

Fictive Archive, Temporal Reparations, and Italy's "Postcolonial Now"

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"How can narrative embody life in words and at the same time respect what we cannot know? [...] Is it possible to construct a story from 'the locus of impossible speech' or resurrect lives from the ruins?"

Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts*¹

Introduction

This citation from Saidiya Hartman highlights the pitfalls of reconstructing and representing the lives of the deceased or those forgotten by history. The archival paradox that she invokes relates less to the recuperative impulse of identifying what has gone missing in catalogs, or whose voices have been violently silenced or misrepresented in society by dominant groups, and more to *how* we can create a viable channel to understand, valorize, and reawaken the lives of the disfranchised in the aftermath of catastrophe. This "how" question indelibly points to a broader imperative to rethink the politics of the past in historical representations. Following Hartman, here I ask: to what extent does our intimacy with the lives of the dead influence the reproduction of their stories? What kinds of narratives are contemporary storytellers producing? How can we reconcile such a time lag if the present can never be fully represented and if previous systems of violence are repetitively haunting the present?² Furthermore, as Hartman provocatively asks in her essay, "how does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?"³

The way in which contemporary storytellers reproduce the stories of the dead suggests an uncertainty implicating political, ethical, and ideological stakes. This is not merely a matter of how we make sense of the past, nor simply of what some critics call "positionalities." Such a framework is often invoked to foreground the question of *who* retells or reproduces these stories, yet, as I see it, risks collapsing into a simple neoliberal inclusion/exclusion logic, reducing complex temporal-political narrative acts to a flatter judgment of authorial legitimacy. Rather, I am concerned with how, and to what extent, a particular past bears distinctive traces that set contemporary orientations for historical narratives. Drawing on David Scott, the task is not to reproduce the illusion of a past-present pseudo-dialectic, but to critically engage these historical conjunctions as situated *problem-spaces*—i.e. ideologically charged conjunctures that do not resolve meaning but instead produce the conditions for new questions and demands from those inhabiting their aftermath.⁴ Such a departure lays bare, at least within the Italian postcolonial context, the violence of simply subjugating the negative structure of colonialism to the conception of postcolonial conditions.

¹ Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (2008): 4.

² Gordon Avery defines "haunting" as "one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security)." See "Introduction" in Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

³ Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 4.

⁴ David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity: The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 7. In the Italian context, Stephanie Malia Hom's recent proposal of empire's "mobius strip" here partially echoes David Scott's concept of "problem-spaces." See Stephanie Malia Hom, *Empire's Mobius Strip: Historical Echoes in Italy's Crisis of Migration and Detention* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

What might be controversially considered as a “historicist impulse” for historical emplotments within postcolonial Italy—exhibited and largely pursued not merely by historians, but also by filmmakers, activists, artists, and fiction writers—to look backward and bring forward redemptive answers cannot serve as an excuse for neutralizing the very process of recuperation.⁵ My argument, of course, is not that these recent works, both creative and academic, are insignificant or conducted wrongly; quite the opposite, in fact. What this article seeks to explore, more pointedly, is how we might theorize Italy’s postcolonial presents and futures without merely reinscribing inherited frameworks for understanding its colonial past. In other words, it inquires whether its postcolonial present bears significance in ways that introduce new theoretical directions to the analytical pairing of the colonial past and what follows. At a very basic level, one may contend that it is often in the present that power structures rooted in the past resurface with greater clarity, allowing for the activation of narratives and knowledges shaped by historical violence. An epistemic shuffle—what this essay seeks to explore—unsettles what has been described as “an entanglement of historicity with power that applies not only in the archives but also dominates the processes and practices by which pastness is authenticated, ratified, and organized into fields of knowledge.”⁶

This is to suggest that representations of the (colonial) past—whether in novels, films, or archival materials—hold the potential of creating new spaces to mobilize the promise of history as the foundation of knowledge. I must first clarify that to “mobilize” is not to erase, dismiss, or even reverse the past, but to engage it differently or, in other words, to probe the ways in which we might reckon with the power dynamics that often hides behind historicity. In today’s Italy, as scholarly attention has increasingly focused on the linkage between its “belated” colonial history and its postcolonial and migratory present, some critics have initiated the first steps by trying not to fall into a teleological or progressive temporal empiricism, especially in their pivotal analyses of cinematic representations.⁷ What remains to be further explored, however, is how such cultural productions within the Italian context give rise to novel epistemological protocols that destabilize the entangled relationship between pastness and power in the making of postcolonial knowledge. If rewriting the chronicle of the past allows more than simply a linear celebratory repair, then producing “counter-histories” or “counter-archives” of minoritized groups in fact gestures toward a pressing task of exploring potential alternative frameworks beyond conventional revisionist logic.

In this essay, I will focus on the novel *Timira: Romanzo Meticcio* (2012), co-authored by Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed, in order to examine how its innovations in both narrative content and form generate essential potentialities for reframing the power relations between archive, fiction, pastness, and the political dimension of historicity. My aim is not to reconstruct the life story of Isabella Marincola (the protagonist) or how that story dialogues with Italy’s racial politics or colonial histories, but rather to consider it as an artwork that solicits reflections on its aesthetic

⁵ In *Conscripts of Modernity*, David Scott also argues that anticolonial narratives have often been structured within a particular narrative form—that of Romance—characterized by its redemptive arc, rhythm of overcoming, and teleological drive toward vindication. These stories of salvation and triumph are propelled by a utopian horizon, shaping the temporal and affective contours through which past, present, and future are imagined. He then proposes a new anticolonial reading through the critical lens of “tragedy” to challenge the conventional Romantic organization of the narrative relation between pasts, presents, and futures. See, in particular, *Conscripts of Modernity*, 9–14.

⁶ This is a citation from Hazel Carby’s foreword to Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s book, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), xxi.

⁷ For recent scholarship that critically explores the issue of time in the context of postcolonial Italy, see, for example, Rhiannon Noel Welch, “Anachronism, Displacement, Trace: ‘Scarred Images’ and the Postcolonial Time Lag,” *California Italian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2017): 1–26; Derek Duncan, “Shooting the Colonial Past in Contemporary Italian Cinema: Effects of Deferral in *Good Morning Aman*,” in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging Homogeneity*, ed. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 115–24.

materialities and, ultimately, on how the novel informs a new politics of archiving. By sketching out the theoretical contours of what Hal Foster terms as the contemporary “archival impulse,” this essay aims to highlight the critical potential of bringing archival practices into dialogue with postcolonial literature, and explores how literary works—particularly historical novels written in Italian—can offer what Angelica Pesarini has called as “a fascinating terrain of epistemological investigation.”⁸ I consider how the archive’s mediation with a lost past enables new epistemic trajectories regarding temporality, for which the recuperative impulse also involves disturbing normative practices for historical inquiries. The authors’ archive-making and -repurposing process introduces an ethically informed approach to reading, analyzing, and reimagining past events, as well as to perceiving Italy’s current socio-political conjuncture as a postcolonial country.

I sustain that *Timira*’s aestheticization of archives remediates the meaning of the *post-* in “postcolonial,” a term that, while often “confusingly universalized,”⁹ is reshaped here to suggest a more fluid and conflictual temporal articulation. The *post-* as a contested site points to a new process of *becoming*, where elements of hybridity, fragmentation, and suspension also undermine the past-present dialectic. *Timira*’s formal experimentation enacts, at varying scales, what Parisa Vaziri—reflecting on Saidiya Hartman’s *Lose Your Mother* and drawing on Glissant’s thinking—describes as “the Black discursive tradition that provincializes historiography in favor of nonhistory—fragmented, unintegrated sediment.”¹⁰ Here, “new” does not mean the replacement, abolition, or disappearance of something obsolete, but rather a deconstruction of “post-” discourses, leading not to their erasure, but rather to a proliferation of connotations in a “decentered” form.¹¹ The new temporal imaginary suggests a cyclical rather than progressive rhythm.¹² Speaking directly about the function of the archive allows us to reconsider how the hermeneutic malleability between archive, narrative, and history intervenes in Italy’s current narratological ambition to imagine a postcolonial now.¹³

This viewpoint, as some may recall immediately, is in conversation with and partially inspired by Homi Bhabha’s “disjunctive temporality” as well as his theorization of the postcolonial “time lag.”¹⁴ For him, “the time-lag of postcolonial modernity moves *forward*, erasing that compliant past tethered to the myth of progress, ordered in the binarisms of its cultural logic: past/present, inside/outside. This *forward* is neither teleological nor is it an endless slippage.”¹⁵ What *Timira* suggests is that there may exist a possibility to break away from this past/present epistemology. Moving away from the traditional framework of a “counter-archive” as a dialectic with official

⁸ Angelica Pesarini, “Making Visible the Invisible: Colonial Sources and Counter-Body Archives in the Boarding Schools of Black ‘Mixed Race’ Italian Children in Fascist East Africa,” *Journal of Postcolonial Writings* 58, no. 5 (2023): 630. For a more creative account on this matter, see also Angelica Pesarini, “Non s’intravede speranza alcuna,” in *Future: il domani dalle voci di oggi*, ed. Igiaba Scego (Florence: Effequ, 2019), 69–77.

⁹ Stuart Hall, “When was ‘the Post-colonial?’: Thinking at the Limit,” in *Selected Writings on Marxism*, ed. Gregor McLennan (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 301.

¹⁰ Parisa Vaziri, “On ‘Saidiya’: Indian Ocean World Slavery and Blackness beyond the Horizon,” *Qui Parle* 28, no. 2 (2019): 241–80, 249. See also Édouard Glissant, “The Quarrel with History,” in *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992), 61–67.

¹¹ Hall, “When Was ‘the Post-colonial?’,” 301.

¹² This statement echoes Giambattista Vico’s well-known theory of “corsi e ricorsi (cycles and recurrences),” suggesting that historical events tend to repeat in cyclical patterns.

¹³ I write this article with the belief that the Italian case can provide a particular commentary to the global relevance of postcolonial knowledge-making process and the contemporary racist and xenophobic nationalisms.

¹⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 254 and 363.

¹⁵ Here I am grateful for Rhiannon Welch’s discussion of Bhabha in her article “Anachronism, Displacement, Trace.” See also Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 363–64.

archival accounts, this essay aims to reconsider how in the Italian context the notion of *archive* as a cultural project speaks not only to the past but also reframes the ways in which we might valorize the past's relations with the present and the future. The narratological-aesthetic innovations turn the "archive" into a living terrain, challenging the term's elevated position in historicist empiricism as a "preapproved allegory for any and all modes of contestation."¹⁶

***Timira*, Archival Revival, and the Critique of Incompletion:**

For the archive, we may begin with a brief overview of its etymological origins. According to Derrida, the Greek origin *arkheion* refers to the physical places of those who commanded: "the citizens who thus held and signified political power were considered to possess the right to make or to represent the law."¹⁷ This foundational entanglement of place, power, and law invites critical reflection on the archive's accrued authority in modernity, while its expanded definitions now offer the potential to unsettle and renegotiate that very nexus. This is, perhaps, particularly relevant for "colonial archives," namely, the institutional repositories and epistemic structures through which imperial powers have historically produced, classified, and legitimized knowledge, often in ways that silenced, marginalized, or erased the voices and agencies of the colonized. Numerous scholars across history, anthropology, cultural studies, and critical theory—among them Thomas Richards, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Ann Stoler, and Achille Mbembe—have profoundly enriched its conceptual terrain. For Mbembe, the archive is "not a piece of data, but a status" or an "instituting imaginary" that shapes regimes of knowledge and authority.¹⁸ Ann Stoler, in turn, disrupts the presumed epistemological solidity of official colonial archives, urging us to attend to their "surplus production," namely those excesses that trace their "interior ridges and porous seams" where closures are breached by unexpected revelations and modes of writing.¹⁹ What Stoler foregrounds is not merely the content, the architectural dimension, or the materiality of the archive, but instead the documents' margins, erasures, and faint traces—the watermarks—that constitute its affective and political power in colonial regimes.

In this vein, *Timira* occupies a unique space in postcolonial Italian literature for its blending of different genres, such as fiction, biography, oral history, and archival reproduction. Most chapters draw on a variety of multimodal materials of different recourses. Based on the real stories of Antar's mother, Isabella Marincola (known in Somalia as Timira Assan), the novel reconstructs how she, as a mixed-race Italo-Somali woman, embodied both Italy's colonial and postcolonial moments—ranging from the fascist period to the 1990s—between Italy and Somalia. An immediate response to the role of such personal stories relates to an antagonistic view typical for works produced by minority groups, i.e. they first and foremost destabilize the official accounts of Italy's colonial history, serving to "promote a 'bottom-up' idea of historiography."²⁰ A closer reading of the book, however, suggests that the authors were not aiming to reject or dismiss official documents and narratives outright. Rather, it is the deliberate contamination and overlap between

¹⁶ Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 2.

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 2.

¹⁸ Achille Mbembe, "The Power of Archive and Its Limits," in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris et al., (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 20–22.

¹⁹ Ann Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 14.

²⁰ Caterina Romeo, "Italian Postcolonial Literature," *California Italian Studies* 7, no. 2 (2017): 26.

private memories and institutional records that signal a more nuanced strategy that works to decolonize homogenized modes of storytelling and expression. In this way, the book itself operates as a cultural object that self-critiques the *concept* of archive, not by negating it, but by reconfiguring it as an ongoing site of spatial-temporal contestation for the imaginaries of postcolonial Italy.²¹

Before delving into *Timira*'s aesthetic and formal potential, I would like to introduce first its content and Isabella's biography, as these establish the general historical and political backgrounds. The authors' aim (probably rooted in a historicist intent) in writing this novel was to create a hospitable space where the deceased Isabella could locate her uniqueness in Italian history. Isabella Marincola was born in 1925 in Mogadishu to a Somali woman, Ashkiro Hassan, and an Italian soldier, Giuseppe Marincola, who then brought her and her brother (who became the anti-fascist partisan Giorgio Marincola) back to Italy as children. While in Italy, Isabella also visited Somalia during the period of the Italian Trust Territory and ultimately settled in Mogadishu from the early seventies until April 1991; however, she was then forced to return to Italy due to Somalia's civil war. In Italy, she navigated a society that identified her both as a glorious product of the Fascist empire and as a racial outsider, which Isabella perceived as different from the racism that she witnessed in her later years. She records that in the 1930s, "molti vedevano in me l'icona dell'avventura coloniale e mi vezzeggiavano come una bertuccia ammaestrata" (many people looked at me as the icon of colonial adventure and they petted me as though caressing a trained monkey).²² Over time, she continues, these public interests in exotic appearances were replaced by an explicit and offensive racism and sexism, as she often sensed "lo sguardo indiscreto, come filtrato dai rami di una siepe" (the indiscreet gaze, as if filtered through the branches of a hedge)²³: "a Teatro, in tram, per la strada: ovunque andassi mi sentivo studiata, con gli occhi e con le parole." (at the theater, on the tram, on the street: wherever I went I felt examined with their eyes and their words).²⁴ Even in the postcolonial era, her experience echoes Caterina Romeo's idea of "racial evaporation" in Italy, where race "has evaporated from the cultural debate in contemporary Italy as a result of the necessity to obliterate 'embarrassing' historical events."²⁵ Or rather, based on what we learn from *Timira*, in public imaginaries these "historical events" might not be considered embarrassing at all. This is testified to in a later episode of 1992: when Isabella went to ask for government subsidies as an "Italian refugee coming from Somalia," she encountered the dottoressa

²¹ In 2008, the Wu Ming collective published an online essay, which they then developed into a book discussing a group of Italian authors emergent at the end of the so-called "First Republic." See Wu Ming, *New Italian Epic: letteratura, sguardo obliquo, ritorno al futuro* (Turin: Einaudi, 2009). This new literary genre—"New Italian Epic"—has thus far inspired numerous academic conferences and debates in both Italy and across the Atlantic. This novel could be situated within this literary genre for its blending of historical critique with formal experimentation and ethical urgency. For a more detailed analysis on *Timira* and New Italian Epic, see, Clarissa Clò, "Collective Transmedia Storytelling from Below: *Timira* and the New Italian Epic," in *Encounters with the Real in Contemporary Italian Literature and Cinema*, ed. Loredana Di Martino and Pasquale Verdicchio (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017).

²² Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed, *Timira: romanzo meticcio* (Turin: Einaudi, 2012), 169. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

²³ Wu Ming 2 and Mohamed, *Timira*, 169.

²⁴ Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed, *Timira*, 169.

²⁵ Caterina Romeo, "Racial Evaporations: Representing Blackness in African Postcolonial Literature," in *Postcolonial Italy*, 221.

Vizzali, who, probably like many other people during that time, still conceived of Italian colonialism as a *missione civilizzatrice* (civilizing mission) on the African continent.²⁶

Another aspect contributing to her role as a distinct “living monument” for both colonial and postcolonial Italy is her profession as a model and later as an actress.²⁷ Such a career trajectory allows us to glimpse how Black female bodies in modern Italy endured white male gazes and public commodification. In postwar Italy, the Black female body became a signifier that could not locate any concrete consciousness in the general public. As Caterina Romeo suggests, in the case of Isabella Marincola, an independent woman with a successful acting career, the colonial imaginary of the Black Venus—where interactions between white men and Black women were largely defined by power imbalances, with Black women often reduced to roles of subjugation, domestic labor, and sexual exploitation—was radically contested.²⁸

The novel interweaves a variety of Isabella’s personal stories and objects—diaries, letters, photographs, and documents—into its narrative or sometimes collects them as separate materials. This posthumous collection and its symbolical significance point to the nature of minoritized knowledge. The conceptual limits of the archive today have broadened significantly and, in many cases, the mention of governmental records, databases, or catalogs carries a negative undertone, explicitly and implicitly linked to concepts such as power, privilege, dominance, or violence. Critics often resort to employing “counter”—*counter-memory*, *counter-history*, *counter-narrative*, *counter-archive*—to valorize these new cultural productions by (racially) minoritized people as acts to challenge official narratives. Yet, as Anjali Arondekar has poignantly stated, “the coupling of *archive* (original emphasis) with minoritized knowledge formation has inevitably led to some simplistic and triumphant forms of empiricism.”²⁹ Non-official archives can easily become caught in such allegorical discourses of resistance, missing the opportunity to connect with broader social schematics that could open up new avenues of understanding.

Several critics, including Daniele Comberiati and Linde Luijnenburg (2015), Clarissa Clò (2017), Angelica Pesarini (2020), and Caterina Romeo (2023), have all illustrated the political connotations of the novel’s subtitle “romanzo meticcio”³⁰ as referring to the model of collaborative writing, or “a quattro mani,” which was one of the principal characteristics of early postcolonial writings in Italy.³¹ Whether and how this collective writing between an immigrant without mastery

²⁶ In the novel, Vizzali states: “noi Italiani...ci teniamo a fare bella figura di fronte al mondo. E infatti lo dicono tutti: le due città più ordinate dell’Africa sono Addis Abeba e l’Asmara, e Mogadiscio sarebbe la terza, se non l’aveste rovinata. E dire che dopo l’indipendenza vi abbiamo dato un sacco di soldi per aiutarvi a crescere” (we Italians...we care about making good impressions in front of the world. And in fact, everyone says so: the two most orderly cities in Africa are Addis Ababa and Asmara, and Mogadishu would be the third, if you hadn’t destroyed it. And to think that after the independence, we gave you a lot of money to help you to develop). In *Timira*, 391.

²⁷ As many scholars and critics have indicated elsewhere, Isabella Marincola’s most important appearance in Italian cinema was in Giuseppe De Santis’s 1949 film *Riso amaro*. Isabella’s brother, Giorgio Marincola, became an anti-Fascist partisan and was executed by Nazi forces in 1945, a tragedy that profoundly impacted Isabella’s life.

²⁸ Caterina Romeo, *Interrupted Narratives and Intersectional Representations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2023), 108.

²⁹ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 2.

³⁰ For a more detailed account of Italy’s fascist/colonial histories of “meticcio”/ “meticcio,” see Pesarini’s recent article, “Making Visible the Invisible,” especially its endnotes.

³¹ As of the case of *Timira*, the word *meticcio* alludes not only to the protagonist Isabella’s mixed-race identity. For a better understanding of how Isabella’s life story in the novel relates to Italy’s Fascist Empire in East Africa and postcolonial Italy, see Angelica Pesarini, “‘You Are the Shame of the Race’: Dynamics of Pain, Shame, and Violence in Shaping Shifting Processes,” in *Shape Shifters: Journeys Across Terrains of Race and Identity*, ed. Lily Anne Y, Welty Tamai et al. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020), 189–216; Michela Bertossa, Lawrence Gianangeli,

of the Italian language and an experienced native Italian writer could embody sufferings and feelings in words remains one of the major issues to be deciphered.³² This collaboration is not in the least balanced or congruent, calling into question the ways in which ever-shifting and asymmetric power dynamics influence the political implications of written words in relation to autobiographically-oriented writings. This conundrum testifies to the fact that the postcolonial period does not imply the ending of the colonial grammar of violence and ideology; rather, it reinforces that the ways in which postcolonial subjects choose to *express* and *imagine* are not free from orders of cruelty.

As critics have also indicated, the issue of “voice” in the case of *Timira* adds another layer of complexity, as neither Wu Ming 2 nor Antar Mohamed is its protagonist, and Isabella Marincola is even notably “excluded from authorial recognition.”³³ The novel is written, in this case, “a sei mani.” But if we take into account that both authors are male, questions of gendered ownership and inequality come to the forefront. This male-centered authorship reinscribes the marginalization of Black women’s voices, agencies, and subjectivities, even within narratives that claim to recover them. Isabella’s presence in the novel is haunting and fragmented, and it is this authorial hyper-hybridity that offers the two male authors “the starting point to construct a more complex representation.”³⁴ Additionally, this collaboration automatically engages in ethical mobilizations as to in what ways they bear witness to the racist violence Isabella experienced in her life, bringing to the forefront the murky relationship between the writer(s) and the subject. The insoluble issue of identification turns into an open question that redirects personal testimonies towards a societal schematic of racialized experiences and storytelling in postcolonial Italy, with coexistent difficulty in interpretation and richness of the interplay of various ontological, subjective, and epistemological actors. The mobilization of a series of boundaries—singular/plural, past/present, public/private, male/female, self/other—comes to activate the debates about how to conceive the multiple relationships between fictive and factual.

This can lead to especially rich discussions in the context of today’s Italy, where the *le mal d’archive* is strongly identifiable in the works of many artists, writers, and critics engaged in exploring new representational modes that seek to understand the public erasure of Italian colonial history and its reverberations in the present. What would be the best way to theorize the cultural politics of the archive in Italy’s current “postcolonial” and “Black” turn? How can literary texts accommodate epistemic platforms in order to review history and temporality? While reading historical novels like *Timira*, how can we balance the inherent impetus for historical specificity with the imaginative potentials of literary reinventions? Or to put it differently, what would be fruitful trajectories to come to terms with the aestheticization of historical records in which the

Luca Peretti and Enrico Zammarchi, “*Timira*, romanzo meticcio e stratificato,” *Forum Italicum* 55, no. 1 (2021): 68–84. Daniele and Luijnenburg also revealed that some of Italy’s major newspapers had mentioned Wu Ming 2 as *Timira*’s sole author, while Antar Mohamed was regarded as the son of “the source (Isabella)” without creatively contributing to the novel. For other collaborative examples produced during the first period of migrant/postcolonial literature in Italy in the early 1990s, see, for example, Pap Khouma, *Io, venditore di elefanti: una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano* (Milan: Garzanti, 1990).

³² As Daniele and Linde have observed, “sometimes migrant writers were considered as storytellers (but sometimes just as witness), whom Italian journalists or writers, with their awareness of literary models, ability to use the rhetorical system and public status, could exploit in order to gain accurate information about the migrant situation.” Daniele Comberlati and Linde Luijnenburg, 276.

³³ Caterina Romeo, “Italian Postcolonial Literature,” 26.

³⁴ Wu Ming 2, “Somalia in Italians’ Eyes: Questions of Space in *Timira*,” paper presented at the conference “Migration, Discrimination and Belonging: Trans-national Spaces in Post-colonial Europe,” University of Warwick, March 6, 2013.

threshold between factual and invented becomes blurred? Traditionally, literary critics' responses to historical novels revolve around the extent to which these narratives converse with historical events, and how their portrayal of the past develops all that has been marginalized or erased. Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed seem to believe in these temporal potentials and enrich auto-reflections with respect to hybridity and collaboration:

Le storie sono di tutti—nascono da una comunità e alla comunità ritornano—anche quando hanno la forma di un'autobiografia e *sembrano* (original emphasis) appartenere a una persona sola, perché sono le sue memorie, la *sua* vita, com'è il caso di questo romanzo meticcio.

Eppure, anche il racconto che ciascuno chiama io è un prodotto collettivo – nessuno si fa davvero da sé – e dunque a maggior ragione sarà collettivo il racconto che uno fa della propria vita attraverso le pagine di un libro (503).

(The stories belong to everyone—they are born from a community and eventually return to it—even when they take the form of an autobiography and *seem to* belong to just one person, because these are that person's memories, his/her life, as is the case with this mixed-genre novel.

Yet even the narrative that everyone would call “I” is a collective product—no one is truly a self-made subject—so the story one tells about their own life in the pages of a book will all the more reason be collective.)³⁵

In this way, Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed emphasize the capability of the novel to establish a universal sense of imagined community, even if the text itself is written and structured based on individual specificities rather than imaginations. Theirs is an urgent appeal for readers to self-create linkages with many overlooked racialized *others* in Italy that might even have no chance to leave their name, such as contemporary migrants arriving in Italy, as Hawthorne has reiterated, only to “face varying degrees of neglect, marginalization, and outright violence.”³⁶ The subtitle “romanzo meticcio” encourages a rethinking of Italy's postcolonial imaginaries through an intra-textual and transhistorical solidarity.

It would be useful to set the aesthetic practices in the work of *Timira* alongside a larger global artistic trend, in which many contemporary artists increasingly engage with archives, historical materials, and the act of collecting remnants of the historical past.³⁷ Projecting *Timira* in the broader context of the “archival turn” allows for speculation on its imaginative potential in the current process of recalibrating what postcolonial and Black identities signify in the Italian context. The archive, as Arondekar theorizes, “has emerged as *the* register of epistemic arrangements, recording in its proliferating avatars the shifting tenor of debates around the production and ethics of knowledge.”³⁸ If we may regard the perception of Italian colonialism and its afterlives as still an ongoing and unfinished inquiry, then the novel's formal experimentation calls into question the very mechanisms through which the personal and the historical are rendered visible, legible, and perceptible. In “An Archival Impulse,” art critic Hal Foster examines how groups of contemporary

³⁵ The translation is mine.

³⁶ Camilla Hawthorne, *Contesting Race and Citizenship: Youth Politics in the Black Mediterranean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2022), 2.

³⁷ Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” *October* 110 (Autumn 2005): 4–5.

³⁸ Arondekar, *For the Record*, 2.

artists engage with archival materials, reactivating and reconfiguring them through new forms and contexts, thereby rendering the past physically and affectively present. The way in which the stories in *Timira* are produced, presented, and organized is also an object-making and archive-making process, reframing Hal Foster's arguments that calls for interpretation based on its "fragmentary" and "indeterminant" structure.³⁹ Writing about the archive-oriented artmaking trend among Western European artists, Foster asserts that one distinctive characteristic of this tendency is these artists' reluctance to pursue comprehensive historical accounts or preservation, instead engaging in a fragmented, sometimes incomplete, investigation of memory, history, and time.⁴⁰

In *Timira*, producing a linear plot is an impossible task, and, quite obviously, was not the authors' objective. For example, at the beginning of the third part, readers encounter a picture of Isabella's identity document,⁴¹ which provides specific information such as her height, date of birth, and colors of eyes and hair. However, what probably strikes readers' eyes would be the five capitalized "ANNULLATO" (canceled) notations scattered throughout the document. Why was it annulled? When? What was the specific political background? What happened to her life afterward? These questions guide readers who may nonetheless feel disoriented because what follows the document are a nationalist poem by Somali poet Timiro Ukash and, on the next page, an Italian newsreel from the year of 1960 celebrating the end of Italy's administration in the Trust Territory in Somalia and its consequent independence. Why both authors selected these three archival objects, and why these were arranged in a specific order, which in fact echoes a general practice throughout the novel, is unclear—at least at the first glance.

Both authors resist the temptation to impose coherence, instead embracing ambiguities and contradictions. On a basic level, acts of listening, transcribing, organizing, and producing Isabella's memories already indicate a process of selection and manipulation that, admittedly, cannot be divorced from the influence of both authors as third-person narrators. Neither of them, after all, has experienced first-hand the same kinds of struggles Isabella lived herself. Conceived as a process of *becoming*, the novel's production emerges as a practice in which archival engagement, memory transcription, speculative imagination, and acts of writing intersect and resonate, collectively challenging notions of specificity, continuity, and the very nature of looking-backward within the context of postcolonial Italy. In this sense, perhaps whether the novel is "trustworthy" or "loyal" to historical facts is the concern of least priority. The narrative operates more as a living manifesto that asks what we might learn about a particular postcolonial imaginary from its written disposition.

The expanded articulation of "realism" in *Timira* functions both as an aesthetic mode and as a contested epistemological apparatus that interrogates its own complicity in mediating subaltern experience through normative frames of legibility. By foregrounding its status as a historically situated and emotionally inflected discourse, it radically disrupts its automatic deployment as a pedagogical tool or affective shortcut for sensitizing the Italian general public to the contemporary phenomenon of immigration. This hybridity helps to reveal the asymmetries of narrative elasticity that undergird Italy's unresolved mapping of postcoloniality and the politics of recognition through which migrant subjects are often intentionally reproduced as objective tools for grassroots activism. This may explain why readers may experience a cognitive discomfort upon reaching the novel's conclusion, where the authors include an unconventional section titled "Titoli di Coda" (Closing

³⁹ Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," 5.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁴¹ The image is available at <https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/2012/07/timira-cut-n-paste/>. See Wu Ming's "Somalia in Italians' Eyes." The same image also appears in *Timira*, 348.

Credits). This is a paratextual appendix that, chapter by chapter, enumerates the diverse sources cited, consulted, adapted, or drawn upon for inspiration.⁴² What might have served as a conclusive moment of narrative coherence and reflective calm—positioning its readers to appreciate the authors’ meticulous attention to factual details—instead gives way to yet another site of psychic agitation:

Prima parte. Nove.

La pausa gelato prima di partorire non è un aneddoto della vita di Isabella, bensì della madre di Wu Ming 2, prima di mettere al mondo il medesimo. Scrittura conviviale vuol dire anche scambiarsi i ricordi (e nei ricordi, perfino le mamme).

(Part One. Nine.

The gelato break before [Isabella] giving birth is not an anecdote from Isabella’s life, but rather from the life of Wu Ming 2’s mother, just before she brought him [Wu Ming 2] into the world. Convivial writing also means sharing memories [and in these memories, even mothers]).⁴³

Timira’s form of literary production is thus attuned both to proximity and distance, or better, to an evolving entanglement of both of these as gestures aiming to promote non-hegemonic understandings of literary texts’ imaginary potentialities. Together with the distancing effect of collaborative writing itself, the above example constitutes a particular sort of materiality that solicits both relational and sensorial effects. The reading practice itself becomes effortful. Extranarrative excursions—located either at the beginning of each chapter or among narratives—contain the potential of temporarily suspending the narrative logic, while always soliciting readers to associate speculatively with what has not been written down or even involuntarily silenced in their collective writings.⁴⁴ Therefore we can argue that the work in question not only “utilizes” or “produces” archives; it also in a way destabilizes their very presence as well, and “arranges these materials according to a quasi-archival logic, a matrix of citation and juxtaposition, and presents them in a quasi-archival architecture, a complex of texts and objects.”⁴⁵ This discourse shares some common characteristics with the Deleuzian metaphor of the “rhizome,” typical in our postmodern (or even post-postmodern) society. The rhizome is characterized by a network of endless lateral/horizontal connections, as opposed to a more linear and hierarchical structure, whether these be material or mental, literal or figurative. The original intention of Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed to bridge what is being written and what might exist beyond the narrative empowers their literary work with the capability to project into the future, if not necessarily a futurity that follows utopian blueprints.

⁴² On *Timira*’s “Titoli di coda,” Clarissa Clò reminds us that “it is our job as readers and critics to point out such omissions and hold them accountable for them.” Clò, “Collective Transmedia Storytelling,” 111.

⁴³ Wu Ming 2 and Mohamed, *Timira*, 510.

⁴⁴ Mirko Mondillo, “Adesso tu mi dici cosa vuoi fare di me’: *Timira*, romanzo meticcio e l’ipermoderno italiano,” *Palimpsest: International Journal for Linguistic, Literary, and Cultural Research*, no. 9 (2020): 143.

⁴⁵ Hal Foster, “An Archival Impulse,” 5. Mondillo in his essay proposes that their “archival” approach in *Timira* is “strabico” (strabismic) because they intended to maximize these materials’ metahistorical potentials, rather than perform a simple act of historiographical consultation. See “Adesso tu mi dici cosa vuoi fare di me,” 144.

An emphasis on the archival components in postcolonial writings does not suggest a playful celebratory process, a decorative symbol or an invitation to disassociate the text from ideological premises. As indicated above, every step in the “archiving” process can hardly be considered apolitical or devoid of ideological dynamics. During colonial times, archives, as repositories of documents, memories, and histories, often served as mechanisms of state power and violence, reinforcing dominant epistemologies while silencing marginalized voices. Even though numerous prominent historians and critics have studied Italian colonialism in Africa, archival material related to the lived experiences of Italo-Somali individuals like those in *Timira* is rare. For postcolonial writings, as Wu Ming 2 has stated elsewhere, the author “è responsabile non solo di come racconta, ma anche di cosa sceglie di raccontare, e questa è uno degli aspetti più importanti della sua personalità artistica” (is responsible not only for how he tells a story, but also for what he chooses to narrate, and this is one of the most important aspects of his artistic personality).⁴⁶ If typical analytical approaches to postcolonial writings (and to writings by other minority groups such as female or queer authors) closely examine how these writers’ agency and fictive imagination transform public imaginaries of unbalanced colonial power dynamics, then *Timira*’s archival form suggests a reinforced sense of *impegno* (commitment) and plays a role in shaping alternative voices of resistance that may not be imagined in other representational formats. Foucault’s theorization of the archive evolves around its relational and regulatory features:

The archive is first the law of what can be said, the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events. But the archive is also that which determines that all these things said do not accumulate endlessly in an amorphous mass, nor are they inscribed in an unbroken linearity, nor do they disappear at the mercy of chance external accidents; but they are grouped together in distinct figures, composed together in accordance with multiple relations, maintained or blurred in accordance with specific regularities; that which determines that they do not withdraw at the same pace in time, but shine, as it were, like stars, some that seem close to us shining brightly from afar off, while others that are in fact close to us are already growing pale.⁴⁷

One overarching lesson from Foucault’s theses is the necessity of configuring the archive and its role in a larger socio-cultural dimension, rather than limiting its empirical functions to a single record, database, or institution. The archive, according to Foucault, is “that which, at the very root of the statement-event, and in that which embodies it, defines at the outset *the system of its enunciability*.”⁴⁸ This foregrounds *Timira*’s interpretive potential and offers a lens through which to look at the broader cultural imaginaries of Italy’s postcolonial writings as a process-oriented political praxis. Considered not merely as factual materials, the archive as a *system* gestures toward the rules that determine what we can say—and how we can speak—about the context in which the archive operates, pertaining concretely to the ideological character of historical novels. *Timira* still reveals that offering “superb historical construction, with its discovery of numerous new facts and connections, serves to demonstrate the necessity for transforming the ‘unreasonable’” racist and

⁴⁶ Wu Ming 2, *Utile per Iscopo? La funzione del romanzo storico in una società di retromaniaci* (Rimini: Guaraldi, 2014), 15.

⁴⁷ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2002), 145–46.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 146.

sexist tensions in contemporary Italian society.⁴⁹ The novel, in this sense, not only joins in the relevant task of recreating the forgotten part of Italy's colonialism and the racial political scenario in the postwar period, but also acts as a "general system" providing new insights and principles that help reconfigure a series of "metahistorical" issues that still plague today's Italy. The character of Isabella embodies a powerful commentary on how negotiations by racialized bodies (especially female bodies) during the colonial and postcolonial periods in Italy mirror and facilitate racial imaginaries.⁵⁰ Postcolonial writers in Italy, as Caterina Romeo has recently reiterated, underline "the strong resistance to considering the intersection between Blackness and Italianness as viable in a society that has historically constructed itself as white and Catholic."⁵¹ The increased public consciousness generated by these writers may well influence Italian public imaginaries and judgments in a progressive manner.

Potential, Temporal Reparations, and Italy's Postcolonial Now

Although Isabella's life spans more than seventy years and illustrates how postcolonial Italian society in the 1990s inherited the racial ideologies and imaginaries rooted in its Fascist empire, her story in the novel is not conveyed through a linear, chronological arc. The adoption of a deliberately fragmented temporal structure resists biographical coherence, inviting readers to reflect on the complexity of historical narratives and temporality, even beyond the past-present duality. Its formal aestheticization brings forward a non-hegemonic and rhizomatic epistemology and emphasizes that the past is no longer the absolute organizing tool of narratives, thus challenging many historical novels' inherent rhetoric of resolution and redemption. Situated within the constellation of Wu Ming 1's "New Italian Epic"—a category of narrative production marked by its overt political investment, narratological complexity, and formal experimentation—*Timira* articulates a poetics of contamination that destabilizes linear temporality and undermines the epistemological authority of singular truths. It enacts a formal reconfiguration that privileges complexity over resolution, and opacity over explanatory closure, exemplifying this new genre's capacity to remap literary form itself as a site of resistance and epistemic renewal.⁵² Imaginaries of incompleteness and rhizome lead us to reflect on the generativity of future-thinking. In other words, the object itself becomes less a site for reconstructing the past in light of the complexities of the present than a critical terrain where the residues of colonial histories are reactivated and interrogated, not in order to resolve them, but rather to expose the unfinished nature of decolonial struggles and to vitalize the temporalities through which postcolonial subjectivities, responsibilities, and futurities are made imaginable.

Conceptually speaking, the continuity between Italy's colonial and postcolonial formations has crystallized into a foundational premise for both public imaginaries and academic inquiries, "about which the rhetoric of disruption often bears a negative or counter-productive undertone."⁵³ The interweaving of informal (personal) and official (state) documents throughout the novel

⁴⁹ Georg Lukàcs, *The Historical Novel* (Dagenham: Merlin Press, 1962), 20.

⁵⁰ The disregard of the particularity of the historical and social contexts from which the object come can also result in dehistoricized interpretations. Thus this essay proposes to investigate the novel through both its form and how its contents relate to the general socio-historical context of colonial and postcolonial Italy.

⁵¹ Caterina Romo, *Interrupted Narratives*, 4.

⁵² Wu Ming 1 didn't list *Timira* as an example of the "New Italian Epic," which, however, included the Italian Ethiopian writer Gabriella Ghermandi's novel *Regina di fiori e di perle* (Rome: Donzelli, 2011).

⁵³ Qian Liu, "Contesting the Black Flâneur: The Rhetoric of Disruption and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah's Urban Literature," *Forum Italicum* 57, no. 3 (2023): 940.

underscores the near-impossibility of mapping power through such reductive binaries as colonizer/colonized, which, interestingly, is reinforced also by the structure of its chapters. The work's narrative structure, describing Isabella's earlier and later lives, is divided into two sequences without direct intersecting nodes, reflecting an ongoing literary practice in postcolonial Italian literature. Writers like Igiaba Scego and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah have adopted similar approaches, although typically in their respective works different threads focus on different protagonists.⁵⁴

The inherent linkage between time and power, or what historians Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Natasha Wheatley call *chronocenos*—the competitive and conflictual relations of multiple temporal regimes—foregrounds the centrality of time and temporality as a contested terrain in human history through which authority, legitimacy, and historical agency are negotiated and imposed.⁵⁵ Within the imperialist logic of modernity, colonial encounters with Indigenous populations in the Global South have entailed a violent temporal homogenization and standardization that sought to collapse diverse local temporalities into a singular, linear, and progress-driven narrative.⁵⁶ The “competitiveness” of multiple temporalities sheds its postmodernish guise of disorder and fragmentation. The issue here is not merely which temporal regime prevails over others, but rather the unilateral imposition of a dominant system through which the colonized—and, more broadly, non-Western subjects—are dispossessed of *autonomy* over time to articulate legitimate temporal epistemologies and narrative logics of their own. To further radicalize the genealogical critiques that have been seeking to unsettle the Enlightenment's auto-mythologizing fabrication of “modernity,” one must refuse the invisible closure offered by a merely diagnostic acknowledgment of its colonial complicities or the restorative gesture of reinscribing the erased pasts of the colonized. For the very category of historical “progress”—that privileged telos of Frankfurt School critical theory—has long been folded into the symbolic economy of Western self-presence: an unstable supplement through which past and present epistemologies are staged in dialectical interplay, perpetually deferring the promise of modernity while reinscribing its violence.

In postcolonial Italy, what I mean by “reparation” emerges less as a juridical logic than as what sociologist Gurminder Bhambra designates “epistemological justice,” a practice that “shapes who has the power (and why) to assert their knowledge against the indications of its problematic status deriving from the different knowledge claims of others.”⁵⁷ A possible “temporal reparation,”

⁵⁴ See Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, *Little Mother*, trans. Giovanna Bellesia-Contuzzi and Victoria Offredi Poletto (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Igiaba Scego, *Adua*, trans. Jamie Richards (New York: New Vessel Press, 2017); and *The Color Line: A Novel*, trans. John Cullen and Gregory Conti (New York: Other Press, 2022).

⁵⁵ Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Natasha Wheatley, “Chronocenos: An Introduction to Power and Time,” in *Power and Time: Temporalities in Conflict and the Making of History*, ed. Dan Edelstein, Stefanos Geroulanos, and Natasha Wheatley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), 27.

⁵⁶ Numerous theorists and philosophers have contended that the colonial matrix of power established a differential and discriminatory order of knowledge. See, for example, also Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity. Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), and Achille Mbembe, *On Postcoloniality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

⁵⁷ Gurminder Bhambra, “Decolonizing Critical Theory? Epistemological Justice, Progress, Reparations,” *Critical Times* 4, no. 1 (2021): 76. However, it is necessary to note that a key distinction separates Bhambra's account from my own. For her, “reparation” entails a collective process through which the historically dominant groups confront and engage the injustices of the past. My use of “reparation,” by contrast, points to a bottom-up process that unsettles the dominant temporal frameworks of knowledge. In this usage, it no longer denotes its conventional register as the material or historical compensation owed to colonized populations; rather, it signifies a tentative—if fragile—recalibration of temporal epistemology within the horizons of the post-postcolonial condition.

in this sense, is irreducible to empirical therapeutic modalities; it is instead antagonistic and trans-subjective, and thus closer to what Benjamin might have named *Messianic arrest* than to the reparative hermeneutics inaugurated by Eve Sedgwick and elaborated in feminist psychoanalytic registers by Ellis Hanson, Robyn Wiegman, and others.⁵⁸ In the postcolonial and decolonial context, *Timira* has a role in reshaping, if not radically overturning, the colonial knowledge system into a new framework—that of a more speculative prism—that would take up postcolonial conditions and experiences. Moving away from the self-conciliatory ethos of the “reparative turn,” a temporal reparation in this case gestures toward a radical horizon of world-renewal, while echoing what Hanson evokes as the “process of reconstructing a sustainable life in their wake.” This figures as a horizon that insists on the simultaneous deconstruction of modernity’s epistemic architectures and the opening of an otherwise.⁵⁹ Admittedly, the post in ‘postcolonial’ emphasizes, rather than undermines, the temporal continuity of imperialist domination, rather than represent it as terminated or expired. The colonizer’s temporal ideology not only resists dissolution in the wake of postcolonial critiques, but also positions itself as the authoritative and universalist carrier of temporal discourses, against which the temporalities embodied by the colonized are rendered illegible, unable to substantiate spectral presences or claim autonomous modes of temporal agency. In this way, we are reminded of Ariella Azoulay’s radical concept of “potential history,” which invites us to approach the world through a non-linear, non-progressive lens, addressing the ongoing effects of imperial violence as if they are occurring in the present.⁶⁰ Her critique of historians’ retrospective methods as imperial gestures sheds light on how to grapple with Italy’s current struggles by suggesting a need to “pulverize the matrix of history” and make “repressed potentialities present again.”⁶¹

Within this literary-cultural scenario, the biggest challenge lies in how to echo and even recreate the historical details of Italy’s colonial past as a collective endeavor, while also exploring specific strategies—sometimes on a secondary level—of historicist representation. Although sharing a similar aim, namely to recuperate what has been forgotten or erased for a larger Italian audience, prominent novelists such as Igiaba Scego, Gabriella Ghermandi, and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah often lean toward the disruptive potential of fictional reproductions. *Timira*’s narrative logic asks readers to consider how the pairing of historical fact with fiction enables new destabilizing models of critique. As I have suggested, the decentralization of narrative voices and the fictionalization of historical materials discourage any effort to theorize Italy’s postcolonial condition as an ascertained or settled afterlife of colonialism. It is this unsettled nature that opens new potentialities for rewriting Italian colonial history, partially recalling what Bhabha pursues in his definition of Western nationalism as “an obscure and ubiquitous form of living the *locality* (original emphasis) of culture.”⁶² The lesson we learn from Bhabha is never to lose the sight of the epistemic potential of micro-events, or even micro-objects at a specific site, in transforming metanarratives on history and historicity. *Timira* exemplifies Bhabha’s point by breaking the discursive generality down into specific forms of assembling and representing. An event-based unfolding anchored in archival coherence can be reconfigured *around* temporality, which

⁵⁸ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 262–63.

⁵⁹ Ellis Hanson, “The Future’s Eve: Reparative Reading after Sedgwick,” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 110, no. 1 (2011): 105. See also Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

⁶⁰ Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 287.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁶² Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 200.

foregrounds Italian colonialism more as an affectively charged structure of experience.⁶³ Such an epistemic shift resists the illusion of historical resolution. The multilayered disruptions compel us to ask how a more fluid discourse of *post-* in the postcolonial is conceptually possible in the crossroad between a systemic erasure of colonial past and an abbreviated radical activism in Italy, when the anticipation of the future also illuminates perception of the uncertain present.

An emphasis on the generative force of cultural productions in re-mediating the meaning of “postcolonial” in Italy reveals the elusive dimension of the term itself in the Italian context. Its primary function is that of a narrative device that shapes public storytelling, rather than a discursive strategy rigorously grounded in the historiographical analysis of Italy’s colonial history. What Karen Pinkus has described as a “non-event” in postwar Italy—i.e. the public’s general indifference toward the African question following the demise of its colonial enterprises, coupled with the absence of immediate large-scale immigration from its former African colonies—signals that Italy’s *post-*empire was accompanied by a *post-*colonial vacuum.⁶⁴ The prefix *post-* here disrupts or even reverses the logic of the prefix *post-* as being linked to a forward-looking anticipation; at the same time, it underscores a sort of suspended temporality, one that neither fully processes or fully departs from its imperial legacies. The result is not a resolved or transcended colonial past, but a haunting repetition of its structures in more contemporary discourses and policies on immigration. This term has, though long in circulation, has only gained signifying force since the early 2000s, largely as a result of a collective scholarly reflection in the field of Italian postcolonial studies on the social transformations brought about by mass immigration flows to Italy from the Global South.⁶⁵ This belatedness makes the Italian case a rather complicated one, and contributes to its hermeneutic liminality. Scholars such as Caterina Romeo and Cristina Lombardi-Diop have also pointed out that historicity and temporality remain some of the major issues for scholars working on the Italian postcolonial to consider. As for Italy, “the postcolonial era began decades after the colonies were lost, and the decolonization process did not begin simultaneous in all the Italian colonies.”⁶⁶ Of course, this temporal liminality parallels a geographical dimension. The latter—referring to Italy’s particular position on the southern edge of Europe—has arguably become the determining, if not the exclusive, analytical coordinate to investigate Italy’s national identities and its place in the world.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Acting as a tool for “temporal reparation” to restore the deprived agency of postcolonial subjects over the management and control of time, including over the future, *Timira*’s aesthetic potential pertains to an emerging shift within Italy’s cultural landscape in which the traditional (violent)

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Pinkus, “Empty Spaces: Decolonization in Italy,” in *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present*, ed. Patricia Palumbo (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 299–320.

⁶⁵ This is arguably not the case for the Great Britain and France, two cases with which Italy has always been compared in this debate, where in the postwar period decolonial movements, public protests, and immigration from their ex-colonies provided the material foundations for intellectual discourses on postcolonialism. For more recent and more nuanced discussions on Italy’s postcolonial conditions and the persistence of empire in the postwar era, see, for example, Hom, *Empire’s Mobius Strip*, and Pamela Ballinger, *The World Refugees Made: Decolonization and the Foundation of Postwar Italy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020).

⁶⁶ Caterina Romeo and Cristina Lombardi-Diop, “The Italian Postcolonial: A Manifesto,” *Italian Studies* 69, no. 3 (2014): 427.

⁶⁷ Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom, “Introduction,” in *Italian Mobilities*, ed. Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Stephanie Malia Hom (London: Routledge, 2016), 7.

mode of looking-backward and moving-forward has been increasingly giving way to alternative critiques of temporality that go beyond the simple past-present matrix. As I have argued elsewhere, if we keep in mind that oppositional cultures are inherently utopistic in their collective tasks of locating alternatives—be they political, cultural, or conceptual—, aesthetic innovations as such forge a new transition “in the midst of multiple discourses regarding Black Italians’ plight of not being able to change.”⁶⁸ This initial gesture, characterized by experimental forms of cultural production, marks an entry-point into a space of epistemological openness, where the past is not automatically subsumed into historical narrative for the sake of sustaining a continuous, self-justifying, and self-evidencing present. Instead it invites a reconsideration of temporality itself, disrupting linear models of history in favor of more fragmented, deferred, or contested modes of remembering and representing. The problematization of such historiography-mania can also perform a pedagogical function, pointing out the necessity of allowing past, present, and future to enter into a fluid channel in which the boundaries between history and imagination are constantly shifting.

⁶⁸ Qian Liu, “Visualizing the Invisible: *Zero* and Afro-Italian Urban Utopias,” in *Italian Contemporary Youth Television*, ed. Luca Barra, Danielle Hipkins, Catherine O’Rawe and Dana Renga (London: Palgrave Macmillan, forthcoming).