

**FILM REVIEW OF
“FRUZZETTI, L. AND Á. ÖSTÖR, 2016,
IN MY MOTHER’S HOUSE”**

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Abstract: *In 2005 Brown University anthropologist Lina Fruzzetti unexpectedly hears from two unknown Italian women, her cousins. Shortly thereafter she interviews her visiting mother. Lina’s father, an Italian official in colonial Eritrea, died when Lina was three. Previously he had a wife and daughter in Carrara, Italy, since deceased. Although Lina goes to Italy to meet her relatives, the film is not an exercise in “finding your roots” but rather is a “life history document”---Lina seeks to understand Italian-Eritrean colonialism. Footage goes back and forth. In Providence, Lina’s mother explains that, widowed, she went to Sudan to work and prosper, placing Lina to board in a Catholic school. Lina finds more relatives, including a nephew and his wife in faraway Barcelona. Experts explain how her father’s Carrara, once an epicenter of Anarchism, supported fascist military adventures. “Repatriated” mixed-race Eritreans discuss Italy and racism. In Eritrea she interviews her mother at home, then maternal kin. She tours Asmara, the Italian colonial capital, hearing reminiscences of Italian rule. The film’s denouement is Lina’s mother’s spectacular funeral. All of Lina’s interviewees are ambivalent. They neither condemn nor exonerate Italy’s Eritrean imperialist adventures. Although Lina’s Catholic schooling enabled her spectacular path to respected US academic, she interviews no nuns or priests. This reviewer posits that since 476 AD Rome has had no empire, but the papacy revived an ecclesiastical empire. The Ethiopian College inside the Vatican figures in a recent study of homosexuality in the Vatican. Its author concludes that while hardliners fulminate against homosexuality, the rank and file tolerate it, as long as no masks are publicly removed. These conclusions mirror Lina’s about the Eritrean colonial adventure. Finally, contemplating kinship rituals of pilgrimage and reunions, we conclude that Lina’s mother’s grave constitutes a shrine that may spiritually enrich future pilgrims from her bloodline, while their reunions with Italian kin may resemble a Protestant model: the pilgrim’s journey to meet Italian kin validates solid status already achieved as a member of the educated international elite.*

This is a film about a cultural anthropologist investigating her own kinship. As such it falls into the category of “life history document” or “personal history,” rather than a more narrowly focused film.¹ Lina Fruzzetti’s father was an Italian working for the colonial administration in an African colony, Eritrea, when he set up a sixteen year-old Eritrean, “Lucia” (her Italian name), in a house and sired two children with her, the first of them Lina. Tragically he died after a fall on a rainy night attempting to fix the leaking roof, leaving his widow to care for Lina, then three years old, and her brother, Andrea, of one year.

However, he had married previously in Italy, where he had a wife and daughter. There was no divorce at that time in Italy or its empire. A Catholic priest, knowing of this marriage, had refused to marry him in Eritrea; the church would not sanction his consensual union.

This film, then, might be about the general problems of plural marriage. How does the second union affect the first and vice versa? This is a problem for polygynous societies and for those that practice divorce. How do the two wives react to each other? Do their children interact? Are there direct economic ties? It is highly probable that Silvio sent money home to his Italian wife and daughter, but no participants discuss that probability. Are there strong distinctions of status? Does one union monopolize respectability and honor? Is illegitimacy considered shameful? Does it carry legal disabilities? The two sets of Silvio’s marital partners and children were in different continents and never directly interacted. Silvio’s second wife was a colonial subject, an African with dark skin. His home with her seems, at first glance, an example of the *casa chica* so prevalent in Latin America when a light-skinned creole gentleman sets up a darker-skinned woman in a house separate from his official one. However, no one in the film discusses Silvio or his Eritrean family in such terms. He had two families, one in Italy, the other in Eritrea, and that seems to be that. In any case the Italian family, not being wealthy or aristocratic, was in no position to lord over the colonial second family. Times were hard, a World War was going on; and, as we shall see, ordinary Italians were not prepared to be openly chauvinistic, not then nor now.

We are back, then, to life history, to a personal account over “longue durée.” The drama starts in 2005 in Providence, R.I., when Lina receives an email with a photo of Silvio and the words, “If this is your father, then we are your cousins.” Silvio had died in 1945, so his nieces, who sent the email, waited much of a lifetime before reaching out. Indeed, both Silvio’s first wife and his daughter, Agnese, had died in the interim.

It was no ordinary person the cousins were reaching out to. Lina Fruzzetti is an established academic, a full professor in the department of anthropology at Ivy League Brown University. She has done considerable fieldwork in Bengal. According to her c.v., on file at Brown, she has published eleven---single authored, co-authored and edited---books, three in collaboration with her husband Ákos Östör, a full professor at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. One of these was a monograph about the southern Blue Nile Province in Sudan (Fruzzetti and Östör 1989). Another, single-authored, book, *When Marriages Go Astray* (Fruzzetti 2013), echoes some of the themes in this film. It looks at women in Bengal who had engaged in inter-caste or inter-faith marriages. Fruzzetti is literate and fluent in Arabic, Tigrinya (Eritrean), English, and Bengali, and speaks fluent Italian, Spanish, French, and Urdu-Hindi. She and her husband are also ethnographic filmmakers, having produced three other documentary films, also available with DER.

¹ This technique is most commonly associated with Oscar Lewis (1961). This first book was a bestseller, as were most of his others. It remains a compelling and beautiful ethnographic document.

It is unlikely that the two cousins in distant Carrara were aware of Lina's status as an outstanding U.S. academic, but they might well have heard she was a professor in a well-known university. In any case their email prompted Lina to question her mother, who, shortly after the cousins' email, arrives in Providence from Eritrea for a visit in 2005. Lina interviews her at length, mostly on the back porch of her home. These are the first of many interviews that Lina conducts throughout the film. The on-camera appearances of her mother are among the more notable. Just watching her is its own reward. The cameraman, who of course we never observe, is her husband, Ákos Östör. Indeed, he seems to have shot all or most of the film's footage. He is never a participant on view in the action and is seldom referred to, although Lina does address him in English when viewing her grandfather's tomb in Italy.

Lucia, Lina's mother, is by now a full bodied matron often wearing Eritrean clothes, that is a long skirted dress and a large white gauze shawl that wraps the back of her head. She is articulate and thoughtful as she talks of her marriage and its tragic conclusion, stating matter-of-factly that she worked very hard cleaning houses and cooking at that time to keep herself and two children alive. War was on (in fact the British were invading Italian East Africa), and friends advised her to go to then Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, where there was no warfare. She did so; but in Sudan she assigned her daughter to a nun's school and her son to a boy's Catholic school. She traveled westward, ending at Al-Damazin, capital of the Blue Nile province. There she started to cook all the meals for 35 Italians working on the dam being built there. She saved money, bought little houses that she rented to workers, and gradually became prosperous. Presumably her two children spent most of their time in boarding schools during this period.

Aerial shots, apparently taken from a plane before landing, next document Lina's approach to the city and district of Carrara in Southern Italy. She has come to visit her cousins Paola and Nanda Fruzzetti. They treat her with great affection and, while apologetic, do not blame themselves for the long delay. Times were unsettled at the end of the war in Italy. After that they were unsure of how to contact her, and so on. A year later Lucia joins Lina is another trip to Carrara. With them are Lina's three adult daughters, along with a bevy of small grandchildren. At least two of three "Irish, Dominican, and Guatemalan" sons-in-law are in the throng as well, but they are not identified on camera.

This large suite, Eritrean-American women and children plus in-marrying male spouses, mingle with Italian kin in Carrara in a series of festive kitchen food-to-table scenes with much laughter and conviviality. They visit the memorial plaque for Silvio Fruzzetti on a church wall, and to the actual tomb of Silvio's father. Lucia is also reunited, after forty years, to Lina's godmother, who had been evacuated from Asmara during troubled times along with other Italian citizens of mixed race. She extols Italian rule but does complain that they allowed only vocational education for Eritreans (in segregated schools) beyond the early grades.

A remarkable Eritrean sequence follows showing Lucia, the family matriarch, in her home in Keren, her native community inland from Asmara. These are extremely gripping ethnographic scenes. showing, but not explaining, glimpses of an elaborate event---serving coffee to guests. Even more memorable are glimpses of the rustic wood-built interior of the home of Lucia's eldest brother in their ancestral village near Keren. His interviews are fascinating. His presence is regal: tall, thin, with white hair and short beard. He flicks an elegant flywhisk while expounding on his life. He fought for the Italians when they invaded Ethiopia in the 1930s. He joined the British when they invaded in 1941, and he joined the Eritrean Liberation Force against the Soviet-allied government of Ethiopia that came to power after Emperor Haile Selassie was overthrown. His daughter, seen on camera, was a freedom fighter for the guerrilla Eritrean Liberation Front. Since

liberation she tired of life in town and has returned to her ancestral land to farm it. We see her spreading fertilizer on the fields. More impressive still are the parting shots of the ninety-three year old uncle, upright and tall, plowing his field on a hot day. He cannot sit still, he must work, and he does so with gusto.

Lina notes that her father helped build the highway connecting Asmara, Eritrea's capital, to its interior. The mountainous terrain is highly reminiscent of Carrara. Then we are in Asmara itself. Built as an Art Deco showcase by the Italians, many beautiful buildings survive and are applauded as well as frequented today by the locals. A friend shows them around. One problem with Italian rule, repeated several times in the film, is that Eritreans were not allowed in Italian schools; they had two or three years of primary schooling, and beyond that only vocational schools. This ended when the British came in 1945 and integrated the schools. The British ruled until 1952, when Ethiopia took over, in an ill-fated reunion with a territory that had been an Italian colony since the late 19th Century. (The historical sequence of colonial rule in Eritrea is never clearly delineated in the film. We learn it only from stray dialogue.)

Lina next tours Asmara, Eritrea's capital, with a younger brother of her mother and family friends, once again trying to assess Italian rule. Asmara had been known as a center for Art Deco architecture, much of which has survived, and of which Eritreans are justly proud. However, their tour guide reports that the central, Italian districts were off limits to Blacks ("i neri") who resided, worked, shopped, and were schooled in other areas.

Lina's adventures with her Italian kin are not over. In 2008 she returns to Carrara and chats with an obviously prosperous couple who were friends with her deceased half-sister, Agnese. They make excuses for Agnese, and stress what a kind and loving person she was. Lina, who learns that Agnese's son, Pietro, is living in Barcelona with his Catalan wife, is next seen against a vista dominating that great urban expanse. With her is her half-nephew, kind and solicitous, as is his wife. Again, there are excuses but no real explanations for the lack of contact over all those years. Lina next discovers that her father's brother, named Andrea like her own brother, had two children, and she visits them next in Italy. They are younger than her other cousins, and believe, erroneously, that their father did not fight in Libya toward the end of World War II, something Lina had learned earlier from the cousins.

Lina's quest for kin has become a quest to understand Italian imperialism and her father's role in it. Her grandfather and his family were all associated with mining marble, exploiting Carrara's world-renowned resource. But marble workers, along with most working class people in Carrara, were notoriously Anarchist. At one point, an expert assures Lina, there were twenty some organized Anarchist Circles in the area. How could such persons be associated with imperialist adventures abroad? Another expert patiently explains the rise of fascism in the area. The marble industry was depressed; Mussolini built factories in response. Soon his organizers were in control of local politics. Italy, and Carrara too, were swept up in Fascist enthusiasm.

Lina's last interviews are with mixed-race Eritreans like herself, who were "repatriated" to Italy during the troubled time when the Soviet-linked Ethiopian dictatorship dominated Eritrea. All such persons could receive Italian passports; and weekly flights were set up to transport them from Asmara to Rome. These individuals, with whom she had previous links, were seated at a home. As in all of Lina's interviews, the responses were ambiguous. "Is there racism in Italy?" "Oh, no!" It turns out that, well, sotto voce, there is quite a bit. Many people resented that the refugees were given housing and jobs. Apparently, though, after years went by and the Eritrean-Italians turned out to be good citizens, sotto voce rumblings have died down. Interestingly, none

of her respondents had ever attempted to contact any of their Italian kin, even though they were aware of who and where they were.

In the film's powerful denouement Lina attends her mother's funeral in Keren in 2011. The footage of the event is compelling. We learn that when Lucia returned from her entrepreneurial years in Sudan she was, relatively, rich. She held open house in her home; anyone from her past was assured of a welcome and a meal. Children from her ancestral village could stay with her while they finished school in town. That explains the assistants in previous scenes helping serve coffee and attending to guests. The funeral was a mass event, the parade of mourners goes on and on as they proceed to the graveyard. Lucia was laid to rest beside Silvio, together at last after sixty-six years. They were never married in church, but they were buried side by side in consecrated ground. Symbolically Silvio has been legitimated as a husband and as an Italian in Eritrea.

As an anthropological viewer, however, I still have many questions. The film turns out not to have been an inquest as to why genealogical segments are lost from personal family trees. The film identifies Lina's Italian family members, but not systematically, not with the aim of filling out a segment in an outline. Lina's Italian relatives appear haphazardly, seemingly by chance. From the start she does not make a systematic attempt to identify and find them. For instance, she does not ask her two newfound cousins who and where are the rest of them. Thus, the discovery of a nephew and his wife in Barcelona is presented as a complete surprise. The Italian relatives do not seem to act as a group; they do not seem to be particularly cohesive.

Nor does Lina present her own extended family except in passing. Her husband the cameraman is never introduced on camera. Her daughters, shown on camera, are not identified by name, much less their numerous children. The two sons-in-law are likewise not identified. However, none of the numerous personnel on camera in the crowd scenes of Cousin Paola's extended family is identified either. Mysteriously, Lina never interviews her brother, Andrea Fruzzetti. It is not clear that he even appears in the film. That name appears in the final credits, but I have not been able to identify him in the footage.

In all this the film differs markedly from that popular television show on PBS: Henry Louis Gates, Jr.' "Finding Your Roots," now in its seventh season. The series is sponsored by, among others, Ancestry, the company that compiles genealogical sources and caters to people trying to construct family trees, exploring one, or more, or all, bloodlines "up" from ego. Gates asks each more-or-less celebrity guest to identify a segment of his or her ancestry that is of most interest; Gates' aim is to explore unexplored bloodlines and find "lost relatives." The desired result tends to edify the respondent, identifying ancestral struggles that have enabled the current descendant's self-worth. Ancestral hardships validate one's own identity.

One example of potential genealogical loss within North American kinship is "passing" among families of color. Some particularly light-skinned persons, especially in the past, might choose to cross over the color line and "pass" for white. When this happens they usually lose all current and future contact with Black relatives. Such kinfolk are lost to each other.²

In any case lost relatives are ubiquitous in American kinship; almost all of us have them. Migration is a huge driving factor in these disappearances; people leave home for the big city, or for the frontier, or for adventures abroad. They never return, or they do not stay in touch. Another

² The topic is often explored in American fiction; a notable example is Philip Roth's 2000 novel about a college professor accused by students of racism who was actually a light-skinned black man who changed his identity. Critics thought that Roth's model was writer Anatole Broyard, who was from New Orleans and had worked for the *New York Times*, but Roth denied that. His novel was a national bestseller.

driving factor, seldom if ever mentioned by Gates, is social mobility. People on the way up may not want to encourage relatives with less refined tastes or a less developed work ethic than themselves. They may fear solicitation of loans unlikely to be repaid, or embarrassing social encounters, or simply tedious interactions with less well-educated people, or less well-mannered ones. Some genealogical cohorts meet oblivion for a reason.

As a life history document, then, Lina Fruzzetti amply confirms the importance of her mother to her own identity and personal achievements. Silvio Fruzzetti, her father, remains enigmatic. Lina is bothered by the problem of Italy as an imperialist latecomer to European colonial expansion.

The Kingdom of Italy was consolidated by the capture of Rome from the Pope in 1870. Decades later its foreign adventures began and were mightily furthered under the fascist dictatorship of Mussolini. But consider, in 1900 Rome faced a Europe in which imperial capital cities far eclipsed it. First was Constantinople, seat of the Ottoman Sultans, Caliphs of Islam and rulers of much of the Muslim world.

Also in the East, the twin imperial capitals of St. Petersburg and Moscow were the stage in which the Romanov dynasty claimed the eastern Christian mantle of Constantinople, but like the Ottomans they in fact dominated a far-flung multi-ethnic and multi-religious empire.

In Vienna the Roman Catholic Habsburgs claimed to continue the traditions of the Holy Roman Empire. They were Germans, but other than Austria their Eastern European domains were multi-national and multi-lingual. Roman Catholicism was one ideological pillar of the dynasty.

To the north two Protestant Germanic dynasties, the Hanover-Saxe-Coburg-Windsors in the UK, and the Hohenzollerns in Berlin, intermarried and competed with each other. Each dynasty claimed imperial crowns in the 1870s; the King of Prussia became the German Emperor, and the Queen of Britain became Empress of India. Berlin waxed more monumental than ever, and the British proclaimed New Delhi in 1911 but actually inaugurated it in 1930.

The Rome of past imperial glory was quite left out of this. Mussolini set to remedy that in the 1920s. But he was already too late; of the imperial capitals mentioned above, only London and New Delhi survived the First World War as such. Empires were on the wane. For all the blood and suffering Mussolini caused, much of the world viewed his effort as more operatic performance than geo-politics. Probably many Italians view it as such today.

Rome, however, remained an “eternal” imperial city in one very real sense. It is the seat of the Vatican, the sovereign Papal State, an elective monarchy, with powerful imperial rituals and soaring architecture. Rome, the imperial capital fell in 476 AD, the Roman Church never fell. Free from most emperors’ scrutiny, Popes went their own way. The upshot is that the Church rationalized and codified its hold on the faithful right down to the parish level and became a world force for order and system, however it might be corrupted.³

Papal Rome is home to a large number of residential colleges, supposedly for seminary students usually grouped by national background. One of the loveliest architectural examples of these rises splendidly in the Vatican gardens, the Ethiopian College. It provides the setting of one of many intriguing encounters between investigative journalist Frederic Martel and a Vatican notable: Musie Ghebrehiorghism, a Bishop originally from a village near Addis Ababa. He was very indignant that Martel was seeking to interview Cardinal Angelo Sodano, who had “privatized” the

³ This is the thesis of historian Peter Heather’s fascinating book on the “restoration” of Rome. See his “Epilogue” (Heather 2013:405-486).

college's penthouse in order to provide himself with luxurious lodging in retirement. "It's an abuse. . . This is the Ethiopian College, so it's for Ethiopians..." (Martel 2019:211).

Sodano had been Vatican Secretary of State in the Pontificate of Jean Paul II. He had long served as Papal Nuncio to Chile under Dictator Augusto Pinochet, to whom he was very favorably inclined, as was anti-communist Jean Paul II. The ambivalent tale of Sodano's Chilean connection is one of many shocking, but problematic, revelations of the dimensions of imperialist ecclesiastical politics today. My point is that Ethiopia has a longstanding palpable connection with the Vatican.⁴

Consequently, I think that Lina might well have interviewed a priest or two in her investigations. Consider, she is the beneficiary of a Catholic education all the way to her college degree. A penniless fatherless little girl in Sudan was launched on her ways to a PhD. However, I must stress that Martel's interviews with Vatican informants are quite as ambiguous as Lina's are with her Italian contacts. Things are not what they seem. Apparently that is all right; one must see behind the mask but not engage in unmasking!

Toward the end of the film Lina declares that the kin ties she have found in Italy shall enrich her daughters and their children. Presumably she has always assumed that their Eritrean ties enrich them. One may consider visiting distant relatives at reunions, and visiting family gravesites and other symbolic spaces, as pilgrimages. In fact, that is what Lina's daughters and their young are doing on camera when we see them---visiting the grave of Lina's grandfather, Pietro Fruzzetti. Anthropologist Gwen Neville in her magisterial study of Protestant rituals of reunion in the US remarks that traditional Roman Catholic pilgrimages are undertaken by people who leave home as penitents, or at least as supplicants for a blessing, and look, on the pilgrimage site as a place of restoration and renewal, if not actual medical cures (Neville 1987). They leave home morally impoverished and return spiritually enriched. Protestants on the other hand look on rituals of kinship and pilgrimages returning to ancestral or natal homes as signs of validation of moral merit already achieved. These pilgrims go to their old hometown or ancestral graveyard to display that they have "made it" in life, being evidently virtuous and good, if not also prosperous. They participate in family reunions and epic voluntary grave cleaning with elaborate outdoor dinners to demonstrate that worthiness to their wider kindred.

One wonders about secular transnational tourism in events uniting kin across vast distances. Do such pilgrims seek spiritual inspiration and enrichment, or simply to demonstrate their own moral worth as cosmopolitan transnational citizens? I suspect that no matter how cosmopolitan they might become, should Lina's daughters and grandchildren in the future visit Lucia and Silvio's grave in Keren they shall experience quite as much spiritual renewal as character validation, probably quite a bit more.

Practically speaking this film is crowded with people, facts, and events. My colleague, the late ethnographic filmmaker, Timothy Asch, maintained as a point of doctrine that ethnographic films ought to go with written explanations. Indeed, were I teaching this film in a course on visual anthropology I would post a study guide online containing detailed maps---there can be no underestimating the geographical ignorance of American college students. I would post historical

⁴ Martel asserts that Sodano was at the center of a cabal of right-wing homosexual clergy that grew up around Pinochet. Among them was a now notorious priest, Fernando Karadima, whom Sodano protected in spite of repeated noxious rumors about him. It was not until 2011, after years of cover up, that the Vatican ordered a trial under canon law. Kardima was convicted for multiple incidents of sexual abuse. As a consequence, Sodano is no favorite of Pope Francis (Martel 2019:225-230).

outlines showing Italian incursions into East Africa. I would devise kinship charts for both sides of Lina's family. Mercifully as an emeritus professor, I no longer have to assume such tasks. I do not regret that. Instead, I happily celebrate having viewed a very moving life history memoir, blessed with startling footage, especially footage of Lina's family scenes of East Africa.

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