

CREATIVITY AND DIVERSITY: A DIALOGUE BETWEEN ACADEMIC WORK AND THE PERFORMING ARTS

ELENA BELLINA
(University of Rochester)

I have always found creativity an effective tool to address overlooked historical issues of injustice, incarceration, and trauma. By creativity I mean the cultural and artistic production resulting from the dialogue between scholarly work and the performing arts at time of constraint. I believe that turning archival records and life writing about different forms of social and racialised discrimination into musical and theatrical adaptations can facilitate the understanding of complex historical dynamics. It makes it easier to process and empathise with individual and collective experiences while presenting them from different viewpoints. My teaching years at the Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester have reinforced my belief that scholarly research benefits from intertwining with diverse artistic productions as they bring scholars, performers, and students together around important societal issues.

I have investigated Italian military captivity in Africa during World War II for several years with a special focus on the cultural and artistic production by Italian prisoners of war (POWs) detained in British camps in East Africa, particularly in Kenya. When I first started my research from an Italian Studies perspective, I was surprised by the limited historical records on these men available at Italian state archives. While I could easily access folders on fascist colonial East Africa at the Central State Archive in Rome, I could only locate a few war pension request forms and repatriation documents related to Italian POWs interned in Allied camps in Africa between 1940 and 1947. I quickly came to terms with Italy's choice to erase this part of its past from its post-war official historical narrative, as Moore and Fedorowich underline (2002). I thus turned to life writing by men who lived through

this form of military captivity to fill in the gaps about their long years as POWs and gathered official records at archives in the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Switzerland.

The unpublished war diaries and memoirs that I was able to identify at the National Diary Archive in Pieve Santo Stefano, Italy, revealed intriguing historical details and accounts that immediately broadened my approach. In their writings, Italian captives made constant reference to the importance of the performing arts in the forms of musical and theatre performances as ways to escape the trauma of captivity and deal with their captors. I was aware of the positioning problems that I had to face while analysing Italian servicemen captured in African countries that the Fascist regime invaded and occupied. The prisoners' pages helped me avoid simplistic analyses by pointing to intellectual and artistic production as key instruments through which we can make sense of such intricate historical experience.

How could servicemen who were raised under fascism cope with war imprisonment in Kenya through opera productions and theatre? They collectively enacted their fears on stage by singing Ettore Petrolini's *Gastone* or Pietro Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* in front of indigenous Kikuyu camp guards and British officers. Music and theatre allowed Italian POWs to come to terms with their defeat, regain some respectability in confinement, and interact with their British and native African captors. Through the performing arts, they fought off the depersonalising routine of captivity and shared knowledge with their guards. Italian POWs had to redefine themselves: from colonisers, they became prisoners kept in remote areas of British colonial Africa guarded by Kikuyus.

Italian captives worked inside and outside their camps, thus becoming a visible presence in East Africa that forced me to question the inadequacy of my Western approach: I needed to devote more space to native Kenyans' perspectives on Italian POWs next to the British and Italian viewpoints that I had adopted up to that moment. Consequently, I started to investigate how Italians were portrayed by East African native people in leading Kenyan newspapers and magazines, as well as in historiographical studies. By examining such records, I realised that Italian POWs represented the largest white group ever present on Kenyan soil (Ochieng, 1985) and that they interacted with local populations in ways I had not imagined. Italians learned how to cope

with native animals and vegetation from the Kikuyu people as they built roads for the British Empire. They worked for the Nairobi National Museum and passed their musical knowledge onto children in Nairobi while performing for the King's African Rifle soldiers, thus leaving behind handmade musical instruments that are still part of the Nairobi Orchestra's collection (Moss, 2010). They erected a chapel and a monument that Kenya recognised as national landmarks in 2011 to memorialise the Italian presence in the Rift Valley.

My personal research path has convinced me of the need to teach my undergraduate students that cultural and artistic production is the result of a dialogue between different artistic forms and cultural traditions. In a school of music, I can easily make students grasp how Giovanni Verga's reinvention of Sicilian culture in *Cavalleria Rusticana* was so successful that his short story was granted three separate lives as a literary piece, a theatre play, and an opera by Pietro Mascagni at the turn of the twentieth century. The leap of faith that students need to take to understand how Italian POWs could find this opera cathartic as they performed it in a camp at the foot of Mount Kenya in 1942, is often too big. Or so I thought until one year ago, when a student of Armenian descent asked me for mentorship for an honour lecture recital in which he intended to discuss the Armenian genocide by turning parts of his Turkish Armenian great-grandmother's genocide memoir into a cycle of classical songs. He believed that my work on Italian POWs' life writing in Africa could help him approach the historical complexity of his own path through his *nana's* childhood memories. As we talked about the importance of positioning ourselves while using life writing to address historical traumatic events, we both realised that the dialogue between academic research and the performing arts remains one of the most powerful means to challenge people's understanding of historical forms of injustice and trauma.

References

- Moore, B. & Fedorowich, K. 2002 *The British Empire and its Italian Prisoners of War, 1940-1947*. New York: Palgrave.

- Moss, R. 2010 *Quavers near the Equator: Recollections of the Nairobi Orchestra and Some Associated Ensembles*. Nairobi: Richard W. Moss Publisher.
- Ochieng, W. 1985 *A History of Kenya*. Nairobi: Macmillan Kenya.