

I NERI BIANCHI: REPRESENTATIONS OF ITALIAN PRISONERS OF WAR TROUBLING RACIAL IDENTITY

NICOLA CLOETE
(University of the Witwatersrand, RSA)
and
DONATO SOMMA
(University of the Witwatersrand, RSA)

Sommario

*I quasi 100 000 prigionieri di guerra italiani sparsi per il Sudafrica durante e dopo la Seconda Guerra Mondiale rappresentano un prolungato e significativo incontro tra sudafricani e italiani. Gli italiani sconvolsero e sovvertirono categorie razziali già consolidate nel paese. Questo articolo ripercorre i punti di rottura nella memoria e nell'immaginario pubblico degli ex prigionieri di guerra italiani (IPOW) in Sudafrica in un momento particolare della storia sudafricana, la fine degli anni '80. Presentiamo un contrappunto alle narrazioni più comuni sulla categoria razziale del "bianco", offrendo una attenta lettura dell'assoggettamento degli IPOW a vite razzializzate in Sudafrica attraverso l'analisi dell'episodio "I Neri Bianchi" all'interno del documentario *Cattivi Italiani in Sud Africa (1941-1947)* (Moni 1989). L'esperienza dell'identità politica e visiva nera, sovrapposta a categorizzazioni regionali e di classe già complesse, rende l'esperienza di questi prigionieri di guerra uno studio unico nel contesto razziale della metà del XX secolo. A livello teorico, l'articolo attinge agli studi sull'identità bianca e sull'identità italiana per considerare l'incontro tra sudafricani bianchi e prigionieri di guerra italiani e la conseguente definizione dell'identità bianca prima dell'entrata in vigore del razzismo istituzionalizzato. Nell'articolo, sosteniamo che il modo in cui i prigionieri di guerra italiani percepivano la propria identità bianca fosse prevalentemente influenzato dal loro senso di "italianità" e che questo fu elemento di disturbo verso i modi consolidati di rappresentare l'identità bianca in Sudafrica all'epoca. Questa complicità per l'identità bianca (costruita lungo le linee delle etnie culturali inglese e afrikaans) viene presentata nel contesto del Sudafrica degli anni '80. Nell'articolo, consideriamo quali furono le implicazioni in quel periodo.*

Keywords: Whiteness, Italian Prisoners of War, South African history, Apartheid history, World War II

Introduction

We read an episode of the multi-part documentary, *Captivi Italici in Sud Africa (1941-1947)* directed by Steve Moni as evidence of multiple and changing experiences of the racial categorisation of Italian Prisoners of War (IPOWs) and whiteness in South Africa. As such, we consider two interconnected contexts and timeframes. The first is that of the IPOWs in South Africa and the second explores race and racialisation practices in South Africa. The documentary refers to the 1940s as remembered by Italian-South Africans, during the 1980s in South Africa. We focus on part three of the documentary which expounds on discussions of race explicitly and utilises these two historical backgrounds to map and analyse the discursive constructs of racial categorisation and whiteness.

IPOWs in South Africa

Allied troops in North Africa were obliged to take custody of the POWs that surrendered to them in their own country. Following brutal transit camps in North Africa, regarding which IPOWs relate their treatment in cramped holding pens, the Italians captured by South African troops were shipped down the east coast of the continent to South Africa (Sani, 1992:297). From Durban they went by rail to Zonderwater (“Without Water”) some fifty kilometers north of Pretoria. Initially, they lived in tented camps, where many died from lightning strikes to the mineral-rich earth below and eventually an IPOW town was built that housed 90,000 prisoners, the largest Allied-run camp in the Southern Hemisphere. Conditions improved steadily as local South African Italians began to help, and a sympathetic commander Col. Prinsloo (who had been in a British-run concentration camp as a child during the Second Boer War) held the camp to very high standards in line with the Geneva Convention. He determined to make it a model camp (298-299).

Following the shift in allegiance of Italy during the war, IPOWs were permitted to work at external work camps and farms. Many did so, and their encounter with the daily life of South Africans was at its most intimate. After the war many IPOWs went into hiding to escape compulsory repatriation, which only ended in 1947, and hoped to naturalise in South Africa. Others applied for citizenship in the face of resistance from the post-war Afrikaner Nationalist government, wary as it was of an influx of Catholic and potentially communist Italians (Sani, 1992:308-315)¹.

Decades later, the filmmaker, Stephen Moni, an Italian-South African contended with the expectations and contradictions of race during Apartheid. In his youth, Moni was part of the first interracial South African punk band, 'National Wake', which produced music in the late 1970s and early 1980s – often coming right up against the apartheid machinery. The band gained some notoriety and was very up-front in its anti-apartheid stance². Racial categorisation was a cornerstone of Apartheid South African ideology and legislation. This categorisation began in the colonial period and was adapted and repurposed through successive regimes of white social, economic and political domination, culminating in the total legislation of South African lives along racial lines in a raft of laws passed between 1950 and their gradual dismantling in the 1980s³. These laws drew on long-

¹ Key works dealing with the overall historiography of the IPOWs in South Africa are Gazzini's 1987 first-hand "Zonderwater: *I prigionieri in Sud Africa* (1941-1947)", Sani's (1992) *History of the Italians in South Africa 1489-1989* reflects on the place of Italians in South African history generally. In the latter, the IPOW experience forms an important part. Scholarly works include Milanese's dissertation on letters from the camps and their relation to Italian identity more broadly (2002) and Horn's dissertation (2012) and subsequent focus on the first years of the Zonderwater Camp (2022).

² The two black members, Gary and Punka Khoza have died, victims of mental health issues and AIDS pandemic respectively. Both white members emigrated, and the story of the band is largely untold, mainly because of the pressure that fractured them and the subsequent social conditions that scattered them (Petridis 2013). Nevertheless, it had a brief resurgence in interest following the *Punk in Africa* documentary (Maas and Jones 2012). Prior to National Wake Moni was in the less well-known but influential Safari Suits, a new-wave punk band based in Cape Town. His work as documentary filmmaker has focused on the social and historical contexts of South African lives, with a recent documentary edit of *This is National Wake* (2022) returning to his time as punk musician in late apartheid.

³ Apartheid legislation was built on extant colonial laws. The shift from cultural segregation to legislated "separate development" is discernible in changes in focus for racist legislation from about 1950; from land and labour to education, miscegenation, legal rights and amenities. This, along with the continuing stranglehold on land rights and labour made for an all-

standing social practices of racial separation entrenched in the cultures of the two dominant white linguistic/cultural groups in South Africa: namely English-speaking and Afrikaans-speaking. White South Africa, though aligned on general principles on the place of 'natives' in the South African social landscape, was deeply divided by the question of South Africa's place in the Second World War, with the English-speaking faction firmly in support of the Empire, and the Afrikaans-speaking divided between those who aligned with empire as a cipher for progress and modernity and those who felt that an emerging republic, founded on Afrikaner agrarian culture, was best served by staying out of the war. An alternative was aligning with its closer ethnic, nationalist parallel in Nazi Germany, who were also resisting Britain (see Simpson, 2022).

Whiteness and Italian Ethnicity in South Africa

We suggest that social experiences of race in South Africa, particularly experiences of 'whiteness' were troubled, at least temporarily, by IPOWs. Their presence in South Africa's regime of whiteness and its insistence on policing the boundaries of race meant that the very categories of race were continuously called into question – see the discussion of *italianità* below.

The self-image of *italiani brava gente* claims the intrinsic goodness of the Italian people. A myth built following Italy's failed colonial enterprises and compounded following the defeat of Fascism after WWII, Favero (2010) argues that the self-image of the *italiani brava gente* is central to the construction of modern Italian identity and functions ideologically to "reformulate and then set aside disquieting moments of national shame" (2010:140).

The racialisation of immigrant communities into whiteness has been the subject of Italian American studies (Luconi, 2011; Guglielmo & Salerno, 2003; Alba, 1985). The focus of identity politics in this scholarship includes the consideration of how Italian immigrants were re-ethnicised as part of their experience within America. There is also literature that suggests the contrary, focused on how projecting and achieving the status of white identity is "a rite of passage by which,

pervasive separation and systematic oppression of people in "non-white" racial categories. See "Apartheid Legislation 1850s-1970s" at *South African History Online*.

besides Americanizing themselves, Caucasian immigrant groups undertake a racist route" (Lipsitz, 1998, cited in Luconi, 2011:152).

In the South African context, Marchetti-Mercer and Virga have more recently discussed the Italian diaspora and their identities within the country (2021, 2023). The authors focus on the complexity of Italian diasporas in South Africa, focused on third generations of descendants of Italian immigrants, and how their Italian identity is shaped through nostalgia, as they navigate belonging. The authors work with the concept of *italianità* to explore the ethnic identity of their research participants.

Italianità, according to Marchetti-Mercer and Virga, "refers to a culturally and historically constructed and changeable concept, fluid and ambiguous by nature [...] it is influenced by social and political events in Italy, but, for Italians living abroad, also by social and political events in the destination country" (2023:25-26). This use of the term is significant in our understanding of how the ex-IPOWs reminisce about their experiences of white South Africa in the documentary.

The documentary was released in Italian in 1989. In that year the apartheid state was under constant guerilla attack in major cities and small towns, with limpet and car bombs an almost weekly occurrence across 1988 and 1989. The South African Border War (1966-1989) was winding down but mired in the complexity of the South African extrication from the then Southwest Africa. International sanctions were still exerting immense economic pressure in South Africa. Our close reading follows the themes that emerge in part three of the documentary.

Stella Bruzzi (2006) notes that documentaries are not passive representations of truth but are instead active, ever-changing narrative constructions that are shaped by performative choices of their creators and subjects. As such they reflect the inherent subjectivity of storytelling, where the act of documentation itself becomes a performance of sorts that continuously shifts and adapts. We consider the layering of interview testimony, narrative context, and the affective framing of the soundtrack – utilising the concepts and approaches to cultural ethnicity described above as our critical framework.

According to Bruzzi (6-7), documentary film exists in a state of productive tension. On the one side is the filmmaker's desire to capture and present absolute truth or reality. On the other side is the

fundamental impossibility of ever achieving that pure objectivity. Rather than seeing this as a failure, Bruzzi suggests this tension is actually what defines the form and its generative capacities. We see this dialectical tension evidenced in the distance in time from the subject matter of the IPOWS in South Africa and the attempts at revisiting and understanding this period by the filmmaker.

I Neri Bianchi⁴

Every episode of the series begins with an establishing shot of the stone facade of the church built by IPOWs on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg, in what is now KwaZulu-Natal. This is followed by a medium shot of the classical pediment and its Latin inscription to Mother Mary from the Italian captives AD 1944. "*Captivi Italici*" gives its name to the series and the combination in this shot of the church that is humble in scale but dignified with classical references and proportions, along with a few bars of stately, restrained string orchestration, sets the tone of the series: a respectful portrait of dignified men. This is a well-used documentary film strategy, to present a world as complete and resolved, and then, through deeper investigation, to show that things are not always what they seem and have not always been so.

Bill Nichols (2017) identified various paradigms for classifying documentaries which have been refined in recent years. This documentary can be read as both expository and participatory; expository documentaries are characterised by ethical concerns related to historical accuracy and verifiability, classic oration aiming to inform and move the audience through the use of the voice-over, and sound that tends towards being expressive and cognitive and fully controlled by the filmmaker (108). Participatory documentary modes include a dialectical engagement between the filmmaker and the subject in this instance through the investment in the encounter of the interview (109).

The format of this Italian language documentary is conversational, with ex-IPOWs and South African interviewees in informal settings,

⁴ The documentary is available in its entirety from the Dante Alighieri Society Johannesburg. Our thanks to Steve Moni for providing us with a Master copy of the work to analyse. Our thanks also to Claudia Dallabona, who gave so generously of her time to discuss translations of the work.

sometimes in the places where the events discussed took place. They respond to an off-camera interviewer, and the candid, sometimes confessional tone of the interviews is often a result of protracted interviews where they are put at ease. Many are smoking, having a glass of wine, in their homes, kitchens, libraries or places of work. Others are gathered for lunch, or in a club room, and a few are at the places where they worked or lived during internment. A disembodied narrator links the edited sections of interview material, providing context for each part of the conversation. The viewer does not hear the questions asked.

The other three parts of the series present aspects of the IPOW experience that, while interesting in themselves, do not come close to the candour in the third part, where the discomfort of how an enemy national and prisoner of war becomes a co-national is explored⁵. From the largely middle-class affluence of their current positions, they remember a time when they were not necessarily welcome. Structurally then, the documentary develops a dialectical tension (Bruzzi, 2006) through interspersed cuts between interviews conducting in the 1980s, archival footage, ambient soundtrack with affective qualities and the use of the voice-over narration to fill in the gaps in historical time and to provide context.

Two threads run through the hour-long episode, the one explores the developing closeness between those imprisoned for refusing to recant fascism, and who were moved to a camp for officers of rank in *Koffiefontein* (in the then Orange Free State), where they shared clandestine communications with Nazi-sympathisers and Afrikaner

⁵ The documentary *Captivi Italici in Sud Africa (1941-1947)*, un documentario in quattro parti (Moni 1989) presents a four-part chronology of the IPOW experience from capture in North Africa and transport to South Africa (*Prima parte, Prigionieri del sud*), through to the formation of the "City of the Prisoner" (*Seconda parte, Città del prigioniero*). The third and fourth parts explore the life of the prisoners in South Africa. The third part, explores the IPOWs status as cheap labour, bringing them into the context of racialised work in South Africa (*Terza parte, I neri bianchi*). The final section speaks to the rapprochement of the IPOWs with nascent Afrikaner Nationalism: in part through proximity on the farms in the hinterland, and in part through alignment with a fiercely anti-British faction of Afrikaner nationalism (*Quarta parte, I boeri italiani*). The amity developed at this late stage of the war laid the groundwork for post-war sympathy for Italian immigration in the face of official resistance of the apartheid state to the prospect of the *roomse gevaar* (the Catholic/communist danger) presented by repatriated IPOWs wishing to return to South Africa as immigrants. Our focus is the "white blacks" literally working themselves out of racial marginalisation at the bottom rung of the pre-Apartheid racial categorisation system.

nationalists in adjacent camps. These hardline fascists established close ties with those who would emerge as founders of Apartheid post-war, and with the *Ossewabrandwag*. This relationship is discussed in the first part of the episode⁶.

The second thread follows those Italians who moved out of the camps into South African society and had to find ways to integrate and survive. In so doing they became enmeshed in the racial political norms of the day, unknowingly setting themselves up for life in South Africa after the war.

Each of the ex-IPOWs interviewed, barring Mario Gazzini, was a permanent resident in South Africa at the time of the documentary; among the 800 or so men who returned or went to ground after the war and re-emerged as South African citizens when they were permitted to do so. Below we trace this thread in the documentary, surfacing, the articulations of race and sex in the IPOW experience.

Choices after Capitulation

Following the opening sequence, this third part of the documentary begins with a wide-angle tracking shot of the open highveld on a clear summer's day, presumably shot from the train route that historically formed the main transport to Zonderwater Prisoner of War Camp. The low shrubland and red earth are offset against a cobalt sky. Across the backdrop, the legend "*25 luglio 1943*" appears. The soundtrack is the tuning into the radio broadcast of capitulation of the Italian government, and the fall of fascism in Italy. The sound is distorted and filled with static interference, the moment is being retrieved in the sound, we must tune in to understand. The juxtaposition with an ostensibly empty landscape infers these worlds coming together for the viewer, the IPOW experience inscribed on a landscape.

We then see Vittorio Giachetti, an ex-president of the IPOW association (The Zonderwater Block Association), read from his diary of the day, surrounded by Zonderwater memorabilia in his home. The domestic and comfortable setting signifies a further dislocation in time and space from that train trip. The viewer holds the aural and visual image of the 1940s as well as the comfort of peacetime in the domestic

⁶ The *Ossewabrandwag* was a pro-Nazi Afrikaner Nationalist organisation founded at the beginning of World War II.

setting. Of course, at the time South Africa was anything but peaceful, the state of emergency raging around the viewers.

Giachetti embodies the staid and comfortable veteran at a distance in time and space that has provided an ordering of his thoughts, reflections on his diary and the past narrativised. He narrates his diary over images of newsreel footage (*Cinegiornale Luce*) of the Badoglio government being established and the stripping of fascist paraphernalia from buildings. The documentary steers clear of the gratuity of Mussolini's execution and the spectacle of the Piazzale Loreto hanging, and this is in line with an aesthetic that sees violence through artistic renderings from the time, underscored with aggressive soundtrack and quick cuts between images.

The next shot returns to tracking across the veld and the broadcast of "8 settembre 1943" imploring Italians to cooperate. The title shot "*I Neri Bianchi*" shows after a fade to black, with a dramatic synthesizer sting. After the formal context given by a historian, we move to Mario Gazzini, on a rooftop in Rome, surrounded by sheaves of dishevelled papers held down by paperweights, cigarette in his hands and the dapper comportment of the chronicler of his fellow IPOWs in South Africa. He makes it clear that some people changed, and some did not, and we learn that people do not change flags and opinions quickly. Those who did not were separated from their fellow IPOWs and placed in Block 8 at Zonderwater, the main internment camp in Cullinan east of Pretoria.

The film cuts to ex-IPOW Orio Turilli from behind the counter of his retail store where he offers the pragmatic view that one had to look after one's own skin, all became "egotists" in the process of choosing how to behave following Italy's change of allegiance in the war. His is a middle-class comfort, standing behind his store cashier counter, he is a master of his environment and a portrait of respectability.

An interviewee states that prisoners were offered a form to complete, in which they recant their allegiance to fascism, a prerequisite to being allowed to work in external camps for some pay. All those who went out to work signed this document, Duilio de Franceschi states clearly that there was a question of principle, and so those who did not sign, himself included, were labelled fascists. He is seated in a media-rich home office, with framed newspaper clippings, photos, and leather-bound volumes. Cravat and silk shirt, he is a picture of learned urbanity. His is a highly curated, ordered, and controlled space; an

internal world of confidence which contrasts well with the fluid desk of Gazzini we met earlier in the episode and his sense of the vast grey areas of political allegiance. Two kinds of respectability emerge in the episode that looks back at a time of chaos: one politically diplomatic, the other avowed, both having processed the experience to some extent. The latitude provided by the *brava gente* concept allows both these opinions to appear seamlessly in this scene, with little apparent contradiction.

Gazzini and de Franceschi offer two points along the spectrum of post-war identity. For Gazzini, there is a complex picture of the individual IPOW's inner conviction, and the practicalities of survival. This reflection as he looks out from a vantage point over rooftops in the Rome, in an Italy that is reaping the postwar 'miracle' of growth and reconstruction. For de Franceschi, settled in the Apartheid state, that though fragile, had provided a post-war life for him, it is possible to declare his principles of loyalty to an Italy whose extreme nationalism is echoed in the state that he settled in post-war.

With the offer to collaborate and help in activities other than war-related ones, the IPOWs had an opportunity to earn some money and get out of the camps. Giustino Iacovitti (who mentions the *brava gente* concept here in his description of white South Africans) and Ugo Spetto speak of the general amiability of South Africans as people, politics aside, and the considerations of earning some money for their families back home.

In the opening moments of this section the documentary makes the impact of global geopolitics come to bear on the lives of individual men, their hopes and frustrations, their politics and education all come into play as they decide to change sides in the war and help to build a foreign country with their labour, or to remain true to the principles of Italian Fascism and wait out the war in South Africa. Spetto recalls the threats of fellow prisoners to those who betrayed Italy, and de Franceschi recalls those who went out to work being called sellouts.

The last word on this moment of decision is given to the brusque and smoky voice of Giuseppe Pulvirenti, whose Sicilian dialect is given Italian subtitles. He bluntly recalls that after forming two lines of those who did and did not want to go out of the camp, the latter were beaten up by five South African police. He is in his kitchen, with a silent consigliere chain-smoking. Pulvirenti does all the talking and the other

man who is silent, there to cross-check and offer verification, is never named. He is anonymous and has chosen to be in the shot. The ominous soundtrack begins when Pulvirenti starts talking about violence. His is the only interview given subtitles in Italian, his dialect and to some extent the content he relates, quite unflinching and unflattering to both South Africans and Italians, makes him the cultural outsider. His is the last word in the documentary to which we will return later.

The next scenes stand as an editorial juxtaposition that frames the question of allegiance. In a brief foreboding sequence, hand-made fascist propaganda produced in the camp is presented to camera by Vittorio Giachetti, bound in a volume he “jealously guards”, these polished and highly designed art deco images are edited with scenes of violence painted in the camp in expressionist oils (probably by a IPOW artist named Sdoya). The soundtrack underscores violence with a brooding and aggressive synthesizer, with sounds of rushing and discordance. On-screen these images infer a backdrop of the ominous and ever-present context of fascism in the camps and lives of IPOWs. This sequence sets the context for the next conversation and its articulation of decisions following capitulation.

The documentary cuts back to the next scene filled with sunlight, on the train to Zonderwater with Giacchetti, de Franceschi and Ernesto Colombo. They have a heated exchange about the eradication of fascist history from Italian history and that so much blood was spilled between Italians in the camp on this account. There is a coded agreement, between these three at least, that the capitulation was a mistake and the implication that the fascist project should have continued, Giacchetti says: “I already rebelled at the time”. No one openly says that they are now avowed fascists though. It is left at that.

On a train, with little glasses of wine in hand and the bleak, seemingly unchanged landscape rushing by, we are transported back to Zonderwater, with prisoners who, because of their allegiance, we can imagine stayed within the camp. There is a shot of the tracks from the back of the train and the narrator gives some exposition about the politicisation of the IPOW question, the confusion about where they fit in is taken outside of internal Italian politics.

Historian Noel Garson is introduced and relates the concern that German, Italian and Afrikaner nationalist prisoners, particularly those of the *Ossewabrandwag*, would create a problematic exchange of ideas

and mutual reinforcement of fascist ideologies and contingent nationalisms.

We do not disembark at Zonderwater though, rather we follow the line of thought of those who objected and would not sign the rejection of fascism document that would allow them to work at external camps. Many of these ended up at *Koffiefontein* with the very Germans and Afrikaner nationalists who were problematic to South Africa, siding with the Allies in the war. We learn of their secret communication and fraternal sense of belonging. This signals that not all IPOWs were the same socially or politically and that some people retained their political convictions and would have stayed in the camp.

The filmmaker takes us out of the world of those who refused to recant, and a map lights up with the sites of external work camps across South Africa, a collage of sepia images shows IPOWs working as manual labourers. The camera lingers on a photograph from the time that shows a black man leading a team of horses in harness pulling a cart. In the foreground, two IPOWs are reaping grain by hand. We are about to move into the realm of labour, specifically the cheap, hard labour that provided those IPOWs who conceded, an opportunity to temporarily leave the camp. The implication for the viewer is that these histories and potential racial categorisations are entangled. Hand reaping was already on its way out in the 1940s, this is labour that exists because it can, hands are available. The camera pans across the still images, left to right; from an IPOW standing with a sheaf under one arm, pausing on the black man dwarfed by the three carthorses and unfocused in the shot, to the IPOW bent at the hip gleaning over stubble.

In the next shot we return to the train – where we are positioned as a fly-on-the-wall – overhearing the debate: how some IPOWs suffered violence for their conviction, and those who emerged from the camps if they were prepared to change allegiance did not. We are exposed to the range of what the IPOW identity could accommodate. Some ideologues, like Giachetti quoted above, never recanted: and they worry that they are erased from Italian history. Some saved themselves, the “egotists” Turilli refers to.

The documentary establishes the idea that as we head into the past on the train, as the echoes of global politics play on the soundtrack, there is no clear solidarity in the experiences of memory of the IPOWs, short of the facts of their status as prisoners. Levels of violence,

collaboration, nationalism, naturalisation, productivity and principles are established as potent themes on the journey the documentary takes us on.

The divergence in the IPOWs experience post-capitulation, and how it shaped their post-war identity are signalled as the origin for the *neri bianchi* of the title. As discussed below, this is because they enter the labour force and the labour they provide brings them into the raced labour category most often occupied by “non-whites” in South Africa. Their freedom is the freedom to work as, and alongside, black South Africans. How they comport and perceive themselves, and how they are perceived in turn by white South Africa is germane to the documentary.

Labour and Mixing

Ex-IPOW Ronnie Tiburtini says they did not know they were in a racist country yet, to “go with” a black woman was not seen as a bad thing by the IPOWs, whereas it was for the white South Africans they worked for. Tiburtini saw much of who was returned to camp for bad behaviour, as an IPOW interpreter in the offices that oversaw external employment for the prisoners. This is explained tersely, the nervous energy around the subject apparent in the close-up shot of him while talking, focused on his testimony and expressions.

Ex-IPOW Colombo, in a dramatically lit wine cellar at a table with a single glass of wine and a half-full bottle, recalls that they were given a form to sign that they were not to mix with people of colour. He also recalls that while this was talked up as a matter of importance, the reality was that the white South Africans went to bed very early, and life in the camp had its own norms. The implication was that this racial segregation was not generally adhered to out of sight of their captors.

In other parts of the documentary, black soldiers of the South African native corps, stationed as guards at Zonderwater (because they were not permitted to bear arms in the conflict) recall the lively contraband trade that developed between these two groups on the outside of South African whiteness (see *Seconda Parte: Città del Prigioniero*).

While Tiburtini speaks rapidly and quite seriously on the matter, Colombo has a twinkle in the eye. We can read at least two attitudes to

miscegenation here, ignorance of norms that seemed, then and now, unusual, and a cavalier approach to any rules.

Spetto recalls that there was some mistrust of the IPOWs, particularly by farmers of “German origins” resulting in them being worked harder than other labourers, twelve instead of eight hours, but on Sundays, they were free to go to the village to shop. He was at De Doorns in the Western Cape. When they first arrived, all the farmers considered them as yet indistinguishable from black South Africans, so they were housed behind barbed wire, but when the farmers realised they “were not cannibals”, were white and “walked on two legs” things loosened up.

The placing of up to 100,000 Italian prisoners, central to which was the perception of their place on a racist eugenic spectrum, surfaced the fault lines and indeed absurdities of the hegemony of whiteness⁷. Optically, the IPOWs presented a spectrum from dark-skinned to light and dark-eye colour to light, thus complicating the visual racing that would underpin much of how Apartheid laws were surveilled and enforced⁸.

Spetto recalls being invited into homes, sharing meals and other markers of acceptance as, if not equals, then at least not to be kept as separate as black South Africans. We encounter his own racist terms, in the tongue-in-cheek association of cannibalism and four-legged walking, with being black, but also his wry perception of the silliness of the farmers in their boundaries and prejudices.

Attention is drawn to the discussion of race in this section by the musical scoring. As Spetto begins to talk about their arrival in De Doorns and the initial racial casting, a synth chord fades in and as he says “*cannibali*” there is a keyboard chord struck, in the audio middle ground, that emphasises that word and idea. Through the rest of his story, the keyboard continues its minor key improvisation, occasionally

⁷ 100 000 is the round number often cited in relation to IPOWs in South Africa, but this reflects a total of those who passed through the administrative system. At its height, the Zonderwater Prisoner of War Camp accommodated 90 000 prisoners. Others spent much of their time in satellite camps (See Carlesso, 2009).

⁸ See Erasmus, *Race Otherwise* (2017), in which she discusses how her blackness is made visible or complicated in South Africa and elsewhere based on how people read her physical attributes, skin colour, and familial resemblances. Erasmus provides an articulation of the changing conceptions of ‘race’ within the South African context, explaining how we come to understand the long histories of its ongoing instability.

rising in volume to punctuate the narrative. This is the second instance of race and violence being given this musical underscoring in the documentary.

In a short space the documentary ensures viewers comes up against the boundaries that had usually been clearly demarcated by race. Labour and sexual encounter were culturally bounded and policed at the time. Hard, unskilled labour was for black South Africans or prisoners, sexual contact between races was a social taboo and eventually illegal. Postwar Apartheid legislated on both these matters with Bantu Education (“education for slavery”) and anti-miscegenation legislation. Here the IPOW stumbles unknowingly through both. Or was it unknowing?

Colombo ends this section saying that they (South Africans) were good people, we were more cunning though. As with the early-to-bed habits of their captors, the ex-IPOWs hint at a continuity to their habits and appetites regardless of the norms.

Simon Viera, a colonel at Zonderwater, recalls that the IPOWs were more inclined to fraternise with the farmers that employed them than the UDF guards, describing how their presence on the farms was a necessary evil to replace some of the labour lost to the war effort. However, this was not without its own complexity, because the roles they fulfilled ranged from bringing particular artisan skills to farm life or construction work, to semi- and unskilled labour, they were in the latter case filling roles that had historically been occupied by non-whites on farms.

The documentary reflects the time that it took for the humanity of the IPOWS to be proven to white South Africa, with each action weighed in the meticulous increments applied by white South Africa to the qualifying metrics of whiteness. It starts with the crude hyperbole of “cannibals” (Spetto) to the negotiation of the line crossed when “going with” a black woman (Tiburtini). In the case of the latter, the IPOWs exert some agency in adopting the position of outsmarting their captors. In doing so they are co-opted into the South African reality of concealed racial miscegenation, the discovery of which will later be investigated by the curtain-twitching Morality Police in the apartheid era, but which at this stage is a social more.

Living conditions and the racial boundary

The next scene begins with the saxophone motif. The narrator tells us that these cabins are much like those inhabited by non-white farm labourers.

Ex-IPOW Remo Barrocci gives a tour of the cramped quarters, which they called "*Villa Italia*" that he and three others occupied in the war years on a farm in the Western Cape, possibly Ceres. He speaks Italian with a thick Afrikaans accent and is dressed in the khakis particularly associated with white South African farmers. He lives integrated into the white farming community of the Western Cape at the time of filming but recalling IPOWs on the farm prompts him to consider the equation of Italians with coloured and black labourers at the time of the Italians' internment. He points out that the accommodation was cold in winter, and they had little to furnish the room with, but they did not want for anything. They were not beaten to work but could only leave the farm with written permission.

There is an analogous system that would have occurred to viewers at the time; the notorious Pass Laws that stringently controlled the movement of black South Africans and were only repealed in 1986. The Italians were not permitted to fraternise with the public under threat of imprisonment, but they could, with their boss' permission visit other IPOWs. Barrocci is emphatic that they never mixed with blacks.

"We would hang out in the cabins or steps, but never with the blacks, never, though there were lots. Because there were lots of differences between us and the blacks, many. You can say I'm bad but: today, yesterday, blacks are blacks, also us Italians. Even the women, have compassion, but no contact. Me, never [...] Also prisoners, there are good and bad, some must be punished."

The speech winds down, with Barrocci standing in the doorway of the cabins that they lived in, the viewer is given another opportunity to reflect on what is said; without commentary we are left with a return of the forlorn saxophone music. As a signifying motif this piece of music invites the viewer to take a longer perspective of this comment. The saxophone holds sustained long notes and is positioned as distant in the

musical space, creating distance and dimension for reflection. Barrocci's commentary represents one avenue of assimilation into postwar South Africa.

To position oneself as farmer, in language and dress, to set oneself apart from other labourers by voluntary racial isolation, even under very restrictive and exclusionary rules. In this way one proves belonging to whiteness ahead of naturalisation.

It is important to remember that all of this is presented from the historical moment of filmmaking, where racist attitudes could, for at least the next few years, be openly asserted. Folded into his 'race' identification were the cascading binaries that so often inform 'racing' as a conscious act (Hall, 1980): to what extent were the Italian prisoners intelligent/stupid, moral/immoral, industrious/lazy, manly/effete, trustworthy/cunning?

The process was never resolved: an informal and small-scale project of 'racing' that played out in South African media and popular imagination, it nevertheless offers insight into the processes of racial discourse within whiteness. The documentary demonstrates how IPOWs and by extension, Italian-South Africa, were not unaffected by the racial politics of the country at the time, as it shows IPOWs who became part of Italian South African communities grappling with their experience of racial marginalisation in the 1940s – firmly related to the racial politics of the time.

The framing of these two times socially and politically via the documentary offers an invaluable record of Italian white attitudes to race outside of the dominant discourses of English-speaking whiteness and Afrikaans-speaking whiteness.

The film moves from the farm context to an abandoned construction camp, that of the road project to create the original Outeniqua Pass (connecting coastal Western Cape to the Karoo hinterland). Here Egidio Bonomelli speaks of the friendship that grew between IPOW labourers and the black labourers operating the pneumatic drills. He describes both groups working for the South Africans, both far from family, and both forbidden to speak with or socialise with white South Africa.

Here, in a work camp, similarities were not mediated by rewards or punishments that went with the hierarchy on the farm. Bonomelli also questioned the difference in social norms, having grown up in Libya he

considered it strange that he should not speak with a black person, as he had always spoken with Arabs.

The testimonies in this section of the documentary show various IPOWs encountering the boundaries of South African whiteness, as they stood in the Second World War. These boundaries that would become codified post-war, already had decades and arguably centuries of established, sedimented practice in the daily lives of South Africans. Their clearest demonstration was in raced labour, where hard, physical 'unskilled' labour was performed by black men, and in the separation of races along the social spectrum ranging from separate leisure time, to racially separate sex lives. There is a generational reticence to discussing sex at all, so mention of sex in this documentary is exclusively hetero-normative.

In Barrocci's testimony there is a concomitant hardening of attitude the closer the his IPOW memory comes to the boundary: actually standing in their dwelling, that is materially the same as what a black or coloured farm worker would live in at the time of the documentary, elicits clarity from him on exactly where the boundary is, and how he policed it even when he was an IPOW.

Latin Lovers

Fraternising was one matter, but the "cardinal sin" of miscegenation was even more serious. Earlier in the episode, South African farmer Fernhout distinguishes between IPOWs on regional bases, saying that northerners did not mix but southern Italians did mix with coloured girls. Spetto and Tiburtini both speak about the seduction of farmers' wives and daughters. This is a matter that has become the core of a series of fictional romances in South African literature⁹, but here, from the mouths of the ex-IPOWs themselves, we sense the one-upmanship and machismo that stems from the Latin Lover trope that had grown up in the pre-war years¹⁰.

⁹ Van Heerden (2000), Joubert (2009, 2010, 2011) and Le Roux (2010) have all created fictionalised IPOWs in their novels that range from historical fiction in multi-generational stories in the case of Joubert and Le Roux to magical realism in Van Heerden.

¹⁰ The Latin Lover embodied in the Italian screen star, has literary and theatrical roots reaching back to Don Giovanni and Casanova (Reich 2004:27), and both of those characters are directly referred to by Tiburtini.

Tiburtini speaks sheepishly of the IPOWs “profiting” from their romantic adventures in South Africa, he gives a genteel portrait of these as the camera pans from a picture hanging on a wall, of him as a young man, to him speaking in the interview, the soundtrack is Enrico Caruso singing sweetly as Tiburtini speaks of the reputation as ‘Don Giovannis’ or ‘Casanovas’ that preceded the IPOWs arriving in a given place. Achille Armellin presents the ‘bridge of love’ in Ceres, where Italians would gather on Sundays and make music, attended by black and white people of the town, especially girls.

Both Tiburtini and Armellin speak of stumbling into a racial divide that, from the context they came from, did not exist. While labour had its clear racial boundaries that they quickly learned and accepted, on their own time, at least for these two ex-IPOWs, there was no urgency to distance themselves from the racial other when it came to romantic involvement. The complex way in which IPOWs picked their way through the cultural codes of race, adopting some and ignoring others, seems to point to a wide range of responses to the increasingly firm lines being taken by their South African captors.

Conclusion

“At first for these people we seemed like white blacks, us. It seemed that we were blacks. Because they called us ‘stupid’ and they said we didn’t know how to do anything. But because we didn’t know how to speak English or how to speak Zulu they said we didn’t have brains. But after six months, we knew a little Zulu and English. I had blacks in the camp who alone could do jobs that not even the whites knew how to do. Because they didn’t have the brain – black and white. The blacks didn’t have the brains because the whites didn’t teach them. But I taught them. But if one doesn’t teach them, they don’t learn. The blacks don’t have brains.”

Pulvirenti’s last word in the documentary is underpinned again by the mournful saxophone motif, and the visual stock image of a row of black labourers hoeing an empty field. As an end to the documentary, the return of the saxophone motif and the scene of black labour pointedly

asks the viewer to consider the IPOWs' experience of race in the light of black South Africa's ongoing experience of race. Degradation, low pay, hard labour, lack of agency, and unjust treatment briefly touched the lives of prisoners who went on to reverse all these fortunes. The reality of black South Africans in 1989 was still that of outsider.

In the last third of the film, as the experiences related become more personal and we are taken to places of significance, the race issue emerges more frequently. We can read the implied message of the film, that the regime separating races is systematic, conscious and unjust, and that when applied to 'white' people, this is obvious. Pulvirenti's words are ambiguous and shot-through with doubt about intelligence and usefulness regarding race; his own and others. We can also read in the interviews a range of approaches presented as naïve, from those who thought it laughable that Italians did not know they should not mix with other races, to those who bought in completely and took on the mantle of white supremacy, building their post-war South African life on full integration with whiteness in the racial hierarchy.

This episode of the broader documentary shows ex-IPOWs reflecting on their experience from a position as integrated Italian-South Africans. We have shown that their experience and negotiations towards that integration were a condensed version of the centuries of racial division already played out in the settled white population of South Africa. Neither English nor Afrikaans, they often failed to fit in neatly, and in some cases resisted the categorisation as part of retaining who they were before their imprisonment.

In 'Choices after Capitulation' the labels of "fascist" and "collaborator" after capitulation are complicated by how they are represented as rounded contemporary identities in the 1980s. Their complex and multi-layered reflection is groundwork for how complex race is, as it shows them as non-homogenous, all still Italians, but with diverging views and backgrounds. They are, however, represented as firmly white in the 1980s.

The section 'Labour and Mixing' demonstrated how core issues of whiteness in South Africa were tied to labour and sexual contact. These were negotiated by IPOWs in complex ways as they tried to adapt to the situation of external work camps. At once pushing boundaries to self-identify, breaking rules where they could, they were in some cases finding out where the boundary was and trying to fit in. They also

brought their own ideas about race and labour, and race and sex. These were not more or less progressive than that of white South Africa, but the burden of proof remained on the IPOWs to take up markers of whiteness.

There is an echo in the testimony of Barrocci, with the experiences noted in scholarship about Italian-American assimilation, namely that achievement of white identity is contingent on taking up the role of policing whiteness. His place in his current life, long after the war, is assured by his early self-policing as an IPOW, keeping himself separate from the black and coloured South Africans with whom he lived in such close proximity. In a remote work camp, the absurdity of these norms are exposed in another IPOWs testimony. Bonomelli's experience and background lead him to question if those sharing the margins of whiteness did not have more in common than white South Africa would have them believe. There are hints in the episode that Italian regionalism fed into this, the prejudicial view that southern Italians mixed easily across racial divides.

The "Latin Lover" is the penultimate discussion. It is emphasised by Tiburtini; his picture as a young man, with Caruso in the background, and Armellini on the 'bridge of love' in Ceres.

In the years between the end of the war and the assimilated state in which we find them, there is a reluctance to shed this romantic image in exchange for further identification with South African whiteness. Complex as it is, and with how it drew IPOWs into danger, across class and colour lines, it is retained as a source of some pride, a lightly worn machismo left over from another life.

The documentary series was taken on as a project by Steve Moni to capture testimonials from an ageing ex-IPOW community in the 1980s. It is astute in its reading of an already shifting narrative in South African politics from the dominance of a race-based nationalism to the emergence into popular consciousness of the anti-apartheid struggle with its social justice and left-leaning politics. The once confident Italian-South Africans, comfortably embedded in apartheid-era whiteness, are largely willing to reposition themselves as victims of circumstance rather than heroic fallen Italian nationals, and those who are not, are underscored with ominous soundtrack, exposed often as unreconstructed fascists and generally seem out of step with the times.

Moni politicises the position of the IPOWs concerning the ongoing struggle of black South Africa by juxtaposing their subjection and oppression in the third part “*I Neri Bianchi*” (The White Blacks). The episode *I Neri Bianchi* shows a diverse group of aging men who have polished the narrative of their time as IPOWs, even so, with every prevarication, euphemism and statement of principle, we can read the complex construction of the racialised life of twentieth-century South Africa. The crash course in whiteness in South Africa offered the ex-IPOWs interviewed a series of choices that brought them closer into or further out of the mainstream of whiteness that had held its hegemony from the end of the War until the 1980s, but was on the verge of radical change.

References:

- | | | |
|--------------|------|--|
| Alba, R. | 1985 | <i>Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity</i> . Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall. |
| Bouchard, N. | 2018 | ‘Colonial legacies and Postcolonial Interruptions’. In: <i>Italian Studies in Southern Africa</i> . Vol 31, No 1:25-59. |
| Bruzzi, S. | 2006 | <i>New Documentary</i> . 2nd edition. London and New York: Routledge |
| Carlesso, L. | 2009 | <i>Centomila prigionieri italiani in Sud Africa: il campo di Zonderwater</i> . Ravenna: Longo Editore & Regione del Veneto. |
| Doumanis, N. | 1999 | “The Italian Empire and <i>brava gente</i> : Oral History and the Dodacanese Islands”. In: Bosworth, RBJ. & Dogliani, P. (eds). <i>Italian Fascism: History, Memory and Representation</i> . UK: Palgrave Macmillan. |

- | | | |
|-------------------------------------|------|--|
| Erasmus, Z. | 2017 | <i>Race Otherwise: Forging a New Humanism for South Africa</i> . Johannesburg: Wits University Press. |
| Favero, P. | 2010 | 'Italians, the "Good People": Reflections of National Self-Representation in Contemporary Italian Debates on Xenophobia and War'. <i>Outlines Critical Practice Studies</i> , 2:138-153. |
| Gazzini, M. | 1987 | <i>Zonderwater: I prigionieri in Sud Africa (1941-1947)</i> . Rome: Bonacci. |
| Guglielmo, J. & Salvatore, S. (eds) | 2003 | <i>Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America</i> . New York: Routledge. |
| Hall, S. | 1980 | "Race, articulation and societies structured in dominance". In: UNESCO (ed.). <i>Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism</i> . Paris: UNESCO |
| Horn, K. | 2012 | 'South African Prisoner-of-War Experience during and after World War II: 1939-c.1950'. Doctoral dissertation, Stellenbosch University. |
| —. | 2022 | "“only the rags we had on...”": Zonderwater Italian Prisoner-of-War Camp, 1941–1942'. <i>Journal of African Military History</i> , 6(2):81-106. |
| Joubert, I. | 2009 | <i>Anderkant Pontenilo</i> . Cape Town: Tafelberg. |
| —. | 2010 | <i>Pérsomi</i> . Cape Town: Tafelberg. |
| —. | 2011 | <i>Kronkelpad</i> . Cape Town: Tafelberg. |

- | | | |
|----------------------------------|------|--|
| Le Roux, M. | 2010 | <i>Die Naamlose</i> . Cape Town: Tafelberg. |
| Luconi, S. | 2011 | “Whiteness and Ethnicity in Italian-American Historiography”. In: <i>The Status of Interpretation in Italian American Studies</i> . Conference Proceedings of the First Forum in Italian American Criticism (FIAC) edited by Jerome Krase. New York. |
| Milanese, A. | 2002 | ‘Italians in South Africa: Challenges in the Representation of an Italian Identity’. Unpublished Master of Arts dissertation, University of Cape Town. |
| Marchetti-Mercer, M. & Virga, A. | 2023 | <i>The Italian Diaspora in South Africa. Nostalgia, Identity and Belonging in the Second and Third Generations</i> . Routledge: New York. |
| Nichols, B. | 2017 | <i>Introduction to Documentary</i> . 3 rd edition. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. |
| Petridis, A. | 2013 | ‘National Wake: the South African punk band who defied apartheid’. In: <i>The Guardian Online</i> . Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/oct/03/national-wake-south-africa-punk-apartheid . [Accessed 13 September 2022] |
| Reich, J. | 2004 | <i>Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity, and Italian Cinema</i> . Bloomington: Indiana University Press. |
| Sani, G. | 1992 | <i>History of the Italians in South Africa 1489-1989</i> . Johannesburg: Zonderwater Block Association. |

- | | | |
|------------------------------|----------------|--|
| Simpson, T. | 2023
(2022) | 'Springboks and the Swastika'. In: <i>History of South Africa: From 1902 to the Present</i> . Online edition, Oxford Academic. Available at: https://0-doi-org.innopac.wits.ac.za/10.1093/oso/9780197672020.003.0009 . [Accessed 3 April 2024] |
| Somma, D. | 2013 | 'Italian Prisoners of War in the South African Imagination: Contemporary Memory History and Narrative'. Unpublished PhD Thesis. University of the Witwatersrand |
| South African History Online | n.d. | "Apartheid Legislation 1850s-1970s". Available at: https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/apartheid-legislation-1850s-1970s . Accessed 3 April 2024. |
| Van Heerden, E. | 2000 | <i>Die Swye van Mario Salviati</i> . Cape Town: Tafelberg. |

Cinematography

- | | | |
|--------------------------------|------|---|
| Maas, D. &
Jones, K. (dirs) | 2012 | <i>Punk in Africa</i> . Meerkat Media (Johannesburg) & Peligroso Productions (Prague). |
| Moni, S. (dir.) | 1989 | <i>Captivi Italici in Sud Africa</i> . Documentary in four parts. Prima Parte: Prigionieri del Sud. Seconda Parte: Città del Prigioniero. Terza Parte: I Neri Bianchi. Quarta Parte: I Boeri Italiani. Viva Films (South Africa) and V.A.V. (Rome). |

Neff, M. (dir.)	2022	<i>This is National Wake.</i> XTR (California) & Near Odessa Productions (US).
-----------------	------	--