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VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY

African memories of Europe: visual traces of Eritrean presences in 1970s Rome

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Abstract

This essay explores the visual traces of Eritrean presence in 1970s Rome, focusing on the documentary film *A testimonianza di una condizione – 2000 eritrei a Roma*. The film, produced by Federico Bruno, Giovanni Gervasi, Ali Reza Movahed, Paolo Rossato, and Johannes Yemane, is one of the earliest visual documents portraying an African migrant community in Italy. It highlights the experiences of Eritrean migrants, particularly women, who faced exploitation and marginalization while striving for better futures through education and political activism. The film underscores the importance of the 1970s as a foundational period for African migration to Italy, challenging the common narrative that significant African migration began in the 1990s. It also emphasizes the role of the Eritrean People's Liberation Front (EPLF) in organizing and empowering the Eritrean diaspora in Rome in that period. By examining this film, the essay aims to reframe Italian collective memory and identity, incorporating African perspectives and experiences. This approach not only enriches the understanding of Italy's social and cultural history but also calls for further research into the visual archives of non-European filmmakers who documented their experiences in Italy.

Keywords

Migration, Europe, Africa, Eritreans in Italy, visual archives

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Introduction

Memory plays a crucial role in shaping collective identities. As European societies become increasingly multicultural, it becomes pivotal to question the ways in which they remember and interpret their pasts in order to better understand how they can construct alternative visions of their identity and their future. According to Maurice Halbwachs (1950), collective memory is not merely a repository of the past but a dynamic process that shapes how communities understand themselves and their place in the world. Memory studies equally emphasize the necessity of including multiple narratives in the construction of identity. As Barbara Misztal (2003) argues, in fact, the inclusion of diverse memories can enrich the collective identity, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the past and the present.

Memory, however, can play a double role in processes of collective identity-making: it is "key to claims of recognition and empowerment on the part of subjects and groups in marginalized positions [but] it is also part of power/knowledge regimes that define forms of selective inclusion and exclusion" (Lähdesmäki et al. 2019: 5). Indeed, in an era in which overtly racist and xenophobic political parties are gaining significant traction in European politics the call for opening up European memories and identities to their historical complexity and multiplicity have become less and less audible. Monolithic accounts of national identity prevail over more nuanced perspectives that take into consideration the long-term processes of mutual interaction, hybridization and crosspollination that occurred as a result of the role that Europe played in the transatlantic slave trade, colonialism, and the contemporary acceleration of migration flows. In this context, the researcher is left with the arduous task of finding new strategies to enter the debate and unsettle the Eurocentric perspectives on which it is grounded. According to comparative literature scholar Andreas Huyssen, one way to respond to the progressive incarceration of European memories and identities into the boundaries of "Fortress Europe" is to acknowledge and investigate the way in which Europe has been imagined, remembered and represented by others. As he suggests,

> At a time when the boundaries of European citizenship are challenged from both the inside and the outside, those boundaries cannot be equated with the imaginary boundaries of European memory. The rights to citizenship are usually defined administratively and politically. European memory cannot be. It cannot be culturally fortressed. For what is European memory if it does not include memories of Europe's role in the world at large? It must reciprocally acknowledge the memories of Europe as they circulate elsewhere, and now even inside Europe itself (2019: 1).

Such perspective allows us to look at Europe from without, decentralizing Europe's memories of itself and opening them up to a dialogic process that can recognize the constitutive role that ideas about, and experiences of, Europe by non-Europeans have played in making Europe what it is today.

In this essay I take up Huyssen's suggestion and, following the conceptual attempts of building a "pluriperspective concept of Europe" (Abdelmadjid 2018: 152; see also Goddard 2024) developed by several scholars over the past few years, I discuss the

existing visual traces of African (and more precisely Eritrean) memories of 1970s Italy as they are represented in one of the earliest visual documents about an African community's experience of life in the Peninsula, the documentary film *A testimonianza di una condizione – 2000 eritrei a Roma* made in 1977 by Federico Bruno, Giovanni Gervasi, Ali Reza Movahed, Paolo Rossato and Johannes Yemane. To the best of my knowledge, this is one of the very first films that deeply and extensively portrays an African migrant community residing in Italy, and one of the first to see an African filmmaker based in Italy, Johannes Yemane, play an active role in the production process. As such, this film allows us to interrogate existing chronologies and memories about African migration to Italy so as to reframe them on a longer-term and rather Afrocentric perspective. In fact, while most existing accounts consider the 1990s as the key turning point in the history that made Italy a major receiving country for African outward mobilities (De Cesaris and Impagliazzo 2020; Di Sanzo 2023), the film shows the importance of the 1970s as a funding decade for the analysis of both African migration fluxes to Italy and the African experience of Italy more generally. On the other hand, the role played by an Eritrean filmmaker in the making of the film offers an important counterpoint to existing debates about the visual representation of migration in Italian cinema, which is dominated by the analysis of films about migration made by Italian filmmakers and only rarely and marginally refers to representations of the African experience of Italy made by African or Afro-descendant filmmakers.

The analysis of this film, its portrayal of the Eritrean experience of Italy in the 1970s and its contribution to opening up our understanding of Italy's collective memory of migration and colonialism constitutes the core of this essay. But this discussion is preceded by two short sections that offers a few theoretical and empirical elements to better frame the argument developed in relation to the film. In the first section, I present a theoretical reflection on the interest of analysing African memories of Europe to transform and enlarge the existing debates about migration, diaspora and collective identity in the continent. In the second, I discuss the role that the film school "Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia" in Rome – the school that the five filmmakers of *A testimonianza di una condizione* attended together at the time the film was produced – can play in offering an archive for the study of non-European memories of Italy thanks to its particular connection, throughout the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, to what was called, back then, the "Third World". In this sense, beyond presenting some specific research results, this essay is also a call for further research into what could constitute an important archive of visual images about Italy made by non-Italian and non-western filmmakers in relation to a period of Italian history that is rarely discussed through the prism of visual representations other than those produced and circulated by Italian and western filmmakers[1].

[1] Drawing on Abdelmadjid's work (2018: 158) and his extended definition of "Europe", I use here the term "West" to define the group of countries that have been involved in modern colonialism, and more precisely those that actively participated in the Berlin Conference in 1884: United Kingdom, United States, Germany, Italy, France, Belgium, Austro-Hungary, Denmark, Spain, Netherlands, Portugal, Russia, Sweden-Norway, and the Ottoman Empire.

The multiplicity of African memories of Europe and the limits of the existing visual archives about the African experience of Italy

Over the past couple of decades, a significant number of researches have emerged which analyse the way in which, while Europe was busy exploring the African continent and deploying its military and commercial power to exploit its resources and people, African people equally explored Europe and made the West the object of curiosity and ethnographic interpretation, and at times their home (Northrup 2009; Otele 2021). Several members of the African commercial and intellectual elites travelled to Europe since the fifteenth century, for instance, producing travel diaries and memories of their experience that help us complicate our understanding of both European modernity and African subjectivity in interesting ways (Adi 1997; Ochonu 2022). As Moses Ochonu highlights in his fascinating analysis of Northern Nigerian Emirs' travel accounts of their trips to Britain in the early twentieth century (written in Hausa language), the African traveller-ethnographer imagination that can be read in these accounts "lays claim to knowledge production through experiencing and observing the ways of the white man in the same way European actors established an epistemological genre on colonized societies through instrumentality of observation, travel, and claims of experiential recall" (Ochonu 2022: 7). These writings help us gaining an alternative understanding of the way African people looked at, and understood Europe during colonialism, through a mixture of rejection and admiration. They also make it possible to reshuffle the European conceptualization of modernity so as to understand modernity "relationally" (Geschiere, Meyer and Pels 2008), not as the exclusive result and prerogative of western actors, but as the outcome of the long-term, unbalanced but certainly not univocal or homogenous relationship between Europe and its numerous "others", including Africa.

Research on the experience of African people living in Europe shows the importance of these materials in complexifying our understanding of processes of collective and individual identity-making in the colonial metropoles (Otele 2021). In her brilliant analysis of Afro-European family photographs collected in Germany and Great Britain, feminist and visual studies scholar Tina Campt highlights the importance of visual archives of European Blackness:

> as objects that place people both historically and socially, through the ways they articulate a profound aspiration to forms of national and cultural belonging, inclusion, and social status. These photos [and other visual materials] document such articulations not only through the factual evidence they record, but, more provocatively, through the ways they stage intentions, aspirations, and performances of European subjects in formation, and capture important moments of enunciation (2012: 8-9).

Campt's research shows how the analysis of the African experience of Europe can help us unsettle normative, monolithic and mono-racial understandings of the European identity so as to include the way in which alternative, multiple and polycultural identities have acted to make themselves visible, progressively building what Shelleen Greene (2021) calls "an archive of Black futurity". The visual traces of the African experience of

Europe that interest us here constitute "radical forms of witnessing that reject traditional ways of seeing blackness only in a subordinate relation to whiteness" (Campt 2021: 17) and open up the possibility to "create another trajectory for our present moment and our possible future" (Greene 2021: 32), beyond the narrow path designed by xenophobic and essentialist readings of European history and present identity.

In relation to these debates, the research presented here insists on an archive that is yet relatively under-researched, the archive of moving images about early African presences in Italy. If a growing body of scholarship have analysed the way in which Italian cinema discusses African migration to Italy and the representation of blackness on Italian screens (Greene 2012; O'Healy 2019), still relatively limited is the scope of the works that focus on moving images produced by Afro-Italian filmmakers or which portray Italy and the Italian society from the point of view African or afro-descendant subjects (Jedlowski 2011; Jedlowski 2012; Frisina and Muresu 2018). Within this framework, if the existing works highlight the long-term presence of Black actors in Italian cinema (De Franceschi 2013), they acknowledge the lack of significant and effective policies to support the production of visual representations of visible minorities by members of these same minorities. New forms of visual media production and dissemination (such as smart phones and social media) offer new archives to investigate the African experiences and memories of today's Italy (Santanera 2019), but harder is the task that faces the researcher who wishes to investigate the visual traces of the historical presence of African and afro-descendant people in the country. It is in this context that the historical experience of the Rome-based film school Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia can be of particular interest.

African film students, school films and Rome's Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in the 1960s and 1970s

As scholars of African cinemas have learned thanks to a number of, mostly recent, researches, several young Africans studied cinema in European film schools in the years that preceded and followed independence. If the case of students who attended French and Russian film schools is probably the best known (cf. Woll 2004; Chomentowski 2021), important experiences happened also in other European countries such as Poland (Pierre-Bouthier 2023), Czechoslovakia (Stejskalová 2017) and, in what interest us more closely, Italy (Laviosa et al. 2021; Coletti 2024). These students, similarly to those who came to Europe to study other disciplines, experienced life, love and political activism, but also racism, poverty and discrimination in Europe, and left several traces of their experiences through various kinds of private or public forms of cultural production. Film students are particularly interesting in this sense, as in most cases they had to produce short or feature films for their final exams, and since they did not have much funding at their disposal, they often turned their eyes on the hosting society and produced visual accounts of their living experience in Europe. Except for a few notable cases, these films have been seldomly studied until today, but they offer a very interesting visual archive to investigate the African memories of Europe produced throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Think

for instance at the fascinating portrayal of African people in 1990s Russia in the short film *October* (1993), shot by Malian/Mauritanian filmmaker Abderrahmane Sissako during his years at the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography (VGIK) in Moscow, or at the harsh denunciation of French attitudes towards African immigrants in the film *Nationalité: Immigré* (1975) – a film that the Mauritanian filmmaker Sidney Sokhona began to shot while he was a student at the École nationale supérieure Louis-Lumière in Paris.

Within this context, Rome's Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (CSC) occupies a particularly interesting as much as understudied position. As Flavia Laviosa, Alfredo Baldi, Jim Carter and Diego Bonelli underscore, the CSC "has included a relevant number of diverse populations: about 500 international students from six continents (Africa, Asia, Australasia, Europe, Latin America and North America), and approximately 100 countries since its opening in 1935" (2021: 175-176). Among them, most students from Southern regions, and particularly from Africa, Latin America and the Middle East, attended the school in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, as a result of "the fascination of world artists with Italian neorealism and for the high reputation of the filmmakers who taught at the CSC, including Luigi Chiarini, Pietro Germi, Alessandro Blasetti and Luigi Zampa" (*ibid*: 178; see also Baldi 2020; Laviosa 2021). If the experience of the Latin American students is particularly well known, as among them were some of the key figures of Latin American cinema and culture of the second half of the twentieth century, such as Julio Garcia Espinosa, Fernando Birri, Gabriel Garcia Marquez (who did not complete the degree) and others (Francese 2009), less known is the history of the African students who attended the school. Among them was Johannes Yemane, the Eritrean filmmaker who contributed to the production of *A testimonianza di una condizione* together with four of his fellow CSC students. Yemane graduated in 1978 and later went back to Eritrea to join the Eritrean People's Liberation Front and fight for Eritrea's independence from Ethiopia, but while he was in Rome he engaged in the artistic and political activism that characterised the students' life in the Italian capital at the time.

As Maria Coletti (2024) underscores, Yemane enrolled at the Centro Sperimentale when he was 28. An already experienced and well-travelled young men, holding a degree in sociology from the University of Rome La Sapienza, he had a scholarship from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to conduct historical research about Eritrea, and wished to study cinema because, as he wrote in his application letter to the CSC, "cinema in Eritrea is in its infancy, or even at an embryonic stage. There are no filmmakers, no local productions to mention, so it is necessary for my land to have one of her sons studying this means of communication" (Yemane quoted in Coletti 2024: 75). As student, he was part of a relatively international cohort, with 9 foreigners (including two other Africans, Mathilda Dixon from Nigeria and Jean Akighe Mba from Gabon) and 31 Italians, who were living "in a post-68 environment, an internationalist spirit […] – as Ali Reza Movahed explained in interviews –. We were a well-integrated group and we often organized political gatherings. We enjoyed ourself together a lot" (Reza Movahed quoted in Coletti 2024, 76).

To better understand the politics at play in the production of a film like *A testimonianza di una condizione*, it is not enough to mention the simple coincidence of Yemane studying

together with four other aspiring filmmakers of various origins (Federico Bruno, Giovanni Gervasi, Ali Reza Movahed and Paolo Rossato) and collaborating for the production of a short film, for their first year examination. Rather, it is important to underline how, the 1960s and 1970s were a period of intense intellectual and political interest by Italian artists (and particularly filmmakers) for African liberation struggles and, more generally, Third World politics and non-Aligned solidarities (Caminati 2022; Mestman 2021). As Luca Caminati underscores,

> While the political and cultural impact of the third-world liberation movements has been largely erased from the Italian cultural landscape – in a way mirroring the erasure of Italy's own colonial past – popular images of terzomondismo (third worldism) are omnipresent in the visual landscape of the time. [Within this context, it is possible to imagine 1960s and 1970s Italian cinema] as part of a much larger system of global radical geopolitical engagement. […] the act of situating it within this wider sphere emphasizes how much it was influenced by, and responded to, the theoretical and artistic developments outside of Europe, from Algerian post-revolutionary cinema to the Latin American formulations of Third Cinema (2022: 140, 143).

Traces of this dense landscape of political solidarities and aesthetic collaborations are visible in the "Archivio Audiovisivo del Movimento Operaio e Democratico - AAMOD" (Audio-visual Archive of the Workers and Democratic movements), based in Rome, the place where I first had the opportunity to encounter *A testimonianza di una condizione* (Jedlowski forthcoming). Originally created to keep the audio-visual archives of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), AAMOD progressively became "one of the essential audio-visual archives for the history of Italian and international militant cinema" (Folens and Lancialonga 2021: 131), as it includes thousands of hours of footages and edited materials relating to political struggles and experimental activist filmmaking from all over the world. Despite being freely accessible on AAMOD YouTube channel[2], *A testimonianza di una condizione* received very little scholarly attention to date, and to my knowledge, it was only presented publicly once in recent years, during a retrospective on Italian colonialism organized by the Casa internazionale delle donne in Rome, in collaboration with AAMOD, the Instituto Luce and the Griot Bookshop (cf. Coletti 2024). The following sections of this essay try to fill this gap by providing a detailed analysis of the film so as to highlight its contribution for the understanding of the role that African memories of Europe can play in reconfiguring European collective identities.

A unique document: *A testimonianza di una condizione – 2000 eritrei a Roma*

The black and white short film *A testimonianza di una condizione – 2000 eritrei a Roma* opens with a long travelling shot of Via Giovanni Giolitti, the narrow road that longs Rome's main train station, Termini, and its imposing Fascist architecture. The camera moves down the road and drives the viewer to Piazza dei Cinquecento, the large square

[2] The film can be watched at the following link: http://patrimonio.aamod.it/aamod-web/film/detail/IL8700001916/22/a-testimonianza-condizione.html?startPage=0&idFondo=

that sits in front of the train station and hosts a busy bus terminal. Buses come and leave full of passengers, dispatching them to the different neighbourhoods of the city, and a few African men profit from the bustling atmosphere to sell commodities on a few informal stalls. The square's name is heavily connected to the Italian colonial past (the *Cinquecento* are the more than five hundred Italian soldiers who died in the battle of Dogali in 1887, one of the largest defeats ever experienced by a colonial army during the European expansion in Africa) and in front of the camera we see unfolding the consequences of colonial past on the Italian society. The camera moves around the square and captures the fugitive image of a few African women, wearing light white veils on their heads, many of them running away from the camera objective: we recognize their traditional East African garments before one of them explicitly introduces herself as an Eritrean woman.

The first who speaks in the film, whose face we do not see, clearly sets the tone for what will follow: "noi qui all'estero, in Italia, ci troviamo molto male, davvero molto male. [...] Bene o male riusciamo a trovare un posto [di lavoro] ma è il posto a cui hanno rinunciato non solo le donne italiane ma tutti gli altri stranieri, in posti proprio orribili, con famiglie proprio pestifere"[3]. The woman that we meet just after is younger, she presents herself and tells us that she has arrived in Italy in 1973 together with an Italian family, to study and work as house help. She explains that, once in Italy, the family forbade her to go to university and obliged her instead to focus only on domestic work. She recalls how she escaped from this family only to end up working in another one which equally made it impossible for her to study. She finally landed, more than three years after arriving in Italy, in a family that allowed her to do what she had originally come to Italy for (going to university) on the side of her domestic job. The tone of the interviewee's voice is far from scared and intimidated by the camera. She is firm, her voice does not betray any uncertainty. Filmic choices by the authors are significant here: the zoom on her face demonstrates her strength as she lists the tasks required of her in the house where she worked as a maid; the shot of her fierce profile confirms her political awareness.

These first two encounters introduce the main topic of the film: the exploitation of Eritrean migrants, and particularly women, by Italian families, and their active rebellion and search for a better future. Contrary to a film like Sembene Ousmane's classic *La Noire de…* (1966), in which the protagonist, the young Senegalese woman Diouana (interpreted by Mbissine Thérèse Diop), is exploited by her hosting family in France and commits suicide as a result of the suffering and discrimination that she experiences after coming to Europe, here we are clearly presented, from the beginning of the film, with a different situation. The migrant women the film focuses on are politically conscious and willing to fight. They are often filmed from below, as to pay a tribute to their autonomy and strength. After introducing herself, for instance, the young woman at the beginning of the film describes her intense daily life, shared between the long hours spent working for her host family and the almost clandestine time (early in the morning and throughout

[3] Translation: "Here, abroad, in Italy, find ourselves in a very bad, really very bad situation [...] For better or worse we manage to find a job, but it is the place that not only Italian women but all the other foreigners have given up on, in truly horrible places, with truly pestiferous families".

the night) invested in studying to earn a better future. She explains that, while she has good interactions with other Italian students, her favourite time of the week is when she meets her fellow Eritreans, every Thursdays and Sundays.

Following this biographical account, the documentary enters a particularly interesting sequence, which introduces the viewer to the political world of the Eritrean community based in Rome. As the young woman explains, during the community meetings, those who can read and write attend courses in political education, and the analphabets are taught how to read and write. We thus follow a group of Eritrean women as they cross Rome on a public bus and land in a peripheral neighbourhood to participate to one of the Sunday community meetings, which takes place in what appears to be a sort of circus tent. At this point the voice-over of an Eritrean man explains in Italian that the Eritrean community gathers in places like this

per discutere della linea politica del fronte popolare [l'EPLF] e anche per riscoprire la nostra cultura originaria e per mantenere vive le nostre tradizioni culturali. Questi momenti comuni per noi rappresentano una risposta all'emarginazione che siamo costretti a subire nelle grandi città europee[4].

The camera then spend a few minutes wondering around the large theatre, crowded by a mostly Eritrean and African audience, overwhelmingly made of women, and showing us scenes of music and dance performances as well as inaudible political speeches by an Eritrean man dressed with military attires. A few billboards in Italian are visible, such as one that signals that we are witnessing a gathering devoted to a special cause: it is the 30th of April and the community is celebrating the martyrs of the Eritrean secessionist rebellion against Ethiopia. The fact that the billboard is in Italian, as well as the fact that all protagonists in the film speak in Italian rather than Tigrinya signal EPLF's efforts to gather international support for its cause by targeting non-Eritrean audiences (cf. Cohen 2023). Beyond these details, it is important to underline the strength of this sequence which makes us aware of the existence of a strongly Afrocentric world in the very heart of a European capital, at a time in which migration from Africa to Italy was largely ignored as a phenomenon by Italian media and local scholars alike.

Once the sequence is over, we are back on a public bus, together with another Eritrean woman, travelling through the EUR, a neighbourhood that is considered as iconic of fascist-style architecture. Throughout the short ride, the same Eritrean man's voice-over that we heard earlier explains us that

la sua storia personale [della donna eritrea che sta viagiando sull'autobus] riflette la storia dell'Eritrea, una storia fatta di colonialismo e di oppressione, prima dai turchi e dagli egizi, poi dal

[4] Translation: "to discuss the political orientation of our political liberation front [the EPLF] and to rediscover our culture and keep our cultural traditions alive. These shared moments for us represent a response to the marginalization that we are forced to suffer in the big European cities."

colonialismo italiano del periodo fascista, e oggi dal colonialismo etiopico. Oggi il popolo eritreo lotta per la sua liberazione al pari degli altri popoli del terzo mondo[5].

It is interesting to note how the emphasis, here and elsewhere in the film, is put on the connection between Italian colonialism and the fascist regime, even if the Italian occupation of Eritrea began much earlier than the arrival of Mussolini to power. This seems to mirror what was a common reading of the Italian colonial past in Italy at the time, a reading that allowed people to pretend that Italians were "brava gente", good people (Del Boca 2005), and that colonialism had only been a parenthesis in the country's recent past – the result of the fascist regime political ambitions and excessive use of violence. This reading of colonialism also helped in consolidating the complicity between EPLF and Italian leftist movements, around a common condemnation of fascism and its consequences at home and abroad.

Two more interviews with Eritrean women describing their exploitation follow this sequence, with the second one adding further interesting details about the tribulation encountered by these women to survive the hardship of their life in Italy. The interviewee in fact describes how, in order to escape her host family's exploitation (including their demand to work sixteen hours a day with no week leaves), she went to the Ethiopian embassy and later to the *questura* (the police station), only to hear officials telling her that, since she had a contract with the family, they could not do anything about it. As a result, the woman explains, she fled the house overnight and found refuge in some fellow Eritrean's home. This story allows her to offer further details on the political fabric of the Eritrean community in Italy:

sapevo dalla dura oppressione che avevo già vissuto nel mio paese che noi, per liberarci dallo sfruttamento, dovevamo lottare duramente. Pur avendo tutti questi problemi per poter vivere in Italia, noi eritrei all'estero siamo organizzati e ben uniti per seguire con la linea che ha il nostro fronte popolare di liberazione[6].

The interview goes on describing the details of the EPLF activities among diasporic women living in Rome, including evening schools dedicated to the alphabetization and the ideological education of the community.

This sequence is particularly interesting as it points at the continuity between colonial forms of subjugation and the exploitation experienced in the colonial metropole. The woman underlines vigorously that belonging to a political movement based in her home country has made her political emancipation in the diaspora possible. This shows that, while much existing literature has insisted on the role that diasporas played in the

[5] Translation: "her personal story [of the Eritrean woman travelling on the bus] reflects the history of Eritrea, a history of colonialism and oppression, first by the Turks and the Egyptians, then by Italian colonialism during the fascist period, and today by Ethiopian colonialism. Today the Eritrean people are fighting for their liberation like other third world peoples".

[6] Translation: "I knew from the harsh oppression that I had already experienced in my country that we had to fight hard to free ourselves from exploitation. Even though we have all these problems to be able to live in Italy, we Eritreans abroad are organized and well united to follow the line dictated by that our popular liberation front".

organization and support of liberation movements across Africa, political activism in the home country also had an impact, the other way around, influencing the life of people away from home and helping them in their struggle against exploitation in the host country. No doubts, the strong and uncritical support that the film offers to the EPLF is a trace of Yemane's connection with the movement and a tribute to the capillary presence that the EPLF had in Rome throughout the 1960s and 1970s. And in this sense, the film willingly closes an eye on the fact that the Eritrean community in Rome, in those years, was going through a moment of strong political division between the supporters of the ELF and those of the newly formed organisation of the EPLF (cf. Pool 1980), and prefers to idealize the Eritreans in Rome as a homogeneous and politically coherent group. However, beyond its political partisanship, the film offers an original and insightful look into the political interactions existing between Africans in the diaspora and in the continent.

The following sequence explicitly declares its support for the EPLF through an interview with the movement spokesperson in Rome who discusses in fluent Italian the advancements of the struggle against Ethiopia and the reforms that the EPLF has introduced in the liberated villages in Eritrea. Here too a direct parallel is made between the struggle in the Horn, the complicated situation of the Eritrean refugees displaced in Sudan, and the life of the more than five thousand Eritrean migrants living in Italy, who are described as living in very difficult conditions. This confirms the idea, already expressed elsewhere in the film, that the liberation struggle against the Ethiopian hegemony at home and against postcolonial exploitation abroad are part of the same revolutionary effort.

The film then continues showing further images of political meetings held by the Eritrean community in the premises of the EPLF's Roman headquarters. The film closing sequence follows again an Eritrean woman wondering around the city of Rome, this time accompanied by an evocative song in Tigrinya, which makes the underlying nostalgia for the homeland physically palpable. The last shot is particularly significant: an Eritrean woman crosses an Italian family and the Italian woman turns to look at her. In so doing, the scene summarizes the particular experience of Eritrean women discussed in the film, and highlights how, in this period of Italian history, the burden of reproductive work is progressively shifted onto the shoulders of migrant women.

Re-envisioning the Italian past through the prism of African experiences

As the detailed analysis of the film suggests, *A testimonianza di una condizione* is a valuable document to open up our understanding of Italian recent past so as to re-envision it through the prism of the African experience. First of all, what this film highlights is the longer-term history of African migration to Italy. Far from the contemporary emphasis in the Italian political and media discourse on migration as a "crisis" and an "emergency"– terms that imply the unfolding of an unexpected and unprecedented phenomenon – *A testimonianza di una condizione* testifies for the scale and rootedness of the African presence in Italy well-before the late-1980s and early-1990s, the dates most

often mentioned to indicate the beginning of migration fluxes to Italy from Africa. As the Italian historian Valeria Deplano underscores, in fact,

> even if in small numbers and located in specific areas of the country, the first foreigners arrived in Italy well before the 1980s, and many of them came from the former colonies. Starting from the mid-1960s and then in the 1970s, in conjunction with the wars that tormented the Horn of Africa, the large Italian cities were in fact the destination of the diaspora from Eritrea and Somalia. [For instance] in the 1970s Somalis, Eritreans and Ethiopians constituted 30% of the foreigners present in Rome (2014: 334, my translation; see also Andall 2005; Morone 2015).

The film vividly highlights the fact that women constituted an important share of these first waves of migration from Africa to Italy, and the specificity of their experience of life in the Peninsula offers important elements to complicate our understanding of Italian women's emancipation in the 1960s and 1970s (Gissi 2022). As Italian Studies scholar Jacqueline Andall's (2000) pioneer work on this topic shows, and *A testimonianza di una condizione* confirms, during this period Italian middle-class women were in many cases unable to radically transform the division of labour inside the family and instead opted to transfer the weight of the patriarchal organization of the private sphere on the shoulders of less advantaged, mostly immigrant women. "This dynamic, which involved the crucial articulation of competences considered inherently gendered, implie[d] much more than a mere economic exchange, which often weighed on the 'wife's' income and not on the overall family budget. This exchange entailed the reaffirmation of the idea that immigrants had to fulfil a biological destiny" (Gissi 2022: 136), that is, women's destiny to occupy the domestic sphere so as to allow Italian men to maintain their hegemonic position in the public space – the position they traditionally occupied in the Italian society. The women interviewed in the film well express the frustration that results from this situation. Because of the ongoing conflict in Eritrea and the influence that EPLF's Marxist-Leninist ideology played on them (Wilson 1991), many of these women had strong sentiments about the need to transform the role of women in society. They came to Italy with the ambition to study and build a better future for themselves and their country. These ambitions often conflicted with the aspirations of their Italian, upper-middle class counterparts, who more often than not ended up relying on immigrant female labour to replace them in their domestic tasks.

The underlying racism of the Italian society which many of the women in the film denounce, complicated the picture, making it difficult for these parallel struggles for emancipation to converge. As the film vividly show, while the number of immigrants in the country was still low, Italy was hardly the country of the "brava gente" that many Italians (back then and still today) believed it to be (cf. Del Boca 2005). Well before the tragic killing of Jerry Masslo in Villa Literno in 1989 and the public indignation that it provoked (Pompei 2020), black people were openly discriminated and stigmatised in the Italian society (Deplano 2014: 344-355). Leonardo de Franceschi's (2013) edited book on the history of the black presence on Italian screens since the early twentieth century clearly illustrate this point, but *A testimonianza di una condizione* is a visual document of

particular value in this sense as the experience of discrimination is narrated directly by the people who lived it, in explicit and unfiltered terms.

However, if *A testimonianza di una condizione* is certainly a document about the racism and discrimination experienced by an African community in Italy, it is also a document about the strength of the leftist political internationalism that grounded political and artistic complicities between African and European people. The vast and structured presence of the EPLF in Rome, which the film very-well explores, is not only the result of the intricate political aftermaths of the Italian colonial presence in Eritrea (Puddu 2019). It is also the result of the complex web of political collaborations that connected African liberation struggles and European leftist movements (Blum et al. 2022; Borruso 2009) as well as African and European artistic avantgardes (Caminati 2022; Mestman 2021; Gray 2020). If this vast horizon of artistic collaborations, political complicities, and long-term friendships has today almost gone out of sight, *A testimonianza di una condizione* shows that its historical importance should not be discarded. Its vision for the possibility of a different relation between Africa and Europe can in fact constitute a positive aspiration to counter the dystopic future of a xenophobic Europe, fortressed onto itself.

Conclusion

In this essay I analysed an important as much as little-studied visual document about the experience of Eritrean people in Italy in the 1970s that can contribute to complexifying our understanding of the Italian recent past. In so doing I argued for the importance of considering African memories of Europe as constitutive of European memory and identity-making processes. As discussed throughout the essay, *A testimonianza di una condizione* is a document that offers several contributions in this sense.

First of all, it is a film that offers us a glimpse of the life of a section of an African community in Italy at a time in which almost no debate about migration to Italy from Africa yet existed, and thus contributes to reshaping the chronology of this phenomenon to better incorporate the experiences of the first waves of African migrants to the Peninsula, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, to our understanding of Italian social, cultural and demographic transformations in the twentieth century. By putting a particular accent on Eritrean people's testimonies of experiences of racism and exploitation in Italy, it also clearly opposes simplistic narratives about the Italian society's pretended welcoming attitude to foreigners, that characterized Italy's self-representation until recently. Secondly, by focusing in particular on the position of African women in this context, it contributes to complicating our understanding of women's struggles for emancipation in Italy over that period, and the diverging paths that at times this fight took for Italian and African women living side by side. Thirdly, by putting a particular emphasis on the political organization of members of the Eritrean community in Rome, the film shows the influence that African liberation movements had on the life of African diasporas living in Europe, as well as on their own struggles against exploitation. And it highlights the complicity that existed between such movements and the various instances of leftist political and artistic activism that were active in Europe at the time. Overall, the film invites us to take into consideration both the long-term history of exploitative and racist attitudes toward African people in

Italy, and the more encouraging existence of significant experiences of collaboration, complicity and solidarity which made the production of a film like *A testimonianza di una condizione* possible.

As the feminist theorist and historian of photography Laura Wexler suggested, visual documents like photographs and documentary films do not show us "the way things were", but they rather testify for "a record of choices", and "it is only through understanding the choices that have been made between alternatives—learning what won out and what was lost, how it happened and at what cost—that the meaning of the past can appear" (quoted in Campt 2012: 5). *A testimonianza di una condizione* is a film that makes the choice to testify for the violence and discrimination experienced by African migrants in Italy, but it does so by opting for the portrayal of strong, active and outspoken women (rather than resigned or passive victims), and for an artistic and political endeavour based on the solidarity between African and Italian intellectuals and artists. We face today the dilemma of similar choices about how to denounce existing injustices while investing in the possibility for intercultural dialogue and collaboration. *A testimonianza di una condizione* might offer us the inspiration to find the right answers.

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