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Author

Lombardi-Diop, Cristina

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Spotless Italy: Hygiene, Domesticity, and the Ubiquity of Whiteness in Fascist and Postwar Consumer Culture

Cristina Lombardi-Diop

“The obsession with cleanliness is certainly a practice of immobilizing time.”
--Roland Barthes (quoted in Ross 1995)

In Ennio Flaiano’s novel *Tempo di uccidere* (1947), time, immobile and eternal, gets stuck, literally, in Ethiopia, when the protagonist’s watch stops. The watch is a useless object, “un orologio da quattro soldi” (2010, 47) for the Italian lieutenant, but not for Mariam—the young Ethiopian he accidentally wounds and then kills—who is utterly fascinated by it and demands it as a present, or souvenir, before their sexual encounter and her killing. Soap, too—used by both to wash themselves in the river—is fatally crucial for Mariam, as it is precisely the exchange of this apparently insignificant commodity that triggers the events leading to her death. As she accepts the soap from the lieutenant, he is convinced that she “aveva ceduto al fascino di qualcosa che mi apparteneva. Cominciava a riconoscermi dei diritti” (41). As Flaiano so subtly evokes in this and other passages of the novel, the lieutenant’s claims for his right of possession extends from Mariam to the whole of Ethiopia and are the mark of distinction of Italy’s imperial desire—both sexual and political—over the land, the bodies, and the cultural identity of Ethiopians. On this particular point, the lieutenant experiences one of his strongest disillusionments. In his eyes, the encounter with Mariam is an encounter with the millenarian past of his own humanity, the measure of his own modernity: “Nei miei occhi c’erano duemila anni di più e lei lo sentiva” (44). Such claims arise from the assumption of power that comes with the diffuse exchange of objects, as well as of sexual, economic, and cultural practices that colonial and imperial occupation produced over time in colonial societies and continue to reproduce in postcolonial ones.

Italy’s first postcolonial novel, published in the same year when Italy officially lost its territorial sovereignty over the East African Empire, constructs the experience of imperialism as intimately linked to the fear of sickness and contagiousness (the lieutenant is convinced of having contracted leprosy from Mariam) and the simultaneous desire for the expiation of the guilt for the violence it yielded. Yet, such desire is not easily satisfied, as Flaiano suggests. Evading the responsibility of imperialist violence, successful as it may be for Flaiano’s lieutenant, is hardly accomplished so neatly in postwar Italy. In its cultural practices, a certain obsession with hygiene seems to signal a desire for keeping the conscience and memory clean, thus immobilizing the time of Africa as an eternal past.¹ What matters here is also the fact that *Tempo di uccidere* opens with a meditation on the relationship between bodily cleanliness and contagiousness, the social circulation of commodities, and that peculiar colonial temporality which sets in

¹ Roberto Derobertis has argued that time, in its narrative circularity and grand Eurocentric perspective, “è la vera ossessione di questo romanzo” (2011).

motion ideas and fantasies about modernity. It is from this intricate nexus of elements that my reflection on commodity culture, domesticity, hygiene, and whiteness begins.

This paper analyzes advertising for cleaning products in order to trace the peculiar formation of the idea of cleanliness and its ideological ties to the larger, more subliminal project of the whitening of race from the mid-1930s to the 1960s. The analysis will take into account the development of a culture of domesticity and consumer culture from Fascism to the postwar period in order to explore the possible continuity of racial, gender, and national identity formations from one political regime to another under the aegis and for the benefit of the political economy of modern capitalism. The aim here is to show how the culture of advertising, as a tool of mass persuasion and national identification, served as a building block for a cultural hegemony that was ultimately crucial for the functioning of capitalist modernity during both historical periods. In order to examine the ubiquity, both spatial and temporal, of the idea of homogeneous national whiteness, the essay will close with one particular example from today's Italy, that is, the 2006 and 2007 video commercials, titled "Happy Housewife" created for the *Guaber* company for their brand *Coloreria Italiana*. In this sense, following race theorist David Theo Goldberg's injunction, this essay tries to take on the task of understanding "how the commitment to homogeneity shaped race, as a modern project of state conception and practice" (2001, 5) and how its delimitation helped define Italy's current identity as a nation homogeneously white.

The period under analysis saw the theorization and application of state racism and the conflation, in legal terms, of whiteness with citizenship; racial segregation in the Italian colonies of East Africa; the integration, albeit problematic, of Southern peasants in the industrial North; and the consolidation of a culture of domestic rationality which, driven by U.S. funding and behavioral models, marked the inception of mass modernization and consumer culture. My hypothesis is that Italy's democratic, post-fascist and postcolonial society was predicated on the consolidation of racial identity as uniformly and permanently white, at a moment when the colonial experience had instead produced demographic heterogeneity. In other words, Italian whiteness was, for the first time, no longer confined to a particular temporality (the Fascist *ventennio*) and a class (the middle-class and intellectual elites) but extended to and began to affect a larger pool of average, petite-bourgeois Italians, and ultimately mass society. I contend that this peculiar ubiquity of whiteness—simultaneously expansive yet fixed—was carried forth, among other things, through a project of "redemptive hygiene" (Ross 1995, 75)² that was, in turn, mediated by the "americanizzazione del quotidiano" (Gundle 1986, 561-594) and the influence of its segregationist and racialist models. As a nation that came to regard itself as clean, sanitized, homogeneously white, and ordered according to principles of modernizing rationality, many contradictory aspects of its uneven national cohesiveness were partially reconciled. In particular, the containment of Southern peasantry, which bore the shame of a backwardness long felt as a burden; the removal of the memory of the colonial experience, marked by the stain of racist persecution and apartheid; the containment and policing of women's desires for public and sexual emancipation, were all made possible by a modernization that promised a different temporality, a fresh and novel start, a blank slate.

² My argument here is highly indebted to Ross's brilliant re-thinking of the culture of postwar French modernization in the wake of the Algerian war and French decolonization.

Cleanliness was for postwar Italy about a desire to de-historicize fascism, Southern poverty, and colonial Africa, a way to confine these historical moments to a parenthetical exteriority that had no place in Italy's new social life and in the modern practices of the reconstruction of daily life. With the booming of the advertising industry and TV broadcasting, cleanliness was visually rendered as whiteness and, in turn, as a desirable, normative condition, homogeneous and apparently a-paradigmatic (Chambers 1997, 187-203) in relation to the perceived regional and class differences present in the peninsula. The ubiquity of whiteness facilitated the erasure from public awareness of Italy's past relations with its own internal differences, the excesses of women's claims for political and economic independence, its history of racial mixing and interracial desires and, in today's Italy, the daily encounters of Italians with blackness.

The Washing Away of Blackness

In the history of European ideas around blackness, as in the popular imagination, an original moment of comic excess—also present in the history of the black-faced minstrel shows—is often linked to the possibility of the washing away of race. Scholar Karen Pinkus mentions a line in Henri Bergson's famous 1900 essay on the meaning of the comic, where the French philosopher states that a Negro makes us laugh because his black face strikes the eye as “unwashed” (Pinkus 1997, 135). The nexus between racial authenticity, blackness, and dirt is at the core of my interest in the legacy of forms of racialization which, as a result of the institutionalization of racism in the late 1930s, infiltrated the larger domain of Italy's public culture and eventually spread to postwar popular culture. The connection between the “protezione della razza” and health prophylaxis pervaded Italy's racial culture of the mid-1930s.

During this same period, theories of blackness as dirt began to inform the eugenicist conception of racial abjection. Eugenics, as an academic and disciplinary discourse, gave rise to a series of “social-technical interventions” that targeted the family to secure the welfare and expansion of the population against declines in fertility and for the protection of the stock (Horn 1994, 66). After 1927, a series of pronatalist measures were implemented through legislation that immediately found resonance in eugenic medical and scientific literature.³ While the 1930 Penal Code (also known as the *Codice Rocco*) penalized the private behaviors of Italians on the basis of a new series of crimes against the integrity and health of the stock, the expansion of the “biotipologia umana,” elaborated by eugenicist Nicola Pende in the early 1930s, inaugurated a “biologia politica” that conceived of medicine as a form of social control and management of the domestic realm, of children, labor, as well as of women's sexuality and family life. In pamphlets, medical literature, and in the visual and written campaigns against contagious diseases such as syphilis and tuberculosis, a correlation was established between the sanitary conditions of the domestic environment, which was the domain of women, and the need to protect the Italian race against contamination and degeneration.⁴

³ For an exhaustive discussion of the relationship between science, medicine, and racism during Fascism see Maiocchi (1999).

⁴ See Malocchi (1999, 41-79) and Mignemi (1994, 65-89).

The battle against the contamination of the blood targeted women as defenders of the genetic purity of the Italian race. The 1936 pamphlet distributed by the *Federazione Italiana Nazionale Fascista* in support of the battle against tuberculosis, and authored by professor Gioacchino Breccia, addressed women as

A voi, Donne d'Italia, Donne Cristiane, Romane e Fasciste, la Patria affida un mandato sublime: creare la sanità e la forza delle nuove generazioni; rinnovare la casa, rendendole la dignità e la salubrità materiale e morale; proteggere il lavoro, vegliandone i pericoli e indirizzando il lavoratore sulle vie della vita sana al controllo sanitario duraturo, assiduo, intelligente, che è necessario; allevare il fanciullo e il giovane alla salubrità piena, ricordando a lui in ogni momento, serenamente, ciò che può essere segno di timore e di pericolo. (Mignemi 1994, 70)

Breccia, a stern supporter of medical bio-politics, gave expression to a vision that had been, in part, already implemented through Fascist mass organizations. From the mid-1920s, the *Opera Nazionale Maternità e Infanzia* (funded as early as 1925) began promoting the safeguarding of maternity, social hygiene, and the health of children and women. Of major relevance were its campaigns against tuberculosis, considered as a highly contagious social disease. The ONMI's "campagna antitubercolare" focused on the role of mothers as guarantors of the cleanliness of the domestic environment and on which, it was believed, children's health highly depended. In order to achieve the goal of domestic prophylaxis, the central government relied on the reach of the medical apparatus that operated through local and regional administrative offices (*enti assistenziali* and *previdenziali*). Such bureaucratic institutions soon contributed to a fairly rigid control of health and social order that also implied a rationalization of household culture.

The fight against tuberculosis thus lent itself to a variety of symbolic manipulations: a central one was the link between illness and blackness, sanity and racial purity (Mignemi 1994, 68-69, 231). In order to reach the masses, from 1930 onward the *Federazione* launched a national campaign in schools all over the state by distributing literature illustrating the progress of medical research against dirt and contagiousness, pamphlets which were accompanied by Mussolini's rhetorical slogans inciting Italians to protect the fatherland and the purity of the stock (Birbanti 2009, 192). Of major relevance is the manifesto created by Gino Boccasile for the celebration of the National Day against Tuberculosis, organized by the Red Cross and the *Federazione* [Figure 1]. Boccasile was an eclectic and talented illustrator who, relocating from his native town of Bari to Milan, began his career by collaborating with the magazine *Fantasie d'Italia*, the official illustrated newspaper of the *Federazione Nazionale Fascista dell'Industria e dell'Abbigliamento*. In his role as an organic artist for the Fascist regime, Boccasile greatly contributed to the visual campaigns that defined dominant models of middle-class femininity. Boccasile enjoyed successful collaborations with fashion magazines (such as *Sovrana*, *La donna*, *Dea Grazia*), satirical magazines (*Ecco settebello*, *Il settebello*), major newspapers, (*Il Corriere della sera*, *Il popolo d'Italia*) and great popularity in his



Manifesto *Giornata delle due croci*
 14 aprile 1934-XII,
 cm 140x100, Coen, Milano, inv. 3059, MiBAC,
 Soprintendenza BSAE per le province di Ve, Bl, Pd e Tv,
 in deposito a Treviso, Museo Civico L. Bailo

Figure 1 - Gino Boccasile, Manifesto “Giornata delle croci,” April 14, 1934

role as chief illustrator for Cesare Zavattini’s fashion magazine *Le grandi firme* (for which he created the famous iconic image of “la signorina Grandi Firme”). As a consequence, Boccasile became one of the most famous illustrators of the regime’s national projects, such as the land reclamation and agrarian campaigns, while continuing to shape with his commercial work the image of an emancipated, publicly active woman whose leisure activities, such as sports, shopping, travelling, dancing, sunbathing, were a major motor for the spreading of consumer culture in 1930s Italy. His role as a commercial artist, on occasion also endorsed by the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* [PNF] (Birbanti 2009, 48), was not divorced from his political and nationalist zeal, as illustrated in the 1934 manifesto for the *Giornata della croce*, in which the image of a brood of naked, defenseless children is accompanied by the slogan “Proteggiamo in ogni nido le nuove gemme della stirpe.” From 1940 onward, Boccasile began to put his versatile and satirical talent at the service of the anti-British and anti-US political campaigns for the Ministry of War. After September 8, 1943 he enlisted in the Italian SS and worked for the propaganda office of the Republic of Salò to draw anti-American, anti-Semitic, and racist posters, the most famous of which, published in *Il Resto del Carlino* on January 13, 1944, appeared with a caption that read: “meditino gli italiani sulla sorte che i ‘liberatori’ riservano alle nostre donne e alle nostre opera d’arte” (Mignemi 1994, 201) [Figure 2].

As Boccasile’s career eloquently illustrates, the realms of consumer culture and politics were complicit in shaping a visual tradition that promised affluence and emancipation and encouraged women to perform racial and patriotic duties. The realm of the political and the realm of consumer culture were jointly complicit in shaping a visual tradition in which the promise of affluence and emancipation of the latter enlisted women, both materially and symbolically, for the racial, patriotic duties of the former.

After the war, Boccasile was condemned for collaborating with the Republic of Salò and remained inactive for some time, but in 1946



Figure 2 - Gino Boccasile, “Soldato USA trafuga la Venere di Milo,”

Il Resto del Carlino, January 13, 1944

he began to work again on what have become classic commercial ads, some of which I will analyze in the next section. Boccasile’s work thus exemplifies the smooth shift from the political project of fascist racism to the racialized project of postwar Italy.

Such a shift also occurred for the visual tradition of hygienic messages, which from the realm of medicine spread to the sphere of the domestic as well as the domain of the body, beauty, and consumption. In the culture of advertisement of the Fascist *ventennio*, the curative and hygienic benefits of water and swimming were soon aligned with the practice of sun-bathing, which began to be promoted in the 1930s as a cure against tuberculosis and other diseases. In advertising for skin products, paleness was still a sign of nobility, but the advertisement of lotions to protect the skin from sun-rays also began to associate sun-bathing and tanning with the realm of travel and pleasure, regardless of class affiliation, and thus detached it from the rural and agricultural world that had characterized it in the past (Pinkus 1995, 174-177). Cosmetics for women, such as Lux soaps and Pond’s skin creams began to be manufactured and marketed as inexpensive goods, which could fulfill the expectations of modern young consumers, especially those in the Northern urban milieu, who were attracted by Hollywood films, American consumer goods and brands, and were less identified geographically and more keyed in to the media system (Arvidsson 2003, 19-37).

Journalist, writer, and critic Umberto Notari, famous for his commentaries on female beauty and his campaigns for a truly autarchic approach to female consumption against the corrupting effects of foreign modernity, explored the crucial nexus of whiteness, racial superiority, and femininity in his “Panegirico della razza italiana” (1939). In this essay he praised the beauty of Italian women as transcending historical contingencies and, for its classical perfection, comparable to the iconic aesthetic tradition of Renaissance paintings: “It does not matter if the clothes are different, simpler or more worn. The physical nature is the same. Complexions have the same smooth whiteness, the eyes the same softness, the mouths the same sparkle, the neck, the shoulders and the bust the same design” (Notari 1939 quoted in Gundle 2007, 102). As Stephen Gundle argues, it was functional to Notari’s intended reclaiming of an antique and anti-modern patriotic image of female Italianess that such classical beauty could be classified as white and

Mediterranean and thus ultimately Italian and, as such, superior to Celtic, Anglo-Saxon, and Slavic races.

What interests me here is how Notari's emphasis on qualities of female beauty (the smooth whiteness of the complexion, the softness of the skin) diverged considerably from the stereotype of Italian female beauty as "dark, passionate, instinctive" and "antique and primitive, close to nature and uncivilized" (Gundle 2007, xxiv-xxv), which Gundle identifies as a crucial and ubiquitous trope of national femininity. It seems, rather, that Notari's "Panegyric" was steeped in the language of the anthropological concept of an Aryan-Mediterranean *Romanità*, propagated after 1936 by racial theorists such as Giulio Cogni, in what was then a new approach to the idea of the homogeneity of the origin of Italian racial identity.⁵ As Gaia Giuliani argues, such "whitening" of the female characteristics signifying sensual fertility, which the regime had attributed to rural and Southern housewives (*le massaie rurali*), reconfigured the particular signification of Mediterranean-ness as darkness and aligned female whiteness with the fascist project of demographic pro-natalism and ruralization (2011). In light of the celebration of *massaismo* and rural, anti-modern traditionalism, the value of white *Romanità* that Notari praised, here mediated between the classical and the modern and, as such, stood as an alternative to the "sterilizing" effects of the industrial city, where poor hygienic conditions and factory work were considered detrimental to the reproductive strength of both men and women (Horn 1994, 96).

Under Fascism, consumer culture was managed within mass organizations, such as the *Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro* (OND) and the *Fasci Femminili*. The OND was dedicated to the promotion and organization of worker leisure, while the *Fasci Femminili* operated within the realm of household culture and home economics.⁶ In 1928, home economics was made a required subject for female secondary education, and the Fascist *visitatrici*, who accompanied public health officials in their campaigns against tuberculosis, were instructed to pay attention not only to the social stability of the working-class household, but also to its degree of cleanliness and hygienic conditions (Horn 1994, 120). After 1936, the rationalization of the household according to scientific managerial principles was extended to Italian East Africa and became intimately complicit with eugenics and particularly instrumental to segregationist policies in Libya and East Africa. While the opinion of hygiene experts resonated in the discussions for the urban planning of Tripoli, one of the centerpieces of the imperial propaganda at the time of the invasion of Ethiopia was the lack of *civiltà* of the Ethiopians, considered backward and underdeveloped on the basis of the "filth" and lack of hygiene of their dwellings and cities. The need for the isolation of the natives in their "quarters" was regarded, according to one urban planner, as an "efficient protection from the epidemic diseases frequently found in the unhygienic indigenous life" (Bosio 1937, quoted in Fuller 2007, 207). While in the peninsula *massaismo* promised a new rationalization of managerial practices and the formation of a new female leadership within the household, in the colonies home economics played a key role in defining racial consciousness and divisions.

⁵ For further details on the Aryanization of Italy after 1936 see De Donno (2006, 394-412).

⁶ On the activities of the OND and the nationalization of leisure during the Fascist regime see De Grazia (1981). For further accounts on home economics, and the activities of ONMI and the *Fasci Femminili* see De Grazia (1992). For a specific discussion of state institutions and female consumption see Arvidsson (2003).

Eugenic literature continued to associate the realm of medicine and genetics to female sexual behavior but, after the conquest of Ethiopia in 1936, the application of such theories directly impinged upon the sexuality and dwelling behaviors of both Italian and African women. While the work of Giorgio Chiurco on sanitary politics in Ethiopia advocated for the betterment of the hygienic conditions of the colonial subjects according to the principles of a “civilizzazione sanitaria” (Maiocchi 1999, 311), eugenicist Gaetano Pierracini’s theory of the “azione centralizzatrice della donna” (Sòrgoni 1998, 197) established that women’s genetic code was less prone to variations and therefore more capable of transmitting the hereditary characters of the race. This theory reversed previously held ideas about patrilinearity as the central principle of the transmission of racial traits.⁷ Italian women were encouraged to settle in the empire in order to carry forth the “vasto lavoro di profilassi e redenzione sociale” (Benedettini 1937, 401; translation mine) that was expected from them. As wives, sexual partners, and mothers of colonialists, they were instructed to mold the colonial environment according to the parameters of white domesticity and colonial hygiene. As a consequence of these new trends, African women were gradually removed from the daily practices of interaction with Italian men and children. Colonial medical manuals began to encourage breastfeeding by mothers as the best solution for Italian children’s growth and for their adaptation to the colonial environment and discouraged the recourse to indigenous wet-nurses, considered dangerous for sanitary reasons, including the fact that milk was deemed a potential carrier of diseases (Sòrgoni 1999). The role of the *lettè*, that is, the Eritrean domestic worker of the wealthy Italian families, was no longer considered central to the domestic economy of the colony.⁸ The imperial domestic space had to erase the presence of African women in order to offer middle-class women both a frontier space and a “proper” place as they settled in it to create modern Italian homes.⁹

In 1939 journalist Ciro Poggiali issued a call to duty to women to perform a fundamental role, that is, to create a domestic space “in perfetto stile italiano...and on the basis of a rigorous and autarchic “economia domestica,” defined as “un’arma necessaria alla conquista pacifica.” In Poggiali’s words: “È un compito squisitamente femminile quello di creare la casa, con la sua autonomia morale ed economica” (1939, 64). Such domestic economy envisioned fruit orchards, a chicken coop, and the circulation of consumer domestic goods that, once adopted by African women, would eventually “stimolare nuovi bisogni tra le masse di nativi” (ibid., 70). Home economics encouraged Italians to form entirely white family nuclei, and colonial hygiene became a centerpiece of pre-colonial courses, containing anti-miscegenation messages coated in scientific discourse (Ben-Ghiat 1996, 137-138). As guardians of the house, Italian women were put in charge of supervising Italian men’s morality, hygiene, and sexual behavior.¹⁰ Fascist colonial propaganda urged women to operate within the colonial domestic environment in order to make it aesthetically pleasant and modern, and thus adaptable for the new middle-class settlers. These, and not peasant women, were to set the model of a “stile

⁷ On patrilinearity and racial identity in colonial Eritrea see Barrera (2005, 97-108).

⁸ In her narrative of colonial and postcolonial daily life in Eritrea, Erminia Dell’Oro describes the figure of the *lettè* in great details (1993).

⁹ For a discussion of Italian women’s presence in colonial Africa see Lombardi-Diop (2005, 145-154). On the role of the Italian colonies as a dreamscape for female fantasies see Pickering-Iazzi (2003, 197-224).

¹⁰ Both Pickering-Iazzi and Ben-Ghiat discuss the pre-colonial camps in some detail.

italiano” that would also encourage African women to mimic their Italian counterparts’ behavior, their looks, and their style, thus slowly transforming African societies into Italian cultural colonies.

A Clean, White Nation: The Decolonization Period

From the mid-1930s, as we have seen, the emphasis on the whiteness and smoothness of women’s complexions changed the idea of female beauty in Italy, in such a way as to prepare the country to the introduction of new cosmetic and beauty products specifically targeted to female consumer culture. In the immediate postwar period, the advertising industry continued the visual tradition that linked cleanliness to beauty but, visually, I suggest here, it began to take advantage of an enhancement in color illustrations in order to emphasize the epidermic quality of the clean bodies of the women and children of postwar, post-fascist Italy. In the advertising for cleaning and beauty products, I read the trope of expiation of Fascist culpability as intimately linked to the more general metaphor of cleansing the country and its collective memory after 1945. The leading figures of Fascism (most notably, Benito Mussolini, Achille Starace, and Roberto Farinacci) had been summarily executed by partisan units and, as such, this rapid elimination of the past “went some way towards generating a climate (perhaps even a sufficient climate) of expiation. The fact of the Resistance was also morally and politically crucial. It provided many, especially in the North, with a sense that the slate had been wiped clean” (Duggan 1995, 7).

Starting in 1952, Italy underwent a period of steady and fast growth, albeit regionally unbalanced, especially for the Southern peasants and for the working classes, whose salaries did not increase until the 1960s. This period saw, nonetheless, a cultural renewal that established the dominance of Italy’s modern culture industries, such as the publishing sector, cinema, illustrated magazines (*rotocalchi*) and national TV broadcasting, which began in 1953 and was extended to the entire country in 1954. The modernization of Italy and the spread of modern secularizing values, however, coexisted with the persistence of (religious) traditionalism in the postwar conception of domesticity and family life (Forgacs 1990, 105-106). As the *Democrazia Cristiana* established itself as the dominant political force of the time, its ruling cadres not only continued to support and sustain the economic power of the State, they also facilitated its ability to interfere in the daily life of civil society.

Reconstruction in post-war Italy meant the end of the antagonism between a state-controlled nationalization of Italy’s public life, and the de-politicization of daily life that had characterized the consolidation of consumer culture in the peninsula under Fascism. This trend reflected a new relationship that Italians, and especially women, established with the domestic space. As a central institution of Italian life, the family was reconfigured in the 1950s around changing concepts of housing and the home, becoming increasingly private and nuclear.¹¹ This also depended upon the slow but increasing

¹¹ One remarkable example of this change is found in 1954 Turin, where research indicates a decisive abandonment of the communal facilities of *lavanderia* (laundry quarters) and an embrace of alternative living arrangements of the wealthier classes. For further details see Caldwell (1995, 149-158).

availability of labor-saving consumer goods, such as refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, and washing machines. In 1964, 7% of Italian families owned a vacuum cleaner, 49% a fridge, and 18% a washing machine, yet such figures increased considerably (32% vacuum cleaners, 81% fridges, 39% washing machines) in households where female consumers were exposed to illustrated women's magazines, such as *Confidenze* (Pierpaolo Luzzatto Fegis 1966, 247-286). In 1960, the majority of Italians still preferred soap bars (71%) to any other body products or shampoos (38%). Yet, they preferred baby powder (59%) over toothpaste (53%), and this was true for all surveyed areas of the North, the Center, and the South. On the contrary, consumption of cosmetics among Italian women (lipsticks, facial creams and powders, as well as deodorants) was distributed unevenly across the North and the South, being higher in urban centers of the North. Again, consumption of such goods increased considerably when women were exposed to TV, radio, and movie theater advertising. Coupled with increased concerns for the psychological aspect of the relationship between mothers and children, the centrality of the domestic space for family life was also determined by the emergence of the idea of household chores as "work" (Caldwell 1995).

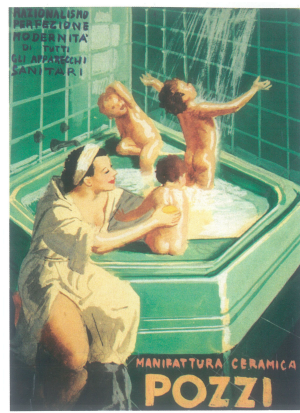
What the above data tell us is that the advertising for such commodities as electrical appliances and cosmetics considerably modified buying patterns and, consequently, the daily experience of women and the family itself. In the 1950s, well-funded detergent campaigns for such brands as *OMO* and *Sunil* appeared in the Italian illustrated press and women's magazines, most of which were created by the prominent American advertising agency J. Walter Thompson (JWT) for Unilever. The ads began to instill in women the idea of "the perilous consequences of not-white-enough laundry" as a form of moral imperative. This type of campaign, run by Unilever worldwide, borrowed its motivational pattern from the experience already developed for the "American Housewife" advertising market. JWT understood that detergents, as products that defined the domestic work of women as equivalent to the labor of men, could open the Italian market and simultaneously spread the ethical and motivational behaviors of American consumer culture in Italy (Arvidsson 2003, 67). In the late 1940s and early 1950s Gino Boccasile, the famous illustrator of the Fascist campaigns against tuberculosis, designed a series of posters for Italian brands such as Paglieri, Palmieri, and Pozzi that manufactured household and beauty goods such as bathroom and hygienic products, but also cosmetics, perfumes, powders and toothpastes. The images of chubby babies immersed in wash-tubs surrounded by bubbles and the protective care of their dedicated young mothers have the allure of novelty and freshness, a serene and other-worldly quality that transformed the ritual of the bath, a mild form of torture for most children, into a dream-like event [Figures 3, 4, and 5]. In the early 1950s, the bath was no longer a matter for State intervention and a collective, communitarian ritual as it was in the 1930s; it was now performed in the privacy of a new domestic setting that alluded to the promise of prosperity, and to a new consumer culture that targeted women as dominant decision-makers in the national economy.



Figure 3 - Gino Boccasile, Manifesto Talco Palmieri, 1950



Figure 4 - Manifesto Tricofilina, 1940



Bozzetto per il manifesto *Ceramica Pozzi*, collezione famiglia Boccasile

Figure 5 - Gino Boccasile, Early version of manifesto for Manifattura Ceramica Pozzi, 1950c

Boccasile's attention to home design reflects his increased awareness of Italian families' slow but steady consumption of manufacturing goods, especially furniture and appliances that followed in the wake of the major building programs initiated after the war and largely financed by the USA (Scrivano 2005, 317-340). Yet, in the slogan that accompanies an early version of the manifesto and which eventually disappeared in the

final one, we can still hear echoes of the lingering language of the fascist modernizing project of the household and Boccasile's sense of ideological continuity between the former regime of cleanliness and its post-fascist successor: "razionalismo, perfezione, modernità di tutti gli apparati igienico sanitari" [Figure 5]. The cleanliness of the home interior in his posters reflects how the spread of economic growth substantially changed the traditional configuration of family and domesticity in favor of a shift in the socialization of Italians from the public to the private sphere. The ritual of the bath experienced in the privacy of a fully tiled bathroom, an image obviously targeting the upper-middle classes, nonetheless reveals how domestic hygiene in postwar Italy involved a process of privatization of life and citizenship that had important consequences on collective behavior and the political life of the country (ibid., 338).

In this sense, one could extend Kristin Ross's identification of French women's "filth complex" "that accompanies the definitive eruption of the new domestic model into the female psyche and which, in turn, translates into a global repudiation for the peasant condition" (Ross 1995, 92) to Italian rural women, for whom migration to the urban areas must have appealed as a form of liberation from the shackles of peasant domestic work. From the beginning of the 1950s, indeed, the modernization of domestic practices, initially limited to the original inhabitants of the urban centers of the north-west, also affected the daily practices of migrants who moved from the rural areas of the north-east and the south (Scrivano, 324; Arvidsson 2003, 77).

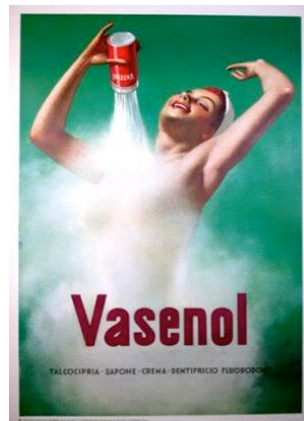


Figure 6 - Gino Boccasile, Manifesto Vasenol, 1952

What is most relevant for my argument here is that the internalization of models of personal and domestic comfort signals a shift in racial representations away from biologist categories and in favor of a more intimate, private understanding of one's place in the moral and national project of racial modernization. What we see in these images is precisely a process of disinvestment from the fascist nationalization of racial consciousness and a reinvestment into an aesthetic of subjective racialization in which modernity and cleanliness play a key part. This passage from bio-politics to commercial politics sanctions the overwhelming dominance in the postwar reconstruction period of capitalist economic forces and commercial capital over Italy's cultural politics.



Figure 7 - Gino Boccasile, Manifesto Castoreale Bagni, 1950

While Boccasile's characteristic style provided a visual continuity between Fascism and the post-war era, the emphasis in these images is on the voluntaristic and intimate aspiration to the whitening of the body through water and powder [Figures 6 and 7], or on the preservation of the "purezza della carnagione" (the purity of skin complexion) through sun-screen

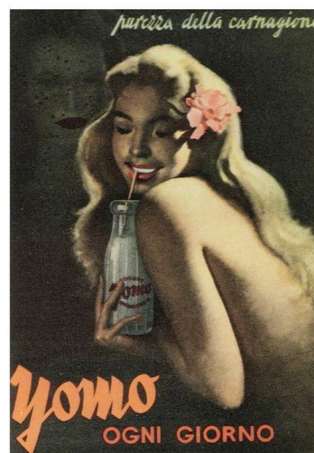


Figure 8 - Gino Boccasile, Manifesto Yomo, 1952



Figure 9 - Gino Boccasile, Manifesto Bertelli, 1940

lotions, a *purezza* that echoes, albeit indirectly, the racist idea of the “*purezza della razza*.” The tanning and powdering of this female body, isolated from any social context, emphasize the possible transformations of whiteness through natural and artificial agents whose temporal efficacy reinstates the body’s permanent, a-historical normativity, this time divested of all political contingency [Figures 8 and 9].

The visual tradition that associated national morality and racial identity with the power of cleaning agents continued in a similar direction when the advertisement industry moved from billboards and illustrated magazines to TV commercials. In the 1950s, with the mechanization of domestic work and the increasing use of electric appliances, advertising found in its alliance with TV broadcasting a national resonance of unsurpassed capacity. While in 1954 only 90,000 Italians owned a TV set, in 1955, 9 million of them watched TV, even if not regularly (Dorfles 1998, 9). Together with the disappearing of the ritual *bucato a mano*, the idea of the opacity of whiteness and the moral imperative of a “*bianco che più bianco non si può*” (Dorfles 1998, 43) became one of the leading themes of soap advertising. From 1957 to 1977 *Carosello*, a TV broadcast daily on RAI, dominated Italian TV culture, although the state-controlled channel imposed rigid codes on its format. It comprised 100 minutes of TV programming followed by thirty-five seconds of advertisement. While women were often absent from the main shows, they were almost invariably there in the so-called “*codino*,” the closing advertisement, signaling their primary role as targets of the commercial campaigns that featured laundry detergents, household appliances, furniture, and cooking ingredients.

As a dominant format of Italian state TV broadcasting, *Carosello* soon became an institution in Italian domestic and advertising culture, reaching an audience of one million Italians as early as 1958 (Giaccardi 2004, 82-95). As a hybrid program, made up of many mini-ads within one format, *Carosello* experimented with the diversification of consumer target audiences—children, parents, grandparents—while continuing to address to the family in its entirety (Scaglioni 2004, 31-46). Its end coincided with the end of state monopoly on national TV in 1976, when the Constitutional Court decision sanctioned the opening of the broadcasting sector to private investors (Pittèri 2004, 55-69).

At the beginning of the 1960s, the iconic TV figure of *Calimero, il pulcino nero*, (1963-1976) appeared for the first time as one of the recurrent and ritualistic sketches of *Carosello* and dominated Italian advertisement for over forty years, becoming a TV series in 1972 and nurturing the collective imaginary of generations of Italians.



Figure 10 - Calimero il pulcino nero, Nino and Toni Pagot, 1963 -1976

As its creators Nino and Toni Pagot explained in 1965 on the pages of the weekly magazine *Domenica del Corriere*, in order to sell the product

bisogna interessare le donne: che cosa attira l'attenzione di una donna? I bambini e gli animali. Bene, il prototipo del bambino indifeso è il pulcino. Se lo facciamo triste e disgraziato, suscita maggiori simpatie. Se lo facciamo nero, cominciamo subito ad introdurre l'idea che bisogna pulirlo. Se lo facciamo protestare, assecondiamo uno dei più antichi vezzi degli italiani. Se gli facciamo combinare un sacco di guai, gli togliamo il carattere troppo patetico e dolciastro che finirebbe per urtare. (Di Marino 2004, 185)

Conceived as a product image for sponsoring the washing-machine detergent *AVA*, the *Calimero*'s video narrative featured a black chick in search of his putative mother, who abandoned him because of his black color. When he finally finds her, he asks her “ma se fossi bianco mi vorresti?” Abandoned again, he eventually meets a Dutch girl (the famous *olandesina*) who assures him that he is not black, but only dirty (“tu non sei nero, sei solo sporco,” she says), washes him with the *AVA* product, and brings him back to his pure, socially acceptable white origin. Following Boccasile's intended whitening of the national body through soaps and shampoos, *Calimero* suggests that the affirmation of Italy's booming consumer economy was predicated on the hygienic cleansing of the stigma of blackness from Italy's household culture.

The Ubiquity of Whiteness

The mass triumph of TV commercials and the dominance of *Carosello* culture in Italy the mid-1950s and 1960s explain the persistence of the moral injunction of whiteness attached to racial self-perception in the decades that followed. At the beginning of the 1990s, sociologist Paola Tabet conducted a national survey among Italian school children aged seven to thirteen on the possible Fascist legacy of racist thought and their perception of blackness. This particular generational target was, obviously, not directly exposed to Fascist propaganda neither were, as Tabet seems to assume, their parents. The children whom Tabet interviewed are, rather, the progeny of the children of the economic miracle whose parents grew up watching *Carosello*. Children in Tabet's survey were asked to respond in writing to hypothetical questions such as “If your parents were black, what would you do?” Or “if your neighbors were black, what would you do?” The answers are alarming, to say the least. Fear, shame, rejection dominate in the responses. Stereotypes, many of which seem to hark back to colonial propaganda, attribute to Africans a constitutive savagery and a pervasive lack of civility. One particular set of responses caught my attention in this study. It describes possible solutions to the hypothetical event of having black parents. These solutions are not as

violent or drastic as other options on the survey, but are nonetheless disconcerting and revealing. One example comes from a fourth grader who writes: “Se i miei genitori fossero neri, io penserei che sarebbero arrivati dall’Africa. Oppure li metterei in lavatrice con Dasch, Dasch Ultra, Omino Bianco, Atlas, Ace detersivo, Ava, Dixan 2000, Coccolino, Ajax, così sarei sicuro che ritornerebbero normali” (Tabet 1997, 113). The affirmation of the normalizing principle of epidermic whiteness in this response brings us full circle back to the fascist legacy of the societal fear and moral shame associated with blackness. Yet the idea that such shame needs tons of different and equally potent brand soaps to be washed away comes straight out of an advertising culture that no longer refers to bio-political categories to define whiteness but privileges the quotidian, diffuse language of commercial brand-names in order to affirm the cleansing of its domestic, familial, and national heritage. Under neoliberalism, thus, as Goldberg aptly demonstrates, race is understood in terms of “geo-phenotypes” (Goldberg 2001, 7) that mark national belonging: those who do not belong are considered a pollutant of the national space that must be cleansed away with the potent products of late capitalism.

The making and remaking of postcolonial Italy as white is a cosmetic, aesthetic, and hygienic operation, one that mobilizes local and international capital for local consumption. My final example of forms of racialization that hinge upon the chromatic opposition of white on black are the 2006 and 2007 video commercials, titled “Happy Housewife” created for the *Guaber* company to advertise a specific product—marketed by their brand *Coloreria Italiana*—used for black dyes, one among a series of sophisticated liquid dyes for fabrics. *Guaber* was founded in 1961 by two Bolognese entrepreneurs, Paolo Gualandi and Athos Bergamaschi. In 1975 Gualandi and Bergamaschi created *The Antica Erboristeria Italiana*, the first commercial brand of personal care products entirely based on natural active principles, and in 1991 founded the *Istituto Erboristico L’Angelica*. In 2006, *Guaber* signed a series of agreements that led to the creation of a large Franco-Italian holding, the *Spotless Group*, with branches in several European countries. The *Spotless Group* specializes in the sale of fabric care products, cleaning products, insecticides and plant care products. Other brands by *Guaber* include *Grey*, *Vape*, *Grago*, and *Coloreria Italiana*, all dedicated to household cleaning products (*Guaber Spotless Group* 2011). The 2006-2007 video campaign was signed by Filmaster, a dynamic and highly creative film production company based in Rome.

The first video, released in 2006 on the occasion of Woman’s Day and titled “Coloured is better. La prima puntata,” depicts an Italian white woman doing laundry. She is interrupted by her white partner’s sexual advance, to which she responds by throwing him into the washing machine, pouring in some of the advertised product, and slamming the lid shut. **[To see film clip 1, click on supplementary content link on left sidebar].**

The image of the hyper-sexualized male black body that subsequently emerges from the machine departs from the Italian colonial paradigm in radical ways. As Paul Gilroy has noted, in the age of a neoliberal consumer culture, blackness can now signify vital prestige rather than abjection and be turned into a marketable commodity (2000). In the Italian context, this turn is exemplified by the marketing strategies of the 1984 Benetton “all the colors of the world” (renamed in 1985 the United Colors of Benetton) campaign, initiated after the company began to manipulate colors by dyeing finished garments rather

than unwoven fibers and signed by photographer Oliviero Toscani.¹² Here the celebration of a multiracial, integrated society hides, as Les Back and Vibeke Quaade suggest, an underlying “grammar of race” (1993, 65), in which the dominant theme is the accentuation of difference, while “race and ethnicity are presented as unchanging and eternal social categories” (68). As corporate multiculturalism “is giving the black body a make-over,” (Gilroy 2000, 270) in Italy, as in the US, “the glamour of difference sells well” (ibid., 250).

The 2006 *Guaber* video thus positions itself within a representational tradition that departs from Italy’s colonial racialist legacy. Italian colonial societies, at least until 1937, turned a blind eye on the widespread practice of interracial relationships between Italian men and African women. The opposite scenario, that is, the mixed unions between Italian women and African men was, on the contrary, considered highly scandalous and severely punished (Barrera 2002, 288-289). While in colonial literature and popular culture the female black body was often made the object of the sexualized male gaze, the predominant image of African men in colonial literature and iconography was one of faithful servants and soldiers. The so-called “Black Peril,” that is, that general sense of menace posed by a hyper-sexualized black masculinity threatening the inviolability of white femininity, so dominant in the English colonial setting, was not of major relevance in the ex-colonies of East Africa (Stefani 2007, 111-121). So, rather than a colonial model, the *Guaber* black man-in-the-washing-machine could be interpreted as a post-racial variation of a representational legacy that celebrates black masculinity as vital and athletic, an ideal body despoiled of all the traces of colonial abjection. This idea draws more closely from the stereotypical notion that a male black body is innately more athletic than a male white body and therefore an object of enhanced sexual desire for white women. The parallel is, obviously, between women’s preferred product and their preferred mate. The white woman in the commercial is indeed the “Happy Housewife” of the *Guaber* campaign title, who finds libidinal pleasure in the consumption of the objectified, marketable, and disposable male black body. As we have seen, the video is, in fact, accompanied by the slogan “Coloured is better.”

The black Apollo, rising from the machine like Venus from the waves, comes to disrupt with a blasting hip-hop beat a familiar scene whose rhythm is a traditional tango played on the accordion. In this first video-commercial, the Italian white couple is viewed from the standpoint of heterosexual and mono-racial normativity, but with a twist. Its unfashionable and outmoded values are superseded by the emergence of racial otherness into the scene of the familial. What is the result of this introduction of racialization into the space of domestic homogeneity? Is this apparently provocative and humorous video intended as a radical confrontation of Italy’s fears of miscegenation in the face of the increasing heterogeneity of its population, or is it simply playing with the ambiguous turn of the post-racial, where race is unhinged from a familiar ground in order to appear, be consumed, and possibly be washed away? At the end of the washing cycle, after things have been mixed and shaken up, the result is not a mix at all, rather the opposite. The male black body, in its excessive nakedness, is divested of all cultural marks, and it is sheer primitiveness, sheer origin. As such, it is distinctively alienated from the domestic

¹² As Pinkus suggests, the proposed all-inclusiveness of the Benetton campaigns defers the meaning of the binary colored/white and exudes a desire for the forgetfulness of the colonial legacy, while also blurring class distinctions (1997).

familiarity of the laundry ritual (performed as a process of fixation of colors). The washing cycle thus signals the national exceptionalism of Italian whiteness, by which a national brand-name (*Coloreria Italiana*) produces the fixity and reification of black over white. It is a particular brand of Italianess that produces this particular type of racial distinction. In this sense, although the video apparently turns the colonial and gender model of interracial desire upside down, in the end it also reinstates the logic of that model's dichotomies.

In the second commercial, titled "What Women Want: Il ritorno" and issued in 2007, we are presented with a different narrative. Here the inept white man reads a pornographic magazine while his partner does laundry. The front page of the magazine displays a picture of a scantily clad black woman emerging from a washer [**To see film clip 2, click on supplementary content link on left sidebar**]. This is much more familiar terrain. It is now the colonial Black Venus who is more desirable than the Italian housewife and titillates the man's sexual fantasies. As the reversal of the first, this second commercial is the real return of the past (as the title says, in fact, "il ritorno,") insofar as it attempts to re-establish the colonial interracial model so abruptly disrupted by the first. This time, it is the white woman who undergoes a punitive washing in the machine. The desired result, that is, the scantily dressed black woman of the magazine cover, is nonetheless unavailable to the white man. In the place of a black woman, out of the machine comes the same iconic black man, this time posing a visible threat to the white man's heterosexual desire. In this ad, interracial desire appears to re-activate, in order to refute, one of the most thoroughly repressed aspects of colonial sexuality, that is, interracial homosociality and homoerotic desire.¹³ This time, though, it has apparently severed its link with the colonial context, since the conditions it references have been obscured.

In their comic undertones, both commercials hint at the possibility of a deregulated and undeterred interracial sexuality in the name of the free circulation of neo-liberal commerce. Yet, both ads reduce the potential transgressive expression of racial and sexual mixing to racial and sexual normativity. In the first commercial, the phallic centrality of white masculinity is washed away by a product whose trick is to fix blackness in its essence, yet leave white femininity unbridled and on the loose. In the removal of the colonial stigma of interracial sociality, the stain of the colonial legacy of segregationist racism is ultimately washed away. In the second commercial, blackness as disruptive sexuality becomes functional to the re-instatement of sexual heteronormativity. The queering of the black male body in the second commercial seems indeed to re-inscribe within a colonial logic the process of desire and repulsion linked to the possibility of racial and sexual mixing. In the face of the increasing heterogeneity of Italian society, both commercials hint at the possible mobility of racial otherness, where race is distributed and dispersed as commodity, yet whiteness is triumphant as blackness has gained no power over its representations.

In conclusion, the *Guaber's* commercials attend to what David Goldberg defines as one the most salient aspects of post-racism, that is, its apparent deflection from the binary oppositions of racism such as black versus white, colonized versus colonizer, subaltern versus dominant. In our post-racial times, the emphasis is on a new affectivity that takes the form of interracial romance and stresses mixture and the creation of social interaction

¹³ For a discussion of this unexplored aspect of colonial society see Stefani (2007).

linked to the arousal of new desires, all in the name of a new and global logic of exchange (Goldberg 2008, 151-198). These ads hint at a racially muted sociality that highlights the post-racial denial of racism, yet they also play with the legacy of colonial racialization. Interracial intimacy, they seem to suggest, is acceptable until contained, until the logic of mixture does not exceed the limits of its own representational history. In the face of the violently repressive measures implemented to keep black Africans out of Europe and black Europeans in their place, the European (and Italian) post-racial is only, apparently, about the liberation from racist segregation and separation. In our time, the obsession with cleanliness takes on another important, yet subtler, function: in washing the body in and out of race, it contributes to diffusing, “evaporating,” and making invisible the institutional causes of racist exclusion inside and outside the borders of Europe.

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