Image, Archive, and Erasure: Visual Strategies of Italian Identity from Fascism to the Present.

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Introduction:

This thesis explores how photographic images have played a fundamental role in the construction of national identities, and how their presence, or absence, within archives continues to shape historical narratives and collective memory. Across modern history, images have not merely illustrated the nation.
They have actively produced it, offering visual blueprints for collective belonging and exclusion. The power of visual media lies in its ability to shape popular perception, particularly among those unaware of its ideological architecture, who absorb and passivly accept such representations as truthful. Authoritarian regimes, and especially the dictators of the twentieth century, were acutely aware of this potential. In their hands, images became instruments of persuasion, tools for manufacturing consensus, consolidating power, and delineating who belongs and who does not.
The case of Italy, which forms the focus of this thesis, is particularly revealing. Unified only in the late nineteenth century, Italy struggled to forge a cohesive national identity and long perceived itself as occupying a marginal position within Europe. The aspiration to elevate its international status competing with colonial powers such as Britain and France fuelled both internal efforts to define "Italian-ness" and external ambitions to acquire overseas territories. These dynamics were not born under fascism, but rooted in an earlier colonial imaginary: the first invasion of Ethiopia occurred in 1895 under a socialist government, decades before Mussolini's rise to power. At the same time, Cesare Lombroso's pseudo-scientific theories racialised southern Italians, establishing a visual taxonomy of criminality and degeneracy that anticipated the fascist regime's own strategies of exclusion. As David Forgacs has argued, Italy's "margins", whether geographical, racial, or cultural, were never outside its identity but constitutive of it.[1]
The aim of this thesis, which constitutes a point of departure in my own visual research, is to demonstrate how such images were never innocent or incidental, but deeply entangled in the project of modern nation-building. More specifically, it argues that "the margins" are not external to national identity, but are socially constructed through these very visual practices. Similarly, the notion of a monolithic Italian identity is revealed not as a natural inheritance, but as a strategic cultural fabrication. At the heart of this project lies a refusal, both personal and political, to treat fascism as an isolated parenthesis in Italian history. Fascism is often framed as a regrettable yet exceptional episode, conjured in public discourse only to justify moments of national darkness. But such minimisation is itself part of the problem.
Fascism did not erupt from a void, nor was Mussolini a messianic figure cast into Italy from elsewhere. He was a product of his time, shaped by the intellectual and political currents of late nineteenth-century Europe, and by the imperial logic embraced by the major colonial powers. This thesis also seeks to show how many of the visual codes, symbolic hierarchies, and exclusionary mechanisms developed under fascism did not disappear with its fall, but were

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1 David Forgacs, *Margini d'Italia: l'esclusione sociale dall'Unità a oggi* (Rome: Laterza, 2021).

instead absorbed into the visual fabric of post-fascist Italy, where they continue to circulate, often in repressed or unacknowledged forms, confirming my conviction that fascism, contrary to what many politicians claim, did not end as a political movement in 1945. While it may have collapsed institutionally with Mussolini's fall, its cultural logic persisted. Fascism should be understood not merely as a political episode, but as a deeply rooted cultural formation. Today, its ideology appears to be undergoing a disturbing revival - a new kind of *"Rinascimento"*- within broader currents of the Western world.

The verb *to tale* denotes the act of skillfully assembling disparate elements into a coherent whole. Much like a dovetail joint, two interlocking pieces of wood that resist being pulled apart in all but one direction, history, too, is composed of segments that, when joined, form a seemingly stable structure. And yet, these joints are neither fixed nor immutable: they represent an ongoing, multidirectional process of construction and deconstruction. What we call "history" is not a monolith but a composite of intersecting narratives, constantly reshaped by the fragments available within the archive. These fragments, however, are often incomplete, misclassified, or strategically omitted. The archive, rather than a neutral repository, becomes a site where dominant powers construct images of the past out of partial, often hegemonic, materials.
As Achille Mbembe argues, the archive is not simply a collection of documents; it is "a system of procedures for the collection, classification, and conservation of traces" that simultaneously enables and restricts historical visibility.[2] To be absent from the archive is not merely to be forgotten but to be actively excluded from the construction of collective memory. This exclusion is particularly acute when the body in question resists the dominant definitions of nationhood, identity, and belonging.
The encounter that set this research was a meeting in Rome with Davide Valeri, the son of sociologist and anti-racist activist Mauro Valeri. I had reached out to Davide while working on my photographic project *Romanzo Meticcio*, hoping to invite him to contribute a written reflection. What emerged was a profound conversation about continuity and legacy, about what it means to carry forward the commitment of a parent whose work has been dedicated to uncovering forgotten stories at the margins of national narratives. Davide expressed a desire to build his contribution on his father's research into the life of Leone Jacovacci, the Italian-Congolese boxer who rose to fame in the 1920s and then disappeared from public memory. As we talked, he offered to share with me his father's private archive donated by Leone Jacovacci himself.
Leone Jacovacci's archive was fragile, disordered, even precarious. Loose photographs, faded newspaper clippings, and brittle caricatures gathered not by an institution, but by the subject himself. Its disorder, however, belied a deeper

coherence: a visual and textual counter-narrative to the state's official record. Among the materials was a hand-written register of matches, an inventory of triumphs largely unacknowledged by the media of his time. Notably absent, however, was any image of his 1928 victory over Mario Bosisio, an opponent openly supported by the Fascist regime. Whether this absence was due to suppression, destruction, or the gatekeeping practices of institutional archives like the Istituto Luce, it functions today as a powerful void. The missing image haunts the archive, embodying what Ariella Azoulay has described as the "potential history" of photography: not what *is* documented, but what could have been and what must now be reconstructed through the labor of the imagination.[3] The visual and discursive silencing of Jacovacci mirrors a broader strategy of exclusion fundamental to the formation of the Italian nation-state. From its unification in 1861, Italy has sought to produce a homogenous visual identity one that idealized whiteness, Catholicism, and a distinctly northern, masculine aesthetic of strength and sacrifice. Figures like Jacovacci, born of a Congolese mother and an Italian father, disrupted this imagined coherence. His success in the ring contradicted the fascist ideal of the Italian athlete and presented a symbolic threat: a Black man as a national champion. The regime's visuals crafted through cinema, photojournalism, and state-controlled archives- could not accommodate such a figure. Thus, his image was omitted, distorted, or caricatured.

As George Didi-Huberman argues, "to be seen is to exist in history".[4]

What I encountered in that personal archive was not just a historical footnote, but a rupture: an image of Italy that had been systematically suppressed. Jacovacci's self-preservation translated into his impulse to document his own legacy. It was both radical and necessary. He understood, perhaps instinctively, that in a system designed to exclude him, only self-representation could preserve his presence. This aligns with what Derrida calls the act of "consignation": the archive's function to unify, classify, and authorize knowledge.[5] Yet Jacovacci's archive resists this function. It does not aspire to the schemes of the state archive but, on the other hand, it exists within intimacy and contradiction. It is an archive that lives in fragments, whose value lies not in coherence but in its rupture from dominant history.
In this light, Jacovacci is not a missing figure in Italian history; he is actually a voice through which to interrogate how images, archives, and their omissions produce the very idea of Italian identity.

2 Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Cape Town: David Philip, 2002), 20.

3 Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 30–33.
4 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Images in Spite of All: Four Photographs from Auschwitz* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 38.
5 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 10.

The implications of Jacovacci's erasure from national memory resonate beyond the personal archive. It raises broader epistemological questions: What constitutes an archive? Who is entitled to be included within it? What narratives are legitimized, and which are excised? These are foundational inquiries into the structure of power, identity, and exclusion. Achille Mbembe argues that "the archive is fundamentally a matter of power," a technology through which authority delineates what counts as knowledge, and by extension, what constitutes the nation.[6] His reflections point toward the archive not only as a repository but as a spatial and symbolic architecture domiciled, policed, and hierarchical.[7] In this light, the archive becomes not just a place of storage, but a site of struggle.

My research interrogates the visual formation of Italian identity from the Risorgimento through post-fascist Italy. In doing so, it also follows Edward Said's call for a contrapuntal reading of history: an approach that resists singular, harmonious narratives in favor of "an eternal ensemble of historical processes" shaped by imperial violence and cultural exclusion.[8] The contrapuntal makes visible the marginalized histories that exist alongside dominant representations, without being fully absorbed into them. Within the Italian context, this means recognizing how colonial legacies, racial hierarchies, and regional disparities were masked under the ideological project of national unification and how the visual regime was instrumental in sustaining that illusion. In this thesis, I suggest that to understand modern Italian identity, and its exclusions, we must attend not only to what is seen, but to what is omitted.
The archive, as Mbembe reminds us, is equally constituted by presence and absence. The photographic record, especially under fascism, operated as both document and illusion, a mechanism for shaping what Ariella Azoulay has called the "regime of the visible."[9] Her notion of "potential history" invites us to reconsider photographs not simply as illustrations of the past but as sites where history could have taken a different course. What if Jacovacci's victory had been publicly recognized? What if images of Black Italians had been incorporated into the national imaginary, rather than sidelined or exoticized?
George Padmore's concept of "colonial fascism" further sharpens this line of inquiry. Writing in the mid-20th century, Padmore exposed the continuity between the governance of overseas colonies and the authoritarian regimes that later emerged in Europe.[10] For Padmore, fascism was not an aberration but an intensification of imperial logic, now turned inward.

This observation is crucial when considering Italy, a nation that developed its colonial ambitions alongside its fascist project.
The exclusion of figures like Jacovacci was not merely racial; it was a necessary component of maintaining a mythologized national purity rooted in imperialist and capitalist expansion.
Methodologically, this research draws on visual analysis, archival research, and critical theory. It engages both state archives, as Istituto Luce, and private archives, like Jacovacci's, to trace the construction of national imagery.
The chapters that follow are structured to explore this question across historical and thematic lines. Chapter I lays the theoretical groundwork by exploring how archives and images operate as instruments of power. Chapter II examines how Italian identity was visually constructed in the post-unification period. Chapter III focuses on the fascist period, analyzing how Mussolini's regime deployed images to create a spectacle of strength and coherence. Chapter IV brings the archive into focus by combining a detailed case study of Leone Jacovacci with an analysis of contemporary counter-archives and artistic practices that challenge and reframe dominant narratives. In the conclusion, I consider what these exclusions reveal about the endurance of racialized power structures in Italy today and how image-making, then and now, is never neutral.

6 Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," 22.
7 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 2–3.
8 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993), 59–61.
9 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 11.
10 George Padmore, *Pan-Africanism or Communism?* (London: Dennis Dobson, 1956), 122–124.

CHAPTER 1:
Images, Archives, and Power.

The term "archive" refers not only to the physical site of state power, often a building or institutional body charged with the safekeeping of official documents, but also to a collection of records that claims to preserve memory and truth. Yet archives, far from being neutral or objective, are always partial, selective, and ideologically charged. They represent a system of knowledge structured through acts of classification, erasure, and institutional authority.

As Achille Mbembe writes, "The archive is not a piece of data, but a status," meaning it operates not simply as a repository of facts, but as a terrain where authority over meaning is exercised and contested.[11]

This chapter investigates the archive not as a neutral vessel for memory, but as a technology of power that constructs historical truth through omission, classification, and exclusion. Archives are never complete; they are always partial, situated, and ideologically loaded.

They are built not to tell all stories, but to sustain certain narratives at the expense of others. This partiality - what Jacques Derrida terms archontic violence - is precisely what renders the archive both a site of state legitimation and a potential space for radical contestation.[12] As Derrida emphasizes in *Archive Fever*, the act of consignation, the process of gathering, classifying, and institutionalizing records, is inseparable from the authority to decide what counts as history.[13]

This is particularly evident in the case of the Archivio Luce, one of the most significant visual repositories of twentieth-century Italy. Founded in 1924 under Mussolini's fascist regime, the Istituto Luce (*L'Unione Cinematografica Educativa*) was conceived as a powerful instrument of mass education and propaganda. As Mussolini famously declared, "Cinema is the most powerful weapon" for shaping public opinion.[14]

The regime quickly understood that in a largely illiterate country, where over 60% of the population could not yet read or write, images had the power not just to inform but to construct the very idea of the nation.

The visual materials produced and disseminated by Luce (cine-*giornali*, newsreels, illustrated magazines, school films) were not simply mirrors of Italian society but active agents in the fabrication of a unified, modern Italian identity. However, the regime's representational strategy was not limited to showing what Italians were; just as crucial was showing what they were not. The "other", whether portrayed as primitive, deviant, inferior, or dangerous, became an essential foil for the projection of a national self.[15]

11 Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 19.
12 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 2.
13 Ibid., 3–4.
14 Benito Mussolini quoted in David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era: Cultural Industries, Politics and the Public*, Manchester University Press, 1990, 53.
15 Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922–1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), esp. Chapter 3.

This binary logic allowed the regime to fill the gaps of a fragmented and regionally diverse nation by constructing identity through contrast, illusion, and exclusion. As such, the Istituto Luce functioned as both an archive of presence and an archive of absence: what it included was as politically charged as what it excluded.

Today, the Archivio Luce stands as a vital cultural institution, offering glimpses into the visual history of the Italian *Novecento*. But it remains a curated, partial archive. Not all its contents are publicly accessible; many documents are either unavailable, restricted, or behind licensing fees.

The case of Leone Jacovacci is telling although he was the first Italian and European boxing champion in two weight classes, only five videos and twenty-seven images of him are available in the Luce archive, far fewer than in his own personal archive.[16] None of these archival materials offers a celebratory portrayal of his victories. Instead, he is depicted as physically strong but intellectually lacking. A wild, instinctive athlete rather than a skilled or strategic boxer. The absence of a triumphant image of Jacovacci, particularly the image of his 1928 victory over Mario Bosisio, is as historically meaningful as any photograph that survives. It is a conspicuous silence and a reminder of how archives not only preserve but erase.

In doing so, archives do not merely preserve; they *produce* history. They fabricate the illusion of completeness while masking their structural absences. It is in these absences, these silences, that counter-histories struggle to survive. Such silences are not accidental. They are the product of deliberate exclusions, omissions, and misclassifications. The logic of the archive, according to Mbembe, is one of "anaesthetisation of time": a temporal freezing that allows states to repair or erase past violence through selective forgetting.[17]

The archive becomes a space of closure, of finality - a terrain where history is no longer layered and complex and rich in contradictions but stabilized into fixed meanings. As Mbembe notes, "The state has always sought to control the archive in order to produce legitimacy and eliminate dissent.[18] As mention earlier, this logic is acutely visible in the Istituto Luce, whose carefully curated historical memory still dominates the Italian imaginary.

The archive's authority over history does not only manifest through omission or selective inclusion; it also determines who is rendered visible and intelligible within the historical record, and under what terms. Achille Mbembe's concept of necropolitics is instructive in this regard as this mode of representation is itself a form of archival necropolitics. As Mbembe argues in *Necropolitics*, the state's power over life and death is not limited to physical violence. It also operates through symbolic erasure.[19]

16 Archivio Luce online catalogue, search results for "Leone Jacovacci," accessed August 2025. See: https://www.archivioluce.com
17 Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive," 22–24.
18 Ibid., 26.
19 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019), 66–68.

Extending Foucault's idea of biopolitics, which locates power in the management of life, Mbembe interrogates the sovereign's power to decide who may live and who must die. While Foucault focuses on the administration of populations, Mbembe underscores how modern states produce death-worlds zones where populations are subjected to conditions of social and political death. To deny someone visibility in the archive is to deny their historical existence, to foreclose the possibility of remembrance.

The archive thus becomes not just a repository of the past, but a tool for managing who is allowed to belong to the nation and who remains outside its narrative frame. Such mechanisms of visual exclusion are not unique to fascist Italy. They persist in contemporary media, education, and public memory.

As James Baldwin famously remarked, "History is not the past. It is the present. We carry our history with us. We are our history."[20] The selective remembering and forgetting that structured the fascist archive continue to shape Italy's racial imaginary today. The images that survive from the fascist era are not inert historical records. They are active agents in the construction of a national identity that remains deeply ambivalent about its colonial and multicultural legacies.

It is precisely against this grain that artists and thinkers have begun to reimagine the archive as a site of resistance. The project of archival critique is not to discard the archive altogether, but to reopen it, to interrogate its gaps, disfigure its authority, and reclaim its silences. In this regard, the work of Saidiya Hartman is particularly generative. In her essay *Venus in Two Acts*, Hartman introduces the method of critical fabulation, a form of speculative history that seeks to reconstruct lives effaced by archival violence.[21] Where traditional historiography falters in the face of absence, Hartman proposes a method that draws on imagination, affect, and conjecture to recover subaltern subjectivities. Her approach is not about fictionalizing the past, but about recognizing that the archive itself is already a fiction, a curated and distorted narrative shaped by power. Critical fabulation, in Hartman's terms, is a way of "telling an impossible story and speaking in the voice of the dead."[22]

This methodology resonates strongly with the case of Leone Jacovacci and my approach, whose visual erasure from Italy's official archives demands precisely this kind of speculative intervention. His image is present in the archives, but only as a caricature of physicality emphasizing brute strength while erasing intellect, discipline, and national belonging. In each instance, Jacovacci is captured as a spectacle rather than as a subject.

Such representations function not simply as misrecognition but as technologies of symbolic exclusion, encoding racial hierarchies into the national visual record. The archive thus participates in what Mbembe might call the coloniality of power, where the racialized other is visible only as a foil for the normative Italian citizen.

20 James Baldwin, "Unnameable Objects, Unspeakable Crimes," *The Progressive*, July 1980.
21 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe*, no. 26 (2008): 1–14.
22 Ibid., 11.

These counter-archives invite us to look beyond the sanctioned record and to see absences as productive ruptures. What is not there is just as significant as what is.

The absence of celebratory images of Jacovacci within this state archive is particularly striking when compared to the richness of his personal collection. The discrepancy between public erasure and private preservation exemplifies how counter-archives emerge: not as supplementary records, but as sites of resistance that challenge the authority of the official narrative. His personal archive, for example, reveals not only how he was represented but how he wished to be remembered: as a disciplined athlete, a cosmopolitan subject, and a legitimate figure within Italian sports history. This counter-archive challenges the state's erasure not through opposition alone, but by offering an alternative mode of visibility. It insists that identity is not bestowed by the state, but actively constructed, even under conditions of exclusion.

In this light, when we approach the photographic archive we must be aware that it is not simply a repository of records, but as a regime of visibility or a system that determines what can be seen, by whom, and with what implications. As Ariella Azoulay reminds us, "Photography is not merely the product of the camera but the outcome of an entire set of political relations."[23]

This insight points to a crucial paradox in the functioning of state archives and image culture more broadly. Even in erasure, power leaves its trace. Absence, when historically situated, becomes a form of presence, a symptom of exclusionary logic. What is not shown can tell us as much as what is displayed. Moreover, the proliferation of images, especially in modern mass culture, compounds this logic. As Achille Mbembe warns, the over-saturation of imagery can lead not to greater awareness but to anesthetization.[24] The image becomes banal, stripped of its political charge, incorporated into a visual regime that dulls critique and forecloses dissent. In such a context, the archive is not merely a historical curiosity but a contemporary battlefield, where access, visibility, and meaning are continually contested.

23 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), p. 23.
24 Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002), p. 25.

Chapter II:
Constructing Whiteness – Visual Practices and
the Formation of Italian Identity.

The visual construction of Italian national identity has been a fragmented and often contradictory process. From the moment of unification in the 1860s, Italy struggled with its internal divisions: cultural, linguistic, and racial. The newly formed state, composed of disparate regions with vastly different traditions, dialects, and levels of development, sought to create a coherent image of itself through cultural production. This process was never neutral. It relied heavily on the creation of visual representations that could define what was and more crucially, what was not "Italian."

Throughout this chapter, I trace how photographic and cinematic images have been employed as tools of segregation, omission, and manipulation to construct a version of Italy that aligns with a European, or better western/imperialistic ideal of whiteness. Ironicly enough, from the Risorgimento through fascism and into the post-war and contemporary era, these visual strategies functioned not only to unify, but principally to exclude.

The Risorgimento, often romanticized as a heroic and organic process of liberation, was in fact a highly orchestrated project of nation-building that leaned heavily on the symbolic power of images. Emerging photography studios and print media played a crucial role in representing the idea of a unified Italian people, even as deep regional inequalities persisted. The South, in particular, was cast as a backward and "uncivilized" territory, a space to be conquered internally. Visual representations (maps, travel photographs, caricatures) began to exoticize southern Italy in ways strikingly similar to later colonial depictions of Africa and the East. As historian John Dickie notes, the new Italian state had to invent its own "internal Orient" in order to define itself as modern and European.[25] At the core of this internal othering stood Cesare Lombroso, whose work laid the ideological and visual foundations for modern scientific racism in Italy.

A physician and criminologist born in Verona in 1835, Lombroso is widely credited as the founder of criminal anthropology.[26] His theory of the "born criminal", a biological throwback to primitive humanity, was supported by an extensive photographic archive. Lombroso's obsessive documentation of skulls, faces, and body types aimed to create visual typologies that could distinguish the deviant from the norm. These were not merely scientific exercises: they were acts of visual violence that pathologized entire populations, especially those from southern regions such as Calabria and Sicily.

In his work, southerners were described as racially degenerate, tainted by Semitic or African heritage, and biologically predisposed to criminality and idleness.[27]

Lombroso's images functioned as a technology of state power.

Alan Sekula has described such practices as integral to the "archival logic" of the modern state, where photography operates as both a mode of classification and

25 John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860–1900* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999)
26 Mary Gibson, "Cesare Lombroso and Italian Criminology: Theory and Politics," *British Journal of Criminology* 28, no. 2 (1988): 131–143.
27 Cesare Lombroso, *L'uomo delinquente* (1876).

a form of surveillance.[28]This logic would later be absorbed and amplified by the fascist regime, but its roots lie in the post-unification efforts to civilize, monitor, and discipline the southern population. The process of national integration was, therefore, also a process of visual colonization: through photographs, drawings, and museum exhibits, the South was not only incorporated into Italy but subordinated within it.

What makes the Italian case particularly complex is that the construction of whiteness was retrospective and unstable. In the early years of unification and even during the early Fascist period, the term "white" was rarely used to describe Italian identity. When it did appear, it was often in conjunction with "Mediterranean," a category that connoted mixture rather than purity, and history rather than biology.

Mussolini himself initially used terms like "bianco-mediterraneo" to refer to Italians, betraying an underlying anxiety about racial classification. It was only with the implementation of the Racial Laws of 1938 that whiteness became a central category of national self-definition. But this whiteness was never secure. It had to be constructed through contrast, especially in relation to Africa and the colonial subject. But, before Italy could assert its whiteness abroad, it had to erase its internal differences. The South, long considered a racial problem, was gradually absorbed into the national imaginary as fully Italian, albeit only after being symbolically purified. This shift laid the groundwork for the next phase of racial projection, in which Fascist Italy would relocate the color line beyond its borders, toward Ethiopia and Eritrea. But the foundational gesture remained the same: to define the nation through a visual opposition to the "Other," whether internal or external.

From Lombroso to the Myth of the Italic Race: Visual Strategies of Racialization.

With the advent of Fascism, the processes of internal othering initiated in the post-Risorgimento period were projected outward, onto colonial subjects. The production of images shifted from defining the South as "other" to defining non-European bodies as biologically and culturally inferior, thereby reinforcing a newly unified Italian identity aligned with European whiteness. This visual shift was not merely rhetorical, it was operationalised through a complex apparatus of photographic campaigns, scientific publications, and illustrated propaganda.

A central figure in this process was Guido Landra, a biologist and anthropologist who directed the production of the *Manifesto della Razza* (1938), the document that laid the ideological foundation for Italy's racial laws.

Landra worked to provide the "scientific" basis for Fascist racism by mobilising

racial anthropology and ethnographic photography. His role was not limited to the drafting of the manifesto; he supervised the collection and classification of photographs that illustrated supposed racial hierarchies between Italians and colonial subjects. These images, often produced in Eritrea, Somalia, and Ethiopia, depicted East African individuals stripped to the waist or fully nude, posed against neutral backdrops, and measured according to "anthropometric" criteria. The aim was to visualise the distance between the Italic type and the "primitive other," and to do so under the guise of empirical science.[29]

These visual campaigns were produced in collaboration with institutions such as the Museo Coloniale di Roma and were often published in illustrated magazines like *La Difesa della Razza* (The Defence of the Race). The publication, launched by Telesio Interlandi and supported by Landra, combined pseudoscientific texts with photography, caricature, and racial diagrams. The magazine frequently juxtaposed "ideal" Italian profiles, based on Greco-Roman statuary, with decontextualized images of colonial subjects, rendering racial difference not just visible but incontestable[30]. The effect was to naturalise Fascist ideology and project a coherent, mythicised racial identity.

This new imagery functioned through repetition and contrast.

While early Fascist propaganda had relied on Mediterranean motifs and rural virility, by the late 1930s, it sought to claim an Aryan lineage for Italians.

The transition was strategic: it provided ideological alignment with Nazi Germany and justified colonial conquest through a civilising mission premised on racial superiority. In this context, images were more than illustrations. They were instruments of consent, calibrated to work on the subconscious of a population still struggling with illiteracy. Posters showed strong, clean-shaven Italian soldiers standing over kneeling or smiling colonial women and children, portraying dominance as benevolence and conquest as care.[31]

At the same time, state photographers such as Luigi Cipriani documented colonial expeditions by staging ethnographic portraits of "native" people. These images, stored in both military and civilian archives, were often devoid of names, locations, or dates, reinforcing the anonymity and fungibility of the colonised subject. The use of photography here was not merely documentary.

It was disciplinary, cataloguing bodies to reinforce hierarchies of race and civilisation.[32]

This visual regime of fascism continued a process begun by Lombroso: the use of photography to "scientifically" render difference visible and morally charged. But whereas Lombroso's typologies targeted the internal other (southerners, criminals, women), Landra and his colleagues externalised this difference, marking the colonial subject as the ultimate non-white Other.

28Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, Vol. 39 (1986): 3–64.

29 See "Guido Landra e l'antropologia fascista"

30 *La Difesa della Razza archives; see also Enzo Collotti's analysis in "Fascism and Racism"*

31 Visual analysis drawn from fascist poster collections and Archivio Luce imagery

32 Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," in *October*, no. 39 (1986): 3–64.

In doing so, they made space for Southern Italians to be retroactively included in the national project on the condition that they participate in the exclusion of others.

In this system of representation, visual propaganda became increasingly central to daily life. One of the most prolific illustrators of the period, Gino Boccasile, re-encapsulated this transformation. Initially famous for his Art Deco, inspired erotic illustrations, Boccasile was recruited by the regime to produce some of its most recognisable propaganda posters. His work for the *Ministero della Cultura Popolare* and other state bodies included depictions of idealised Aryan families, heroic Blackshirt soldiers, and grotesque caricatures of the enemy, often drawn in explicitly racialised terms.[33] In his advertisements for *La Rinascente*, Boccasile seamlessly wove racial purity into consumer imagery: white soap washing away darkness, pale-skinned children smiling against clean modernist backdrops, Black figures represented as dirty or servile.[34]

These visual tropes laid the groundwork for postwar Italian advertising, which, despite the fall of fascism, carried forward many of the same racial logics to demonstrate that the core issue was not only political, but mostly cultural. With the boom of consumer culture in the 1950s and 60s, whiteness was equated with modernity, cleanliness, and beauty. Television became the new medium through which these ideals circulated, particularly through programs like *Carosello*. The character Calimero, a small, black chick covered in dirt who laments that no one loves him "because I'm black", offers a paradigmatic example.[35] While often read as innocuous, Calimero embodies a cultural script in which blackness is associated with defectiveness, and redemption lies in becoming clean, read: white.

Calimero, perpetually dirty laments: "It's not fair, they treat me like this because I'm small and black." The solution, invariably, is to wash himself with the advertised product, most often a brand of soap or detergent, after which he emerges clean and white, finally worthy of acceptance. His eventual transformation occurs not through self-affirmation, but through exposure to branded soap, embedding the ideology of racial improvement into a logic of capitalist consumption. Such imagery, while less violent than fascist propaganda, is no less ideological. It continues to encode racial difference as a problem to be resolved through assimilation or erasure.

A particularly telling example of this continuity is found in the 1947 *La Stampa* article inspired by the popular Neapolitan song *Tammurriata Nera*.[36] The piece reflected a growing anxiety in postwar Italy about the presence of mixed-race children born to Italian women and African American soldiers, many of whom

had been stationed in southern Italy during the Allied occupation. These children, called *mulatti*, were framed not only as the product of war but as a national dilemma, evoking older fears of racial contamination. The press and cultural commentators responded with a mixture of pity, revulsion, and anthropological curiosity, rhetorics that recalled colonial discourse but now re-centered on the Italian body itself.

This tension was also dramatized in cinema. Francesco De Robertis' *Il Mulatto* (1950) told the story of a man returning from prison only to discover that he is the father of a mixed-race child, born of violence inflicted on his wife by an African-American soldier.[37] Rather than challenging racist attitudes, the film navigates the ambivalence of paternal responsibility, shame, and societal rejection, framing the Black child as a "problem" rather than a subject. Such films did not critically engage with Italy's colonial history; instead, they displaced guilt onto external forces, particularly American racial politics, positioning Italians as victims of both war and racial otherness.

In the 1970s, Italian cinema took a different turn with the emergence of erotic dramas and exploitation films that exoticized Blackness, particularly through the figure of Eritrean actress Zeudi Araya. Films such as *La ragazza dalla pelle di luna* (The Girl with the Moon Skin), *Il corpo* (The Body), and *La ragazza fuoristrada* (The Off-Road Girl) cast Araya as a sensual, untamed woman whose desirability was inseparable from her perceived racial and cultural difference.[38] These films drew directly on colonial tropes: the Black woman as primitive, hypersexual, and closer to nature, a fantasy of conquest and domination now re-scripted for the postcolonial screen. Araya's body became a site of projection for white male desire and anxiety, revealing how the colonial gaze continued to shape Italian visual culture long after the end of the Empire.

This sexualised racial imagery was not confined to the silver screen. In popular advertising, the trope of the "dark temptress" reappeared in campaigns like *Morositas*, a brand of licorice candies marketed through imagery of sultry Black women, and even in laundry detergent ads. The infamous 2006 commercial for *Coloreria Italiana* featured a white woman washing a Black man, who emerges from the machine transformed into a white one.[39] While marketed with irony, the ad reproduced deeply entrenched narratives: Blackness as a stain to be removed, whiteness as cleanliness and desirability, the washing machine as an allegory for racial purification.

Such depictions reflect not just lingering colonial residues but a structural failure to confront Italy's imperial past. As David Forgacs and others have noted, colonialism remains largely absent from Italian public memory, an absence that

33 Simonetta Falconi, *Gino Boccasile: Un artista italiano tra fascismo e modernità* (Mondadori, 2005).
34 David Forgacs, *Italy's Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation Since 1861* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 87–89.
35 Giacomo Lichtner, "Calimero and the Colour of Soap: Racial Tropes in Italian TV Advertising," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 17, no. 1 (2012): 43–62.
36 See *La Stampa*, 1947, on *Tammurriata Nera* and the social reaction to mixed-race children.

37 Francesco De Robertis, *Il Mulatto*, directed in 1950; for analysis, see Gaia Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender in Modern Italy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).
38 See Stefania Parigi, "Eroticism and Exoticism in Italian Cinema of the 1970s," *Cinema e Storia*, vol. 3 (2015).
39 Lichtner, Giacomo. "Racial Tropes in Contemporary Italian Advertising," *Journal of Italian Media Studies*, vol. 9 (2014).

reinforces the marginalization of Black and mixed-race Italians in the present.[40] Even moments that seem to mark a shift, such as the election of Denny Méndez, a Black Miss Italy in 1996, have been met with backlash and attempts to reaffirm a "purer" national identity. Méndez herself was the subject of public controversy, with judges and commentators questioning whether someone "non-bianca" could truly represent Italy. The discomfort revealed how fragile and exclusionary the imagined community of Italianness remains.

This enduring resistance to pluralism continues today. General Roberto Vannacci's recent statements lamenting the erosion of "Italian values" and implicitly attacking multiculturalism, as well as the racialised language used by conservative newspapers like *Libero*, confirm how colonial ideologies have not disappeared. What is repressed returns: in the archive, in the image, and in the nation's continuing inability to reckon with its margins.

If the fascist regime used state-sponsored media like *Istituto Luce* to construct a monolithic image of Italian identity, today the same patterns persist through commercial platforms and algorithmic distribution, cloaked in the aesthetics of irony, nostalgia, or satire.

Italian television remains a striking example of this continuity. Programs from the 1980s onward have routinely employed Blackface, exoticised stereotypes, and the racialisation of dialects and bodies to produce comic relief or cultural contrast. Variety shows like *Domenica In* and *Striscia la Notizia* regularly featured caricatured depictions of Black or immigrant characters, figures whose sole purpose was to highlight their non-Italianness and thereby reaffirm a normative whiteness.[41] These representations work not just by excluding racialised subjects from full civic visibility, but by framing their presence as anomalous, entertaining, or transgressive.

These are not isolated incidents but part of a visual regime in which whiteness continues to function as the invisible standard of national belonging.

This return of colonial tropes under the guise of humour or consumer desire is symptomatic of what Italian postcolonial theorist Cristina Lombardi-Diop calls "colonial aphasia", a condition in which the nation forgets and represses its imperial past, while simultaneously reproducing its logics.[42] The result is a profound cultural dissonance: Italy proclaims itself post-racial and colourblind, even as it continues to circulate images that racialise and exoticise the other. What is missing is not representation per se, but the conditions for a different kind of representation, one that emerges from the margins rather than reaffirms the center.

This problem is compounded by the structural absence of colonial history in

40 David Forgacs, *Italy's Margins: Social Exclusion and Nation Formation Since 1861*, especially Chapter 6.

41 Clò, Clarissa. "The Exotic and the Familiar in Italian TV: Stereotyping and Postcolonial Spectacle." *Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2012): 456–475.

42 Lombardi-Diop, Cristina, and Caterina Romeo. *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2012.

public education, museums, and media discourse. While Germany has publicly confronted its Nazi past and France has debated its colonial legacy, Italy has largely remained silent. There is no national museum of colonialism, no widely disseminated curriculum, and no mainstream platform for Multicultural-Italian voices. While the Museo Delle Civiltà in Rome, located in the EUR district, originally built under Mussolini to celebrate Fascist imperial ambitions, houses one of the most extensive ethnographic and colonial collections in the country, it has yet to fully transform into a space where critical discourse on colonialism can emerge. Despite its potential and ongoing decolonial efforts, the institution remains heavily shaped by the very structures it seeks to interrogate, constrained by bureaucratic oversight and institutional reluctance to confront Italy's colonial past head-on. The colonial archives remain scattered, underfunded, or inaccessible. And when images do surface, such as those of Leone Jacovacci, they are rarely framed within a critical historical context. Their absence or misrepresentation becomes part of the archive's power: to decide what counts as memory, and what can be safely forgotten.

Meanwhile, anti-immigration rhetoric and the militarisation of the Mediterranean frontier have produced new visual languages of exclusion. Images of boats, refugees, border patrols, and detention camps now dominate the iconography of Italy's "frontier." These images are not neutral; they evoke older colonial grammars in which Africa is seen as a source of danger, disorder, or demographic threat. Politicians like Matteo Salvini have actively exploited this visual field, using staged photographs of himself patrolling borders or inspecting migrant centres to reinforce narratives of defense and purity. In this way, contemporary political imagery echoes earlier efforts by Mussolini to visualise the boundaries of Italian identity, not through inclusion, but through fortification. The stakes of this visual continuity are not merely symbolic.

As Stuart Hall reminded us, "the spectacle is where power is exercised."[43] In Italy, the visual field remains a key site where race, citizenship, and belonging are negotiated or more often denied. And as long as the country refuses to confront the visual foundations of its national mythologies, the archive of colonial violence will continue to surface in distorted and damaging ways.

This chapter has traced a historical arc from the Risorgimento to the present, showing how images have functioned not only to represent Italian identity but mostly to produce and police its boundaries. From Lombroso's typologies to fascist propaganda, from eroticised colonial cinema to contemporary commercials, the Italian image-world remains haunted by its past. What is needed is not more visibility for marginalised figures within an unchanged frame, but a radical rethinking of the visual regime itself. Only then can the archive be dislodged from its role as gatekeeper of the nation and opened instead to its histories of contradiction, plurality, and resistance.

43 Hall, Stuart. "Encoding, Decoding." In *Culture, Media, Language*, edited by Stuart Hall et al., Routledge, 1980.
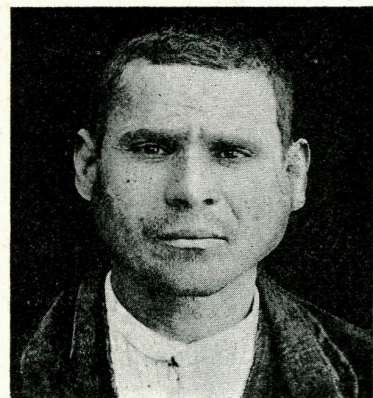
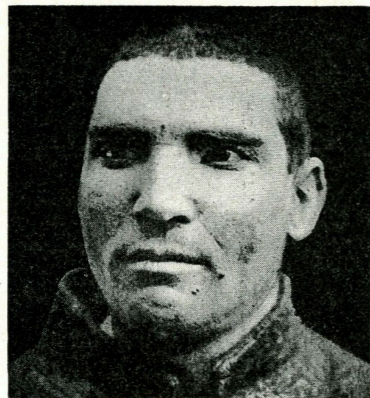Fig. 1

Fig. I3. Tipo comune - Assassino.

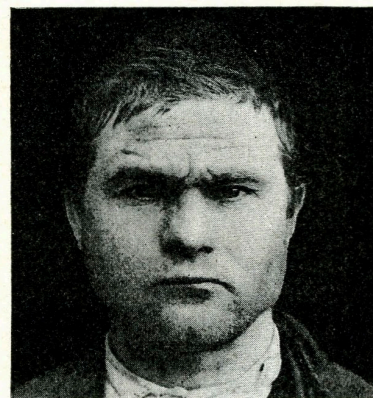Fig. I6. Tipo comune (a fronte sfuggente) - Omicida-grassatore.
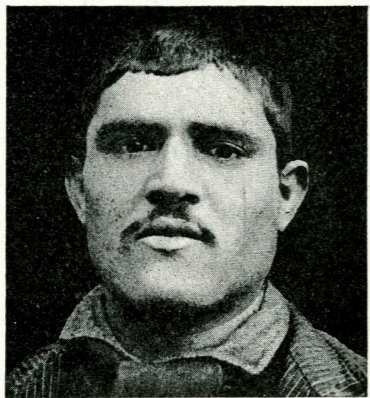
Fig. I4. Tipo comune - Omicida.

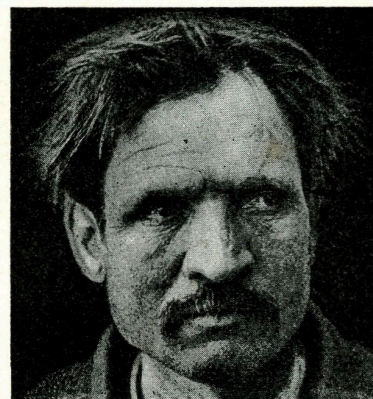Fig. I7. Tipo comune (a fronte sfuggente) - Omicida.
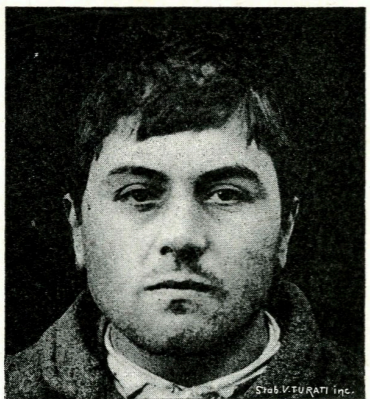
Fig. I5. Tipo comune - Feritore-ladro.

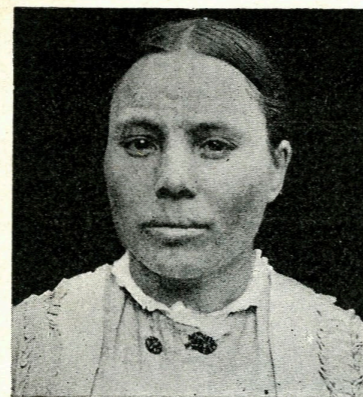Fig. I8. Tipo comune (a fronte sfuggente) - Omicida-grassatore.
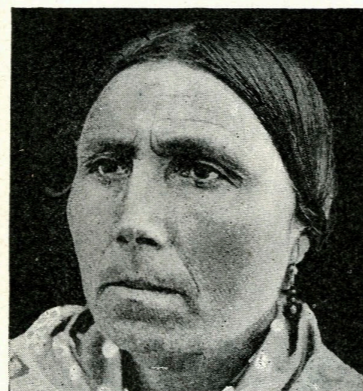
Fig. 31. Donne omicide - Omicida.

Fig. 34. Tipo infantile (comune) - Omicida (d'anni I4).

Fig. 32. Donne omicide - Parricida.
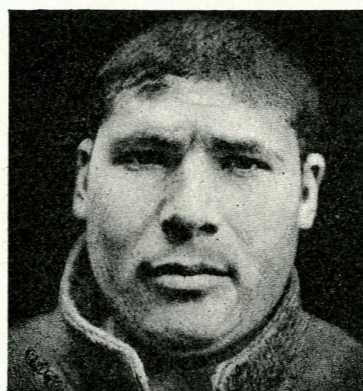
Fig. 35. Tipo infantile (imbecille) - Assassino (d'anni I8).
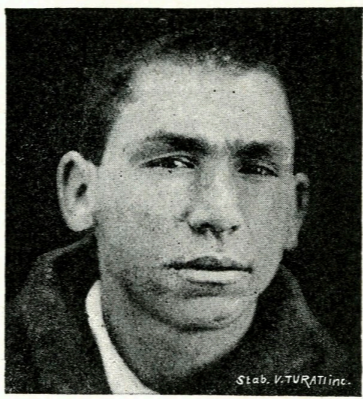
Fig. 33. Donne omicide - Conjugicida.

Fig. 36. Tipo infantile (arr. di sviluppo) - Assassino (d'anni 26).
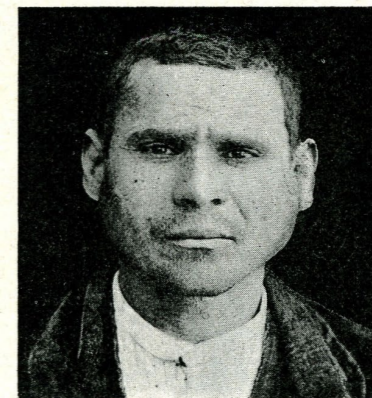
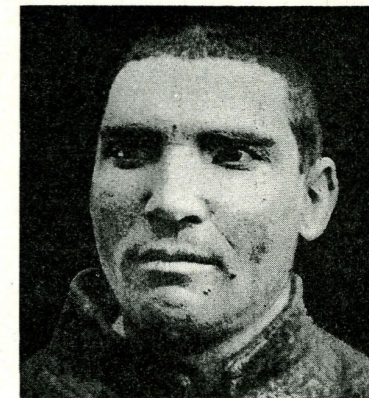Fig. I3. Tipo comune - Assassino.

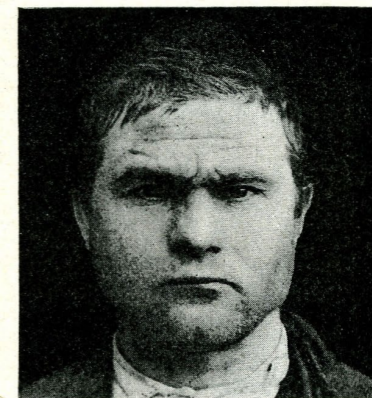Fig. I6. Tipo comune (a fronte sfuggente) - Omicida-grassatore.
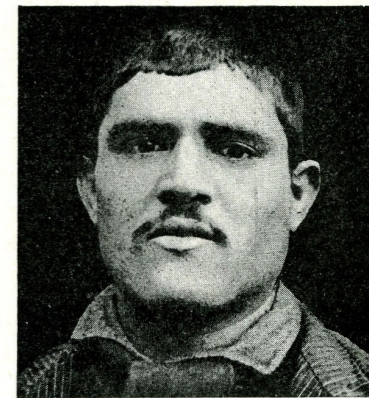
Fig. I4. Tipo comune - Omicida.

Fig. I7. Tipo comune (a fronte sfuggente) - Omicida.

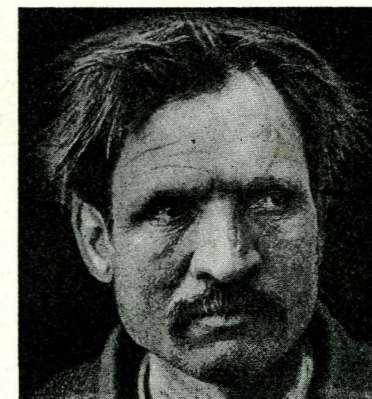Fig. I5. Tipo comune - Feritore-ladro.

Fig. I8. Tipo comune (a fronte sfuggente) - Omicida-grassatore.

Fig. 2

Fig. 2

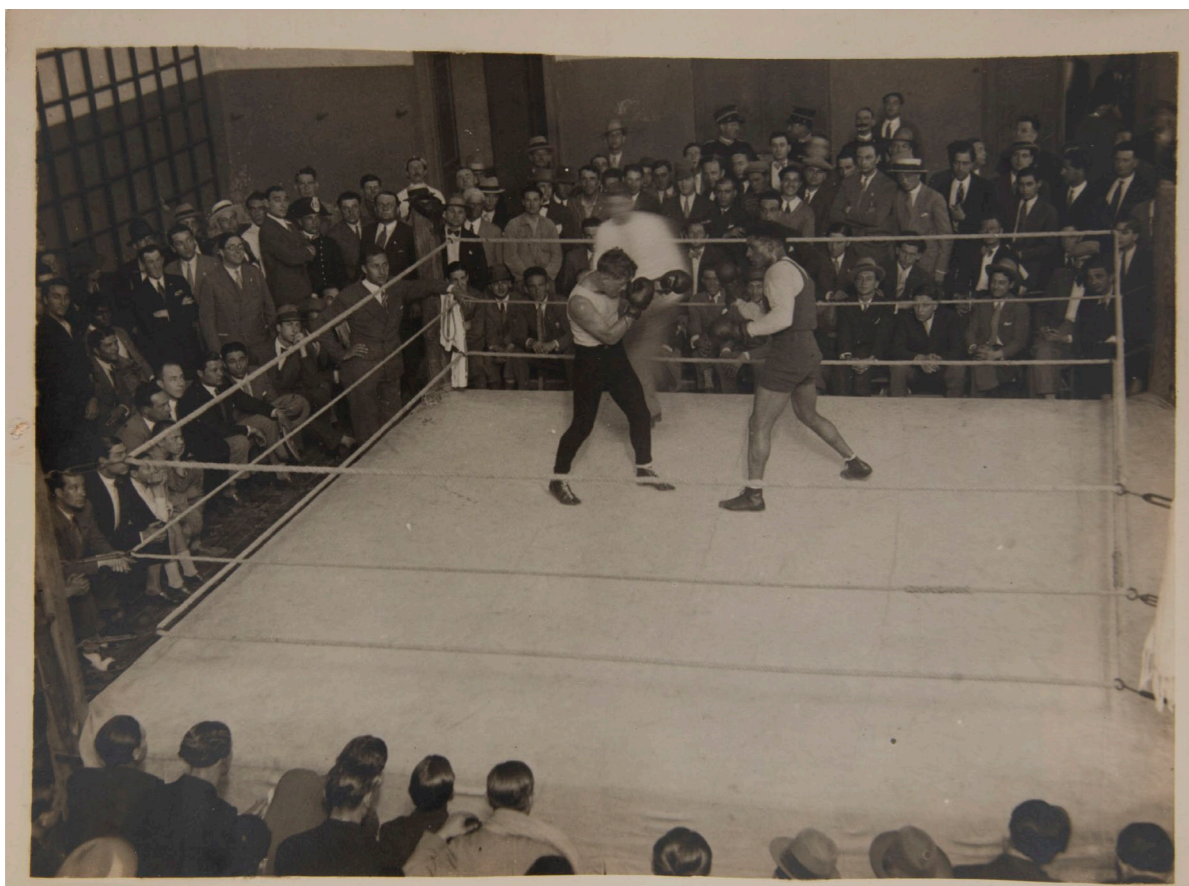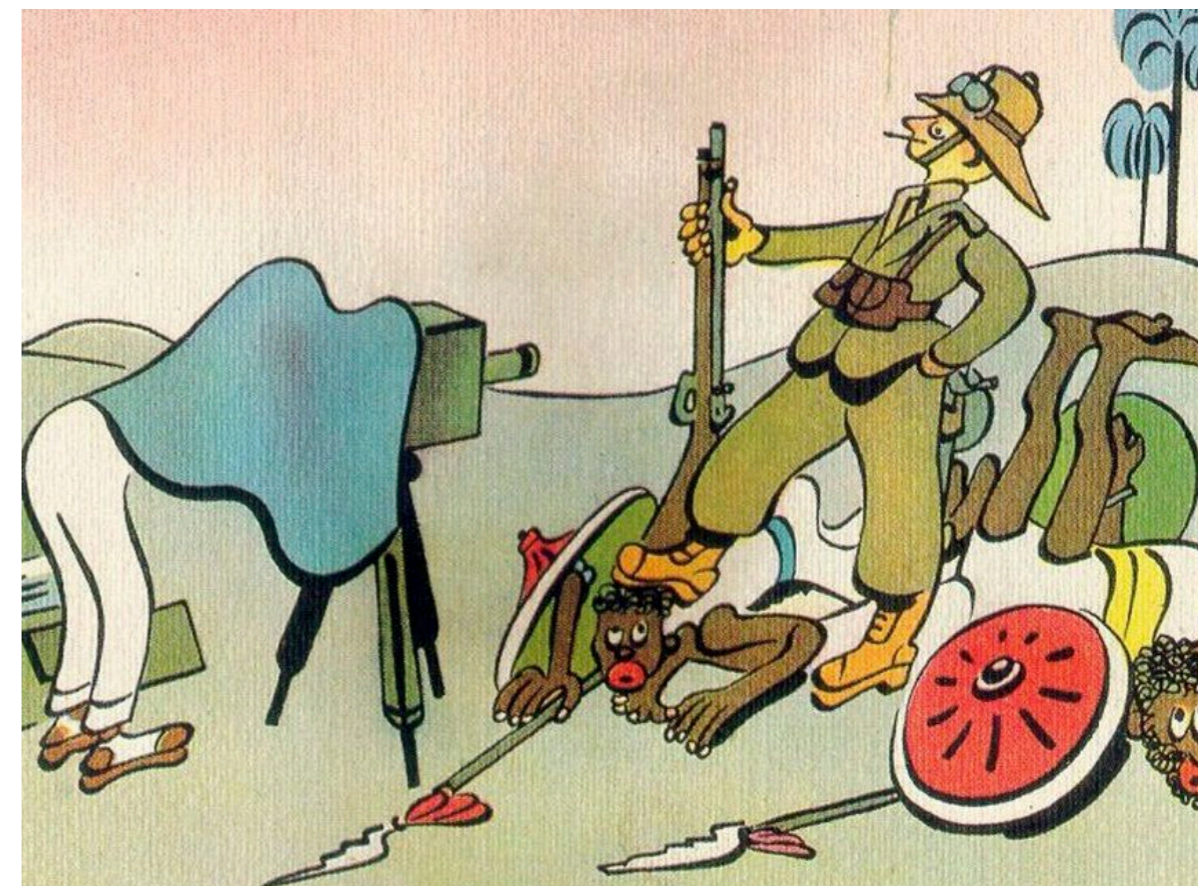Fig. 3

Fig. 4

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

Fig. 10
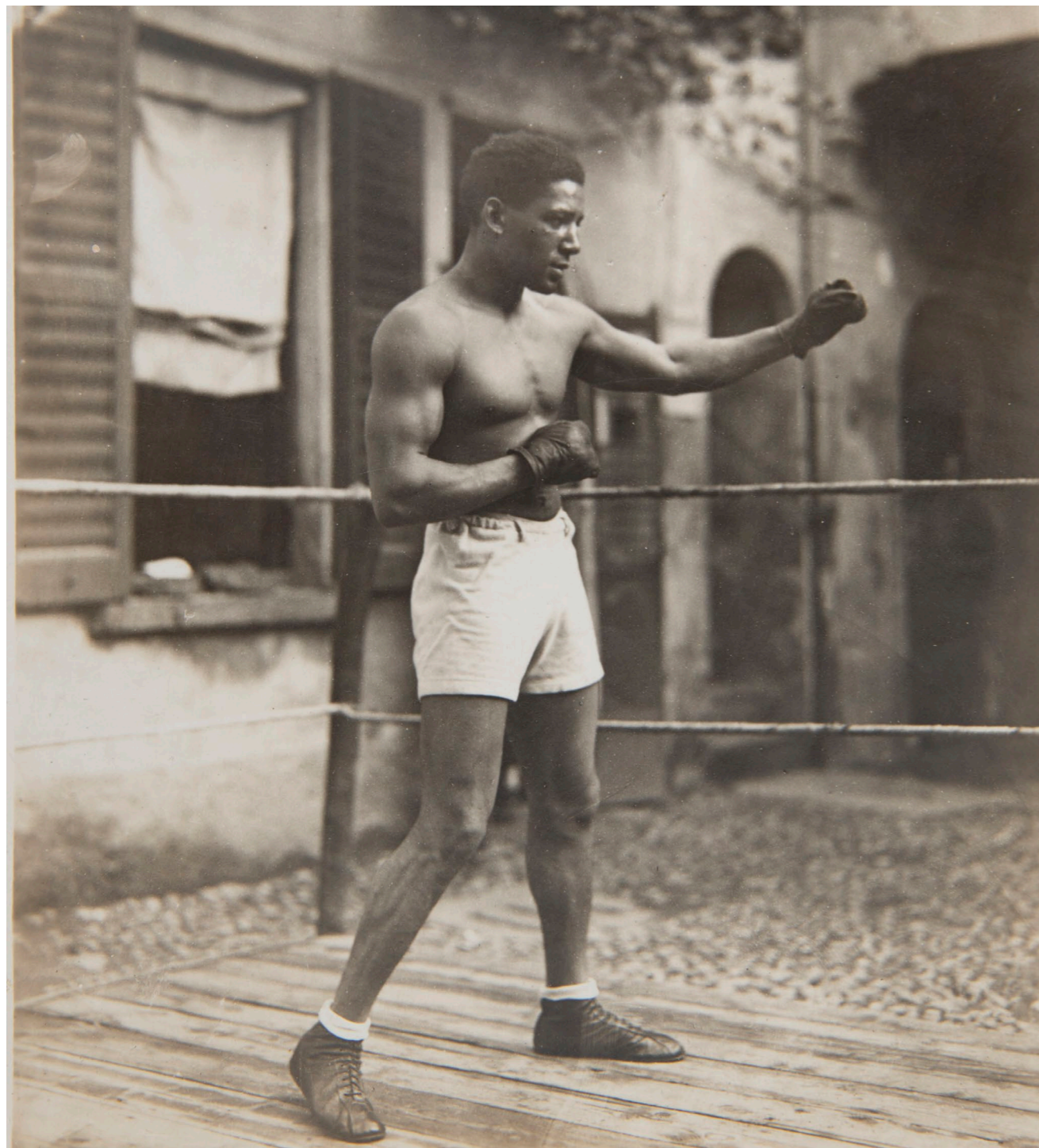
Fig. 11

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

Fig. 14

Fig. 15
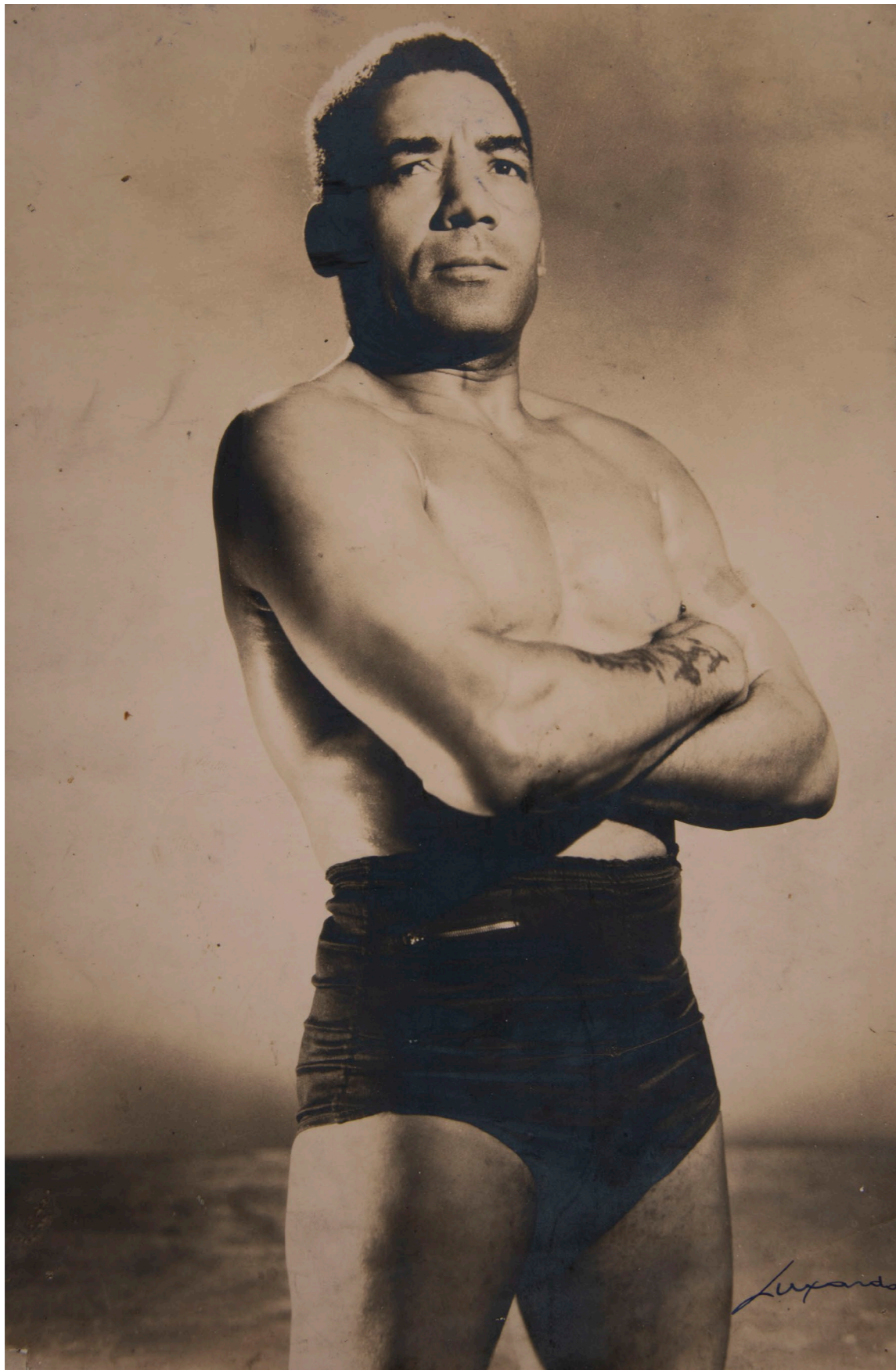
Fig. 16

1938/1945

Fig. 17

Fig. 18

Fig. 19

I BASTARDI

Pochi esempi, rigorosamente documentati, mostreranno agli italiani come i caratteri fisici degli europei vengono alterati dall'incrocio con qualsiasi altra razza. E' ancora vivo in tutti il ricordo della occupazione della Renania da parte di truppe di colore francesi. Durante la permanenza nella zona del Reno nacquero dall'unione dei soldati marocchini e annamiti con donne tedesche molti bastardi che restano a testimoniare l'onta subita dalla Germania.

La figura 1, mostra due ragazzi nati da padre marocchino e da madre tedesca. I caratteri « ariani » sono stati sommersi

da caratteri dominanti e infatti l'individuo rappresentato al numero 1 e 2, mostra nei capelli arricciati e nel naso largo e appiattito, per non parlare di altri caratteri, l'influenza « negride » mentre l'individuo indicato al numero 3-4, ha marcato sul volto il tipo « orientalide ». I marocchini, come tutti sanno non sono dei negri ma dei mediterranei africani. Appare così documentata l'opportunità stabilita nel manifesto del razzismo fascista di fare una netta distinzione fra gli europei e i mediterranei africani ed orientali!

La figura 2 ci mostra la fotografia di un ragazzo nato da padre annamita e da madre europea, si notino i numerosi caratteri « mongolidi » che presenta questo ragazzo.

La stessa figura richiama anche l'attenzione sopra un carattere particolare dei mongoli che si è riprodotto tale e quale nell'incrocio, mostra difatti la caratteristica piega della palpebra detta « piega mongolica », che nasconde dal lato mediale la caruncola dell'occhio.

Questi due soli esempi mostrano la tragica irresponsabilità della Francia che con le sue truppe di colore inquina tutte le regioni ove disgraziatamente si estende o si estese il suo potere. Si pensi che in condizioni forse peggiori della Renania è oggi la Corsica, con le sue numerose guarnigioni di truppe di colore!

Altri tipici esempi di incroci ci sono dati dalla mescolanza di cinesi con donne europee. Si calcola che in Europa vivano almeno 500 famiglie dal padre cinese e la madre europea soprattutto in Inghilterra, Francia e Germania, ma queste famiglie imbastardite non mancano neanche in Italia. Il centro di diffusione di queste famiglie sembra che sia a Parigi e Lione; a Parigi esiste anzi una scuola cinese per i bambini figli di cinesi e di europee.

Le figure 3 e 4 mostrano alcune di queste famiglie in cui il padre è cinese e la madre francese. Nessun commento è necessario per far notare le numerose influenze mongoliche nei prodotti dell'incrocio.

Gli esempi fin qui portati si riferiscono ai prodotti della mescolanza o dell'incrocio di donne europee con uomini marocchini, cinesi e annamiti, appartenenti cioè a razze che non si possono certo chiamare inferiori. Si noti poi che i prodotti dell'incrocio hanno vissuto nel favorevole ambiente europeo, eppure l'influenza dell'incrocio è stata lo stesso disastrosa. Gli ultimi esempi che portiamo, rappresentati alle figure 5 e 6, mostrano invece le tragiche conseguenze dell'incrocio in terra d'Africa con razze molto lontane dalla nostra. Si tratta dei discendenti dei coloni olandesi che, sono ormai molti anni, si unirono alle donne indigene di razza « ottentotta ».
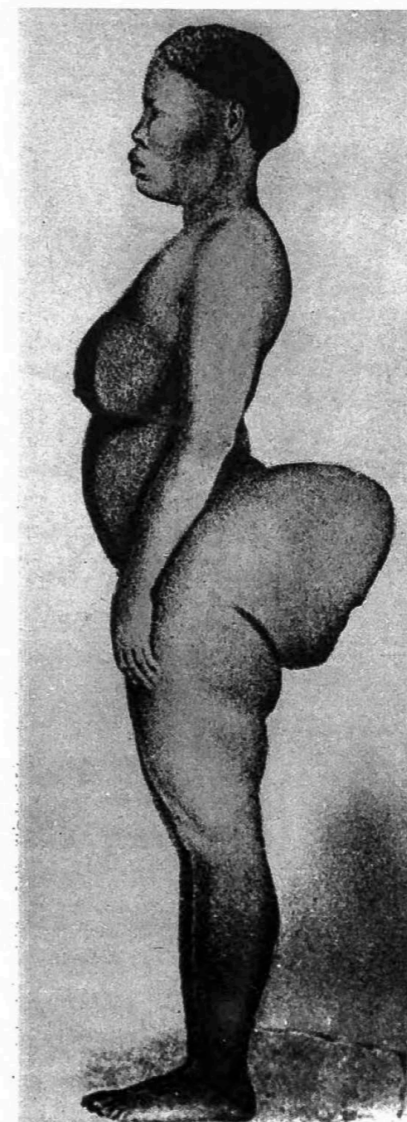
Sono questi i bastardi di Reoboth delle antiche colonie tedesche dell'Africa del sud-ovest.

Questi individui furono fotografati or sono trent'anni da Eugen Fischer, e sono stati rifotografati pochi anni fa da Lichtnecker.

Le figure riproducono quindi gli stessi individui da bambini e da adulti e si vede chiaramente come con il procedere degli anni si accentuino sempre più i caratteri della razza ottentotta.

Speriamo che questi pochi esempi invitino gli Italiani a pensare.

G. L.

Figura 1 . Ecco i frutti dell'immondo ibridismo, tanto caro ai francesi: fanciulli di padre marocchino e di madre tedesca, nati durante l'occupazione della Ruhr

Figura 2 . Un altro risultato del rovinoso antirazzismo francese: un ibrido germano-annamita

16

Dall'incrocio tra contadini olandesi fissati in Africa e membri della tribù dei Boscimani è nata la famosa "Venere ottentotta", qui fotografata. L'importanza che gli studiosi di antropologia attribuiscono a questo mostro di natura deriva dal fatto che esso rappresenta non un esempio eccezionale dei risultati a cui può condurre la pratica del meticciato, ma il campione più perfetto di un tipo umano, dotato di caratteri ereditari e quindi permanenti, che conta a centinaia i suoi esemplari. Nell'Africa del Sud, dove gli incroci tra Boeri e Boscimani si verificarono, questi esemplari formarono, nel secolo scorso, una minuscola società battezzata pomposamente dai suoi componenti col nome di "Nazione dei bastardi".

Figura 3 . Cinese il padre, francese la madre, bastardo il figlio!

Figura 4 . Una creatura dai tratti ibridi e volgari è il frutto dell'incrocio tra un cinese ed un'europea
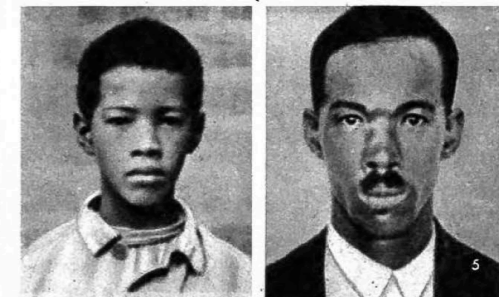

Figura 5 e 6 . Ecco — ragazzi e adulti — i bastardi di Reoboth, discendenti dei coloni olandesi e delle donne ottentotte

17

"They will not prevail"

Fig. 21

" Protect her! She could be your mother, your wife, your sister, or your daughter.

Fig. 22

Fig. 23

La Rinascente.
The white fair.

Fig. 24

60

61

...tta. E chi poteva vendicare tutte
...vittime che Pastor Milanés aveva
...sso con le braccia in croce?
...rbacco : il vendicatore c'era :
...one Jacovacci. L'uomo dal destro
...gorante; un destro che sembrò
...iantare Mario Bosisio, che co-
...nse Len Johnson al tappeto, e
...fece abbandonare il prestigioso
...os all'apogeo del suo splendore.
...acovacci-Pastor Milanés: dina-
...e contro dinamite. Chi sarebbe
...ato per aria? L'incontro si svolse
...Palazzo dello Sport ». Un gior-
...e dell'epoca, « Boxematch », così
...crive l'incontro. Attenzione: il
...ncontista è De Deo Ceccarelli,
...gli anziani del nostro sport ri-
...iano come uno dei maggiori cri-
...di pugilato di quel tempo. Cec-
...lli così intitolava il suo artico-
...« Africa parla! ». Sentite: « Ja-
...cci ha cominciato calmo, sor-
...e, permettendo al suo avversa-
...colpi di assaggio. Calma peri-
...sa per chi ha buona memoria e
...chi conosce il mulatto italiano.
...Pastor Milanés si è invece illu-
...indubbiamente mal consiglia-
...na iniziato il secondo round
...erto, troppo! Jacovacci non ha
...o: si è raccolto ed il suo destro
...rtito con lo scatto delle grandi
...ate, colpendo all'altezza del-
...chio. Il cubano è crollato, men-
... « Palazzo dello Sport » si è
...diato come un deposito di
...diato come un deposito di...

che provoca il totale sbandamento
del match. Pastor si è rialzato. Ja-

nimarlo. Rimettendosi, assume un'a-
ria feroce; stringe i pugni dentro i

E tutti si sono recat...
al match rivincita fra...
vacci e Pastor Milan...
cuore. Proibito l'ingre...
e alle persone deboli...
poteva fulminarli.

Gong! Si attende sub...
sione: niente. Termina...
presa ed i due avversar...
dati nemmeno un pugn...
vacci e Pastor si temo...
di non toccarsi. Si pen...
una ripresa. Macchè! I...
ci avversari, che nel...
tro sembravano nutriti...
ora appaiono nelle s...
due agnelli, satolli di l...

Quando Pastor accenn...
scappa Jacovacci, quan...
latto italiano che abboz...
di attacco, è il cubano...
la corda. Il pubblico...
precedente aveva perso...
la troppa emozione, ora...
dendo per la troppa n...
sbraita, incitando i due...
si battaglia. Come abbai...
na. Inconcludenti corp...
timori e paure. Si er...
così tanto i due avvers...
mo incontro, che adess...
persino l'acqua gelata....
senza il minimo briciol...
ne. Incontro nullo. E...
si è visto.

Delusione del pubblico...
inviperito. L'Africa...
macht, nel secondo si...
mata in Polo Nord...

Fig. 25

If I were white would you take me? Of course!

You're not black. You're just soiled.

Ava, how it cleans!

Fig. 26

Fig. 26

Fig. 27
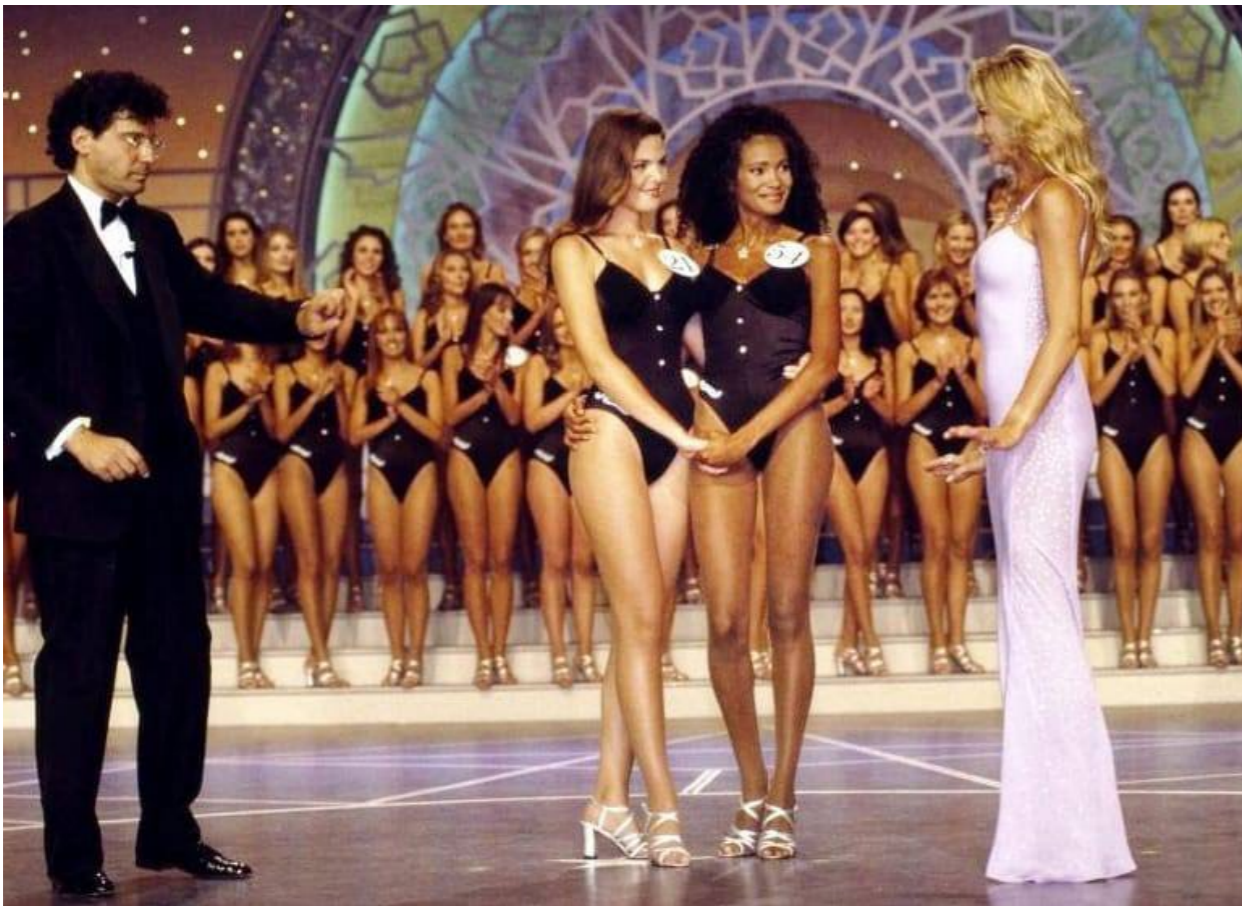
Fig. 29

Fig. 30

Claudio Lippi: *"Is everyone here normal? Oh God, I'm not sure... It looks great on you (referring to the host). On him, a bit less (pointing to a guy in the audience). But are you Italian?"*

The guy: *"Yes, but my father is Brazilian."*

Claudio Lippi: *"Ah, now I understand. But on the human side? I mean, he's a human being, not a primate?"*

Fig. 31

Fig. 31

" But you are actually handsome for your race..."

Fig. 32

82

2024

Chapter III:
The Construction of the Fascist Icon: Mussolini's Self-Representation and
the Visual Machine of Power.

In a lucid and extremely interesting reflection on the dangers of visual documentation, King Leopold II, whose atrocities in the Congo were widely exposed through photography, once reportedly lamented: "*The Kodak has been a sore calamity to us. The most powerful enemy that has confronted us, indeed.*"[44]

This statement, cited in the recent project *A Sore Calamity* by Max Pinckers and Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras, underscores how photographic evidence posed a threat to the political regime that sought to hide its violence. By contrast, Benito Mussolini embraced photography and cinema not as threats but as central instruments of rule. Rather than resisting the proliferation of images, the fascist regime engineered them, turning the visual into a strategic tool of domination. This radical embrace of the image, far from being a peripheral phenomenon, became a defining characteristic of fascist governance.

Mussolini understood that Italy, newly unified and still fragmented by strong regional identities, lacked a shared cultural imaginary. The Italian people, many of whom were illiterate and excluded from institutional narratives, had to be shown who they were, or more precisely, who they were not. The fascist regime's visual strategy revolved around the construction of this collective identity through contrast, exclusion, and symbolic projection. Central to this effort was the creation of a new political icon: the Duce himself.

Unlike previous leaders, Mussolini systematically cultivated his public image through a visual apparatus unprecedented in scope. He was the first political figure in Italy to hire an official photographic staff tasked with curating every aspect of his appearance both public and private. One of the earliest and most iconic visual tropes was the image of Mussolini on horseback. After the March on Rome in 1922, thousands of postcards were printed portraying him as a heroic equestrian leader, a posture that invoked both Renaissance statuary and the imperial grandeur of Rome. This image, reproduced endlessly, aligned Mussolini with figures of noble power, martial virtue, and classical authority.[45] The symbolism was clear: strength, leadership, virility, and continuity with a mythical past.

Alessandra Antola Swan notes that during Mussolini's public speeches, photographers initially struggled to capture his face due to technical limitations like the absence of telephoto lenses. As a result, photojournalists were encouraged to take frontal, eye-level shots that emphasized the leader's expressions and gestures, often shot from below to reinforce his monumental presence. The Duce was typically portrayed in commanding stances, hands on hips or arms crossed, his face upturned toward a visionary horizon.

Whether skiing, playing football, or holding a child, every gesture contributed to a mythology of approachability combined with virility.

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44 Mark Twain, *King Leopold's Soliloquy* (1905); cited in Max Pinckers & Victoria Gonzalez-Figueras, *A Sore Calamity* (2024).

45 For analysis of the equestrian trope, see Simonetta Falasca-Zamponi, *Fascist Spectacle: The Aesthetics of Power in Mussolini's Italy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

But Mussolini's photographic representation evolved alongside the regime's ambitions. In 1927, the regime established the Istituto Luce, which would become the most important state-controlled visual institution of the fascist era. Originally conceived to produce newsreels (cinegiornali) and documentary films, Istituto Luce was quickly expanded to include a photographic division, *Servizio Fotografico Luce*, which coordinated directly with Mussolini's office.[46] By the early 1930s, this imagery underwent a further transformation. In 1932, the tenth anniversary of the March on Rome, a shift occurred: Mussolini's visual persona became less realist and more mystified.

This shift marked not only a change in aesthetics but a recalibration of the political function of images. While early fascist iconography relied on realist portrayals, showing Mussolini as a virile man of action, always grounded in the physical world, the regime soon realized the need for a more elastic, idealized representation capable of transcending temporal constraints and reaching the spiritual domain of legend. The result was an image of the Duce not simply as a political leader, but as a secular saint: omnipresent, invulnerable, and eternal. This transformation was facilitated in part by technological advancements and aesthetic experimentation. By 1932, photomontage had become a widely used technique within fascist visual culture. Drawing inspiration from Soviet propaganda but stripped of its class content, Italian photomontages deployed double exposure, exaggerated contrasts, and manipulated scales to project Mussolini as larger than life. Posters from the period show his face superimposed over maps of Italy, workers' bodies, or rays of sunlight, fusing the leader with the land, the people, and the divine. These images circulated widely in magazines, exhibitions, postcards, and schoolbooks saturating the visual field with a single, dominant icon.

The cultic quality of this imagery was not incidental. It was designed to cultivate emotional affect and ritual identification. As Alessandra Antola Swan argues, the fascist archive operated not only as a record of events but as an "apparatus of conviction," a system in which repetition and idealization took precedence over accuracy.[47]

The camera ceased to function as a documentarian tool and became instead a myth-making device. The Duce was not to be seen as he was but as he ought to be, idealized in posture, moralized in action, and immortalized in form. Istituto Luce played a crucial role in producing and disseminating this mythology. Its vast photographic and cinematic archive contains thousands of images in which Mussolini is seen farming, fencing, skiing, swimming, reading to children, and inspecting factories, each activity carefully curated to demonstrate both his proximity to the common man and his superiority as a leader.

The sheer volume and repetition of these images did not simply reflect Mussolini's ubiquity; they created it. In this sense, Istituto Luce functioned not just as a propagandistic organ, but as a "visual factory" of fascist mythos, manufacturing symbolic capital in the form of photographic surplus. Consider, for instance, a series of images from the Luce archive that depict Mussolini skiing with his family, kicking a football in a playground, and walking through the countryside with peasant families.[48] These are not random snapshots but staged performances, precisely framed to elicit a particular identification. The ski photograph, taken in winter gear, with Mussolini slightly elevated and gazing into the distance, reiterates the trope of the visionary leader who conquers not just political adversaries but nature itself. The football image, with Mussolini mid-kick in a suit and fedora, collapses the distinction between elite and popular culture, demonstrating his accessibility while maintaining his centrality. These photographs blur the boundary between spontaneity and spectacle. Their value lies not in their veracity but in their performative repetition. Photomontage, soft focus, and graphic overlays began to be employed to create a Duce not only admired but venerated.[49] These images aimed not to convince, but to instill awe; not to portray, but to canonize. As Swan explains, this marked a move toward what we might call "post-photographic" imagery: images designed not to capture the real but to fabricate the ideal.[50]

It is interesting to notice how the apparatus that Mussolini created understood immidiately the photographic power, rejecting almost from the beginning the scientific charaterestic of the medium of "representing the truth" but instead, embracing its metaphisical feature, the ability to construct narratives.

This strategic manipulation of Mussolini's image stands in contrast with the absence of Leone Jacovacci's visual records. Jacovacci was denied a place in the visual pantheon of fascist Italy. The silence surrounding Jacovacci within state archives is not incidental.

It illustrates precisely what the fascist visual regime sought to suppress: the image of an Italian champion who did not conform to the racialized aesthetics of the regime. If Mussolini's body was endlessly reproduced to embody the virtues of the "new Italian," Jacovacci's body was excluded to preserve that very fiction. Mussolini's visual strategy constituted a regime of vision. It established who could be seen, how, and why. The Duce's image was carefully manufactured to anchor national identity, while figures like Jacovacci, whose presence would complicate that identity, were effaced. This disparity illustrates what Walter Benjamin once described as the "aestheticization of politics," a process through which power seeks to render itself sublime through visual means.[51]

46 See Alessandra Antola Swan, *Photographing Mussolini: The Politics and Aesthetics of the Italian Fascist State Archive* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), pp. 27–35.
47 Alessandra Antola Swan, *Photographing Mussolini: The Politics and Aesthetics of the Italian Fascist State Archive* (Bloomsbury, 2023), p. 72.

48 Istituto Luce photographic archive: A00052676 (skiing), A00020063 (football), A00013157 (countryside).
49 Ibid., pp. 52–59.
50 Ibid., p. 61.
51 Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Schocken, 1969), p. 242.

In fascist Italy, politics did not merely use images, it became image.
But this process was inherently selective.
In this context, the fascist archive must be understood not as a passive repository but as an active agent of historical formation. It chose whom to remember and whom to forget, what to illuminate and what to consign to darkness. The missing images of Jacovacci are thus not simply gaps in documentation; they are active sites of repression, symptoms of an archival logic premised on racial exclusion. Their absence speaks as loudly as Mussolini's surplus presence and perhaps more truthfully.

As examined in previous chapters, the archive is never a neutral repository but a site of struggle, shaped by power relations, exclusions, and erasures. Within the fascist visual regime, the archive served as both a mirror and amplifier of the regime's racialized construction of Italian identity. While Mussolini carefully crafted his myth through mass-distributed images, others, particularly those who did not fit the mold of fascist whiteness, were deliberately omitted or marginalized. One of the most striking and violent instances of this exclusion is the case of Leone Jacovacci. His story, partially visible through clippings, official records, and family-held documents, unfolds as a lived counter-archive. His erasure from the collective visual memory of the nation reveals the fragility of citizenship when tied to race, and exposes how fascist media, institutions, and even contemporary historiography have worked to suppress alternative representations of Italian identity. This case illustrates with clarity that the archive is never a mere repository of facts. It constitutes a symbolic order that defines who is allowed to be remembered, in what form, and who is condemned to silence, spectrality, or misrepresentation.[52]

Before exploring Jacovacci's complex biography, it is worth pausing on the language that anticipated his most historic match. These lines, taken from major Italian newspapers of the time, show not only the pervasive racism of interwar Italy, but the semiotic operation through which Jacovacci's body was racialized, exoticized, and ultimately disqualified as a legitimate symbol of the nation:

"Chi rappresenterà l'Italia oltre le Alpi? Il bianco Bosisio o il mulatto Jacovacci?"

("Who will represent Italy beyond the Alps? The white Bosisio or the mulatto Jacovacci?")

"Se la nostra razza dovesse includere Jacovacci? Be', sia dei nostri il magnifico mulatto che è latino nello spirito che nelle sembianze. Certo, la mia preferenza visiva va al color latte Bosisio, che al caffè e latte Jacovacci. Ma io non sono un pittore in cerca di colore..."

("If our race had to include Jacovacci? Well, let the magnificent mulatto be counted among us, as he is Latin in spirit and appearance. Certainly, my visual preference goes to the milk-colored Bosisio, rather than to the coffee-and-milk Jacovacci. But I am not a painter looking for color...")

"Benedicono la madre congolese di Jack, che ha diffuso nel suo corpo, insieme al sangue negro, quella indolenza e mancanza di ambizione che l'ha tenuto tranquillo fino ad ora..."

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52   Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002), 20.

("We bless Jack's Congolese mother, who passed on to his body—along with Negro blood—that indolence and lack of ambition which has kept him subdued until now...")

"L'odore di polvere ecciterà l'uomo di colore che riporterà in vita la sua propensione atavica..."

("The smell of dust will excite the man of color, reviving his atavistic instincts...")[53]

These statements, published in the lead-up to the so-called "match of the century," reflect not only widespread colonial imagery, but also the central tension of Jacovacci's existence: he was both too Italian, and perhaps too successful as an athlete, to be denied and too Black to be accepted.
The match against Bosisio was not simply a sporting event. It was a referendum on national representation, citizenship, and racial belonging.[54]
I first encountered the archive of Leone Jacovacci through a conversation with Davide Valeri, as mentioned in the introduction. That encounter opened a crevice in the smooth façade of Italy's visual memory. The absence of a key image, the image of Jacovacci raising his fist in victory after defeating Bosisio for the European title in 1928, is not merely a historical omission; it is a political wound. It marks the precise point at which the archive was weaponized to enforce the racial boundaries of national identity.
Leone Jacovacci was born on April 19, 1902, in Kinkanda, in the Congo Free State, to Umberto Jacovacci, an Italian agronomist who had migrated there in 1898, and Zibu Mabeta, the daughter of a local tribal leader.[55] Like many Italians of the time, Umberto had been lured by colonial promises of opportunity. Three years later, he returned to Rome with his son, separating Leone permanently from his mother and from the African continent. He would never see either again. The rupture at the core of Jacovacci's life, between continents, identities, and familial bonds, was only the beginning of a life shaped by border-crossings and constant reinvention.
At the age of fourteen, Leone ran away from a boarding school in Frascati, escaping what he described as a "prison." He traveled south to Taranto, passing himself off as a poor boy from Calcutta and managing to board a British naval ship, where he was trained in the basics of boxing. He assumed a new identity, Jack Walker, and began to circulate under this anglicized pseudonym, navigating multiple systems of exclusion. The multiplicity of names he adopted was not mere performance, but a survival strategy.
In Italy, he was too Black to be recognized. In England, he was too Italian. In France, he found partial legitimacy by passing as African-American.

The refusal of any single national frame to accommodate his identity reflects the profound precarity of Black citizenship in Europe, a condition Alan Sekula would describe as "the body as the site of inscription".[56] This expression helps illuminate how Leone's identity was constantly subjected to interpretation, classification, and surveillance. His body became a contested terrain where race, nationality, and belonging were inscribed by others, through documents, laws, and public perceptions. Sekula's notion reminds us that for racialized subjects, identity is rarely self-determined but always shaped and constrained by the systems of power that attempt to fix the meaning of a body. In Jacovacci's case, every border crossing required a new fiction, a new negotiation with the archive of visibility. His body, quite literally, bore the weight of inscription, of labels that fluctuated depending on where he was, who was looking, and what they chose to see.
In London, Leone's boxing career took off. For ten months he remained undefeated, winning his first fourteen matches by knockout. When racial barriers in Britain prevented him from competing for national titles, he relocated to Paris, joining a growing community of African-American and Afro-diasporic boxers who, like him, had been excluded from recognition in their home countries. In April 1922, still under the name Jack Walker, he made his Italian debut in a match against Bruno Frattini. He pretended not to speak Italian until, in the third round, he shouted "Passami l'acqua!" (Give me some water) surprising the audience and officials alike. Despite his Italian citizenship (granted via paternal recognition and notarization), Jacovacci was denied membership in the Italian Boxing Federation for another five years.[57]
This refusal was justified on the bureaucratic grounds that he had not completed military service in Italy, then a symbolic requirement for citizenship. But the underlying reason was racial. As his victories accumulated, so did institutional resistance. The Fascist regime was unwilling to accept a Black man as the face of Italian triumph, especially in a sport so deeply tied to physical valor and national pride.[58]
Jacovacci's case dramatizes a structural dilemma: if the archive is built to include only those who fit within its ideological parameters, then it will always render racialized figures illegible, or at best, exceptional and dehistoricized. As Mbembe writes, "to archive is to dismember time".[59] Jacovacci's story was not just misrepresented. It was amputated from Italy's official chronology.
The much-anticipated rematch between Leone Jacovacci and Mario Bosisio, held in 1928 at the Stadio Nazionale in Rome, was framed by the press as more than a sporting event: it was a symbolic confrontation over who had the right to embody the Italian nation. With over 40,000 spectators in attendance and all the highest political offices represented, the fight became a national spectacle,

53   Mauro Valeri, *Il Nero di Roma. Storia di Leone Jacovacci, Pugile Italiano* (Rome: Palombi Editori, 2008), 109–113.
54 Ibid., 113.
55 Ibid., 115–118.

56 Alan Sekula, "The Body and the Archive," *October*, no. 39 (1986): 3–64.
57 Valeri, *Il Nero di Roma*, 123–126.
58 Ibid., 130–134
59 Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," 22.

amplified by the regime's media apparatus and broadcast live on the radio for the first time in Italian sports history.[60] The tension surrounding the bout, referred to as the "match of the century," was racialized to an extreme degree, with newspaper headlines debating whether "the white Bosisio or the mulatto Jacovacci" should be permitted to represent Italy on the European stage.[61] Although Jacovacci won decisively, outboxing Bosisio over the course of the match, the result was recorded as a draw.

This decision allowed Bosisio to retain the European middleweight title and was widely condemned by the audience and even segments of the press. Jacovacci, overwhelmed, was seen weeping in the locker room after the verdict.[62] When Bosisio later captured the title officially by defeating another Italian, Molina, he was contractually obliged to face Jacovacci once again. In this rematch, held under immense public pressure, Jacovacci won clearly and officially became European champion.

But that victory marked the beginning, not the height, of his erasure. The Fascist regime, determined to suppress the image of a Black man as a national hero, intervened immediately. The entire match had been filmed by the Istituto Luce, yet the final minutes, those showing Jacovacci's triumph, were cut from the version distributed to cinemas across Italy.[63] Even more disturbingly, no image was ever published or archived showing Jacovacci with his fist raised in victory. That missing photograph, central to the visual culture of sport and victory, functions as an emblematic void in both national memory and the fascist archive.[64] Instead, it was Bosisio who toured Italian cinemas, offering public commentary after screenings and continuing to claim himself the rightful champion. Jacovacci was never interviewed.[65]

In this manipulation, we witness the archive not merely as a passive omission but as an *active dispositif* of racial power. The absence of Jacovacci's celebratory image is not incidental but structural, part of what Ariella Azoulay would call the "regime of rights" embedded in photographic production.[66] Azoulay's concept refers to the idea that photography is never neutral, it operates within a field of power in which the right to be photographed, to be seen, and to have one's image circulate is deeply political. The "regime of rights" determines who is granted visibility and under what conditions, as well as who is excluded, silenced, or made invisible. In Jacovacci's case, the refusal to publish his image of victory was not merely an editorial decision; it was a denial of political recognition, a way of withholding his right to full participation in the national imaginary.

60 Mauro Valeri, *Il Nero di Roma. Storia di Leone Jacovacci, Pugile Italiano* (Rome: Palombi Editori, 2008), 145–148.
61 Ibid., 109–113.
62 Ibid., 150–152.
63 Alessandra Antola Swan, *Photographing Mussolini: The Making of a Political Icon* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2023), 68–71.
64 Valeri, *Il Nero di Roma*, 157–160.
65 Ibid., 162.
66 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 14–15.

The image did exist. He was photographed. He did win but the mechanisms that confer visibility and legitimacy chose to suppress it.

This suppression aligns with what Azoulay calls the photographic event, where meaning is shaped not just by the image itself but by the network of decisions, permissions, and denials surrounding it. Photography here does not simply record; it affirms or denies visibility. By denying Jacovacci the right to be seen, the Fascist state denied his claim to belonging.

This silencing coincided with the consolidation of Fascist racial doctrine. Though the Manifesto della Razza would not be published until 1938, the regime had already begun to shape a white, virile image of the Italian citizen, especially in relation to the colonial project. The idea that a Black man could symbolize Italian excellence was incompatible with Mussolini's vision.[67] Instead, the regime turned its attention to athletes like Primo Carnera (white, enormous, and obedient) who could be molded into national icons. Carnera's image was heavily promoted by the regime and eventually weaponized in the global arena as a symbol of Fascist strength.[68]

By contrast, Jacovacci's refusal to conform, his independence, his refusal to become a tool of propaganda, made him a threat. As Mauro Valeri observes, Jacovacci's presence destabilized the logic of racial nationalism.[69] This destabilization was responded to not with violence but with invisibilization: the preferred tactic of a regime that understood the power of visual culture. The result was not only Jacovacci's exclusion from public memory, but also a broader loss, an erasure of Black Italian presence from the symbolic order of citizenship. Even Jacovacci himself seemed to internalize the implications of this erasure. In his personal archive, a meticulous ledger of his victories, he left a striking omission: the match against Bosisio is not recorded on the date it occurred. Only later, in a different pen and handwriting, does the name "Bosisio" appear, without a date, on a clipping from 1928.[70] The hesitancy speaks volumes. As if Jacovacci sensed that his greatest triumph was also the point of no return. That in winning, he had exposed the limits of what the Italian state was willing to accept.

If archives function as technologies of power, constructed sites of visibility and erasure, then the task of the artist working with and against the archive is both critical and ethical. It involves a dual commitment: to excavate what has been forgotten or suppressed, and to remain attentive to the stakes of representation. As previously discussed, Leone Jacovacci's privately assembled archive stands as an early example of self-affirmation through visual means, a gesture that recalls the photographic thinking of Frederick Douglass. In a series of speeches delivered throughout the 1860s, Douglass famously argued that photography held the potential to dismantle dehumanizing representations of Black people

67 Giorgio Fabre, *Il razzismo del Duce* (Rome: Laterza, 2005), 49–52.
68 Simon Martin, *Sport Italia: The Italian Love Affair with Sport* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 75–77.
69 Valeri, *Il Nero di Roma*, 170–173.
70 Ibid., 185–186.

by offering images of dignity, composure, and self-possession. "The picture and the mirror," Douglass noted, "are among the most powerful means of moral and social elevation known to man."[71] His understanding of photography as an act of self-making, of being seen not as caricature but as citizen, resonates deeply with Jacovacci's efforts to preserve, annotate, and circulate his own visual history. Douglass's theory of the image underscores how self-representation can contest the logics of colonial archives, where the Black body has historically been fixed as a specimen, criminal, or exoticized other. But Douglass also implicitly warned of the dangers of ceding control over the image. His belief in photography was not rooted in its mechanical neutrality, but in the possibility that it might be used to affirm subjectivity, rather than strip it away. The archive Jacovacci left behind, composed of photographs, press clippings, and program annotations, can be understood as a lived instantiation of this theory: a counter-image repository, compiled by a man aware that state institutions would not preserve his story.

This historical framework offers a critical lens through which to examine contemporary artists engaging with the archive. Among them, Alessandra Ferrini's practice stands out for its rigorous interrogation of Italian colonial memory. Through research-based installations and lens-based media, Ferrini exposes the mechanisms by which Italy has erased or neutralized its violent imperial past. Her long-term project *A Bomb to Be Reloaded* (2019–ongoing), for instance, centers on the story of Omar al-Mukhtar, the Libyan anti-colonial leader captured and executed by Italian forces. Rather than merely documenting the gaps in public memory, Ferrini delves into the Italian diplomatic and military archives, juxtaposing fragments of state-produced imagery with testimonials and counter-evidence. What emerges is not only an exposure of erasure, but a formal strategy that destabilizes the authority of the archive itself. By reassembling found images and texts into new spatial and visual arrangements, Ferrini creates what Ariella Azoulay might call a "potential history", a proposition for what could have been remembered, had violence not intervened in the transmission of knowledge.[72]

In Ferrini's work, the archival material is not simply a source: it is a terrain of negotiation. She does not seek to restore a singular truth, but rather to demonstrate the fractures and ideological investments embedded in the historical record. Importantly, her position as an Italian artist confronting her nation's colonial past allows her to interrogate power without appropriating the voices of the colonized. Her practice becomes a model for working within one's cultural field while dismantling its epistemic foundations.

A different but equally compelling approach is found in the recent work of Max Pinckers. In *State of Emergency* (2024), Pinckers engages with the visual language of authoritarianism and state secrecy by photographing both the

banal and symbolic dimensions of institutional power. His work critiques the relationship between photography, state violence, and political spectacle, particularly in regimes that use censorship or media manipulation to craft a controlled narrative. Rather than attempting to "reveal" hidden truths through a documentary lens, Pinckers embraces ambiguity, deploying artificial lighting, staged compositions, and archival fragments to expose the performativity of state power.[73]

In this project, the archive is not merely an object of recovery but a stage of confrontation. Pinckers recognizes that representation is never neutral, that to photograph is to construct, not simply to capture. What distinguishes his work is not the discovery of lost materials, but the critical awareness with which he frames his own intervention. As an artist who is not directly embedded in the political context he investigates, Pinckers navigates the ethics of representation through formal choices that foreground the constructed nature of the image. His photographs do not presume to "speak for" the subjects of state violence; instead, they speak about the systems that render those subjects invisible. That artists like Ferrini and Pinckers, despite coming from different positions of cultural proximity, can challenge archival authority without reinscribing its logics raises an important set of questions.

What does it mean to engage critically with histories that are not one's own? How can the visual artist enter the archive without repeating the violences it has enacted? These questions are not only theoretical. They are deeply situated in practice. If representation is always implicated in power, then the responsibility of the artist lies not in neutrality, but in reflexivity.

For an artist whose practice involves working with memory, history, and the visual record, the task is not only to excavate but also to care. This involves questioning one's own gaze, acknowledging one's positionality, and making space for multiplicity without flattening complexity. It also requires us to recognize, as Mbembe suggests, that "the ordinary" is never devoid of historical force.[74] In the mundane and overlooked fragments of personal archives, such as Jacovacci's hand-written fight record, annotated press clippings, or newspaper caricatures, lie the seeds of counter-history. These fragments do not simply oppose official narratives; they rupture them from within, reminding us that absence, too, can be a form of presence.

71 Frederick Douglass, "Lecture on Pictures," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, Vol. 2, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982), 445.
72 Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 17–18.

73 Max Pinckers, *State of Emergency*, 2024, https://www.maxpinckers.be/archive/state-of-emergency.
74 Achille Mbembe, "The Power of the Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, eds. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 21.

Conclusion:
Refusing the Archive: Towards a Politics of
Solidarity and Speculation.

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that the archive, far from being a passive collection of documents, is a site of contestation, exclusion, and ideological inscription. From the Risorgimento to post-Fascism, Italy's visual regimes have systematically defined national identity through the erasure or manipulation of racialized, colonial, and working-class bodies. In this concluding chapter, I want to reflect on what it means to work with such archives as an artist, an artist whose practice is rooted not only in research but also in the production of responses to history. This requires more than aesthetic engagement. It demands an ethical positioning: a commitment to unlearning the colonial codes embedded in archival structures, and to proposing other ways of seeing, remembering, and imagining.

The question I return to repeatedly in my practice is: what can artists do to reactivate an archive that has been shaped by violence, silence, and exclusion? And how can we engage critically with these materials without reinforcing the same structures we seek to dismantle?

As my work has shown, the act of retrieving and recontextualizing archival materials can be a form of refusal. Yet this refusal is not simply a gesture of negation. It is a refusal in the Gramscian sense, a refusal to accept the dominant terms of visibility, voice, and legitimacy, and a commitment to constructing a different form of memory from below.

Antonio Gramsci remains one of the most important figures in thinking about the politics of cultural memory. Writing from the margins of Fascist Italy, and later from prison, Gramsci developed the concept of the "subaltern" to describe those social groups who are structurally denied a voice within hegemonic institutions. For Gramsci, the struggle for hegemony, control over cultural meanings and historical narratives, was inseparable from the formation of political consciousness. The subaltern, as he defines it, is not only oppressed economically or politically, but also epistemologically invisible.[75]

In my essay on the act of refusal, written during the seminar *"Rehearsing Solidarity. On Political Imagination in Artistic Practices"* led by Mohanad Yaqubi, I explored how refusal can be understood not simply as negation but as a generative and speculative gesture, one that opens new possibilities for engaging with the archive from a position of criticality and care. I explored how Gramsci's concepts of "war of position" and the role of the intellectual remain essential to understanding how artists can engage critically with the archive. In contrast to the "war of manoeuvre", direct confrontation, Gramsci saw the "war of position" as a long-term cultural struggle waged in the realm of ideas, values, and representation.[76] This is where the archive becomes central. It is in the archive that dominant history solidifies its authority, and it is in the cracks of that archive that counter-histories must be forged.

75 Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 52–57.
76 Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 229–239.

As I argued in that essay, Gramsci lacked institutional support but built a political vision grounded in solidarity, not personal power. He refused the comfort of intellectual detachment, advocating instead for a collective effort to restructure social relations through cultural production. The same logic applies to the way artists today must position themselves vis-à-vis the archive: not as distant observers or passive curators, but as active participants in a political process of re-signification.

The question of representation, central to any discussion of archival work, was radically reframed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?".[77] Building on and revising Gramsci, Spivak questions whether those who have been structurally silenced (the subaltern) can ever truly be heard within the discursive frameworks of Western power. She reminds us that even well-intentioned acts of "giving voice" can risk reproducing the epistemic violence they seek to undo.

Spivak's warning is especially pertinent for artists working with historical materials that concern colonized or racialized subjects. The archive is not neutral, and neither is our access to it. As I have experienced directly, entering official archives often requires a process of justification: researchers must explain what they intend to do, how they will interpret the materials, and why their inquiry is legitimate. These gatekeeping mechanisms reflect not only logistical limitations but also an ideological framework that polices who is allowed to narrate history and from what position.

This is why I insist that working with the archive must involve both critique and care. It means avoiding the aestheticization of violence. It also means recognizing our own positionality, as Spivak does, and the privileges that come with being able to access, interpret, and circulate these materials. My personal struggle is not the same as that of my ancestors. I move through institutional and artistic spaces that were not built for them. The question I must continually ask is: how can I use those privileges not to reproduce exclusion, but to contest it?

As I continue to work with archival materials, I become increasingly aware of the need to undo the archive, not in the sense of destruction, but in the sense of refusing its fixed codes of conduct. The archive, as it stands, is built upon hierarchies that mirror colonial, racial, and national structures. It is rigid, closed, and curated according to institutional values. But if we are to produce other futures, we must keep the archive open to re-questioning and re-working, allowing it to function as a fluid space rather than a sealed container of truth. This is not an abstract idea. It has concrete implications for how we approach memory, loss, and historical injustice. As Frantz Fanon wrote in *The Wretched of the Earth*, colonial violence is not only physical, but it is also ontological.[78]

It destroys not just bodies but entire ways of being, knowing, and remembering. In *Concerning Violence*, the film by Göran Olsson, archival footage shot by Europeans is recontextualized through Fanon's words, generating new meanings and unsettling the authority of the original images.[79] This is a powerful example of speculative engagement with the archive, one that refuses to accept the frame as it is and proposes a counter-reading.

My own practice aligns with this approach. I do not believe the archive should be merely illustrated or aestheticized. I believe it must be re-performed, speculatively reimagined in ways that highlight both its limits and its possibilities. My methodology is grounded in solidarity, not salvage. I do not seek to speak for the erased or the forgotten, but to create the conditions through which new narratives may emerge. This means listening, collaborating, and being open to the unknown.

In this light, I have come to see the archive created by Leone Jacovacci himself as an act of self-archiving, a form of self-affirmation. His detailed collection of press clippings, match records, and personal mementos represents not only an attempt to document his career but also a refusal to disappear. As Frederick Douglass understood more than a century earlier, the ability to control one's own image is a political act.[80] Douglass sat for more photographs than any American of his time, not out of vanity, but because he recognized the photograph as a counterweight to the caricatures that defined Blackness in the public imagination. Douglass argued that the photograph could be a tool of self-definition for those historically denied personhood. The archive, then, becomes a space not only of memory but of visual sovereignty. Jacovacci's refusal to be reduced to a racial media refused to do so, is part of this legacy.

As artists working with archives today, we must carry that legacy forward not by replicating the forms of documentation that oppressed figures like Jacovacci, but by creating new visual languages that speak to the gaps, silences, and refusals embedded in those forms.

A Personal Reflection: Refusing Neutrality, Embracing Solidarity.

This thesis began with a personal encounter with Davide Valeri and the silences surrounding the image of Leone Jacovacci. What started as a search for a missing photograph evolved into a broader investigation into the politics of visibility, the construction of Italian national identity, and the responsibility of the artist to interrogate historical narratives. Yet, despite its conceptual breadth, the project remains anchored in a personal imperative: to refuse neutrality. I do not approach the archive as a detached observer.

77 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 271–313.
78 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 1–62.

79 Göran Olsson, dir., *Concerning Violence*, documentary film, Sweden, 2014.
80 John Stauffer, Zoe Trodd, and Celeste-Marie Bernier, *Picturing Frederick Douglass: An Illustrated Biography of the Nineteenth Century's Most Photographed American* (New York: Liveright, 2015), 17–29.

I am implicated in the histories I engage. I speak from a position shaped by the inherited struggles of those who came before me, struggles that not only marked my identity, but also enabled the conditions of privilege I now inhabit. The very fact that I can write this thesis is a testament to their resistance and sacrifice.

My layered cultural background, and a practice rooted in research and artistic response, have taught me that my work is not about retrieving the past as a fixed or stable truth, but about troubling the terms through which that past has been legitimized, often violently, by institutions of power. As I wrote during the seminar *Rehearsing Solidarity. On Political Imagination in Artistic Practices*, the refusal to accept dominant narratives is not a withdrawal but a generative act. It is an opening.

Solidarity, in this sense, becomes both an ethical orientation and a method of working. It is not a posture of charity, but of accountability. It means to stand not above, but alongside, acknowledging one's privileges while resisting the systems that produce silence, invisibility, and marginalization. In engaging with archives, this requires more than citation or critique. It requires an attunement to the structural conditions of access, the codes of legitimacy, and the embedded violence that defines what can be remembered and what must be forgotten.

Throughout this research, I have returned to the archive not only as a repository of documents, but as a terrain of struggle. As Frantz Fanon reminds us, violence is not only physical. It is epistemic. The image, too, can wound. But as the film *Concerning Violence* demonstrates, images can also be re-signified, made to speak otherwise through new contexts and alignments. This is where speculation becomes a political gesture. To speculate is not to escape history but to insist on its multiplicity: to imagine, through the absences, what else could have been, and what still might be.

My position, as an artist working across personal, colonial, and post-fascist legacies is shaped by these tensions. I do not believe the task is to resolve them, but to inhabit them critically.

I do not seek to "give voice" to the subaltern, as Spivak warns us against such pretensions. Rather, I seek to listen to the silences, to make space for discontinuity, and to question the frameworks that make certain stories possible while foreclosing others.

This is not simply a theoretical position. It is a way of working, through images, texts, fragments, and refusals. The goal is not to produce clarity, but to dislodge certainty. In doing so, I hope to contribute not to the archive as it is, but to the archive as it might become.

In this spirit, I do not conclude with an answer, but with a gesture of continuation. The archive is not where history ends. It is where new questions begin.

Footnotes:

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29 See "Guido Landra e l'antropologia fascista".

30 La Difesa della Razza archives; see also Enzo Collotti's analysis in "Fascism and Racism".

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LIST WORKS:

Fig. 29 Photo Miss Italy 1996 Denny Mendez.

Fig. 30 Paolo Di Canio, former Lazio player, celebrates a goal.

Fig.31 Still from an episode of Domenica In, currently the most popular and most-watched Sunday show in the country.

Fig.32 Still from an episode of "Muschio Selvaggio", an Italian podcast.

Image, Archive, and Erasure:
Visual Strategies of Italian Identity from Fascism to the Present.

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