

## WHAT IS BLACK AMERICA FOR ITALY? WHAT IS ITALY FOR BLACK AMERICA?: RACE AND CULTURE IN TRANSNATIONAL EXCHANGES BETWEEN ITALY AND THE UNITED STATES

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*Niente mi ha reso davvero libera come viaggiare. Sono nata dentro quel piroscapo che mi portava a Liverpool, in Europa. Nata a diciannove anni. Solcando quel mare dove la mia gente, la gente nera, ha sofferto l'inferno. Ed è superando l'inferno che sono rinata. Ora sto di nuovo partendo [...] Sto andando a conoscere la terra in cui finalmente potrò essere me stessa.*  
(Scego, 2020:113).

As I was reading Igiaba Scego's 2020 novel, *La linea del colore. Il grand tour di Lafanu Brown*, about the fictional African American Lafanu Brown's time in 19<sup>th</sup> century Italy, this quotation particularly stood out to me. Not only does it highlight a central theme of my research, but it also deals with one of the main questions I am asking in my current project. For the former, *viaggiare* can be used to characterise my projects as I have examined the ways in which American culture traveled to Italy, primarily in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the impact it had and still has on Italian society. Having explored the place and significance of American female consumer culture in Italy in the three decades after the Second World War for my first book, *Italian Women's Experiences with American Consumer Culture, 1945-1975: The Italian Mrs. Consumer* (2020), my attention has now turned to another aspect of female American culture in 20<sup>th</sup> century Italy: the presence of African American women in Italian film, television, music, and fashion.

Using the ideas of travel and mobility, this new project traces these women's journeys to Italy as a democratic republic, which was seeking to distance itself from an unwanted Fascist legacy, in order to bring to

light new stories in Italy's history. Moreover, this project uses critical race studies as its primary analytical lens, examining the women's representation in Italian media and their reception by the country's public to enrich, deepen, and diversify our understandings of the history of race relations in the peninsula. Scholarship on race in Italy, while being a relatively recent development, has primarily investigated the indigenous populations in Italy's colonies, their descendants, or migrants from Africa. More recently, important work has been done on the African American presence in postwar Italy by scholars, such as Shelleen Greene (2012), Charles L. Leavitt IV (2013, 2019), Melanie Masterton Sherazi (2019) and Silvana Patriarca (2022), which has served to expand the parameters of the historical narrative of race and Italy. By analysing the lives and positionality of African American women, such as singer, dancer, and actress Lola Falana, model and actress Donyale Luna and soprano Leontyne Price, my project contributes to diversifying and adding nuance to this area of research<sup>1</sup>. For example, where do African American women fit in Italy's racial landscape? Are they viewed and treated in a similar manner to women from Africa, especially those coming from Italy's former colonies? In other words, does coming from the United States, a superpower at the time with a strong global cultural presence, or coming from a continent that had been colonised and exploited by European countries play a significant role in determining one's status? In this vein, another important consideration is that of the specific conditions that allowed these African American female entertainers to travel to and work in Italy. How did race, class and gender intersect to contribute to their mobility?

In addition to examining the ways in which Falana, Luna and Pryce moved into and through Italian society, the project also explores the movement of ideas, specifically, those regarding race. Did American

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<sup>1</sup> Lola Falana starred in three Italian films in 1967 — *Quando dico che ti amo*, dir. Giorgio Bianchi; *Lola Colt: Faccia a faccia con El Diablo*, dir. Siro Marcellini; and *Stasera mi butto*, dir. Ettore Maria Fizzarotti — as well as co-starred in RAI's ten-episode variety program *Sabato sera*, dir. Antonello Falqui. She returned to Italian television in 1971 appearing in RAI's *Teatro 10*, dir. Antonello Falqui, in 1973, co-starring in another RAI variety program, *Hai visto mai?*, dir. Enzo Trapani and in the 1980s, in a Fininvest program. Donyale Luna, notable for being the first Black woman to appear on a cover of *Vogue* (*British Vogue*, March 1966), appeared in fashion spreads in Italian magazines and in Federico Fellini's *Satyricon* (1969) and Carmelo Bene's *Salomè* (1972). Leontyne Price made her La Scala debut in 1960 in *Aida*.

notions of race accompany these women as they travelled to Italy and possibly contribute to influencing Italian understandings of race and ultimately, Italian national identity formation? Moreover, how did the racialised discourse and thinking of the Fascist era affect representations and understandings of these women?

Additionally, instead of looking solely at the Italian aspect and the American impact in Italy, I am also interested in how these women's Italian experiences affected their own understandings of race, especially as racism and discrimination were still firmly embedded in the United States. In this manner, the words of Lafanu Brown, quoted above, speak to another line of inquiry of this project. Did travelling to Italy free these women from the restraints and restrictions of racism in the States? For example, when Lola Falana came to Italy, the Civil Rights Movement in the United States had achieved significant goals with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. However, racism, discrimination, police brutality towards African Americans, and economic injustice continued to persist in American society, leading to the rise of the Black Power movement in 1965. Thus, when Black America was expressing a stronger and more assertive stance against injustice, Falana arrived in Italy. Therefore, did Italy offer an escape or alternative to the marginalization of African Americans in the US?

This project's focus on travel, mobility and race not only provides new insight into the historic relationship between Italy and the United States, but also adds new stories and understandings to the history of race relations in Italy, which is an integral part of the Italian story.

## References

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