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Author

Greene, Shelleen

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The "Oppositional Gaze" and the Italian Cinema: Joy Nwosu's *Cinema e Africa nera* (1968)

Shelleen Greene

Introduction

In 1968, Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko (b. 1940), a musician, ethnomusicologist, screenwriter and novelist, published *Cinema e Africa nera* (Cinema and Black Africa).[1] Nwosu's book is one of the first produced in Italy to survey the representation of peoples of African descent across Italian, other Western European, and American national cinemas. *Cinema e Africa nera* is also a prescient study of the then emergent African film industries during the 1960s period of decolonization. In 2014, Italian film scholar Leonardo De Franceschi, in collaboration with Nwosu, republished *Cinema e Africa nera,* with a new introduction and interview with Nwosu.[2] In 2024, *Cinema e Africa nera* was featured in the film journal, *Black Camera*, in an article titled "Close-Up: The Africas/Diasporas of Women in the Evolution of a TransAfrican Film Practice and Critical Inquiry," with interviews with De Franceschi and Nwosu conducted by filmmaker and scholar Beti Ellerson.[3] Drawing upon Nwosu's pathbreaking work, in this article I situate *Cinema e Africa nera* within a broader history of film scholarship that examines racial representation and colonial legacies in the Italian national cinema. I will first outline the sociopolitical contexts of Nwosu's *Cinema e Africa nera,* including African decolonization and its reception in Italy. I then consider the study's significance in relation to a body of scholarship on Italian cinema and media studies attendant to racial discourse and representation. It is my contention that *Cinema e Africa nera* advances a critical race and decolonial analysis prior to the formative emergence of these fields almost two decades later.

In 1962, Nwosu travelled from Nigeria to Italy to study operatic vocal performance at the Conservatory of Santa Cecilia in Rome. Nwosu entered a vibrant circle of leftist intellectuals and artists in Rome, including director, writer and activist Giovanni Vento (1927–79), who became her collaborator, book editor, and partner during this period.[4] Nwosu appeared in Vento's *Il nero*

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[1] For this article, I use the title *Cinema e Africa nera* from the 1968 publication. The 2014 reissue uses *Cinema e Africa: l'immagine dei neri nel cinema bianco e il primo cinema africano visti nel 1968* (Cinema and Africa: The Image of Black People in White Cinema and the Early African Cinema as seen in 1968), and as De Franceschi notes, the revised title, including subtitle, places greater emphasis on Nwosu's analysis of the representations of peoples of African descent in film through "an analysis of issues related to race and the legacies of colonialism," and is also "an expression of the precise historical and cultural contexts marked by the upheavals of 1968." See Leonardo De Franceschi, "Preface to the Second Edition," in *Cinema e Africa: l'immagine dei neri nel cinema bianco e il primo cinema africano visti nel 1968*, by Joy Nwosu (Rome: Aracne Editrice, 2014), 31. Ellerson returns to the original title in her 2024 article. See Leonardo De Franceschi and Beti Ellerson, "Part III: Women's TransAfrican Cinematic Practice and Activism: Mapping the Trajectory of an African Women's Cinematic Consciousness: Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko: *Cinema e Africa Nera* and a Seminal Moment of Africa/Diaspora Cinematic Discourse in Italy," *Black Camera* 15, no. 2 (Spring 2024): 225–39. Translations to English of Nwosu's work provided by author and Leonardo De Franceschi.

[2] Joy Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa: l'immagine dei neri nel cinema bianco e il primo cinema africano visti nel 1968* (Rome: Aracne Editrice, 2014). *Cinema e Africa nera* was originally published by Tindalo Press in Rome, 1968.

[3] See De Franceschi and Ellerson, "Part III: Women's TransAfrican Cinematic Practice and Activism."

[4] Joy Nwosu, "Incontro con Joy Nwosu, autrice del libro *Cinema e Africa*," interview by Leonardo De Franceschi, YouTube, May 12, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mOPbWlhFnmc&list=PL6XDB2l1CQusXOHhoNyo6q0IVVa3gVayH.

(1967, *The Black*), a film about the children of interracial relations between African or African American World War II soldiers and Italian women who came of age in the 1960s jazz scene in Naples. Vento was also instrumental in connecting Nwosu with Tindalo Press, which published *Cinema e Africa nera,* as well as with film historian and critic Mino Argentieri (1927–2017), who wrote the preface to the first edition. Nwosu completed *Cinema e Africa nera* as her thesis for her degree in mass communications at the International University for Social Studies, Pro Deo (later Libera Università Internazionale degli Studi Sociali/LUISS), where she also studied cinematography and screenwriting. Along with *Cinema e Africa nera,* Nwosu also completed *Io odio, tu odi* (*I Hate as Much as You Hate,* 1968), a semi-autobiographical film script based on her experiences of the Biafran war and racial discrimination in Italy.[5]

Cinema e Africa nera was released in 1968, a year marked by tumultuous political, social, and cultural upheaval. In Italy, the civil unrest and student and labor uprisings that culminated during the "long 1968" were motivated by reasons similar to those in other countries, including the ongoing conflict in Vietnam, economic inequality, and Cold War political stratification.[6] While the French student and labor movement of May 1968 exemplified the tumult of this period, between 1967 and 1968 Italy saw the rise of a prolific student movement as a response to failed educational reforms and disillusionment with the postwar economic "boom." Demonstrations spread across the country, culminating in spring 1968 with the occupation of the University of Rome and the violent encounters between demonstrators and police at the Battle of Valle Giulia.[7] The year also saw the Tet Offensive (the turning point of the Vietnam War), the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the close of the formative midcentury period of the U.S. Civil Rights movement, Czechoslovakia's brief liberation movement against the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the ongoing decolonization and independent movements in the former colonial territories. Within these historical contexts, *Cinema e Africa nera* is a text both of its time and a harbinger for the time to come.

Although *Cinema e Africa nera* emerged within this historic moment of political and social transformation, the events within Nwosu's home country of Nigeria directly led to the production of her study. The Nigerian Civil War (1967–70) began seven years after independence, the result of political instability and ethnic conflicts among the Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa-Fulani people, which eventually gave rise to military coups and the establishment of the Nigerian Federal Government under General Yakubu Gowon.[8] Under the leadership of General Odumegwu Ojukwu, parts of the eastern region of Nigeria, populated primarily by Igbo people, seceded from Nigeria forming the Republic of Biafra.[9] The conflict ended in 1970 when, after extensive military losses, the Biafran government surrendered to the Nigerian Federal Government. Over the three-year civil war, the Biafran republic suffered severe civilian casualties through mass starvation and ethnic cleansing campaigns. Nwosu, an Igbo from Enugu, Biafra's capital, and a supporter of Igbo

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Republished as Joy Nwosu, "Film, Africa, Blacks: A Conversation with Joy Nwosu, Rome/Los Angeles 2014," interview by Leonardo De Franceschi, *African Women in Cinema* (blog), September 16, 2017, https://africanwomenincinema.blogspot.com/2017/09/joy-nwosu-author-of-cinema-e-africa.html.

[5] De Franceschi and Ellerson, "Part III: Women's TransAfrican Cinematic Practice and Activism," 238–39. Ellerson also notes that the preface for *Cinema e Africa nera* was written by journalist Franco Prattico (1929–2012), one of the co-founders of the newspaper *La Repubblica* in 1976.

[6] Umberto Gentiloni Silveri, *The History of Contemporary Italy: 1943–2019* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 103-104.

[7] Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943–1988* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 304.

[8] Michael Gould, *The Biafran War: The Struggle for Modern Nigeria* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2013), 51.

[9] Ibid.

independence, was personally impacted by the civil war unfolding while she was still a student in Italy.[10] As she details in interview, the deaths of her siblings during the conflict prompted her to change the direction of her studies:

> [Three] years into my voice training, the war broke out in Nigeria, and it was a very stressful time for me because I lost two of my own people, two of my own brothers in the war, and I lost a sister too. I just woke up and saw my family being decimated by the war, and it affected me physically, psychologically, in every way. I lost my voice. And I was sitting there, telling myself that I lost my voice. What do I do? I came [to Italy] to study music, singing, now I've lost my voice, what do I do? So I said, let me go back to the university and study something else. So I went back to the university, to DEO Rome, the International University for Social Studies…a Catholic university, to do cinematography and script writing because I wanted to have a skill to take back to Nigeria. And in that study, most of it was writing scripts…we wrote stories upon stories, and at the end I was supposed to write a thesis and I chose to do a study of cinema and the effects of cinema in Africa, or the place of the black person in the world of cinema.[11]

Cinema e Africa nera was also informed by Nwosu's employment as an actor in the Italian film industry. Nwosu was a part of a transnational circulation of African diasporic artists and intellectuals who were living and working within Italy during the 1960s. As De Franceschi writes, Nwosu was one of hundreds of African students sent to European and North American cities to pursue their education on scholarship.[12] Along with her role in Vento's *Il nero,* Nwosu also worked as an extra in Joseph L. Mankiewicz's historical epic *Cleopatra* (1963), which filmed at Rome's Cinecittà studios between 1961 and 1962. She also appears in *La decima vittima* (*The Tenth Victim*, Elio Petri, 1965), a science-fiction film starring Marcello Mastroianni and Ursula Andress, set in a dystopic future in which citizens participate in a human hunting game. Nwosu's work within the Italian industry provided her a knowledge of contemporary film production in the country, as well as access to industry professionals, archives, and libraries to conduct extensive research on Italian and international films. As she states:

> I was [working] in the cinema, and I was writing about the cinema, and I had access to [people] who helped me with my research, with my information. I was given permission to go into the library of Cinecittà to do my research. I was shown films about black people, especially American Blacks in cinematography. I saw early African films made by Africans…especially the Senegalese Ousmane Sembène and the rest of them. So, I saw their films and I started writing.[13]

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[10] Goodwin Sadoh, *Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko: The Saga of a Nigerian Female Ethnomusicologist* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, 2012), 25. As relayed in Sadoh's biography of Nwosu, in 1970 Nwosu briefly traveled to the Ivory Coast under the auspices of the Italian Catholic charitable organization, Caritas International, to support Biafran refugee children. Due to her support of the Biafran government and concerns for her safety, she was removed to London, and then returned to Rome, where she completed musical training at the Conservatorio di Musica in Pesaro (1970). Nwosu returned to Nigeria in 1972.

[11] Nwosu, "Incontro con Joy Nwosu," 14:15.

[12] De Franceschi, "Preface to the Second Edition," 14.

[13] Nwosu, "Incontro con Joy Nwosu," 14:15.

Cinema e Africa nera is organized into four chapters, with a preface and introduction. The first chapter, "Film europei e americani sull'Africa" ("European and American Films on Africa"), surveys the beginning of moving images in relation to imperialism. From the introduction of the cinema in the late nineteenth century, she argues, the representation of Black peoples has been used to portray Africa as savage, cannibalistic, and violent in order to sustain and extend empire. The second chapter, "Il negro nel film" ("The Black in Film"), examines the filmic representation of Black peoples from a psychological perspective, probing the racist constructions of blackness on screen in relation to the white imaginary. The third chapter, "Il tentativo degli indipendenti" ("The Endeavor of the Independents"), examines the international auteur, avant-garde, and independent cinemas of the postwar era, influenced by left revolutionary politics, in their attempt to dismantle racist ideological constructs of dominant "first world" cinemas and put forth more complex and diverse representations of Africa in the era of decolonization. The final chapter, "Cinema africano oggi" ("African Cinema Today"), surveys the then-emergent African film industry, as produced by Ousmane Sembène, Paulin Soumanou Vieyra, and Jean-Paul N'gassa. In the following, I summarize Nwosu's arguments in each chapter in order to convey the originality and scope of her discussion, with an emphasis on her arguments regarding the Italian national cinema. I conclude with an interview with Dr. Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko and her current reflections on her pathbreaking work.

As De Franceschi notes in his preface to the second edition, *Cinema e Africa nera,* as one of the first book-length studies of the representation of Black people in film and the nascent African cinemas, holds a significant position within Italian film studies.[14] More specifically, the book was written by an African woman residing in Italy (Nwosu was 26 years old at the time of the publication), who presents an incisive critique of the Italian cinema, particularly of the representation of peoples of African descent in Italian neorealism, as well as the auteur and independent cinemas of the 1960s, that directly addressed African decolonization. De Franceschi suggests Nwosu's study "oscillates between militant criticism and pamphlet invective, often far from a balanced and detached academic-scientific *ratio,*" demonstrating a "corrosive polemical" approach that is a product of the heightened political climate of the era.[15] In her chapters, Nwosu offers a necessary counterpoint to Western European leftist intellectuals, such as Jean Rouch, Gillo Pontecorvo, and Pier Paolo Pasolini who dominated discourses not only on African independence, but also on the production of revolutionary film form and aesthetics. Thus, while her study may be described as "militant," she eschews a Marxist analysis based solely on class oppression, to focus more centrally on race, racism, and the colonial legacy.

While Nwosu's study is singular in its comprehensive discussion of race, representation, and the legacies of Western colonialism in Italian and international cinemas, Italian film criticism during the 1960s was attentive to African decolonization and independence movements and did respond to the emergence of film industries in African countries, particularly as African films begin to circulate in international film festivals. In 1965, film historian Romano Calisi edited the volume, *Problemi dello sviluppo cinematografico nei paesi africani e arabi* (Problems of Cinematographic Development in African and Arab Countries), the proceedings of the International Roundtable on African and Arab Cinema, with essays on the state of various national film industries in North and Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East by such figures as Calisi, Georges Sadoul, and Eitel Monaco, as well as Senegalese director Blaise Senghor and Tunisian

[14] De Franceschi, "Preface to the Second Edition," 17.
[15] Ibid., 18.

film critic and historian Tahar Cheriaa.[16] The volume approaches African and Middle Eastern cinema through the lens of industrial development, film circulation, and spectatorship, as well as examining the conditions (economic and ideological) necessary for the creation of an "authentic" African cinema. Similarly to this volume (which Nwosu cites in *Cinema e Africa nera*), Nwosu approaches her comparative analysis of American, European, and African cinema not only through an ideological critique, but an industry-studies approach that incorporates economic, distribution, and exhibition data.

Nwosu's study is also indebted to scholars—including Antonio Gramsci, Angelo Del Boca, and Frantz Fanon—and a body of literature that became the basis for postcolonial studies, then still an emergent academic field. The first chapter, "European and American Films on Africa," begins with an extended citation from Del Boca, a foundational scholar of Italian colonialism. Del Boca's *L'Africa aspetta il 1960* (1959, *Africa Awaits 1960*), provides an incisive comparison of French and British imperialism. While the French dominate through assimilation and by "multiplying French citizens everywhere," the English he argues, extend a "system of *indirect rule* and [are] orientated towards auto-governance."[17] However, what the British and French share, along with other European empires, Del Boca argues, is the "absolute conviction of leaving indelible signs of their civilization in Africa."[18] The passage concludes: "In fact, [the French and British] feel particularly offended—and with them also those minor colonizers who are (or were), [i.e.] the Belgians, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the Spanish, and the Italians—when their former subjects question, more or less brutally, their philanthropic vocation."[19]

Written in 1959, *L'Africa aspetta il 1960* is a prescient discourse on African decolonialization and neocolonialism. The year 1960 not only saw the independence of Nigeria, Nwosu's home country, but also of sixteen other African countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, and Senegal. Written almost a decade removed from this historic year, Nwosu's study emerges within the new realities of neocolonialism. To begin her study with Del Boca's portentous commentary on the nature of colonialism speaks to Nwosu's own position as an African student, brought to Italy on scholarship to study European music and to learn *bel canto,* under the auspices of Catholic charitable organizations and government "aid" to Africa. As a beneficiary of Western European postwar international aid to its former colonies, Nwosu now uses her position to "speak back" to empire, namely to question, critique, and subvert Western "civilization" as circulated in filmic representations.

With this intention, Nwosu begins her study in 1896, the oft-cited inaugural year of the cinema, arguing that the cinema, in fact, had several firsts, not only the Lumière Brothers' Cinematograph screenings at the Grand Café in Paris, but also Thomas Edison's Vitascope in the United States, and Robert Paul's Theatrograph screenings at the Alhambra in London.[20] Nwosu uses the introduction of the Warwick Bioscope (or Urban bioscope) by inventor Charles Urban in South Africa as a transition to the introduction of cinema in Africa, citing 1905 as the year of the

[16] Romano Calisi, ed., *Problemi dello sviluppo cinematografico nei paesi africani e arabi* (Rome: Istituto di Pedagogia dell'Università di Roma, Centro di Sociologia delle Comunicazioni di Massa, 1965). Eitel Monaco was the President of the Associazione nazionale industrie cinematografiche audiovisive e multimediali / ANICA (The National Association of Cinematographic, Audiovisual and Multimedia Industries).
[17] Angelo Del Boca, *L'Africa aspetta il 1960* (Milan: Bompiani, 1959), 19–21. As quoted in Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 47.
[18] Del Boca, *L'Africa aspetta*, 19–21. As quoted in Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 48.
[19] Ibid.
[20] Ibid.

first moving image projections on the continent, via mobile cinema theaters, in Dakar, Senegal.[21] After revising the inaugural moment of cinema to include the first projected moving images in Africa, Nwosu then turns to films produced in Africa by Western European industries, including Pathé (France) and Ambrosio, one of the first film companies in Italy. As she notes, within the first decade of the twentieth century, Italian filmmaker Roberto Omegna (1876–1948) had completed ethnographic films in Ethiopia, including *La caccia al leopardo* (*Leopard Hunting in Abyssinia*, 1909) and *Matrimonio abissino* (*Marriage Customs in Abyssinia,* 1909).[22] Omegna, who helped establish Ambrosio, filmed extensively in the Italian colonial territories in Libya, Ethiopia and Somalia, along with other early Italian filmmakers such as Luca Comerio (1878–1940) and Alberto Chentrens. As with other Western European countries, early Italian filmmakers used the camera as an extension of the colonial enterprise.[23]

With Italy's 1936 invasion of Ethiopia and the establishment of the Italian East African Empire (1936–41), Nwosu notes that the Italian colonial cinema, its documentaries, narrative fiction, and genre hybrid films, were used as propaganda to support and justify the invasion. She discusses the major Italian colonial films of the period, including *Il grande appello* (*The Great Call,* dir. Mario Camerini, 1936), *Scipione l'Africano* (*Scipio Africanus*, dir. Carmine Gallone, 1937), *Luciano Serra pilota* (*Luciano Serra, Pilot*, dir. Goffredo Alessandrini, 1938), *Sentinelle di bronzo* (*Bronze Sentinels,* dir. Carmine Gallone, 1937), and *Lo squadrone bianco* (*The White Squadron,* dir. Augusto Genina, 1936).[24] Nwosu argues that like other European colonial cinemas, Italian colonial cinema constructed stereotyped depictions of African peoples. However, Italy, in addition, offered a vision of what she terms "the empire of redemption and reconquest" and of solidarity between "black shirts and desert knights [who] ended up finding themselves on the same level. Rome and Addis Ababa, sharpshooters and *dubat*."[25] Thus, Nwosu argues that the Italian colonial cinema served to justify the establishment of the East African Empire, either through the historical revisionism that established the Fascist empire as heir to the ancient Roman Empire in *Scipione l'Africano,* the representation of the loyal *ascaro* (African colonial soldier) in *Sentinelle di bronzo,* or—as in *Luciano Serra pilota, Lo squadrone bianco*, and *Il grande appello*—the Italian fascist male who solidifies his identity in the African deserts by sacrificing himself for his country.[26]

Nwosu's strongest contributions to postcolonial studies of the Italian national cinema are the connections she makes between the Italian colonial cinema of the 1930s and the Italian cinema of the 1950s and 1960s that constructed stereotyped representations of Africa in documentary and narrative fiction film, including exploitative films such as *Eva nera* (*Black Eve*, dir. Giuliano Tomei, 1953) and *mondo cane* films such as *Africa addio* (*Farewell Africa*, dir. Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi, 1966), along with sentimentalized dramas that reiterate the narrative

[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Liliana Ellena, Paola Olivetti, Ivana Solavagione, Marta Teodoro, Emanuela Esposito, Corrado Borsa, and Baldo Vallero, eds., "Film documentario: Il muto," in *Film D'Africa: film italiani prima, durante e dopo l'avventura coloniale* (Turin: Archivio Nazionale Cinematografico della Resistenza, 1999), 149–54.
[24] One of the first full-length studies of the Italian colonial cinema only appeared in 2015 with Ruth Ben-Ghiat's *Italian Fascism's Empire Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 2015). The cinema under the Fascist regime is also the focus of the edited volume *Re-viewing Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943*, ed. Piero Garofalo and Jacqueline Reich (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002).
[25] Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 52.
[26] Ibid. Like "ascari," "dubat" was a term used to designate African soldiers, including Somali, Ethiopian, and Eritrean, who served in the Italian Royal Corps of Colonial Troops.

conventions of the Italian colonial films, such as *Violenza segreta* (*Secret Violence*, dir. Giorgio Moser, 1963) and *Congo vivo* (*Congo Alive*, dir. Giuseppe Bennati, 1962). Of the lineage between the Italian colonial film and postwar films set within and about Africa, Nwosu states:

> Here: we don't believe we're wrong if we discern that it was this kind of cinema that inspired *Africa addio, Violenza per una monaca* [*A Nun at the Crossroads*]*, Violenza segreta, Congo vivo,* just as we don't think we're wrong if we maintain that it was from the films of Camerini, Alessandrini, Genina that were born films such as *Eva nera, Mal d'Africa* ([*The Final Prey*], dir. Stanis Nievo, 1967), *Continente perduto* ([*Lost Continent*], Giorgio Moser, 1955), about the *mal d'Africa*—this is a truly original, racist contribution—from which even certain "quality" productions (*L'eclisse* [The Eclipse], dir. Michelangelo Antonioni) aren't exempt. Because fascism, in its warlike Catholic sentimentalism, was a true Italian phenomenon that persists.[27]

She later comments upon the dramas *Congo vivo* and *Violenza segreta* (an adaptation of author Enrico Emanuelli's 1961 anticolonial novel, *Settimana nera* [Black Week]) as films that present themselves as being factual presentations of the "relations between Africans and Europeans," but are instead about what she calls "fascist sexual frustration": Nwosu links many of these films to the colonial libidinal economy that produced the image of the African woman as metaphor for colonial conquest, such as the "Faccetta nera" and, in the postwar era, the "Eva nera" and other variations on the *esotico-erotico* (exotic-erotic) film cycles.[28] However, in her third chapter Nwosu reserves her most critical analysis for the Italian *auteur* cinema of the 1960s and the Italian *Terzomondismo* ("third world-ism") of leftist filmmakers such as Gillo Pontecorvo and Pier Paolo Pasolini.

First, Nwosu approaches Michelangelo Antonioni's 1962 film, *L'eclisse.* The film concerns the relationship between Vittoria (Monica Vitti), a translator, and Piero (Alain Delon), a stockbroker, set in the EUR (Esposizione Universale Roma/Universal Exposition Rome), and culminating in a solar eclipse. While conveying the conventions of Italian modernist art cinema, including narrative ambiguity and complexity of form, as well as Cold War anxieties surrounding the arms race and the postwar "economic boom," Nwosu is attentive to the film's meditation upon African decolonialization. The center of Nwosu's critique is Monica Vitti's infamous blackface performance, which takes place in the apartment of her decidedly racist British acquaintance from Kenya. While Vittoria does not make any explicit comments about the Fascist colonial era, the film is set in the EUR neighborhood, founded during the Ventennio nero, when the regime viewed Africa as the *quarta sponda* or "fourth shore" of its empire. In the scene, Vittoria suddenly appears in blackface as an "African woman" dressed in animal skin and carrying a spear while dancing among various photographs of decontextualized African landscapes. Nwosu argues that the

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[27] Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 53. The *mondo cane* films have been examined in Gaia Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender in Modern Italy: Intersectional Representations in Visual Culture (Mapping Global Racisms)* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). The neocolonial narrative films have been analyzed in Shelleen Greene, *Equivocal Subjects – Between Italy and Africa: Constructions of Racial and National Identity in the Italian Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012). For a discussion of the *esotico-erotico* films*,* see Rosetta Giuliani-Caponetto, "Blaxploitation Italian Style: Exhuming and Consuming the Colonial Black Venus in 1970s Cinema in Italy," in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 191–203.

[28] Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 56–58.

meditation serves as a kind of displacement of Fascist colonialism (onto the British) in an attempt to assert an "anti-racist" position. Nwosu writes:

> [We] see Italians end up being racist, even when they are convinced they are the apostles of anti-racism. This is the case, precisely, in the Italian films mentioned above; but also Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'eclisse,* when in a scene from the film he projects "his" Africa onto the small screen: that is, "that complex of hypocrisies that the civilly progressive man foists upon the weak."[29]

As Mino Argentieri suggests in his reflection upon Nwosu's work in 2014, the issue of racism within Italy and Western European countries is at the core of Nwosu's study—a racism that persists even after the anti-Fascist Resistance movement of World War II. Argentieri states:

> By amplifying the myth of the Resistance, the left turned a blind eye to a lack of awareness in favor of jumping on the bandwagon of those who had defeated Nazi-fascism. There was, and still is, a fog that has prevented and prevents what remains of the Left from understanding that Italy has a prevalently conservative, if not reactionary, inclination. I'm convinced that the cultures that fertilized and supported fascism have deposited seeds that cannot be hastily uprooted and extinguished. Racist prejudice comes from these branches, to which are linked not only [Telesio] Interlandi as the theorist of the Italic lineage and races, but also the Catholic Church itself, liberal post-unification Italy, [and] some remnants of positivism.[30]

In Argentieri's connection of *Cinema e Africa nera*'s critique of the cinema of the Italian left, particularly its variation of Terzomondismo, to a longer trajectory of state racism that extends back to the Fascist era, and further still to the post-Unification period, we can begin to understand how Nwosu's study anticipates the field of Italian postcolonial studies, specifically focused on Italian colonial and postcolonial visual cultures.[31]

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[29] Nwosu *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 57. Nwosu quotes Enrico Emmanuelli (1909–67), author of *Settimana nera* (Milan: Mondadori, 1961). Set during the years of Italian trusteeship of Somalia, *Settimana nera* is one of the first novels to condemn Italian colonialism and neocolonialism. Giorgio Moser, director of *Continente perduto* (1955), directed the adaptation of the novel titled *Violenza segreta* (1963). Nwosu critiques both of Moser's films as examples of the continuation of the fascist colonial legacy.

[30] Mino Argentieri, "Conversation with Mino Argentieri," interview by Leonardo De Franceschi, in *Cinema e Africa: l'immagine dei neri nel cinema bianco e il primo cinema africano visti nel 1968* (Rome: Aracne Editrice, 2014), 125–26. Nwosu refers to Telesio Interlandi (1894–1965), the Fascist propagandist who founded the journal *La difesa della razza* (*The Defense of the Race*) in 1938, one of the leading journals that circulated antisemitic discourse and other forms of Italian state racism, especially as outlined in the Manifesto of Racial Scientists (1938). He remains a major influence on Italian neofascist political organizations.

[31] Over two decades after the publication of *Cinema e Africa nera,* we see a body of scholarship that approaches the Italian colonial legacy in its visual media, including Karen Pinkus, *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising Under Fascism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), as well as her cogent analysis of Antonioni's *L'eclisse* in "Empty Spaces: Decolonization in Italy," in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. Patrizia Palumbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 299–320. See also Sandra Ponzanesi, "Beyond the Black Venus: Colonial Sexual Politics and Contemporary Visual Practices," in *Italian Colonialism: Legacies and Memories*, ed. Derek Duncan (London: Peter Lang Verlag, 2005), and Áine O'Healy, "'[Non] è una somala': Deconstructing African Femininity in Italian Film," *The Italianist* 29, no. 2 (2009): 175–98.

Nwosu continues this concise analysis of Italian cinema and its colonial legacies in the two subsequent chapters, "The Black in Film," and "The Endeavor of the Independents." "The Black in Film" chapter puts forth a psychosocial analysis of the representation of Black people in American and European film, which she terms "a sort of ideological-sentimental cocktail made of confidence and fear, hate and sweetness, of disgust and love. A mixture, as we've seen, from which no one is saved, even when one believes oneself to be completely outside of it."[32] For Nwosu, it is not a matter of celebrating "positive" representations of Black people within film, as she notes of Peter Noble and Italian film critic Lorenzo Quaglietti, but rather the function of such representations in the white imaginary.[33] Nwosu begins with a reading of *Birth of the Nation* (D.W. Griffith, 1915), the racist propaganda film set during the U.S. antebellum, Civil War, and Reconstruction periods. Drawing upon the work of African American historian Lawrence Reddick, Nwosu argues the racist stereotypes perpetuated in the film stem from the obsessive myth of the Black rapist, to which the film returns with a "pathological insistence," and from the fear of miscegenation.[34] Thus, Nwosu begins the chapter by arguing that the racist stereotypes of the Black rapist, the evil "mulatto," and the obedient Mammy and Uncle Tom figures not only seek to represent Black people as inferior, but are at their core about (white) pathologies concerning interracial sex and desire, stemming from the history of institutional slavery. For Nwosu, this obsession with displacing white anxieties, sexual deviance, and violence onto Black people is evident throughout American cinema. Drawing upon the film criticism of James Baldwin in *Notes of a Native Son* (1955) and author-filmmaker Norman Mailer, she reads films such as *Carmen Jones* (Otto Preminger, 1954), *Native Son* (Pierre Chenal, 1951), *In the Heat of the Night* (Norman Jewison, 1967), and *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner* (Stanley Cramer, 1967), as offering a false "sentimentalism" in representations of African Americans that have less to do with their lived experience than with the white imaginary.[35]

Nwosu's discourse on the American cinema becomes the basis for her comparative discussion of the representation of Black people in Italian neorealist and postwar narrative films. Nwosu turns her attention to canonical and minor neorealist films that depict Black people, mainly the African American soldier and mixed-race subjects: these films include *Paisà* (dir. Roberto Rossellini, 1946), *Sciuscià* (*Shoeshine,* dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1946), *Tombolo, paradiso nero* (*Tombolo, Black Paradise,* dir. Giorgio Ferroni, 1947), *Vivere in pace* (*To Live in Peace,* dir. Luigi Zampa, 1947), *Senza pietà* (*Without Pity,* dir. Alberto Lattuada, 1948), *Il Mulatto* (*Angelo,* dir. Francesco De Robertis, 1949) and *Angelo tra la folla* (*Angelo in the Crowd,* dir. Francesco De Robertis, 1950), *Miracolo a Milano* (*Miracle in Milan,* dir. Vittorio De Sica, 1951), and *Il peccato di Anna* (*Anna's Sin,* dir. Camillo Mastrocinque, 1953).[36] Distinct from traditional readings of Italian neorealism as a definitive break from the Fascist era, Nwosu's argument immediately makes connections

[32] Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 61.

[33] Nwosu's bibliography includes British film critic Peter Noble's *The Negro on Film* (London: Skelton Robinson, 1949), considered the first book-length study on the representations of Black people in film. Translated in Italian in 1956, Nwosu also references the introduction to Noble's Italian translation by film critic Lorenzo Quaglietti.

[34] Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 62. Historian Lawrence Reddick (1910–95) served as curator of the Schomburg Collection of Negro Literature between 1939 to 1948. Nwosu cites Reddick's 1944 study "Educational Programs for the Improvement of Race Relations: Motion Pictures, Radio, the Press, and Libraries," *The Journal of Negro Education* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1944): 367–89.

[35] Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 64–65.

[36] Neorealist films featuring the African American soldier are discussed in, among others, Chandra Harris, *Who's Got the Power: Blacks in Italian Cinema and Literature, 1910–1948* (PhD diss., Brown University, 2004), and Greene, *Equivocal Subjects*.

between the two. She writes: "Now we want to talk about the sentimental-Catholic fascist Italy that, with the fall of fascism and the expulsion of the Germans, came to enrich itself with new psychological shades and psychological perplexities, as found in those Italian protest films [grouped] under the name of neorealism."[37]

Nwosu turns her attention first to the films by De Sica and screenwriter and theorist Cesare Zavattini, *Sciuscià* and *Miracolo a Milano,* in which she acknowledges their attempt to create Black-white relations of "cordiality, kindness, and good intentions."[38] However, Nwosu is critical of *Miracle in Milan,* in which one subplot involves two residents of a squatter camp, an African American soldier and a white Italian woman, who are in love with each other, but because of their race cannot be together. In keeping with the magical-realist narrative, the two lovers separately ask the main character, Totò, who has been granted magical powers, to change their race so that they may be united. However, in asking separately, they are each changed into the opposite race (performed by the actors in white- and blackface), and remain unrequited lovers. Despite its good intentions, Nwosu states that Zavattini and De Sica fail to address directly the racism that confounds the two lovers, arguing that the two authors "[have] seen the color problem without really wanting to see it, escaping, evading it": she suggests in the end that the authors cannot imagine a successful interracial union on screen.[39] Nwosu levies a similar argument against the "minor" neorealist films such as *Il Mulatto, Vivere in pace,* and *Senza pietà,* which, she argues, are characterized by a "compromise" in which the films take a patronizing attitude towards Black people in the narratives, and the directors "end up [expressing] racism despite their intentions."[40]

The singular exception Nwosu finds in this body of neorealist films that depict Black people is Roberto Rossellini's *Paisà.* In her reading of the second episode set in Naples, depicting the relationship between Joe, an African American soldier (portrayed by professional actor Hylan "Dots" Johnson) and the street urchin, Alfonsino. In the episode, Alfonsino attempts to sell the African American soldier, whom he finds inebriated on the streets of Naples. The two wander the postwar ruins of the city, during which the Black soldier relates the racial discrimination he will experience upon his return home. Alfonsino, unable to understand the soldier, waits until Joe passes out and steals his boots. Later, the Black soldier finds Alfonsino on the street and demands that the boy take him to Alfonsino's home and return his shoes. Alfonsino takes the soldier to a cavern, where the soldier witnesses the poverty and devastation of the local population. Alfonsino tells the soldier his parents are dead, and the soldier, stunned by the encounter, departs alone. Here, reading the film alongside Quaglietti, Nwosu argues that Rossellini's film is the "most advanced in proposing an authentic change of perspective."[41]

For Nwosu, *Paisà* is able to realize a nuanced portrayal of Joe because he demonstrates a profound transformation in his worldview through his realization of Alfonsino's circumstances. This is in contrast to the first episode, in which the white American soldiers mistakenly blame the Sicilian girl Carmela for the death of their fellow soldier, thereby learning little of the sacrifices of their Italian counterparts. She argues that Rossellini's reliance upon "visual reality" and "character details" creates a sense of a "constant search for identification" between the African American soldier and Alfonsino. While acknowledging limitations in Rossellini's depiction of the soldier, particularly what she identifies as the muting of "protest," Nwosu states that in several scenes "the

[37] Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 68.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., 69.
[40] Ibid., 135.
[41] Ibid., 69.

actor appears more than the character."[42] Nwosu seems to suggest that, in his collaboration with Rossellini, Johnson's performance, improvisational in nature, exceeds the "sentimentalism" and accompanying racist stereotypes that she attributes to other neorealist films, such as *Miracolo a Milano.*

Hence, for Nwosu, cinematic realism is established by allowing Johnson, through improvisation and use of vernacular in his interaction with the young child actor, to convey a "reality" of the Black experience that is often obscured by stereotypes constructed through racist ideologies.[43] Nwosu concludes that for these reasons, *Paisà* "remains the most significant document of Italian cinema, the highest example, the most advanced film, the most anti-sentimental model of postwar cinematographic culture: the one from which the neorealist movement could have drawn good ideas, instead of relying upon more or less updated but old ones."[44] In her analysis of Italian neorealist films, Nwosu opens new approaches to cinematic realism through an analysis of the representation of race relations and racial identities.

The complex and nuanced presentation of Black identity and subjectivity that Nwosu identifies in Johnson's performance in *Paisà*, which for her is the true hallmark of cinematic realism, is carried forward in the third chapter devoted to independent and leftist cinemas of the 1950s and 1960s. In this discussion, Nwosu is concerned with postwar film movements, including independent, avant-garde, experimental narrative, and documentary movements such as direct cinema and *cinéma vérité*. These movements challenged dominant film industries not only through production and aesthetic innovations, but also by seeking, under the influence of decolonization, Marxist theory, and revolutionary struggle, to represent new relationships between the West and the non-West.

However, it is a tendency to project European anxieties upon Africa that Nwosu finds in the work of Italian directors such as Pontecorvo, Pasolini (*Il padre selvaggio* [*Savage Father*], screenplay, 1962]), and Valerio Zurlini (*Seduto alla sua destra* [*Black Jesus,* 1968]). Nwosu argues that Pontecorvo's canonical *Battle of Algiers* (1966) gives an impression of "déjà-vu, something like a film about the Italian resistance made twenty years later."[45] Zurlini's film, based on the life of Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba, once again suffers from an intellectualism that "fails to integrate the real model of Lumumba."[46]

Nwosu directs her most pointed critique toward Pasolini's construction of Africa. By the late 1960s, Pasolini had developed an approach to global subalternity, representing the Italian subproletariat in his poetry, novels (*Ragazzi di Vita* [*Boys of Life*, 1955] and *Una vita violenta* [*A Violent Life*, 199]), and films, through which he sought to make connections to a broader "Third World." Like many other Western intellectuals, for Pasolini African decolonization was imagined as an escape and salvation from the neo-capitalist West. *The Savage Father* concerns a young

[42] Ibid.

[43] Although not cited, Nwosu's definition of cinematic realism, her emphasis on what she calls "visual reality" and "character details," seems to adhere to André Bazin's discussion of Italian neorealism, particularly in his emphasis on Rossellini's "particular way of regarding things," rather than remaining on the level of documentary and social realism: "Neorealism contrasts with the realist aesthetics that preceded it, and in particular with naturalism and verism, in that its realism is not so much concerned with the choice of subject as with a particular way of regarding things…To put it another way, neorealism by definition rejects analysis, whether political, moral, psychological, logical, or social, of the characters and their actions. It looks on reality as a whole, incomprehensible, certainly, but inseparably one." See André Bazin, "In Defense of Rossellini: A Letter to Guido Aristarco, Editor-in-Chief of *Cinema Nuovo*," in *What is Cinema?: Vol. II*, ed. and trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 97.

[44] Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 69–70.

[45] Ibid, 138.

[46] Ibid.

Italian teacher who develops a relationship with Davidson, a young African student, whom he inspires to maintain his ties to his African culture and thereby to find the source of his poetry. For Nwosu, the screenplay amounts to "an operation conducted from the outside rather than from a dialectic internal to the African continent, an operation that often resembles a true intellectual masturbation."[47]

Along with citing a 1966 interview in which Pasolini "defines Africa as a drug that you take as a distraction, to escape suicide," Nwosu further argues that in *The Savage Father* "Africa is a simple backdrop for a cinematic essay between *Accattone* and *The Gospel According to St. Matthew,*" transforming "the Galilee of the Gospel into a southern landscape, and the Black boys of Kado into a sort of Black African *Ragazzi di Vita."*[48] Nwosu's reading is in keeping with Pasolini's thinking about global subalternity. She cites *Accattone* (1962), a representation of the Italian subproletariat in Rome, and *The Passion According to St. Matthew* (1964), a film made in southern Italy, but influenced by Pasolini's location scouts in Palestine (1963–64). These films became part of a series of film essays, *Notes for a Poem on the Third World*, which later included *Notes for a Film on India* (1968), *Notes for an African Oresteia* (1969–70), and *The Walls of Sana'a* (1971). Almost five decades after Nwosu's prescient analysis, Pasolini remains a contested figure in studies of Italian postcolonial visual culture, critiqued for his orientalist approach to the Italian subproletariat and global South, but also recognized for registering the impact of decolonization and Third World revolutionary movements in a period of cultural and political transformation in Italy.[49]

Nwosu identifies a more visionary and revolutionary cinema in the work of Italian filmmakers Valentino Orsini and Giovanni Vento. For Nwosu, Orsini's *I dannati della terra* (*The Wretched of the Earth,* 1968), an experimental film about an Italian director, Fausto, who must complete a film about African liberation struggle begun by Abramo, an African director, recently deceased. Here, Nwosu argues the "film seems constructed from an internal African viewpoint, not only because it is inspired by a classic of Frantz Fanon, but because the presence of the African director, Abramo, gives us the possibility to catch from the inside social and political aspects of Africa today."[50]

Nwosu also finds this kind of engagement with contemporary Africa in Vento's *Africa in casa* (*Africa at Home*, 1968), a documentary about Africans from the former Italian East African empire residing in Italy as Italian citizens. Vento's film foregoes "mythical images of Africa" and the intellectualism and false objectivity of Rouch. Nwosu writes that in *Africa in casa* "the dialogue is entrusted with the role of protagonist," meaning that the lived experiences of African Italians are conveyed through the history of Italian colonialism. In one excerpt from the film, we learn the history of Said Ben Amur, "an Ethiopian. Born in Massaua, but lives in Italy, between Rome and Naples, for 40 years. In Rome, he lives in a furnished room near Termini Station, while his family is in Naples. A wife and two children. They're in Capodichino, in the Berlingieri district, the neighborhood for Black Italians born during the war."[51] For Nwosu, *Africa a casa* represents a postcolonial Italy, in narratives that convey the legacies of Italian colonialism *within* the country, not projected upon a mythical African construct.

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[47] Ibid., 84.
[48] Ibid., 137.
[49] See Giovanni Trento, *Pasolini e l'Africa. L'Africa di Pasolini: panmeridionalismo e rappresentazioni dell'Africa postcoloniale* (Milan: Mimesis Edizione, 2009); Luca Caminati, *Orientalismo eretico: Pier Paolo Pasolini e il cinema del Terzo Mondo* (Rome: Mondadori, 2007); and Gaia Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender in Modern Italy*.
[50] Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 138.
[51] Ibid., 38.

Nwosu finds a similar focus on the contemporary Italian postcolonial condition in Vento's *Il nero*, the story of two mixed-race Italian youths, Silvano (Silvano Manera) and Mario (Mario Monaco), who live in Naples. Silvano and Mario are "Madonna's children," or the children born during and after World War II of African American soldiers and Italian women. As mentioned, Nwosu was Vento's collaborator and partner, and in the film, she performs the role of Joy, a Nigerian student involved with Silvano. *Il nero* becomes another instance of conveying Black Italian subjectivities on screen, and Nwosu praises the film as being "about young people, in which the discourse of the images comes first."[52] She quotes Vento from a 1966 interview in which he states the film is about young people: "first as twenty-year-olds, and second, as Blacks. Because Black Italians (and not, for example, Americans or Africans) born during the occupation are the first Blacks in our history."[53] Like Nwosu's *Cinema e Africa nera,* Vento's *Africa a casa* and *Il nero* remained "lost texts" for decades, outside of Italian film history.[54] However, their work is prescient in its anticipation of an Italian cinema that represents a postcolonial Italy, recalibrating a history of Italian postcolonial visual culture whose beginnings are often placed in the late 1980s.

For her last chapter, Nwosu turns to the new horizon of African cinema. Her approach is historical, industrial, thematic, and aesthetic, recognizing both the transnational and domestic genesis of the productions. Writing prior to the establishment of the Pan African Film and Television Festival of Ouagadougou (FESPACO) in 1969, Nwosu acknowledges that "the majority of African countries [don't] have a commercial cinematic production, only a minority produces documentaries and main distribution companies are controlled by Hollywood, the UK and France."[55] Nwosu also recognizes that the major African directors of the period were, like herself, granted scholarships to study film abroad, including Vieyra, trained at France's Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques (IDHEC), Sembene, who studied at the Gorki Studios in Moscow (USSR), and Senegalese director Ababacar Samb, who trained at Italy's Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia.[56]

Cinema e Africa nera is a significant contribution to this body of Italian film criticism centered upon Black representation and African cinema. In her own cautious yet optimistic way, Nwosu identifies within this body of films a reckoning with the colonial legacy and a formal innovation in the realization of a distinctly African worldview. In the work of Sembene (*La Noire de…* [*Black Girl*, 1966), *Niaye* (1964), and Moustapha Alassane (*La Bague du roi Koda* [*The Ring of King Koda*, 1962)*, Le Retour d'un aventurier* [*Return of an Adventurer*, 1966), Nwosu comments that "their characters are confronted with Europe, and after this experience react by hiding or asking if what they learned equates to what they forgot, and end by going back to tradition."[57] She also invokes Fanon in discussing this distinctly African outlook as conveyed in its cinema, stating: "the issue of double alienation of the Black, whether he tries to assimilate to European culture or if he takes shelter in his blackness, is also the theme of *Black Skin, White Masks* by Fanon, who in

[52] Ibid., 137.
[53] Ibid., 82.
[54] See Silvana Patriarca, "Invisibility of Racism: On the Reception of Giovanni Vento's *Il nero* and Antonio Campobasso's *Nero di Puglia,* 1967–1982," *Modern Italy* 23, no. 4 (2018): 445–59, and *Race in Post-fascist Italy: War Children and the Color of the Nation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), originally published as *Il colore della Repubblica: "Figli della Guerra" e razzismo nell'Italia postfacista* (Turin: Einaudi, 2021). See also De Franceschi, "*Il nero*" *di Giovanni Vento: un film e un regista verso l'Italia plurale* (Dublin, UK: Artdigiland, 2021).
[55] Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 138.
[56] Ibid., 139.
[57] Ibid., 140.

Wretched of the Earth invited new peoples of the world to avoid imitating Europe and to build a new humanism."[58]

This article's title refers to bell hooks's essay entitled "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" (1992). As hooks argues, the ability of Black women spectators to both "interrogate the gaze of the Other" and "look back, and at one another" becomes a critical practice and means of producing agency.[59] In her theorization of the "oppositional gaze," hooks expands the parameters of Film and Media Studies, challenging and revising foundational essays on the cinema, such as Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), to include Black feminist perspectives on spectatorship and identification. Moreover, *Cinema e Africa nera* prompts a correction in our citational practice, as it is a foundational work for the body of scholarship in Italian film studies and Italian postcolonial visual culture.

Certainly, *Cinema e Africa nera* not only demonstrates this critical practice but also puts forth a distinctly Black Italian perspective active in the 1960s. As she notes in her interviews, at the time of writing there were no studies of international cinema from the African perspective. Indeed, some of the first book-length studies of racial representation were published after *Cinema e Africa nera,* including canonical works such as Donald Bogle's *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks: An Interpretative History of Blacks in Films* (1973), Thomas Cripps's *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film, 1900–1942* (1977), and Teshome Gabriel's *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (1982).

Not only does *Cinema e Africa nera* anticipate major methodological and theoretical innovations in film and media studies in terms of race and representation; Nwosu's third and fourth chapter discussions anticipate a Black Italian consciousness and perspective, such as can be seen in the televisual and cinematic work of, among others, Medhin Paolos (*Asmarina,* 2015), Fred Kuwornu (*Blaxploitalian: One Hundred Years of Blackness in Italian Cinema* [2016], *18 Ius Soli* [2011]), Amin Nour (*Ambaradan* [2018], *Genewration* [2013]), Daphne Di Cinto (*Il moro* [*The Moor* [2022]), Dagmawi Ymer (*Asmat* [2015], *Va' Pensiero* [2013]), and Antonio Dikele Distefano (*Zero* [2021], *Autumn Beat* [2022]). This list, although far from exhaustive, demonstrates an active process of "looking back" in the audiovisual practice of Black Italian media practitioners and scholars. To this ongoing reconstruction of the histories of the African diaspora in Italy we may confidently include Nwosu's *Cinema e Africa nera.*

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Interview with Joy Nwosu Lo-Bamijoko: September 2024

SG: How did your immersion in film culture and production, during the heightened political moment of the late 1960s, lead to what you describe as the African perspective as conveyed in *Cinema e Africa nera?*

JNLB: I originally went to Rome, Italy, on a scholarship to study music at the famous Conservatory of Music, Santa Cecilia. I was halfway into my studies when the Biafran War broke out in Nigeria. The first thing that happened to me and to all the other Nigerian students in Rome was that we lost our scholarships. The impasse during this period of war afforded me the time to think of where I

[58] Ibid., 70.
[59] bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 115.

was going with my music studies. At that time in Nigeria, we did not have theatres or performance venues. And here was I studying music. I had to study something that would at least procure me a job on my return to Nigeria. Cinematography was just rearing its head in West Africa, especially in Senegal, where film directors like Ousmane Sembene were making films based on their local stories. I was highly interested in filmmaking, so I decided to go to school to learn more about it.

SG: You have spoken about the genesis of *Cinema e Africa nera* during your studies in Italy, first at the Santa Cecilia Conservatory, and then at the International University for Social Studies (Pro Deo/LUISS). Did this perspective come from your experiences in Nigeria prior to your first travels to Europe, at the beginning of the African film industry, or in your experiences within Europe (Italy) and, later on, moving internationally among Europe, United States, and Africa?

JNLB: My decision to go into the study of cinematography was because I had to be realistic about the prospects of music in Nigeria. With the absence of performance venues and facilities for music practice, I didn't see with music in Nigeria any future for me as I did with cinematography. So, to answer your question correctly, while I was in Italy, I traveled the length and breadth of Europe, widening my horizon and providing me with choices as well as the means to explore those choices.

SG: You have talked about the heightened political period of the 1960s, of decolonization and revolutionary politics, particularly the Nigerian civil war and the Civil Rights movement in the United States. I find *Cinema e Africa nera* to be so remarkable because you were not only watching and researching the films and literature, but you were also involved with film production, as an actor and screenwriter, during a turbulent period globally. Your book, I think, revises a certain chronology of Italian film studies which has focused on racial representation, the Italian colonial legacy, and African migration to Italy. As Drs. De Franceschi and Ellerson note in their interviews with you, your work predates book-length scholarship on the African diaspora in Italian film by at least two decades.

JNLB: Yes. Those were turbulent times, and in hindsight I shudder at how tough those times were and how tough we had to be to survive it. When we lost our scholarships because of the war in Nigeria, we looked for ways to survive. Jobs were hard to get in Italy, and extras in films were the only openings available to us. The Italian filmmakers were making films about their time in Africa, and there were films, like *Cleopatra*, that needed large crowds of extras. The money we earned kept us afloat until help came.

Cinema e Africa nera was the thesis I wrote for my degree in cinema studies. While I was researching for my thesis, I came across Black authors who were advocating the same ideas that I believed in. And I used their arguments to validate mine. At least in America and Europe, Blacks were poorly represented in films. While in Africa, films by black film makers were nascent.

My decision to write on Black Africa was because, at that time, I found practically nothing written by an African on Black African films. We did not have what could be called an African film industry. There were no institutes that catered to African films. The filmmakers in Senegal were all independent film makers. The Nigerian film industry, as we know it today, was nonexistent.

The focus of my work, be it in music or in cinema or in literature, has always been and will remain Africa. This is because I am aware that we Africans need to tell our own story. No one can tell it better. Everything written about Africa in the past, even the best of it, has been superficial, written by someone looking at Africa from the periphery, and never from the inside. This is why in all my works I have tried to portray Africa from the African point of view.

SG: In *Cinema e Africa,* you devote part of your discussion to Italian leftist intellectual directors including Gillo Pontecorvo, Valerio Zurlini, and Pier Paolo Pasolini. You are very critical of some of these directors, especially Pontecorvo and Pasolini, and you write that in their films and screenplays "Africa emerges as the result of an operation guided by the outside rather than as the result of an internal dialectic."[60] Could you say more about the lack of an "internal dialectic" on the part of Italian leftist directors who were making films about Africa and African independence? Is this to say that the directors did not address Italy's colonial history in Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, and Libya, or that they were using Africa as a projection or screen for their own concerns about Italy?

JNLB: I would describe what the Italian filmmakers at that time were doing as sensationalism. The Blacks in all their films, at that time, were used as backdrops. They had no story, and no voice. They were like objects in the films, moved around, placed in strategic positions, or used in their stereotypical roles as slaves. Although we knew that Italy had lost its colony in Africa and was practically driven out of Africa, their depiction of the African in their films was frozen in their period of glory in Africa. Their films about Africa were mostly documentaries.

SG: You praise several Italian directors, including your collaborator Giovanni Vento. In particular, Vento as collaborator and partner was very influential in the publication of your thesis, and you performed the role of Joy in his film *Il nero* (1967). Vento also directed *Africa in casa* (1968) about Africans from the former Italian East African empire living in Italy. How were films such as *Africa in casa* (dir. Giovani Vento, 1968) different from the works of Pontecorvo, Zurlini, and Pasolini—not only in terms of their approach to political conditions in Europe and Africa, but also in terms of their use of the camera, image production, and film aesthetics?

JNLB: Giovanni Vento was a film impresario as well as a film director. His love for the Blacks started after visiting the camp in Rome where the Italian government confined the Black wives and mulatto children who returned to Italy after the fall of Eritrea and Ethiopia. He wanted to tell their story and was so fascinated by what he learned that he made documentaries and mini films about them. My involvement with him and his work was responsible for catapulting me into the Italian film world. I was very fortunate to have him. Knowing him made my work easier. With him by my side, I had access to all the information I needed in writing my book.

SG: In the last twenty-five years, with the rise of non-Western European immigration to Italy and second-generation Italians seeking citizenship, Italian film studies have been influenced by the field of postcolonial studies, such as in the work of Dr. De Franceschi. Reading *Cinema e Africa nera* is a revelation in that you provide a film criticism informed by the Italian

[60] Nwosu, *Cinema e Africa*, 2nd ed., 137.

colonial history. Would you consider your work as "postcolonial" film criticism? Do you find that label or comparison useful for the kind of criticism you engaged in *Cinema e Africa nera?*

JNLB: Definitely! *Cinema e Africa nera* is a postcolonial work. By the late fifties and during the sixties, many African countries had gained their independence. Before then, I could not have written my book. I probably would have been discouraged or prohibited from writing it.

SG: In an interview, you discuss creating a strong African woman character in Vento's *Il nero.* Your critical voice in *Cinema e Africa nera* is also firm and unwavering in your approach to American and European cinema. Your writing reminded me of the work of Black feminist and author bell hooks, who in 1992 wrote the essay "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators" about the critical film viewing practices of Black women. I wanted to ask if you are familiar with her essay. In addition, were you influenced by the writings of Black feminists (from the United States) such as Angela Davis or bell hooks? Do you see connections between Black feminist thought in the United States and Africa?

JNLB: I knew about the Black movements in America. I watched the feminist movements of the American Black women. Did they influence me? Of course. More than influencing me, they encouraged people like me to speak up and take a stand. The Black movement in America, especially the feminist movement, emboldened me to research in places where only men could go. I used my work, and the publication of my work, to offer an insight into who we are.

SG: You've had an extensive career since *Cinema e Africa nera* as an ethnomusicologist, performer, and novelist. Your writings, such as *Mirror of Our Lives: Voices of Four Igbo Women* (2011), *Vagaries of Life and Girls' Talk* (2018), *Pregnant Future: No One Knows What Tomorrow will Bring* (2017), *Obanje! The Reincarnated* (2021), center on the lives of African women navigating marriage, motherhood, and careers. I wonder if you see your current writing as related to *Cinema e Africa nera* or *Io odio, tu odi* (1968) in any way? Although written over several decades, it seems that you're a storyteller, conveying stories of real lives and of empowerment, whether through a critique of the cinema or through stories based on your own life.

JNLB: My specialization in the study of cinema was in script writing. You are right. I am a storyteller. When I write, I visualize the stories, as if I am watching a film. As an author, being a script writer helps me see what I write.