

(Re)entering the archive: critical reflections on archives and whiteness

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ABSTRACT

As a UK-based artist-researcher, my work has been mostly concerned with questioning the archive of Italian coloniality from an outsider position. This contribution wishes to engage critically with some of the foundational elements and methods of my practice and to dwell on what it means to engage with the archive of coloniality from the privilege of whiteness. I will put forward some reflections on the ethical implications of this work and some propositions on how to (re)enter the archive, that is, how to create conditions that do not replicate colonial and racist relations. In particular, I will consider practices of positioning, intersectionality and sustained commitment to anti-racist politics, while also identifying some of the obstacles that have been preventing a constructive debate within the Italian visual art contexts. The text is interspersed with images from the installation *A Bomb to be Reloaded* (2019) in which I have investigated the influence of Frantz Fanon's thought on a generation of militant intellectuals in Italy, and, in particular, on Giovanni Pirelli. It features research on the dismembered library of the Centro di documentazione Frantz Fanon, a research centre for the study and support of decolonial and anti-imperialist struggles that was active in Milan between 1963 and 1967, as well as testimonies by the Italo-Somali actress Kadigia Bove.

Keywords

archive of coloniality, whiteness, Italian visual arts, Frantz Fanon, anti-racist politics



Alessandra Ferrini, *A Bomb to be Reloaded (Chapter 1)*. 2019. View of the installation at Villa Romana, Florence (photograph by Leonardo Morfini, OKNO studio).

In this contribution, I will attempt to step back from the contents of my work in order to share a series of reflections on the ethical implications intrinsic to working with the archive of coloniality as a European artist and researcher who identifies herself as white and focuses on visuality and questions of race, resistance and national identity construction in Italy. By doing so, I hope to provide the reader with a broader understanding of the strategies and conditions that I am attempting to devise within my practice, to critically approach issues such as white privilege, colonial violence, social engagement, political commitment and praxis. The reflections contained here are primarily in response to the visual arts context in Italy where I have been consistently working in, albeit from an outsider position.

This text consists of three parts: (1) “knocking at the door of the archive”; (2) “entering the archive”; (3) “re-entering the archive.” Although these titles suggest an involvement with a physical archive (a site), throughout the text I will be referring to the notion of the ‘archive of coloniality,’ which is not necessarily tied to material culture or spatial locations. Building on a previous conversation that I shared with Charles Burdett, Gaia Giuliani, Marianna Griffini, Linde Luijnenburg and Gianmarco Mancosu, by ‘archive of coloniality’ I intend “a multi-layered, collective repository of aspiration, dominance, desire, self-aggrandizement and fear through which the development of society’s self-image can be revealed but also – through a systematic

and critical approach to the (visual) archive of coloniality – contested” (Burdett et al. 2019, 53). This understanding builds on the work of Ann Laura Stoler who, in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, defines the colonial archive as a “site of knowledge production” and a “repository of codified beliefs” (2009, 97).



Alessandra Ferrini, *A Bomb to be Reloaded (Chapter 2)*. 2019. View of the installation at Villa Romana, Florence (photograph by Leonardo Morfini, OKNO studio).

Knocking at the door of the archive

Before entering the archive of coloniality, it is necessary to metaphorically knock at its door – that is, one must ask for permission. Given the expanded nature of this archive, permission is not a matter of physical access but rather, it must be conceived as a commitment to account for one’s positionality and intensions as researcher. It requires a severe scrutiny of the means, reasons, conditions and objectives behind the desire to engage with such a contested and traumatic archive. Particularly, for white researchers, this entails a reflexive process that must begin with the willingness to engage with a series of uncomfortable realisations: from guilt, to shame or refusal – what Robin DiAngelo defines as ‘white fragility’ (2018). Learning to deal with these feelings and to deconstruct the white gaze, without turning it into a redemptive exercise, must be at the core of this work. By developing a sense of responsibility and accountability towards the trauma inherent to the colonial archive, this process ought to begin with the scrutiny and sustained critique of the way racism is ingrained in ways of seeing, being and thinking to which we can never be immune. From this space of vulnerability and awareness, I believe that permission to enter the archive can be humbly asked for. But, on the other hand, it can never be expected to be granted as it cannot be intended as a transaction. Permission

is requested, metaphorically, to the trauma that has been caused by the assertion of white supremacy – and as a result it must be imagined as part of a process that is based on the understanding and ongoing analysis of how the structural nature of racism affects each sphere of life with anti-black violence while providing whiteness with privileges so deeply rooted that are – in most cases – not recognised, or simply taken for granted. It is specifically because whiteness has imposed itself as the norm, that there is a widespread refusal to discuss white privilege or whiteness in general. In the case of Italy, the ways in which blackness is made either hypervisible or invisible (Giuliani 2018), further characterise the distinctive way in which whiteness has been constructed and enforced. By hypervisibility I refer here to the way in which images of black bodies – mostly represented as destitute migrants – are overly reproduced in the media, contributing to white supremacists' narratives of racial replacement. On the other hand, by invisibility I refer to the way blackness is relegated to marginal spaces that, as defined by Heather Merrill, are spaces that “demarcate the discursive and systemic production of blackness as social erasure and even social death” (2019, 14). These conditions, moreover, should also be assessed in relation to the specific fascist and imperial ideology that they emerge from.

In this regard, positioning must be understood as a foundational practice: it is something that, from an ethical and political point of view, must always be accounted for. Yet, positioning should not be intended as a confessional act that washes away all sins – namely, a tactic to cleanse the artist and researcher from accountability and obliquely restore white privilege. Indeed, positioning cannot be used as a disclaimer or stand as a performance of white guilt. It needs to be supported by a deeply rooted critique of white privilege and a meaningful contribution to anti-racist praxis.

In addition, a productive process of situating one's work must engage in a deconstruction of whiteness that takes into account different power structures at work within different constructions of white identities and the different working conditions that our situatedness imply. For instance, in my case, besides the pivotal step of recognising the structural privilege that my whiteness implies, I must also be aware that I relate to Italian colonial history from Northern Europe – that is, with a certain bias. I intervene within the Italian context from the outside and with a distinctive way of seeing that comes out of a British and more generally Anglophone approach to Visual Culture Studies. In addition, I had to reacquaint myself with Italian history and discover a context that felt familiar but also foreign – as well as to understand this against my position in the UK as a migrant refusing assimilation. And I had to realise that the reason why I could quickly establish myself as both an artist and scholar in Italy (beside my whiteness and Italianness) was related to the approach and academic support that I was bringing from the UK, something not readily available within Italy, where practice-based PhDs do not exist.

This statement wishes to highlight the variables and infrastructures that allow me to work and the preconceived ideas and experiences that might hinder my understanding of a given

situation or subject. Positioning, in my opinion, must be used as a toolkit, a checklist against which to assess one's own work and relation to the object/subject of study in order to strive for as much transparency as possible. Indeed, working with the archive of coloniality implies the establishment of relations with subjects – whether alive or dead, named or unnamed – that are oppressed by structural racism. Having integrity in my work, thus demands a hypervigilant approach to the way I negotiate these relations and my position therein, which begins with always doubting each and every step of my reasoning.



Alessandra Ferrini, *A Bomb to be Reloaded (Chapter 1)*. 2019. Detail from the installation at Villa Romana, Florence (photograph by Leonardo Morfini, OKNO studio).

Entering the archive

After asking for permission, one must reflect on what it means to enter the archive. As I have just discussed, permission is a matter of establishing an ethical set of practices. This process, though, is only the beginning: the really difficult work starts once the door's threshold has been crossed. Moreover, asking does not imply that permission has, or will ever be, granted. As a matter of fact, it stands as a reminder that we are always guests within this archive, as white bodies are always a symbol of colonial violence.

Indeed, over the years, one of the activities that has made me acutely aware of my

whiteness – and of the privileges it affords me – is entering archives. As materializations of a system of power/thought/relations that is rooted in the building of what Édouard Glissant defines as the ‘European project’ (1989) one must acknowledge that the bureaucratic machine of the archive is shaped by and for whiteness. And that, as Nicholas Mirzoeff (2011) reminds us, this machine produces visibility and its hegemonic gaze. I believe that it is this crucial understanding that should refrain researchers from falling victim to the so-called ‘archive fever’ and rushing to engage with the archive of coloniality – a lesson that I am constantly teaching myself. If this caution might be a given in certain academic disciplines, it must be acknowledged that the same cannot be stated for artistic practice. Within the Italian context, where postcolonial, decolonial and anticolonial thought is not generally part of art academy’s curricula, the urge to work with colonial artefacts, images or on/with black subjects, oftentimes ends up (re)creating particularly dangerous colonial tropes and narratives. To make things worse, the widespread lack of knowledge about the history of colonialism and racism in Italy, coupled with an almost complete absence of people of colour within the Italian art scene, does not allow for the development of a constructive debate. As a result, such engagements with the archive can be reduced to exploitative, extractive operations upon which white artists capitalise at the expenses of those subjects, academics, and artists that should have a say in the way their own bodies and traumatic histories ought to be represented and talked about.

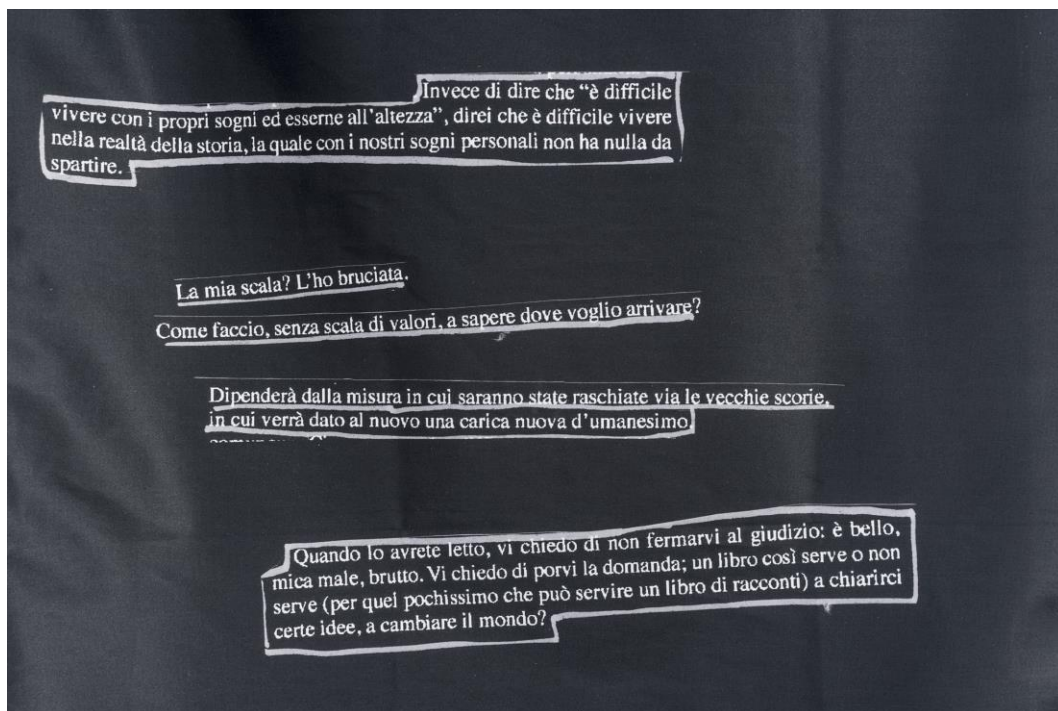
Indeed, the violence that the archive of coloniality guards, produces and preserves is all too real to the bodies that are still a target of it. Talks about empathy and being allies by white people, in my opinion, have very little meaning in the face of the embodied trauma that the archive of coloniality triggers in people of colour. In *Archival-poetics*, Australian aboriginal poet Natalie Harkins provides a warning for those, like her, involved in engaging with “blood in the records”. She writes: “some blood-memory lessons should begin with a slow and deep inhale knowing in that moment before exhale where this archival-poetic journey might never end the next breath may clot, won’t feel so easy” (2019, 13). She refers to this work as “archive fever paradox” (2019, 21):

archive fever paradox
 my blood it pumps
 where hearts
 have
 stopped

As white researchers, we must acknowledge that while researching these archives, as much as we might be moved, angered, or made to despair, we are immune from such “blood-memory”. We are not re-traumatized by looking, researching, discussing these histories of violence. Our artistic and academic careers are indeed based on the privilege that this detachment provides – the ease with which we can engage in these conversations and decide when to drop them, with little or no consequences. Engaging with racial politics is indeed a choice

for us, as they do not negatively impact our life. Within this understanding, notions of solidarity also become redundant, symbolising ways for white people to ally themselves with the oppressed people that their wealth depend on, maintaining power imbalance.

Whether approaching the colonial past or current representations of blackness, these stances are commonly recreated, especially within visual practice. In the essay *White Innocence in the Black Mediterranean*, Ida Danewid (2017), drawing on Gloria Wekker (2016), challenges the way, as white cultural producers (artists, writers, activists) we – white subjects – attempt to oppose right wing, fascist discourse with a politics of pity that erases historical connections and reinforces the idea of the migrant as guest or ‘charitable subject’ (always other), and place us in the position of benevolent, good, empathic hospitable subjects. In Danewid’s opinion, this attitude reinforces right wing discourse of unwelcome guests, performing stranger fetishism (Ahmed 2012) and, by doing so, avoids tackling the root causes of migration and unbalanced privileges at the core of the European project.



Alessandra Ferrini, *A Bomb to be Reloaded* (Chapter 1). 2019. Detail from the installation at Villa Romana, Florence (photograph by Leonardo Morfini, OKNO studio).

Danewid’s essay seems to also resonate with Martin Luther King Jr’s warning about the “white moderate who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice,” and who he identified as the main obstacle to black freedom. He wrote: “[s]hallow understanding from people of goodwill is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will” (1963).

Or, as the saying goes, the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Re-entering the archive

To re-enter the archive, one must have first taken a step back. This operation entails a moment of distance (to reflect critically on one's positioning and approach), which is followed by knocking once more at the door of the archive – to ask for permission again. But can the archive really be entered differently? What strategies can be deployed to create new conditions to confront – and be confronted with – the archive of coloniality from the privilege of whiteness?

The first step in this process, in my opinion, is listening. It is about having difficult conversations and stepping back. Whiteness seizes all platforms and feels legitimised to occupy all spaces – something not easily shared by people of colour, whose presence is often questioned, concealed, exploited or made painfully visible. What I am teaching myself, is to refuse the urge to speak and take up space, in the hope to contribute to creating the conditions for safe spaces for blackness to emerge. This includes the necessity to step out of the comfort zone afforded to me by my whiteness, to learn to deal with the fear of being caught up in a racist thought (even if 'unintentional' or 'latent'), and to fight against the pietistic mechanisms triggered by white fragility and guilt.

Secondly, to re-enter the archive one must be willing to think intersectionally, that is, to be open to discuss and acknowledge the interplay of race, class, gender, able-ism, sexual orientation, wealth, education, etc. But also, to create safe environments that take into account the stigma and trauma entailed in the discussion of oppression. And to do this, one must recognise the different factors that shape such markers and adopt an intersectional approach to history and to be in the world. It is not about 'giving voice', it is about listening and creating the conditions for exchange, but also about hijacking formats, grants, institutions, in order to start a conversation or putting pressure on those who replicate oppressive conditions of work/life. On the other hand, it is also about realising that any work produced in this direction does not entirely belong to you – the artist – but to a community shaped by a history of violence and erasure.

And most importantly, I believe that to be granted permission to re-enter the archive one must have embarked on long-term commitment to reflexivity and self-transformation. This entails a willingness to sustain this work actively and indeterminably, because it is the very prerogative of having the possibility of a way-out that constitutes our white privilege. As a result, engaging critically with the archive of coloniality must become a life-long work, a political praxis rather than a purely academic exercise.

If these considerations might be considered banal or common knowledge in some circles, I believe that it is still necessary to spell them out when considering the Italian visual arts context, in which issues of race and class – but also critical considerations on political praxis and family heritage – are seldom addressed head-on. This condition leads to a stagnant discourse in which the colonial and fascist heritage is concealed and white artists are not held accountable for their approaches to the archive of coloniality. This matter is further complicated

if we take gender into consideration, which is often ignored. But to deal with whiteness in the archive of coloniality, one must be prepared to be affected, to be stripped bare, to be honest about one's history, privileges and bias. Marina Garcés' invitation to "deal honestly with the real" is specifically helpful here. For Garcés, it means "entering on to the scene, not to participate in it and choose some of its possibles, but to take a stance [...] exposing oneself and getting involved" (2012, 3).

As an artist and researcher, I believe that beside actions and engagement, we need to also focus on the way we set and build a discourse, while also retaining a suspicion towards focus on aesthetics and form as a driving force of artistic practice: fascism was indeed a highly aesthetic project, much in the same way as visibility is a product of the Western imperial gaze. The feeling that I often get by working in Italy, however, is that there is little interest in how artists discuss or approach the colonial archive, or in the kind of language they use to do so: the late and sudden realisation that this issue has been removed from the debate for decades legitimises any attempt to shine a light on it. It is this attitude that prevents an appropriate level of criticality in the field of the visual arts.



Alessandra Ferrini, *A Bomb to be Reloaded (Chapter 0)*. 2019. Detail from the installation at Villa Romana, Florence (photograph by Leonardo Morfini, OKNO studio).

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