

The African Descendant, an ‘Invisible Man’ to the Media

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Abstract In the European public sphere African descendants are seldom featured as narrators of their own background and complex identity. According to European institutions and independent researchers there is a serious lack of debate about Europe’s colonial past and about the impact that it still has on the racist and discriminatory way people of African descent are portrayed and perceived. The media, in particular, could play a significant role to help cultural diversity and to oppose racism, allowing non-white Europeans to be more visible and vocal within their own organisations.

Keywords African-European. Mainstream media. Racism. Discrimination. Colonialism. Slavery.

I am an invisible man [...] I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me [...] When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination - indeed, everything and anything except me [...]

(Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 1952)

In 2015 the European Parliament decided to support the International Decade for People of African Descent proclaimed by the United Nations.¹ In March 2019 the same Parliament adopted a resolution on fundamental rights of people of African descent in Europe.² One of the most significant parts of the resolution reads:

1 <https://www.un.org/en/observances/decade-people-african-descent>.

2 European Parliament, 2014-2019; TEXTS ADOPTED; P8_TA(2019) 0239, Fundamental rights of people of African descent, European Parliament resolution of 26 March 2019 on fundamental rights of people of African descent in Europe (2018/2899(RSP)).

The European Parliament [...] calls on the Member States to declassify their colonial archives; [...] to include some form of reparations such as offering public apologies and the restitution of stolen artefacts to their countries of origin; [...] encourages the Member States to make the history of people of African descent part of their curricula and to present a comprehensive perspective on colonialism and slavery which recognises their historical and contemporary adverse effects on people of African descent.

This resolution is a clear and sound call to action for national governments. Any European citizen would expect politicians to understand the relevance of such a resolution for national institutions, and yet there has been almost no national debate about current forms of racism as a consequence of colonialism. It is hard to find evidence that any politician in a relevant position has even thought of apologising for his own country's colonial crimes, or of proposing a change in national school curricula, as the European Parliament suggested.

When national politicians look so indifferent to European institutions' calls, it should be the mainstream media to hold political parties and the governments accountable for not responding to EU obligations. However, the national media did not pick up the European Parliament's recommendation and just a very few news websites reported the call, with almost no impact on the public sphere and on the national debate in those countries that have a history of slavery and colonialism. So how could European citizens know about the need to address those issues, if also the media remain silent, if the matter remains unreported, and if this particular group of people, the Africans descendants, remain invisible?

Actually, black Europeans, African Europeans or 'Afropeans', cannot be any invisible, since there are an estimated 15-20 million people of African descent living in Europe. They are an indispensable part of the population of the continent, either as working immigrants or people who established for generations, like the children and grandchildren from the ex colonies. They come from different backgrounds and they have contributed to Europe's development and culture for centuries. However, it is evident that their contribution is not sufficiently perceived because this group does not seem to be even formally acknowledged. In some European countries data collection does not take into account ethnic origin. In other words, they cannot be counted and their origin remains unknown.

I am a European citizen of African descent, or an Italian-Eritrean, and I can confirm that this form of invisibilization exists. My African roots and origin are not considered in my documents. I have an Italian name and surname that come from my great grand father, an Italian officer who went to colonise the land of Eritrea, in the Horn of Africa, at the end of nineteenth century. That officer had children with

an Eritrean young woman, my great grand mother Gabrù Adahana, and their first born child was my grandfather Vittorio, whom I was named after. However, the side of my African great grand mother remained almost invisible to my family. Only the name and the identity of that officer, a white European male, survived over the generations.

My parents and myself, we all grew up in post colonial Italy where the dark side of the colonial past remained almost hidden. It seems that Italy, like other European countries, has carefully neglected most of the violence, of the genocides and the terrible events of our history in Africa. After the Second World War, in the Italian public sphere colonialism was associated only with Fascism and with the Savoia monarchs, even if colonial crimes started much earlier with the liberal and socialist governments of the 1890s. Italy's post-war institutions have built national identity also on the comforting myth of the 'good Italian coloniser' when it comes to the military occupation of Eritrea, Somalia, Libya and Ethiopia over 60 years of colonisation (Del Boca 2013). So did most of the social, political and cultural institutions, from most of political parties to the media. When I realised that so much history was missing in the construction of the Italian and of the European identity, I felt I had to know more, and investigate what it meant to be a grandchild of colonialism, and an African descendant. As a media professional myself, I found out that still today the descendants of those Africans who were victims of the slave trade and of colonial violence are seldom featured in the media sphere as narrators of their own background and complex identity. Independent research shows that the mainstream media tend to feature immigrants, refugees, people from Africa in a silent, demeaning and stereotypical ways (Milazzo 2021). The Italian media watch *Carta di Roma* issues an annual report about media and migration, and every year data confirm this attitude. Immigrants are quoted less than 3% of the time in the news stories, in interviews, TV shows, and feature writing. Simply, they do speak for themselves, while most of the comments come from politicians (over 70%), other journalists, activists, and NGOs. According to the report, if the conservative media tend to frame Africans as potential criminals, as a threat to European society, the progressive media inevitably use a patronising tone, which is ultimately discriminatory and racist, even when they have the best intentions.

As a journalist I see that such forms of discrimination and invisibilization by the media first happen in the media own organisations, it happens within. It is hard to find in Europe's mainstream media, especially in the broadcasting system, the name and the looks of a black or brown anchorman or anchorwoman. Seldom we see journalists and media professionals who are visible, vocal or who have leading roles in the newsrooms, those who have power in the production of content, and therefore in the way media influence society.

The scarce representation of non-white European media professionals is confirmed by a recent study by the Reuters Institute for Journalism Research (Borchardt et al. 2019). Those researchers have analysed the newsroom organisation and editorial management in a hundred major media outlets, both online and print media, in various European countries, including the United Kingdom, in Germany and in Sweden, where sensitivity to multiculturalism seems widespread. According to the study, none of the major media companies in Germany and Great Britain have a non-white editor-in-chief. In Germany and in Sweden journalists with a migrant background are evidently under represented and the reason, according to the editors, seem to be the lack of adequate language skills and education.

European Commission vice-president Věra Jourová has told the online news website EURACTIV that under-representation of people with a minority racial or ethnic background in the media, including in newsrooms themselves, remains a problem that needs to be addressed, and the European Commission is ready to help with funding (Brzozowski 2020).

Under representation cannot but consolidate racial stereotypes and several forms of discrimination, along with growing social and economic inequalities. This is about the material, substantial living conditions of people, such as access to housing, to decent employment and salaries, to education and health. In addition, people of African descent are often forced to live in areas that are vulnerable to environmental degradation, with poor rights to a safe, clean, healthy and sustainable environment. Beyond Europe, emerging forms of environmental racism are posing serious threats to the simple enjoyment of human rights for those communities. In the current debate about climate change a few recall that the African continent has contributed only to 3% of gas emissions and global warming, but African countries suffer the most the impact of the climate crisis, with devastating environmental effects, further impoverishment, further migration (UNEP). However, the perception of those forms of climate injustice and environmental racism is still weak in Europe.

European countries should make the fight against racism and racial discrimination a top priority [...] There is no shortage of legal, professional and financial tools to achieve all of this. What is lacking is political will. (Council of Europe 2021)

This is how the Council of Europe (CoE) Commissioner for Human Rights, Dunja Mijatović, commented the latest report on 'Afrophobia'. The report is based on the discussions that the Commissioner started two years ago with human rights defenders, who claim that people of African descent continue to be exposed to various forms of racial discrimination, including stereotyping, violence, and profil-

ing in criminal justice. According to the CoE Commissioner, the national governments and local institutions keep denying the problem and prevent any form of public debate on Afrophobia. Cases and patterns of human rights violations affecting people of African descent are not given actual consideration by the national parliaments, political parties, politicians, and therefore the media, noted Ms Mijatović. The report also pointed to the governments' poor efforts to address the legacy of colonialism and the slave trade, and the lack of educational and awareness-raising efforts that contribute to the invisibility of the problem: "They need to tackle the roots of racism against Black people and address the legacy of the colonial past and historical slavery", she stated (Council of Europe 2021).

Regarding 'the legacy of the colonial past' it is sufficiently evident that apart from the enclave of academic world in which colonial history and legacy have been analysed consistently, the mainstream cultural institutions have shown little interest so far. How many famous novels do we know that deal with colonial history? How many best sellers or movies or TV series have represented Europe's colonial past and its long-term impact on today's relations with Africa? How many school curricula include Europe's colonial history in Africa, Asia and Latin America? How many politicians have called for a national day of mourning for all the victims of the colonial crimes committed by the British, the French, the Spanish, the Portuguese, the Belgians, the Dutch and the Italians? Not many.

However, it is sufficiently encouraging that the international and the European institutions are now trying to make some pressure on national governments and societies to fight racism by offering a fair representation of that part of Europe's history and relations with the former colonies. As for the role of the media, if the core principles of journalism still regard the objectivity, the accuracy and the fairness in which we frame society, it is journalists who should help that process of awareness to begin. A radical change should come from their own organisation, from within, allowing non-white European media professionals to make their voice heard, to make their complex history told.

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