68n4, 69n9
mimicry, 226
postcolonial temporality, 117, 119
third space, 252n17
unhomely, 119, 122
Biacchi, Riccardo, 17, 103–5, 107, 110
bianchezza. See whiteness
Bianco e nero (film, Comencini), 117–18, 119, 206, 207, 209–11
Billo il Grand Dakhar (film, Muscardin), 206, 214–15
Bayart, Jean-François, 53–54
Bayly, C. A., 128
beauty
Eritrean, 145–46, 153n22
racism and, 234n3
Somali, 208
whiteness/cleanliness and, 177, 180
See also Black Venus
Beaver, Frank, 192
Belgium, 57–58
La bella Antonia (film, Laurenti), 194
“Bella Ciao” (song), 270
Bellucci, Stefano, 11
belonging (national)
cultural practices and, 9–10
emigration and, 3, 27n3, 76–77, 79
as foundational concept in postcolonial thinking, 60
as fundamental public value, 37
immigration and, 45–46
language and, 10, 280
passing and, 128
postcolonial literature and, 109
race/racialization and, 10, 14, 184, 197–98
See also citizenship; Italianness
Belzoni, Giovanni, 129–30
Ben-Ghiat, Ruth, 11, 51, 123n2, 166
Benin City, Nigeria, 242
Benjamin, Walter, 31, 105
Bensaâd, Ali, 44
Bergson, Henri, 178
Berlusconi, Silvio, 175, 178
Berlusconi government, 90, 104, 235n3, 278
Bertolucci, Attilio, 142
Bevilacqua, Piero, 163
Bhabha, Homi, 31
as foundational postcolonial thinker, 60, 68n4, 69n9
mimicry, 226
postcolonial temporality, 117, 119
third space, 252n17
unhomely, 119, 122
Biacchi, Riccardo, 17, 103–5, 107, 110
bianchezza. See whiteness
Bianco e nero (film, Comencini), 117–18, 119, 206, 207, 209–11
Billo il Grand Dakhar (film, Muscardin), 206, 214–15
binaries
black/white, 126–27, 177, 223
Christian/Muslim, 132
male/female, 15
master/slave, 146
metropole/periphery, 3–4
miscenation and, 192
North/South, 4–5, 9
postraciality and, 186
blackface, 126, 127, 178

Black Italians (radio program, Scego), 229–30
blackness, 14, 17–18
black masculinity/black male bodies, 18, 184, 186, 212–13, 220n7, 280
as dirt, 178–79, 184, 190n8
in Europe/German national identity, 55
historical lack of sizable black community in Italy, 175–76
increasing complexity of literary representations, 223–24, 230–31
internalization of racism and, 227–28
invisibility, 197, 209–10, 225, 235n4
Italians and and, 10, 18, 229–30, 231
in literary space, 224–25
sexuality and, 184–86, 212, 226
stereotypical representations, 235n6
translation of, 235n5, 236n17
transnationalism and, 279, 281
visibility, 223, 224, 225
white otherness and, 146
See also whiteness; women, African/black

Black Venus
cannibalism/danger of the Black Venus, 191, 194–95, 197, 198
contemporary surfacing of, 229
historical development of, 192–93, 207, 208
Hottentot Venus, 207, 220n5
in Italian blaxploitation, 191, 194, 195, 196, 197, 198
Pasolini’s use, 143
Blanchard, Pascal, 84
blaxploitation, 191–99
defined/described, 192
emergence in Italy, 195–96
Blinded Devil (film, Omoigui and Sandretti), 245, 247
Boehmer, Elleke, 55–56

Bologna, University of, 69n10
Bonelli, Sergio, 104, 105, 113n8
Bonfiglioli, Chiara, 15
Bongie, Chris, 144, 145
Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo, 178
borders
citizenship and, 43–44
colonial order and, 161
crossing of/music and, 270
European Union and, 43–45, 46–47, 68n6
globalization and, 38, 85
narrative structure and, 161
nation-states and, 40
US border closure, 164
“Borders of the Nation, Borders of Citizenship” (Ballinger), 202n9
Bouchane, Mohamed, 225, 226–27
Bourdie, Pierre, 32, 54, 84
Brah, Avtar, 226
Braidotti, Rosi, 223
Bräiloiu, Constantin, 268
Braudel, Fernand, 86
Brazil, Italian emigrants in, 16, 71, 72, 74–79, 82n16
breastfeeding, 181, 190n12
Breccia, Gioacchino, 179
Breger, Claudia, 55
Brescia, 239, 242
Brignone, Guido, 193, 202n8
Britain
black male sexuality in, 212
colonial resistance and, 7
defeat of Italy, 1, 52
immigration from former colonies, 2, 6
labor law, 40
multicultural policy, 58
postcolonial studies, 56
race studies, 13
second generation (as term), 290n10
Somalia and, 34
Brito, Christiana De Caldas, 228
Brizzi, Enrico, 9
Brunetta, Gian Piero, 154n27
Brunetti, Bruno, 27n6
Buccheri, Vincenzo, 191, 195
Buikema, Rosemarie, 69n7
Burckhardt, John Lewis, 127, 137n5
Burns, Jennifer, 12, 81n9
Burton, Richard F., 127, 137n5


Cabiria (film, Pastrone), 255–56
Cadel, Francesca, 147, 155n34
Cairo, Egypt, 125, 127, 128, 130
Calderón (Pasolini), 152n7
Calice, Nino, 164–65
Calimerò, il pulcino nero (TV icon), 183
Calvino, Italo, 62
Camilleri, Andrea, 8–9
Caminati, Luca, 144, 154n23
“Campana e Pound” (Pasolini), 155n34
Campassi, Gabriella, 220n3
Campt, Tina, 55
Canada, Italian emigrants to, 4
canon, literary
canonization, 61
exclusions from, 224–25, 235n7
French expansion of, 53
revisions needed, 10–11, 59–60
revisions of, 12, 13, 17, 157
Capelli, Luisa, 33
capitalism, 99n6
citizenship and, 43
colonial mechanisms of subordination and, 205–6
immigration patterns and, 176
influence on local geographies, 157, 160, 168
modernity and, 85–88
national unity and, 5
Pasolini and, 147
race and, 93, 94
southern Italy and, 17, 163
Caponetto, Rosetta Giuliani, 18, 293
Capretti, Luciana, 8
CARA Italia (film, Yimer), 113n6–7
Carducci, Giosuè, 10
Careri, Maria, 153n16
Carmichael, Stokely, 152n7
Carosello (TV broadcast), 182–83
Carter, Jimmy, 129, 137n8
Casa della Memoria e della Storia (Rome), 270, 272n1
Cassini, Nadia, 194
Castel Volturno, 167, 222, 234n3
Catholic identity, whiteness and, 175
Catholic tradition, 267
Cederna, Giulio, 236n12
Césaire, Aimé, 54
Chakrabarty, Dipesh, 16, 85, 162–63
Chambers, Iain, 69nn9–10

Cosmopolitanism, 52
interrupted modernity, 57
modernity and colonialism, 14
modernity and migration, 12, 253
Chatterjee, Partha, 5, 44
“Che fare col ‘buon selvaggio’?” (Pasolini), 152n6
Chiamatemi Ali (Bouchane), 225, 226–27
Chiarocci, Grazia, 227
Chow, Rey, 206, 217
chromatic norm, 225, 228, 230
Ciampi, Carlo Azeglio, 37
Cianfarani, Carmine, 195
Ciani, Maya Llaguno, 281–84
cinema, 18
division into genres, 202n6
exilic/diasporic, 242, 246–47, 254
exploitation cinema, 192, 194, 195, 202n7
fascist, 14
male gaze, 202n5
parallels between external and internal migrations, 125–26, 259
privatization of Nigerian, 240
See also Black Venus; blaxploitation;
   Divorzio all’islamica a Viale Marconi; Good Morning Aman;
terracial sociality/intimacy;
Nigerian video industry/productoin
   in Italy; Pasolini, Pier Paolo
Cipolla, Arnaldo, 202n8
Circolo Gianni Bosio, 264–72
circumcision, 134
citizenship, 10, 14
of emigrants, 16, 27nn2–3, 73–74, 75, 82n27
European, 38, 45–47, 75, 88
foreign, 75–79
former colonial subjects and, 202n9
as foundational concept in postcolonial thinking, 60
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Page Numbers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immigration and</td>
<td>6, 43–44, 259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian transnational identity and</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy’s double colonialism and</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>jus sanguinis</em> principle</td>
<td>9–10, 19, 76–77, 275–76, 279, 284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism and</td>
<td>39, 41, 178, 197, 202n8, 217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second generation and</td>
<td>19, 275–76, 277, 279, 283–84, 285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See also belonging (national); Italianness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Clandestino</em> (Manu Chao)</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Class politics vs. postcolonialism</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial elite</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demise of upper classes</td>
<td>259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fascism and</td>
<td>163–64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interracial intimacy and</td>
<td>209–10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasolini and</td>
<td>142, 153n13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and</td>
<td>84, 86, 94, 130–31, 177, 180, 186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workers’ movements of 1960s</td>
<td>41–42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See also intersectionality; southern Italy and southern Italians</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clifford, James</td>
<td>141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clò, Clarissa</td>
<td>18–19, 228, 293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Code switching</td>
<td>285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cogni, Giulio</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coker, Elizabeth Marie</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cold War</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Colf” (Kuruvilla)</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial amnesia</td>
<td>84, 115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active denial/removal of memory</td>
<td>175, 177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cinematic challenges to</td>
<td>77–79, 105, 117–18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Controversy surrounding challenges to</td>
<td>91–92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Germany and Netherlands</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of confronting</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nostalgia and</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repression of colonial past</td>
<td>116, 119, 123n2, 124n4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See also denial or belated</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgment of Italian colonialism; memory, colonial; Somalia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonialism, Italian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burst of interest in</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonia (as term)</td>
<td>3, 16, 71–73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial education</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial gaze</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concealed attachment to</td>
<td>123n2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emigration to colonies</td>
<td>3–4, 6, 27n4, 28n11, 164–66, 176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hygiene movement and</td>
<td>181, 190n14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interracial relationships/offspring</td>
<td>197–98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legacy of</td>
<td>2, 8, 13–15, 210, 218</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less structural relationship of Italy with its colonies</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modernity and</td>
<td>10, 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nationalism and</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nation-state construction and</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In Pasolini’s work</td>
<td>141, 143–44, 148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource extraction</td>
<td>153n17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See also Adwa, Battle of (1896); Black Venus; colonial amnesia;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial acknowledgment of Italian colonialism; Eritrea; Ethiopia;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italic-Ethiopian war (1935–1936); Libya colonialism/colonial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capitalism and</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflation with immigration</td>
<td>124n10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homosociality and</td>
<td>185–86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legacies of</td>
<td>159–60, 222–23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native informants</td>
<td>60, 88–89, 168</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of colonial spaces</td>
<td>161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Racism and</td>
<td>83–84, 87–88, 176, 222–23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radical realism</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporal borders</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coloreria Italiana (black dye product)</td>
<td>184–86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comberiati, Daniele</td>
<td>12, 109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comencini, Cristina</td>
<td>117–18, 119, 206, 207, 209–11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Com’è se giù vuol dire KO?” (Gangbo)</td>
<td>279, 280–81, 285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Come un uomo sulla terra</em> (film, Segre, Yimer, and Biadene)</td>
<td>17, 103–5, 107, 110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Comitiva Flaminio” (black Italian Youth Group)</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commedia all’italiana</td>
<td>133, 134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community (as term)</td>
<td>250n3, 266</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Concorso” (Mubiayi)</td>
<td>228–29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La condizione postcoloniale. See Mezzadra, Sandro</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Con il nastro rosa” (Battisti)</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumerism and consumption</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Popular culture and</td>
<td>278, 280–81, 285</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women and</td>
<td>180, 182–83, 184–85</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INDEX

contact zones, 131
contraceptive pill, 194
Il corpo (film, Scattini), 191, 198–99
Il Corriere della Sera (newspaper), 234n3
Crispi, Francesco, 193
Cristo si è fermato a Eboli (Levi), 17, 142, 157–65
Italo-Ethiopian war, 158, 160–62, 163–64
North/South conflict, 158–60
southern Italian emigration, 163, 164–65, 166–67, 168
Croce, Benedetto, 61
Cronenberg, David, 217
cultural studies, 13, 52, 55, 61, 72
Culture and Imperialism (Said), 10–11, 159
Curcio, Anna, 189n2
“Curry di pollo” (Wadia), 279
Curti, Lidia, 69n10
Cyrenaica, 4

Dainotto, Roberto, 28n9
D’Alema government, 37–38
Dal Lago, Alessandro, 29n30, 230, 254
Dalla parte della donna (Saraceno), 194
D’Amato, Joe, 198, 203n12
Dangerous Twins (film, Ogidan), 239
D’Annunzio, Gabriele, 10
Davoli, Ninetto, 142
De Amicis, Edmondo, 10
Decameron (film, Pasolini), 202n6
de Certeau, Michel, 40, 45
decolonization, 1, 6–8, 58, 115, 208
de Donato, Gigliola, 171n9
De Felice, Renzo, 92
deferral/deferred action, 7, 17, 119, 120–21
de Laude, Silvia, 153n16
Del Boca, Angelo, 7, 50n5, 116, 175, 202n10
Deleuze, Cinema and National Identity (Martin-Jones), 118–19
Deleuze, Gilles, 54
dell’Oro, Erminia, 8, 115, 190n13
Demarie, Marco, 277
De Martino, Ernesto, 142, 145, 154n29
demonstrations. See activism and social movements
denial or belated acknowledgment of Italian colonialism, 86, 205

cmpared with other European nations, 53

concealment of colonial crimes, 7–8, 175, 202n10
film and, 115–16
foreclosure from public sphere, 91–93
interracial anxiety and, 197–98
postcolonial studies in Italy and, 51–52, 62
resistance to multiculturalism and, 58
See also colonial amnesia

dede Oliveira, Felippe, 75, 78
dede Oliveira, Tiago, 75–76, 78
DeriveApprodi (publisher), 29n23
De Robertis, Francesco, 197–98
Derobertis, Roberto, 17, 27n6, 69n10, 293
Derrida, Jacques, 32, 117
De Seta, Enrico, 193
De Seta, Vittorio, 220n7, 251n14
detention centers, 45, 58, 69n8, 105
deterritorialization, 13
“Pan-South” and, 140, 142
reterritorialization and, 119, 122, 124n6
De Vivo, Barbara, 69n10
diaspora, 27n2
collective/transnational identity
formation, 27n2, 120, 241, 257, 259, 279–80
defined/described, 251n7
diasporic filmmaking, 239, 242, 247, 254
diasporic sensitivity, 285
Dutch context, 55–56
experience of second generation, 275
Fascism and, 164
impact on Italian identity, 79, 166, 177
modernity and, 168
Pan-Africanism and, 141
popular culture and, 279–80
postcolonialism and, 3–4, 276–77
talking back of diasporic communities, 253–54
See also emigrants and emigration;
immigrants and immigration
Di Bari, Nicola, 263, 269, 270
Dietrich, David, 178
La difesa della razza (magazine), 220n5
Dilara, Hevi, 266
Diliberto, Pierfrancesco, 245
Di Maio, Alessandra, 235n4
divorce, 133, 135, 191
Divorce, Italian Style (film, Germi), 126, 133–34
Divorzio all’islamica a Viale Marconi (film, Lakhous), 17, 125–26, 127, 131–35, 138n17
“Documenti, prego” (Mubiayi), 228, 279
Dodecanese Islands, as Italian colony, 1
Dogali, Battle of (1887), 193, 255, 256
La dolce vita (film, Fellini), 210
La Domenica del Corriere (magazine), 145, 148, 154n31, 183
domestic service
in cinematic representations of African women, 208, 211–12
colonial Eritrean women and, 6, 181–82
Italian women’s liberation and exploitation of immigrant women, 208, 228
as means of support for immigrant families, 280
migration and, 6, 15
Duncan, Derek, 11, 293
 cinematic parallels between past and present migrations, 259
indirect temporality, 17
 interracial relationships in film, 220n2
 on A Time to Kill, 143
Dutch Antilles, 55

Ebri, Kossi Komla, 278
economic crisis
 global (contemporary), 91, 94, 168
 Great Depression, 164
Ecuadoran community in Rome, 267, 269
Efendi, Wahid, 284
Efe-Obomwan (film, Omoigui), 243–44, 245
Egbuna, Obi, 152n7
Egypt
 Egyptian immigrants in Italy, 125
 Egyptomania, 138n9
 nineteenth-century European migrations to, 27n4, 125, 126, 128
 paracolonial, 127, 128–31
Einaudi (publisher), 112n1
election campaign of 2006, 37
Elisha, Ester, 229
Ellison, Ralph, 225
Emanuelle nera (series, Albertini), 198, 203n12
Emelonye, Obi, 251n6
emigrants and emigration, 2
to African colonies, 3–4, 6, 27n4, 28n11, 164–66, 176
to Brazil, 16, 71–72, 74–79, 82n16
citizenship and, 16, 27nn2–3, 73–75, 82n27
emigrant post-“coloniality,” 16, 72, 74, 77, 79, 81n12
fascist diaspora, 164
Italian identity and, 3, 9, 12, 73–74, 166, 177
links with other diasporas, 276–77
music of, 271
to paracolonial Egypt, 128
parallels with internal migration and immigration, 5–6, 11, 72, 117, 125–26, 253, 258–59, 282–83
relationship with southern Italy, 163
statistics, 28n18
to the United States, 3–4, 14, 41, 81n12, 117, 163
See also success, migrant narratives of Empire (Hardt and Negri), 44
Ene, Roxana, 268, 271
England. See Britain
English language, 12, 56, 81n10, 235n5, 242
Eni (state-controlled energy company), 143
Eritrea
 beauty stereotypes, 145–46, 153n22
 colonial legacy, 256–57
Ethiopia and, 153n15, 256–57
as Italian colony, 1, 3, 4, 6, 181–82
Italian emigrants, 27n4
Italy’s search for gold, 153n17
Pasolini’s corpus, 17, 140, 142–44, 148, 152n2, 153n18, 154n27
as setting of L’ottava vibrazione, 106–8, 115
as setting of Volto Nascosto, 104
Eritrean immigrants in Italy, 6, 29n20, 73, 81n8, 110
Eshetu, Theo, 246
Essed, Philomena, 57
essentialism and essentialization of French antipostcolonialism, 53–54
in Italian gender studies, 15
racialization and, 93
essentialism and essentialization (continued)

racism and, 225–26, 236n16

southern Italy and, 4–5

of subaltern body, 144

Ethiopia

colonial legacy, 138n20, 256–57

Eritrea and, 153n15, 256–57

as Italian colony, 1, 109, 181

Italy’s search for gold, 153n17

representations of, 155n32

as setting of Tempo di uccidere, 140

as setting of Volto Nascosto, 104, 106

See also Adwa, Battle of (1896);

Italo-Ethiopian war (1935–1936)

Ethiopian immigrants in Italy, 236n12

migrant testimony, 17, 103–5, 107, 110

relative lack of, 6, 29n20, 73, 81n8

ethnicity vs. race, 223

eugenics, 18, 179–82, 193

Eurocentrism, 2

in development of modernity, 86–87

diasporic filmmaking’s displacement of, 246, 247–48

in literature/literary criticism, 10, 161

reversal of, 227

Europe and European Union

borders/border control, 43–45, 46–47, 68n6

citizenship, 38, 45–47, 75, 88

cultural hybridity, 253–54

demographic heterogeneity, 178

denial of colonial past, 222–23

distribution of Nigerian video in, 241

European identity, 16, 57, 253

guest worker recruitment, 5, 9, 42, 55

immigration policy, 258

Italy’s historical/cultural role in creating, 86

Italy’s position, 11

postcolonial critique in, 52, 53–56

postcolonial legacies in, 31–32, 57–59, 68n6, 205

race studies, 13

second generation (as term), 290n10

exoticism, 4, 9, 106

Black Venus and, 191

exotic desire, 82n24, 193, 207

exploitation films, 192, 194, 195, 202n7

See also blaxploitation

Fade to White (Caponetto), 197

Falaschi, Giovanni, 160, 161

Falceteto, Benjamin, 76, 78

Fanon, Frantz

colonial others, 86

as foundational postcolonial thinker, 54

Pasolini and, 140, 152n7

racism, 94

Rome visits, 33

Fantôme Afrique (film, Julien), 257

Farah, Nuruddin, 271

Farah, Ubax Cristina Ali, 60, 109, 278,

279–80

Fascism and Fascist Italy, 1

colonial history, 52, 92, 141

colonial racism, 41

erasure of racist policies of, 92–93, 221

homosexuality and, 144

internal migrations, 72, 164

legacy of, 14, 183–84

Levi as political prisoner, 160, 171n8

“Mediterranean Africa” and, 146

nostalgia for, 142, 147

Pasolini and, 147, 148

postfascist inability to mourn, 91–93

racial purity, 18, 192, 193, 197, 202n8,

207, 212–13

rural/agricultural policies, 163–66, 180–81

See also Italo-Ethiopian war (1935–1936);

propaganda, colonial/fascist

Fascist Legacy (TV documentary, 1980s), 92

Fazel, Shirin Ramzanali, 8

Federazione nazionale fascista, 179

Fellini, Federico, 124n5, 209–10

feminism

intersectionality and, 12, 15, 130–31

white privilege and, 228, 230–31

women’s liberation movement of 1970s,

191–92, 194–96, 198–99, 208

feminization of migration, 42, 240

Fenech, Edwige, 194

Ferrara, 196

Ferrone, Federico, 72, 74–79

Filipino Protestant Church (Igreja ni Cristo), 266

film. See cinema

Filmmaster (film production company), 184–86
Finati, Giovanni, 17, 127–28, 129–31, 133, 137n5
Fiore, Teresa, 16, 293–94
*Il fiore delle Mille e una notte* (film, Pasolini), 140, 143–44, 147
Flaiano, Ennio, 10–11, 140, 143
Flamino Maphia (group), 279–80
folk music, 265, 267–70, 274n26
Fordism, 42–43
foreclosure, 88–92, 93
Fortini, Franco, 144, 154n30, 155n36
Fortunato, Mario, 235n7, 235n8
fotoromanzos, 281–84
Foucault, Michel, 39, 53, 54, 94, 161
Fuhrmann, Claudio, 206, 207, 208
“Frammento alla morte” (Pasolini), 140
France
colonial resistance and, 7
denial of colonial past, 32
guest worker recruitment, 9
immigration to from former colonies, 2, 6
multicultural policy, 58
postcolonial legacies in, 57–58
postcolonial studies in, 53–54, 56
second generation (as term), 290n10
Frankenberg, Ruth, 176
Francescon, Idiwaldo, 75–76
Franzina, Emilio, 82n16
Franzoni, Dom Giovanni, 270
Freud, Sigmund, 17, 116, 119, 123n2
Friedrich, Caspar David, 124n13
Friuli region, 141, 152n8
Fuller, Mia, 7–8, 11, 51, 123n2
Futurism, 141
Gabaccia, Donna R., 81n7, 137n6, 164, 276–77
Gadda, Carlo Emilio, 133
Galesi, Laura, 167–68
Gandhi, Leela, 123n2
Gangbo, Jadelin Mabiala, 278, 279, 280–81, 285
Garritano, Carmela, 243
Gaspari, Oscar, 72
Gemser, Laura, 198
gender identity, 130, 216–17
gendering, 2, 133
gender studies, 12, 15, 69n7
Gentilini, Gianfranco, 76, 78
Gerima, Haile, 18, 254–57, 259, 260
Germany
defeat of Italy, 1
denial of colonial past, 32
guest worker recruitment, 9
indirect postcoloniality, 73
Nazism, 91, 92
postcolonial studies in, 54–55
Germi, Pietro, 126, 133–34
Ghermandi, Gabriella, 8, 60, 108–9, 115
Ghibli (Capretti), 8
*El Ghibli* (literary journal), 69n10
Gilroy, Paul
Black Atlantic, 55
black music, 14
creation of space for blackness, 230
denial of past, 221
diaspora, 27n2, 141
postcolonial legacies in Europe, 57–58
publication of, 69n9
public funding of cultural production, 247
repression, 123n2
Giuliani, Gaia, 180–81
Glyn, Ruth, 195–96
Goldberg, David Theo
European demographic heterogeneity, 178
externality, 223
geno-phenotypes, 184
interracial sociality, 185
invisibility of race, 221–22
racial counter-histories, 231
Goldstein, Ann, 153n16
*Good Morning Aman* (film, Noce), 119–22, 123n3, 206, 215–18
Gouda, Frances, 55–56, 68n7
INDEX

306

grace, 146, 153n12
Gramsci, Antonio, 32, 152n10
influence on postcolonial studies, 5, 52, 73
Pasolini and, 153n13
postcolonial misreading of, 53
Southern Question, 5, 141–42, 159
trasformismo, 257–58
Granozio, Luigi, 263
Grant, Barry Keith, 195
Grassilli, Maria Giulia, 246, 247
Gray, Herman, 186
“La grazia degli Eritrei” (Pasolini), 142–43, 145–46, 152n2
Greene, Shelleen, 18, 197, 201n2, 294
Grespi, Barbara, 191, 194
Grier, Pam, 195
Griffin, Gabriele, 223
Guaber (corporation), 184–86
Guareschi, Giovannino, 152n7
Guarnizo, Luis E., 241–42
guest worker recruitment, 5, 9, 42, 55
Guha, Ranajit, 5
Guibre, Abdul Salam, 222, 234n3
“La Guinea” (Pasolini), 142, 152n6
Gundle, Stephen, 177, 180
GVK (Giving Vividly with Kindness), 239–40, 241, 243–45, 246–47, 248
gypsies, 89, 223
Hage, Ghassan, 46–47
Haggard, H. Rider, 127
Hall, Stuart, 43, 276
Handala (musical group), 264
“Happy Housewife” advertising campaign, 184–86
Hardt, Michael, 44, 82n25, 94, 205
Hay, James, 258
Haynes, Jonathan, 239, 240, 243
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 88
hegemony, 3–4, 52
cultural, 5
English linguistic, 56
politics of memory and, 95
of whiteness, 178
Henson, Matthew, 257
Holm, John, 135, 138n20
Homo eurafricanus theory, 146
homosexuality, 144, 154n28, 185–86, 216–17
hooks, bell, 228
Hop on Pop (Jenkins, McPherson, and Shattuc, eds.), 285
Horn of Africa (generally), 7–8, 103, 105, 139, 176
See also Eritrea; Ethiopia;
Italo-Ethiopian war (1935–1936); Somalia
Hotel Orientale (Palermo, Sicily), 257
Hottentot Venus, 207, 220n5
Hoving, Isabel, 68n7
Howe, Andrew, 234n3
Huggan, Graham, 57
hybridity
cultural, 60, 253–54, 269–72
fascist fears of, 207
hidden, 259
literary writings, 160, 168
national identity and, 278–79, 284
second generation and, 19, 84–85, 278, 284, 285
See also miscegenation/racial hybridity;
multiculturalism
hygiene movement, 18, 190n14
management of women’s domestic sphere, 179–80, 181–82
postracialism and, 186
whiteness and, 176–77, 180–81, 182–83, 183–84
identification centers, 105, 113n6
“Identità” (Scego), 229
Ilbert, Robert, 128–29
Imigrantes Italianos (immigration website), 82n18
immigrants and immigration, 9–10, 235n4
of descendants of Italian emigrants, 16, 74–79
Europe and, 44–45, 45–47, 57–58
former colonies and, 2, 4–7, 29n20, 54, 124n10
growing presence of, 223–24
as “guests,” 272
Italian language and, 225–26
Italy as immigration country, 32, 73, 84–85, 86, 240–41, 251n4, 251n6
labor market and, 16, 42–45, 46–47, 176
late beginning of in Italy, 9, 73, 198–99
multicultural education and, 270–71
parallels with internal migration and
emigration, 5–6, 11, 72, 117,
125–26, 253, 258–59, 282–83
revived interest in Italy’s colonial past
and, 115
statistics/population of immigrants in
Italy, 28n20, 81n8, 251n4, 289n4
stigmatization of, 16, 41
subaltern experience, 226
violence against, 89–90, 168, 176, 186,
222, 223, 234n3
See also immigrants and immigration,
“illegal”; refugees/asylum seekers;
success, migrant narratives of
immigrants and immigration, “illegal”
antimigrant legislation, 90, 104, 112n3,
167
in diasporic cinema, 214, 236n12,
244–45
labor market and, 46
Libya and, 69n8, 113n5
living conditions, 167–68
populations of, 251n4
social marginalization of, 167, 214, 225,
236n12
See also immigrants and immigration
Immigrato (Methnani), 225, 226–27,
235n7, 235n8
L’inattesa piega degli eventi (Brizzi), 9
India, 141, 228
Indian diaspora, 29n20, 81n10
Indian Subaltern Studies Group, 5
direct postcoloniality
defined, 4, 27n4, 29n20, 72, 73
Italian emigration and, 27n4, 74, 79
Indonesia, 6, 55
industrialization, internal migration and,
5, 41–42, 142, 258
“In ostaggio” (Nasty Brooker), 284
internal migrations, 257
fascist policies limiting, 164
industrialization and, 5, 41–42, 142, 258
parallels with immigration and
emigration, 5–6, 11, 72, 117,
125–26, 253, 258–59, 282–83
International Organization for Migration,
44
intraracial sociality/intimacy, 17–18, 206–
18, 224, 230
between African men and Italian
women, 184–85, 201n2, 202n8,
212–15
between African women and Italian
men, 117–18, 191, 194, 196–98,
207–12, 229
in fascist Italy, 193, 197, 202n8, 207
homosocial/homosexual, 185–86,
215–18
incommensurability of, 206, 210–11,
217, 220n2
sexuality and, 120, 121, 124n8, 154n28
intersectionality
feminism and, 12, 15, 130–31
intraracial relationships and, 206, 215
popular culture and, 14
race/class, 84, 86, 94, 130–31, 177, 180,
186, 228
race/gender, 18, 223, 224, 227
race/national identity, 229, 230
race and, 13–15, 234n3
Invisible Man (Ellison), 225
Inza, Kone, 241
Io, l’altro (film, Melliti), 117
“Io, nero italiano e la mia vita ad ostacoli”
(Khouma), 230
Io venditore di elefanti (Khouma), 225–26,
226–27
Iqbal Masih elementary school (Rome),
271
Islam, conversion to, 126, 129, 134
See also Finati, Giovanni
“Istranyeri” (Yusuf), 265, 271–72
Italian Colonialism (Andall and Duncan,
ed.s.), 11
Italian Colonialism (Ben-Ghiat and Fuller,
ed.s.), 11, 123n2
Italiani del nord e del sud (Niceforo), 41
Italiani per vocazione (Scego), 275, 278,
279–81
italianità, 3, 9–10, 14, 17, 109
Italianess, 77
blackness and, 10, 18, 229–30, 231
colonial memory and, 9, 87–88, 95, 165,
177
colonial past as foundational to, 17
contact zones and, 127
diaspora and, 166, 177
emigration and, 3, 9, 12, 73, 74, 166, 177
Italianness (continued)
eugenics and, 179–82
expansion of, 109, 229
foreign citizenship and, 75–79
homogeneity of, 7, 178, 199, 230, 258
hybridity and, 278–79, 284
multiculturalism and, 60
nostalgia and, 108
popular culture knowledge and, 277–78, 285
racialization and, 14–15, 221, 222
racial mixing and, 197–98
race and, 83–84, 87–88, 93, 176, 230
second generation and, 82n27
south Italy and, 9, 88, 141, 158–59
transnationalism and, 17, 72–73, 177
whiteness and, 176–77, 180–81, 185, 192, 193, 197, 199, 224
See also citizenship
Italo-Abyssinian war (1895–1896). See Adwa, Battle of (1896)
Italo-Ethiopian war (1935–1936)
atonement for, 256
as extension of trends under liberal government, 41
Italian emigration and, 165–66
as Italy’s imperial peak, 52
Levi’s exile, 160, 171n8
southern Italy and, 158, 161–62, 163–64
spectral presence of Adwa and, 124n4
Italy’s “Southern Question” (Schneider), 4–5
Iyob, Ruth, 256–57
Jackson, Peter, 190n15
Jacobson, Matthew Frye, 234n1
Jacovacci, Leone, 229
Jaeyckin, Just, 203n12
Jameson, Fredric, 92
“Jane Austen and Empire” (Said), 159
Jane la meticcia (Milanesi), 202n8
Jazz Singer, The (film, Crosland), 126–27
Jedlowski, Alessandro, 18, 105, 294
Jenkins, Henry, 285, 290n15
Jews, passing of, 127
Joanna, Violeta, 267–68, 269
Julien, Isaac, 18, 254, 257–60
jus sanguinis, 9–10, 19, 76–77, 275–76, 279, 284
J. Walter Thompson (advertising agency), 182
Kafalenos, Emma, 135
Kant, Immanuel, 88
“Karnevale” (Wadia), 279
“Kaye Nude” (Tah), 273n21
Kelsen, Hans, 40
Kenya, 140
Khouma, Pap, 10, 225–26, 226–27, 230
Kilomba, Grada, 222
King, Russell, 9
Krisane, Hedy, 246
Kurdish immigrants in Rome, 265–66
Kuruvilla, Gabriella, 228, 229, 278
Labanca, Nicola, 113n10
colonial memorialization, 8
La Domenica del Corriere, 154n31
fascist racism, 14
Italian campaign to occupy Ethiopia, 124n4
Italian presence in Libya, 58
migration and colonization, 3, 27n4, 72
silencing of colonial past, 91–92, 202n10
labor market
immigration patterns and, 16, 42–45, 46–47, 176
mobility and, 40–42, 42–45, 167–68
race and, 41, 46–47, 94–95
See also domestic service
Lacan, Jacques, 88–89, 94, 217
Lakhouss, Amara, 17, 125–26, 127, 131–35, 138n15, 138n17
Lamerica (film, Amelio), 116–17, 122, 123n3, 125–26, 262n3
Lampedusa, Giuseppe Tomasi di, 257, 258
Lampedusa, island of, 32, 69n8, 105, 110, 236n12
Lancaster, Burt, 260
language, 3–4, 34
belonging and, 10, 280
English linguistic hegemony, 56
filmmaking techniques and, 78
immigrants and, 81n9, 104, 225–26
Italian as lingua franca in paracolonial Egypt, 128, 130–31
Italian as postcolonial language, 12
Lingua Franca vs. lingua franca, 138n20
outsider use of insider language, 60, 77
passing and, 130–31, 131–33, 135
second generation and, 278, 280, 281–82
Lataretu, Marie, 268
Laurenti, Mariano, 194
Lazarus, Neil, 68n4
Leeds-Utrecht-Munich Postcolonial
Europe research project, 55
Leftist parties in Italy, 73
Lega Nord (Northern League), 37, 76, 77, 90
Legène, Susanne, 68n7
Lemaître, Sandrine, 84
Leopard (film, Visconti), 257–58, 259, 260, 262n3
Leopardi, Giacomo, 142
La letteratura postcoloniale italiana
(Morosetti), 11–12
Lettere dal carcere (Gramsci), 5, 152n9, 159
Lettere dal Sahara (film, De Seta), 220n7, 251n14
Levi, Carlo, 10, 153n11, 160, 161, 167, 171n8
See also Cristo si è fermato a Eboli
Levi, Primo, 104–5
Lewis, Gail, 57
liberal era
colonialism of, 4, 255–56, 257
racism in, 41, 87
Libianchi, Armando, 263
Libya
detention centers, 58, 69n8
immigrants in Italy, 29n20
as Italian colony, 1, 6, 262n3
Italian emigrants, 27n4
migration through, 104, 105, 110, 113n5
segregationist policies, 181
Lion of the Desert, The (film, Akkad), 92, 262n3
Lipsitz, George, 280–81, 285
literary space, whiteness of, 224–25, 231
literature. See canon, literary
Little Cairo neighborhood of Rome, 125, 126, 127, 131
Locher-Scholten, Elsbeth, 68n7
Lomax, Alan, 269
Lombardi-Diop, Cristina, 17–18, 81n10, 222, 259, 294
Lontano da Mogadiscio (Fazel), 8
Lorde, Audre, 226
Lotman, Yuri, 138n19
Luberto, Antonietta, 166
Lucania region, 154n29, 171n4
See also Cristo si è fermato a Eboli
Lucarelli, Carlo, 9, 17, 106–8, 115
Luchetti, Daniele, 206
Lusophone studies, 68n6
madamato, 107, 143, 144
Maggi, Armando, 154n29
Maghreb countries, EU borders and, 44
I magliari (Rosi), 138n17
Magoni, Claudio, 284
Makaping, Geneviève, 227–28
Malcolm X, 140, 152n7
male gaze, 202n5, 209
Malizia (film, Samperi), 194
“Mamma mia dammi cento lire” (Italian emigrant song), 271
Mamma Mia video series (Smith), 240
Mamma Roma (film, Pasolini), 258
Manfredi, Gianfranco, 17, 104, 105–6, 107, 113nn9–10, 115–16
Manganelli, Giorgio, 155n32
Mangano, Antonello, 167–68
Mannoni, Octave, 54
Manu Chao (musician), 271
Manzolini, Michele, 72, 74–79
Marcellini, Romolo, 143
Marcus, Millicent, 258
marginality
double marginality of Nigerian filmmaking in Italy, 239–40, 242, 246, 247
hybridity and, 254
of Italian literature, 62
perspective of diasporic sensitivity, 275, 285
second generation and, 290n10
Marincola, Giorgio, 229–30
Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso, 10
Martin-Jones, David, 118–19, 120
Marx, Karl, 88
masculinity, 14, 15, 224
See also under blackness
Mastroianni, Marcello, 134
Matera, 160, 163, 165–66
Mathijs, Ernest, 194
Matteo, Sante, 11
Mau-Mau Rebellion (1952–1960), 7
Mazzacurati, Carlo, 116
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>310 INDEX</td>
<td>310</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>M Butterfly</em> (film, Cronenberg), 217</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McClintock, Anne, 193</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McPherson, Tara, 285</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mecca, 126, 130, 133</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mediascapes, 241</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mediterranean Crossings</em> (Chambers), 12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mediterranean imaginary, 12, 56, 253, 259</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mediterranean Africa,” 139–40, 146</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mellino, Miguel, 16, 69nn9–10, 189n2, 294</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melliti, Mohsen, 117</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meltemi (publisher), 11, 31, 33, 69n9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Memorie di una principessa etiope</em></td>
<td>(Nasibú), 8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>memory, 124n12, 168</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>memory, colonial</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cinematic constructions of, 116, 117–18,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>254–55, 257, 258</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>construction of, 16–17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>literary reexamination of, 8–9, 108,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>115–16</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in migrant testimony and writing,</td>
<td>104–5, 109–10, 259</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>music and, 264, 266</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>national identity and, 9, 87–88, 95, 165,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>177</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nostalgia and, 52, 106, 108, 176</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>oral history/folklore and, 255, 256</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>race/racialization and, 87–88, 94, 95, 177</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>race theory and, 13</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mendik, Xavier, 194</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Merica</em> (film, Ferrone, Manzolini, and</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ragazzi), 72, 74–79</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Merica Merica” (emigration song), 71</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mernissi, Fatema, 284</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Mésentante (Rancière), 42–43</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methnani, Salah, 225, 226–27, 235n7,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>235n8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metropole</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colonial impacts on, 51, 72–73, 77, 144,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>159, 205–6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>emigration and, 72</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ex-colonial immigrants in, 103, 105–6,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>108, 110, 217</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian identity and, 166</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>memory displacements in, 8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>periphery and, 1, 3–4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>racism and, 15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States as, 81n12</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mezzadra, Sandro, 16, 69n10, 294–295</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>affective labor, 212</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colonial legacies, 157–58</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italianness, 77</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>metabolbers, 205–6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>postcolonial temporality, 118</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Mezzogiorno</em></td>
<td>*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See southern Italy and southern Italians</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>La mia casa è dove sono</em> (Scego), 28n12,</td>
<td>229</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miccichè, Lino, 195</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Midnight’s Children</em> (Rushdie), 229</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Le mie ‘Mille e una notte’” (Pasolini),</td>
<td>142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 153n18,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>154n27</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mignemi, Adolfo, 193</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milan, 258</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milanesi, Guido, 202n8</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miran, Jonathan, 146</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>miscegenation/racial hybridity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black mothers’ fear of rejection by</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mixed-race children, 229</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>citizenship and, 197, 202n9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in colonies, 109, 144, 192, 207</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>contemporary cinematic depictions,</td>
<td>211, 214–15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>220n5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>meticcios, 144, 153n23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>postwar anxiety/ambivalence, 192,</td>
<td>196–98, 201n2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitscherlich, Alexander and Margarete, 91</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mobility</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>internal migrants vs. transnational</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immigrants, 259</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian citizenship and, 75</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>migrant workers, 167–68</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mobility management, 40–46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of otherness, 185</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>passing and, 127</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>racialization and, 94–95</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>modernity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>capitalism and, 85–88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colonialism and, 10, 14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cultural heterogeneity and, 254</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>diaspora and, 168</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hygiene and, 177</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>industrialization and, 31</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>migration and, 12, 253</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modigliani, Sara, 268, 271</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moldavia, 29n20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molina, Stefano, 277</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Montaldo, Giuliano, 116</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
monuments, 8, 256
Morante, Elsa, 140
Moravia, Alberto, 140
Morire è un attimo (Ballario), 115
Moroccans as immigrants, 6, 28n20, 81n8
Morosetti, Tiziana, 11–12
Morura, Jean-Marc, 53
Mourid “Dar-el-Salaam” (Ladispoli), 267
Movimento Sociale Italiano, 37
Mubiyai, Ingy, 109, 228–29, 278, 279
Mukhtar, Omar al, 92, 262n3
“Il Mulatto” (Greene), 201n2
Il mulatto (film, De Robertis), 197–98
multiculturalism, 11, 12
antimulticultural rhetoric and, 85
in education, 270–71
growing interest in, 29n23, 32
immigration and, 9, 73
national identity and, 60
Netherlands and, 54, 55–6
role of Europe in, 57–58
in Rome, 263–64
See also hybridity
Mulvey, Laura, 202n5
Munzi, Francesco, 118
Muscardin, Laura, 206, 214–15
music. See Rome, migrant music in
Mussolini. See Fascism and Fascist Italy
Myrie, Vanessa, 257
Nahid, Hamid, 242, 254
Nakahara, Tamao, 202n7
Naldini, Nico, 152n2
Naples, 31, 90
Napoleon’s occupation of Egypt (1798–1801), 128
Napolitano, Giorgio, 291n23
“Nascita” (Mubiayi), 229
Nasibú, Marta, 8
Nasty Brooker (rapper), 284
national identity. See Italianness
nation-states, 3
capitalism and, 5
colonialism as foundational for, 223, 254
globalization and, 38
mobility and, 40–41, 43
new nationalism, 37–38, 46
race and, 39, 41
territory and, 39–40, 44–45
See also unification, Italian
native informants, 60, 88–89, 168
Natural Disastro, 284
Neffà (rapper), 281
Negri, Antonio, 32, 44, 94, 147, 205
Negritude, 140, 142, 152n6
neocolonization, 2, 53, 77
neoliberalism
  citizenship and, 43
  postcolonialism and, 85, 205
  racism and, 94, 184
neorealism, 161, 245
neresza. See blackness
Netherlands
guest worker recruitment, 9
immigration from former colonies, 6
indirect postcoloniality, 73
postcolonial legacies in, 57–58
postcolonial studies in, 54, 55–56
Ngūgī wa Thiong’o, 69n9
Niceforo, Alfredo, 41
Nigerian migration to Italy, 209, 240–41, 244–45, 251n4
Nigerian video industry/production in Italy, 18, 239–48
GVK, 239–40, 241, 243–45, 246–47, 248
marketing strategies, 246–47, 248
Nollywood and, 240–41, 250n1
Il nipote del Negus (Camilleri), 8–9
Nnebue, Kenneth, 240, 251n5
Noce, Claudio, 119–22, 123n3, 206, 215–18
Noi italiani neri (Khouma), 230
Nollywood, 240–41, 250n1
See also Nigerian video industry/production in Italy
nostalgia
  for colonialism, 6–7, 9, 52, 57, 107–8, 116, 176
  for Fascism, 142, 147
  for land of origin, 75
  for peasant values, 155n34
La nostra vita (film, Luchetti), 206, 207, 211–12, 213, 214
Notari, Umberto, 180–81
Notes for an African Orestesìa (film, Pasolini). See Appunti per un’Orestiade africana
Nzegwu, Nkiru, 228
Obama, Barack, 175, 178
O’Healy, Áine, 18, 117, 123n3, 295
Okafor, John, 245
Okoh, Rose, 243, 245
Ombre corte (publisher), 29n23
Omoigui, Vincent, 243–45, 247, 251n6
“OndeG2” (radio program), 277
“100% hip hop” (Natural Disastro), 284
Onishi, Norimitsu, 250n1
Only Way After Home But It’s Risky, The (film, Osharhenoguwu), 243, 246, 251n12
ONMI (Opera nazionale maternità e infanzia), 179
Oostindie, Geert, 69n7
oral history, 18, 255, 256, 264–72
Orchestra di Piazza Vittorio (music group), 264
Orientalism (Said), 51, 127, 160–61
Orientalism/Orientalization, 126 as concealer of racism, 224
Finati, 17, 127–28, 129–31, 133, 137n5 in Italian literature, 10–11
nationalism and, 68n6 as redemption, 217
Southern Question and, 4–5
Orsitto, Fulvio, 202n6
Orton, Marie, 195–96
Osharhenogwu, Prince Frank Abieyuwa, 242–43, 246, 251n12
Osuofia in London (film, Ogoro), 239
otherness and others
Black Venus and, 193
colonialism and, 86, 87 as defining concept in postcolonialism, 59, 60–61
immigrant Italian descendants as, 76, 77–78
national identity and, 158–59, 178, 221 native informants, 88–89
Pasolini and, 139, 141–42, 145, 148, 153n13
racialization of, 91, 185, 205, 217, 222 reversed, 146
second generation and, 290n10 southern Italy and, 141–42, 158–59
talking back and, 253–54
whiteness and, 146
L’ottava vibrazione (Lucarelli), 9, 17, 106–8, 115
Ozdamar, Emine Sevgi, 55
Ozel, Abdurrahman, 265–66, 270
Il padre selvaggio (Pasolini), 140
Padua, 90
Paglieri, Maria, 29n22
Pagot, Nino and Toni, 183
Palazzo Gangi ballroom, 259–60
Palermo (Sicily), 257
Palumbo, Michael, 92
Palumbo, Patrizia, 11
Pan-Africanism, 140, 141, 256
Panagiotidis, Efthimia, 44–45 “Panegirico della razza italiana” (Notari), 180
Pan-South, Pasolini’s concept of, 139, 140–42, 152nn6–7, 153n12
Paolella, Domenico, 198
Paradisi, Giulio, 203n11
Paradoxes of Postcolonial Culture (Ponzanesi), 11–12
Parati, Grazziola, 12, 81n9, 124n6
Paris Peace Treaty (1947), 1, 6
Partito Comunista Italiano, 33, 159 “Partono gli emigranti” (Bandelli), 271
Pascoli, Giovanni, 10, 147
Pasolini, Pier Paolo, 8, 139–48, 258
Eritrean corpus, 17, 140, 142–44, 148, 152n2, 153n18, 154n27
Friulian roots, 140, 141, 152n8
influence on Italian cinema, 202n6
nostalgia for peasant values, 155n34
Pan-South, 139, 140–42, 152nn6–7, 153n12
sexuality and, 152n3, 153n12
subalternity, 139, 141–42, 144–47, 153n13
Passerini, Luisa, 57
passing and posing defined/described, 126–27
identity and, 134, 135
by immigrants to Italy, 137n4
as Muslim (historical), 126, 127–31, 137n5
as Muslim (in Divorzio), 131–35
privileged social status and, 227
Pattynama, Pamela, 68n7
Pavoni, Ludovico, 198, 203n11
Pea, Enrico, 10
La peccatrice (film, Pavoni), 198, 203n11
INDEX

Pecore nere (Capitani and Coen, eds.), 228–29, 275, 278–79
Pellegrini, Ines, 143–44, 146, 153n22
Pende, Nicola, 179
Peroni, Lino, 153n14
Perugini, Marco, 244
Petrolìo (Pasolini), 143, 146–47, 153nn16–17
Pezzarossa, Fulvio, 12
Philippines, immigrants to Italy, 28n20
photography, colonial, 107, 143, 194–95, 208
Piazza Argentina (Rome), 263–64
Piazza della Repubblica (Rome), 265, 267, 269
Piazza Farnese (Rome), 265
Piazza Flaminio (Rome), 269
Piazza Vittorio (Rome), 131, 264
Piazza Vittoria (Rome), 131, 264
Pickering-Iazzi, Robin, 153n23
pidgin, 135
Piedmont Film Commission, 247
Pierraccini, Gaetano, 181
Pietrobon, Gigliola, 194
Pinchiorri, Simone, 82n21
Pinkus, Karen, 175, 178, 190n3, 208
Pivetta, Oreste, 225
place, 40, 43, 45
See also space
Place in Literature (Dainotto), 28n9
Place in the Sun, A (Palumbo), 11
Placido, Michele, 125–26, 206, 212–14
Playing the Race Card (Williams), 126–27
Poesia in forma di rosa (Pasolini), 152n6
Poesie a Casarsa (Pasolini), 152n8
Poland, 31
Polezzi, Loredana, 12
Polish immigrants in Italy, 29n20
Pontecorvo, Gillo, 32
Ponte Marconi (music group), 270
Ponzanesi, Sandra, 11–12, 16, 81n10, 193, 295
popular body, Pasolini’s concept of, 142, 144, 146, 147, 152n3, 153n12
popular culture and hip hop, 14, 18–19, 275, 277–85
Italian identity and, 277–78, 285
resistance and, 280–81, 285
transnational sense of self, 279–80
used for education, 281–84
populism, 57, 147, 161
Portelli, Alessandro, 18, 295
exclusion of immigrants from literary sphere, 235n7
ignorance as justification for racism, 226
Italian identity expansion, 109, 229
whiteness as norm, 175–76, 224
posing. See passing and posing
postcolonialism, 3–4, 10
defined/described, 1–2, 59, 60–61, 158
in Europe, 31–32, 57–59, 68n6, 205
Italy as postcolonial country, 73, 83–85, 86–87, 205
postracialism and, 178, 222
second generation and, 276–77
postcolonial studies, 3–4, 8
France, 53–54, 56
Germany, 54–55
Gramsci’s influence, 5, 52, 73
Netherlands, 54, 55–56
postmodernism/postmodernity, 147, 155n37
Post(National) Italian Cinema (Orsitto), 202n6
postraciality, 17–18, 184–86, 221–23
defined/described, 176, 177–78
“Post-scriptum a ‘La grazia degli Eritrei’” (Pasolini), 142, 143, 144–45, 146, 154n29
poststructuralism, 53, 60
Pound, Ezra, 147, 155n34
poverty of southern Italy, 159, 160, 164–65, 165–66
Pratt, Mary Louise, 137n6
La preda (film, Paolella), 198
La presa di Macallè (Camilleri), 8
Pries, Ludger, 46
Prison Notebooks (Gramsci), 5, 152n9, 159
Projeto Imigrantes (foreign citizenship website), 75
propaganda, colonial/fascist, 4, 171n6, 207, 220n5
Black Venus in, 208
hygiene, 181
propaganda, colonial/fascist (continued)
internal migration and, 164
Italian racial purity, 176, 193, 197
legacies of, 183–84
rural, 164–65
undermining/revision of, 18, 256
"Prospettive" (Samaniego), 284
protests. See activism and social
movements
Pummarò (film, Placido), 125–26, 206,
212–14
Puwar, Nirmal, 224, 235n9
Qaddhafi, Muammar, 58
Quando gli uomini armarono la clava e
con le donne fecero din don (film,
Corbucci), 194
Quaquarelli, Lucia, 12
Quel gran pezzo dell’Ubalda tutta nuda e
tutta calda (film, Laurenti), 194
Quijano, Anibal, 86, 87
Quirico, Domenico, 113n10

La rabbia (Pasolini), 152n7
race
class and, 84, 86, 94, 130–31, 177, 180, 186
constructed nature of, 17–18, 205,
209–10
evaporation of, 221–23, 234n2
as master discourse, 60, 89, 94, 95, 189n2
postraciality, 17–18, 176, 177–78,
184–86, 221–23
race studies, 13–15
as social fiction, 221, 223, 234n1
See also blackness; intersectionality;
miscegenation/racial hybridity;
racialization; racism; whiteness
racialization, 2
as common sense, 205–6
defined/described, 93, 94
differential racialization, 226
eroticism/desire and, 207
of North Africans, 226, 227, 236n12
otherness and, 91, 185, 205, 217, 222
process/structures of, 14–15
of southern Italians, 4–5, 5–6, 14, 16,
236n12
See also race; racism
race, 16, 269–70
access to public space and, 228–29
citizenship and, 39, 41, 178, 197, 202n8,
217
colonialism and, 83–84, 87–88, 176,
222–23
as colonial legacy, 183–84, 218, 227–28
construction of racial difference and,
215
defined/described, 38–39, 94, 236n16
Dutch context, 55–56
examples of, 120, 121, 211
foreclosure of, 88–91, 93
as fundamental signifier within Italian
social space, 89, 91, 95
internalization of, 227–28
intersectionality and, 13–15, 234n3
labor and, 40–2, 42–43, 86, 211
mobility of, 38–39
postraciality and, 17–18, 176, 177–78,
184–86, 221–23
against returning Italian emigrants,
75–76
against southern Italians, 41, 84, 87, 88,
132–33, 159, 177, 226, 258
state/structural, 46, 105, 230–31, 235n3,
245, 275–76, 279–80
stereotyping/essentializing, 225–26,
236n16
violence against immigrants, 89–90, 168,
176, 186, 222, 223, 234n3
See also blackness; miscegenation/racial
hybridity; otherness and others;
race; racialization; whiteness
La ragazza dalla pelle di luna (film,
Scattini), 191, 194–96
La ragazza fuoristrada (film, Scattini), 191,
195, 196–97, 202n7
Ragazzi, Francesco, 72, 74–79
Ragazzini, Giuseppe, 74–75
Ragusa, Kym, 229
Rahola, Federico, 205–6
RAI (Radiotelevisione Italiana), 182–83
Rai Radio Tre, 229–30
La Rana (magazine), 193
Rancière, Jacques, 42–43, 45, 94
"Rapdipunt" (Farah), 279–80
realism, radical, 160–61, 162
reality, Pasolini’s concept of, 140, 142, 144,
146, 152n3, 153n12
refugees/asylum seekers, 55, 103
encounters with racism, 105
expulsion of, 107
from Italy to Egypt, 128
Libyan detention centers and, 58
receiving centers, 113n6
Index

Regina di fiori e di perle (Queen of Flower and Pearls, Ghermandi), 8, 108–9, 115

“Relazione” (Scego), 277–78

religion and music, 266–67

remittances, 120, 244

representation, 61, 126

repression, 89, 116, 119, 123n2, 124n8

La Repubblica (newspaper), 234n3

“La Resistenza negra” (Pasolini), 142, 152n7, 153n11

Rete G2 (network), 275, 277, 281–84, 289n6, 290n10, 291n23

Revisioning Italy (Allen and Russo, eds.), 11

Rhoda (Scego), 235n6

“Ricordarsi dei nostri bisnonni” (emigration song), 71

Rigo, Enrica, 44, 45

Risorgimento. See unification, Italian

Riusciranno i nostri eroi a ritrovare l’amico misteriosamente scomparso in Africa? (film, Scola), 279

Robinson, Cedric, 86

Rocco and his Brothers (film, Visconti), 5–6, 258

Roediger, David, 94–95

Rogin, Michael, 127

Roma forestiera (cultural project), 264–72

“Roma forestiera” (song, Libianchi and Granozio), 263

Romania, 31

Romania, Vincenzo, 137n4

Romanians as immigrants in Italy

folk music and, 265, 267–68, 269, 270, 274n26

populations/statistics, 28n20, 81n8

racism against, 89–90, 273n24

romanità, 256

Rome

immigrant community in, 120, 125

multicultural education in, 270–71

Piazza Argentina, 263–64

Piazza della Repubblica, 265, 267, 269

Piazzale dei Cinquecento, 255, 256

Piazzale Flaminio, 269

Piazza Vittorio, 131, 264

racist violence in, 89–90

as setting of Voto Nascosto, 104

street music history, 263

See also Rete G2 (network); Rome, migrant music in

Rome, migrant music in, 18, 263–72

in communities, 265–67

as contemporary folk music, 263–64

in homes, 264–65

hybridity of, 269–72

in streets, 265

in subways/buses/transit stations, 263, 265, 267–68, 267–69

Romeo, Caterina, 18, 295

Romolo Balzani Choir (Rome), 271

Rosarno, 90, 167–68, 222, 235n3

Rosi, Francesco, 138n17

Ross, Kristin, 177

Ross, Adolfo, 82n22

Rossini, Carlo Conti, 146

Rossini, Ilaria, 12

“Ruben” (Kuruvilla), 229

Ruberto, Laura, 82n27

ruralismo ideology, 163–64

Rushdie, Salman, 229

Russo, Mary, 11

Ryan-Scheutz, Colleen, 143–44, 154n25

Sabelli, Sonia, 69n10

Saber, Ashraf, 229

Sabir (pidgin), 135

Sagarana (literary journal), 69n10

Saibou, Aiyva, 168

Said, Edward

colonialism’s impact on writers, 10–11, 159, 163

as foundational postcolonial thinker, 51, 60, 127

French poststructuralism and, 53

French translation of, 68n4

Gramsci’s influence, 52

Orientalism, 4–5, 217

radical realism, 160–61

representation, 126

traveling theory, 54, 56, 62

Saimir (film, Munzi), 118

Salgari, Emilio, 127

Salò (film, Pasolini), 143, 146, 147, 202n6

“Salsicce” (Scego), 229, 278–79

Salt, Henry (English consul in Egypt), 129–30

Samaniego, Mike, 284

Sambadù, amore negro (Volpi), 202n8, 212
Sandretti, Simone, 244–45, 247
Sanyal, Kanyal, 85
Sapeto, Giuseppe, 146
Saraceno, Chiara, 194
Sartori, Giovanni, 90
Sartre, Jean-Paul, 33, 54, 86
Sassen, Saskia, 45, 46
Sayad, Abdelmalek, 252n17
Scalfaro, Oscar Luigi, 256
Scafoglio, Edoardo, 10
Scattini, Luigi, 191–99, 202n7
Sc ego, Igiaba, 10, 109, 228

Black Italians, 229–30

“Identità,” 229
Italians per vocazione, 275, 278, 279–81
La mia casa è dove sono, 28n12, 229
as postcolonial thinker, 60
“Relazione,” 277–78
Rhoda, 235n6
“Salsicce,” 229, 278–79
Schengen Agreement (1985), 44
Schneider, Jane, 4–5
Scola, Ettore, 279
Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio (Lakhous), 131
Scotellaro, Rocco, 167
Scrittori e popolo (Asor Rosa), 161
Scritture Migranti (literary journal), 29n23, 69n10
secessionist movements, 37
second generation, 12, 18–19, 82n27
citizenship battles, 19, 275–76, 277, 279, 283–84, 285
hybrid subjectivities of, 84–85
literature of, 103, 275, 277–81, 285
as postcolonial, 276–77
Rete G2 network, 281–84
as term, 277, 289n10
Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, 216
Sega, Maria Teresa, 220n3
Segre, Andrea, 17, 103–5, 107, 110
segregation, 47, 84, 93, 178
Senghor, Léopold Sédar, 54, 140, 152n6
Senso (film, Visconti), 257, 262n3
Sentinelle di bronzo (film, Marcellini), 143
Serao, Matilde, 10
Sergi, Giuseppe, 146
Sergio and Jeaneth (Ecuadorian singing couple in Rome), 269
sexuality, 14
black males and, 184–86, 212, 226
interracial intimacy and, 120, 121, 124n8, 154n28
intersections with race and gender, 15, 215
Pasolini and, 152n3, 153n12
power and, 147
See also Black Venus
sex work, 15, 196
in cinematic representations of African women, 208, 209
feminization of migration and, 240
sex tourism, 210
Sharpe, Jenny, 222
Shattuc, Jane, 285
Shohat, Ella, 1
Show Boat (1927 musical, Kern and Hammerstein), 126
Sibhatu, Ribka, 236n16
Sicily
immigrant workers in, 167
Leopard and, 257–58, 259–60
as migrant destination, 110
Sicilian dialect, 132, 135
stereotypes, 133, 134, 135, 209
Siliotto, Carlo, 271
Sims, Yvonne, 195
“Sineciosi della diaspora” (Pasolini), 141
Sirotti, Andrea, 13
“Sisterhood” (Nzegwu), 228
Skin between Us, The (Ragusa), 229
slavery/slave trade
antislavery struggles, 5
Brazilian abolition and Italian emigration, 74
capitalism and, 85, 86, 99n6
parallels with contemporary migrations, 254, 257, 259, 260
politics of memory and, 95
racist consequences, 207, 222
US abolition, 168
Smith, Bob, Jr., 240
Smith, Michael P., 241–42
socialist/anarchist traditions, 16, 32
social movements. See activism and social movements
Society Must Be Defended (Foucault), 94
Sollors, Werner, 270
“Solo fumo” (Neffa), 281

Copyrighted material – 978-1-137-28415-6
Soltanto il mare (film, Yimer, Cederna, and Barraco), 226, 236n12
Somalia, 1, 6–7, 27n4, 28nn13–14, 34
Somali immigrants in Italy
- cinematic representations, 120–22, 208, 215
- disappointments of, 105
- music/poetry of, 265, 271–72
- relative lack of, 6, 29n20, 73, 81n8
Sòrgoni, Barbara, 192, 197, 220n4
Sossi, Federica, 45
Sotto la croce del sud (film, Brignone), 193, 202n8
South Asian Subaltern Studies Collective, 52
southern Italy and southern Italians, 2, 9
- as backward, 161–63, 171n10
- conditions for today’s migrant peasants, 167–68
- Fascist rural policies and, 163–66, 180–81
- as internal colony, 84, 158–59
- migration to Tunisia, 125
- Pasolini’s Pan-South and, 139, 145
- racialization, 4–5, 5–6, 14, 16, 236n12
- racism against, 41, 84, 87–88, 132–33, 159, 177, 226, 258
- southern Italian identity, 134
- southern magic, 154n29, 162
- subalternity, 4, 5, 17, 27n6, 141–42, 164–65, 226
- waves of global migrations across, 157
See also emigrants and emigration; internal migrations; unification, Italian
Souza, Diamante, 265
sovereignty, 38, 39, 41, 44, 85
space, 3–4
- black bodies and, 224
- center/periphery dichotomy, 227
- defined/described, 39–40, 45
- diversification of, 231
- European, 47
- function of, 159
- Italian women’s access to, 228
- national, 119
- public, music in, 265, 266
- public monuments and, 256
- racism and, 225–26
third space, 252n17
transnational, 45–46
as white, 235n9
Spackman, Barbara, 17, 296
Spain, 31–32, 57–58
spectrality, 117, 121
Spinazzola, Vittorio, 161
Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty
- epistemic violence, 168
- foreclosure of native informant, 88–89
- as foundational postcolonial thinker, 52, 60
French reception of, 68n4
- representation, 61
- translation of, 69n9
Spotless Group (corporation), 184–86
Stan, Liviu, 268, 274n26
Steinfeld, Robert J., 40
Stora, Benjamin, 59
La straniera (Tawfik), 235n6
Straniero a chi? Tracce parole dei figli dell’immigrazione (Rete G2), 284
Straus, Roger, 162
Studi culturali (journal), 29n23
Gli studi postcoloniali (Bassi and Sirotti, eds.), 13
subalternity
- binaries of, 14–15
- in definition of postcolonialism, 59
- foundational theories of, 52
- of Italian Americans, 3–4
- Pasolini and, 139, 141–42, 144–47, 153n13
- social activism and, 77
- of southern Italians, 4, 5, 17, 27n6, 141–42, 164–65, 226
success, migrant narratives of, 71, 246
- critique/deconstruction of, 74, 76, 77, 245
- nostalgia and, 107
Sud side stori (film, Torre), 206, 207, 209
Sultana, Sushmita, 271, 274n29
Sundaram, Ravi, 242
Suriname (Caribbean), 6, 55
survivor narratives, 104–5, 109–10, 257, 259–60
syncretism, 285
- cultural, 267, 281
- linguistic, 272
- in migrant music, 269, 270
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Page(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tabet, Paola</td>
<td>29n30, 183</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tagore, Ranbindranath</td>
<td>271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tah, Touzahouin Anatole</td>
<td>264–65, 271, 273n21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>talking back</td>
<td>61, 77, 253–54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Tammurriata nera” (song)</td>
<td>201n2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tanase, Maria</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tanning</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taraf della Metropolitana (music group)</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taraf della Transilvania (music group)</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tawfik, Younis</td>
<td>235n6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>television broadcasting</td>
<td>182–83, 195, 240, 278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tempo di uccidere</em> (film, Montaldo)</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tempo di uccidere</em> (Flaiano)</td>
<td>140, 143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>temporality, postcolonial</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>backwardness</td>
<td>162–63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nonlinearity in film narrative</td>
<td>118–20, 121–22, 257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resurfacing of past</td>
<td>117, 222</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tesoro mio</em> (film, Paradisi)</td>
<td>203n11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Teste rasate</em> (film, Fragasso)</td>
<td>206, 207, 208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>testimony, migrant</td>
<td>17, 104–5, 107, 109–10, 113n12, 259</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thompson, Edward P.</td>
<td>153n13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tìmìra. Romanzo Meticcio</em> (Wu Ming 2)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todorova, Maria</td>
<td>68n6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Togliatti, Palmiro</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomaselso, Giovanna</td>
<td>29n22, 171n6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torre, Roberta</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Touadi, Jean Leonard</td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Traiettorie di sguardi</em> (Makaping)</td>
<td>227–28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transnationalism</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blackness and</td>
<td>279, 281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European citizenship and</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>expanding interest in</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Italian identity</td>
<td>17, 72–73, 177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in nation-state formation</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Nigerian filmmaking</td>
<td>241–42, 246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pan-Africanism</td>
<td>140, 141, 256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pasolini’s Pan-South</td>
<td>139, 140–42, 152n6–7, 153n12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>See also</strong> capitalism; diaspora;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>globalization; hybridity; mobility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transsexual immigrants</td>
<td>82n24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>traveling theory</td>
<td>54, 56, 62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treglia, Erasmo</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trento, Giovanna</td>
<td>17, 82n16, 141, 296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treviso, 74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trieste, 273n8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tripoli, 181</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Triulzi, Alessandro</td>
<td>69n10, 296</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colonial past</td>
<td>8, 16–17, 123n2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethiopia-Eritrea relations</td>
<td>256–57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>True North</em> (film, Julien)</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Truman Show, The</em> (film, Weir)</td>
<td>135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tsianos, Vassilis</td>
<td>44–45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tuberculosis</td>
<td>179, 180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisia, 4, 27n4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunisians as immigrants</td>
<td>6, 29n20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turin, 227, 241, 244, 258</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turkish Steps (Sicily)</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ukrainian immigrants to Italy</td>
<td>28n20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Umano normale” (Zanko)</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ungaretti, Giuseppe</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unhomely, the</td>
<td>17, 119, 122</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unification, Italian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as anticolonial struggle</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colonization and</td>
<td>3, 72–73, 87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lateness of</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>revisionist histories</td>
<td>257–58, 262n3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>southern Italy and</td>
<td>4, 84, 125, 141, 159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniliver (corporation)</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom. See Britain</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>advertising in</td>
<td>182</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black masculinity in</td>
<td>184, 186, 212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blaxploitation in</td>
<td>192, 195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>border closure</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>distribution of Nigerian video in</td>
<td>241</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian American studies</td>
<td>3–4, 29n24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian emigration to</td>
<td>3–4, 14, 41, 81n12, 117, 163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy’s cultural relationship</td>
<td>197</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>labor law</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama’s election</td>
<td>175, 198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>postraciality of</td>
<td>177–78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>problematic translation of racial terms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>from American context to Italian context</td>
<td>235n5, 236n17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>race studies, 13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>racialization of Italian migrants</td>
<td>14, 41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>racism in labor market</td>
<td>41, 94–95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second generation (as term)</td>
<td>289n10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transnational racial influence</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unilateralism</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whiteness studies in</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UN Refugee Agency</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urlazanu, Jani, 265, 268, 269</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>L’uva puttanella</em> (Scotellaro), 167</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Uwado</em> (film, Omoigui and Sandretti), 245</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Vagabondo” (Di Bari), 263, 269, 270</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veneto, 71, 74, 76, 81n3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verdicchio, Pasquale, 4, 27n6, 159</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verona, 74</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viaggio e missione cattolica tra i Mensa i Bogos e gli Habab (Sapeto), 146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viaggio in Africa (Manganelli), 155n32</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viarengo, Maria Abbebù, 227</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>violence against immigrants, 89–90, 168, 176, 186, 222, 223, 234n3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visconti, Luchino, 5–6, 257–58, 259, 260, 262n3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viscusi, Robert, 3–4, 81n12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visual and Other Pleasures (Mulvey), 202n5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vite, 229</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volpi, Maria (Mura), 202n8, 213</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wabara, Abiola, 222, 235n3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walters, William, 44</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>We Are Not Slaves</em> (film, Omoigui and Sandretti), 244</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wekker, Gloria, 57, 68n7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Western Union: Small Boats</em> (Julien), 257–60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whiteness, 14, 17–18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in advertising, 182–86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>comic books and, 190n7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>complexity of, 223</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>construction of colonial memory and, 118</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desirability of, 229</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eugenics and, 179–82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feminism and white privilege, 228, 230–31</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hegemony of, 178</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>immigration policy and, 46–47</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian identity and, 176–77, 180–81, 185, 192, 193, 197, 199, 224</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of literary space, 224–25, 231</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as normative, 175–76, 209–10, 224, 235n9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as Other, 146</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>passing and, 126–27, 227</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>translation to Italian context, 235n5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Williams, Linda, 126–27, 131, 132</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>women, African/black</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>agency of, 144, 195, 208, 278</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>black femininity, 18, 191, 193, 195, 197, 198–99, 208</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>eugenics and, 181–82</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in interracial relationships, 117–18, 191, 194, 196–98, 207–12, 229</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>material conditions of, 280</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>occupation of space and, 224</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>photography of colonial, 194–95, 208</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sex work and, 208, 209, 210, 240</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stereotypes of native women, 107</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as symbols of colonized Africa, 123n3, 193, 207, 220n3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See also Black Venus; domestic service women, Italian/white</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in interracial relationships, 184–85, 201n2, 202n9, 212–15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>southern, representations of, 162</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as targets of advertising, 184–86</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as targets of eugenics propaganda, 179–82, 193</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See also whiteness</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>work/labor, 41–42, 220n2, 265, 268, 269</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>See also domestic service; labor market; sex work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing back, 56, 60</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wuchale, Treaty of (1889), 254–55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu Ming, 112n1, 290n15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wu Ming 2, 9</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wyke, Maria, 255–56</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>xenophobia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as colonial legacy, 14, 57</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>intersections with racism, 269–70</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>as normal, 13, 90–91</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>against returning Italian emigrants, 77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yando, Letizia, 270</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yegenoglu, Meyda, 55</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yimer, Dagmawi, 246</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>CARA Italia</em>, 113nn6–7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Come un uomo sulla terra</em>, 17, 103–5, 107, 110</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Soltanto il mare</em>, 226, 236n12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Young, Robert J. C., 296</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>colonial desire, 207</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian postcolonial studies, 16, 31–34,</td>
<td>Zaccheo, Felice, 271</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73, 79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>publication of, 69n9</td>
<td>Zaimoglu, Feridun, 55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yusuf, Geedi Kuule, 265, 271–72</td>
<td>Zanko, 284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zaccaria, Paola, 69n9</td>
<td>Zaprunder (journal), 29n23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zeleza, Paul, 251n7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Zulian, Sergio, 77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>