Introduction

Current events involving immigrants in Italy have sparked the need to understand where this hate and discrimination is stemming from. Relations between Italy and countries in Africa date back to the pre-colonial era, but intensified greatly during the colonial period after Italy colonized four African countries. Intense racial policies were put in place during this time that greatly impacted the treatment of the African people. This research looks to examine underlying connections between the colonial period and current times.

Methodology

This research was conducted by examining various forms of media. For the colonial media representations, images, excerpts from books, songs and were analyzed to understand how the African people were portrayed to the Italian public. To determine the current perceptions of immigrants, articles from a variety of news outlets in Italy and the United States have been used, as well as journal articles, dating up until the end of 2018.

Research Question: Have the perceptions of immigrants held by Italians today been influenced by the underlying themes rooted in the Italian media representations of the African people during the colonial period?

Common Colonial Media Representations

- Colonial media representations are rooted in the sentiments created through racial laws of the time, creating a divide between “true” Italians and those who adopted the culture and language, the Africans who were colonized, with the “true Italians being seen as far superior”
- African people often represented in traditional dress and in the wilderness to convey a notion of “savagery, lack of civilization” (Polezzi, “Il Pieno e Il Vuoto: …” 351)
- Depicted as being inferior to Italians through more feminine descriptions and childlike characteristics, in visual representations, in comparison to Italians shown in a heroic, masculine and grown up manner
- Establish a “colonial gaze”, describing a sense of Italians looking down on the African people and seeing them as of a lesser capacity for all aspects of life, promoting Italian superiority in the colonies (Polezzi, “Imperial Reproductions: …” 36)

Current Political and Social Climate

- Salvini and right-wing politicians are pushing anti-immigrant sentiments
  - Claim immigrants are “socially dangerous”, however they commit crimes at a lower rate than Italians (Misculin)
  - A decree was passed in November 2018 making ruling for immigrants seeking asylum and gaining citizenship more difficult to make Italy “safer” (Giuffrida)
  - They are choosing to only publicize crimes committed by immigrants, when Italians are committing the same crimes, to make it appear as though they are dangerous and measures should be taken to keep them out of the country (Horowitz)
  - Immigrants and those supporting the integration are being discriminated against and segregated from the rest of society
  - In Lodi, “foreign” children must show extra proof to receive subsidized lunch that no one else must show or they have to bring lunch and sit in a class room, segregated from the cafeteria (Horowitz “Italy’s Tough Line…”)
  - Domenico Lucano, mayor of Riaci has worked for the past twenty years to integrate immigrants into Italian society and is now facing arrest for his actions (Momigliano)

Conclusion

In uncovering the truths about the Italian colonial period in relation to the media that was being presented to the Italian public, one can recognize that these media representations were used to evoke certain sentiments about the African people, since they were not of Italian descent. Through a range of visual and verbal media and through officials policies and legislation, authors, artists and political members of the colonial period were able to portray an image of the African people that demonstrated their savage and uncivilized nature. These colonial media representations of the African people allowed the Italian’s to promote the fact that their efforts were done out of charity in an attempt to modernize and civilize the African countries that they colonized, while in reality this was far from the truth. Fast forward 90 years and one can see that in present day Italy, negative sentiments and discrimination are still swirling around those from other countries, especially from Africa. Once again, the ideas of promoting racial superiority of the Italian people, in relation to immigrants is resurfacing in Italy, ideas that were last prominent during the colonial period especially under fascism. Italians are being faced with the option to welcome and incorporate immigrants into Italian society, but due in large part to the influence of the right-wing, in many cases individuals are choosing to discriminate against them and individuals who are choosing to help immigrants. These sentiments can be traced back, not only to the colonial period, but specifically to the inaccurate representations that the Italians were presented of the African people. These representations truly sparked negative sentiments and ideas of inferiority towards the African people based on inaccurate representations, but without knowing the truths about the colonial period, people were never given a reason to change their minds.

References