Vital Subjects
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Breached Walls and Wounded Bodies

It has often been remarked that Italian cinema was born “under the sign of the Risorgimento,” itself a national “resurgence,” or “rebirth” (Brunetta, *The History of Italian Cinema* 16). On September 20, 1905—the thirty-fifth anniversary of the Italian state’s annexation of Rome—Filoteo Alberini’s seven-frame film reenactment of the event, titled *La presa di Roma* (*The Taking of Rome*), was screened for an audience of thousands outdoors, adjacent to the very backdrop against which it was filmed. A huge white screen was erected next to the famous “breach” of the Aurelian wall at Porta Pia, the widely mythologized point of entry for Italian troops in their so-called conquest of Rome. In post-Unification Italy, rhetorical losses, ruptures, or “breaches,” abound, and what they refer to most frequently are perceived challenges to Italy’s territorial and corporeal integrity. Italy’s constitutive fractures are perhaps the central preoccupation of Italian modernity, and rhetorics of loss (through the emigration of labor-power; racial decline or degeneration; corporeal and territorial mutilation) function as mechanisms of disavowal,

11 For a historical reconstruction of the film’s production and release, as well as essays on its modern restoration, see Musumeci and Toffetti. See also Canosa, *La presa di Roma*. For film titles and citations, I have followed the notation style used by Bertellini in “Introduction: Early Italian Cinema” 235–239 and again in Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema* 367.

12 In “L’entrata dell’esercito italiano in Roma,” Edmondo De Amicis provides a first-hand journalistic account of the events of September 20, 1870, which already deploys a visual-cinematic style. His prose, which dwells for some time in the oneiric, glides through the central neighborhoods of Rome like a *carrellata*, or a tracking shot (*Roma capitale*).
paradoxically “mending” such fractures. In the case of La presa di Roma, the territorial unification of the modern, secular Italian state (though still “incomplete,” even after World War I) is affected through a breach; proclaiming its wholeness therefore requires a rupture (Fig. 4.1).

Four years later, in 1909, Alberini’s second ode to the Risorgimento, Il piccolo garibaldino (The Little Garibaldian Soldier), narrates the ascent to martyrdom of a young patriot who dies in battle alongside popular Risorgimento hero Giuseppe Garibaldi. The closing scene is a dream-sequence of the dead young hero’s mother, who solemnly accepts her son’s allegiance to a new, spiritual mother, l’Italia turrita, as she consecrates his sacrifice by kissing his bloody flesh wound (Fig. 4.2). The “birth of the nation” that Italy’s first films celebrate thus hinges on both a territorial rupture and a bodily one.

Several rhetorical formulations that have emerged over the course of the past several chapters—from colonialism as a pedagogic, therapeutic, or life-affirming, rather than a violent and life-negating set of practices, to the rhetoric of territorial and corporeal loss and restoration—return in this chapter in an analysis of the encounter between biopolitics and early Italian cinema. A close reading of Giovanni Pastrone’s 1914 epic silent film Cabiria, liberal Italy’s first international blockbuster and a film that commemorated the Italian invasion of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (Libya) in 1911, illustrates how the biopolitical constellation I have been tracing emerges in one of the most important technological innovations of the turn of the twentieth century, that magical encounter between industry and art known as cinema.

Between the close of the nineteenth century and the disappointing outcome of the Paris Peace Conference that “mutilated” Italy’s victory in World War I and prompted D’Annunzio’s occupation of Fiume, Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti had invested significant human and economic capital in an attempt

13 Here I refer to Roberto Esposito’s remarks, which serve as the epigraph to this book (Campbell, “Interview with Roberto Esposito” 49). See also the Introduction to the present study.

14 Here I refer of course to D.W. Griffith’s groundbreaking film The Birth of a Nation, about which Michael Rogin has remarked: “American film was born in a racist epic” (“The Sword Became a Flashing Vision” 191). While the same cannot be said for these Italian “birth of a nation” short films, my goal in this chapter is to illustrate the links between their staging of territorial and bodily loss or rupture and turn-of-the-twentieth century Italian racial logics.

15 Cabiria is based loosely upon literary precedents: Emilio Salgari’s Cartagine in fiamme (1908) and Gustave Flaubert’s Salammbô (1862).
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to wrest the territories of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica from Ottoman rule and local resistance, beginning in October 1911.\textsuperscript{16}

The Giolitti administration’s decision to invade Libya was accompanied by a flurry of propaganda from Italy’s political and literary frontline. Seven years before he occupied Fiume, D’Annunzio’s verses “Canzoni della geste d’Oltremare” praised the “glory of the race” (razza) of Aeneas in its effort to conquer Libya and “widen [Italy’s] skies.”\textsuperscript{17} In the Canzoni, which Lucia Re argues are a turning point in Italian racial discourse because they reflect the passage from a nineteenth-century, positivist discourse on race as divisive and polarizing to a unified, “modern,” twentieth-century “colonial and racial national identity,” D’Annunzio, “traces an imaginary, poetic hyper-map across the Mediterranean that connects disparate events in time and space in order to highlight ‘la gloria della razza’” (“Italians and the Invention of Race” 28). At the end of November 1911, poet Giovanni Pascoli delivered one of his last public addresses in praise of “proletarian” colonization to a crowd in Barga; the speech also appeared in the Roman daily La Tribuna (La grande

\textsuperscript{16} At the beginning of that month, 35,000 Italian troops landed in Tripoli furnished with neither maps nor interpreters on the hunch that the scarce number of Ottoman troops stationed there would pose no threat. Instead, the invasion would mark the beginning of a brutal twenty-year campaign for Italian control, punctuated by the first use of aircraft in a military offensive, the deployment of mustard gas, the violent expropriation of agricultural land from local inhabitants of Cyrenaica and their internment in concentration camps in the Syrtic desert, and culminating in the capture of septuagenarian and Cyrenaican resistance leader 'Umar al-Mukhtar and his public execution by hanging in 1931. In 1934, Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, two regions divided by the Syrtic desert, which had historically been distinguished by two distinct spheres of influence: the Maghreb for the former and Egypt for the latter, were united (along with the desert of Fazzan) to form a single colony, which was named Libya—a term classical texts used to designate African regions west of Egypt. Rochat quips that this was the only act of Italian colonialism with which Libyan dictator Muammar el-Qaddafi has never taken issue. Historians Ali A. Ahmida (\textit{The Making of Modern Italy}), Angelo Del Boca (\textit{Gli italiani in Africa Orientale}), Nicola Labanca (“The Embarrassment of Libya”), and Giorgio Rochat (\textit{Le guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia}) have exposed and denounced many of the details about this episode in Italian history, which the Italian state had for many years obscured. For a reading of the Libyan “Arab Spring” in light of Italian colonial history, see Fuller, “Libyan Genocide 2.0.” Fuller suggests that just one of the ironies of today’s Italo-Libyan relations is that: ‘Qadhafi has already replaced Italians in Libyan memory as the perpetrator of genocide.”

\textsuperscript{17} “La canzone del sangue,” 29. The Canzoni were published in the \textit{Corriere della Sera} between October 1911 and January 1912, and are now contained in \textit{Merope}, book four of \textit{Laudi del cielo, del mare, della terra, e degli eroi}. 
proletaria si è mossa). Futurist F.T. Marinetti sent dispatches from the Libyan front to the Parisian newspaper *L’Intransigeant*, which he later published in Italian as *La Battaglia di Tripoli* (1912).\(^{18}\) Enrico Corradini, founder of the Italian Nationalist Association (ANI), published three volumes, *L’Ora di Tripoli, La conquista di Tripoli, and Sopra le vie del nuovo impero*, in which he shared his vision that one day, “with strength, activity, and the conquest of African treasures, a whole new population with Italian blood” would occupy Mediterranean Africa.\(^{19}\) Earlier in 1911, Corradini, along with Alfredo Rocco and Luigi Federzoni (later appointed Minister of the Colonies) had anticipated the Italian invasion, issuing the first edition of their newspaper *The National Idea* on March 1, the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Italian army’s historic defeat at Adwa (Labanca, *Oltremare* 112).\(^{20}\) Colonial defeats—at Dogali in 1887 and at Adwa in 1896—might be considered additional coordinates in the constellation of rhetorical loss that I have been tracing. These defeats had carried significant rhetorical weight since the earliest utterances of pro-colonial propaganda, exemplified in the late nineteenth-century works of Alfredo Oriani.\(^{21}\) Overwhelmingly, loss, rather than victory, served to mobilize public opinion in favor of colonial war.

D’Annunzio’s speech to aviators at Centocelle in 1919 continued to rehearse this narrative, in which the Italian defeat at Adwa would be avenged by Italian colonial victory elsewhere. For D’Annunzio and other colonial enthusiasts, the precise location of this elsewhere was less important than the tenor of the promise that there was still land left to conquer on Italy’s “fourth shore” in the Mediterranean.\(^{22}\) As he would make clear on the eve of his occupation of “unredeemed” Fiume with his image of an airway fusing the distant and disparate lands of Libya, Eritrea, and Somalia (“Make it so that between

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18 The preface to the collection includes a manifesto published at the beginning of the conflict with an exhortation to the “poets, painters, sculptors and musicians of Italy” to put aside “verses, paintbrushes, chisels and orchestras” and turn to admire instead the “formidable symphonies of shrapnel and the wild sculptures that our inspired artillery forges within enemy masses” (Marinetti, *La battaglia di Tripoli*).


20 For a rich account of the contours and breadth of the colonial imaginary in Italy from the 1880s through World War II, see L. Ricci.

21 See Chapter One of the present study.

22 Labanca notes that more important than Rome’s control of Libya was avoiding the risk that Libya fall into the hands of London or Paris, which would have meant Italy’s geopolitical exclusion from the southern Mediterranean (Labanca, *Oltremare* 109).
Tripoli and Murzuq, between Tripoli and Tumu, the yellow road transforms itself into a sky-blue road, that the oasis at Kufra sees the tri-colored wings arrive through the air like flags hoisted to honor the new Patria. Connect Tripolitania to Eritrea, Cyrenaica to Somalia,” La penultima ventura, 98), and as colonial historians have maintained, internal differences and geographical distance between the colonies were irrelevant to a colonial politics based less upon access to resources specific to desired lands and more upon an abstract notion of conquest, or as colonial historian Nicola Labanca has put it, “the search for international prestige, [or] the politics of might [potenza]” (Oltremare 109).23 By the last decade of the nineteenth century, Italy’s colonies in the Horn of Africa had proved incapable of attracting the large numbers of Italian emigrants Franchetti and others had hoped. Increasingly, beginning with the Italian military’s initial incursion upon Libyan shores and continuing through the 1930s, when the fascist government sent Italians to settle some thirty villages there, hopes for the agricultural self-sufficiency of poor Italian peasants would be directed at the only portion of the North African coast that had not yet been occupied by France or Great Britain.24 The vagueness of Italy’s geographic coordinates of conquest and their eventual establishment through deduction (the territorial table scraps of the Berlin conference) lent a specificity to the Italian colonization of Africa, which Karen Pinkus has characterized in the following way: “Italy’s peculiar indolence in solidifying the borders that would serve to frame the black but that also would expand and turn slowly green (the color of agricultural reclamation, as well as unified Italy), is key” (29). Pinkus’ claim invites us to think about the chromatics of colonial conquest in this period not only in black and white, but also in the green of a promised land of abundant crop cultivation. What Italians found instead, with the exception of the verdant areas along the Libyan coastline, turned out to be “an immense sandbox” characterized instead by the beige of harsh and uncultivable desert sands.25

23 For a similar claim about the Italian government’s superficial knowledge of the regions and people they set out to conquer, see Rochat, “Il colonialismo italiano”; Le guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia 24.
24 Fuller points out that, although “the preferred image of the colonies portrayed a promised land full of Italian farmers,” the only sectors that grew significantly over the course of the Italian colonial enterprise were the military and government bureaucracy (Moderns Abroad 38).
25 Fuller notes that the few voices of anti-colonial dissent rehearsed Prime Minister Francesco Nitti’s disparaging remark that Libya was merely “an immense sandbox” (Moderns Abroad 47). Augusto Genina’s Mussolini Cup-winning 1936 film about the
The widely circulated literary-propagandistic works in praise of Libyan conquest by Corradini, D’Annunzio, Pascoli, Marinetti, and others signaled a critical juncture on the road toward the aestheticization of politics that D’Annunzio would rehearse at Fiume and—as Walter Benjamin famously recognized—fascism would attempt to perfect, through, among other things, its efforts to exercise ultimate control over the content and distribution of popular culture in general and the film industry in particular.

Poets and literary propagandists found much-needed inspiration in Libyan conquest. Italian occupation of Tripolitania, *Lo squadrone bianco* [*The White Squadron*, Roma Film] relies heavily upon the chromatic binarism of black and white, as its title suggests. The blinding sun and sand of the Libyan desert also play a critical role in the conversion of the decadent bourgeois young man into a proper colonial hero Mario (Antonio Centa) and the demise of his predecessor, Capitan Santelia (Fosco Giachetti). See: Bertellini; Boggio.

For a compelling reading of film history that disrupts the by now conventional, Benjaminian link between film and modernity by highlighting instead cinema’s reliance on “pictorial statements”—particularly those that narrativize race—which predate the typical hallmarks of modernity such as industrialization, mechanical reproducibility, and mass culture, see “A Mirror with a Memory,” in Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema* 276–291. Volumes have been written on Italian film production under fascism. Seminal works in Italian include: Argentieri; Brunetta, *Cinema italiano tra le due guerre*; Redi. In English, see: Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*; Landy; Reich and Garofalo; S. Ricci.
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(United Italy’s first and longest national war\textsuperscript{27}) as it served variously as an opportunity to confirm the aesthetic value of battle (Marinetti), to revive ancient Italian primacy through heroism and sacrifice (D’Annunzio), to deliver Italy’s huddled masses from being “swallowed up” by other nations (Pascoli), and to enable the “proletarian nation” to conduct its “exuberant genetic strength [potenza]” toward the elimination of inferior civilizations (Corradini).\textsuperscript{28} The invasion of Libya in 1911 also marked a turning point in Italy’s cinematic conquest of Africa.\textsuperscript{29} The invasion was immediately relayed to Italian audiences in New York through the documentary film \textit{Guerra in Tripolitania} (\textit{Italian-Turkish War}, Cines, 1911) (Bertellini, \textit{Italy in Early American Cinema} 12). The war gave what preeminent historian of Italian cinema Gian Piero Brunetta calls “a decisive push to the confluence of cinematic production, nationalist ideology, and the ambitions of a small country that had been unified and liberated only a few decades earlier” (\textit{History of Italian Cinema} 34). Film pioneer Luca Comerio (1870–1940) accompanied Italian troops as they landed at Tripoli, marking a historic union between war and cinema that would be further solidified with his appointment as the Italian army’s official filmmaker during World War I, and some ten years later with Mussolini’s notorious maxim that “cinema is

\textsuperscript{27} Giorgio Rochat describes how the Italian military distinguishes between “national” and “colonial” wars. “National” wars require large government expenditure, the direct involvement of the Italian Army, and widespread public support ensured through propaganda campaigns. Examples are the 1911–1912 war in Libya and the 1935–1936 war in Ethiopia. “Colonial” wars, on the other hand, were administered by the Ministry of Colonies (later the Ministry of Italian Africa), involved a reduced number of Italian forces, and enjoyed little to no public support (\textit{Le guerre italiane in Libia e in Etiopia} 23).

\textsuperscript{28} These distilled positions refer to D’Annunzio, Pascoli, and Marinetti’s Libyan works, cited in the text and notes above. Pascoli’s formulation was that Italian emigrant laborers “were lost in the whirlpool [gorghi] of other nationalities” (\textit{La grande proletaria si è mossa} 9). For Corradini, see \textit{Sopra le vie del nuovo impero} 47–48 (cited in Tomasello, \textit{L’Africa tra mito e realtà} 53).

\textsuperscript{29} For a historical overview of narrative films produced in Italy and set and/or filmed in Africa, including a useful filmography, see Brunetta and Gili. For a more comprehensive filmography of Italian films on Africa, as well as a discussion (in English) of Italian films and newsreels on Africa during and after fascism (1930–1960), see Baratieri, whose useful historical study, despite several regrettable editorial errors, fills a void in scholarship on Italian film about Africa. Indeed, since around 2010 a veritable flurry of film scholarship has emerged that seeks to redress longstanding lacunae in the (post) colonial chapter(s) of Italian film history. In addition to the pioneering works by Ruth Ben-Ghiat and Giorgio Bertellini, see: Franceschi; Greene; O’Healy; Trento; Duncan, “Italy’s Postcolonial Cinema.”
the [regime’s] strongest weapon.”\textsuperscript{30} Anticipating Marinetti’s “Manifesto of Futurist Cinema” by some five years, Comerio allegedly strapped himself to an airplane in order to film from the very Libyan sky that Marinetti would later visit (Moliterno 90). The influence was mutual: as Brunetta points out, Marinetti’s earlier literary works, particularly his aeronautical and anticlerical poem \textit{Il monoplano del Papa} (\textit{The Pope’s Monoplane}) of 1910, already deployed a cinematic gaze that would share affinities with that of Comerio’s films (\textit{The History of Italian Cinema} 34). In addition to Marinetti and Comerio, notable early filmmakers such as Giovanni Vitrotti and Elvira Notari found Libya an apt stage for ethnographic films, war reportage, and popular drama. Notari’s \textit{L’eroismo d’un aviatore a Tripoli} (\textit{Heroism of an Aviator in Tripoli}, Dora Film, 1912) decried the Libyan war’s obliteration of enemy life and domestic amorous passion: “In Libya the war showed the terrible potential of aviation: the rain of bombs exploding confused and destroyed the enemy. Strange spectacle! Powerful means of destruction,” announced the film’s synopsis, referring to the fact that Italian aircraft had bombed Tripoli in November 1911 (an event which made history as the first use of aircraft in a military offensive).\textsuperscript{31} To paraphrase Paul Virilio (writing about World War I), during the Libyan occupation, war, aviation, and cinema formed “a single moment,” influencing visual perception for soldiers and directors alike (4). I will return to a fuller discussion of this below, but for now it will suffice to mention that Pastrone’s \textit{Cabiria} stands apart from these other texts insofar as it takes up Libya as neither a site for visual war reportage, nor as a racy backdrop for a contemporary drama or comedy. Instead, Pastrone—following literary-propagandistic precedents set by Corradini, Pascoli, and D’Annunzio, and in line with the early Italian film industry’s fascination with antiquity—conjures up a mythical past in order to justify the present by staging an analogy between

\textsuperscript{30} For more on Comerio, see: Comerio et al.; Dagrada, et al.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{La vita cinematografica}, Turin, n. 20, 1912, p. 35 (cited in Bruno 199). Bruno notes the scholarly neglect of the silent film era in Italy (with the exception of grand literary and historic epics such as \textit{Cabiria}), which led to the obscurity of regional filmmakers like Notari, despite her prolific filmography and international success (14). Historical studies of the Italian silent era include: Bernardini; Prolo; Canosa, \textit{Cinema muto italiano}. For a technical and historical overview of the silent era, including the transition to color and the preservation of the film stock, as well as a filmography and a guide to archival silent film research, see \textit{Cherchi Usai, Silent Cinema}. Useful anthologies on the American and European silent traditions include: Abel, \textit{Silent Film}; Grieveson and Kramer, \textit{The Silent Cinema Reader}. 
ancient Rome’s battle for Carthage and contemporary Rome’s attempts to colonize Libya.  

Circuits of Loss and Return

The critical history of Pastrone’s pioneering film has been shaped by an overwhelming concern with the film’s technological achievements and difficulties. *Cabiria* is remembered by film scholars for its innovative use of the tracking shot, and more specifically for the use of the dolly mounted on a sinusoidal track to emphasize the three dimensionality of cinematic space (Cherchi Usai, “*Cabiria*, an Incomplete Masterpiece” 161). Like the set’s dimensions, the film’s set designs and pyrotechnic effects have been praised for their monumentality. D.W. Griffith is said to have raced to San Francisco to attend a screening of Pastrone’s masterpiece sometime after completing *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Griffith was allegedly so humbled by Pastrone’s cinematic achievement that his own appeared “primeval” in comparison. He would go on to shoot *Intolerance* (1916) determined to outdo his Italian contemporary.

Equally intriguing for scholars of *Cabiria* has been the elusiveness and fragmentation of the filmic material itself. At least until 1988, there were multiple versions in circulation, most based upon a truncated re-issue of the film in 1931. The original 1914 version—released at over 3 hours—was rumored to have been lost in a fire. The quest that ensued for the lost film

32 Though Marinetti was one of the loudest voices in this pro-colonial chorus, his disdain for “passatismo” meant that his Libyan dream did not rely upon conjuring up a mythic return to ancient Rome. In October 1911, he published his “Second Futurist Political Manifesto,” in which he celebrated the Libyan war by declaring that, among other things, “The tiresome memory of the greatness of Ancient Rome must be eradicated by an Italian greatness that is a hundred times more impressive” (*Critical Writings* 73–74). The piece first appeared in Marinetti, *Guerra sola igiene del mondo*. It appears as “Manifesto a Tripoli italiana” in Marinetti, *Futurismo e fascismo*. In an interview with Sicilian periodical *Lavvenire* in February 1915, Marinetti explained his distance from Corradini and the Nationalists for wanting to “consolidate the nation around tradition, a mania for monuments, and veneration for ancient ruins. [...] I am with them, however, as brothers-in-arms, when it’s a case of spiting in the face or kicking the living daylights out of all those pacifists and socialists who would like to sully, humble, and degrade this great word *Italy*. I want to make the point, however, that the Italy of tomorrow must be, and will be, infinitely greater than the archaeological and cultural one the nationalists are hell-bent on cobbbling together, restoring, and setting up on pedestals” (*Critical Writings* 240).
of *Cabiria* thus parallels the film’s narrative itself, which recounts the battle between Rome and Carthage during the Second Punic War by following the somewhat accidental capture of the title character, a young Roman girl named Cabiria, her subsequent sale at a Carthaginian market, her near sacrifice to the fire god Moloch, and her eventual rescue and return to Rome by the darkened slave Maciste. In the late 1980s, film scholar Paolo Cherchi Usai dramatized this technological and narrative overlap when he called for a restoration of the original 1914 version by playfully suggesting, “We know that parts of the lost [film] *Cabiria* are still retrievable, but it would be premature to say that the little Carthaginian slave has yet been saved” (“*Cabiria*, an Incomplete Masterpiece” 165).33

*Cabiria* is a film that posits a territorial “loss”—formerly Roman territories on Italy’s “fourth shore”—as remedied by a corporeal return. In addition to staging a parallel between territorial and bodily restitution, Pastrone’s rhetoric of loss and return, like the nebulous imaginative geographies of Italian colonialism I mentioned above, requires a temporal and geographic conflation: contemporary Tripolitania and Cyrenaica stand in for ancient Carthage (in modern Tunisia, where the film’s desert scenes were in fact filmed). To reference Carthage at the onset of the Libyan campaign was to refer to the far less ancient “loss” of Tunisia to France roughly thirty years prior. I’ve pointed out that two colonial defeats, those of Dogali and Adwa, played a large role in bringing public opinion around in favor of colonial conquest. To these losses one might add several others—both real and imagined—that lent shape to colonial rhetoric in the period between Unification and the close of World War I. The loss of Italian bodies to the Americas that early colonialist Leopoldo Franchetti used to justify “demographic” colonialism in Eritrea was figured as both economic and biological; lest they were redirected to colonial lands, Italian emigrants had no choice but to “revitalize” other nationalities, financially and racially.34 France’s colonization of Tunisia in 1881 brought yet another perceived loss to the attention of Italians who were worried about their place in the imperial world order. Beginning in the 1820s and throughout the wars of Italian independence and unification, significant

33 Cherchi Usai’s call was heeded, as *Cabiria* was restored once in 1995 and again in 2006 (de Oliveira).

34 Likewise, as I argued in the preceding chapter, the melancholic hero of D’Annunzio’s novel *Trionfo della morte* (1894) Giorgio Aurispa figures his father’s financial ruin as a bloodletting, producing yet another figure for economic and biological loss, which is tied to Aurispa’s preoccupation with racial decline.
numbers of Italians representing all sectors of the economy settled in Tunisia, constituting the largest European community there. 35 By the time France declared Tunisia a protectorate in 1881, there were tens of thousands of Italians (primarily Sicilians) working and living there who, despite the fact that they heavily outnumbered the French, stood to become their subjects (Brondino 16–21). In the words of Franchetti, writing after the Italian invasion of Libya, “In the remaining regions around [the Mediterranean Sea], occupied by other civilized nations, Italian activity is taking place, but our compatriots are destined to be absorbed sooner or later by the dominating nationality” (“Prefazione” iv). Franchetti’s language once again betrays a concern with what might be called the liquidity of political subjection, which in turn recalls a biological, if not reproductive, model according to which active Italian laborers risked being “absorbed” by “the dominating nationality”; to what does this absorption refer if not a kind of miscegenation between Italians and those “other civilized nations” who stood to dominate them?

35 Most Italians settled in Tunis and other coastal centers such as La Goulette (or “Goletta”), Bizerte, and Sfax and worked as merchants, industrialists, doctors, lawyers, local administrators, and military personnel, as well as fishermen, farmers, and manual laborers. See: Melfa; Choate, Emigrant Nation 83–86; Marilotti; Pendola; Rainero, Les Italiens dans la Tunisie contemporaine; Rainero, L’Italia e il Nordafrica contemporaneo.
If Eritrea was figured in reproductive (and doubly gendered) language as Italy’s “first-born colony” (*colonia primogenita*), colonial proponents overwhelmingly described Libya as a site of return. D’Annunzio’s verses in praise of Libyan occupation refer to the return of a “fertile race” (*stirpe ferace*) to Italy’s “fourth shore,” upon which it would “once again deepen its ancient trace” (D’Annunzio, “La canzone d’Oltremare” in *Merope* 650). Ancient Roman architecture at sites such as Leptis Magna were presented as proof that, in the memorable words of Giovanni Pascoli: “ci fummo già” (we were already there). “We left traces that neither Berbers, Bedouins nor Turks could erase,” Pascoli claims. The “return” to Libya would accomplish what the battles of the Risorgimento had not: “Now fifty years ago, Italy was made. On the sacred fiftieth anniversary, you have also proved [...] that Italians were also made,” concludes Pascoli (*La grande proletaria si è mossa* 18; 25). This rhetoric of return was mobilized, of course, to justify even more loss. Predictably, thousands of war dead and wounded (on both sides of the conflict) were vital to accomplishing Italy’s triumphant “return” to Mediterranean Africa. If colonial rhetoricians cashed in on the affective value of loss and return, it was because it appealed to a preexisting set of societal anxieties about the circulation of Italian bodies and the land they either inhabited or sought to. As Lucia Re describes:

Fig. 4.5 Fulvio Axilla and Maciste share a laugh at their adoring female server in *Cabiria*
Some of the most jingoist accounts of the Libyan war, built on the double myth of ‘the return,’ were in fact published in Latin America to appeal to the emigrant community. The colonial war was represented as a return of Italians to the land beneficially colonized by their Roman forefathers, and the conquest of Libya by the motherland would provide the opportunity for the victims of the Italian diaspora finally to return home to ‘their sea,’ the Mediterranean. (“Italians and the Invention of Race” 34)

The territorial breach that brought about the “birth of the [Italian] nation” in Alberini’s 1905 film, coupled with the bodily rupture of the young Garibaldian soldier that concluded Alberini’s second film likewise registered such national anxieties about bodily and territorial fragmentation. Alberini’s short films dramatized how the acquisition of Rome that “completed” the territorial unification of Italy required the breach of the wall at Porta Pia; likewise, the corporeal unification of Italy (which was urgent precisely because of so much bodily loss—to emigration and battle—that preceded it) required a flesh wound. The phantasmagoric restoration of both bodies and lands, national and colonial, were thus inscribed in an economy of loss.

Colonial Drive

If anxiety shaped the Italian colonial imaginary at the turn of the century, so did desire. Following Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, and Achille Mbembe, who in distinct ways have demonstrated what is to be gained from analyzing colonialism in psychoanalytic terms, cultural studies of colonialism have dedicated volumes over the past several decades to contextualizing and theorizing desire in the colonial context. Numerous studies of French, British, Spanish, and to a lesser extent German colonialism take up real or imagined sexual and affective relationships between colonizer and colonized, between desiring subjects and their objects of desire. Many important works inspired by these readings of the admittedly more robust colonial traditions of other nation-states have been directed at the Italian case, unpacking how the colonial encounter is both structured by and structures sexual and affective bonds, dreams, fantasies, and so on. Such work has been fundamental

36 A few recent examples include: Holden and Ruppel; Yegenoglu; Young, Colonial Desire; Zantop.
37 Bringing an analysis of Italian cinema of the 1930s to bear on the colonial context
in accounting for how—far from being carried out unilaterally, with sheer force by gun-wielding white men—colonialism required an array of often intimate alliances between men and women, subjects and objects, whites and non-whites. While I have no reservations about the advantages of addressing the colonial encounter through the analytic of Freudian desire in the Italian case (one need only think of the popular tunes “Faccetta nera” and “Tripoli, bel suol d’amore” to get a sense of how Italian colonialism blatantly conflated sexual and territorial conquest) it may be more apt to think of the Italian preoccupation with loss that I have been discussing throughout this book’s chapters through Lacan’s concept of drive, as he distinguishes it from desire. While, for Lacan, desire is a dialectically (and ideologically) constituted repetitive loop that continues to produce only more of itself (“a desire to

of desire, Cecilia Boggio has gone so far as to claim, “The truth is that Italians were controlling Ethiopia only with and through cinematic fantasies” (279). While historians might take issue with such an understanding of colonial fantasy—citing, among other things, the deployment of mustard gas, which caused the violent deaths and subjection of local populations—cinema was one of the perceived “weapons” of the regime in the colonies, aimed at both local populations and colonials alike. See Ben-Ghiat, “The Italian Colonial Cinema,” *Italian Fascism’s Empire Cinema.*

Fig. 4.6 Khartalo examines Cabiria’s face before marking her forehead as “sold” in *Cabiria*
desire,” as Jodi Dean paraphrases it), the subject of drive attains enjoyment (jouissance) through repeated failure. Slavoj Žižek explains:

[A]lthough in both cases, the link between object and loss is crucial, in the case of the objet a as the object of desire, we have an object which was originally lost [...], whereas in the case of the objet a as the object of drive, the “object” is directly the loss itself—in the shift from desire to drive, we pass from the lost object to loss itself as an object. That is to say, the weird movement called “drive” is not driven by the “impossible” quest for the lost object; it is a push to directly enact the “loss”—the gap, cut, distance—itsel. (Emphasis in original. In Defense of Lost Causes 328)\(^{38}\)

As texts by Franchetti, Mantegazza, and D’Annunzio have revealed, corporeal loss, conceived of as displacement, dismemberment, decline, and/or death, was a profoundly Italian cultural preoccupation in the historical moment under consideration, particularly given the fact that, in the case of emigration, the bodies dislodged from their roots in Italian soil had, more often than not, never been “Italian” to begin with (they left the peninsula as Genoans, Lombards, Venetians, Neapolitans, and so on). The outpouring of literary depictions of such emphatically national loss—from at least as early as Ugo Foscolo (Le ultime lettere di Jacopo Ortis and Dei sepolcri), and Giacomo Leopardi (the Canti of 1818) to Edmondo De Amicis (“Dagli Appennini alle Ande” and Sull’oceano), Giovanni Pascoli (“Italy”) and Gabriele D’Annunzio (“Agli italiani degli Stati Uniti”)—served only to tighten the knot of signification, ensuring the fetishization of loss itself.\(^{39}\) Colonialism was presented as therapeutic, a paradoxical way of healing fragmentation through sacrifice and bodily mutilation. In Pascoli’s words:

Terra, mare e cielo, alpi e pianura, penisola e isole, settentrione e mezzogiorno, vi sono perfettamente fusi. Il roseo e grave alpino combatte vicino al bruno e snello siciliano, l’alto granatieri Lombardo s’affratella

\(^{38}\) Lacan’s jouissance is critical to Žižek’s notion of politics. Jodi Dean writes that, with jouissance, “he is calling our attention to the way that we all, in contemporary consumer-driven entertainment society, enjoy popular culture and the way this enjoyment binds us into the ideological formation that supports global capital” (Žižek’s Politics xvi).

\(^{39}\) Lacan’s objet petit a, on which Žižek’s reading of drive hinges, is similar to Freud’s fetish. Whereas Lacan’s objet petit a stands in for a lost object (the mother’s breast), Freud’s fetish stands in for an object that was never there in the first place (the phallic mother).
col piccolo e adusto fuciliere sardo. [...] Scorrete le liste dei morti gloriosi, dei feriti felici della loro luminosa ferita: voi avrete agio di ricordare e ripassare la geografia di questa che appunto era, tempo fa, una espressione geografica. (La grande proletaria si è mossa 15)

[Land, sea and sky, mountains and plains, peninsulas and islands, north and south, they are perfectly fused. The rosy and grave Alpine fights near the thin, brown Sicilian; the tall Lombard grenadier swears brotherhood to the small, sallow Sardinian rifleman. [...] Scan the lists of the glorious dead, of the wounded, rejoicing in their luminous wounds; you will immediately be able to review the entire geography of Italy, Italy that a short time ago existed only as a “geographical expression.” (Baranello 11)]

Territories, like the racialized bodies (the ruddy northerner, the swarthy southerner) that inhabit them, once divided, are miraculously soldered together through colonial war. In appealing to colonialism as a chance to mend these biopolitical fractures, a kind of colonial drive is activated, in which colonial defeat as a justification for colonial war ensures loss follows ever more loss. In such a rhetorical context, colonial battle wounds become a source not of pain, but of patriotic pleasure; they are “luminous.” Wounds, defeat, loss—these are the keywords of early Italian colonial discourse that entrap it in the circuit of drive. For Jodi Dean, drive is the structure of biopolitics itself, which accounts for how, in its attempt to protect life, it winds up in “monstrous reversals, as biopolitics turns into an intensified politics of death.”\textsuperscript{40} Indeed, in post-Unification Italy, Dean’s biopolitical drive played itself out in a variety of ways. For Franchetti, the “vital forces of the nation” are to nourish Italian soldiers as they defend colonial borders in Eritrea; Mantegazza’s regulatory future of global reproductive health necessitates the incineration of infants who are deemed biologically unfit; and D’Annunzio’s

\textsuperscript{40} For Dean, atomic power and racism exemplify the loop of biopolitical drive, “the turning round and reversing, the movement outward and back” that results in capture. On atomic power as an “externalized biopolitics,” she writes: “[I]tself the manifestation and result of the imperative to secure a population completely, atomic power can, if deployed, destroy the sovereign power to maintain life.” On racism as an “internalized biopolitics,” she writes: “Racism is bound up with the technologies to put biopower to work, with a State that uses race to justify its sovereign power of making life and letting live and so mobilizes death in order to strengthen the race” (“Drive as the Structure of Biopolitics” 6).
triumphant regeneration of the race at Fiume demands Italian blood be spilled and bodies mutilated in battle.
Biopolitical discourse in post-Unification Italy involves primarily physiological expressions of race; in the cultural production explored in this book, the discursive project of “making Italians” has been comprised most often of elements such as blood, organs, and vital fitness. Likewise, whiteness has either been presumed “neutral”—what Ross Chambers has called “the unexamined”—or it has been feverishly insisted upon as an indicator of physiological decline (here I refer to D’Annunzio of the preceding chapter, for whose women this constitutes an aesthetic value) or in contrast to blackness,
as Chapter One demonstrated with Enrico Persano’s description of Italians as “white men” inhabiting new colonial climates, and in Chapter Two with Mantegazza’s assignment of Italians to a higher level of psychic civilization.
than “negroes.” Often, more important than skin color has been a unique preoccupation with which bodies are reproducing, laboring, or sacrificing themselves in battle, and where—be it in the Americas, Italy’s southern regions and islands, the new colony in the Horn of Africa, the mutilated territories of the Adriatic, the lost ones of the Mediterranea, or the science-fictive capital of the United Planetary States in the year 3000, Andropolis. In Pastrone’s *Cabiria*, a peculiar, simulated blackness that is emphatically not the racist blackface of the late-nineteenth century American and British traditions instead comes into view.

Italy’s incursion into Tripolitania and Cyrenaica brought epidermal blackness (as well as Arab-ness) into sharper focus for an Italian public who, up until that point, had maintained a comfortably distant relationship to exoticized Africans gleaned primarily through the armchair adventure novels of Emilio Salgari and accounts of nineteenth-century travel writers, geographers, ethnographers, and positivist social scientists of a Lombrosian stripe. As Pinkus explains, “[B]lackness did not become a repository for any particular fantasies or cultural positions in Italy until the Libyan conquest of 1911” (29). Lucia Re has also argued that the Libyan campaign mended the fragmentary nature of Risorgimento-era Italian racial discourse, providing an ‘other’ upon which to project a unitary Italian race (“Italians and the Invention of Race” 3).

*Cabiria*’s Maciste was played by Bartolomeo Pagano, a Genoan stevedore-turned-actor, whose skin was conspicuously darkened for his role as the noble slave (Fig. 4.3).

41 Chambers’ essay, which, significantly, begins with an anecdote about his “discovery” of the Sicilian provenance of a flight-mate (“a Mediterranean” with “black hair, olive complexion, dark eyes”) from Sydney to Rome, argues that whiteness’ taken-for-grantedness can be summed up in the word “in(di)visibility.” While in a variety of contexts (Chambers mentions Australia, South Africa, and the United States) nonwhites are homogenized through plurality, whites enjoy a quality of “undividedness” and “aparadigmacity,” or neutral wholeness that enables an individualized—rather than plural and homogenized—identity.

42 In the follow-up to *Cabiria*, directed by Vincenzo Dénizot and Romano Luigi Borgnetto and titled simply *Maciste* (Itala Film, 1915), Pagano as Maciste theatrically disguises himself in minstrel-style blackface in order to rescue yet another damsel in distress. Jacqueline Reich reads this scene as confirming Maciste’s whiteness by way of highlighting the comic performativity of his blackness in both this film and, by association, in *Cabiria* (249–251). Scholarship on blackface and minstrelsy in the U.S. and Britain is vast. See: Lhamon; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft*; Pickering; Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise*; Strausbaugh.

43 In a letter to D’Annunzio, who added rhetorical flourish to Pastrone’s intertitles and
The spectacle of Maciste’s body—exposed, dark flesh and glistening muscles—was one of the primary reasons for the film’s enormous success. Pastrone and others capitalized on Maciste’s popularity, as Pagano went on through to the late 1920s to star in over twenty subsequent “Maciste” films, which would be the precursors to the wildly popular Italian “sword and sandal” or peplum films of the 1950s and 60s (Farassino, “Maciste e il paradigma divistico”; Schenk 160). If the peplum genre exploited classical antiquity in producing cinematic models of male masculinity, in Italy, this genre grew out of a circus tradition that by the mid-nineteenth-century had already begun to stage heroic gladiators alongside elephants and tigers in performing Biblical and classical texts. The development of a parallel, if not overlapping, “strongman” genre characterized by feats of athleticism and acrobatics can also be traced to Maciste’s role in Cabiria (as well as Bruto Castellani’s Ursus from Enrico Guazzoni’s 1913 colossal Quo Vadis?) (Farassino, “Anatomia del cinema muscolare” 30). While scholars have acknowledged Cabiria’s Maciste as the “father” of subsequent muscle-bound heroes such as Rambo and Conan, they have tended to focus their attention on the construction of these later heroes as necessarily white (Rushing). One feature of Maciste’s appearance that has recently gained attention by film scholars such as Giorgio Bertellini (“Colonial Autism”), Jacqueline Reich (“Slave to Fashion”), and Shelleen Greene (Equivocal Subjects 14–49) is the sudden “whitening” of Maciste—after Cabiria, Pagano’s Maciste shed his notoriety to the film’s publicity posters, Pastrone reveals a conscious decision to make the Maciste character a “mulatto,” though he provides no indication of his motivation for this choice. In her article, Antonia Lant reads Pastrone’s film as an illustration of two divergent approaches to the theoretical question (posed by Vachel Lindsay, Sergei Eisenstein, and Siegfried Kracauer) as to whether cinema was the twentieth-century reincarnation of the hieroglyph. Lant identifies two strands of thinking on the question, one originating in the U.S. and the other in Europe. The approach to the question that emerged in the U.S. was the capacity of cinema to represent the racial stratification, or perhaps more accurately polarization, that structured American life at the turn of the century. European filmmakers tended to address cinema-as-hieroglyph via their approach to three-dimensional cinematic space. Lant reminds us that cinema emerged not only at the height of western European imperialism, but also in the midst of a larger debate about spatiality in art in general, and in particular in the choice of avant-garde artists (Lant cites Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, and the cubists) to set aside, among other things, the constraints of Renaissance perspective. Orientalist visual topoi were thus dear to early European filmmakers not only for their capacity to reflect imperialist ambitions, but also for their ability to add a monumental and ornate depth to the cinematic canvas.
dark skin, “evolving” from the darkened slave in *Cabiria* to an unequivocally white idealized Italian.\(^{44}\)

Bearing in mind both Maciste’s rather abrupt whitening and the rhetorical economy of territorial and corporeal loss that pervaded this historical moment in Italy, the artificiality of Maciste’s darkness might be read within the film’s visual and ideological registers of colonial war. *Cabiria* should be situated within a biopolitical context that not only anticipates the fascist aesthetics and politics of empire, but also includes the constellation of turn-of-the-twentieth-century concerns about the biological and territorial integrity of the Italian peninsula that I have been exploring over the past several chapters. *Cabiria* is a film about the “lost,” set in the formerly Roman lands of northern Africa, whose narrative hinges on the loss and restoration of a proper Italian body—a dazzlingly white young blond-haired girl.\(^{45}\) Robert Rushing has ventriloquized the film’s underlying logic as, “Yes, perhaps colonialist exploitation is brutal, but, after all, we had to save that little girl” (173; 89 n. 28). Colonial war in the film is thus a justification for returning an Italian body to its “proper” home; this bodily loss and return parallels the loss and restoration of a colonial territory to Rome that was purportedly to be carried out as a result of Libyan conquest.

In addition to the critical attention it has received for its innovative use of the tracking shot and the monumentality of its sets, *Cabiria* is often described as a rather transparent celebration of Rome’s imperial past in a way that lays the groundwork for Mussolini’s cult of *romanità*. In the years leading up to Italy’s Libyan campaign, proponents of Italian colonialism found in imperial Rome’s dictum of “mare nostrum” a legitimating claim to the Mediterranean that

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44 Jacqueline Reich argues that Maciste’s whitening after *Cabiria* runs parallel to his passage from a bare-chested strongman to a modern, bourgeois, suited (and eventually uniformed) hero in subsequent Maciste films. For Reich, Maciste’s whitening resulted from a racialized notion of Italian nationalism that privileged the white male body, as well as the clothing that never fully masked its musculature, as the loci of virile Italian modernity, thereby setting the stage for Mussolini’s widely-documented public persona as a model of virile masculinity. Her analysis reads Maciste’s racialization in terms of emergent modes of masculinity tied to the nascent fashion industry, and thereby does not attempt to account for Maciste’s racialization in terms of the film’s subtext of colonial war, as this chapter does.

45 Alternatively, Greene reads the blonde-haired Cabiria (who is described by D’Annunzio in the intertitles “queen of all things white,” see note 46 below) as a figure for Sicily, and her marriage to the Roman Fulvio at the film’s end as the incorporation of Sicily (and by extension the entire Italian South) by the nation-state.
would reach its apex some twenty years later during the fascist dictatorship’s imperialist media blitz. As I’ve argued, Italy’s claims to the Mediterranean were born from both an inferiority complex with regard to stronger colonial powers such as Great Britain and France and the purported fragmentation of the long-exploited and feverishly laboring Italian body politic.46 Critically, both of these concerns found expression in racial terms: Italians risked racial degeneration or obliteration (as they were “absorbed” or “swallowed up” by other nationalities) and/or racial persecution (as their darkness—itself often a product of laboring in the fields or toiling in the coalmines—was interpreted in the Americas as an indication of Italian inferiority and a justification for lynching).47 In such a context, the Punic Wars were a welcome font of cinematic inspiration, as they enabled contemporary Italians to “return” to a distant and secure past—when they were the victors of a race war, rather than the vanquished—in order to reclaim an otherwise profoundly unstable present.

If the film’s narrative is often taken at face value as a thinly veiled apology for Italy’s colonial war in Libya, likewise, the film’s hero—the slave Maciste—has been described variously by Cabiria’s critics as “black,” “African,” or “Ethiopian,” thereby reducing the character’s artificial darkness to a transparent indicator of his fictional provenance.48 Cabiria was Italy’s first wide-release colonial film, and certainly one of Italy’s earliest cinematic attempts to represent blackness for a mass audience. Yet the relationship between colonial regimes of representation and the racialized body of Maciste is by no means straightforward. The film’s intertitles, which were embellished by D’Annunzio, refer quite plainly to the film’s plot as narrating a great “race war” (“lotta delle stirpi”), or the supreme conflict of two adversarial races (“conflitto supremo di due stirpi avverse”). Yet this battle between two races does not apply to Maciste, whose darkened skin coupled with his status as hero—indeed, as the man who saves Rome, embodied by

46 As one parliamentarian put it: “[The Italo-Turkish War] was necessary for Italy’s position in the Mediterranean […] and the enterprise has reaffirmed the moral unity of Italy before the civilized world” (cited in Fuller, Moderns Abroad 48). We have seen how this “moral unity” also contains a racial imperative.

47 The lynching of Italians was, of course, nowhere near as widespread as the practice of lynching African Americans in the United States. I mention it here in reference to Pascoli’s claim that “In America, [Italians] had become a bit like negroes; and, like negroes, every so often they were placed outside of the law and humanity, and they were lynched.” Pascoli uses this as a justification for Italian colonialism in his address La grande proletaria si è mossa (The Great Proletarian, She Has Risen!).

48 Prolo refers to him as the “black slave” of Fulvio Axilla.
young Cabiria—operates outside the racial logic at play among the film’s other characters that equates oriental- or Semitic-ness with the savage and decadent Carthaginians. One preliminary question that the film begs is: how were Italians to perceive Maciste’s darkened skin in such a context? In the United States, at least one viewer, African American film reviewer J. Cogdell, was pleased by the film’s positive portrayal of the “force and pride of Ethiopia” in the body of the slave-hero Maciste.\(^49\) Italian reviewers, on the other hand, seemed to have been aware of Pagano’s Genoan provenance. What were they to make, then, of his body paint and cheetah pelt? Rather than answering this question definitively through an historical reconstruction of Maciste’s popular reception, my goal in the remainder of this chapter is to read Maciste’s uncanny racialization in the context of the film’s ideological investment in the biopolitics of colonial war.

In *Cabiria*, race operates in four distinct but interrelated ways. First, as I have mentioned, race is already inscribed—be it implicitly or explicitly—in Italy’s biopolitical economy of territorial/corporeal loss/return. Next, race is staged in the film through contrasts between epidermal lightness and darkness. The third way in which race is at work in this film is in line with anti-colonial thinkers, beginning with Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, who have argued that it is impossible to understand colonial relations of power without taking seriously the degree to which race served to produce, justify, and nourish the colonial imagination on both sides of the encounter. Finally, if an analysis of colonial representation requires taking stock of how race structures its myriad manifestations, following Tom Gunning and Linda Williams, I also take seriously the interrogative injunction: “how can one not write about race and the cinema?”\(^50\) *Cabiria* thus calls out for a reading that is attentive to the racial and colonial dynamics at play in its narrative, visual, and ideological architecture.

To be sure, it is not only blackness that interests Pastrone—it is perhaps more apt to describe the film’s overall aesthetic as clamorously Orientalist

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49 According to Lant (who raises doubts as to whether Cogdell actually saw the film), African American appraisals of early cinema in the U.S. were often concerned with the amount of time-space black characters occupied in film, and Cogdell found in Maciste an exemplary black character, one whose physical presence and psychological depth were exceptional when compared to other cinematic representations of the day (218).

50 This question is posed with regard to the U.S. in Gunning 50. Gunning ties the evolution of cinematic forms to the portrayal of race in the U.S. See also Williams, who argues that race and melodrama are two essential nodes to which the entire history of American film is bound.
In addition to Maciste, several other of the film’s supporting characters are emphatically racialized, from the sly Jewish innkeeper to the eroticized Carthaginian princess Sophonisba. Still, to the extent that Cabiria may be said to participate in the larger biopolitical context that I have been discussing, the centrality of a blackened hero to this narrative of corporeal and territorial “return” requires some careful attention. If the Italian presence in Libya brought about a heightened precision with regard to Italian representations of blackness, one question that arises is whether this film itself constitutes such a rupture, or whether it can be said instead to anticipate one. In slightly different terms: does Maciste’s blackness belong to a new canon of racialized representation that emerges with this unprecedented colonial conquest, or does it instead remain squarely within the biopolitical? Is the “race war” that D’Annunzio’s intertitles celebrate indeed about dominating or obliterating an African other, or is it instead about improving the Italian race through territorial acquisition and corporeal restitution?

Karen Pinkus has traced Italian cultural preoccupations with blackness before fascism to F.T. Marinetti’s 1909 Mafarka le futuriste, roman africain (translated into Italian in 1910 as Mafarka il futurista). For Pinkus, Mafarka, as a sexually disquieting “figure of blackness” (in spite of the fact he is coded specifically as Arab, he is distinguished from white heroes insofar as he is “colored”) gave birth not only to his parthenogenetic son Gazourmah but also to a paradigm punctuated by bourgeois European concerns about licentiousness, racial mixing, and the fluidity of borders. Pinkus traces the movement of what she calls the “Mafarka paradigm,” a “narrative figure of the monstrous and taboo,” through a representative iconography of blackness, focusing her attention on racialized bodies in advertising from the 1920s and 30s and cataloguing them under typological headings such as “The Smiling Negress,” “The Silent Arab,” “The Moretto,” and so on. Though Pastrone’s film follows chronologically the release of Marinetti’s incendiary novel, it turns within a different representational orbit. Maciste is neither hypersexualized nor subservient; he takes cover under the veil of feigned darkness (his character is covered in body paint), yet he stands in patent opposition to the blackness of blackface. In a brief but revealing scene in which Maciste and his Roman master Fulvio Axilla take respite in a Carthaginian tavern, they

51 For more on the various racial hierarchies at play in the film, see Greene.
52 On parthenogenesis in Mafarka, see: “Mafarka and Son: Marinetti’s Homophobic Economics” in Spackman, Fascist Virilities 49–76.
are served by a rotund woman who is unmistakably coded as the “mammy” figure popularized during the Civil War through Jim Crow eras in the United States (Fig. 4.5).53

The jubilant server smiles coquettishly as she offers Fulvio and Maciste a carafe of wine. The ivory of her eyes and teeth appear in stark contrast to her ebony-enhanced complexion, a visual and literary topos about epidermal blackness dating back to the earliest days of the European “exploration” of Africa. As she moves her shoulders to and fro in flirtatious and accommodating rapture, Maciste turns away from her, facing the film viewer as he stifles a raucous laugh by covering his mouth with his hand. Seeing him, Fulvio too erupts with laughter, pointing at the hospitable “mammy.” The two share an amused drink, and the scene abruptly ends. This moment of conviviality between the patently white Fulvio and the darkened slave Maciste at the expense of the hostess seems to caution us against reading Maciste’s darkening as consistent with the practice of blackface. The scene stakes

53 While the popularity of the minstrel show in Italy has yet to be fully explored, Jacqueline Reich speculates that its iconography was familiar to Italian filmmakers and filmgoers at the time given the widespread popularity of American films in early twentieth-century Italy. Following Gerard Butters (7), Reich notes that an overwhelming majority of American films produced in that period featured white men in blackface rather than African American actors (250). For a discussion of minstrelsy and its origins in the popular tradition of commedia dell’arte, see Greene 27–28.
out a racial boundary between Fulvio and Maciste (as laughing subjects) on one side and the mammy character (as ridiculed object) on the other. Furthermore, Maciste’s and Fulvio’s laughter at the hostess suggests that Maciste’s comic nature is to derive from his playful strongman posturing rather than his “put on” skin color.

Maciste’s racialization fails to conform to the profile of more familiar racist types—he is neither childish and meek nor licentious and aggressive; the figure would certainly not appear in Pinkus’ “catalogue of abjection.” Indeed, film scholar Shelleen Greene has recently added an additional interpretative layer to Maciste’s racialization in the film: as a figure of the “mixed-race subject [who figures] the post-unification division of Italy into north and south […], two racially distinct regions” (17). Greene continues, “[In] Cabiria, by way of the mixed-race Maciste, external colonization of Africa helped resolve […] the racial otherness of Italy’s southern populations” (20). Another alternative to reading Maciste’s darkness as a mere symptom of his other- or African-ness, would be to situate it within the film’s economy of light. Fire is used both as a recurring thematic and a lighting technique, and the racialization of the film’s principal characters is carried out through the visual topoi of stark contrasts between epidermal lightness and darkness.
Drawing from studies of how the photographic media work through and with light to construct and reproduce whiteness, our first question is: how might *Cabiria*’s use of fire shed light on Maciste’s darkness?54

The explosion of Mount Etna—an example of the film’s use of fire as a lighting source and of its pyrotechnic monumentality—sets the story in motion, causing Cabiria’s home to go up in flames and placing her in the hands of her servant Croessa. From the outset, Cabiria is associated with both fire and light—viewers learn from the typically D’Annunzian intertitle that her name “carries the genius of the industrious flame,” and her flowing white gowns and the pallor of her face are foregrounded in nearly all frames in which she appears.55 Cabiria and Croessa are captured by Phoenician pirates, who bring them to Carthage, where they are sold to the High Priest Khartalo, who selects Cabiria for sacrifice to the fire god Moloch (Fig. 4.6).

Croessa narrowly escapes imprisonment, and happens upon the Roman Fulvio Axilla, who, along with his loyal slave Maciste, is in Carthage on a reconnaissance mission for the Roman army. Croessa enlists their help in the rescue of Cabiria from the sacrificial pyre. Maciste heroically wrests Cabiria from the flaming mouth of Moloch, and the adventures of Fulvio, Maciste, and Cabiria ensue—first comic and eventually tragic. Cabiria eventually returns into enemy hands. Viewers meet her again some ten years later as

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54 In his reading of the racial unconscious of American *film noir*, Eric Lott suggests that both the moral “darkness” or “shadiness” traditionally thematized within the genre and the use of chiaroscuro are structured by a racial logic (“The Whiteness of Film Noir”). Two classic studies of whiteness and the photographic media are Winston; Dyer.

55 Giovanni Pastrone allegedly paid D’Annunzio 50,000 lire for his role in *Cabiria*. Though Pastrone gave all authorial credit to D’Annunzio in advertisements and press releases for the film, D’Annunzio’s actual contribution was limited to the embellishment of the intertitles, which were authored by Pastrone. In addition to adding poetic flourish to Pastrone’s text, D’Annunzio is responsible for the selection of the names of (among others) the film’s most celebrated protagonists, Cabiria and Maciste (Prolo 68). Critics agree that Pastrone’s solicitation of D’Annunzio was an essential component of his theatrical publicity campaign for the film, which included—in addition to bombastic announcements of the film to come in major periodicals such as the *Corriere della sera*—an aerial flyover in Rome to announce the film’s premier in April 1914. The plane was piloted by Giovanni Vildner, who was famous for his Trieste–Rome raid (Chimirri 95). For more on D’Annunzio’s role in the making of *Cabiria*, see: Alovisio, “Il film che visse due volte”; Faccioli; Cherchi Usai, “Lettere di Giovanni Pastrone a Gabriele D’Annunzio,” “Lettere di Gabriele D’Annunzio a Giovanni Pastrone,” and “Lettere di Ildebrando Pizzetti a Gabriele D’Annunzio,” in *Giovanni Pastrone* 71–97.
the slave Elissa, “queen of all things white and of perfect silences.” Maciste comes to her rescue once again, and the film’s triumphant concluding scene shows Cabiria, Fulvio, and Maciste aboard a ship bound for Rome. Cabiria-the-character, insofar as she is endowed with whiteness, light, and/or fire is thus a figure for cinema. This play is made evident by Pastrone’s decision (following D’Annunzio’s suggestion) to change the title of his masterpiece from *Il romanzo del fuoco* to *Cabiria*—thus metonymically fusing film and protagonist (Chimirri 33; Prolo 68).

In this reductive plot summary, I have bracketed descriptions of the spectacular scenes depicting historic Roman and Carthaginian battles, though many of the film’s claims to groundbreaking visual effects rest upon these scenes. The historical epic was one of the most successful genres in the “golden years” of Italian cinema, during which other significant films celebrating Roman primacy, such as Enrico Guazzoni’s *Quo Vadis?* (Cines, 1913) and Giovanni Enrico Vidali’s *Spartaco* (Spartacus, Pasquali & Co, 1913), also enjoyed success. While the conventions of the genre and the possibilities for spectacular visual effects doubtless explain at least in part

1 As in the preceding chapter on D’Annunzio, my references to whiteness here are based on the language of D’Annunzio’s intertitles, which refer explicitly to Elissa/Cabiria as “queen of all things white” (Chimirri 111). In Pastrone’s scenario for *Cabiria* (which D’Annunzio embellished for the film’s intertitles), Elissa is referred to as “the blonde slave” (Alovisio and Barbera 45–52; Alovisio).

2 A maxim of Federico Fellini’s: “Films are light” (Malkiewicz 1). Cinema has long been hailed as the medium of light. In his seminal work on whiteness and the photographic media, Richard Dyer explains the racial stakes of lighting, as he argues that “a culture of light” has been inextricable from the construction of whiteness (82–144). In film studies, lighting has been studied as a technical part of filmmaking; as part of film’s industrial and technological history (i.e.: the transition from gas to electric light); as the material condition for film itself (light projected onto a screen), and/or for how lighting lends depth to a film’s ideological content. Classic studies of how film lighting structures or reveals ideology include: Baxter; Kracauer. For a survey of a range of studies of film and light, see the introduction to Guerin. “Light” also comes up in the philosophy of cinema, most notably within the work of Gilles Deleuze. For Deleuze, “light” encompasses the field of the visible, or the seeable (as distinct from the affirmable, or the “sayable”). On the other hand, “[For Deleuze], the cinema offers a medium in which to grasp the fluctuating relationship of the articulable and visible. [...] The cinema gradually discovers ways to proliferate disjunctions between the visible and the articulable, thereby catalyzing a kind of thought that diverges from strict determination.” Cinema thus reconfigures such regimes of truth by resisting the over-determination of the image by the field of discourse (Flaxman 25–26).

3 There is some discrepancy about what constitutes Italian film’s “golden years.” For
Pastrone’s affection for the depiction of bellicose maneuvers in *Cabiria*, in addition, the film stages what Paul Virilio (1984) has identified as a “logistics of military perception” that emerged during World War I. Virilio situates his reading of the complicity between military modes of seeing and cinematic perception in World War I because during that war, as he puts it: “a supply of images would become the equivalent of an ammunition supply” (1). Indeed, in the early years of Italian cinema, the “seventh art” was lauded by critics for its capacity to complete the task of Italian unification; the motion picture would be able to finish the work that the battles of the Risorgimento and Italy’s early colonial incursions had struggled to accomplish: restoring Italy’s status among western European powers and ensuring its territorial and biological wholeness (Rhodes).

As Virilio argues, during the years of World War I, innovations in aerial reconnaissance and surveillance photography and film were to gain ground in ways that would have lasting effects—not only on the wartime perception of the infantry and officers for whom such technologies were strategically crucial, but also on the civilian photographic media. From the darkness of the trench, the soldier’s gaze illuminated his target thanks to the visual prosthetic of his rifle’s telescopic sight (Bishop and Phillips). Yet, as Virilio points out, not only were soldiers “actors in a bloody conflict” that saw the replacement of hand-to-hand combat with distance fighting requiring not only optical prosthetics such as riflescopes, but also rapid-fire weapons. “[Soldiers] were also the first spectators of a pyrotechnic fairy-play whose magical, spectacular nature some of them [Ernst Junger, Apollinaire, and Marinetti] could already recognize” (87–88). In Virilio’s analogy between war and cinema, the soldier who both produces and consumes the explosive spectacle of war from the cover of darkness may be considered to parallel, at varying moments, the cinematic cameraman, projectionist, and/or viewer. It is here—and not within the “transparency” of the film’s imperialist aesthetics—that I would like to situate Maciste’s darkness.

In fact, Pastrone’s film may well be anticipating Virilio’s thesis by drawing an explicit connection between wartime and cinematic technologies. In a scene depicting Rome’s defeat by Carthaginian ally Syracuse, Pastrone stages Archimedes’ legendary discovery of burning mirrors that are eventually able
to set fire to the Roman fleet (Figs. 4.7 and 4.8). Like the projectionist, Archimedes directs his mirrors at a blank screen; the spectacle that results from his experiment in long-range assault is a flame—a flame which delights both Archimedes-as-projectionist/ spectator and as pyro-strategist. Once projected onto his proto-cinematic screen, the image reveals itself as a kind of weaponry, capable of setting fire to Roman battleships from a distance. Yet, like Cabiria-the-character (a figure for cinema), Archimedes’ flaming image is threatened to be consumed by the very conditions of its existence. Cabiria’s name invokes her mythical origins—born from fire—and the narrative turns on her repeated capture and near sacrifice to the flaming mouth of Moloch (this scene was the one that caught the attention of the artists who designed the film’s publicity posters). Fire thus both generates the cinematic spectacle and threatens to destroy it—let’s not forget the missing original of Cabiria-the-film, rumored to have perished, like so many other reels of nitrocellulose, in a fire. Returning for a moment to Virilio, “Just as the nitrocellulose that went into film stock was also used for the production of explosives, so the artilleryman’s motto was the same as the cameraman’s: lighting reveals everything” (20).

Maciste’s artificial darkness therefore has something to do with his ability not only to see, but to produce, through contrast, the light that the film thematizes through fire and the whiteness of its protagonist. It is critical to note here that Cabiria’s final rescue hinges on Maciste’s ability to recognize Cabiria in the slave Elissa after ten years have passed. Significantly, while Fulvio and Maciste’s characters are both visibly unmarked by the passage of time, it is not Cabiria-as-Elissa who recognizes her heroic liberators from years past. It is Maciste who is given a privileged capacity for visual perception.
From the first shot in which he appears, he is quite conspicuously aligned with the gaze (Fig. 4.9). While his master, the Roman Fulvio, is the official “spy,” sent to Carthage on a covert reconnaissance mission, the shot in Fig. 4.9 establishes Maciste as the one who surveys and sights, while Fulvio occupies the background of the frame, fumbling somewhat impotently with his map and local guide.

Moving ahead to the final rescue scenes of the older Cabiria: Maciste and Fulvio are taken hostage, and Cabiria takes pity on the prisoners (whom, again, she does not recognize) (Fig. 4.10). Here, the composition of the shot—a blinding sunlight viewed from within the aperture in the dungeon wall—gives way to a vision of Cabiria, thus exemplifying the link between the title character and cinematic projection. In a subsequent scene, viewers again see Maciste under the cover of darkness as he spots the older Cabiria and attempts a second heroic capture (Fig. 4.11). These shots recall the architecture of cinema: Maciste occupies enclosed, quadrangular spaces, while the spectacle—Cabiria—moves past before his eyes. In both of these critical scenes that play on the recognition and rescue of the title character, Maciste is framed in spaces that might be likened to the projection room. In addition, Maciste is likened to the cinematic spectator who views the flaming filmic spectacle from a position of darkness: he is the one who spots Cabiria, and eventually enables her return to Rome. His positioning as spectator brings us back to Virilio’s formulation: the soldier as both a choreographer of the spectacle of war (through his “lighting up” of the battlefield with rapid-fire
Biopolitics and Colonial Drive

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guns) and as a consumer of that spectacle. Aligning Maciste-the-spectator with the soldier on the battlefield allows us to conceive of his body paint and his cheetah pelt as a kind of camouflage. Yet, like the soldier, Maciste not only consumes the scene before him: he also creates it. In both instances, he emerges from his confinement in the projection room, eventually joining Cabiria in the frame; his darkened skin thus amplifies Cabiria's spectacular whiteness. In this way, Maciste's darkness becomes part of the spectacle of the film's dazzling light play. Furthermore, Pastrone's equation of Cabiria with fire, whiteness, and light is read alongside his interest in Archimedes' burning mirrors, a further possible link between Cabiria-the-film, or cinema in general, and war weaponry. Critically, a black and white racial logic is already implicit in this equation, suggesting that with increasing frequency, particularly under fascism, constructing whiteness would be one of the primary cinematic battles to be waged on the Italian screen (Ben-Ghiat, "Envisioning Modernity"; Fascist Modernities).

How to reconcile this techno-theoretical reading of race in this film with the biopolitical context of colonial war? If, as Pastrone suggests, and as Mussolini would claim a decade later, “cinema is the [regime’s] strongest weapon,” and Maciste is a soldier-spectator, what kind of war are viewers watching in Cabiria? Unlike the films that documented the Italian invasion of Libya by Luca Comerio, the film is displaced geographically and chronologically from the event of colonial war. Furthermore, as Giorgio Bertellini has argued, the Maciste serials and other strongman films produced alongside them, include “no real violence: confrontations, duels, and battles are somewhat harmless and even cartoonish” ("Colonial Autism" 261). Bertellini’s connection between these “giganti buoni” ("good giants") and the myth of “Italiani, brava gente” (Italians as good colonizers) is certainly well taken. No blood is spilled in Cabiria; the epic battle scenes appear more to showcase the necessarily distant grandeur of the cinematic set than to recruit viewers for the bodily sacrifice of combat (as did Alberini’s 1909 ode to the Garibaldian boy-soldier with which this chapter began).

Biopolitics reveals how the film stages war as productive rather than

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5 Likewise, scholars have acknowledged the “strongmen” as precursors to fascist masculinity (Renzi).

6 For Bertellini, such distant grandeur would result from the film’s “antiquarian solipsism,” which he argues was the primary mode of Italian film from 1905 to the early 1910s ("Colonial Autism" 258–259).
destructive, as life-affirming rather than life-negating.\(^7\) It demonstrates how the film’s ideological investments lie less in advocating colonial war as taking place between two adversarial races, and instead presents a version of war that is productive: lands and bodies once lost are now returned to their rightful place, and life is affirmed. Indeed, Pascoli’s famed speech advocating Libyan invasion, *La grande proletaria si è mossa* (*The Great Proletarian, She Has Risen!*), singles out one of the heroic peasant-soldiers hailed in the speech who “is forced to bring death but wishes to bring nothing but life” (Baranello 14).\(^8\) He continues:

[Noi...l’Italia in guerra], combattiamo e spargiamo sangue, e in prima il nostro, non per disertare ma per coltivare, non per inselvatichire e corrompere ma per umanare e incivilire, non per asserire ma per liberare. Il fatto nostro non è quello dei Turchi. La nostra è dunque [...] guerra non offensiva ma difensiva. Noi difendiamo gli uomini e il loro diritto di alimentarsi e vestirsi con prodotti della terra da loro lavorata, contro esseri che parte della terra necessaria al genere umano tutto, sequestrano per sé [...] senza coltivarla, togliendo pane, cibi, vesti, case, all’intera collettività che ne abbisogna. (18)

[[We are an Italy at war] who fight[s] and shed[s] blood, foremost our own, not to devastate, but to cultivate; not to degenerate or to corrupt, but to humanize and civilize; not to enslave, but to liberate. Our reality is not that of the Turks. Our war is therefore a defensive act, not an offensive one, despite how our individual strategic and tactical actions may appear. We defend our men and their right to feed and clothe themselves with the products of the land worked by their own hands, against others who seize for themselves and close off, without cultivating it, land that is necessary and workable for all men, taking bread, foodstuffs, clothes and homes from the greater collective that has need of them.] (12)

The targets of this “defensive” war of cultivation, civilization, and liberation were of course (and as we first saw in Franchetti), Italians themselves, who

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\(^7\) For Hardt and Negri, in today’s global biopolitical order, war is a “permanent social relation” that “brings death, but also, paradoxically, must produce life” (*Multitude* 12–13).

\(^8\) Unless otherwise noted, I have used Baranello’s English translation of Pascoli’s speech.
stood to gain the capacity to feed and clothe themselves through agricultural work. Furthermore, while the targets of defense are “uomini,” or “men” (mankind), the offending group (the Ottomans) are “esseri,” or “beings.” This is precisely how biopolitics functions: in this case, the “men” have privileged access to rights and a political life, while the “beings” do not. This is only confirmed by the fact that Italians’ status as “men” grant them entry into “the entire collectivity” (or the common), while the “beings” are presumably excluded from it and therefore subject to death.

In *Cabiria*, Pastrone picks up Pascoli’s logic, which uses Roman primacy to justify Libyan conquest as a “defensive” or life-affirming war. Like Pascoli, Pastrone’s narrative stages the Italian invasion of Libya as a “return” to its Roman past as an imperial Mediterranean power. This territorial return is paralleled by the corporeal return of young Cabiria, against the backdrop of what D’Annunzio’s intertitles explicitly term “the supreme conflict of two adversarial races.” And yet, thanks to the cartoonishness of the violence, as well as the “put on” character of Maciste’s race, colonial war in this film appears to be not so much about eliminating an enemy race, but, true to biopolitical form but, instead, about improving the (Italian) race. Maciste’s uncanny darkening—in addition to thematicizing the capacity for the emergent medium to represent a colonial confrontation that would be played out in ever more black-and-white terms, particularly throughout the 1930s—seems also to remind us that what Italy stands to gain in Libya is ultimately self-referential. If colonial war is productive, a way of adding in territorial terms what has been “lost” in corporeal ones, Maciste’s racialization serves to signal Italy’s initial colonizing project not so much as a confrontation with an African “other,” but instead Italy’s ongoing struggle with versions of itself. 9 Bertellini and Greene have recently drawn similar conclusions, albeit through different routes, about the meaning of Maciste’s racialized body. 10 In addition to what I described above as the

9 Giorgio Bertellini’s reading of Maciste’s racialization as “autistic” and/or “solipsistic” arrives at a similar conclusion, though I am less interested in the necessity of the African “other” for Italian racial discourse, and have focused instead on Italian colonialism’s self-referential nature within the frame of biopolitics. In addition, my reading places more emphasis upon the imagined territorial parameters of Italian racial discourse. Similarly, John David Rhodes has suggested that the monumentality of *Cabiria* stages a parallel between the conquest of cinematic space and that of colonial terrain (unpublished essay titled “Making Room for Empire: *Cabiria* and the Production of Cinematic Space” and cited in Lant 222, n. 17).

10 Shelleen Greene in her reading of Maciste as a “mixed race” Italian focuses on his
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technological function of Maciste’s darkness (to produce, through contrast, the whiteness of Cabiria, and, following the chain of signification that I have been assembling, that of all “lost” Italians), the film’s indebtedness to Pascoli’s rhetoric enables us to add still more depth to our reading of Maciste’s racialization. The uncanniness of Maciste’s racial coding—he is (to Italian viewers, at least) at once recognizably Italian and artificially darkened—renders the racial stakes of Libyan conquest visible. It betrays a logic much like Pascoli’s, according to which Italians are bound for racial persecution if they continue to emigrate toward the Americas, rather than to Libyan shores: “In America, they became a bit like the Negroes, these compatriots of the man who discovered her. And like the Negroes, they were sometimes outlawed and dehumanized; they were lynched” (8). Maciste’s darkened skin makes oblique reference to these hard-laboring Italians on whom Pascoli’s Libyan rhetoric depends. The working masses, figured by Pascoli with the gendered “grande proletaria,” darkened by toiling in the coalmines or laboring under a harsh sun, are the rhetorical lynchpins of his famed address. With Libyan conquest, Italians thus stood only to gain, not only territorially and economically, but also biologically. Returned to their “proper” place (for Pascoli, a planned, rather than a “spontaneous,” colony) and delivered from racial persecution, their blood would nourish the soil that in turn would nourish them.

Let us not forget that Bartolomeo Pagano, whose strongman posturing in Cabiria helped launch an international genre, was discovered by casting scouts while unloading cargo ships on the docks of Genoa. Indeed, a 1914 Corriere della sera review of Cabiria declared:

Il pubblico dei grandi e dei piccolo fraternizza per così dire con Maciste; ne ammira la superba bellezza delle forme erculee che lo fanno un raro campione della nostra razza (egli venne scoperto a Genova, dove esercitava l’umile e nobile mestiere di scaricatore nel porto), lo applaude, si addolora della sua prigionia, gode della sua liberazione, sorride con lui, distacca la sua nera figura dallo schermo e se la fa amica, portandola poi con sé nella

figuring as a stand-in for southern Italian laborers (14–49).

Vittorio Martinelli constructs a narrative of physical decline around the figure of Pagano as he notes that by 1928, after an incredibly productive acting career, Pagano had retreated to his Villa Maciste in order to convalesce after bouts of paratyphoid fever and arthritis had reduced him to an incredibly thin and frail man confined to a wheelchair (10).
memoria, per raccontarne le prodezze ed esaltarne la bella naturalezza dell’azione. (Corriere della sera, “Maciste in persona al Lirico”\(^\text{12}\))

[Whether young or old, the audience befriends Maciste; they admire the superb beauty of his Herculean form which makes him a rare champion of our race (he was discovered in Genoa, where he practiced the humble and noble profession of dock worker), they applaud him, feel the agony of his imprisonment, rejoice in his liberation, smile with him, detach his black figure from the screen and turn [it] into a friendly companion, always accessible in their imagination, in order to tell stories about his deeds and glorify the natural beauty of his action.] (Reich 245)

For Reich, this passage indicates that in the case of Maciste, “color is, as personified by the figure of Maciste, superceded by the national” (245). Reading the film’s treatment of race in the context of Italian colonial rhetoric and biopolitics, we have uncovered an even more nuanced understanding of this critic’s notion of “our race.” Reading symptomatically this reviewer’s conflation of the character Maciste and the actor Pagano, one finds an example of how Maciste is to be consumed visually as belonging not to some other, “African race,” but to “[the Italian] race” on the basis of his once laboring (and now comically mighty) body. Indeed, in describing the widespread appeal Pagano’s Maciste had to bourgeois and working-class audiences alike, Luca Cottini writes that one of the reasons for his popularity was precisely his comic “tendency to solve problems by using the strength of his arms.” Furthermore, for Cottini, what granted Pagano’s Maciste such lasting popularity in the wake of Cabiria was precisely his recognizability as the embodiment of the ideal Italian man.

**Fusing the Symbolic Landscape**

Biopolitics enables us to conceive of Italian racial discourse before fascism in “productive” terms, or at the very least, in terms of an economy of loss and restoration and/or return, rather than simply an economy of racial superiority and inferiority. Since well before the culminating battles of the Risorgimento, Italy experienced its national “rebirth” as the end of an

\(^\text{12}\) I am grateful to Jacqueline Reich for providing me the original reference and source.
enduring occupation by foreign (primarily French and Austrian) oppressors; as we have seen, this sense of inferiority with regard to Europe, as well as the particularly Italian experience of emigration, became critical components of early colonial rhetoric and the rhetorics of loss that subtended it, and later, of D’Annunzio’s imperialist poetics at Fiume. By way of conclusion, I’d like to turn for a moment to two films made in the wake of *Cabiria* that illustrate the persistence and evolution of some of the themes I have been discussing, particularly: Maciste’s racialization in light of the film’s conflation of territorial and corporeal restitution, and the black, white, and green of Libyan conquest, or, the inextricability of agricultural rhetoric from Italian racial discourse. In addition, both films continue where *Cabiria* left off, the first, Pastrone’s *Maciste alpino* (*Maciste the Alpine Soldier, Itala Film, 1916*), by following Maciste to contested northeastern lands, and the second, Carmine Gallone’s *Scipione l’Africano* (*Scipio the African, Ente Nazionale Industrie Cinematografiche, 1937*), by narrating the Punic Wars from the perspective of Scipio Africanus (who plays only a minor role in *Cabiria*). *Maciste alpino* was filmed during World War I and marked lift-off in Maciste’s (Pagano’s) ascent to serial celebrity as a “strong (white) man.” *Scipione l’Africano*, produced by the regime at the height of its racist mania (sandwiched chronologically between the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia and the drafting of the racial laws in 1938) takes another cinematic stab at the Punic Wars with quite a different approach to racialization than *Cabiria*.

In my discussion of *Cabiria* above, I focused upon the film’s rhetorical investment in Rome’s territorial “loss” of Mediterranean Africa by following Maciste, Cabiria, and Fulvio through their adventures in Carthage. One of the scenes I did not discuss, shot on location in the Graian Alps of Piedmont, depicts Hannibal’s historic crossing of the Alps. Back in Carthage, Fulvio receives word of the “impending danger for his far-away fatherland [*patria*],” and quickly retreats for Rome. (This is where *Scipione l’Africano* will pick up the
story in 1937, as it begins with Hannibal’s oppressive Roman reign). In addition to staging a territorial loss, *Cabiria* thus also stages a territorial breach whose contemporary correlative is to be found in the “unredeemed” lands of Trieste, Trent, and the South Tyrol held by Austria-Hungary (the basis for these claims lay, of course, in the peoples who inhabited these lands, whom irredentisti such as D’Annunzio claimed were not only linguistically but racially Italian). This is precisely where *Maciste alpino*, the far lesser known follow-up to the hugely successful *Cabiria*, takes place. The film stages yet another gendered corporeal loss—the daughter of a Count whom Maciste has befriended—and the plot is driven by Maciste’s capricious yet lighthearted feats of strength against Austrian soldiers in his attempts to rescue the maiden. Critically, by *Maciste alpino*, Maciste has shed his blackened skin and instead dons the unmistakable feathered cap of the Alpine soldier (Fig. 4.12).

If we were to map the geographies of these first two Maciste films alongside how they stage the racialization of their hero, we have one celebrating the return of Italy’s Mediterranean “fourth shore” and featuring a blackened hero (whose uncanny racialization serves more to underscore Italian “whiteness” than to represent any consistent figure of “blackness”), followed directly by a film whose subtext addresses Italy’s struggle with the Austro-Hungarian Empire over the “unredeemed” Italian territories. Maciste’s transition to unequivocal whiteness (recall the “rosy-cheeked and solemn Alpine soldier” in contrast to the “the dark and slender Sicilian” of Pascolian colonial poetics) thus occurs alongside a therapeutic circumscription of “missing” Italian territories to the Northeast and the South—remember Pascoli’s claim in *La grande proletaria*, “Earth, sea and sky, alps and plains, peninsula and islands, North and South are perfectly fused” (Baranello 11, emphasis mine), as well as D’Annunzio’s aeronautical vision that seamlessly linked not only Libya to Eritrea and Somalia, but also to the battlefields of World War I and the unredeemed territories of Istria (including Fiume). That cinema has played a pivotal role in evoking a symbolic landscape that is either national or colonial (though, as I have been arguing, one is never entirely immune from the other) is clear, then, from the earliest examples of Italian film, which interpellated
their viewers through visual (and invisible) logics of territorial and corporeal wounds and healing.  

Shifting our focus two decades forward to the propaganda film *Scipione l’Africano*, we have a significant refashioning of the racial logics at play in *Cabiria*. Mussolini’s obsession with *romanità* finds full expression in this expensive regime-financed cinematic colossus that narrates Scipio’s triumphant departure for Carthage and his battle with Hannibal in the North African desert. Produced during the regime’s Ethiopian campaign, *Scipione*—like *Cabiria*—stages an analogy between past and present through an even more dubious geographic displacement: ancient Carthage stands in for modern Ethiopia, as the clash is referred to as occurring between “Italy” and “Africa.” The film thus depicts the battle between Rome and Carthage in brashly black and white terms: during the epic Battle of Zama scenes, Hannibal (who is portrayed in the film following standard iconography: with dark skin and hair, a curly beard and an eye patch), flanked by black African extras dressed as Carthaginian soldiers, rides a black horse, while Scipione rides a starkly white one (Fig. 4.13).

The drama of these climactic battle scenes is heightened through repeated cuts between reciprocally charging black and white horses. The film opens with a shot of a battlefield full of Roman war dead and an exhortation to “Avenge *[vendicare]*) the dead of Canne,” which would have resonated at the time in Italian ears with pro-colonial cries to “Avenge the dead of Adwa.” Its conclusion closes the chain of signification with which it began: the final scenes begin with a battlefield full of Carthaginian war dead, as a Roman soldier rises and proclaims, “The dead of Canne are avenged! Hannibal is defeated!” Voices ring out over victorious legions boarding ships returning to Rome. “Carthage is destroyed! Rome is saved!” The final scene depicts Scipio at home once again, surrounded by his servants, wife, and children. Scipio appears in the foreground (his wife and infant are visible in the background), and dips his hand into a bushel of grain, solemnly proclaiming, “The grain is good, and tomorrow, with the help of the gods, we will plant it” (“Buon grano. E domani, con l’aiuto degli dei, comincerà la semina.”) He turns to join his family in the shot, and his young son enters the frame, approaching his father for an affectionate pat on the head. Reclamation, in at least two senses—in terms of avenging bodily and territorial loss, as well as in terms of the regime’s plans for agricultural self-sufficiency as exemplified

13 On how symbolic and material landscapes inform cinematic practice, and vice-versa, see Harper and Rayner. See also Denis Cosgrove’s seminal study.
by their well-funded projects of *bonifica*—thus becomes the node around which the film’s ideo-logic turns. The negation of life, or avenging the dead of Canne (Adwa) by sacrificing Romans, killing Carthaginians, and wresting their land from Hannibal’s grip is thus a necessary counterpart to the productive, or life-affirming, agricultural project of *bonifica*. From the play between whiteness and darkness in *Cabiria* over a backdrop of ancient loss and gain, the regime’s film picks up where *Cabiria* left off not only thematically (by following another narrative thread through the Punic Wars), but also ideologically. In this later period, the inextricability of life from politics would give way to an ever more explicit subjection of the former to the latter, thereby increasing mechanisms of colonial drive and activating immunitary apparatuses in ways that are still emerging from the shadows and coming to light.

14 The film was shot on location in the “reclaimed” lands of the Pontine Marshes, illustrating the convergence between internal and external colonization during the regime (Caprotti, “Scipio Africanus”; *Mussolini’s Cities*). On the fascist new towns, see: Fuller, “Tradition as a Means to the End of Tradition” 178; “Wherever You Go, There You Are.” David Horn ties *bonifica* to both human bodies (i.e. the regime’s demographic policies) and to agricultural new towns, which the regime cast as a fertile alternative to the sterile city (*Social Bodies* 95–122).