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ARTICLE

'ADWA' AND THE ORAL TURN

REIMAGINING MUSEUM AND ARCHIVAL PRACTICES BEYOND VISUAL HEGEMONY

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One day, I stepped into the dimly lit exhibition *Sight* at the Wellcome Collection in London. Surrounded by displays of diverse “world views”, I was captivated by the atmosphere. But as I explored, an unexpected realization hit me: I had never questioned the central role of the tool through which I was producing knowledge: the eye. At that time, I had already discovered black feminist theorist Tina Campt¹ and her method of listening to images and I was already applying it to my PhD research which investigated how we can imagine new ontologies and ethical practices that allow us to engage with colonial ethnographic photography portraying Black female bodies. This investigation departed from the colonial photographic archive of the former Colonial Museum of Rome² (also known as IslAO archive), and although Campt’s methodology was offering a way to look beyond the white gaze, I still had not questioned the foundation of how I was generating knowledge, nor did I realize that I was excluding other epistemologies based on different senses.

This paper emerged from a concern that, even within well-intentioned decolonial efforts and the dissemination of critiques of ocular-centrism, colonial visualities are still sometimes reproduced. For this reason, in the following paragraphs, I would like to focus on the risks associated with the use of visual material in specific environments such as museums and archives. I will begin by examining how visual perception, though often regarded as objective³ by non-specialist audiences, is deeply influenced by cultural and ideological frameworks.

I'll introduce the concept of visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff's⁴ "white sight," outlining how it inherently biases and racializes our understanding of visual information, with specific attention to the distortions introduced by photography and museum exhibitions. I will then present an alternative approach grounded in the work of Camp and other Black and African thinkers, and I will advocate for orality as a complementary methodology capable of challenging the objectification inherent in photography and museum practices. In my opinion this approach offers a way to engage with visual culture beyond the limitations of sight alone, opening up more relational and regenerative ways of interpreting difficult heritage. I will then offer a concrete example from the ISIAO photographic archive,⁵ developed as part of my practice-based PhD research, titled *Adwa*—a project yet to be exhibited but envisioned for a museum space—which will illustrate practically how this oral methodology can foster decolonial interpretations⁶ of historical photographs.

CULTURAL BIASES OF SIGHT AND WHITE SIGHT

As philosopher David Kleinberg-Levin⁷ reminds us, in Euro-American⁸ societies, vision is so central and regarded as a primary cognitive process that its importance is reflected in language, with expressions such as 'perspective,' 'insight,' 'speculation,' and 'point of view'—making sight the dominant metaphor for understanding and processing the world. However, as scholars such as Foster,⁹ Mirzoeff¹⁰ and again Kleinberg-Levin,¹¹ illustrate, sight is neither an objective nor a neutral way of engaging with the world, nor—as sensory anthropology¹² and Indigenous methodologies¹³ remind us—is it the only means of producing knowledge. Rather, it is socially constructed—shaped by the cultural context in which we live, influencing both what we see and how we interpret it.

I found art historian Hal Foster's¹⁴ distinction between "vision" and "visuality" very helpful to clarify its constructed nature: *vision*, the biological act of seeing, involves raw sensory data processed by the brain. *Visuality*, on the other hand, refers to the complex social, historical, and ideological contexts that shape our interpretation of what we see. According to Foster,¹⁵ *visuality* is therefore the mechanism through which our cultural background frames sight, making it a mediated experience.

This brings us to the concept of sight bias, which refers to the cultural and ideological distortions embedded in acts of seeing—distortions that are amplified by the widespread belief that vision provides an impartial reflection of reality. In colonial contexts, sight bias supported white supremacist ideologies by framing non-European people through a Eurocentric lens. This bias can make certain ideologies invisible to viewers, naturalizing them instead. Mirzoeff¹⁶ describes this visual logic as 'white sight'—a mode of seeing through which vision is produced that sustains racial hierarchies, legitimizes colonial dominance, and dehumanizes those represented. He illustrates this through artistic depictions of plantations, which portray figures of power, such as the plantation overseer, in aesthetically pleasing or celebratory ways, thereby obscuring the violence and subjugation embedded in the plantation system.

Photography as a metaphor *par excellence* of the “objectivity” of vision is a particularly significant example of sight bias. In the next paragraph, I will explain how photographs have contributed to the social construction of *white sight* and how the mere exhibition without a critical apparatus can perpetuate these biases.

PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL FOR *WHITE SIGHT*

As is now widely recognized, photography has historically contributed to the social construction of *white sight* in several ways. First, the very nature of the photographic apparatus is objectifying—or “predatory,” as photography theorist Susan Sontag¹⁷ describes it. In my opinion, the objectifying nature of the white gaze—reproduced through photography and thus linking the photographic apparatus to racism—becomes even clearer when we consider the reflections of Nigerian sociologist and gender scholar Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí.¹⁸ She highlights how, in Euro-American societies, the rational mind has historically been dissociated from the body. She explains “until recently, the history of Western societies has been presented as a documentation of rational thought in which ideas are framed as the agents of history. If bodies appear at all, they are articulated as the debased side of human nature.”¹⁹ She demonstrates how the body will determine the social role of specific groups while the thinkers themselves are bodyless. As such, this supposedly “rational” and disembodied vision becomes a tool for social differentiation and hierarchy.

Secondly, photography has perpetuated white sight through the images it has produced, tying the camera to a history of colonialism and reinforcing racial hierarchies as both Mirzoeff²⁰ and media theorist Jonathan Beller²¹ note. On this front one significant instance is early anthropological photography, which—amplified by the influence of positivism²²—actively shaped a racialized visual reality by constructing an essentialized image of the “other” as “exotic” or “primitive” (as demonstrated by Pinney,²³ Edwards,²⁴ Hight and Sampson²⁵ and—in Italy—Palma²⁶). A particularly illustrative case is anthropometric photography and the work by Victorian polymath Francis Galton:²⁷ by ostensibly “measuring” “human” differences—while notably excluding white subjects—these photographic practices have fostered pseudo-scientific legitimacy to racist ideologies, linking physical appearance to socially constructed hierarchies and contributing to a larger visual regime that positioned non-white people as subordinate or alien.

Finally, photography has contributed to the construction of *white sight* through the interrelated mechanisms of invisibility and desensitization: first, similarly to other visual media—as illustrated above by Mirzoeff in the plantation example—photography can render violent ideologies invisible while marginalizing Black subjects and their cultural specificities. Second, photography’s reliance on repetition amplifies this effect by fostering desensitization to Black suffering through the continual circulation of images that normalize power hierarchies and racial subjugation. Scholars such as Gaia Giuliani,²⁸ Susan Sontag,²⁹ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay³⁰ have explored how the repetition inherent in photography reinforces

structures of dominance and the de-sensibilization towards the suffering of others.

In my opinion, such biases continue to shape institutional contexts today, where museums and archives often present images of non-European peoples and their artifacts through dominant visual frameworks. These displays frequently obscure the visual hierarchies and colonial power structures they perpetuate, thereby reinforcing the distortions produced by *white sight*. While photography has long served as a tool of *white sight*, museums—functioning as visual regimes in their own right—not only adopt photographic practices but also contribute to *white sight* through their distinct visual strategies. In the following paragraph, I will examine how these mechanisms operate within museums to construct and sustain *white sight*.

THE MUSEUM AS A TOOL FOR *WHITE SIGHT*

Having explored how photography functions as a visual technology that reinforces and creates *white sight*, I now turn to museums - another powerful medium through which racial hierarchies have been constructed and sustained through sight. I will also explore the ongoing challenges museums face in dismantling these ingrained practices.

To ground this discussion, I will begin with a specific example from the Italian context: the Colonial Museum of Rome (1923–1971). As described by historians Beatrice Falcucci³¹ and Francesca Gandolfo,³² this museum—conceived as a visual extension of the Ministry of the Colonies—was created to promote colonial ventures and encourage investment. Despite its overtly propagandistic function, it shares with more “scientific” anthropological museums a visual strategy that constructs racist narratives. In both cases, displays juxtapose “civilized” figures—such as scientists or explorers—with distorted and abstract representations of Africans as “primitive.” These visual oppositions served to reinforce notions of European superiority and, in the Italian case, to legitimize colonial occupation by portraying Italians as the rightful heirs of the Roman Empire. However, it is not *just* the exhibition narrative that creates these racialized ideas; it is also the very act of exhibiting—and therefore watching—that reinforces this narrative. As cultural theorist and sociologist Tony Bennett³³ argues, in *The Birth of the Museum*, museums were designed to control knowledge through visibility. He explains that this control is exercised by the action of ‘seeing without being seen’ making a parallel with Foucault’s idea of the panopticon, a structure that promotes a one-sided, controlling gaze. This unidirectional act of watching, in my opinion is inherently violent as it renders the “white” audience conceptually and physically invisible to the observed while simultaneously hyper-visualizing it, similarly to photography objectifying nature.

Moreover, museum displays—in my view—often reproduce a key mechanism of white sight described by Mirzoeff:³⁴ the screen. By placing objects in glass cases or on plinths, they create a physical and perceptual distance between the viewer and the object. The screen—both literal and metaphorical—functions as a distancing device that renders the act of seeing “objective”, while simultaneously

objectifying what is seen. Mirzoeff³⁵ explains that this process transforms what is being observed—whether a person or an object—into abstract data; I would add that it effectively strips them of their environmental and human relationships. If we combine the search for “objectivity” and “universality,” which underpins the function of the screen/separation, with poet, and philosopher Édouard Glissant’s notion of “transparency”—a way of seeing the “Other” that demands full exposure and control in the name of understanding—then the act of viewing in museums then emerges as a profoundly violent and racialized form of perception.

If the very act of looking is already violent in a museum context where other cultures are exhibited—and if colonial photography, by its nature, content and history, carries violence—then it becomes clear why I find the uncritical and unframed display of photographs from colonial times deeply problematic. An example of this is the exhibition *Il Cono d’Ombra* (The Shadow Cone): *Decolonial Narratives of Overseas* at Castel Nuovo in Naples in 2022. This exhibition seeks to critically confront and reframe Italy’s neglected colonial legacy by reactivating the original site of a 1930s fascist colonial exhibition, while offering space for African artists to challenge archival authority and construct alternative narratives of memory, reparation, and resistance.³⁶ At the entrance of the 2022 exhibition, visitors were presented with two photo-murals of the 1930s Naples exhibition, which as mentioned above took place in the same venue. The photographs depict live camels surrounded by a curious crowd, while on another wall—yet still within view—two Ethiopians or Eritreans are shown standing guard beneath the triumphal arch of Castel Nuovo. These photographs are used as a static backdrop to create atmosphere without providing context or addressing the problematic content. In addition to the uncritical use of these photographs, the visual grammar—quite frighteningly—closely resembles that of the Colonial Museum, where animals and Africans were frequently paired in ways that reinforced demeaning, hierarchical ideas.³⁷

This example shows how both exhibitions and photographs are part of a visual technology that is inherently violent that excludes more relational way of interpreting items. If curators choose to include such images, they must proceed with extreme caution: the images should be critically reframed, their composition disrupted—e.g., through altered tones or colours—and their original documentary and aesthetic functions subverted to clearly expose them for what they are: problematic objects.³⁸

A compelling—though not flawless—example of this shift is the Portuguese exhibition *Desconstruir o Colonialismo, Descolonizar o Imaginário* at the Museu Nacional de Etnologia in Lisbon (29 Oct 2024–2 Nov 2025), which, like the Naples show, used contemporary artworks as counternarratives—but not only that. Colonial visual materials (photographs, newspaper clippings, documents) were shown in small, fragmented, non-aestheticized forms, often colour-shifted, and accompanied by extensive written commentary that directly addressed the ideologies they represent. In addition, colonial myths were countered by factual

narratives created by African artifacts and their written interpretation, while contemporary works offered a temporal grounding that resisted the abstract, timeless framing often imposed on African identities.

If sight is a problematic means of producing knowledge in relation to colonial history and collections, orality may provide a safer alternative—one that could open up more relational, listening-based ways of producing knowledge. In the following paragraphs, I will examine how orality functions as such an alternative and present a practical example developed during my PhD research.

ORALITY AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO SIGHT

The examples above illustrate that vision—and actions like photography and exhibiting—cannot be understood as neutral acts. From this perspective, the study of African oral traditions—such as those described by historian and philosopher Amadou Hampâté Bâ³⁹—and Black sonic experiences, as explored by contemporary art curator and biotechnologist Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung,⁴⁰ offer a possible alternative for interpreting museums and engaging with colonial visual archives. These approaches foreground relational, embodied, and situated ways of knowing that challenge the distancing and objectifying logic of visibility discussed above. In the case of my specific practice-based Ph.D, the above reflections related to *white sight* and study of these different epistemologies led me to develop a non-sight methodology to engage with the colonial photographic collection of the former Colonial Museum of Rome (IsIAO collection) which I applied in the creation of the oral piece *Adwa*. In this research in practice, I have found that orality constitutes an effective alternative to white sight primarily by (1) harnessing the regenerative force inherent in the frequencies of the word as described by Hampâté Bâ⁴¹ and (2) utilizing the capacity of the oral to produce and process embodied knowledge to transmit difficult information and therefore ultimately nurture social change. In the following paragraphs I will introduce these concepts.

REGENERATIVE FORCE OF THE WORD A PROCESS OF CONNECTION AND EMBODIED KNOWLEDGE

Speech and vibration, as defined in African oral traditions, represent a form of generative and embodied knowledge—one that does not merely convey information, but activates energy, resonance, and transformation. Within the Bambara tradition as articulated by Hampâté Bâ,⁴² the word (*kuma*) is not just a medium of communication but a manifestation of a cosmic force: “knowledge is energy... is the reality.”⁴³ In this epistemology, knowledge is not external and abstract but immanent, vibrational, and corporeal—produced and received through the total engagement of the body.

This conception of knowledge breaks radically from the Western ocular-centric tradition, where understanding is tied to observation, categorization, and visual evidence as I have introduced in the first part of this article. Instead, *knowledge*

as *vibration*—through the sonic, oral, and affective—is a relational experience: it is *felt* as much as it is “known.” As anthropologist Kathryn Linn Geurts⁴⁴ shows in the Anlo context, the word is *force*; it physically impacts both speaker and listener, collapsing the boundary between subject and object. The morpheme *fo* (“to strike, beat, blow”) underscores this notion: words do not just signify—they *do*.

Moreover, the sound of words is not only a form of knowledge transmitted through vibrations that resonate and create relational experiences, but also an immersive somatic encounter that connects us through the act of listening. Ndikung⁴⁵ argues that sound goes beyond its mere auditory qualities; it has the power to weave together histories that challenge dominant narratives and create both physical and emotional spaces. Storytelling as defined by Ndikung, is an embodied, sonic practice through which histories, knowledge, and memory are transmitted across generations—encoded not only in language but in the physical and affective resonance of sound within the body. This means that storytelling—as the word in Hampâté Bâ—is not just about sharing information; it is an embodied experience that shapes our understanding of time and space, influencing both individual and collective memory. Also, when stories are recited, they resonate deeply within our bodies, impacting how we feel and perceive our surroundings.

The act of storytelling as described by Ndikung as oral and embodied independently from the content, especially when it conveys intimacy and shared humanity, engages our senses and emotions, making it a powerful medium for forging connections and understanding our place within broader historical and cultural contexts. In the case of museums, I believe that this methodology—the oral—can be very powerful, as museums could be essentially storytellers (not to be confused with the written or visual narratives typical of museum displays). Instead of relying on visual material, they can draw inspiration from orality—as exemplified by my oral museum interpretation *Adwa*, which I will describe briefly in the following paragraphs. In my opinion, orality offers museums the opportunity not just to implement “inclusive” measures—like integrating non-Western epistemologies and counter-narratives—but to actively foster agency and support liberatory practices. It also provides a particularly effective means of unlearning *white sight* and conveying knowledge about historical wrongdoing and white responsibility, thereby contributing to processes of social awareness and transformation.

PROCESSING SOMATIC KNOWLEDGE THROUGH ORALITY TRANSMITTING DIFFICULT INFORMATION AND FOSTERING CHANGE

In the previous paragraph, I briefly introduced the concept of speech as a vibrational, regenerative force and storytelling as an embodied, sonic practice. I described how the sound of words can be experienced as somatic knowledge, felt within the body. According to critical communication scholars Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown⁴⁶ quoting feminist philosopher Alexis Shotwell,⁴⁷ somatic feeling also known as *implicit understanding*, whether it is practical, kinetic, somatic, or affective, is

"knowledge" in that it informs and precedes abstract meaning and *propositional knowledge* namely a knowledge that is verbalized and explicit. But this raises further questions: what kind of knowledge is being transmitted through these vibrations, and how does this form of knowledge relate to heritage shaped by racist ideologies?

According to Sekimoto and Brown⁴⁸ our bodies serve as sites where power dynamics and ideological norms manifest which means that somatic and affective responses—*implicit understanding*—expose embedded social practices and belief systems, such as racism. Therefore, to reply to the above question, implicit knowledge reveal the traumas and social constructs deeply embedded within us which are held in both black and white bodies as trauma therapist and author of the influential book *My Grandmother's Hands*, Resmaa Menakem⁴⁹ points out. Therefore, as Sekimoto and Brown⁵⁰ explain, if the body is a site where ideological norms and power relations are embedded then somatic perception is a means of revealing and potentially interrupting those structures. Therefore, to reply to the second question, this means that museums could address racial issue embedded in the colonial heritage not only at a cognitive level but also a more profound somatic level—an approach I sought to explore in my oral interpretation of *Adwa* by bringing awareness to these somatic reactions in the script of this oral interpretation.

However, in a European context—where systemic racism manifests through police brutality, exclusionary migration policies, and widespread discrimination,⁵¹ efforts to confront racialized histories may provoke guilt, denial, or defensiveness, rather than empathy. Menakem⁵² offers a method for addressing the negative emotions and embodied effects of racialized trauma by focusing on calming the nervous system and working through the body's stored responses. Central to this approach is the activation of the so-called *vagus* nerve, a key component of the parasympathetic nervous system, which regulates internal bodily states and can influence both sensation and mood. Menakem highlights the role of humming as a way to activate the *vagus* nerve and this opens a connection between Menakem's calming technique and the regenerative power of spoken word as a means of engaging the *vagus* nerve and fostering positive feeling. My oral interpretation *Adwa* draws on the oral epistemologies outlined here and the connection between somatic awareness and the healing power of speech as I will introduce in the following paragraphs.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PIECE ADWA

To illustrate how the theories and concepts discussed above can shape a museum interpretation of a colonial object, I will briefly⁵³ describe the final output of my practice-based Ph.D. research: the oral interpretation *Adwa*. This piece is an intimate, autoethnographic dialogue recited with a colonial photograph from the ISIAO collection. The image belongs to a shelf-mark dedicated to women (ISIAO. ERITREA.19.A.I.I), depicted in varying ways and for differing purposes (from anthropological "documentation" to erotic photographs). The specific photograph

addressed in *Adwa* is a staged portrait by Aldo Baratti, a settler-photographer documented in Asmara from 1922 till 1939⁵⁴ but probably active before and after these dates. It depicts a young teenager portrayed as “Black Venus”, part of a series produced for the clandestine pornographic market in metropolitan Italy.⁵⁵

My connection with the girl—a process also mirrored in the autobiographical writing of *Adwa*—began through Camp’s methodology of *Listening to Images*⁵⁶, which also inspired the use of autoethnographic writing as well as the structure of the piece as a fictional dialogue addressed to her. I chose the name *Adwa* both in reference to the historic Ethiopian victory over Italian forces in 1896 and as an homage to the novel *Adwa* by Italo-Somali novelist Igiaba Scego.

My autoethnographic approach engages both the girl in the photograph and the audience, seeking to create a transparent curatorial narrative in which my interpretative choices are made explicit, while also cultivating an empathic connection between the audience, the subject, and myself. Autoethnography, as explained by qualitative researcher Carolyn Ellis and communication theorist Arthur Bochner,⁵⁷ “is an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural.” Autoethnography, in this sense, along with the influence of Black feminist academics such as Tina Camp, Saidiya Hartman and poet Audre Lorde,⁵⁸ was central to the development of *Adwa*. The *Adwa* piece took the form of an oral dialogue—not a letter, as the written format presented in this paper might suggest—as a means of fostering empathy, which not only counters the objectification of the image but also expresses agency and care. As in Lorde’s work, care is understood as a form of inner knowledge and dialogue that allows us to relate to one another, and through which, I would add, the previously mentioned somatic knowledge can be meaningfully understood.

Camp’s theory of listening to images builds on a broader understanding of sound, particularly through its most fundamental element: frequency. She argues that sound involves more than auditory perception—it is a deeply embodied experience, felt as vibration, especially at the level of infrasound (below 20 Hz). Her focus on the haptic qualities of sound enabled me to re-engage with archival images through bodily awareness. By closely observing details in the photograph—such as muscular tension around the mouth or eyes—and tuning in to my own bodily reactions, I began to uncover what Camp describes as the “expressiveness of quiet”⁵⁹ and “the generative dimensions of static.” This embodied way of reading the image revealed overlooked narratives and resisted the distancing effect imposed by white visibility. Camp’s approach allowed me to dismantle what Mirzoeff and Sontag describe as the “screen” or “distance” separating viewer and subject, offering instead a mode of engagement that reveals what *white sight* had long obscured.

To further resist the objectification inherent in the photograph, I turned to black feminist scholar Saidiya Hartman’s⁶⁰ method of *critical fabulation*: critical fabulation or “speculative history, close narration, and documentary poetics”⁶¹ is based on the idea of filling the gaps of the archive by imagining alternative

possibilities. With no biographical information about the girl—labelled only as “Baria Girl” in the archive—I used Hartman’s methodology to creatively respond to the silences within the colonial archive. *Critical fabulation* enabled me to envision the girl not as an anonymous subject of the colonial gaze, but as a real person—someone with relationships, a community, and a history. Although these imagined scenarios were not included explicitly in the final script—so as to avoid speaking over or for a pain I have not lived—their presence shaped the emotional and narrative structure of the piece, allowing the empathetic connection I sought to emerge. Through this intimate and imaginative lens, I also examined the construction of the eroticization of the black female body, the imposition of fascist racial laws, the subsequent monstrification of that body, and the enduring effects of these visual and political regimes alongside curatorial concerns such as consent, as articulated by photographer critical theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay.⁶² Ultimately, the oral piece highlights how pre-war visual representations established a racial hierarchy and promotes the idea of a white Italian identity, which still persist today.

While Camp’s methodology fosters connection with the photograph’s subject, and Hartman’s method and autoethnography enabled me to weave together historical research and empathic insight in the development of the script, the meaning and the scope of this oral piece was shaped by oral epistemology. This meant that the interpretative text was not to be printed but to be recorded giving attention to the rhythmic aspect of speech. Inspired by Hampâté Bâ and Ndikung emphasis on oral epistemologies, I shaped the work around tone, cadence, and the vibrational resonance of the voice. These sonic qualities aimed to create a communal, immersive storytelling experience. To deepen this rhythm, I alternated prose with a chorus inspired by writer Maaza Mengiste’s novel *The Shadow King*.⁶³ In this context, listening to images becomes a holistic experience that moves beyond intellectual comprehension, allowing knowledge to be registered somatically as an affective response. However, I felt that for this approach to be both ethical and reparative, I needed to engage deeply with Black and African literature, and to enter into meaningful dialogue with Afro-descendant creatives. These exchanges were essential in beginning a process of unlearning—one that is still ongoing—and in reshaping my relationship with the archive.

Drawing on Menakem’s trauma therapy principles, I also integrated somatic awareness into the piece. Menakem emphasizes the importance of addressing and processing racialized trauma through bodily sensation, particularly via activation of the *vagus* nerve mentioned above. To amplify the reparative auditory effects of the words, in *Adwa*, I incorporated 528 Hz frequencies, which have been proven to stimulate the *vagus* nerve and promote a sense of calm even with short exposure⁶⁴ and therefore influence also our emotions.⁶⁵

Through this synthesis of theory, embodiment, and sound, *Adwa* invites a multisensory and emotionally grounded engagement with the colonial archive. It offers a counter-narrative to the distancing effects of the gaze, fostering instead a space of shared affect, presence, and healing. This approach aligns this work

with the field's call for museums to engage meaningfully with the past, present, and future, emphasizing care as defined by decolonial museologists Wayne Modest and Claudia Augustat.⁶⁶ care as crucial strategies for navigating uncertain environments or reshaping societies beyond current political frameworks. They argue that museums, as spaces for care, actively engage in ethical responsibilities toward all beings, human and non-human. The *Adwa* piece significantly contributes to this field by providing a methodology aimed at enhancing our comprehension of racism's role in the histories of planetary precarity and anti-Black culture.

The *Adwa* piece is intended to be exhibited in a museum environment in the near future, to be experienced not only by a Black audience but, more crucially, by a white audience. This focus on white audiences (or on people who have internalised *white sight*) stems from the fact that they are participants in epistemological systems shaping museums and archives that perpetuate white supremacy. As a person of mixed background who has also internalised racist constructions, I believe it is particularly important for white audiences to engage in the process of unlearning these structures, as this is essential for fostering meaningful change and creating the conditions for collective liberation.

The *Adwa* piece offers a curatorial methodology that can be applied to other collections and contexts by curators seeking to engage critically with colonial heritage. Grounded in historical analysis and processes of unlearning, *Adwa*—and similar approaches rooted in performance⁶⁷ and orality⁶⁸—can support decolonial curatorial work across institutions, enabling others to reframe collections through relational and anti-extractive methods. A brief written abstract of *Adwa* can offer a concrete example of this methodology, though it cannot replicate the embodied experience conveyed through the specific frequency used and the sound of my voice which, together, animate the piece.

I will call you "Adwa"
like the woman in a book by the famous writer Igiaba Scego.
I hope you like this name,
I hope you have the same strong resilience yet human fragility
as this fictional woman.
I cannot bear that you have no name,
that you are just defined by a label
"Baria girl"
like you were just a specimen.

By the time I decided to speak to you,
months have passed since my last visit to you.
That day, with a light heart,
to choose whom I would write to
I opened IsIAO.ERITREA.19.A.I.I, a shelf-mark dedicated to women....
At that time, I had already decided to dialogue with some of you in an attempt to
understand you better....
to listen to your silent resilience.

*I had not previously been upset or even affected by this material -
I felt it really didn't concern me as an individual... as a woman.
However, that day my eyes did not roam the surface of
the images as usual;
something had changed in me.
Some time ago I had read Tina Campt's 'Listening to Images' (2017) which
discusses how photographs have 'resonant frequencies'.
Muscle tensions betray an intimate and silent reactivity that reveals a subjectivity
long ignored by white scholars.
These tensions, which can be interpreted as sounds,
allowed me to see
... to listen to all of you for the first time.*

*I realized that my detachment had been the result of the so-called
"objective" modernist culture
a symptom of a white racist gaze.
Now, I feel ashamed to look at you all
I am violating your privacy,
your humanity...
I feel a heaviness in my chest at seeing you all so
exposed,
analyzed,
exhibited.
But I don't want to avoid this pain.
it is a sign that I am beginning to be more aware of the constructions
of white supremacy and patriarchy*

CHORUS

Am I awakening?

(...)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this research underscores the critical need to challenge the dominant visual-centric paradigms that have historically shaped the interpretation and presentation of colonial photographic archives in museums. Through an exploration of alternative methodologies—such as Campt's approach of "listening to images" and Hampâté Bâ's insights on the power of orality—I have demonstrated that knowledge production is deeply embedded in our sensory experiences, which extend beyond the visual. The racist constructions inherent in colonial photography and the harmful legacy of *white sight* require more than just surface-level critique; they demand a fundamental shift in how we engage with such materials.

By emphasizing the role of embodied knowledge, sound, and orality, the proposed methodology offers a deeper, more empathetic engagement with the colonial archive. It moves beyond the objectifying gaze that museums

and photographic practices often reinforce, proposing an approach that fosters connection and repair. This sensory-based framework not only confronts the violence perpetuated by colonial images but also opens pathways to new forms of curatorial practice that center care, ethical engagement, and reparative justice.

In the case of the IslAO archive, this approach reveals how the physical and emotional distance created by traditional visual methods perpetuates colonial power dynamics. Instead, by “listening” to these images and allowing bodily sensations and sound to guide interpretation, we are able to create a space for epistemic and aesthetic restitution. The integration of oral traditions in museum practices holds the potential to address racial issues more profoundly, breaking down hierarchies of power and fostering a more holistic understanding of history and culture.

Ultimately, this oral interpretation *Adwa* advocates for a decolonial curatorial practice that shifts from a logic of ownership and control to one of listening,⁶⁹ care, and relational engagement. This approach aligns with the broader call for museums to act as spaces of restitution and transformation, not just through the return of objects, but through a more profound rethinking of how we produce and share knowledge. By prioritizing orality, embodiment, and multisensory engagement, museums can become sites of healing, reflection, and social change, where the narratives of the oppressed are heard, felt, and truly understood.

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1 Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Duke University Press, 2017).

2 The Colonial Museum was a propaganda institution officially established in 1923, just one year after Mussolini came to power. It was closed in 1971. For more information about this institution and the difference with other similar, but more "scientific" Italian institution see Francesca Gandolfo, *Il Museo coloniale di Roma (1904–1971): Fra le zebre nel paese dell'olio di ricino*. (Gangemi Editore, 2014).

3 David Kleinberg-Levin extensively discusses how the supposed objectivity of visual perception has been questioned throughout the philosophical tradition. See *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

4 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *White Sight: Visual Politics and Practices of Whiteness* (MIT Press, 2023).

5 The term "IsIAO collections" (Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente – Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient) refers in this context to the holdings of the former Colonial Museum (1923–1971). However, the IsIAO collections also include items acquired by the Italian Institute for Africa (later renamed IsIAO), which was permanently closed in 2016. The collection comprises anthropological and archaeological artifacts, documents, military items, architectural scale models, photographs, visual art, and philatelic materials—

amounting to a total of approximately 11,000 items, according to ISIAO records. Since 2017, legal ownership of these collections has been transferred from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Ministry of Culture (formerly Ministry of Heritage), and they are currently administered by the Museum of Civilizations (Museo delle Civiltà, MuCiv) in Rome, formerly known as the Luigi Pigorini National Museum of Prehistory and Ethnography.

6 By *museum interpretation*, I am referring to Freeman Tilden's definition: "an educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience and by illustrative media." Although this is a broad definition that includes experiential and sensory engagement, in practice, the most common form of interpretation used by art and anthropological museums is written—such as object labels, wall texts, and catalog entries. For the above citation see: Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 3rd ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 8.

7 David Kleinberg-Levin, ed., *Sites of Vision: The Discursive Construction of Sight in the History of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999).

8 The term 'Euro-American' is used instead of 'Western' to avoid reinforcing the dichotomy that normalizes the centrality of white culture originally produced in Europe. However, the author acknowledges the limitations of this term, as 'America' also includes First Nations and Indigenous populations, as well as political and geographical regions that have been, and continue to be, subject to Western neocolonial influence.

9 Foster, *Vision and Visuality*.

10 Mirzoeff, *White Sight*.

11 Kleinberg-Levin, *Sites of Vision*.

12 Some authors in this field: Kathryn Linn Geurts, *Culture and the Senses: Embodiment, Identity, and Well-Being in an African Community*. (University of California Press, 2003); Mark Harris, ed., *Ways of Knowing: New Approaches in the Anthropology of Knowledge and Learning*. (Berghahn Books, 2018); David Howes, "Embodiment and Senses," in *The Routledge Companion to Sound Studies*, ed. Michael Bull (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019).

13 Some authors in this field: Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 2nd ed. (London: Zed Books, 2012; first published 1999). or Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020).

14 Foster, *Vision and Visuality*.

15 Ibid.

16 Mirzoeff, *White Sight*.

17 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (London: Penguin Classics, 2008; originally published 1977).

18 Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, "Visualizing the Body: Western Theories and African Subjects," in *African Gender Studies: A Reader*, ed. Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2005), 3–21.

19 Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, "Visualizing the Body", 4.

20 Ibid.

21 Jonathan Beller, "Camera Obscura After All: The Racist Writing with Light," in *The Message Is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital* (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 99–114, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1x07z9t.9>.

22 Lorraine Daston and Peter L. Galison, *Objectivity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

23 Christopher Pinney, "The Parallel Histories of Anthropology and Photography," in *Anthropology and Photography, 1860–1920*, ed. Elizabeth Edwards (Yale University Press, 1992); Christopher Pinney, *Photography and Anthropology* (London: Reaktion, 2011); Christopher Pinney and Nicolas Peterson, eds., *Photography's Other Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

24 Elizabeth Edwards, "Photographic 'Types': The Pursuit of Method," *Visual Anthropology* 3, no. 2–3 (1990): 235–258; Elizabeth Edwards, *Anthropology and Photography*,

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- 25 Eleanor M. Hight and Gary D. Sampson, eds., *Colonialist Photography: Imag(in)ing Race and Place* (London: Routledge, 2002).
- 26 Ilvana Palma, "Mirror with a Memory? La confezione dell'immagine coloniale," in *L'Impero nel cassetto: L'Italia coloniale tra album privati e archivi pubblici*, ed. Adolfo Mignemi, Paolo Bertella Farsetti, and Alessandro Triulzi (Milan: Mimesis, 2013), 81–107.S
- 27 Efram Sera–Shriar, "Anthropometric portraiture and Victorian anthropology: Situating Francis Galton's photographic work in the late 1870s". *History of Science* 53, no. 2 (2015) 155-179. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0073275315580953>.
- 28 Gaia Giuliani, *Monsters, Catastrophes and the Anthropocene: A Postcolonial Critique*. (Routledge, 2020).
- 29 Susan Sontag, "Regarding the pain of others." *Diogene* 201, no. 1 (2003): 127-139.
- 30 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*. (Verso, 2019).
- 31 Beatrice Falcucci, "A Repository of Colonial Intervisuality and Memory: The Colonial Museum in Rome," *Revue d'histoire culturelle* 6 (2023), published July 28, 2023, accessed May 18, 2024, <http://journals.openedition.org/rhc/5651>; <https://doi.org/10.4000/rhc.5651>.
- 32 Francesca Gandolfo, *Il Museo coloniale di Roma (1904–1971): Fra le zebre nel paese dell'olio di ricino*. (Gangemi Editore, 2014).
- 33 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. (Routledge, 2013).
- 34 Mirzoeff, *White Sight*.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 FM Centro per l'Arte Contemporanea, "Il Cono d'Ombra / The Shadow Cone: Decolonial Narratives of Overseas," accessed May 12, 2025, <https://www.fmcca.it/en/21/eve/77-il-cono-da-ombra-the-shadow-cone-decolonial-narratives-of-overseas/>.
- 37 Beatrice Falcucci, "A Repository of Colonial Intervisuality and Memory".
- 38 For examples of this see Elizabeth Edwards and Sigrid Lien, eds., *Uncertain Images: Museums and the Work of Photographs* (Ashgate Publishing, 2014).
- 39 Amadou Hampâté Bâ, *The Living Tradition*, in *UNESCO General History of Africa, Volume I: Methodology and African Prehistory*, ed. Joseph Ki-Zerbo (London: Heinemann, 1981).
- 40 Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, *In a While or Two We Will Find the Tone: Essays and Proposals, Curatorial Concepts, and Critiques*. (Archive Books, 2020).
- 41 Bâ, "The Living Tradition."
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid., 168.
- 44 Kathryn Linn Geurts, "On Embodied Consciousness in Anlo-Ewe Worlds: A cultural phenomenology of the fetal position." *Ethnography* 4, no. 3 (2003), 363-395.
- 45 Ndikung, *In a While or Two We Will Find the Tone*.
- 46 Sachi Sekimoto and Christopher Brown, *Race and the Senses: The Felt Politics of Racial Embodiment* (Routledge, 2020), 46.
- 47 Alexis Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding*. (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), quoted in Sekimoto and Brown, *Race and the Senses*.
- 48 Sekimoto, Sachi, and Christopher Brown. *Race and the Senses*.
- 49 Resmaa Menakem, *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Central Recovery Press, 2017).
- 50 Sekimoto and Brown. *Race and the Senses*.
- 51 European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA), *Being Black in the EU: Summary* (2019), https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2019-being-black-in-the-eu-summary_en.pdf (accessed April 2023).

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- 53 A more in-depth description of the process behind the *Adwa* piece will be published in Nuala Morse, ed., *Careful Museology: Global Perspectives on Care Work in the Museum* (London and New York: Routledge, forthcoming 2026).
- 54 For more information on this photographer: Luigi Goglia, *Colonialismo e fotografia: Il caso italiano* (Sicania, 1989). Or Claudio Crescentini, "Aldo Baratti: 'Foto-Riflessioni' ed Estetismi dall'Africa Orientale," *Makarenko*, n.d., accessed February 9, 2022, www.makarenko.it/aldo-baratti-foto-riflessioni-ed-estetismi-dallafrica-orientale.
- 55 "Adua" is part of a series of three photographs in the ISIAO photographic collection (available at the National Central Library of Rome at ISIAO.ERITREA.19.I.I. foto 7, 8, 9), this type of activity is also confirmed by colonial historian Angelo Del Boca, "L'Impero," in *I luoghi della memoria. Simboli e miti dell'Italia unita*, ed. Mario Isnenghi (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1996), 423–24.
- 56 Campt, *Listening to Images*.
- 57 Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2000), 748.
- 58 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984).
- 59 Campt, *Listening to Images*, 11.
- 60 Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval* (Norton & Company, 2019).
- 61 Saidiya Hartman, "Intimate History, Radical Narrative," *The Journal of African American History* 106, no. 1 (2021): 127.
- 62 Ariella Aisha Azoulay, "The Captive Photograph," *Boston Review*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/the-captive-photograph/>.
- 63 Maaza Mengiste, *The Shadow King* (Canongate Books, 2019).
- 64 K. Akimoto, A. Hu, T. Yamaguchi, and H. Kobayashi, "Effect of 528 Hz Music on the Endocrine System and Autonomic Nervous System," *Health* 10 (2018): 1159–1170, <https://doi.org/10.4236/health.2018.109088>.
- 65 M. Kumar, T. D. Abhayapala, and P. Samarasinghe, "A Preliminary Investigation on Frequency Dependant Cues for Human Emotions," *Acoustics* 4, no. 2 (2022): 460–68. This research shows that primary subjective emotions (happy, sad, anger, and calm) are triggered by a range of specific frequencies. For example for the class emotion "happy", the preferred pure tone lies in the frequency range of 210–528 Hz; the emotion class "anger" is triggered in a frequency range starting from 440 Hz to 528 Hz; while calm is perceived within the frequency range from 285–528 Hz. Of course, when talking about music as a complex cognitive product, other studies have shown that music also arouses different emotions depending on its characteristics, such as melody, rhythm and dynamism, but as we have already pointed out here, we are considering music as vibrations and frequencies.
- 66 Wayne Modest and Claudia Augustat, *Spaces of Care: Confronting Colonial Afterlives in European Ethnographic Museums* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2023).
- 67 An example is the work by writer, artist, and scholar Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński "Uneathing in Conversation" 2017.
- 68 An example is Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Research: Indigenous Storywork as Methodology* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019).
- 69 Rolando Vázquez, "Aesthetic and Epistemic Restitution for the Joy of Life: Recalling Earth, Overcoming the Contemporary, Knowing Otherwise," in *Learning from Ancestors: Epistemic Restitution and Rematriation*, ed. Irene de Craen, *Errant Journal*, no. 5 (Amsterdam: Framer Framed, 2023).