

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of the Liberal Arts

**INVISIBLE DIASPORAS: AFRO-MODERNISM IN ITALY**

A Dissertation in

Comparative Literature

by

Sara Marzioli

© 2013 Sara Marzioli

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2013

The dissertation of Sara Marzioli was reviewed and approved\* by the following:

Jonathan P. Eburne  
Associate Professor of Comparative Literature and English  
Dissertation Advisor  
Chair of Committee

Kevin M. Bell  
Associate Professor of English

Janet Lyon  
Associate Professor of English, Science, Technology and Society, and  
Women's Studies

Sophia A. McClennen  
Professor of International Affairs and Comparative Literature

Aldon L. Nielsen  
The George and Barbara Kelly Professor of American Literature

Maria R. Truglio  
Associate Professor of Italian and Women's Studies

Caroline Eckhardt  
Head, Department of Comparative Literature  
Director, School of Languages and Literatures

\*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School

## ABSTRACT

This project traces the multifarious modalities in which African American artists and intellectuals have engaged with their European and African legacies by way of Italy, thus redressing the marginality of peoples of African descent within the historical and cultural narratives of Euro-American modernity. Prompted by Italy's oblique yet powerful participation in the history of European imperialism—as well as in the discourses of avant-garde aesthetics, radical politics, and literary modernism—this project is organized around key moments in the political and cultural history of the transatlantic. It spans from the colonial enterprises of the early twentieth century to the emergence of the Global South in the late sixties. By building on current scholarship that has increasingly expanded the range of perspectives assumed by Modernist Studies, I propose an alternative picture of afro-modernism, one in which both African American and Italian twentieth-century writers and thinkers actively recast the dichotomies between progressive and primitive cultures, colonizer and colonized, margin and center. Examining the symbolic and real import of Africa in the literary and cultural exchanges that took place between Harlem, Rome, and Addis Ababa (which Italy occupied in 1935), I propose the notion of “living history” as a conceptual strategy used by African American and Italian intellectuals to account for their preoccupation with transatlantic history and historiography. In a context free from rigidly codified racial relations and institutionally sanctioned encounters, the intersection of a long view of history with the

subjective engagement with historical and cultural processes, such as the Civil Rights Movement, pan-Africanism, decolonization, and the Cold War, engenders an alternative cultural narrative of the black transatlantic characterized by multiple conceptualizations of historicism. The authors I study— Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Marcus Garvey, George Schuyler, Spike Lee, Ralph Ellison, William Demby, Curzio Malaparte, and Pier Paolo Pasolini— envision the present and the future in conversation with the past, in ways that become particularly striking in the context of the simultaneity of the architecture of Rome and Italy's ancient history of exchanges with Africa. My aim is thus twofold: to offer a new archive of Euro-American modernism that seeks to move beyond accepted notions and narratives of progress, nation-building, and cultural identity, while providing the historical knowledge to better cope with current migratory phenomena and processes of globalization as they intersect with the history of the Atlantic world.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>LIST OF FIGURES</b>	vi
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	vii
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	1
<b>CHAPTER ONE</b>	
Africa <i>Futura</i> : The Aesthetics of Political Modernist Projects in the Black Transatlantic of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Marcus Garvey, and George Schuyler	29
<b>CHAPTER TWO</b>	
“We Are All on the Wrong Side.” Buffalo Soldiers on the Italian Front According to Curzio Malaparte, Spike Lee, and Fred Kujo Kuworno	104
<b>CHAPTER THREE</b>	
“Diggin’ in” Deep History: Ralph Ellison's View of Roman Antiquity and Black Internationalism	145
<b>CHAPTER FOUR</b>	
Performative History and Defiant Narratives in William Demby’s <i>The Catacombs</i> and Pier Paolo Pasolini’s <i>Notes for An African Oresteia</i>	203
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	256
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	260

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1:</b> Campo de' fiori—"W il PCI" .....	175
<b>Figure 2:</b> Campo de' fiori—"Posing with Bruno" .....	177
<b>Figure 3:</b> The Pantheon .....	180
<b>Figure 4:</b> Via della Conciliazione .....	181

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the Department of Comparative Literature for granting me the support necessary to pursue this ambitious project. My deepest gratitude goes to Professor Jonathan Eburne, whose mentorship has helped me in the most difficult moments. I could not envision this work without the stimulating intellectual exchange we have had during these years and his availability to read drafts of this work at all stages of the writing process. A special thanks goes also to Professor Sophia McClennen for believing in the positive potential of my work.

This project has been realized thanks to the Dissertation Support Grant from the Graduate School, which allowed me to pursue full time research in Summer 2008. I am grateful to the Penn State Alumni Association, which granted me a Dissertation Enhancement Award in the early stages of my research and has recently honored me with its prestigious Dissertation Award. I cannot think of a better omen for my academic career. I would also like to thank the Africana Research Center and the Center for American Literary Studies at Penn State, whose grants have helped me complete the archival research so crucial for this dissertation. I am also grateful to the Ralph Ellison Estate for permission to reproduce an excerpt of a letter from Ellison to Jim Melchert and the images contained in Chapter Three.

A special mention is due to my fellow students and friends, in particular Germán Campos-Muñoz, Dawn Taylor, and Mich Nyawalo, for the friendship and ongoing

dialogue that have made my experience of graduate studies a less lonely effort. Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the professors of English and Italian, especially my committee members, for helping me understand the meaning and practice of serious scholarship and teaching.



## INTRODUCTION

It is paradoxical that Italy, a country whose territory is a bridge between Europe and Africa, is hardly mentioned in discussions of Europe's changing identity. The social and cultural practice of denying an evident reality did not escape Homi Bhabha, who visited Italy when the migratory flow from Africa was significantly increasing. In his 1995 essay, "Black and White and Read All Over," Bhabha recounts his experience in Valbrona, a small town on Lake Como, near Milan, which houses the Rockefeller Foundation's International Study Center. While describing the quiet life of the village, he notices the gap between the ongoing cosmopolitan conversations at the Center and the isolation from global phenomena seemingly affecting Valbrona. He also observes a significant presence of immigrants from Africa. This latter observation is of vital importance because, as Bhabha says, "there is no overt racial animosity in Valbrona" (17). "Overt" is, of course, the operative term in Bhabha's remark. The majority of these immigrants are street vendors, who "may receive a passing joke or a greeting" from the locals, "but always as a way of polite avoidance and escape." Bhabha rightly affirms that this apparently civil easiness hides an "anxious vacancy surrounding the precarious figure of the lone black man standing in an elegant lake resort, selling things that no one seems to want" (16). Bhabha's comment on his experience in Italy is symptomatic of Italy's self-marginalization within the cultural circulation of the black transatlantic, especially after World War II. The invisibility of African diasporic cultures in Italy is the result of historical and political forces, as well as of the cultural habit of minimizing Italy's long

history of encounters with the African continent. This work proposes Italy as one of the nodes of exchanges of the black transatlantic network, thus redressing its cultural and social effacement at key moments during the twentieth century.

Bhabha recounts how the Valbroneses' attitude towards the immigrants reminds him of James Baldwin's "Stranger in the Village," in which the American writer asks: "Can [anyone] be liked whose human weight and complexity cannot be or has not been admitted?" (qtd. in Bhabha 18). The lack of "admission," meaning both disregard and the consequent exclusion from social and political institutions, produces what Bhabha terms an "anxious vacancy." The prosthetic existence of African immigrants extends to debates on and representations of Italian social life in its cultural and political manifestations. The attitude of erasing foreign peoples' presence from the Italian cultural narrative has become more evident in the last three decades, with their growing immigration from Africa. To be sure, in the almost twenty years since Bhabha's observations of the dynamic between African immigrants and middle-class Italians on the shores of Lake Como, progress has been made. For example, the novel *Io, venditore d'elefanti* (*I, Seller of Elephants*, 1990),<sup>1</sup> by Senegalese author Pap Kouma is now in its eighth edition and is adopted as a textbook in Italian schools. Yet the trope of invisibility still aptly describes the status of immigrants from Africa, inhibiting the process of including these individuals in the Italian body politic as fully enfranchised citizens. In light of the growing social, cultural, and political activism by people of African descent in the Italian peninsula, I argue for the necessity of foregrounding the history of exchanges between

---

<sup>1</sup> The novel narrates exactly the life of one of the street-vendors Bhabha mentions in the article, a vendor who used to sell, among other things, wooden elephants.

Italy and the African Diaspora in the twentieth century. This study assumes, as its epistemological and political impetus, the necessity of both addressing and redressing the historical and intellectual conditions of invisibility under which Afro-Italian relations have evolved throughout the twentieth century. Along these lines, I am particularly interested in unearthing the role of African American culture in this network as a little known aspect of Italo-American cultural and historical relations during the last century. I claim that African American culture is a catalyst of the multifarious ways in which African diasporic cultures and histories have traversed Italy. The ensuing network represents a critical confluence urgently posed under the pressure of what Bhabha argues is “the ontological invisibility rooted in centuries of dialectical tension between the opposing motions of encounter and negation” (“Black and White and Read All Over” 19).

African American intellectuals’ engagements with their European and African legacies by way of Italy are informed by the over-determination of Italy’s identity with the imperial Roman past, Christianity, and the humanistic discourse of the Renaissance, which has been at the center of colonialism’s “civilizing mission.” I employ the expression over-determined here because, even though these traditions do not pertain to the history of the country as a nation-state, they are still held to be the only truly glorious epochs of Italian history. Hence, Italian culture has been clinging to the past as a way of validating and redeeming its present. The memory of this glorious past, though, enters into tension with the country’s marginality in the twentieth-century global geopolitical order, engendering a productive space for epistemological inquiry. Italian cities, as open-air museums, have compelled expatriate intellectuals and visitors alike to plunge into

deep history.<sup>2</sup> One of the consequences of this immersion into history is the unsettling of the epistemological category of master narratives (albeit while practicing it), well before postmodernism will diagnose their futility and dangerousness. In this context of “living, deep history,” simultaneity replaces progressive time, and past cultural traditions emerge at play in the present rather than being relegated to a primordial past. Distinctions between backward and modern, as well as between northern and southern Italian histories of cultural intermixture, are consequently crushed into the social and cultural spectacle of a society whose identity has been literally shaped at a crossroads between Europe and Africa. One of the aims of this work is to offer a new archive of transnational modernism informed by Italian culture and history as the prism through which African American artists negotiate their belonging to the black transatlantic. To this end, this work seeks to reveal and interpret the ways in which African American writers and artists conceptualize alternative historiographies and the attendant categories of historical and philosophical time engaging with Africa and Europe by way of their encounter with Italy.<sup>3</sup> The specificities of the Italian context allow us to move beyond the Middle Passage as focal referent of diasporic cultures, not by transcending it—which, besides being unethical, would be historically inaccurate—but by offering alternative historiographies that redress

---

<sup>2</sup> In historical studies, “deep history” refers to the whole span of human experience, tracing back before writing, which is usually the limit beyond which prehistory is located.

<sup>3</sup> A useful account of the evolution of the African Diaspora as an epistemological category is Edwards’ “The Uses of Diaspora.” Harris’s *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora* (1982) is the first comprehensive monograph on the topic. The journal *Callaloo* devoted a special issue to the African Diaspora (30:2, 2007) with a focus on the Americas. A special issue of *African Studies Review* (43:1, 2000) on the African Diaspora and the black Atlantic contains an overview of Diaspora Studies and a rich debate on its status as an academic discipline. On the relations between African Diaspora and African American studies, see Gruesser, *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies and the Black Atlantic* (2005) and *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing about Africa* (2000). Specific to the experience of African American artists in France is Fabre’s classic *From Harlem to Paris* (1991).

the invisibility of black modernity within Italian and European cultures. One recurring practice is the “use” of Africa in cultural artifacts produced at crucial moments in the formation of Italy’s national identity, as exemplified by the work of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. His Futurism has been one of the main sources of nationalistic rhetoric (not to mention proto-Fascism) in modern Italy. As such, his tendency towards the deferment to Africa of the project of a truly modern Italy is a telling example of the important role played by the continent in the discourse of Italian identity.

Italy’s exchanges with the African continent go back to Republican Rome and the Punic Wars (264 BCE) as narrated by Virgil. Sante Matteo’s overview reminds us that these relations include:

The consolidation of Christian hegemony under the tutelage of African writers, such as Athanasius, Origen, and Augustine; the contacts and trade that resulted from the Crusades, paving the way for the Renaissance; the colonial wars undertaken in the Horn of Africa by the newly born nation of Italy at the end of the nineteenth century and in Libya at the beginning of the twentieth, and subsequently resumed during the Fascist regime in the 1930s (*ItaliAfrica* 4).

What Matteo does not provide, however, is an analysis of the consequences of this history’s exclusion from Italian literary and historical canons. With respect to this panorama, overlap between the climax of the Italian colonial enterprise and the Fascist Regime has contributed to the relegation of the country’s intense exchanges with Africa

to the far recesses of the national collective memory.<sup>4</sup> The desire to set aside individual responsibility in allegiance to the Fascist Regime, the disastrous defeat in World War II, and the country's key role in the development of the European Union in the early fifties, are the main explanations for the dismissal of Italy's connections to Africa. Added to the historical issue of the country's complex relations with its southern territories, these more recent events provide the framework within which to understand the invisibility of African diasporic cultures within intellectual debates and academic studies. The invisibility of the human being, which Bhabha notes in regard to African street vendors, is the social corollary to the archival invisibility of Italo-African exchanges. African American writers and intellectuals who have engaged with Italian culture and society will notice this invisibility, detecting the idiosyncrasy between the country's sociocultural outlook and its official narratives.

It is no exaggeration to say that the official narrative of the Italian national identity has been formulated by means of two exclusions: the southern Italians and Italian contacts with Africa. In "Hybrid Italians, Diasporic Africans: Who's/Whose Meticcio?" Laura Harris argues that Africa—or better, its elusion—has been functional in the

---

<sup>4</sup>Although significant groups of Italians had migrated to Tunisia and Libya in the mid-eighteenth century, Italy had started its colonial campaign in Africa only in 1885. Soon to be the first European nation defeated by an indigenous population in the battle of Adwa, Ethiopia, in 1886, the Italian presence in Africa ended with The Treaty of Paris in 1946 that took away from the defeated Fascist Italy the colonies of Libya, Ethiopia, and Somalia. Only in October 1985, the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Italo-Ethiopian War, did public television air an informative and historically accurate documentary on Italian colonialism, titled "L'impero: un'avventura Africana" (Del Boca IX). The screening caused a heated debate among prominent intellectuals, many of whom were still upholding the false myth of a humane, good colonialism. For a detailed account of the Italo-Ethiopian War and of Mussolini's rule of Ethiopia see Sbacchi, *Ethiopia Under Mussolini: Fascism and the Colonial Experience*; on the lack of a collective, historical reflection on this chapter of Italian history, Del Boca's *L'Africa nella coscienza degli italiani: Miti, Memorie, Errori, Sconfitte* is an excellent study.

formation of Italian national identity as white and European. Harris states that “whether manifest in imagined bodily difference informing national definition or in the current influx of immigrants, Africa has always formed and defined the socially constructed myth of Italy as monoracial and monocultural” (602). Struggling to prove its Europeanness to be synonymous with modernity and nation-state political legitimacy, Italy has set aside its historical linkages to and dialogues with Africa. As Vanessa Maher notes, “[t]he imagery evoked by the new immigration does not have an empirical referent. It is dissociated from its historical context. A sort of collective amnesia has swallowed up the experience of Italian emigration, of Italian colonialism, of Fascism, the knowledge of the complexity of Italian society itself” (“Immigration and Identities” 168). In other words, erasure of the long and multifarious relations with Africa has been a key strategy in supporting a reductive version of Italian identity.

One of the symptoms of this erasure is Italy’s lack of a structural protocol to socially and legally define its racial relations. As Sante Matteo claims, immigrants to Italy do not bear “the heavy historical baggage of colonialism and slavery on their shoulders. ... Racism based on skin color has not been an entrenched, institutionalized aspect of Italian society” (5). In fact, whereas France promulgated its Code Noire in 1685—a decree passed by King Louis XIV regulating the conditions of slavery in the French colonial empire—the only Italian laws dealing with race were those enforced from 1938 until the demise of Fascism in 1943, as Matteo reminds us (8). In fact, during the Italian occupation of Ethiopia, in “America and Abyssinia,” Marcus Garvey noticed that the Kingdom of Ethiopia was being invaded by a European nation whose people were not even white (2).

In what follows, I seek to expound the web of cultural and political encounters as a multifaceted discourse engendered by Italy's past greatness, the country's status as the cradle of Western civilization, and its history of intense exchanges with Africa facilitated by the Mediterranean Sea that functions as a bridge rather than a barrier between Europe and Africa. Italy does not only represent a crossroads in a purely geographical sense, but is also exemplary of the contradictions engendered by modernity, all the more significant for African American intellectuals and African diasporic discourses because it does so in the heart of Europe, rather than in a distant developing country that could be identified with exoticism and backwardness.

As Tony Morrison argues in *Playing in the Dark*, the canon of Anglo-American culture has been constructed and interpreted around the absence of an Africanist discourse as the pragmatic way of dealing with the greatest idiosyncrasy of American society—institutionalized slavery in the “land of the free.” Morrison states that, “in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate” (9). My aim is to reveal the language that has made invisible the African presence in Italian culture. This absence is a loud cry that surfaces in the cultural, social, and political identity of a country whose cultural and social forces have consistently recurred to African American and African cultures in moments of crisis. For example, in William Demby's novel *The Catacombs* (1965), addressed in the last chapter of this work, these elisions and tensions constitute the textual fabric that connects worldwide events to the specific historical, social, and cultural conditions of Italy in the early sixties.



Despite monocultural official narratives, Italian intellectuals and artists have demonstrated great attention for African American culture since the late nineteenth century. The oldest trace of this dialogue uncovered in my investigation is an 1898 sociological study by Gennaro Mondaini titled *La questione dei negri nella storia e nella società nord-americana* (*The Issue of Blacks in the History and Society of North America*). Not only during the 1920's did the post-war euphoria of the jazz age sweep Italy as well, but the anti-Fascist culture of the 1930s also used the lyrics of blues songs translated into Italian to avoid the censorship of foreign cultural production. Debates on music became the means for social and cultural analysis. An eloquent example is Gramsci's interpretation of the jazz vogue as embryonic of a "Euro-African civilization" (*Letters from Prison* 128), thus disrupting the unidirectional mindset of the European self-conceptualization that identifies the Other (the outgroup, as anthropologists prefer nowadays) in the black subject.

The thirties were a decade of intense translational work, despite the strong nationalist rhetoric adopted by the regime. Famous authors of the Harlem Renaissance were translated into Italian, as part of the xenophilia that has always characterized Italian intellectual elites. As Giorgio Rimondi phrases it, "Italy was trying to formulate her own cultural narrative through the lens of foreign cultures" (42). Rimondi provides a detailed history of Italian interest in African American culture, especially in jazz. He mentions the musician and poet Alfredo Casella, who, after a visit to the US in 1926, published a series of articles in *L'Italia letteraria* on jazz and modernist poetics in which he reconciles "cosmopolitanism and chauvinism" (37), the enthusiasm for jazz and the Fascist rhetoric on the great destiny of Italy. Music critic Massimo Mila published *JazzHot* in 1935 (qtd.

in Bergoglio 5) to be followed, in the forties, by Emilio Cecchi's *America Amara* (*Bitter America* 1943), Leone Piccioni's *Letteratura dei negri d'America* (*Literature of Black Americans* 1946), and Alberto Savinio's essay *Pianista negro* (*Black Pianist* 1948).

These studies and translations discuss modernist poetics together with the social phenomena that jazz and poetic experimentations give rise to, while inserting themselves in the broader debate of Italian coeval culture. The focus on Italy's presence in the context of the black transatlantic demands that we reveal its dialogue with Africa, which is inextricably connected to the reception, discussion, and appropriation of African American culture in twentieth-century Italy. Moreover, Italy emerged as a destination for African American intellectuals and artists in the nineteenth century. Frederick Douglass and William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, for example, wrote of their travels through the peninsula on their way from Africa to Europe. In the second half of the nineteenth century, Edmonia Lewis moved to Rome to pursue a career as a sculptor. In the early 1920s Jessie Fauset was a correspondent for *The Crisis* from Italy and France, while Langston Hughes recounts his experience in Genoa in his autobiography *The Big Sea* (1940). Finally, since the anticolonial activism of clandestine Italian Communist Party members during the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935), the Italian left has been active within pan-Africanist projects and has supported the political self-determination of the newly independent African nations.<sup>5</sup>

The major theoretical points of reference for my work are Transatlantic and African Diaspora Studies, which I will discuss in relation to their importance and

---

<sup>5</sup> For an account of the relationship between the different streams of the Italian left and anticolonialism in Africa, see Procacci, *La sinistra italiana e la guerra in Etiopia* (1978) and Borruso, *Il PCI e l'Africa indipendente* (2004).

usefulness in the expanding critical field of Transnational Modernism. The inclusion of Italy within these networks expands our knowledge and understanding of their historical and epistemological workings. The analysis of the black transatlantic circulation of ideas by way of Italy, the “cradle” of Western civilization, redresses received notions of primitivism in the modernist use of African cultures, practices of historical master narratives, and formulations of African American and Italian cultural identities alike.

While engaging with Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic* (1993) and Brent Hayes Edwards’s *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003), I will propose the figuration of “living history” as a counterpoint to their models. As a discursive strategy, this category refers to the engagements of African American intellectuals and artists with their African and European legacies by way of Italy. When looking at these networks from the Italian perspective, with its history of Greco-Roman legacies and subsequent Christian Empire,<sup>6</sup> the black transatlantic becomes a site of dialogue and contestation of the very foundation of white Western Europe. At once a major source of legitimization of European imperialism and not quite up to European standards of progress, Italy has offered African American intellectuals an opening into the very idiosyncrasies and weaknesses of the imperial, all-devouring European civilization. The historical referents for these studies are in fact France and Great Britain, the major European empires of the twentieth century, each with the ensuing linguistic and cultural centralization that is alien to Italian colonial history and its ramifications within the black transatlantic. Given these historical and social specificities, the discourse of “living history” springs from a dialectical articulation

---

<sup>6</sup> Transatlantic is a more appropriate term that emphasizes reciprocal influence and collaborations beyond the Middle Passage itself.

of the slave trade and colonization as deep historical narratives in which the concept of origins loses its central function.

In the by now classic study *The Black Atlantic* (1993), Paul Gilroy postulates the Black Atlantic as a “political and cultural formation” (19) engendered by the ship as a traveling microcosm, concretization, and symbol of the slave trade. A troubling aspect of this function of the ship is the emphasis it puts on the concept of origins. The ship, writes Gilroy, directs our attention to “the Middle Passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists” (3). Yet the idea of origin is not central to the majority of the cultural production I examine, whose authors engage with historical and cultural narratives from the perspective of deep time. Nonetheless, the Black Atlantic figures black modernity as a transnational phenomenon and Gilroy’s study is unsurpassed in its study of African diasporic cultures as central to the development of Western modernity and its cultural output. Indeed, the experience of the slave trade has positioned people of African descent at the core of modernity well before their European and American counterparts. In Gilroy’s words,

It is being suggested that the concentrated intensity of the slave experience is something that marks out blacks as the first truly modern people, handling in the nineteenth century dilemmas and difficulties, which would become the substance of everyday life in Europe a century later. (220-221)

Brent Hayes Edwards, taking on Gilroy’s legacy, employs the epistemological category of the Diaspora to unravel the modernist network of encounters among French, black American, and Western African intellectuals from the colonies, facilitated by Paris

as the metropole of the French colonial empire.<sup>7</sup> Edwards's emphasis on the specific time and place of this network of encounters removes it completely from its historical background. In other words, Edwards circumvents the historical and symbolic value of Africa altogether. Nevertheless, his work is of paramount importance in analyzing the cultural gaps along with synthesis and innovations within the African Diaspora. In this regard, Edwards's *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003) unveils a number of cultural projects achieved between Paris, New York, and Dakar, which are made possible by the very linguistic, cultural, and social differences that characterize the intellectuals involved. Leveraging on the practice of internationalism "pursued by transnationalism" (11), Edwards shows the wide range of linguistic, intellectual, and political experiences subsumed under the categories of the African Diaspora and the Black Atlantic. In his own words, he privileges the "status of that difference," that is, "the trace or the residue, perhaps, of what resists or escapes translation. [...] Such an unevenness or differentiation marks a constitutive *décalage* in the very tissue of the culture. [...] It can be translated as 'gap,' 'discrepancy,' 'time-lag' or 'interval'" (*The Practice of Diaspora* 13). Edwards's approach foregrounds the metropole as a space in which the exchanges engendered by the confluence of human and cultural factors are disconnected from the deep history that has made them possible.

In contrast with Edwards's scenario, the writers and artists treated here—Marcus Garvey, George Schuyler, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, William Demby, Curzio Malaparte, Ralph Ellison, Spike Lee, and Pier Paolo Pasolini—do not share the language

---

<sup>7</sup> On the role of Paris as a crossroads of Anglophone and Francophone black cultures see the special issue of *Modern Fiction Studies* titled, "Paris, Modern Fiction, and the Black Atlantic," edited by Jonathan Eburne and Jeremy Braddock (2005).

of the host country, neither do they belong to a colonial empire. Italy has no metropole of the likes of Paris or London. Therefore, collaborations, encounters, and exchanges are scattered, sometimes fleeting, and usually not regulated by public institutions, cultural or political.<sup>8</sup> From the conversations I narrate here, two distinct elements surface: one is the African American intellectuals' critique of their own belonging to a Western civilization that has strived so hard to write them out of its cultural tradition; the second is these writers's engagement with Africa, both as an imaginary and historical reality. Thus, my work engages with the conversation on the so-called Black Europe, but with two distinctions. Derived from African Diaspora and European studies, the paradigm of Black Europe marginalizes the exchange through the Atlantic as a source of European modernity. Moreover, its focus on contemporary migratory phenomena, especially their effect on European societies and cultures, overlooks historical precedents dating back to 1492 and the "discovery" of the Americas. This is particularly true in the case of Italy, whose scholars of Black Europe devote their attention mostly to recent Italophone literature and to a much lesser degree to colonial literature, thus implicitly enforcing the idea that before recent migration, Italy had no experience with black cultures, from either the African continent or the Americas.<sup>9</sup>

In engaging with these two models, my project offers an alternative that helps clarify the modalities and the outcome of African American intellectuals who have interrogated their own historical narrative by way of their displacement in Italy. Through

---

<sup>8</sup> The only exception is the Institute for the Study of Africa and the Orient, founded by Mussolini as the cultural emanation of the colonial project.

<sup>9</sup> Important studies include Sanches et al., *Europe in Black and White* (2011); Hine et al., *Black Europe and the African Diaspora* (2004); and Marable and Agard-Jones, *Transnational Blackness* (2008).

the engagement with Italian history and culture, they have revisited, I argue, the historicity of their origins into a “living history,” an epistemological tool distinguished by simultaneity and performativity. They accomplish this re-inscription through the conceptualization of both historical and narrative time, facilitated by the overloaded historicity of Italian urban spaces, the availability to the sight of history itself, and Italy’s central role in the foundation of canonical Western cultures. Moreover, I argue that these engagements can be fully understood only in the broader context of Italy’s relations to Africa and the Mediterranean, thus unmistakably placing African American culture in the context of the African Diaspora. To foreground the centrality of Africa to Italian history and culture means to place Africa at the very foundation of Western history, despite the marginalization of the continent by subsequent empires and kingdoms, not least the Christian one. Yet as the Egyptian obelisks and other African artifacts scattered throughout the country dramatize, the presence of African communities emerges, albeit surreptitiously, at every corner of Italian cities, most of all in Rome. Indeed, memories of Africa surface from the catacombs and the coliseum, but also in the architecture of the Middle Age and of the Renaissance, which flourished thanks to the trade routes through Africa and the Middle East controlled by the Italian maritime republics.

A brief clarification of the ways in which I employ the concept of Diaspora is in order. In *Diasporas* (2003, 2008 English translation), Marcel Dufoix explores the multifarious valences of the term Diaspora as an epistemological category, using the concept of performance to connect the diasporic experience with the writing of history. According to Dufoix, the diasporic experience is characterized by “two kinds of history: historicity, the past, employed to guarantee continuity through space and persistence

through time, and historiography, the writing of the past, as a *performative mode of existence*” (57, emphasis added). Such understanding of the performative is the mechanism through which the discourse of “living history” emerges in diasporic artistic production as the tendency to dialectically relate history as the past and historiography as the writing of the individual experience of that past. Because of this, the concept of the performative is a useful tool to tackle individual engagements with history and the modalities in which these engagements represent fictionalized critiques of historical master narratives.

History as past, in Dufoix’s sense, is the theoretical framework for the African American cultural production studied here. However, the “writing of the past” as a “performative mode of existence” aptly describes the functioning of the cultural products I consider. On one hand, the ontological quality itself of the diasporic experience accounts for the recurrence of the performative in the articulation, elaboration, and understanding of the cultural and social aspects of the African Diaspora. On the other, when the experience of history and its artistic articulation become the subject of the artistic practice itself, the diasporic experiences examined here are articulated on a further level as “meta-performances.” The most obvious example is the African American writer William Demby, who lived in Italy from 1948 to 1965. His novel, *The Catacombs* (1965), narrates the experience of the expatriate writer as he composes the book we are reading. In turn, Ralph Ellison, who famously rejected the label of expatriate writer, engages with “Africa” by way of his dislocation in Rome where he was writing about African American culture and drafting his posthumous unfinished novel *Three Days before the Shooting* (2011). Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, founder of the twentieth-century



avant-garde movement Futurism, constitutes an Italian counterpoint. His take on and use of Africa posits a transnational poetic as the birthmark of Futurism, despite playing the role of barter of the new Italianness. Finally, Marcus Garvey, founder of the pan-Africanist United Negro Improvement Association, wrote *The Course of African Philosophy* (1937) to guide the heirs of his association towards the realization of a black empire in Africa, devoid of any actual reference to the history and cultures of the continent. Indeed, the climactic moment of Garvey's act of collective engagement served the careful construction of his role as king of an imagined black empire in Africa.

Moreover, performance is both collective, as the set of habits and referents that constitutes a national or ethnic belonging, and individual, as African American writers who expatriate to Europe inevitably interrogate their individual relationship to Africa.<sup>10</sup> For example, during his stay in Rome, Ralph Ellison straddles between his official, hyper-visible role as cultural ambassador at the American Academy and his radical ideas on the Civil Right Movement in the United States and anticolonialism in Africa. Ten years later, William Demby, through the fictional writer who is the protagonist of *The Catacombs*, brings ancient Rome into life in the Italian backdrop of the early sixties. Even contemporary film director Spike Lee is not content with rewriting the history of the African American participation in World War II. His film, *Miracle at St. Anna*, portrays African American soldiers connecting with the local popular culture of a mountain village in Tuscany. Through references to Neorealism, it enables the rural

---

<sup>10</sup> See Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (1993) in dialogue with Laura Doyle's "Towards a Philosophy of Transnationalism" (2011) for an understanding of national borders as means for contacts and contaminations rather than protection from outside influences.

community, almost destroyed by Fascism and by the war, to recover its cultural traditions as a source of cohesion among its members.

These cross-cultural encounters are not surprising. As it emerges from Patrick Manning's recent *African Diaspora: A History through Culture* (2010), the displacement of people of African descent through a multiplicity of geographical routes—and in varied degrees of violence—has been one of the main agents of modernization in the West. The artistic production we call modernist today is thus necessarily to be read within the dynamics of the African Diaspora. This is the premise of *Primitivist Modernism* (1998) by Sieglinde Lemke, who convincingly proves modernism to be a cultural and philosophical formation engendered by the “aesthetic collaboration” (3) of white Western and African cultures. Lemke's study foregrounds the encounters and cultural exchanges made possible by the Middle Passage, according to Gilroy, the original moment of black modernity.<sup>11</sup> Lemke analyzes what are by now classic modernist “contaminations,” such as the role of African sculptures in the birth of Cubism or the craze for Josephine Baker in interwar Paris. Most importantly, his study sets an important precedent in considering the “aesthetic collaborations” that have engendered modernism as we know it, accounting for the Africanist, as well as Southeast Asian and Latin American, presence that has participated in the formation of Western modernism (3). Lemke asserts: “wittingly or unwittingly, Euro-American modernism's identity has always been hyphenated, has always been hybrid, has always been biracial” (9).

Building on these studies, my work further claims that modern writers and intellectuals, while engaging in these conversations, were consciously producing a

---

<sup>11</sup> See Gikandi, 31-50.

critique of their own artistic practices. They do so by addressing the historicity of their own cultural location or locations through the interrogation of time as both a philosophical and historical category of inquiry. It is the very centrality of time in modern scientific discourse, and its artistic elaborations, that makes this interrogation possible. The dynamic between invisibility and visibility, a central trope of modernism with its privileging of the sight as the main sensorial experience of reality, comes to the fore again in connection to historiography. Taking on the invisibility of African diasporic culture within Western master narratives is the recurrent task of many fictional characters of modernist texts, as the protagonist of Ellison's *Invisible Man* shows. This task is also foregrounded in the spatialization of time, as it is revealed by William Demby's cubistic experimentations and his vision of narrative as a historical canvas on which many things are simultaneously happening. A similar function, albeit accomplished in different modalities, pertains to Ellison's excavations of the simultaneity of Rome's long history in his photographs. Hence, a brief sketch of modernist conceptions of historical time and their working within artistic forms is in order.

At the core of Enlightenment projects of systematization of cultural productions lies the belief in a hierarchical order of value measured in terms of progressive development (Habermas' work is both a product and a discussion of this epistemological practice). The faith in reason at the core of the Enlightenment and its epistemological models has often replaced rationality with rationalization. In this philosophical discourse, the understanding of time as a category external to the experience of human beings has been a fundamental tool. Ronald Schleifer, in *Modernism and Time*, ascribes the changes brought by the second industrial revolution to a radically different perception of time that

distinguishes cultural modernism at the turn of the twentieth century from its previous, late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century phases. Thus, Schleifer describes the earlier conception of time—derived from Newton’s physics—as resulting in a series of assumptions according to which,

[t]ime is always and everywhere the same, succession without content; [that] time does not affect the event taking place ‘within’ time; [and that] the individual subject of knowledge and experience is atemporal. ... These qualities of Enlightenment temporality ... give rise to the absolute distinction between present and past and between modes of representation that possess what Michel Foucault calls “the obscure power of making a past impression present once more.” (3)

Paul Gilroy’s good faith notwithstanding, this stance weakens his usage of the Middle Passage as the single event that marks the beginning of black modernity. Even Gilroy’s path-breaking work is informed by the urgency of structuring and ordering the artistic production within models that explain spatiotemporal gaps as phenomena that are familiar to us. Not to mention the endurance of a mindset accustomed to perceive different modalities of development as sociocultural stasis. It is not by chance that among the changes engendered by the second industrial revolution, Schleifer mentions the unprecedented “abundance” of goods for consumption as the single most important factor that produces a radically different modern subject. This difference, according to Schleifer, is measurable in terms of a different experience of time. The “clear and positive” distinction between “base and superstructure, use and exchange, meaning and intention,” which for Schleifer is best described by its “atemporality,” is lost. Hence,

what he calls the “logic of abundance” (5) is “relative and, above all, relative to time: abundance is always momentary [...] even if such moments stretch on to become particular historical periods” (5). This “atemporal quality” has been transferred onto colonial spaces, which, as Marianna Torgovnick clearly points out, functioned as the repository for older stages of Western development, safeguarded against destruction by means of technological advancements, in effect categorizing the primitive and backwardness as shields from the “progress of time.” It is precisely in this respect that the Italian context lacks the overdetermination of an all-powerful West. It is a locality infused with the qualities of both worlds—the primitive non-European and the sophisticated European, the backward and the soon-to-be advanced nation.

Marinetti foresaw what Schleifer would argue a century later, that is, the most novel feature of cultural modernism is the subject’s awareness of “being in time,” a feature engendered by “the dislocation in time and space occasioned by the second industrial revolution” (6). This heightened consciousness of one’s own temporality and positionality explains the centrality of the unconscious in twentieth-century modernism. In Schleifer’s words, “the temporal situation of the subject of experience—situated within the contours of his or her own life and within the ‘events’ of history more generally conceived—is a constituent element in the nature of that experience” (7). Schleifer traces this change in the understanding of time in history, science, and aesthetics through the work of an array of writers, philosophers, and mathematicians. The central figure of his analysis is Walter Benjamin, whose well-known formulations of the image and of the “dialectic at a standstill” are at the core of current studies of temporality and historiography within modernism (qtd. in Schleifer 99).

This shift in perceiving and conceptualizing time has produced a steady critique of history as progressive evolution, a linear succession of events taking place within an immutable time. The acknowledgement of historical time as different from natural time occurred only between 1750 and 1850, with the exclusion of Giambattista Vico's earlier concept of cyclical history. According to Hayden White, a fundamental change in European society took place when it began to think of itself as existing in history, that is, to be aware of its historicity. The fundamental philosophical turn engendered by this awareness was that, as White says, "history could be 'made' as well as 'suffered'" (White, Introduction, *The Practice of Conceptual History* xi). The acknowledgement of history as a constructed narrative has engendered a growing interest in the study of historiography, which finds one of its most significant moments for literary study in Reinhart Koselleck's scholarship. Founded on the relations of historiography to phenomenological concepts of time, his *Futures Past* (1979) argues that we perceive time through spatial metaphors (a statement supported by quantum physics). Koselleck proposes the categories of "space of experience" and "horizon of expectation," which embody our perception of "past and future time" (*Future Pasts* 268). Thus, he claims that "it makes sense to say that experience based on the past is spatial since it is assembled into a totality within which many layers of earlier times are simultaneously present without, in any case, providing any indication of the before and after" (269). Reinhart Koselleck's exploration of historical time in relation to historiography is useful in the analysis of creative texts insofar as it foregrounds "the status of historiography as discourse (Barthes, Foucault, Derrida) rather than as discipline" (White, Introduction xiii). As a discourse, it always carries the awareness of the relativism to time, space, and

culture, of the language it employs to express itself. From this perspective, historical accounts are susceptible to reinterpretation, “provisional and open to revision” (White, Introduction xiv). The distinction between Koselleck’s “concept of history” and the philosophers’ various figurations and metaphors of history (from the muse Clio to Benjamin’s “Angel of History” and Machiavelli’s “Fortuna”) is that the “concept of history” accounts for “the distinctive historical ways of knowing reality as history” (White, Introduction xii). Therefore, I read the cultural production of the African Diaspora through its intersections with historiography and fiction, defined by spatial and temporal understandings of the human experience.

The intellectual history delineated in this work inserts itself in the fields of African American, African Diaspora, and New Modernist Studies to address the invisibility of black peoples and black cultures within Italian cultural narrative, thus revealing the ways in which African American writers wrote themselves into the foundational narrative of the West. This project takes into consideration two exceptional examples in the African Diaspora and the black transatlantic, African American and Italian cultures, by interrogating the existing archive of transnational modernism. As “The New Modernist Studies” (2008) by Douglas Mao and Rebecca Walkowitz<sup>12</sup> have demonstrated, Modernism is expanding both geographically and historically and this expansion, I would add, is especially characteristic of black modernisms. This expansive

---

<sup>12</sup> “The New Modernist Studies,” *PMLA* (123:3): 2008, includes a useful bibliography of works that expand modernism geographically and temporally, including pop culture and visual arts in the former colonies. Among these works, *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (2001), and *Geomodernisms*, eds. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel (2005), are path-breaking works in this expansive direction, to which we should add Susan Stanford Friedman’s paradigm of Global Modernism.

approach to what we define modernist requires an interrogation of the repository of texts and artifacts that we acknowledge as constitutive of the transnational modernist archive. The figure that connects the heterogeneous cultural production I examine in the following chapters is Africa as the future of Europe or, in Antonio Gramsci's words, the birth of a "Euro-African civilization" (*Letters from Prison* 128). The triangulation determined by Addis Ababa, Rome, and Harlem represents the porous geographical borders of the network I will trace. The works I examine engage with the deep historical time of the black transatlantic, rearticulating received historical narratives in a dialectical discourse that questions the centrality of the concepts of origins and nationhood. This allows me to propose the figuration of "living history" as an alternative epistemology of the cultural traffic produced by the black transatlantic. As such, each of my chapters is characterized by a specific modality of engaging with history and its aesthetic representation: "Africa *Futura*," "Deep Time and Visible History," "Corporeal History," and "Performative History."

This dissertation is organized around four key moments of intensification of these exchanges, which reflect major international political and cultural debates. I trace the role that such international phenomena have played within Italy, unveiling, in turn, Italy's contributions to them. The first of these nodes is the interplay of Futurism and the emergence of Fascism at a turning point in the elaboration of a national culture striving to voice the country's full entrance into modernity. The Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-36) and the climax of Italy's colonial project in Africa lead the country into World War II, the second key historical moment I consider in my work. World War II is the backdrop for an unprecedented presence in Italy of people of African descent: colonial subjects drafted in



the British and French armies and African American soldiers in the segregated US army. I look at this presence in conjunction with the debates on the reconstruction of the social and political fabric shattered by the war. The subsequent node under consideration is the fifties, a crucial decade for both anticolonial movements and the consolidation of Italy's political and cultural allegiance to the Western block. The early sixties, characterized by the emergence of the North-South paradigm, discourses of globalization, and the consolidation of the African Diaspora as an academic discipline, represent the last temporal and cultural node of this study.

The first chapter, "Africa *Futura*," sets the cultural and theoretical framework within which African American cultural production has been read and interpreted in Italy, that is, through the mediation of the peninsula's previous contacts with Africa. I focus on Marinetti's literary production, in which these contacts with Africa are in dialogue with coeval discourses on blackness, especially the emancipatory rhetoric and the activism of figures such as Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey. As a result, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's figuration of Africa does not correspond to the exotic, primitive Other, but becomes the ground on and through which the new, modern Italy can be shaped. This argument is supported by the analysis of the play *The Drum of Fire* (1922), a short story set in the United States and titled "The Negro" (1922), and the speech Marinetti delivered at the Italian Academy in 1938, titled "Africa as Producer of New Arts and Poetry." The chapter reaches to the aftermath of the Italo-Ethiopian War (1935-36), which became the locus of ideological and literary contentions within the African American community and its political symbolic relations with Africa. For this purpose, my readings of George Schuyler's serial fiction for the *Pittsburgh Courier* and Marcus Garvey's *Message to The*

*People* (1937) highlight the function of performing an imaginary idea of nation through literary and theatrical forms that undermine the very idea of the nation, thus arching back to Marinetti's questionable Italian nationalism.

In the second chapter, "Corporeal History," I trace the narrative and filmic productions inspired by the experiences of African American soldiers on the Italian front during World War II. Curzio Malaparte's novel *The Skin* (1949), Spike Lee's film *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008), and the documentary *Inside Buffalo* (2009) by Italo-Ghanaian director Fred Kudjo Kuworno, are symptomatic of what I call a "corporeal measure" of history. This conceptual tool allows us to detect the connections between the encounters taking place during the war with current issues of racism in the European and US context.

My third chapter looks at Ralph Ellison's sojourn in Rome from 1955 to 1957 as a fellow of the American Academy. In "'Diggin' in' Deep History," I pay special attention to the connections Ellison draws between African and Asian anticolonial struggles, the Civil Rights Movement, and Rome as the historical palimpsest on which to write African American culture within European cultural foundation. Ellison's engagement through writing and photography with the "deep time" displayed by the architecture of Rome allows him to assess African American myths and rituals, not as the backward vestige of a primitive past, but in the present of American and world cultures. These linkages emerge in his essays, his correspondence with Albert Murray, and in certain episodes of *Three Days Before the Shooting* (2011). Even more intriguing is Ellison's meditation on black internationalism and history through the photographs he has taken in Rome, which speak to the deep historicity he foregrounds in the architectural simultaneity of the "eternal city."

The fourth chapter, “Performative History,” focuses on the decade spanning from the early sixties to the early seventies, a transitional time marked by the escalation of the Cold War and the unfinished shift from a colonial to a postcolonial world order. In this context, I look at the work of African American writer William Demby, who lived in Italy for twenty-five years, and at the documentary production of the Italian writer and film director Pier Paolo Pasolini. From Demby’s novel *The Catacombs* (1965) and Pasolini’s *Notes for An African Oresteia* (1969), I draw the concept of “performative history” as a key epistemological tool to read the cultural production of the black transatlantic.

In looking at the network woven within the black Atlantic through the mediation of Italy both as imaginary encounters and as geographical displacements, I identify a systematic engagement with concepts of history and historiography, and their intersection with fiction. The black transatlantic, via its Italian detour, surfaces forcefully as historical narrative, creatively recuperated and modified by African American artists through their encounters with Italy. The peculiarity of Italian modern history provides a set of epistemologies and artistic representations of colonialism, anticolonial movements, and their intertwinement with modern Western cultural formations. I propose the discourse of “living history” as a tool employed by African American writers and intellectuals to excavate and reveal their own historical presence within the Western world. “Living history” is an alternative discourse to the Middle Passage, which allows us to understand black transatlantic encounters and the ensuing cultural production as flexible, in-progress formations, engendered by the inclusion of the cultural and social dynamics of the African Diaspora in the long view of history. The historical narratives produced with the

mediation of the Italian context defy the invisibility of black modernity, which thus emerges at the core of Western civilization, rather than in opposition to it.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Africa Futura: The Aesthetics of Political Modernist Projects in the Black Transatlantic of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Marcus Garvey, and George Schuyler*

The correlation between colonialism, imperialism, and other forms of contact with the African continent is among the staples of Modernist Studies. V. Y. Mudimbe's famous claim that the continent is a "construction of the Western intellectual" (*The Idea of Africa* 9) finds its corroboration in a well-known imagery, which, in different forms and degrees, conceptualizes Africa as the locus of lost origins. Africa is envisioned as a distant and exotic location, whose culture and people (these nouns in the singular being symptomatic of both its imaginary simplicity and strangeness) constitute the Other of modern Europe and the US.<sup>13</sup> From the beginning of the twentieth century to the late 1930s—the temporal span of this chapter—the representation of exotic cultures in Western literatures progressively strengthened with the growing circulation of peoples and ideas throughout the transatlantic world. In Gauguin's Polynesian paintings, Picasso's African masks, and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, to mention a few canonical examples, the allegedly primitive cultures functioned as a background against which to measure the rationalism, sophistication, and progressive development of Western white

---

<sup>13</sup> On the complex function of primitivism within modernism see Michael Bell, *Primitivism*; Carole Sweeney, *From Fetish to Subject*; Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide*; Chris Bongie, *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism and the Fin de Siècle*; Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*; and Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*. I will address primitivism especially in its Futurist variations.

societies. I intend to argue, however, that this construct of primitive Africa is by no means the only possible one. The idea of Africa functions under very different protocols when studied in the context of the black transatlantic. Scholars often overlook the crucial fact that, in the twentieth century, the cultural usage of the African continent was transformed by the futuristic and modernist projects of nation building, cultural avant-gardes, and political emancipation. My purpose in this chapter is to address this pivotal yet ignored conceptualization of a future Africa in the context of the black transatlantic. I argue that the trope of Africa as the place and source of “the future” plays a fundamental role in the modernist national and cultural narratives of black American and Italian intellectuals, and that its formation and manifestations must be understood in terms of the intense network of exchanges within the triangulation of the Americas, Europe, and Africa.

The three authors studied in this chapter—Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Marcus Garvey, and George Schuyler—all tend to project the modernity of their nation, or the nation whose construction they are advocating, onto the African continent. In their literary and political projects, Africa is *the* space where the realization of futuristic designs can take place. They create an idea of Africa that is fated to become the locus of futuristic collective concretizations, vulnerable even to drift into the impracticality of sci-fi. Covering the two decades of 1920s and 1930s, this chapter follows the entanglement of black American and Italian politics of self-representation in the space of the black transatlantic. I will pay special attention to the emergence, in this space, of the tensions between the artistic experimentation of the avant-gardes and the growing importance of nationalism and conservative ideologies such as Fascism and Communism. The apex of

this tension is dramatically enacted through the Italian aggression toward Ethiopia in October 1935, which spurred an intense political and intellectual debate among African Americans, leading Marinetti to use the name of Italy as an empty signifier in order to appease the Fascist Regime.

The chapter is divided into two parts. The first traces the connections between Italian Futurism and ideas circulating within the black transatlantic. Focusing on the work of Marinetti as founder of the Italian Futurist movement, I show the central role that a domesticated African continent has in imagining the new modern and futuristic Italy. As Africa had long been considered part of Italy, Marinetti employs her peoples to engage in projects of Italian self-determination and modernization. His fiction on the projects of a super man and a revolutionary, independent Italian collective body politic are imbued with the rhetoric of contemporary transatlantic discourses on racial uplift and black sovereignty. The centrality of the exceptional individual as an agent of collective change in the fictional and political revolutionary projects of the time comes to the fore in Marcus Garvey's and George Schuyler's work, which is the focus of the second section of the chapter.

All of the works analyzed here create discomfort in the reader. Marinetti, Schuyler, and Garvey all play with the labile distinction between the progressive ideals of anticolonialist nationalism and racial, essentialist-driven Fascism. Garvey's dream of a black African Empire that includes the entire continent, inhabited by peoples of all geographical provenances, who speak multiple languages, and possess a variety of cultural backgrounds, points to the malleability of the very concept of the nation. I will discuss Marinetti's articulation of a Futurist, rather than Italian patriotism, which

embraced the world (“La democrazia futurista” 412). Finally, George Schuyler—who did not support any form of collective project—devoted five years to writing fiction that created a black world order, denouncing American racism and identifying in black internationalism the strategy leading to full enfranchisement of black Americans. The comparative analysis of these three cases provides us with a useful vantage point from which to assess the voracious cultural prognoses that constituted what I call *Africa futura*. This is a modernist construct, which, put in a dialectic relationship with the vision of a primitive Africa, allows for an insight into the complex intersection of modernism and national consciousness within the black transatlantic.

### **Part I: Othering Italy, Domesticating Africa in Marinetti’s Futuristic Italy<sup>14</sup>**

Africa plays a central role in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti’s project to create a modern Italy, imagined as a culturally hybrid geographical space.<sup>15</sup> In Marinetti’s work, Africa is not the antithesis that serves to define modern Italy, but the very space that engenders the creation of a progressive nation. The African kings and the maverick soldiers of his stories, rather than merely being the Other of Euro-American primitivism, voice the faith in the betterment of humankind to be achieved through the fusion of the

---

<sup>14</sup> In my discussion of Futurism, I will mostly deal with the work and thought of its founder—which, starting in the 1970s, scholars have called Marinettismo. For more details about these categories, see Giuseppe Gazzola’s introduction to *Futurismo: Impact and Legacy*, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Such a project reveals the fundamental contradiction of Futurism and in general the modernist European avant-garde, visible in the clash between the obsession with the new, the rejection of the past, and the inevitable return to tradition. Africa is so closely connected to Italian history and culture that it is preposterous to imagine a brand new future through the detour to the African continent. On the contradictions constitutive of the Futurist project, see Cinzia Sartini-Blum, *The Other Modernism*.



Italian genius—a hypertrophic sense of individualism rather than any specific feature of Italianness<sup>16</sup>—and the qualities of the African nature and peoples. Marinetti’s Italianness, as envisioned by the detour in the lands of black world cultures dominated by the African American discourse of the New Negro, speaks to the position of Italy within the black transatlantic and to the modalities of representation of black cultures in Italy. In this sense, the presence of Africa in Marinetti’s literary production is more than the result of an outlandish artistic personality, committed to exaggeration and improbability in order to market his work. Rather, it voices the acknowledgement of the country’s long-standing relations with Africa, and it is symptomatic of the fraught relations between Italian culture, the national body politic, and the political borders established with the unification of the peninsula in 1861.

Although official historiography has endeavored to occlude the linkages between Italy and Africa, the historical and cultural ties between these two regions, especially the Maghreb and the Horn of Africa, are long and intense. In the twentieth century, Futurism became the key avant-garde movement to capitalize on these ties, especially through the works of Marinetti as the founder of the movement.<sup>17</sup> A crucial figure of the early twentieth-century international avant-garde, Marinetti diagnosed a pivotal place for Africa within his writings well before the Fascist regime actually attempted to

---

<sup>16</sup> See “La democrazia futurista” in *Teoria e invenzione futurista* (1983), ed. Luciano de Maria.

<sup>17</sup> In spite of his prolific activity, Marinetti is mainly remembered for two reasons. The first is his “Manifesto of Futurism,” a programmatic aesthetic and ideological declaration that sparked the international proliferation of manifestoes that distinctly mark avant-garde movements. The second reason is his controversial and oft-cited affiliation with the Italian Fascist party. On the relation between Futurism and the Fascist regime, see the extensive work of Walter Adamson, Emilio Gentile, and Günter Berghaus.

consolidate its imperial ambitions in the continent.<sup>18</sup> In this sense, Marinetti's writing dramatizes a fundamental phase in Italian cultural relations with Africa. His approach is at once symptomatic of the tendency of Italian historiography to dismiss the exchanges with Africa and of the language that will be employed throughout the century to represent the encounters with peoples of the African Diaspora. Along these lines, I will explore the novel *Mafarka le futuriste: roman africain* (*Mafarka the Futurist: An African Novel*, 1909) together with later works such as the play *Il tamburo di fuoco. Drame africain di calore, colore, rumore e odore* (*The Drum of Fire. African Play of Heat, Color, Noise and Smell*) and the short story "Il Negro" ("The Negro") both published in 1922.<sup>19</sup> The temporal gap among these texts speaks to the steady presence of African themes and settings in Marinetti's work while revealing a transatlantic approach to the creation of Italian modernity with the narratives that stretch to the American shores. In this section, I seek to foreground the elements in Marinetti's work that shed light on the presence and use of Africa at such a crucial point of political and cultural definition of the new Italian state in the early twentieth century. In doing so, I intend to demonstrate how the importance of Africa in Marinetti's work is better understood when read against the backdrop of anticolonialist discourses and the intense dialogue between black cultures and international modernism.

Let us start by providing a sense of Africa's role in the cultural climate of early twentieth-century Europe. For instance, despite the little treatment that colonialism

---

<sup>18</sup> See Walter Adamson, "Fascism and Culture" and *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism*.

<sup>19</sup> The English translations of these texts are mine.

receives in Antonio Gramsci's work, he makes an observation that speaks to the awareness of the growing importance of black cultures in Europe. In a letter to his friend Berti on August 28, 1927, Gramsci thus comments on Henri Massis' book *Défense de l'Occident* (1927):

Una grande delusione intellettuale mi ha dato invece il tanto strombazzato libro di Henri Massis *Défense de l'Occident*; [...] Ciò che mi fa ridere è il fatto che questo egregio Massis, il quale ha una benedetta paura che l'ideologia asiatica di Tagore e di Gandhi non distrugga il razionalismo cattolico francese, non s'accorge che Parigi è diventata una mezza colonia dell'intellettualismo senegalese e che in Francia si moltiplica il numero dei meticci. Si potrebbe, per ridere, sostenere, che se la Germania è l'estrema propaggine dell'asiatismo ideologico, la Francia è l'inizio dell'Africa tenebrosa e che il jazz-band è la prima molecola di una nuova civiltà eurafricana! (143)

On the other hand, I had a great intellectual disappointment with the highly touted book by Henri Massis, *Defense de l'Occident (Defense of the West)*; I think that either Filippo Crispolti or Egilberto Martire would have written a sparer book if the subject had occurred to them. What makes me laugh is that this eminent Massis, who is dreadfully afraid that Tagore's and Gandhi's Asiatic ideology might destroy French Catholic rationalism, does not realize that Paris has almost become a colony of Senegalese intellectualism and that in France the number of half-breeds is increasing by leaps and bounds. One might, just for a laugh, maintain that, if Germany is the extreme outcrop of ideological Asianism,

France is the beginning of darkest Africa and the jazz-band is the first molecule of a new Euro-African civilization! (*Letters from Prison* 128)

Gramsci's observation of the pervasiveness of African cultures, within the European intellectual fabric, both satirizes the fear of contamination within Europeanness itself and speaks to the lack of understanding of how African cultures were already present in European cultural traditions. Gramsci's jest is, despite its apparent levity, indicative of the paradoxical attitude toward Africa that imagined the continent as both the backward Other ("mysterious Africa") and the source of the creation of a modern world ("a Euro-African civilization"). Along these lines, in her excellent study of the southern question and the national construction of Italy, Aliza Wong resorts to Edward Said's *Orientalism* to assert that "[i]n Italy, in addition to imagining the distant "Other," Italians also found the alien within their own national borders. This southern Other played an integral role in the development of patriotic, moral, imperialist, and immigration discourses during the liberal period" (*Race and the Nation* 5). Wong points to a domestic Other that, I argue, is projected on to Italian images of Africa and her peoples. A dialectic relation comes into play between the Southern Italian imagined as alien and the African Other envisioned as domestic.

The presence of a domestic other, which geographically corresponded to more than one-third of the country, produced complex and ambivalent formulations of the Italian relation to Africa, and while primitivism was instrumental in these processes, it by no means encompassed them. The continent, connected to Italy by the Mediterranean Sea, would play at least a double role within the construction of the discourses of Italian

national identity. Together with the stereotype of backwardness and brutality that contrasted with the economically developed and culturally refined European nations, Africa also stood as the medium and the space through which Italians, especially southerners, could be transformed into modern citizens. Africa was not the absolute Other of modernist primitivism, a distant and backward space against which the progress of European civilization could be measured. It was rather an extension of modern Italy, even the imaginary space that made the very thought of a modern Italy possible. Wong provides further evidence of this dynamic by reporting the contents of a letter written in 1863 by General Ninio Bixio to his wife. Bixio, one of the key personalities of the Risorgimento,<sup>20</sup> describes Puglia as “Una terra che dovrebbe essere distrutta o quanto meno spopolata e gli abitanti mandati in Africa per essere civilizzata!” (“A land that would need to be destroyed or at least depopulated and its inhabitants sent to Africa to be civilized!”; qtd. in Wong 21). Bixio’s comment is symptomatic of a deeply rooted attitude of northern Italians towards the south. Africa functions as a diminishing term of comparison to justify the conquest of the south.<sup>21</sup> Yet it points to the continent as conducive of a more civilized polity seemingly unattainable by mere political reforms in the south. It is striking that the “civilization” of southern Italians could be achieved by moving them to countries commonly held as primitive and backwards. Hence, Bixio’s words reveal the double function performed by Africa in the imagination of the fathers of

---

<sup>20</sup> The Risorgimento was the independence movement that led to the creation of Italy as a nation-state under the banner of the Kingdom of Piedmont.

<sup>21</sup> On the southern question and the ways in which its creation is part of the definition of Europe against its Others, see Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius*, 2006.

the country.<sup>22</sup> Futurism, especially Marinetti's work, reflects and amplifies this mindset, creating a consistent logic of an Africanist rhetoric present throughout the twentieth century.

This logic has deep roots in Italian encounters with Africa in early modernity. In "Imagination of Renaissance Italians," John Brackett analyzes the travel narratives and commentaries of fifteenth-century Italian merchants to demonstrate how their attitude was more tolerant and open towards Africans when compared to the reactions of coeval Spanish and Portuguese adventurers. As an explanation of this different and more tolerant mindset, Brackett adduces the domestic fragmentations of Italians as subjects of city-states, such as the Florentines, Venetians, Genovese and so on, and the long-standing history of encounters with the continent that arches back to the Roman Empire. In referring to a certain Cadamosto, one of the merchants whose narratives he studies, Brackett argues:

Especially striking is his ability to name important cities to the south, names, which would only enter general circulation with Leo Africanus' accounts of travel in Africa in the early sixteenth century. [...] But Cadamosto's account reflects something more about his own personality, [...] his willingness to withhold value judgments in practically every instance. (80)

---

<sup>22</sup> Seventy-five years later, Marinetti would still argue the necessity of Italian artists to travel to Africa to create new Futurist art. I will discuss the speech later in the chapter.

This is the strongest of the examples adduced by Brackett. Yet each one of them highlights the absence of tropes of cultural comparison and of hierarchies of value, an attitude partially due to the lack of a nationalist rhetoric of Italianness.

Several centuries later, curiosity for the African continent as a familiar yet different reality would justify the Italian colonial project. According to its supporters, colonialism consisted of the appropriation of territories that were “naturally” part of Italy. In *Il vero volto dell'anticolonialismo italiano* (1955), Enrico De Leone points out that “Prima del fascismo, Mazzini aveva esortato alla conquista della Tunisia ‘chiave del Mediterraneo centrale, connessa al sistema sardo-siculo e lontana un ventiquattro leghe dalla Sicilia, spetta visibilmente all’Italia’” (“[a]lready before the Fascists did, Mazzini had called for the conquest of Tunisia, ‘key to the central Mediterranean in Mazzini’s own words, Tunisia visibly belongs to Italy connected as it is, to the Sardinian-Sicilian system and removed from Sicily by a mere 24 leagues’”; 25, my translation). De Leone also recalls the invocation, full of pathos, delivered by Cesare Correnti, an exponent of Cavour’s government:

L’Africa ci attira visibilmente. È una predestinazione. Ci sta sugli occhi da secoli questo libro suggellato, questo orizzonte misterioso che ci chiude lo spazio, che ci rende semibarbaro il Mediterraneo, che costringe l’Italia a trovarsi sugli ultimi confini del mondo civile ... L’Africa, sempre l’Africa! ... L’abbiamo proprio negli occhi e fin qui ne siamo sempre esiliati. (25)

Africa visibly attracts us. It's our fate. This sealed book has been in our eyes forever, this mysterious horizon that closes our space, that makes our Mediterranean almost barbaric, that relegates Italy on the furthest borders of the civilized world ... Africa, always Africa! ... We truly have it in our eyes and Yet so far, we have always been exiled from it. (25, my translation)

De Leone's study is a defense of colonialism. As late as 1955, when the book was published, he still held to the official rhetoric of the Italian "humane colonialism," based on respect for the indigenous populations.<sup>23</sup> Marinetti's futurist Italianness springs from this tradition founded on a colonialist discourse in which the political annexation of African territories to Italy is the official act that sanctions a geographical and historical mutual belonging.

### ***Marinetti's Futurist Primitivism***

This cultural context informs Futurist primitivism. The Futurist vision of Africa, especially as expressed in Marinetti's work, is at once unique and exemplary of the broader, transnational cultural network this chapter traces. It is exemplary insofar as Africa is treated as a malleable symbol, the catalyst for nationalistic and aesthetic tensions across the West. It is peculiar in that it is developed by means of a highly chauvinistic rhetoric for all things Futurist, as Marinetti's project relies on the inclusion

---

<sup>23</sup> Del Boca, *L'africa nella coscienza degli italiani*, provides political, cultural, and historical proofs of this attitude, trivialized in the obnoxious saying "Italians, good people."



of Africa for the realization of his idealistic vision of a modern Italy, as the pivot of the transnational grandeur of the Mediterranean.<sup>24</sup> Yet Marinetti voices the idea of a mother country disconnected from the idea of family and of national borders, arguing that “La vera concezione di patria nasce per la prima volta oggi dalla concezione futurista del Mondo. ... passione accanita, violenta, e tenace per il divenire-progresso-rivoluzione della propria razza lanciata alla conquista delle mete più lontane” (“[t]he true idea of the mother country is born today with the futurist idea of the World. ... stubborn, violent, and tenacious passion for the progressive-revolutionary-becoming of our race set for the conquest of the most unattainable goals”; “Il patriottismo futurista” 337, my translation). Futurism presents itself as the source of the spiritual greatness of Italy and not vice-versa, the adjective Italian seemingly accidental, replaceable with Futurist. The futurist idea of the world—rather than of Italy—allowed for the integration of Africa within its borders, together with the appropriation of elements of other foreign cultures, as part of a transnational geography that helps to explain the Futurist brand of both primitivism and nationalism.<sup>25</sup> The Futurists, in fact, unsettle the received notion of primitivism by using the term to define themselves, a usage further complicated by Marinetti, who displaces into Africa the revolutionary projects meant to turn Italy into a modern and futuristic nation.

---

<sup>24</sup> See Marja Harmanma’s article on the Futurist anarchic distopia of “artocracy” and individualism, “Beyond Anarchism: Marinetti’s Futurist (Anti) Utopia of Individualism and Artocracy” (2009).

<sup>25</sup> As I will argue later, even in the phase of the alignment of Futurism with Fascism, this openness towards foreign cultural elements and towards Africa continues, as demonstrated by Marinetti’s speech to the Italian Academy in 1938.

The Futurists' tendency to associate primitivism with a sensibility derived from new technological and scientific developments, rather than the usage of cultural and natural elements from distant, exotic locales, bestows a specific nuance on the movement's relation to Africa. In *Literary Futurism* John White discusses this specificity in comparison to Cubism and Russian Futurism. The Futurists rejected the recurrence of exotic art produced in far away locations as another version of the veneration for the past typical of Italian passéists. White claims that "[c]ertainly much of the stress in the Futurist context is on a new modernist primitivism *qua* state of mind, not on the geographical exoticism of Tahiti or the Gabon; yet one also finds that the new-felt globalism discussed by Marinetti still privileges certain technically more progressive locations" (298). This distinction is crucial, as Italy was struggling toward industrial and social modernization in an attempt to follow in the footsteps of France, Germany, and England. The painter Boccioni would largely elaborate on these differences. In *Pittura scultura futuriste* he claims, "in contrast to the retrospective primitivism of the Cubists, the Futurists are to be seen as 'the primitives of a new sensibility that has been completely transformed'" (qtd. in White 132). According to Boccioni, the influence of the machine on the life of men was taking humanity towards new beginnings. White argues:

[t]he effect is to invigorate them, to return them to the essential and the intuitive machine-reality, uncluttered by the passéist intellect. Boccioni's expression 'primitives of a new sensibility' will echo throughout later phases of Futurism. Although primarily associated with the early years of the movement, 'it is still present in Fillia's call for a new primitivism

without romanticism' (1934) and Marinetti's and Tullio Crali's talk of the 'new primitive man, as expressed in their Manifesto of Musical Words' of 1940. (299)

Primitive as a historically crystallized and immutable past has no currency in the Futurists' imagination of a new and modern Italy. The regenerative power of Futurism, according to its founder, will embrace Africa as well as Italy. The exceptional individual, especially able to exploit contemporary technological innovations, would lead the masses to a revolution of artistic sensibility and political identity that would unfold in both Italy and Africa. According to Mikonnen, "[t]he figure of the African futurist rebel, who promises reconciliation between technology and the 'instinctual' nature of man, is the outcome of a simple overturning of values associated with the 19<sup>th</sup> century image of the African primitive, or the primitive within" ("Artificial Africa in the European Avant Garde" 407). Mikonnen's comment is correct, but overlooks the attempted synthesis of African and European civilizations, a recurrent feature of Marinetti's Africanist writing. Mikonnen, whose criticism is representative of much scholarship on Marinetti, does not account for the agency that the African settings and characters have in Marinetti's work well after the end of the iconoclastic attitude of the movement. In a counterintuitive manner, the potential for the national renewal of Italy is envisioned in Africa, at the hand of African kings and heroes, who are able to produce a synthesis between African cultural traditions and European technical knowledge.

***What Is Africa to Me: Marinetti's Hybrid Italy***

Marinetti's position was so unique that, in reporting on a Futurist soirée in Paris, Apollinaire describes him as “autour d'un feu de bivouac M.r.n.tt. s'exerçait à parler petit nègre” (“practicing to speak *le petit nègre* around a camp fire”; 1916, in “Le Poète assassiné Paris”; qtd. in White 306). Not only does Marinetti speak “le petite nègre,” but Africa is also inscribed in the very birth of Futurism, appearing in the founding manifesto of the movement. The caustic chastiser of traditions and of all things past is exemplary of Lukacs's “transcendental homelessness” (qtd. in Torgovnick 187). The theorist of the novel refers to “the condition of the modern Western mind, the mind that produced the novel,” which is “secular but yearning for the sacred, ironic but yearning for the absolute, individualistic but yearning for the wholeness of community, asking questions but receiving no answers, fragmented but yearning for ‘immanent totality’” (qtd. in Torgovnick 188). This list of dyads fits Marinetti's outlandish, self-contradictory artistic trajectory, whose start I identify with a coeval text crucial for understanding Marinetti's Africanist discourse—the novel *Mafarka the Futurist*, published in France in 1909 with the subtitle *An African Novel*. This initial symptom of Marinetti's concern for Africa gives us a primary venue to explore the manner in which the Futurists imagine their project within both the continent and the Italian borders. It is an osmotic relation between Italy and Africa rather than the swallowing of the continent by the European nation.

In the introduction to the most recent Italian edition of the novel (1993), Italian literary scholar Luigi Ballerini foregrounds the elements that make the Africa of *Mafarka* something different from a distant, exotic place. He explains that the epithet referring to

the protagonist, el-Bar, means “of the sea,” thus connecting the protagonist to the meaning of the Mediterranean Sea as *mare nostrum* or *mare interno* (“our sea” or “internal sea” xvi).<sup>26</sup> The naming here betrays the conception of the southern side of the Mediterranean as part of the Latin world and of the sea itself as a bridge rather than a dividing obstacle in the imagined geography of Italy. This is not, however, Marinetti’s invention. The name *Africa* originally referred to the African provinces of the Roman Empire and was later commonly used to designate Libya—which, not surprisingly, would later become the first of the Italian colonies in the continent. Describing the extent to which Marinetti’s literary incorporation of Africa resulted from an existing tradition of thought, Ballarini refers to an encyclopedia written in the 4th century by the Arab author Al-Mas’udi, whose French translation circulated widely during the mid-nineteenth century. This detail is also useful in relation to Marinetti’s play *The Drum of Fire* (1922), whose protagonist Kabango has been educated in Timbuktu, one of the most important centers of Arabic culture in Africa. In fact, after being annexed to the Mali Empire in the early 14th century, Timbuktu became an important center of Islamic studies. In both *Mafarka* and *The Drum of Fire*, what Marinetti claimed to be an ahistorical treatment of Africa did not appear so to his coeval readers, who, despite the hyperbolic style and imagination of the author, could recognize the details of a historical and cultural reality connected to Italy by centuries of exchanges.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> My translation.

<sup>27</sup> Cinzia Sartini-Blum makes the most recent claim of a-historicity of *Mafarka* in “Incorporating the Exotic: From Futurist Excess to Postmodern Impasse” in *A Place in the Sun* (2003).

***Mafarka the Futurist: An African Novel***

*Mafarka* (1909) marks a critical moment in the development of Marinetti's inclusion of Africa within his literary representation of a Futurist Italy and of the Italian *über* man. The protagonist of the novel, Mafarka el-Bar, is an Arab prince who after deposing his uncle has to fight the hordes of black soldiers the latter sends against him. When his brother is killed in action, Mafarka plans the construction of a "mechanical son," half human and half machine, able to defy death itself.<sup>28</sup> The novel is significant as the first literary rendition of the Futurist *über* man, and as such has received much scholarly attention.<sup>29</sup>

The potential for renewal, which Marinetti identifies with Africa, is functional to the creation of the new man, but does not result in the advancement of a new social order, either in Africa or in Europe. It is not by chance that the novel ends with an earthquake of incredible proportion that promises to destroy the entire planet, after Gazurmah, the mechanical newborn creature, kills Mafarka's mother, Colubbi. The natural order has been subverted and the new futurist hero flies towards the sky; there is no suggestion of the creation of a new society or a new political order in keeping with Marinetti's

---

<sup>28</sup> The subtitle *African Novel* that accompanied the first edition was removed in the 1922 edition, together with a series of excisions that followed the trial for inappropriate language in the text. Ironically it was published by a press named Augustea—a clear reference to the Roman emperor, just in the year of Mussolini's seizing of power (1922), the end of Futurist political activism, and the beginning of the close if fraught relationship between Marinetti and the Duce.

<sup>29</sup> See Rita Wilson's reading of Africa as mythical space, Barbara Spackman's feminist reading of the novel, Harris' foregrounding of the Arab ethnicity of Mafarka, Tomasello's focus on Africa as the uncontaminated space in which to envision the Futurist *über* man. See Sartini-Blum's treatment of the individual sovereignty of the protagonist as the sign of Marinetti's early fascistic tendencies.

intention to do away with any existing form of political organization. As Tomasello puts it:

Rather than the sanction of human triumph, that is, the triumph of the *über* man, Marinetti's novel foresees the self-destruction of humankind, as expressed through the last words uttered by Colubbi, the woman excluded by the birth of Gazurmah. ... 'Tu mi hai spezzato il cuore sotto le tue costole di bronzo! ... Ma uccidendomi hai ucciso la Terra, la Terra! ... Fra poco udrai il suo primo sussulto d'agonia!' ('You broke my heart under the weight of your metal ribs! ... But, in killing me, you have killed the Earth, the Earth! ... You will soon hear its first lament of agony'). (222)

Immediately, the first underground quake and a deep aftershock shake the earth. Gazurmah "bruscamente si dondolò forte, e infine gettò lontano suo padre, come un toro infuriato si libera da un giogo. Mafarka piombò inerte sulla roccia, schiacciandovisi come un panno bagnato" ("briskly and powerfully he swayed and threw far away his father, like a raging bull freeing himself of his yoke. Mafarka fell dead on the rocks, crushed like a soaked cloth"; 219).<sup>30</sup> Thus, Mafarka embodies the Futurist man killed by his creation Gazurmah, in the most defiant and ambitious Futurist visions, that is, to give birth to their successors and foresee their own destruction. Gazurmah's body, together with Mafarka's mind and will, allow for the victorious futurists' struggle against nature, but it is an ephemeral victory. At this stage, the real Other of the Futurist hero is not the African, but the product of his own intellect, his mechanical son. This act of self-creation thereby

---

<sup>30</sup> The English translations of the novel are mine.

entails self-destruction as well, revealing the impossibility of a telic project by the avant-garde in the face of society and politics. Hence, Gazurmah stands for the monsters produced by a collective imagination nurtured by the fear of uncertainty in the present and unpredictability of the future.

The celebration of technology as the possibility for a new civilization clashes with the destruction of the exceptional individual. The annihilation of the *über* man as catalyst of this technological revolution engenders a discrepancy between claims of progress, objectivism, and truth on the one hand and, on the other, an art that puts forth itself as the creative energy to fill that gap. If the creative act itself destroys the creator, the progressive trajectory of a teleological conception of history and human progress is eschewed in favor of the futuristic valorization of constant change, that is, dynamism as the sole force that can avoid the instrumentalization of art. It is a destructive phase of human history symbolized in the novel by the passage of power from Mafarka, as the guiding figure of his people toward liberation and moral uplift, to Gazurmah, the immortal mechanical man. Mafarka's self-destructive act is functional as one of the main tenets of Futurism—the repudiation of history and of the past, which results in a contradiction. Commenting on the use of Africa as past in the novel, critic Luigi Ballerini suggests, “si potrebbe formulare un’idea di nuovo (di futuro anteriore) non asservito alla concezione lineare di un progresso che confonde regolarmente il meglio con il più recente ... rispetto a chi ancora concepisce il progresso come marcia invece che come scavo” (“[envisioning] an idea of the new (of future anterior) that is not functional to a linear conception of progress, which confounds the best with the most recent [...] against those who still conceive of progress as a forward march rather than a movement of



excavation”; xiv). The Futuristic hero conjures the forces of the past and of the present to create the future, in an attempt to defy linear time. In the *Manifesto of Futurism* Marinetti boldly declares, “Time and Space have died yesterday. We are already living in the realms of the Absolute, for we have already created infinite, omnipresent speed” (14). Yet he calls his rebellious movement Futurism and celebrates speed and technology, the manifestations ante-litteram (before writing) of the present time, almost as mystical values the modern human being should adhere to. The *Manifesto* itself, as the genre used to set rules and norms, contrasts with the claim to do away with traditions and social obligations. The young generations, who will replace Marinetti and his cohorts in the undaunted march towards the future, will perpetuate Futurism’s dynamism. Thus, he declares, “Our successors will rise up against us, from far away, from every part of the world, [...] sniffing like dogs at the doors of our academies, at the delicious scent of our decaying minds, already destined for the catacombs of libraries” (*Manifesto* 16).

This attitude is consistent with the celebration of individual freedom stated by Mafarka. After destroying his uncle King Bubassa’s army, he refuses to treat the subjugated soldier as the shepherd of a herd. He states, “Che gli Arabi fossero miei soldati me lo concedevo con orgoglio... Ma che essi diventassero il mio gregge... oh! Triste sorte! Quest’idea basterebbe a corrompere per sempre il loro sangue e il mio” (“I was proud of leading the army of Arab soldiers ... But that they would become my herd ... Oh! Miserable fate! This idea would suffice to corrupt forever their blood and mine!”; 159). Marinetti here shows awareness of the dangers implicit in a mass of people accepting a strong leader as guide and Mafarka, his super man, prefers to travel his path alone. Yet he needs the soldiers’ sanction to gain the confidence necessary to realize his

dream of a “super human” creature. Thus, he tells them, “Si, si fratelli miei, vi apro le braccia e vi stringo tutti sul mio cuore ... Voi siete degni finalmente di udire il verbo misterioso della mia religione” (“Yes, my brothers, I welcome you and I embrace you ... you are finally worth to hear the mysterious word of my religion”; 162). This passage reveals the contradictory relations between Futurism and the collective, at once needed and repelled. In the essay “Futurist Democracy,” Marinetti would speak of the exceptional quality of the Italian people not as a national body but as individuals. Yet in his fiction the exceptional individual needs the collective body to approve and sanction his project, as shown by his play *Il tamburo di fuoco* (*The Drum of Fire*).

### ***Il tamburo di fuoco***

The tension between the corporate individual and the collective body politic runs through *Il tamburo di fuoco* (*The Drum of Fire* 1922), with which, fourteen years after *Mafarka*, Marinetti returns to Africa. In both works, the other space of Africa is figured as belonging to the Futurist project rather than being the a-historical space of a primitive, anterior culture. As Marianna Torgovnick explains in *Gone Primitive*,

If primitive societies resemble our prehistory and exist in contemporary spaces accessible to individuals, then origins remain accessible. Our need for the primitive to be eternally present accounts in part for the anxiety often expressed by anthropologists and adventurers about the speed with which primitive societies vanish. The primitive must be available or our ‘origins’ may no longer be available, re-creatable. (186)

In Marinetti's work, indigenous cultures are integrated with present-day Italy to shape a joint project of Futurist modernity, rather than preserving their a-historicity to function as the origin of the West. Neither Italy nor Africa is a passive object onto which the project of modernity can be performed. Rather, their integration is constitutive, because only in Africa can Marinetti seem to find the necessary intellectual energy to implement his utopia of a truly progressive society. This is a useful perspective from which to look at *The Drum of Fire*, an exemplary case of Marinetti's chaotic, chameleonic art-making and self-contradictory ideological statements.

The play, subtitled *African Drama of Heat, Color, Noises, and Odor*, was performed in May and June 1922 and published in 1923. It represents the work in which Marinetti's idiosyncratic attitude towards Africa is most visible and constitutes a formal rupture in his theatrical production. According to the author's preface, the play is "impressionistic," that is, traditional, rather than "synthetic." Marinetti warns the spectator not to get used to this style, because this work is only an "intermezzo," an exception before he resumes the production of the "ultrafuturist, synthetic plays": "Non potevo raggiungere lo scopo con un dramma sintetico. Scrissi dunque questo dramma impressionista con relativo sviluppo teatrale. Nessuna concessione ai vostri gusti tradizionali avrete prossimamente nuove sintesi teatrali futuriste" ("I could not reach my goal with a synthetic drama. Consequently, I decided to write this impressionistic drama with stage directions. But this is no concession to your traditional taste. You will soon

have new futurist theatrical synthesis"; 8).<sup>31</sup> According to Cinzia Sartini-Blum, the source of this play is the defeat of the Futurist Party in the 1919 and 1921 political elections, and the ensuing disillusionment with the expectations of social and political change the Futurists were expecting from World War I ("Incorporating the Exotic" 142). The replacement of the "synthetic" with a more realistic form belies the urge to express the author's disappointment with the failure of the alliance with the Socialists to realize a political revolution in Italy. Yet the protagonist of the play, the king Kabango, before being killed by his own people, successfully rescues the "sinrun," the fetish representing the merging between European and African knowledge. It is therefore a work of positive expectations. The play employs a didactic tone to convey the revolutionary project the Futurist Party had tried to realize in Italy by participating in the 1921 and 1922 political elections. By envisioning the protagonist Kabango as the viable racially and culturally hybrid future of Italian cultural and political progress, Marinetti claims the encounter with African cultures as the path to the future.

The drama revolves around Kabango, the progressive king of an unidentified African people, who fights the treachery of his internal political enemies and the resignation of his people. Kabango is of black, Berber, and Arabic descent, quintessentially modern in his sophisticated education and knowledge of the ways of the world. Couched in the play's contemporary discourses on colonialism and Italian modernity and figured by Marinetti's volcanic and chaotic imagination, Kabango can be seen as a "typically exceptional" Italian and the spokesperson for a vision of collective good. His character is consistent with the writings in which Marinetti boasts about the

---

<sup>31</sup> Unless otherwise indicated translations are mine.

intrinsic, positive qualities of the Italian people as a group of “exceptional individualities” (“Futurist Democracy”), whose patriotism is disconnected from the Italian nation. Compared to the hedonistic Mafarka, Kabango’s individuality is interested in the collective. Even if Mafarka destroys himself in order to generate a mechanical son, the outcome of this self-sacrifice is still an exceptional individuality, albeit a hybrid between the human and the mechanical. Kabango, on the contrary, is a pragmatic and realistic leader who pursues a collective project with the support of his people. The racial hybridity of Kabango also echoes long-standing debates on the question of the Italian “race” and national identity—a question particularly important insofar as the ethnic hybridity of Italians was used to explain the success of the Roman Empire. According to this argument, the Roman colonization of England had created a strong people whose power was visible in the present greatness of the country, the leader of a world empire (de Leone 28). Marinetti’s ambivalent racial and nationalistic discourses result from both his hyperbolic, unfettered imagination and from contemporary discourses on nation-building, which are inflected by his experience in the cosmopolitan environments of Alexandria of Egypt as well as Paris and Milan.

The conception of the past in *Mafarka* also undergoes a dramatic change in *The Drum of Fire*. While in the former the past is dismissed without exception, in *The Drum of Fire* tradition is considered susceptible to improvement for the good of the people. Within this framework, the earlier Futurist iconoclastic attitude is replaced by a more pragmatic approach to the relations between art and politics or, in other words, to the role of the Futurists themselves in Italian society. In *The Drum of Fire*, the potential for renewal contained in the sinrun as symbol of the productive synthesis of tradition and

innovation will be implemented only with the support of the entire population. In other words, the exceptional Kabango can realize his project only through a collective endeavor. As Sartini-Blum explains, “the fetish embodies the possibility of productively integrating the magical and the technological, traditional knowledge and the innovation of the avant-garde” (“Incorporating the Exotic” 148).

Kabango manages to escape from his uncle, who is trying to overthrow him and to replace his democratic rule with an authoritarian regime. It is not by chance that Kabango supports the independence of Africa, yelling to the crowd of Giumas gathered around him, “L’Africa agli africani” (“Africa for the Africans!”; 98). The inclusion of an anticolonial discourse in Marinetti’s work, while rather surprising, can be understood with the success of Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* that premiered two years earlier and on which Marinetti wrote an article titled “O’Neill futurista americano” (“O’Neill: American Futurist”).<sup>32</sup> Thus, the revolution in Italy should follow the African example of insurrection and self-determination. The Giumas are a decadent people, their glory is (much like that of Italy) in the past, and as Kabango says, “Tutto vi sarà facile perché avete avuto la fortuna di incontrarmi” (“Everything will be easy for you, because you have the luck of meeting me”; 73). The deadly power of nature, namely an infestation of snakes (61-2), has almost completely exterminated the Giumas, who relying on Kabango to improve their lot, help him to escape from his uncle. He thanks them with a long speech meant to encourage them to defy the hostility of nature in order to rebuild their civilization while escaping the authoritarian ambitions of his uncle. Despite Kabango’s

---

<sup>32</sup> The unpublished article is in the Filippo Tommaso Marinetti Papers at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

paternalistic and righteous tone as the leader of a civilizing mission, it is noteworthy that he includes himself as the beneficiary of that mission. Kabango, echoing contemporary discourses of black independence from the Americas to Africa, encourages the Giumas to search for “la via dei neri” (“the black way”; 64) towards civilization. He enumerates their qualities and achievements together with the flaws they need to overcome to raise the fate of their race, and in so doing he echoes common stereotypes of black people—laziness, sensuality, and music as the only outlet of their sensibility. In a paternalistic tone typical of Marinetti’s protagonists, Kabango tells the Giuma that, as a token of gratitude for their hospitality, he will teach them how to exterminate the snakes and how to conquer nature:

Cercate di creare il modo dei negri e che sia rispettato dai bianchi! Anche i bianchi ebbero 15 secoli di vita lenta. Poi in un secolo realizzarono il loro progresso. Come loro voi dovete uscire dal vostro letargo. Questo letargo è dovuto all’isolamento, al clima torrido e alla terra generosa che non esige sforzi. [...] Non siete certo inferiori ai bianchi. Farò di voi dei meccanici, dei fabbri, dei costruttori di città. (73)

Try to create a way specific to black people and to have it respected by whites! White people too have had 15 centuries of slow life. Then, in one century, they built their progress. As they did, you must get out of your hibernation that is due to the isolation, the torrid weather and to the generous land that does not require much work. [...] You certainly are not inferior to whites. I’ll make of you mechanics, blacksmiths, and builders of cities. (71-3)

This recipe for the development and the independence of Africa is strikingly similar to claims to self-determination and political enfranchisement voiced by black American leaders, a mixture of the priority to be given to industrial education voiced by Booker T. Washington and the primacy of classical education expounded by W. E. B. Du Bois. Kabango credits the Giumas with the invention of the *chiteno* (“a saving principle”; 73) as well as claiming that the plant of cotton is native to their land and not to Egypt, and therefore they should irrigate their lands and profit from its production (75). As Kabango envisions himself as the enlightened leader who can implement the “dictatorship of intelligence and knowledge,” he offers to teach the Giumas “the relation of cause and effect” (72) among natural elements, thus upholding a Western system of thought, though, he stresses the importance of being selective in borrowing from the Europeans. One thing they should not adopt, he claims, is “L’arte europea di mentire” (“The European art of lying”; 73).

Echoing Booker T. Washington’s ideology of economic independence as the first step towards political enfranchisement for African Americans, Kabango spurs them to take control of the commerce of natural resources controlled by white people and to transfer their maternal love, “alla Madre Africa” (“to Mother Africa”; 74). Mabima, the princess he is destined to marry, exhorts him to save his life instead of endangering it to deliver the *sinrun* in the safe hands of Bagamoio, the faithful servant. But Kabango is driven by ideals of collective good, and says: “si si... ma non posso immaginarmi fuori del dovere che mi sono imposto: redimere la mia razza!” (“I cannot live without the project that I have chosen for myself: to redeem my race!”; 90). This mixture of



individualist and anticolonialist rhetoric culminates with Kabango's declaration of his own racial belonging. He declares, "Io che porto in me il sangue degli arabi, dei negri e dei berberi, ho ucciso i vizi di queste razze e ho intensificato in me le loro virtù.

Prodigio!" ("because I have in me the blood of the Arab, the black and the Berber, I have destroyed the vices of these three races and I have intensified in me their virtues. What a wonder!"; 73). Upon meeting his death, Kabango is consoled by the idea that he will not die in vain because his "followers" will continue his work by preserving and diffusing the teachings contained in the *sinrun*. Whereas the founding Manifesto of Futurism voiced the will to have future generations override one's creation, Marinetti expresses here the vision of future generations capitalizing on the inheritance of the past. Kabango, in fact, reiterates the idea that the rescue of the Giumas' civilization can only be achieved by enmeshing traditional culture with the new knowledge brought by Kabango's European and Islamic education. The African king becomes the mouthpiece of the complex and contradictory ideas on Italianness. Whereas his words echo the most common primitivist rhetoric, he is paradoxically open to the productive encounter between traditions historically pitted against each other. Marinetti's protagonists echo the rhetoric of the self-determination of African peoples as paradigmatic of the necessity to subvert the Italian political order itself. Moreover, despite Kabango's exceptional individuality, he stands for the commonality among the individuals of the collective body politic, that is, Marinetti's new man is a corporate individual; his exceptionality has no function without the collaboration of an exceptional collectivity.

***“The Negro”: European Cannibalism and Transatlantic Economies***

The principle of simultaneity becomes the rationale that frames the collection of short stories containing “The Negro,” a story of lynching, cannibalism, and eroticism set in Florida, to my knowledge the only piece of fiction that Marinetti sets in the United States. The story speaks to Marinetti’s understanding of sociopolitical renewal within a transatlantic circuit of economic, cultural, and physical exchange. If Mafarka creates the futuristic *über* man by incorporating the technical with the human, the black man functions here as an allegorical figure for the procreation of a new race, physically and intellectually embodying the best qualities of European and American peoples. The tension between individual and collective, having run through the works read so far, reaches its apex here in the scene of reversed cannibalism. If the aim is to satisfy the need for excitement and novelty in a bored European lady, the sale of the dismembered black man’s body to the lynching mob, grotesquely hints at the closest of all social experiences: the incorporation of someone else’s body. Through the hyperbolic style that casts ridicule onto each character, the narrator voices a reversal of the stereotype of African cannibalism in describing the white characters as beast-like.

“The Negro” first appeared in *Gli amori futuristi. Programmi di vita con varianti a scelta* (*Futurist Loves: Life Plans with Variables* 1922).<sup>33</sup> According to the author’s preface, his “sensitive contemporaries” have emerged from the war “unable to desire, to love, and to enjoy the new life” (7), swept by the disillusionment and catastrophe of World War I. Marinetti claims that the existing forms of the novel and of the novella are

---

<sup>33</sup> Later published as “Il negro, consigli di vita a una signora scettica” in *Scatole d’amore in conserva*, (*Canned Love*); last edition in *Novelle con le labbra tinte* (1930).

not adequate for these new men. Thus, he has created these short pieces, to entertain the reader with “a healthy extra-logical exercise, [which] will amuse him by reinvigorating him with artificial optimism” (8). These stories, he continues, will “cure most of the moral dilemma” (8) of post-war humanity. In the last edition of the collection, published in 1930 under the title *Novelle con le labbra dipinte. Simultaneità con programmi di vita a scelta* (*Stories with painted lips. Simultaneity with programs for life with variables*), he explains the novelty of adding multiple endings for the reader to choose from, as a response to the consequences of speed in modern life. As our lives, according to the authorial preface, are not long enough to include all the experiences that speed would allow us in one single life, the simultaneous options will compensate for the physical inadequacies of the human being. Living multiple existences at once, claims Marinetti, can disrupt the linearity of time, albeit multiple literary lives. In a reminder of Einstein’s law of gravity, Marinetti admits: “Così l’intuizione popolare dice che i fatti si chiamano e s’inseguono nello sforzo di unificazione simultanea fuori tempo o spazio che fa l’universo” (“Hence, the popular saying goes that facts recall and follow each other in the effort of simultaneous unification outside of time and space, which makes the universe”; VIII).

The purpose of multiple lives is not clear, although the author provides the reader with examples of simultaneity. Among them, Marinetti lists his ability to hold multiple conversations at once and the possibility for students to take care of their grooming or to exercise quietly during class, because, as Marinetti says, “Dobbiamo superare ogni convenzionalismo sociale e rendere lecita ogni simultaneità” (“We need to move beyond every social convention and to make acceptable every simultaneity”; VIII). To prove that

the Futurists have already attained the maximum level of simultaneity afforded a human being, he cites those spectators who read the newspaper while attending a theatrical performance, although they are unable to do it during the “*sintesi futuriste che sono ininterrottamente teatrali, dinamiche e sorprendenti*” (“Futurist dramatic syntheses that are unremittingly theatrical, dynamic and surprising”; XII). Simultaneity is not the only novelty of this collection, which is composed of “*Programmi di vita, un nuovo genere letterario e intrattenimento spirituale*” (“programs of life, a new literary genre and spiritual entertainment”; XIII) according to Marinetti, who claims to have invented it in 1919. An explanation of the “*tono imperativo e consigliere*” (“imperative and advising tone”; XVII) follows: “*La variante a scelta offre degli ironici e divertenti trampolini all’immaginazione cosicchè ogni tragico fatto della vita liberato dal peso della logica e lanciato in alto apre necessariamente varchi di luce benefica nelle zone più buie dell’anima*” (“The variable by choice offers to the imagination ironic and funny springboards, so that each tragic existential event is freed from the weight of logic and, thrown up in the air, it inevitably creates a passage for beneficial light to enter the darker corners of the soul”; XVIII). Ultimately the reason for such a program is to “*uccidere quella mania critica e quel pessimismo nostalgico e esterofilo che avvelena ancora una parte della nostra razza forte*” (“kill the critical obsession and the nostalgic and xenophile pessimism, which still poison our strong race”; XVII). This is a rather ironic statement to introduce a story set in a foreign country, which reminds the reader not take Marinetti’s words at face-value.

“The Negro,” subtitled “*Consigli a una signora scettica*” (“Suggestions to a skeptical lady”), tells the story of Kam-Rim, an African American man lynched for

flirting with a white woman. Kam-Rim represents the synthesis of civilizations that Marinetti had already figured in Kabango, as is spelled out in the narrator's words: "Fategli segno di entrare quando farà buio e via i pregiudizi sulle razze e sulla ferocia dei negri. Kam-Rim intelligentissimo è capace di superare, oltre alla sua, tutte le razze della terra come amatore ardente e insieme cortese" ("When it is becoming dark, let him in, putting aside the prejudices about the races and about the ferociousness of blacks. Kam-Rim is very intelligent, and as a lover passionate and courteous, he is able to overcome, besides his own, all the races of the earth"; 175). Clearly, Marinetti admits that if we can bypass the issue of skin color, which is possible once vision is impaired by darkness, one can enjoy Kam-Rim's company; his virtues are not only physical but also intellectual.

Sartini-Blum observes that compared to Mafarka, Kam-Rim is only a degraded incarnation of the exotic hero—"transplanted from his native land into a new society where colonization has followed its extreme course, he is reduced to an exotic body that can be consumed to appease Western desires and anxieties. [...] His sovereignty is limited to his ability to seduce a bored Western lady" (153).

Yet Kam-Rim is not the only character to undergo the narrator's iconoclasm and grotesque tone. A ferocious mob chases him and hangs him, apparently driven by "Il feroce chiaro di luna che ordina il massacro" ("the sharp moonlight that orders the massacre"; 179). By virtue of the exaggerated description, the white mob appears beast-like and ferocious, obeying only its own hatred and responding instinctively to the influence of the moon. In other words, if Kam-Rim is the degraded, exotic Other, the lynching crowd is a degraded assembly of white people devoid of any redeeming quality—a disorderly throng characterized in severe terms: "Lungo corteo mugolante che

ribolle, corre, si ferma, discute sulla morte più atroce” (“[t]he long, whimpering and restless procession, runs, stops and discusses the most horrible death”; 180). In fact, even when hanging from the electric pole, Kam-Rim represents a danger. “Il petto ha gonfiamenti mostruosi pieni di minaccia. A un tratto il membro dell’impiccato si erige sulla folla, proiettando la sua ombra enorme di sigaro spavaldo sul lastricato bianco” (“The chest swells hideously, full of menace. Suddenly, the member of the hanged man towers over the crowd, projecting his huge shadow like an arrogant cigar, over the white pavement”; 180). The hyperbolic writing style describes nature taking over both the urban landscape and the characters, which assume a supernatural, fantastic appearance. As if to make sure that the invented town of Kuroo in the distant Southern United States does not alienate the readers at home, Marinetti includes an Italian in the lynching mob-- “Un italiano furbo e simbolista grida: -Sia impiccato sul palo di questa lampada elettrica, e muoia così nel bianco il negraccio, sotto la luna bianca! Poi scimmiescamente s’arrampica sul palo, portando una carrucola” (“An Italian, clever and symbolist shouts: Let’s hang him on the electric pole and let this nigger die in the white, under the white moon! Then, monkey-like, he climbs the pole, carrying a pulley”; 180). The Italian, described as climbing the pole “like a monkey” (180), is the one who gives the final, deadly blow to Kam-Rim. If the plot so far is a fictionalized account of news coming from the US, the concluding scene of cannibalism contextualizes the story within a transatlantic economy of exchange.

As mentioned above, the story is addressed to a white, aristocratic woman, who has already tried all that old Europe had to offer in terms of sensual pleasure. Marinetti, admitting he could do nothing himself to help her, suggests that she cross the ocean and

look for an African American man. For the experience to be really transformative, says Marinetti, the black body has to be literally “incorporated” by the woman. Therefore, imagining the sale of Kam-Rim’s body after the lynching, Marinetti sours the lady to buy the “best piece”—the ennui is clear here, so that “the exotic individuality is reborn in the lady herself” (“Incorporating the Exotic” 154). So that, Marinetti tells the lady:

Potrete tornare l’inverno seguente all’Hotel Excelsior a Roma portando nel vostro sangue qualcosa che nessun uomo e nessuna donna ha! Quella forza esasperata di negro inferocito vi darà finalmente l’equilibrio morale, erotico, sentimentale che certo invano mendichereste in mille flirts cretini o amori pessimisti e stanchi. (182)

The following winter, you will be able to go back to the Hotel Excelsior in Rome, carrying in your blood something that no other woman or man has! That exasperated force of an angry black will finally give you the moral, erotic and sentimental balance, which you would beg for uselessly in thousands of silly flirts or bad and tired loves. (183)

The text makes clear that the cannibalistic act is functional to improve and strengthen the “race at home,” for Kam-Rim possesses qualities that are nowhere to be found in Europe. Despite Marinetti’s fanfare about the qualities of the Italian “race,” he suggests crossing the Atlantic Ocean (or the Mediterranean, in the case of *The Drum of Fire*) in order to find inspirations and qualities that alone can help build the new Italian man or woman. If the incorporation of the racial Other is a staple of exotic primitivism, in

this story it is uncertain whether the real Other is the black man or the beast-like white mob. The necessity of the masses to literally incorporate the maverick individual, questions his leadership. Perhaps an echo of the defeat of the Futurist Party at recent elections and the disillusionment with the promises of change that World War I carried for the Futurists, Marinetti's revolutionary dreams can take place only through a transnational, or more specifically, transatlantic project.

The texts previously analyzed present this aspect. In *The Drum of Fire*, in which Kabango, the enlightened leader, is killed by his political opponent and in *Mafarka the Futurist: An African Novel*, where the fantasy of male power is questioned by the intervention of the protagonist's mother in his creation of the mechanical son. In the short story "The Negro," the narrator advises a white European lady to eat the dismembered body of an African American man lynched by a white mob, in order to inject new strength and intelligence into her European blood.

A brief detour in the Futurist political adventure, leading to Mussolini's seizing of power and the end of the short-lived liberal Italy, will help contextualize Marinetti's works and shed light on his consistent Africanist discourse. These texts are significant also for their contrast with the traditional nationalism to which Futurism had been welded since the beginning of the second phase of the movement marked by its adjustment to Mussolini's regime.



### ***Futurist Politics: The Defeat of a Dream***

Marinetti aimed to realize a political project by creating an art that would free the consciousness of Italians from the fetters of the past. To this end, he deployed theatrical performance, provocative gestures and language, as well as experimental music produced by what he termed “intonarumori” (“strikers of noise”). In “La democrazia futurista” (1919), Marinetti argues that since Italy does not have the natural resources and industrial potential to realize an imperial project, the country should capitalize on its individualities—“Il nostro orgoglio di italiani si fonda sull’enorme numero di eccezionali individui di cui il popolo italiano è formato” (“our pride, as Italians, rests on our superiority as an enormous number of talented individuals”; *Critical Writings* 300). With his usual flamboyance, he explains how it would be a crime to waste such a wealth of intelligence and creativity. This self-reliance leads him to engage with political activity—an interest materialized in the foundation of the Futurist political party.

In his recent book *La nostra sfida alle stelle: futuristi in politica* (2010), Emilio Gentile traces the political trajectory of the Futurist party. Gentile claims the need to study the Futurist political project and activism in order to “per conoscere meglio il ruolo del radicalismo nazionale nella crisi del sistema liberale e nell’origine del fascismo” (“better understand the role of national radicalism in the crisis of the liberal system and in the origin of fascism”; 8).<sup>34</sup> Gentile clarifies the differences between the Futurist and the Nationalist Party and foregrounds how, within the Futurist political project, modernization did not imply rationalization. In discussing Boccioni’s statement on the

---

<sup>34</sup> The English translation of the quotes from Gentile’s text is mine.

rejection of culture as tradition, Gentile argues that, “Il futurismo separò nettamente il senso della modernità dal razionalismo e dallo storicismo; accettò l’idea del progresso ma non lo considerò uno sviluppo evolutivo verso un’umanità affratellata nella ragione e nella pace” (“Futurism clearly separated the sense of modernity from rationalism and historicism; it accepted the idea of progress but did not see it as a kind of evolutionary development towards a humanity brotherly connected by reason and peace”; 29). This feature of the Futurist understanding of modernization puts them at odds with the Fascists, whose authoritarian vision of the state demands the regimentation of both public and private life. A further specificity of Marinetti’s political project was the rejection of the chauvinistic positions of the Nationalist Party, too anchored to the traditional Italian rhetoric of a great past to be recovered for Italy’s transformation into a powerful, modern nation. According to Marinetti, Futurists agreed with the Nationalist Party only on their mutual disgust for “the pacifist and mediocre *camorra* in the government” [...] and the great imbecility and cowardice of the Socialist Reformists” (qtd. in Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics* 73). Another key issue in assessing Futurism’s involvement with Fascism and Mussolini’s imperial project is Marinetti’s understanding of the unlikely success of a large-scale colonial campaign in Africa. Thus writes Marinetti in his journal on December 18, 1918: “Assurdità dell’imperialismo dei nazionalisti che si basa sulla Gloria dei romani antichi e sul predominio industriale commerciale e coloniale impossibile” (“How absurd is the nationalists’ imperialism founded on the glory of the ancient Romans and on a commercial, industrial, and colonial supremacy that is impossible”; qtd. in Gentile 74). To his pragmatic and realistic gauging of Italy’s economic and geopolitical weight, Marinetti added a quasi-idealistic perception of the potential of the

Italian people, which was a strong enough reason for him to commit to political activism. In a letter to Giovanni Papini, who opposed open political activity in the elections of 1913, Marinetti explained that his reasons rested in “*the hope, the thrust, the will* in purifying, rejuvenating, and accelerating the Italian political conscience” (qtd. in Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics* 70). The Futurists, adds Berghaus, had to offer an example to the disillusioned and cynical youth, to persuade them that, “the new Italy is not too far away” (70). Indeed, the future of the Futurists is in their present. This is in fact the role Marinetti assumes in the preface to the previously mentioned collection of short stories *Futurist Loves: Plans of life with variables*. Art and politics, thus, overlap. Simultaneity is the principle and the magic wand to awaken Italians’s political consciousness and artistic habits alike.

The Futurist political program was, in Gentile’s words, “kaleidoscopic” (68). It included the suppression of the parliament, a strong anticlerical position, the goal to fight illiteracy, even the right to vote for women and the abolition of the national army. It is not surprising then that the Futurists began to gain a growing popular support. In their official organ *Roma Futurista* (founded in 1919, after the electoral defeat and the closure of the journal *L’Italia Futurista*), an article signed by Andrea Rocca on July 13, 1919, calls for the end of capitalism:

il capitale è oggi il padrone che dirige e tiranneggia a sua posta la produzione della ricchezza [...] Domani dovrà essere il lavoro, colle rappresentanze di tutta la sua produzione integrale, cioè di lavoro intellettuale e lavoro manuale, che abbia la direzione della produzione, la proprietà degli strumenti e la

responsabilità dei costi, servendosi all'occorrenza del capitale come di un prestito.

Capital is today the master that leads and lords over the production of wealth [...]. Tomorrow, labor will have to take on this role, representative of all its different components, that is, both manual and intellectual labor. Labor will have to manage production itself, the ownership of means of p[roduction]. and the responsibility of the costs, recurring, according to its needs, to capital in the form of loans. (qtd. in Gentile 68)

As the lexical choices of this passage evince, the Futurists were successfully appropriating Marxist values and rhetoric despite their desire to distinguish themselves from the Communists and the anarchists; their growing popularity among the workers alarmed Antonio Gramsci himself. In the Political Manifesto of Futurism (1918) we read that the Italian revolution

tende a sovvertire i valori attuali, a dar voce ai veri rappresentanti della nazione, a mettere in valore le qualità create dalla Guerra, a dare a tutte le classi educazione e coscienza italiana. È contro gli utopistici livellamenti. Per la libertà, per la fraternità, contro l'assurda uguaglianza. Per la dittatura dell'intelligenza in ogni campo, senza domandare al depositario della medesima a quale classe appartenga. Per il frutto del lavoro ai lavoratori. Per un ben inteso sindacalismo nazionale.

[a]ims to subvert the current values, to give voice to the true representatives of the nation, to foreground the positive qualities created by the Great War, to give to all classes an Italian consciousness and an Italian education. The Futurist revolution is against utopist leveling. It supports freedom and brotherhood, but it is against the absurd equality. It is for the dictatorship of intelligence in every field, without asking to its owner what class he belongs to. It is for the product of labor to the workers and for a well-conceived national syndicalism. (qtd. in Gentile 63)

Even after political defeat, Marinetti was still interested in connecting with the working masses. In the spring of 1922, at the Winter Club of the Subalpina Gallery in Milan, the Futurists organized the International Futurist Exposition. As attested by Giorgio Rimondi, the exposition was

organized by the communist-futurist Franco Rampa Rossi and inaugurated by Marinetti. ... Marinetti himself led the visit of a group of factory workers to the exhibition, organized by the Proletkult and thus commended by Gramsci in a letter to Trotsky: 'Marinetti ... has expressed his satisfaction for acknowledging that the workers have much more sensitivity for the Futurist issues/concerns than the bourgeoisie'. (*La scrittura sincopata* 43)

According to Rimondi, this alliance between the political and artistic avant-garde was short lived, soon overrun by the extreme tendencies of both the Italian Communist Party and the Futurist group. Yet before its ending, in 1923, the Futurist activist Fillia and

Tullio Bracci organized the Artists Futurist Union with the intention of functioning as a link between the masses of workers and avant-gardist artistic tendencies (Rimondi 43).

Marinetti and Gramsci are rarely discussed together in Italian intellectual history. Yet Gramsci's response to Futurist political commitment is an interesting indicator of not only the revolutionary urge that characterized the decade between the end of World War I and the advent of Fascism, but also of the importance the Futurist Party had gained in the Italian political arena. Antonio Gramsci's article "Marinetti the Revolutionary,"<sup>35</sup> published in *L'Ordine Nuovo* in 1921, gauges this success and wards off the implied danger of a Futurist-lead government. The occasion for the piece is the celebratory pronouncement of none less than the Russian Minister of Culture, Lunacharsky, on the revolutionary potential of Marinetti and Futurism. Gramsci insightfully reads Marinetti's popularity among Italian workers as the outcome of the movement's very iconoclasm and lack of a programmatic plan. Yet it is not a simple matter of political competition that preoccupies Gramsci. His article opens with an indignant outcry against the very possibility of associating Futurism with Marxism: "This incredible, enormous, colossal event has happened, which, if divulged, threatens completely to destroy all the prestige and reputation of the Communist International." Lunacharsky's mention of Marinetti as a "revolutionary intellectual" strikes Gramsci as a truly unbelievable occurrence that, if publicized, would jeopardize the credibility of the Comintern (214).

Gramsci classifies Futurist art in terms of its social function, thus co-opting its aesthetics for the aim of the Marxist Revolution. He proceeds by explaining the project of

---

<sup>35</sup> I have used the English translation, since, to my knowledge, the original has never been published in any of the Italian anthologies of Gramsci's writings.

the Marxist revolution as the effort to create a “new civilization,” which entails a transitory phase in which society will move from the old to the new system. He compares this phase to a battlefield where arbitrariness outstrips the revolutionary plan: “the battlefield for the creation of a new civilization is, on the other hand, absolutely mysterious, absolutely characterized by the unforeseeable and the unexpected” (215). One of the unexpected forces on the battlefield is Futurism, an unavoidable evil for Gramsci, who interprets Futurism’s iconoclasm as the destructive force for its potential to erase the existing order. Asking Lenin’s famous question in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, “What remains to be done?” Gramsci responds,

[N]othing other than to destroy the present form of civilization. ... It means to destroy spiritual hierarchies, prejudices, idols, and ossified traditions. The Futurists have carried out this task in the field of bourgeois culture. *They have grasped sharply and clearly that our age, the age of big industry and of intense and tumultuous life, was in need of new forms of art, philosophy, behavior and language.* ... In their field, the field of culture, the Futurists are revolutionaries. (215) [Emphasis in the original]

Forced to acknowledge the popularity of Futurism among the workers, Gramsci interestingly reverses the terms of the argument. He turns it into the apology of the workers’ farsightedness in supporting the Futurists as a means of self-empowerment through replacing the Futurists in creating art. In Gramsci’s words, “When they supported the Futurists, the workers’ groups showed that they were not afraid of destruction, certain as they were of being able to create poetry, paintings and plays like the Futurists” (215).

In foregrounding how the Futurists have filled a need of the new masses of industrial workers and urban dwellers, Gramsci connects Futurism to its historical context, through which he negates any long-lasting value. Thus, the dangerous popularity of Futurism is completely ascribed to historical contingencies, that is, its ability to respond to the dynamism of their contemporary society. Such a line of reasoning, though, implies that the Futurist is not an avant-garde in itself. Rather, it is a keen observer and detector of coeval sociopolitical tendencies, an approach that foresees the little attention the movement's political ideas have received. This is reminiscent of what Robert Graves and Laura Riding Jackson say about the genuine modernist poet,

[o]ne must always therefore keep this distinction in mind: between what is historically new in poetry because the poet is acting as a barker for civilization, and what is intrinsically new in poetry because the poet is an original interpreter of the fortunes of mankind. (435)

Futurism is completely withdrawn into its present, and its cooption is made possible exactly by its living completely off the present. This is coherent with Gramsci's main concern about Futurism, the potential of its political program to overpower that of the Communist Manifesto. This is why Gramsci makes clear that the revolutionary potential of Futurism pertains exclusively to "the field of culture" (217). Thus, the Futurists are included in this transient phase of transformation, but are not part of the new order resulting from the Marxist revolution. The avant-garde and the revolutionary ideology support each other as far as they are both dynamic and iconoclastic. Once the revolution has settled down, the avant-garde becomes inconvenient for the stability of the



realized order.<sup>36</sup> Such order, Gramsci tells us, will produce its own art, whose forms and methods cannot be predicted. If they were predictable they would not represent the new, thus, Gramsci argues that art “cannot be reorganized by a workers’ power according to a plan. ... There will be a proletarian culture (a civilization) totally different from the bourgeois one.” The new art will be “the flowering and ornament of a proletarian social organization” (217). The outcome of what Gramsci saw as the workers’ willingness to embrace the Futurist iconoclasm’s negativity entails an understanding of art aptly described by Graves and Riding as “presenting poetry as an instrument of historical progress” (436). Gramsci’s workers are, in fact, those “liberal-minded readers who regard civilization as a steady human progress which does not exclude the idea of a modernist, historically advanced poetry, [who] offer themselves as ripe for conversion” (436). The workers support “*historicity*” (235, emphasis in the original), claims Gramsci, in the sense that they make possible the revolutionary ideals of the Marxist revolution by embracing Futurist art. Clearly, art becomes a means subdued to the attainment of a specific goal, and its dynamism and iconoclasm lose their potential to break the linear development of history to actually support it. History will give Marinetti, not Gramsci, the opportunity to test the revolutionary ideals in the constructive phase following the overthrow of the existing order.

Cinzia Sartini-Blum has argued against the distinction advocated by many scholars (John White among them) between artistic experimentation and political

---

<sup>36</sup>Marinetti will navigate the test-bed of the constructive phase by juggling his artistic freedom from within the Fascist regime, whose consolidation will close the space for Futurism’s iconoclasm. Conversely, it is interesting to note that this piece on Marinetti has been excluded from *Letteratura e vita nazionale*, the selection of writings by which Gramsci’s thought has been canonized in Italy.

conservativeness. Likewise, I disagree with the position that sees Futurism yielding completely to the diktat of Fascism after 1922. Marinetti's later writings, produced during Mussolini's regime, often reveal (behind the celebratory and condescending rhetoric) the same transnational vision of Italianness and of Futurist aesthetics that characterized the earlier phase of his movement. This vision, I claim, comes to the fore in Marinetti's works connected to Africa, to which he returns at the height of the Fascist Regime, when any idea of artistic or social revolution is at best a chimera.

***Africa: Producer and Instigator of Arts and Poetry***

By the late thirties, the fortune of Futurism and of Marinetti was dawning. Despite his appointment to the Italian Academy, his writings, which saw little circulation, raised a limited interest beyond the shrinking Futurist circle. In this context, he suggested to the Duce a plan to allow Italian artists to travel to Africa with the aim of developing African art, which, "at present," he said, "is only a copy of the ancient Egyptian art or Arab art" (198). This is the premise of the speech titled "L'Africa generatrice e ispiratrice di arti e poesia" ("Africa: Producer and Instigator of Arts and Poetry"; Italian Academy, Rome, 1938). The text, which has a prescriptive, foundational, and exhortatory style, fits the defining criteria of the manifesto. As Janet Lyon notes, a manifesto "may be shorthand for a text's particular stridency of tone. ... To call a text a manifesto is to announce ahead of time its ardent disregard for good manners and reasoned civility" (*Manifestoes* 12). Actually, Marinetti does not call for the foundation of a new artistic movement or school. He expresses his disappointment with the contemporary conditions of Italian art and once

again urges for a renewal that is African, not Italian. In the same year of the promulgation of the Racial Laws, he still insists—albeit eschewing the bombastic style and more daring political attitude of earlier writings—on the renewal of a national art to take place in Africa. The purpose of the manifesto is to persuade Mussolini to finance the travel of Italian artists to Africa, in order to:

Offrire ai poeti ai pittori agli scultori ai musicisti e agli architetti novatori lavati d'ogni abitudine tradizionale la possibilità di vivere qualche tempo in Africa e lanciare un concorso con giuria insieme patriottica competente e futurist ache escluda i plagiary i fotografisti e premi i creatori autentici di nuove poesie plastiche musiche e architetture africane.

Offer to innovative poets, painters, sculptors, musicians, and architects free from any traditional habit the possibility to live for some time in Africa and then to call a competition with a jury at once patriotic competent and futurist that excludes plagiarizers photographers and that award the authentic creators of new African plastic poems music and architectures. (201)<sup>37</sup>

Marinetti is looking for funding that allows him and his fellow artists to leave Italy and to travel throughout the Italian territories in Africa in order to re-create an African art. The contradictory statement implies that neither Sub-Saharan Africa nor Italy or Europe have a worthy artistic tradition of their own. Among the eighteen points that his manifesto lists, there is one that voices what seems to be the need to free the European artist of

---

<sup>37</sup> The translation into English of the speech is mine.

European influence: “Riassumere velocemente molte zone in volo con aeropoesie aeropitture e aeromusiche che nulla abbiano delle ispirazioni europee” (“6. To sum up quickly many areas by flight with aeropoems and aeropaintings and aeromusics that have nothing to do with European inspirations”; 199). At the beginning of the speech, he had declared the insignificance of the artistic production that he had observed in the newly conquered region of Tembien-Gheralta. Merging military prowess with artistic interest, Marinetti recalls that after taking part in the military occupation of the region, he “Aveva chiamato a raccolta tutti i contastorie e con l’amico poeta e chirurgo Pino Masnata, aveva certificato che i loro poemi accompagnati da un rozzo violino, non sono altro che rozze nenie ritoccate per l’occasione” (“had convened all storytellers and with the help of the surgeon [*sic*] and poet Pino Masnata, had certified that their poems accompanied by a coarse violin are nothing more than coarse singsongs touched up for the occasion”; 198). Therefore, “con un gran balzo in avanti” (“with a giant leap forward”; 199), he expounds a programmatic plan to create a new African art. Once again, Marinetti figures Africa as both the source of spiritual renewal and the space where such renewal of society and artistic practice would take place.

This late manifesto, read in the headquarters of the major Fascist cultural institution, confirms both the idea of a nationalism that springs from Futurism itself (rather than from Italian national identity) and Marinetti’s vision of a new Italy by way of Africa and the transatlantic. Symptomatic of Marinetti’s struggle to create a space for his artistic visions within the Fascist Regime, the purpose of this manifesto is the creation of an African rather than Italian art that would reflect the imperial project in Africa. Moreover, despite mentioning artists of various European nationalities, he calls for the

end of any “European inspiration,” proceeding with his call for an African art. Under the transnationalism of his Futurist aesthetics, Italian national borders are for him the bridge towards other spaces, rather than walls erected to protect the nationalistic grandeur of the Fascist Regime. More significantly, within the context of the Italian expansion in Africa, Marinetti borrows freely from the politics and cultures of the black transatlantic:

Kabango’s use of the language of racial uplift and self-determination of the people of the African Diaspora in the play *The Drum of Fire*, the inclusion of Africa in the Futurist Italian nation, and finally the creation of an African art in 1938, at the height of the Italian Empire in East Africa.

## **Part II: Ethiopia and Corporate Personhood in Marcus Garvey’s and George Schuyler’s Writings**

### ***Marcus Garvey’s Poetic African Empire***

The concept of the corporate individual is a helpful tool to understand Marcus Garvey’s political project. His activism, pan-African and transatlantic in scope and strategy, rests on racial essentialism and a great emphasis on the significance of Africa, both symbolic and real, as the black peoples’ sacred land of origin. Garvey’s *modus operandi* attempted to accommodate a visionary, almost utopian plan with concrete endeavors such as the foundation of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (U.N.I.A.) in 1914 and the cruise line *The Black Star* to repatriate black peoples to Africa. The multiple layers of mimicry and satire that mark Garvey’s enactment of his own political vision reveal the paradoxical nature of this double-edged project.

Nonetheless, his political leadership and ambitious project are an essential chapter in the history of black Americans's emancipation, diasporic thought, and internationalism. The adoption of contemporary ideologies of nationalism, imperialism, and Fascism makes Garvey a man of his time, who, against all odds, believed in the possibility of fulfilling the dream of the complete self-determination of the African continent. His activism against the Italian aggression of the Kingdom of Ethiopian is essential in the development of pan-Africanism<sup>38</sup> and of the influence of Afrocentrism in African American political consciousness. Robert Hill quotes from a speech Garvey delivered in Los Angeles in 1922, which well represents the core of Garvey's thought: "This thing of governments is a big idea, very, very big, is the biggest thing of the age, is the thing men are seeking everywhere" (qtd. in "Making Noise" 182). Thus, he devotes his entire life to the establishment of an independent government for peoples of African descent.

Garvey was born in Jamaica in 1887. After a period of apprenticeship with a local press, he traveled to Central America where he worked as an editor of various newspapers before moving to London. Soon after arriving in the United States in 1916, he started a lecture tour, giving speeches on street corners before deciding that the U.N.I.A. should be more active in the effort of improving the condition of peoples of African ancestry. He founded the newspaper *The Negro World* and later *The Blackman*, as well as The Black Star, a ship line owned by the members of the U.N.I.A., whose management will lead to his expulsion from the US following a trial for mail fraud. Garvey was a follower of Booker T. Washington and believed that economic, cultural,

---

<sup>38</sup> For a detailed account of the debates and activism spurred by this event among African Americans, see Harris, *African American Reactions to war in Ethiopia, 1936-1941*.

and social independence were necessary to free black peoples from the exploitation and marginalization they suffered all over the world.

The central role of the leader is the staple of Garvey's political strategy. The success of his enterprise lies on convincing millions of black peoples, suffering violence and exploitation, that, through this strong leadership, it would be possible to pursue black sovereignty on the African continent. Thus, the careful construction of his image as a strong, successful leader was a fundamental first step, followed by the ability to persuade people of the feasibility of his dream. Garvey scholars have acknowledged his ability to use the media to project a well-crafted image of his leadership and his movement, with the aim of gaining followers for the U.N.I.A. by simultaneously showing them the collective future he envisioned. Hence, the performance of this vision assumed a pivotal role in the sensationalist politics that reached its height during the twenties and thirties. The necessity to include the colonial territories and their peoples within American and European nation-states heightened the permeability between art and politics.

Garvey's ideal of an African sovereign state relied on a detailed program of activism to educate black Americans to become its future citizens. The prestige and greatness of the black nation to come was guaranteed on the history of ancient African empires (mostly the Egyptian), a prestige communicated through a mixture of European, American, and Caribbean forms of spectacle. As Robert Hill explains, the carnival, the pageantry of kings and religious hierarchies of Europe, and the American tradition of ethnic festivities all helped build Garvey's plan to give the idea of black sovereignty a concrete referent (195-99). The following section focuses on *Message to the People: The Course of African Philosophy* (1937), Garvey's work that best testifies to both his "poetic

politics” and his plan to create a black political constituency. In summing the contradictory impulses of Garvey’s project, *Message to the People* is second only to the real life spectacle of his parades. In 1937, the year Garvey organized the School of African Philosophy in Canada, he had already been expelled from the US on the accusation of mail fraud; meanwhile, the Italian Fascist Army had occupied the Kingdom of Ethiopia.

*Message to the People* is designed as a series of lessons on how to develop leadership skills, ranging from how to achieve a good education to the importance of personal hygiene. As Garvey scholar Tony Martin explains, the lessons are the “distillation of what Garvey had learned in a life of activism and hindsight” (Introduction xvi, 1986). The very subtitle, *The Course of African Philosophy*, presents two paradoxes. First, the determinative article hints at a comprehensive and definitive exposition of African philosophical thought, which is absent from the text. Secondly, despite Garvey’s consistent mention of past African empires as the beginning of human civilizations and as the blueprint for coeval models of nation-state, he does not refer to cultural and historical specificities of these antecedents. His Africa was a political, social, and cultural entity to be created anew, inspired by the Bible and black American experience. Hence, Garvey’s project was to call into existence a nation by an imaginative act founded on the lure of a distant past, which only loosely constituted the common history of his black American audiences. To this end, he employed a well-crafted image of himself as a black man who, despite his humble origins and the obstacles posed by racism, had built a successful career. Similar to the exceptional individual in Marinetti’s visions of a new, modern Italy, the success of Garvey’s maverick leader is contingent upon the relational quality of his



connection to the masses. In turn, the prestige of his individual qualities is contingent upon their recognition and sanction by the collectivity.

By enacting the reality to be implemented and helped by the disenfranchisement of black peoples in the US as well as worldwide, Garvey succeeds in building in his audience the belief that a united continental empire under his leadership was a likely historical occurrence. As Mark Thompson aptly puts it,

Without doubt, the *Message* offers a speculative idea of history and the Volk. ... Garvey's call to the history books and his Nietzschean insistence on persistence as truth marks the existence of a level of discourse in his text that never lets go of the aesthetics of the will. The truth of history is engendered by the creative act of the subject will. The speculative idea (the Nazi myth) that lurks beneath the surface of Garvey's image of Christianity qualifies his theology as a cult of personality. History here is little more than one man's fantasy imposed on what Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy call the collective 'subject-State'. (64)

Garvey's parades, based on carefully established power hierarchies he borrowed from the organizational structure of European aristocracy, prove the sophistication with which he claims the political and social credibility of black peoples. The underlining argument is that, if such parades and images are empty or ridicule signifiers, then they were so within European historical narratives as well. Garvey is well aware of the power of tradition; he rejects violent overturns of the existing order and claims the empowerment of black people through the acquisition of historical consciousness.

His *Message to the People* calls forth historical knowledge and beauty as inseparable elements. The mastery of history enhanced by the usage of the imagination

would produce the best leaders. Hence, he reminds his students to be sensitive to form. In his words, “Where there is a good story and a good plot, in the form of a novel, read it” (14). He tells his students to read poetry, since, “from a good line of poetry, you may get the inspiration for the career of a life time.” Although history is more important than fiction, he urges his people to read history, “incessantly until you master it” (15). He is not exhorting his followers to spend their time in what he would call idle poetic contemplation, but he recognizes beauty to be functional to the implementation of his political plan. The *Message* is devised as a manual to create leaders for the U.N.I.A. and he wanted to guarantee the continuation of the activity of the organization, after his death. To this end, he goes a great length in explaining the best strategies to adopt for the recruitment of new members. If the majority of the lessons consist of standard practices of political activism, what is striking is Garvey’s insistence on the use of the imagination, for which, he argues, reading novels and poetry is an essential preparatory exercise. Moreover, he exhorts to, “always talk about a nation. Always feel that you see the nation. Use the object lessons of other nations to convince your people of the reality of a nation” (37). As it is the case with magic rituals, one can call a nation into existence by repeating the necessity of its existence. It may be due to this sort of rhetoric that in analyzing the overlapping of Garvey’s aesthetic and political strategies, Robert Hill refers to Garvey’s prestige in his native Jamaica as a supernatural figure. Hill supports this claim quoting a 1994 commemorative article published in *Jamaica Journal*, according to which Garvey was associated with “a belief system which saw him as a prophet imbued with almost divine qualities who could foretell events, sometimes change the course of nature, and who could put a course on his enemies” (qtd. in “Making Noise” 197).

Garvey is, on one hand, a pragmatic realist: he suggests searching for knowledge “out there,” that is, searching for a knowledge that needs only to be discovered or unveiled. In another instance, he urges his audience to imagine a black continental empire, an idea that required a real “suspension of disbelief” given the circumstances of his time. This confidence could be achieved through the observation of how every detail of knowledge and experience could be used in the life of a black person: “Every thought that strikes you, see how it fits in with the Negro, and to what extent you can use it to his benefit or in his behalf. Your entire obsession must be to see things from the Negro’s point of view” (12). He offers an example by revising the Bible for the betterment and needs of black peoples. Through this conceptual lens, he is entitled to say that the biblical injunction not to kill was an interdiction to kill the soul of people, that is, their “personality,” and not their bodies (58). Similarly, he reinterprets the biblical myth of creation to claim that Adam and Eve were black:

So there must be something permanent, lasting, and eternal about the Blackman. God knows why he fixes it so. ... Tell them how lasting you are and when they doubt it, send them to their Bibles, which you yourself never wrote. It emphasizes the greater truth ...: the Blackman evidently was the first man. Adam and Eve were black. Their two children, Cain and Abel, were Black. When Cain slew Abel and God appeared to ask him for his brother he was so shocked that he turned white, being the affliction of leprosy and as such, he became the progenitor of a new race born out of double sin. The white man is Cain transformed, hence his career of murder, from Cain to Mussolini. (105)

Whereas, in this quote, Garvey includes Mussolini in the group of white people, in one of the earliest articles on the Italian aggression of Ethiopia published in *The Blackman*, he has expressed his indignation for an invasion carried out by non-white people. Indeed, Mussolini had declared the Italian people to belong to the Aryan race on the eve of the alliance with Germany, which prompted the promulgation of the Racial Laws in 1938.<sup>39</sup> Hence, the Italian aggression towards the venerable Kingdom of Ethiopia had constituted for Garvey a double affront. As he argues in *The Blackman*: “There are fifteen million Negroes in the United States, and it would be rather surprising if they were to remain quiet in America and allow a bastard European nation like Italy to over-run the last bit of independent territory claimed by Negroes in the motherland” (“American and Abyssinia,” 1935, 1-2). Garvey is seeking political legitimacy on the grounds of racial chauvinism and the cult of the origins, which are typical traits of Fascism. This strategy will prove successful, as the Italian Fascist hierarchies will express preoccupation with the success of his U.N.I.A.

Concerning the other popular ideology of the time, namely Communism, Garvey dismisses it in a few lines stating that Marx did not know anything about Negroes and that Communism is dangerous as it “seeks to put governments in the hands of a white ignorant mass” (134). He provides a series of examples to prove that the mobs that lynch black people in the United States, or shoots down indigenous inhabitants of the African colonies, include mostly lower class white people. Ironically, these statements precede Lesson 17 of *The Course of African Philosophy*, titled “The Five-Years Plan of the

---

<sup>39</sup> “La concezione del razzismo in Italia deve essere essenzialmente italiana e l'indirizzo arianonordico.” (*La difesa della razza*, I: 1, 5 agosto 1938, 2). On the issue of whether Italians belong to white Europe, see Laura Harris, “Who’s/Whose Meticcio?”

U.N.I.A..” It is “a scheme of colossal magnitude” (190), as he himself called it, which resembles closely the Communist five-year plans. Garvey’s economic plan is a detailed financial project to implement the program of the association through fund-raising and accountability, which would be satirized by the novelist George Schuyler in *The Black Internationale* (1936-38). Neither he is more lenient towards capitalism. He offers an interesting hindsight, prescient of Martin Luther King Jr.’s line of argument, into the ways in which the interests of capitalism have been pursued by pitting the lower classes, white and black, against each other.

Garvey’s strategy, political, cultural, and financial, is founded on the belief that the black man is the “original” human being. As he would repeat in different guises throughout his career, by virtue of “coming first,” black people have authority over the sociopolitical models adopted by Europe and the United States and consolidated in the first part of the twentieth century. No wonder that such plan would constitute the material for the biting satire of journalist and writer George Schuyler.

### ***Garvey’s Black Empire as a Third Degree Reality***

Garvey’s African Empire as the future of black peoples worldwide is the powerful expression of a conception of a future that arcs back to its own past. The idea of rationalization as the byproduct of a scientific understanding of human life espoused by Frederick Jameson is ultimately overpowered by a creative, mystical vision founded on the expert employment of aesthetics to give form to an inexistent content, that is, the nation itself.

The key tool in Garvey's strategy is to offer a performance of the black empire to come. Hill reports the words of a journalist covering a parade of the U.N.I.A. in August 1920, describing it as "one that will go down in history as a brilliant, imposing and elaborate event. ... A spectacle, which truly reveals the ancient glory of Ethiopia" ("Making Noise" 190). The parade produced an unprecedented enthusiasm among black Americans, who could experience the feeling of belonging to a nation, previously denied to them by American racism. Garvey possessed the great ability to merge rationality and pragmatism with imagination and a poetic "suspension of disbelief" that was necessary to market his utopian plan, which was well inserted in the widespread Fascist ideology of the time. Garvey had actually been an admirer of Mussolini until the Fascist invasion of Ethiopia, as Mark Thompson details in *Black Fascisms* (2007). The idyllic affair lasted until Mussolini invaded Ethiopia, the last black independent kingdom in the world. After this event, Mussolini becomes for Garvey "The Beast of Rome," as he titled a poem he published in his newspaper *The Blackman*.

According to Thompson, Garvey shared the Fascist conception of the state, the idea that the leader embodies the ideal of both "the individual and the collective" (67), and the cult of personality clearly expressed in his aim to create a following of men and women "like him." Tony Martin concludes his preface to *Message to the People* by recalling a speech Garvey delivered in Canada in 1937, wherein Garvey explains his commitment to the School of African Philosophy: "I have given them all I know. [...] I'm trying to make everyone a Marcus Garvey personified" (xxi). This is not a surprising statement, since Garvey aspired to turn upside down the existing world-order. One of the main prerogatives of the fascist leader, as Thompson highlights, is the right to create the

reality that society will share: “All that the Duce does is a truthful interpretation of reality because he creates reality. [...] Because the Duce is the ideal human, he is the only one in the position to dictate, to speak reality. The duce is both the end and means of fascist identification” (67). The idea of creating reality was very congenial to Garvey, whose project was completely disconnected from the coeval contingencies of Africa. Marcus Garvey could envision a black empire at a time when Africa was under the rule of Europe and black people in the Americas were a disenfranchised minority. Thus, through an act of the imagination and faith in the progress of human kind, a global revolution was possible. What Michelle Stephens termed “Garvey’s dramatic political theatre” (97) was more than the pageant of a world to come. It gained the support of millions of black people and even caused alarm in the Italian Ministry of the Colonies, who “counseled against complacency, for the showmanship did not diminish the importance of Garvey’s ‘back-to-Africa’ principle .... An Africa which gives hospitality to Negroes who have the education, instruction, feelings and lifestyles of the Americans would be more difficult to colonize than the one before the war” (qtd. in Grant 341). The “showmanship” was indeed impressive as Stephens thoroughly discusses in her study, delineating a political leader who had a pan-African, transnational vision of returning to Africa the people of the African Diaspora.

Garvey was acutely aware that dissatisfaction could be used as a revolutionary force, and devised a way to compensate the transfer of the vital force from the people to his organization, with his dream of change expressed in ecstatic visions of a heavenly future. This millennial spirit creates a compound of aesthetics and politics, which is constitutive of Garvey’s discourse. In this sense, reading Garvey’s political project as

poetic does not mean to diminish his historical importance. Rather, it is the recognition of his genius in convincing millions of black people that through an effort of the imagination they could make themselves believe, in the face of historical evidence, that they could liberate Africa from white rule and make it their own. In other words, he understood that the actual existence of the referent is not required, if political belief could be substantiated as form. A visionary with political ambition, but denied the possibility of official political power, he turned into a poet. He created his own state apparatus, a collective body politic from groups of diverse origins, cultures, languages, histories, and lifestyles, so that these groups could taste what it means to be part of a represented collectivity. As Hill argues, Garvey was consciously mimicking the spectacle of white Western power, showing a “penchant for satire, particularly to be seen in his heaping upon the sacred symbols of white spiritual power the invective of irony and sarcasm. Garvey was not being naïve, even if at times his mimicry seems a bit ingenuous, smacking less of criticism than emulation” (200). His insistence on the fact that, by virtue of being black, he owned the original—of imperialist models, of fascist ideology, lastly, of humanity, distinguishes Garvey from other black leaders. As Stephens clearly puts it, “Garvey’s ultimate brazenness and impudence was that in his racialized vision of a hybrid, conquering African civilization, he also claimed to own the *original* of the copy.” She further clarifies in quoting Garvey, “What the white man has done are but copies, replicas, are but duplicates, facsimiles of what the black man originated and endowed civilization with” (99). Stephen sees Garvey’s ontological understanding of blackness and his embrace of Fascism and nationalism, “as a spectacular traveling portrayal of the race’s right to statehood; to use Joseph Roach’s term, as a circumatlantic performance of



black transnationality” (100). Garvey’s Africa is an imaginary locale, anachronistic if looked at from a historical perspective. It is an entity crystallized in a past so distant that it can function simultaneously as black America’s origin, cradle, and point of arrival in the near future—an Africa that can be called to existence by the will of a visionary leader such as him.

### ***George Schuyler’s The Black Internationale and Revolt in Ethiopia***

Journalist and novelist George Schuyler (1895-1977) began his career writing for *The Messenger*, a socialist publication edited by Philip Randolph. He later accepted to author a column for the *Pittsburg Courier* and wrote *Black No More* (1931), a novel in which he envisions the fate of U.S. society after the disappearance of black people turned white by a scientific discovery. Familiar with Garvey’s ideas, Schuyler started criticizing them from the very beginning of his journalistic career. The climax of his dissent is reached in the serial fiction written for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. I will focus on the “The Black Internationale” and on “Revolt in Ethiopia” for their interest in the fate of Ethiopia, which exploded within the African American community following Italy’s invasion in October 1935. In these stories, Africa becomes the terrain on which technology is conjoined with magic to bring about a new world order in which the power divide between black and white peoples is reversed. Thus, the African continent is the locale where the attainment of full civil rights for the peoples of the African Diaspora becomes possible. Far from being an escapist fantasy, Schuyler’s fiction is rooted in the United

States context; ultimately, the political enfranchisement of African American people is enacted by way of a futuristic Africa.

George Schuyler published his first story set in Ethiopia as early as 1934, which was followed by the series titled, “The Ethiopian Murder Mystery,” written during the war (between October 1935 and February 1936). The last two series comprised “The Black Empire,” “The Black Internationale,” and “Revolt in Ethiopia,” which span from July 1936 to January 1939.<sup>40</sup> In his article “*Shock Americana!*: George Schuyler Serializes Black Internationalism,” Alexander Bain gives a clear overview of Schuyler’s stance on the growing force of black internationalism as an alternative to Fascism, Communism, and nationalism, the key ideological trends of the 1920s and 1930s (and beyond). He argues that Schuyler’s “only genuine conviction was that most collectivisms, and especially [the] ones grounded in racial identity, were balkanizing and subversive” (938). Whereas “global black consciousness” was seen by figures such as George Padmore and C. L. R. James as “both political program and as imaginative project” (938), for Schuyler, claims Bain, “any collective politics of difference is a structure not of liberation but of delusion” (938). Paradoxically, however, Schuyler’s serial fiction and opinion editorials for the *Pittsburgh Courier* helped shape the “imagined nation” that black Americans lacked. Thus, he unwittingly participated in Marcus Garvey’s production of an imaginary black national pageantry, in which race replaced the lack of national territory. “The problem for Schuyler,” argues Bain, “was that the more “clarity” black internationalism attained, the more likely it was to turn into something repugnant—

---

<sup>40</sup>The first two series have been published together under the title *Black Empire*, whereas “Revolt in Ethiopia” was later published individually in *Revolt in Ethiopia*.

more ancestral than revolutionary” (946). Indeed, Schuyler’s serial fiction satirizes the very strategy adopted by political leaders of the time to conquer the masses by offering them a well-orchestrated spectacle, one in which the dream of a black sovereign state was represented as a viable political project, sketched out in each detail.

In the afterword to *Black Empire*, Robert Hill quotes Schuyler’s own opinion of his serial fiction:

I have been greatly amused by the public enthusiasm for “The Black Internationale,” which is hokum and hack work of the purest vein. I deliberately set out to crowd as much race chauvinism and sheer improbability into it as my fertile imagination could conjure. The result vindicated my low opinion of the human race. (qtd. in Hill 276)

Expressing this opinion to one of his colleagues at the *Courier* in 1937, Schuyler’s words may well have referred to the political atmosphere of the era, marked by the consolidation of the Fascist ideology and nationalistic vindications played out in the imperial grip of Europe on Africa and Asia. More significantly, Schuyler admits to the strategy of “feeding” his audience with what it expected: an escapist fiction that avenges European imperialism in Africa, where the last independent black nation had been invaded by Mussolini’s army with the consent of the League of Nations.

The parody of “race chauvinism and sheer improbability” relates not only to Schuyler’s fiction, but to Marcus Garvey’s political project as well. As argued by Robert Hill and reiterated more recently by Michelle Stephens, the awareness in Garvey’s appropriation of European political and religious power aesthetics produced a burlesque parody of the values upon which Western imperial projects were founded. In his

parodies, Schuyler leverages on this outcome of Garvey's political strategy, ultimately validating Garvey's project.

Schuyler parodies the methods political leaders employ, Garvey included, in order to gain the allegiance of the masses. He does so by using the genre of serial fiction, especially effective because of its episodic nature. Its success is based on spoon-feeding the reader with what apparently is harmless and trite entertainment, manipulating the reader's emotions and responses. The writer and editor of the newspaper organize the entertainment of the reader, interrupting the plot at climactic moments of the narrative to guarantee consistent sales. In his comments, Schuyler refers to both Garvey's aesthetics and his lack of "tactic skills," which was the cause of the movement's ultimate failure. Garvey's *mise en scène* of the non-existent African Empire, for the public to identify with, is echoed by the serial fiction writer's manipulation of the audience: he provides a well-planned and timed entertainment to mold the reader's reactions and emotions, a result achieved by synchronously capitalizing on and contributing to the emotional and ideological investment of the African American community on the outrage over the "rape of Ethiopia."

The fundamental political concern of Schuyler's serial fiction is the interdependence he sees between African American political enfranchisement and anticolonialism in Africa. These concerns explain the historicity that emerges from *The Black Internationale* and *Ethiopian Stories*. The genres of science fiction, detective story, and adventure writing all allow Schuyler to "educate" his readership about the contingent situation of Africa while expressing the necessity of implementing freedom at home.

***Schuyler's Africa: Internationalism and Technological Magic***

Schuyler's serial fiction envisions Africa as the means to delve into the folly of Garvey's political project in order to foreground and criticize the status quo of African Americans in the US. The project of Dr. Belsidus, the mastermind in "The Black Internationale," has little connection to the historical and technological reality of Schuyler's time; the narrative opens with an episode taken from the news, in which Dr. Belsidus is planning an air strike to avenge the lynching of a black man in the South. In addition, the treatment of spirituality and magic in "Revolt in Ethiopia" (the last series published from 1938 to 1939) foregrounds the backwardness of the racist social order of the US, vis à vis the progressive Ethiopian kingdom, where modernity is harmoniously integrated with tradition. In "Revolt in Ethiopia. A Tale of Insurrection Against Italian Imperialism," contained in the collection *Ethiopian Stories*, the reader is exposed to the danger produced by the disconnection between spiritual practices and their historical context. Interestingly, the main spiritual site of the ancient Ethiopian Church is the background of Schuyler's most overt critique of American racism and the paradoxical situation that allowed slavery to coexist with ideals of freedom and equality since the nation's founding.

"The Black Internationale: Story of Black Genius Against the World" was published from November 1936 to April 1938 and now published in the collection titled *Black Empire*. As Schuyler himself has noted, the story is imbued with a good dose of race chauvinism and improbability. The narrative revolves around the project of freeing Africa from European rule before completely wiping out white people, a plan to be

carried out by a worldwide organization under the guidance of Dr. Belsidus, a truly diabolic genius. I will focus on two episodes of the series. The first one, set in New York, tells the story of the first Temple of Love—a space to be replicated throughout the world, where the members of the organization attain the spiritual practice they need according to Belsidus’s plans. Pitted against the Ethiopian church, which is the setting to most of “A Tale of Insurrection,” the spiritual rituals performed in the Temple of Love are the prosaic means necessary to obtain the manpower for the revolution. The second episode is the avenging of a black man lynched in Alabama, which, I argue, functions as a reminder to the African American reader that to participate in black internationalist activities progresses the Civil Rights Movement at home. The narrator, Carl Slater, who, at this early stage of his participation in the organization, is still skeptical of the ruthless violence and cynicism of Belsidus’s means, asks the latter why the Temple of Love is needed. He receives an unambiguous answer:

Binks is no fool Carl. He’s going to give the masses of Negroes the sort of religion they want but haven’t been able to get. Music and dancing, no collections, plenty of pageantry, keeping things down to earth with enough sex to make everything interesting. They can come here and get everything they need. (“Black Internationale” 58)

Controlling the economic and scientific sectors of black America is not enough for Belsidus, as spiritual and sensorial pleasures need to be satisfied to ensure the loyalty of his followers. Finally, Carl and Pat enter the underground temple. Beautiful and determined ushers keep the crowd quiet; expectations rise and are finally interrupted by a

sudden music and light display, “almost blinding” (59). Numbers are important, as “150” musicians appear suddenly from a raising surface, sided by two lines of “50 brown girls” and “behind them on each side came 50 women in pale yellow tunics that reached to the floor” (60). The impression is strengthened by the massive quantity of characters in this cult-like atmosphere, and the surprise becomes untenable when “[a]ll the lights seemed to die or concentrate themselves in one great spotlight, and this shone upon the huge 50-foot statue of the nude Negro” (61). The crowd follows the orders given by a voice coming from an invisible source, instructing with regards to the statue, “gaze on Him!” (61). Thus, race is ironically referred to as spectacle. The fascination is too strong. Even the narrator, who as a high ranking member of the organization’s hierarchy knows that the statue is nothing more than a robot designed by Binks, cannot resist the orders: “I knew Binks had rigged up this robot and I knew approximately just how it worked, and yet for the life of me I could not but enter into the spirit of the thing and obey the commands of the voice. I, too, looked downward. [...] Like automatons we returned to our cushions” (61). As Thompson argues, even Carl Slater shows a latent fascist nature, and citing Adorno he calls attention to the need for a specular relationship between leader and follower: “The mechanism which transforms libido into the bond between leader and followers, and between followers and themselves, is that of *identification*” (qtd. in Thompson 82). Despite the awe-inspiring display of technology in Dr. Belsidus’s organization, whose grandiose plan could not be accomplished without the achievements of modern science, Schuyler is aware that the allure of progress is enmeshed with the fear that the machine may take control of the human mind. Hence, for the God of Love to fully exercise his power, it is essential to help the members to let go of their rational fears

and enjoy a collective orgiastic ritual to facilitate the yielding of personal will to sensuous pleasure. It is important to recognize that “The Black Internationale” envisions a distant future, relevant in its distance from the hardships of every day life in the Depression Era and from the bleak international situation. As Etsuko Taketani argues on behalf of “The Black Internationale”:

Envisioned to restructure politico-affective race relations in the post-Ethiopian era, Schuyler’s near-futurist pulp fiction gave the signified colored empire—as both the basis for a militant black anticolonial crusade and a projection into a postcolonial future that justifies race war, full play in the black imagination.

Black Empire thus affords a deeper understanding of what the black internationalism of the mid-1930s was fighting for in its violent fascination with empire and race war. (143)

Yet Schuyler’s stronger criticism is directed to the use of emotions as a means of political activity. The statue has instilled a sense of community in the audience, but for this sense to be enjoyable, individual self-awareness has to be nullified. Hence, the members are given some hard liquor that makes them unconscious and a wild, frenetic dance starts. Music from Congo is playing: “As I fought against this strange drug, the music grew wilder and wilder. Bach and Sibelius gave way to evil, blood-stirring rhythms born in the steamy swamps of the Congo. From somewhere a crescendo of tom toms rent the air with their sizzling syncopation, and moaning minor chords tore the heartstrings” (62). The magic element is brought in from the back door, in this highly controlled technological spectacle that evokes complete abandonment in its call for full



participation. Waking up with an unusual sense of well being, Carl observes: “Whatever happened [...] I’m feeling swell. Just as light as a feather. Really buoyant” (64). Even the well-aware insider loses his control, drawn into the orgiastic atmosphere.

### ***Revolt in Ethiopia: Magic and Technology***

The magic element associated with a religious cult is represented in completely opposite terms in the story titled, “Revolt in Ethiopia,” contained in the collection *Ethiopian Stories*. “Revolt in Ethiopia” sets its key scene on the mountain of Abra Destum, which has guarded for centuries the temple of the Bishop Truli Handem, leader of the Ethiopian Church. From the beginning it is clear that this site lacks the ridicule of the Temple of Love, with its preposterous music from Congo and a mechanical black nude worshipped as a god. Robert Hill argues that Schuyler’s fiction set in Africa is relevant because there was little fiction with African subjects during the Harlem Renaissance, despite the growing Afrocentrism. Most importantly, it is relevant because “Africa represented for Schuyler an agent of change, to which he viewed African Americans as tied in a common opposition to imperialist domination and the myths of white supremacy and black inferiority. Schuyler’s novellas actively involve Africans, and African interests drive the plots” (6). In this story, Schuyler foregrounds African historicity at a time when the continent symbolized a black prestigious past, with little historical precedent. Schuyler had travelled throughout West Africa incognito in order to keep his freedom of movement. In so doing, he had the opportunity to come into contact with the reality of the place without the mediation of local government officials. This

knowledge is evident in his writings and it is employed, I argue, to cultivate the political awareness in his African American readers of their own fate. In *Ethiopian Stories* the distant geographical setting of the story is familiarized by the presence of two African American characters, which brings into the story the issue of US interracial relations.

“Revolt in Ethiopia” narrates the adventures of a rich African American man, Dick, who during a cruise in the Mediterranean witnesses the murder of a faithful servant to the Ethiopian princess Ettara Zunda, because of the latter’s involvement in the resistance against the Italian occupation. Ultimately, convinced more by the princess’s charm, than by an inclination for bravery and justice, he decides to help her realize the plan. She needs to reach the Bishop’s temple in Abra Destum in order to obtain from him an ancient and invaluable treasure that she will sell in order to buy weapons and airplanes to support the Ethiopian resistance. Bill Sifton accompanies Dick in his travels. He is a lower class black man who speaks dialect and is for this reason reprehended consistently by the snobbish, nouveau riche Dick. Despite the displacement in distant Africa and the genre of the story, an international espionage merged with romance, Schuyler does not miss the opportunity to bring his readers back to their American reality, claiming that the passion for international justice would inevitably raise the consciousness needed for action at home. Hill claims that Bill is the “comic side-kick” to Dick, yet it is Bill who ultimately rescues the treasure when Italian soldiers attack them in a final assault.

It is again Bill’s presence that foregrounds the one-dimensional personality of the character of Dick, when in front of the temple they are informed that the servant cannot enter because, “only free men and lords may enter the presence of the bishop. Bill is considered a slave by this people” (179). Referring to the long and complex history

between African Americans and the Ethiopian aristocratic family, the reaction of both Dick and the princess is laughter: “The princess and Dick laughed as he [Bill] sat down on one of the benches and pulled out a cigarette. And yet they were far from being at ease. They had survived everything so far, but what would be their reception by the patriarch?” (181). Worried about their own fate and the fate of their mission, they laugh at Bill, comfortable in their alleged superiority determined by Bill’s economic status and the princess’ aristocratic lineage. Yet Bill’s response to Dick’s order to wait outside seems a further proof of the prejudices African Americans had against Africans. To Bill’s protests for being called a slave, Dick replies, “Never mind, you stay here,” Dick ordered, “I guess they won’t eat you” (182). The gratuitous reference to cannibalism voiced by Bill reinforces the representation of this character as emblematic of the African American middle class that shared much of the ignorance and prejudices about Africa of its white counterpart. Bill plays along and replies, “‘Ah wouldn’t know,’ Bill observed looking at the lean giants surrounding them. ‘These jokers look mighty hungry’” (179).

Once they enter the temple, taking on his didactic tone, the narrator describes profusely the solemn atmosphere, the organic relation among the people present and the labyrinthine, underground space that constitutes the huge temple, a solemn, sophisticated scene. A chorus starts intoning a chant “that must have been old when Rome was born” (182), and the dancing that ensues is a composed yet beautiful choreography of movements. We are far from the orgiastic, machine-controlled and drug-induced reaction of the crowd in the Temple of Love in New York. The narrator makes sure the reader understands how ancient, sophisticated, and venerable this civilization is:

Here it survived in spite of Mussolini, in spite of perfidious England, in spite of Ethiopia's desertion by the traitorous League of Nations. As the weird ancient music finally died and the priests fell back to their places, Dick wept unashamed. What a pity that this civilization should be destroyed by brutal Fascism. (182)

The detailed description provides, as Hill argues, "an alternative positive mythology to African Americans always faced with the mythology of European superiority" (30). Yet it is not the nostalgic reminiscence of a time past, because the Ethiopians are showing the ability to integrate technology with magic, past and present. An incredible scene marks the arrival to the sacred mountain, in which Italian soldiers are chasing Dick, Bill, and the princess:

One after the other fell in their tracks as death mysteriously halted them. When fully half of them lay dead, the other threw down their rifles and ran in panic in all directions. But faster was death. No sound came to disturb the stillness of the summit of Abra Destum, but one by one the Italian perished on the sun-drenched mountaintop until not one remained. Dick and Bill looked at each other, wondering, incredulous. These deaths were uncanny, unbelievable. (177)

The Italian soldiers fall down dead one by one, yet no whistle is audible. The uncanny feeling will soon be dispelled by the explanation that the Ethiopians's rifles "are equipped with Maxim silencers ... and telescope sights" (179). Even if this scene fulfills the function of depicting the Ethiopians as a modern African people, not everything can be explained rationally at Abra Destum. Finally, they are in the presence of the Bishop,

whose description reveals a man centuries old and yet whose eyes are still “alert” in a noble gaze and who “spoke a few words in a surprisingly strong and steady, though somewhat high-pitched voice” (183). After the princess gives the bishop the half ring that has to match the half kept by him, for her to receive the treasure, a detailed description follows, to explain how these people can live for so long. It talks of diet and prayers, not of magic potions, thus indicating the higher skills and knowledge of this people. The magic undertones of the scene foreground the belonging of these rituals and habits to an ancient tradition—in other words, they foreground their own historicity. They are set in contrast against the superficial use of a mythical past for the purpose of political propaganda à la Dr. Belsidus’ Temple of Love in New York.

Schuyler shared Garvey’s vision of black unity to resist and overturn white imperialism, and would not forgive him for the failure of this project, which Schuyler blamed on Garvey’s diplomatic ineptitude. He could express outright scorn, as in his article on the parade through the streets of Harlem: “Garvey’s comic opera movement,” which had sold “Africa to the sable brethren,” calling him, reports Hill, “the best-known of all the Negro hustlers.” But he would also admit, “Marcus has his value, ... he furnishes a note of humor and ridiculousness in a world that is worried and blue. And on the other hand his weird and grandiose schemes and pronouncements are as an island of glamour in a sea of practicality” (qtd. in Hill 274). There is a certain degree of ironic reciprocity between Garvey and Schuyler, with the latter actually showing through his fiction what the former projected as the goal of his movement—an African Empire that overrules Europe and the United States. Of course, whereas the first offered his project as a viable, political effort, the success of Schuyler’s “hokum” fiction—proved by the letters

of the *Courier*'s readers asking whether Africa had really been liberated from white imperialism, indicates that the boundary between reality and fiction is not so self-evident, especially in times of economic hardship, racial segregation, and growing fear of another world war.

The Futurist principle of simultaneity in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's politics results in a synchronicity of space and an hypertrophic present that allow him to envision a modern Italy not merely on African soil, but one that would be altogether impossible without Africa and the New World; his usage of Africa is mediated by the echoes of pan-Africanism and of the rhetoric of racial uplift employed by coeval African American leaders. As demonstrated by the analysis of his short story of a lynching in the American south, "Il negro," and of his play *Il tamburo di fuoco*, whose protagonist is an African king who voices slogans of racial uplift and black self-determination, Marinetti conceptualizes a modern, progressive Italian nation that included Africa, despite the coeval anxiety for the nascent Euro-African civilization observed by Gramsci. Likewise, Marcus Garvey's political project to build a black nation for the people of the African Diaspora claimed to follow the past greatness of the ancient African civilizations, "renewed" by the detour through the New World. The theatricality of Garvey's project, symptomatic of the sensationalist politics consolidated in these two decades, employs Africa to integrate ancient civilizations and the new, modern America. The strategy used by Garvey is satirized in Schuyler's serialized fiction, *Black Empire* and *Ethiopian Stories*, whose significance goes beyond entertainment value. Indeed, it narrates the realization of a plan of worldwide black self-determination grounded within the US before reaching the imaginary realm of an African Empire. Furthermore, in *Ethiopian Stories*, the old Ethiopian civilization shows the latest innovations in technological weaponry coexisting with ancient magic traditions, thus foregrounding Africa as the potential locale of a productive path towards a sustainable modernity, achievable only as a

transnational project. Africa, as the sci-fi fictional detour to denounce American society (Schuyler), as the fictional locale for the implementation of a political project (Garvey), or as the acknowledgment and usage of a cultural and historical inheritance (Marinetti), is not only the primordial origin to be protected for the modern human being to return to, but the future cross-cultural civilization which overcomes the excesses of modernity.

## CHAPTER TWO

“We Are All on the Wrong Side.” Buffalo Soldiers on the Italian Front  
According to Curzio Malaparte, Spike Lee, and Fred Kujo Kuworno

Gli italiani, come formiche quando si distrugge loro il nido, corrono da tutte le parti, a piedi, a cavallo, in treno, in barca. Ora bisogna salvare la casa e la pelle: bisogna difendere quella povera Italia che ognuno di noi porta addosso.

Italians, like ants when their anthill is destroyed, run all around, walking, by horse, by train or boat. The only thing left to do is to save one's home and one's skin: one has to defend that miserable Italy he carries with him  
(Longanesi, *In piedi e seduti*, 128).

Leo Longanesi's words describe the brutal reality facing Italy after the Armistice of Cassile was announced on September 8, 1943. The powerless Italian population, overcome by political chaos and military conflict between the Allied and the German Armies, is at the center of Curzio Malaparte's novel *The Skin: History and Story* (1952).

While Marinetti, Garvey, and Schuyler, through different strategies, had domesticated Africa and her peoples as part of their modernist national projects, by 1943 World War II had decreed the failure of these projects. Malaparte's novel depicts the commodification of the human body and the annihilation of European cultural and ethical values produced by the war. References to African slavery unfold in the novel alongside



the presence of African American soldiers. The market of bodies—black and white, men and women, of all political affiliations—is a constant reminder of the debasement of Italian (and European) society caused by the excruciating circumstances of war. This human market is consistently represented in association with racial discourses connected to the Slave Trade. It is also employed to critique the American liberators, and referred to as a reminder of the racial oppression in US society.

Thus, this chapter will study contestations over the economies of cultural exchange at work in historicizing the interactions between black US soldiers and Italian citizens during and after the war. While a popularized postwar Marxist interpretation views these exchanges as brotherly, Malaparte's novel both emphasizes and denaturalizes the meaning of "skin" to articulate the desperation he perceived in these encounters.

After discussing Malaparte's controversial novel and its vexed reception in postwar Italy, further insight is sought in three films, two narrative and one documentary, that variously historicize this same period. *La pelle (The Skin)* by Liliana Cavani (1981), based on Malaparte's novel, focuses on gender discourses in connection to African soldiers drafted from the French colonies in northern (Arabic) Africa. Hence, Cavani overlooks almost completely the African American presence in Malaparte's text, favoring consistently the contemporary feminist movements sweeping both North African and European cultures. The other narrative film of interest, Spike Lee's *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008), aims to restore to historical memory the contribution of African American soldiers to the Italian Campaign. In this film, the "invisibility" of black subjects in Italian society and historical memory is literally subverted, as the protagonists enter a little village on the mountains of Tuscany, testing the political and personal allegiances of its

inhabitants. Moreover, Italian culture, with its symbolic value as the cradle of European and by extension Western civilization is literally rescued and metaphorically saved by the soldiers. A narrative that is thematically and stylistically inspired by Neorealism frames the historically accurate account of war events. This framing speaks to Lee's claim that it takes a miracle, despite sixty years of civil rights struggles in the US, for official historiography to register the rescue of Europe by African American soldiers. Whereas in Malaparte's novel the characters of the African American soldiers emphasize the denunciation of the destruction of the spiritual and cultural values of Western civilizations through the hypertrophic symbolism of skin, in *Miracle at St. Anna* they become the agents for the "awakening" of the dormant cultural consciousness of the community in which they take refuge after desertion by their own white commander.

Finally, I will briefly address the historical documentary *Inside Buffalo* by the Italo-Ghanean director Fred Kujo Kuwornu (2009). This third film is significant in showing the value of the black transatlantic in understanding Italian history and society. It demonstrates the crucial role of the alliance between African American soldiers and Italian partisans and civilians in the liberation of Italy from Fascism. This is a foundational moment in the history of republican Italy, hence, Kuwornu has declared as the main exigence of the documentary to remind an increasingly racist Italian society of the role played by people of African descent at a crucial moment in the country's history. While Black soldiers sacrificed their lives to fight Fascism side by side with the Partisans, they unfortunately do not hold the same heroic status given white American soldiers in popular Italian historiography.

The arrival of the Allied forces in October 1943 brought about the first large-scale interaction between Italians and people of color on Italian soil. The French and British governments had drafted soldiers from their colonial territories, and the US army employed a large contingent of African American soldiers. Malaparte addresses these encounters as well as the clashes often caused by such diversity of cultures and languages under the violent and harsh conditions of war. Malaparte himself admits to having never been interested in racial issues; hence, their presence in his work is symptomatic of the growing importance of the African Diaspora in shaping European history and culture.<sup>41</sup> What at first sight appears to be a casual presence in Malaparte's narrative, when read in light of aforementioned reinscriptions of African American soldiers at a crucial moment in Italian history, emerges as a fundamental feature in the postwar global order. The decolonization of Africa, the forceful rise of the Civil Rights Movement in the US, and increasing migratory currents from the former colonies to Europe are the backdrop of the transatlantic discourse that emerges from reading these works.

### ***A Debased Civilization: Malaparte's The Skin***

Curzio Malaparte (1898–1957) was born Kurt Erich Suckert in Prato (Tuscany). He fought in World War I and participated in Mussolini's March on Rome in October 1922. His novel *Viva Caporetto!* (1921) was censored by the Fascist government; his following publication, *Tecnica del colpo di stato* (1931) cost him his membership in the Fascist Party. He founded (with Massimo Bontempelli) the international literary journal

---

<sup>41</sup> See Malaparte, *Viaggio in Etiopia*, a reportage from his travels to Africa, commissioned by the newspaper *Il Corriere della Sera* in 1939.

900 and was co-editor of the influential *La Fiera Letteraria*. His major novels, *Kaputt* (1945) and *La pelle* (1950), draw upon his journalistic reporting on various war fronts during World War II. The Catholic Church listed *La pelle* in its Index of Prohibited Books and the controversy it generated haunted the author, whose outlandish personality lead him to leave his villa in Capri for the People's Republic of China after becoming fascinated with Mao's doctrine. Because of his changing political allegiances, and most of all his pretentiousness of being above political feuds, his writing has garnered little attention within canonized Italian literature. Yet precisely because of its political instability, Malaparte's work offers valuable insight into historical events that have shaped the contemporary world-order and Italy's role within it.

*The Skin* defies the genre of the novel itself as it forms a constellation of parallel episodes in which ethical and cultural values are ridiculed and subverted. The text addresses the debacle of the European civilization on the terrain of literary expression. Amidst the debris of Europe, the numerous references to Greek and Latin cultures become empty signifiers that heighten the misery of the textual present. Human debasement produced by the war and the three-year Nazi occupation of Naples is rendered in a hyper-realistic style that rescues the narrative from the danger of rhetoric. In its place, the body, via the synecdoche of the skin, becomes the central referent to narrate history and the privileged means of communication and experience. The twelve self-sufficient episodes are connected by conversations between American Colonel Jack Hamilton and Malaparte himself, acting as an Italian liaison officer and narrator of the novel. The text is a baroque, hyper-realistic portrayal of the Naples to which the American Army arrived in October 1943, a scenario aptly described as a kind of

carnavalesque version of Dante's hell. Indeed, the narrator Malaparte, like Virgilio, guides the American commanders in their descent into the intricate alleys of Naples. The hellish tone is set by the opening paragraph:

Eravamo puliti, lavati e ben nutriti, Jack ed io, in mezzo alla terribile folla napoletana squallida, sporca, affamata, vestita di stracci, che torme di soldati degli eserciti liberatori, composti di tutte le razze della terra, urtavano e ingiuriavano in tutte le lingue e in tutti i dialetti del mondo. (8)

We were clean, tidy and well-fed, Jack and I, as we made our way through the midst of the dreadful Neapolitan mob—squalid, dirty, starving, ragged, jostled and insulted in all the languages and dialects of the world by troops of soldiers belonging to the armies of liberation, which were drawn from all the races of the earth. (9)<sup>42</sup>

At first sight, the text expresses a clear distinction between the Allied Army and Malaparte on one side, with civilians on the other. Whereas the winners of the war stand as examples of righteousness and virtue, Italian civilians, defeated and hungry, represent the abject state of European society after four years of fratricidal war. Nevertheless, the narrator promptly reveals how this stark distinction between the innocent and morally upright liberators and the guilty Italian people is a façade. The uneasiness felt by the American soldiers in the face of such human degradation soon develops into a sense of guilt, which becomes as profound as the squalor of the defeated--

---

<sup>42</sup> The English translation is from *The Skin*, New York: Signet Classics, 1952.

Una volta gli avevo recitato quel verso dell'*Agamennone* di Eschilo: ‘Se si rispettano gli Dei e i templi dei vinti, i vincitori si salveranno’ ed egli mi aveva guardato un istante in silenzio. Poi mi aveva domandato quali Dei gli americani avrebbero dovuto rispettare in Europa. ‘La nostra fame, la nostra miseria, la nostra umiliazione’ - gli avevo risposto. (183)

Once I had recited to him [General Cork] that verse from the *Agamennnon* of Aeschylus which runs, ‘If conquerors respect the temples and the gods of the conquered, they shall be saved;’ and he had looked at me for a moment in silence. Then he had asked me which gods the Americans would have to respect in Europe if they were to be saved; ‘Our hunger, our misery and our humiliations’ - I had replied. (160)

The narrator advises the liberator to refrain from judging the defeated. Scholar Luigi Martelli quotes Malaparte, “freedom is more expensive than slavery” and he refers to *The Skin*, commenting that “La libertà costa più cara della schiavitù. La libertà non si paga nè col sangue, nè con i più nobili sentimenti, ma con la vigliaccheria, la prostituzione e il tradimento” (54) (“Freedom is more expensive than slavery. Freedom is not paid with blood or with the noblest feelings, but with cowardice, prostitution, and treachery”; my translation). According to Malaparte, once the values of a civilization have been shattered, there is nothing worth dying for and life becomes a struggle for mere physical survival. This desire to live thrusts the human being into committing the most infamous actions. Hence, at the end of the novel, the flag of Europe literally becomes a

flag of human flesh; an American tank parading in a triumphal entrance into Rome crushes a civilian who lies flat on the road, while the cameras of the American army zoom in on the gruesome scene.

### ***The Limits of Language***

Physical destruction and moral debasement become a spectacle, a drama acted out by the people for the sake of their liberator and of their own survival. Concerned with their physical survival, civilians engage in every sort of commerce: Women live as prostitutes, fathers sell their daughters' virginity for a few dollars, soldiers who deserted the Italian army after the Armistice sell their bodies, women sell their children to the Moroccan soldiers (the *goumiers*), while the local Mafioso bargains with Colonel Clark the sale (by the kilos!) of German prisoners. To save one's skin is the main reason for action, although Malaparte recognizes that Neapolitans have been heroic in enduring a long resistance to the Nazis before the arrival of the American Army. Now that the "liberators" have invaded the city, the only concern is to survive famine, sicknesses, and social chaos.

As skin is the measure of life and history, the novel emphasizes vision over communication. Language has lost its potential for signification, employing a descriptive style that produces an uninterrupted series of scenes "saturated with images in which dialogue is minimal" (Marrone 218). Dialogue is impossible after the self-destruction of modern logocentric Western culture, bringing within its own domestic space the annihilation it had practiced in the colonies. At the same time, the presence of soldiers

from the colonies has transformed Italy into a Babylon. The linguistic multiplicity enters the text itself, as the narrator switches from Italian to English, from French to Spanish and German. It is not only a chaotic world of languages, but also of stories and histories, as indicated by the subtitle of the novel. Two planes of representation intersect and often blur together: the historical narrative and the fictional text, complicated by the narrator's penchant for telling surreal stories in a matter of fact style and hyperbolizing historical events.

Luigi Baldacci, one of the very few Italian critics to focus on the text's stylistic traits, rather than on the political alliances of its author,<sup>43</sup> suggests looking at Malaparte's rhetorical art as the key to understanding the world-view expressed in the text. Baldacci claims,

Come dannunziano, come surrealista, come appendicista, come verista dell'incredibile, Malaparte procede per aggregazioni, per *abbozzature*. Il suo non-finito viene a significare, in quanto *work in progress*, che se tutto è eccessivo, tutto è altresì insufficiente. Si poteva dire di meno, ma si poteva anche dire di più. (vii)

In the tradition of D'Annunzio, as a surrealist, a writer of serial fiction, a realist of the unbelievable, Malaparte progresses through aggregations and sketches.

His non-finite comes to mean, as work in progress, that if everything is

---

<sup>43</sup> An example of the polemicist vein typical even of the scholarship supportive of Malaparte's work is Guerri, *L'Arcitaliano*, 2008.



excessive, everything is nonetheless insufficient. One could say less, but could also say more. (My translation)

Baldacci's thesis of a poetic of the work in progress, a constant approximation to reality, speaks to the ethical and ideological void narrated by the text while revealing the narrator's involvement in the tragic history he tells. Responsibility of the individual is a crucial concern in a text that records the impotence of politics to meet the high ethical demands of the postwar era. Malaparte is writing when the outcome of the battle between Communists and Christian Democrats is still uncertain, yet he manages to foresee the opportunistic switches in political allegiances that will characterize Italian politics soon after the demise of Fascism and consequent dismissals of responsibility in events of the country's more recent history.<sup>44</sup>

The slow-paced narrative seems to prolong the suffering it describes as the narrator indulges in long, detailed descriptions and moral asides, referring frequently to Roman, Greek and Renaissance cultures. Malaparte's aesthetic strategy includes the narration of incredible events in a realistic tone that heightens the uncanny quality of his war writing. As Gary Indiana explains in his discussion of *Kaputt* in *Bookforum*—a travelogue of the writer's experience as correspondent from numerous European war fronts—"Malaparte's introduction of the imaginary into the ostensibly real [...] reveals a psychological reality in *Kaputt*, a pathology woven into all social relations by the war" (n. pag.). Examples of these uncanny images include the bones of a human hand he pretends to have found in his dish of couscous and the grim sight of the child served at

---

<sup>44</sup> See Elena Torriglia's account of this debate.

the General Cork's banquet; it is, in fact, a manatee, the last "fish" in the aquarium of the city, emptied after that all the exotic fishes have been served at the liberators' table.

In these dreadful scenarios, where social relations are turned into pathology and dialogue is thwarted, reality is experienced and understood mainly through the body. The relationship with the liberators is established in terms of economic profit and physical survival. The liberator is the Other independently from his skin color and language, by virtue instead of his power to bestow freedom on a people. Discussing the plague of prostitution with Mrs. Flat, an American aviator, the narrator asks her what she would do if the Japanese had invaded America and treated the women as Americans have treated Italian women. Outraged by the comparison, Mrs. Flat exclaims: "The Japanese are men of color," to which the narrator replicates, "to conquered peoples, ... all conquerors are men of color" (183). The expression is candidly used, as no one questions the negative stigma associated with it. Hence, the ideals of freedom, democracy, and collective endeavor are brutally exposed as empty words, consistent with the portrayal of a destroyed civilization, whose alleged superiority has led the continent to a fratricidal war.

### ***African American Soldiers or Black Bodies?***

Malaparte's representation of African American soldiers is ambivalent. As Chandra Harris argues in his dissertation:

The influence of the white American soldiers' prejudice on Malaparte's opinions of blacks, as well as the influence of Italy's own views of Africans, cannot be minimized: the events the author describes take place in a post-Fascist 1940s

Italy, heavily influenced by formerly-imposed racial laws and colonialist rhetoric regarding Africa, which was invaded/liberated by corps of soldiers from America, many from the segregated South like Jack, where the Jim Crow laws were still in effect. (143)

Yet Malaparte uses the language of slavery throughout his conversations with Colonel Jack, making him uncomfortable in voicing a critique of the righteousness of the winners. Malaparte's critical voice does not spare the upper classes of Italian society, either. On one hand, the figure of the black soldier forms part of Malaparte's critique of the liberator's claims to moral superiority; on the other, through extracts of dialogues with the Neapolitan aristocracy, local representatives of the Church, and members of the fallen Fascist regime, the text is a harsh accusation of opportunism and ethical debasement aimed towards the political elite.

Fascist production of images of blackness certainly infiltrates Malaparte's novel and, I argue, is functional to the author's treatment of this historical phase as one of both ethical decadence and mere fight for survival.<sup>45</sup> The most significant scenes involving black soldiers highlight the ethical debasement of the Italian (and European) population. The "flying market" of black soldiers is one form of the commodification of the human being portrayed by the novel. As black bodies are compared to the heroes of Greek culture, their presence as liberators of the Italian and European populations signifies both their appropriation of a tradition from which they had been excluded and the

---

<sup>45</sup> On the Fascist creation of bodily images for propaganda and marketing reasons, see Karen Pinkus's *Bodily Regimes*.

destruction—perhaps through this very negation—of a Western civilization premised upon this tradition. Moreover, the moralizing voice of the narrator targets every national group, Italians included. In the second episode of the novel, “The Wig,” we read of a grotesque Neapolitan invention; convinced that black soldiers prefer blond women, they start selling “intimate wigs” for prostitutes. The episode, which is mostly another occasion for the narrator to preach about the innocence and the idealism of the American people, opens with a generalization of Italian people and the importance of the genitals in Latin cultures. Commenting on the spread of venereal diseases, the narrator says,

Mi sentii umiliato dallo schifoso morbo proprio nella parte che in un italiano è più sensibile, nel sesso. Gli organi genitali hanno sempre avuto una grande importanza nella vita dei popoli latini, e specialmente nella vita del popolo italiano, nella storia d’Italia. (51)

I felt humiliated by the loathsome disease in the very part of my anatomy, which in an Italian is most sensitive. The genitals have always played a very important part in the lives of the Latin peoples, especially in the lives of the Italian people and in the history of Italy. The true emblem of Italy is not the tricolor but the sexual organs. The patriotism of the Italian people is all there. (52)

In a society that has turned into a human market, Malaparte’s ambiguous language denounces the debasement of the human being into what Benjamin first and Giorgio Agamben later, have termed “bare life.” If for Fascism the individual derived value from belonging to a collectivity, now value is merely biological and as such can be

turned into mere commodity, bargained, weighed and measured. Talking with Colonel Jack, the narrator compares the price of live Italians to those of dead African Americans: “A dead Negro costs nothing; he costs much less than a dead white man—even less than a live Italian! He costs pretty much the same as twenty Neapolitan children who had died of hunger” (21). He continues this disquisition on the price of human flesh with a comparison of dead blacks to Greek epic heroes—

Era veramente strano che un nero morto costasse così poco. Un negro morto è un bellissimo morto: è lucido, massiccio, immense, e quando è disteso per terra occupa quasi il doppio del terreno che occupa un bianco morto. Anche se un negro vivo in America non era se non un povero lustrascarpe di Harlem, o uno scaricatore di carbone nel porto, o un fuochista delle ferrovie, da morto ingombra quasi altrettanto terreno quanto ne ingombravano i grandi, splendidi cadaveri degli eroi di Omero. Mi faceva piacere in fondo, pensare che il cadavere di un negro ingombra quasi tanta terra quanto Achille morto, o Ettore morto, o Aiace morto. E non sapevo rassegnarmi all’idea che un negro morto costasse così poco. (23)

It was indeed strange that a dead Negro should cost so little. A dead Negro is very handsome. He is glossy, massive, immense and when he is stretched out in the ground he occupies twice as much space as a dead white man. Even if a Negro, when he was alive in America, was only a poor Harlem bootblack, or a worker whose job was to unload coal in the docks, or a fireman on the railways, in death he took up almost as much space as the huge, magnificent corpses of the Homeric

heroes. At heart I was pleased to think that the corpse of a Negro took up almost as much ground as the corpses of Achilles, Hector or Ajax would have done. And I could not resign myself to the idea that a dead Negro should cost so little. (21)

Malaparte knew American reality too well to use casually racial stereotypes and the language of slavery to any ends lesser than a narrator's discourse on the ethical position of the liberators and emphasis of the slavery into which the European peoples, Italians especially, had thrown themselves. The absurdity of his disquisition on the aesthetic and market value of dead bodies fits the surreal social landscape produced by the war economy. One of the crudest examples is the description of the adaptation of the prostitution exchange to the arrival of the Allied armies:

I prezzi delle bambine e dei ragazzi da qualche giorno erano caduti, e continuavano a ribassare. [...] A Napoli accorrevano donne da tutte le parti dell'Italia meridionale. Durante le ultime settimane i grossisti avevano buttato sul mercato una forte partita di donne siciliane. (16)

During the last three or four days the price of girls and boys had dropped, and they were still falling. [...] This fall in the price of human flesh on the Neapolitan market may have been due to the fact that women were flocking to Naples from all parts of Southern Italy. During recent weeks wholesalers had thrown on to the market a large consignment of Sicilian women. (15)

This language is reminiscent of the slave trade, perhaps the historical event Malaparte finds most appropriate to render the debasement of human life he witnesses in Italy and Europe, which in the style of the novel cannot but assume a grotesque tone. Hence, the narrator asks, “È vero che la carne di un Americano negro costa più di quella di un Americano bianco?” (14) (“Is it true that the flesh of a black American costs more than that of a white American?”) Colonel Jack indignantly replies ‘Tu m’agaces’” (“You annoy me”; 16). When compared the commerce of women and children, the so-called “flying market” of black soldiers fades into a form of amiable sociality between Italian civilians and African American GIs.

Thus, the narrator introduces the so-called “flying market” of black soldiers, an exaggeration of a similar theme portrayed in the second episode of Roberto Rossellini’s neorealist masterpiece *Paisà* (1946). Neapolitan children offered themselves as tourist guides to African American soldiers, made them spend money in bars and restaurants, possibly stole their valuables and then handed them over to another child for a certain amount of money. This is how the narrator in *The Skin* describes the “flying market”:

Ma un negro vivo costava moltissimo. Il prezzo dei negri vivi a Napoli, era da qualche giorno salito da duecento dollari a duemila dollari, e tendeva ad aumentare. Bastava osservare con quali occhi golosi la povera gente guardava un negro, un negro vivo, per capire che il prezzo dei negri vivi era molto alto, e continuava a salire. Il sogno di tutti i napoletani poveri, specialmente degli “scugnizzi”, dei ragazzi, era di potersi comprare un black, magari per poche ore. La caccia ai soldati negri era il gioco favorito dei ragazzi. Napoli, per i ragazzi, era un’immensa foresta equatoriale, piena di un denso odore caldo di frittelle

dolci, dove negri estatici camminavano dondolandosi sui fianchi, gli occhi rivolti al cielo. ... Era quel che si chiamava *the flying market*, il “mercato volante.”

Cinquanta dollari era il prezzo massimo che si pagava per comprarsi un negro a giornata, cioè per poche ore: il tempo necessario per ubriacarlo, spogliarlo di tutto quello che aveva addosso, dal berretto alle scarpe, e poi, scesa la notte, abbandonarlo nudo sul lastrico di un vicolo. Il negro non sospettava di nulla.

Non sospettava neppure di esser venduto e comprato come uno schiavo. Non si avvedeva di essere comprato e venduto ogni quarto d'ora, e camminava innocente e felice, tutto fiero delle sue scarpe d'oro lucente, della sua uniforme attillata, dei suoi guanti gialli, dei suoi anelli e dei suoi denti d'oro, dei suoi grandi occhi bianchi, viscidii, e trasparenti come occhi di polpo. [...] Il negro non s'accorgeva di esser diventato un amerce di scambio, non sospettava neppure di essere venduto e comprato come uno schiavo. Non era certo dignitoso per i soldati negri dell'esercito Americano, so kind, so black, so respectable, aver vinto la guerra e trovarsi ad essere venduti e comprati come schiavi. (24-5)

But a live Negro costs a small fortune. Within the last few days the price of live Negroes had risen in Naples from two hundred to a thousand dollars, and its tendency was to increase. It was only necessary to see the hungry expressions with which the poor people eyed a Negro—a live Negro—to appreciate that the price of live Negroes was very high and was still rising. The dream of all the poor peoples of Naples, especially of the “scugnizzi” [street Arabs] and the boys, was to be able to hire a “black,” if only for a few hours. Hunting Negro



soldiers was the favorite sport of the boys. Naples to them was a vast equatorial forest, redolent with a warm, heavy odor of sweet fritters, where ecstatic Negroes promenaded, swaying their hips, their eyes fixed upon the heaven. ... This was what was called the “flying market.” Fifty dollars was the maximum price that was paid for the hire of a Negro for a day, that is for a few hours - that is the time needed to make him drunk, to strip him of everything he had on, from his cap to his shoes, and then after nightfall, to abandon him naked on the pavement of an alley. The Negro suspects nothing. He is not conscious of being bought and resold every quarter of an hour and he walks about innocently and happily, very proud of his shoes, which glitter as though made of gold, his smart uniform, his yellow gloves, his rings and gold teeth, his great white eyes, viscous and translucent like the eyes of an octopus. ... The Negro is oblivious of the fact that he has become a medium of exchange, he does not even suspect that he has been bought and sold like a slave. It was certainly not dignified, the position of the Negro soldier in the American army—so kind, so black, so respectful—who had won the war, landed at Naples as conquerors, and now found themselves being bought and sold like unfortunate slaves. (21-22)

Children living in the streets during a conflict are able to take advantage of those in power, thus undermining the project of liberation and its supporting power hierarchy. As Daniel Gunn argues, “the inversion and ridicule of the categories of heroism, allegiance, and honor is the author’s strategy to the subversion of history” (“It’s the Fate of Europe to Become Naples,” 4). Malaparte’s hyperbolic style and the grotesque tone

employed to depict human misery engender a disconnect between the narrator and the events narrated, which prevents the transformation of debased humanity into a pitiful spectacle. A lighter tone in the representation of this struggling humanity is used in portraying the theft of a Liberty ship anchored at the port of Naples, as well as the complete disassembling of a tank that has disappeared from the backyard of a residential building in less than two hours. The exploitation of black and white soldiers by civilians depends on the former's willingness to be allured by hospitality and friendship. Thus Malaparte describes how Neapolitans offer a familial atmosphere to the GIs in exchange for food:

Il padrone di un negro trattava il suo schiavo come un ospite caro: gli offriva da bere, ... lo faceva ballare con le proprie figlie al suono di un vecchio grammofono, lo faceva dormire nel proprio letto, insieme con tutta la sua famiglia, maschi e femmine. ... E il negro, ogni sera, tornava recando in dono zucchero, sigarette, spam, bacon, pane ... Al *black* piaceva quella familiare vita quieta. ... Dopo qualche giorno, il fortunato negro, divenuto lo schiavo di quella povera e cordiale famiglia napoletana, si fidanzava con una delle figlie del suo padrone. (25-6)

A Negro's master treated his slave as an honored guest. He offered him food and drink, ... let him dance with his own daughters to the strain of an old gramophone, made him sleep, along with all the members of his family, male and female, in his own bed. ... And the Negro would come home every evening with gifts of sugar, spam, cigarettes, bacon, bread. [...] The "black" was

delighted by the quiet family life. [...] After a few days the fortunate Negro, having become the slave of this poor, warmhearted Neapolitan family, would become engaged to one of his master's daughters. (23)

Clearly the reference to the institution of slavery is completely gratuitous here. It can be understood as part of the pathological situation described by Malaparte, in which all human transactions are made through the body, with the aim and by means of satisfying corporeal needs. Daniel Gunn offers an insight into Malaparte's horrific vision:

The Malaparte of sex, laughter, and death re-emerges here, as reminder of the hollowness of victory: the *scugnizzo* leads his master-slave to the flesh-market, starting at home with his own sister; the deathly element derives from the echo in the new imperialism of the genocidal affront of African slavery; while the laughter is Neapolitan, in revenge against the liberator-invaders. (No pag.)

The laughter of the Neapolitans, though, is not an empowering strategy conducive to some kind of political agency. Rather, it is mere survival, an art at which Neapolitans excel thanks to their long history of rule by foreign powers. The narrator actually argues that they would have already disappeared, had they not already grown accustomed to buy and to sell those who came as winners and masters throughout the long history of the city: "Il popolo napoletano sarebbe morto di fame già da molti secoli, se ogni tanto non gli capitasse la fortuna di poter comprare e rivendere tutti coloro, italiani o stranieri, che pretendono di sbarcare a Napoli da vincitori o da padroni" (25) ("The people of Naples would have perished of hunger centuries ago if every so often they had not been lucky

enough to be able to buy and resell all those, Italians and foreigners, who presumed to land at Naples as conquerors and overlords”; 23). This statement is a warning to the liberators that it will not be easy to subjugate a population so used to resorting to such oppression survival strategies. The overturn of power hierarchies echoes the psychological strategies for survival employed by slaves in the Americas, whose signifying practices and cunning tricks were necessary coping mechanisms in the face of physical exploitation and psychological subjugation.

The extreme scenario of the war is rendered through a surreal language that transforms atrocious scenes of human suffering into grotesque images. An apt example of this style is found in the section titled “Black Wind,” in which Malaparte narrates, amidst other events, the death of his dog Febo and the encounter near Cassino with a dying soldier. His relationship with his dog is the occasion to express his discomfited attitude towards humanity. During the narrator’s political confinement the dog falls ill. His sadness is due to his understanding that human beings are incapable of being free. Thus the narrator tells us, “Andammo a star di casa a Roma; e Febo era triste, pareva che lo spettacolo della mia libertà lo umiliasse. Egli sapeva che la libertà non è un fatto umano, che gli uomini non sanno e forse non possono essere liberi, che la libertà, in Italia, in Europa, puzza quanto la schiavitù” (163) (“We went to live in Rome; and Febo was sad—he seemed to be humiliated by the spectacle of my freedom. He knew that freedom is alien to humanity, that men cannot and perhaps do not know how to be free, and that in Italy and in Europe freedom is discredited no less than slavery”;142).

Febo is too compassionate to live in this world and he ends his life as a guinea pig in the laboratory of a nearby hospital. As critics have revealed, the story of the dog is

pure fiction, but it is functional to the narrator's argument that soldiers and civilians are the "dogs," the guinea pigs of the war as shown by the next scene in the outskirts of Rome. Here the American Army is still unsuccessfully trying to break the Germans' defense line positioned in the famous medieval abbey of Cassino.

An American Army jeep has just hit a mine and the narrator with his guide stop to assist the wounded. A young white soldier is dying, a scene transformed by the narrator into a gory spectacle: "Da un enorme squarcio al ventre gli intestini gli colavano giù per le gambe, aggrovigliandosi per le ginocchia in un grosso nodo bluastro" (168) ("There was an enormous hole in his stomach, and from it protruded his intestines; they were slowly oozing down his legs and coiling themselves into a big bluish heap between his knees";147). His fellow soldiers are trying to alleviate his last moments whose tragic quality is transformed into an absurd, pitiful spectacle of human impotence. Suddenly, a black soldier walks towards them singing and apparently unconcerned with the heavy shelling that is taking place around him. In light of the exchanges of insults between Malaparte and the American sergeant, who accuses Italians to be "a dirty race of bastards" and Europeans of only "being able to die of hunger," the appearance of the African American soldiers has a valence that goes beyond the realistic narrative. The sergeant, mad at so many human losses in his battalion, rails against Malaparte's suggestion to entertain the dying soldier to limit his suffering, yet asks the black soldier to sing a tune for the dying man:

Il negro si mise a sedere per terra, e cominciò a cantare. Era una canzone triste, il lamento di un negro malato, seduto sulla riva di un fiume, sotto una Bianca pioggia di fiocchi di cotone. ... "Non mi piace la tua canzone", disse il sergente,

“è triste e non sa di nulla. Cantane un'altra.” “But...” disse il negro, “that’s a marvelous song!” “Ti dico che non sa di nulla!” gridò il sergente, “guarda Mussolini: neppure a Mussolini piace la tua canzone”, e tese il dito verso di me. (142)

The Negro sat on the ground and began to sing. It was a sad song, the lament of a sick Negro, sitting on the bank of a river, amid a shower of white flakes of cotton-wool. ... ‘Shut up!’ shouted the sergeant to the Negro. ‘I don’t like your song. ... Look at Mussolini. Even Mussolini doesn’t like your song.’ And he pointed his finger at me. (155)

Malaparte performs a parody of Mussolini’s posture and voice, praising the American soldiers for liberating Italy from their German allies, making clear the intended sarcasm. Malaparte is mocking his own country, where former Fascists are ready to worship the American flag:

E sporgendo le labbra, dondolandomi sui fianchi *come un nero*, sollevando il braccio nel saluto romano, gridai: “Camicie Nere! I nostri alleati Americani sono finalmente sbarcati in Italia per aiutarci a combattere i nostri alleati tedeschi. ... Camicie Nere di tutta l'Italia, viva l'America fascista. (143)

And I stood with legs apart and arms akimbo, swaying my hips. I threw back my head, puffed up my cheeks, thrust out my chin and pouted my lips. “Blackshirts of all Italy!” I cried. “The war in which we have been gloriously defeated has

been at last won. Our beloved enemies, in fulfillment of the prayers of the whole Italian nation, have at last landed in Italy to help us fight our hated German allies. Blackshirts of all Italy-long live America!” (158)

Everyone laughs at him, until, struck by a feeling of humiliation, he ends his performance against the audience’s call to continue. Once again, the farcical register seems to be the only one available to the narrator, who has prepared the reader from the very opening of the novel by declaring that, “il nome Italia mi puzzava in bocca come un pezzo di carne marcia...” (“the name of Italy stank in [his] nostrils like a piece of rotten meat”; 12).

Malaparte’s penchant for excess and ridicule reinforces the unreliability of the narrator, whose derogatory and cynical commentary move across national and ethnic boundaries.

On one hand, the representation of African American soldiers offered by the novel can be read as the realistic depiction of the racism inherent to European cultures. On the other, by employing the language of slavery, it reminds the reader of the commodification of human beings at the foundation of Western imperialism, American and European alike, which reached its apex with the self-destruction of Europe itself in World War II.

### ***Cultural Encounters in the War Context***

As mentioned earlier, the arrival of the liberators meant the arrival in Italy of a multiracial male population. As Liliana Cavani puts it, “A Napoli nel '44, pensa, c'erano tutte le razze della terra sparse per i vicoli, gli inglesi con gli indiani, i francesi coi

marocchini, gli americani... A lui interessò, io penso, la stranezza dell'impatto" ("In Naples in '44 there were all the races of the earth scattered in the intricate alleys, the English with the Indians, the French with the Moroccans, the Americans ... I think he was interested in the peculiarity of the impact"; qtd. in Marrone 221). Cavani would be faithful to this aspect of the novel by asking the actors in her film to play in their own language. Scholar Daniel Gunn concurs with Cavani's emphasis on the relevance of the cultural clash in Malaparte's novel, all the more significant, in Gunn's own words, "in a Naples which is itself the supreme site of hybridity, of multiculturalism *avant la lettre*, as [the narrator] will later explain to the American General Cork (a pseudonym for General Mark Clark), using the city as both origin and terminus" (57). For Gunn, Malaparte envisions the future of Europe through the current state of Naples and quotes the narrator, who says,

When Naples was one of the most illustrious capitals in Europe, one of the greatest cities in the world, it contained a bit of everything. It contained a bit of London, a bit of Paris, a bit of Madrid, a bit of Vienna—it was a microcosm of Europe. Now that it is in its decline nothing is left in it but Naples. What do you expect to find in London, Paris, Vienna? You will find Naples. It is the fate of Europe to become Naples. (188)

The current debasement of Naples is then the near future awaiting Europe. It is significant that Naples functions as the springboard for a discussion of the mysterious, irrational aspects pertaining to European cultures and society despite the Enlightenment. The narrator tells General Clark that Naples is the dark side of Europe, the facet that one



cannot understand through rationality, though the American General insists on the usefulness of Descartes in understanding even Hitler. Colonel Jack is a well-educated man from Virginia whose true admiration for Europe prevents him from accepting its decadent reality. Whenever Colonel Jack blushes at the sight of Europeans's "moral and physical humiliation" (22-20), the narrator reacts with sarcasm and cynicism in trying to hide his shame. Yet it is a sarcasm directed at American society too, as his disquisitions on the price of human flesh provoke repulsion and disgust in the refined Colonel Jack.

Colonel Jack is not immune to racism, as Malaparte makes clear in a conversation between him and members of the local aristocracy. When one of the ladies expresses her sympathy for black soldiers, because, she claims, "at least, they have the color of their opinions," Colonel Jack replies, "Leurs opinions sont tres blanches. Ces sont des veritables enfants" ("Their opinions are very white. They are true children"; 224). His racist words in the language of the alleged ancient and sophisticated European culture are the strongest indictment against European civilization expressed in the novel. Despite the gravity of such an opinion, no one comments on Colonel Jack's words. Rather, the whole group agrees with Lady Wintermere's preference for black soldiers over whites. Speaking of the British army, she says that it is an army of "Sono molto simpatici ma non capisco perchè si siano portati dietro tutti quei poveri soldati bianchi" ("very nice soldiers, though I don't understand why they have carried with them all those poor white soldiers"; 197). The Baron Romano Avezzana reports a dialogue between a black soldier and a sciuscià in which the black soldier asks if he is Italian and the child answers, "No, I'm a Negro." "That boy" says Colonel Jack "has a good sense of politics," to which the Baron replies, "You mean has a lot of historical sense" (225). According to the Baron, the child

expresses a shared history of exploitation with the African American soldiers, whereas Colonel Jack interprets the child's attitude as deriving from the ability to take advantage of the historical circumstances. He then asks why Neapolitans like blacks so much; the paternalistic tone of the aristocrats' answers reiterate the stereotype of comparing black people to children. The conversation ends with Baron Romano Avezzana's critique of Christianity: "Quel che ci fa imperdonabili è appunto l'essere cristiani" ("To be Christians is what makes us unforgivable"; 226). Their compassionate opinions towards blacks are evidence of their historical anachronism and of their inability to understand the social and political changes ensuing from World War II, thus foreshadowing Italy's marginality on the world scene in the aftermath of World War II. The narrator is listening but not participating in the conversation. The aristocrats, the alleged political and cultural leaders of the country, set the topic aside without further discussion.

Coherent to a poetics that yields a world in complete decay, in which ideologies and values have lost their function, Malaparte's attitude invokes the impossibility of a meaningful dialogue across racial and class differences. In the alternative economy in his corporeal history of World War II, he claims that the meaning is the object itself, as a viable interpretation of reality is no longer possible. Consequently, *The Skin* suggests a representation of African American and African soldiers as a bodily presence that becomes the means to denounce the very history of the assumed superiority and universality of the values of Western civilization.

### *The Skin by Liliana Cavani*

In the filmic adaptation of the novel realized in 1981 by director Liliana Cavani, racial issues emerge mostly through the treatment of gender relationships. She claimed to be less interested in the truthfulness of the historical events narrated by Malaparte than the condition of women in a patriarchal and oppressive society. She stresses the importance of addressing this historical phase over the plausibility of the events narrated by Malaparte. Thus, she claims,

Subito dopo la guerra c'è stato un gran bisogno di dare un ordine agli avvenimenti, di razionalizzarli, di renderli distanti con il ricorso ai grandi sentimenti: l'eroismo delle azioni di guerra, la generosità delle popolazioni. Anche l'apoteosi della Resistenza faceva parte di questa necessità. Malaparte invece ha raccontato i fatti: abietti, crudeli, veri. (qtd. in Marrone, "Il mito di Babele" 221)

Soon after the war, emerged the need to order the events, to rationalize them, to detach oneself from them recurring to high sentiments: the heroism of the war actions, the generosity of populations. The apotheosis of the Resistance was part of this necessity. Malaparte, instead, has told the events: vile, cruel, true. (My translation)

Cavani maintains the narrator's role as *trait d'union* of the episodes composing the novel, the violence inherent in the context of war, in which human life is subject to brutality and debasement. Thus, the movie presents the viewer with a hellish spectacle, a fundamental feature of Malaparte's poetics, as noted by Marrone, "the frequent close ups denote the precarious and obsessive nature of reality" (228). Cavani's minimal editing leaves questions unanswered and problematizes the attempt at drawing a moral lesson out of violence and suffering. She includes the most violent scenes of the text and foregrounds the human suffering by excising the long passages in which the narrator voices his thought on the human misery he is observing. Most Italian critics of the film have missed this point, judging Cavani's aesthetic style as a form of yielding to the temptation of pure spectacle. As film critic Grazzini states, "il film strizza l'occhio a Hollywood e punta più sullo choc ... lasciando fuori il discorso storico-culturale e la lezione morale." ("the film winks at Hollywood and leverages more on shock ... leaving out the historical and cultural discourse and the moral lesson"; 3). Grazzini's comment discloses the inability of Italian intellectuals and society alike to face the events of Fascism and World War II with an inquiring attitude rather than a preconceived idea of the winners and the defeated.

The exclusion from the film of the lengthy episodes, whose protagonists are African American soldiers, is symptomatic of the erasure of the presence of the African Diaspora in Italian historical narratives. The space given to the episodes of Italian mothers selling their children to Moroccan soldiers is functional to Cavani's focus on gender and sexuality in a patriarchal and conservative society, rather than the sign of an

interest in racial issues.<sup>46</sup>

In view of the at least partial overturn of power hierarchies in the chaos produced by the war, groups that are marginalized, either on the basis of gender or race, can temporarily claim power. Thus explains scholar Alessandro Giardino, “flesh and its color, as well as national minorities, are commodified and circulated” (“Liliana Cavani’s *La pelle*” 112). As I have insisted in my analysis of the novel, Malaparte employs the argument of slavery both to criticize the righteous liberators and to stress the debasement of Italian society. Italians are literally selling their bodies to the Allies, who in turn take advantage of the desperation of the population, according to the suspension of ethical and moral norms in a war context.

There are only two episodes of the novel concerned with African American soldiers in the film which relate to gender issues that are, according to Giardino, the focus of Cavani’s adaptation. First, the sale of blonde “intimate wig,” an accessory for prostitutes, according to the novel, motivated by the assumption that black soldiers preferred blond women. Second, the two black soldiers running away from a brothel during the eruption of the Vesuvio. If Italy would see mass immigration from Africa starting only in the early ‘90s, the effacement of such an important presence in occupied Italy, in the work of a director otherwise attentive to social issues and historical memory, speaks to the rooted intellectual habit in Italy of excluding the people of the Africana Diaspora from national narratives. Yet Cavani includes a reference to the segregation in the American army. While Malaparte is having dinner with American officials, the

---

<sup>46</sup> See Alessandro Giardino’s “La pelle di Liliana Cavani” for an account of the conditions of Italian women in the media industry and in society at large and the response by Italian Feminism.

camera zooms on a fight between a black and a white soldier. When the fight catches the officers' attention, we hear the line, "Sporco negro!" ("Dirty Nigger!") and an American sergeant commenting: "Ci risiamo" ("Here we are again"). The event is not further discussed and the conversation focuses on the poor quality of the food and directs the attention towards the African soldiers. This is the gruesome scene in which Malaparte composes a human hand with the meat-bones he finds in the couscous, provoking disgust among his fellow diners by suggesting they are eating human meat. To make things worse, we see the *goumiers* following a nurse who carries the arm of a wounded soldier, implicitly suggesting their intention to cook it, as it follows the scene in the restaurant and leads into the inconsequential dialogue between General Cork and a Moroccan official, in which the African soldiers are defined "erotomani di girasoli," ("erotomaniac of sunflowers"; my translation). The dialogue precedes the sequence that shows children sold by their mothers to the soldiers, with which the denunciation of prostitution comes full circle. Despite the director's claim that her intention was to show that in wartime women and children pay the highest price, this scene denounces Cavani's ambiguous relation to racial issues.

The minimal dialogue, characteristic of the novel, is further emphasized in the film in which the character of Malaparte is completely transformed into a voyeur, thus contributing to the spectacle of exceptional violence and debasement of humanity. As Gaetana Marrone says, "The few camera movements show static bodies as simulacra of the ruin of values ... the scant dialogue highlights the density of the images" (229). Silence here functions as a statement of impotence on the part of the narrator and of the cultural and political elites of the country to imagine a future. Cavani highlights the

discourse of women's oppression within the failure of Italian society and politics, eschewing the racial issues that were central to the historical events narrated in the novel.

In the original version of the film presented at the Festival of Cannes in 1981, the characters acted in their own language, thus rendering the social, political, and cultural chaos in which Italy versed at the time. Nevertheless, the consequences of the encounters among different cultures and nationalities are left unexplored in the movie, whose focus is the condition of women worsened by the war. Through the episodes of the "flying market," of Malaparte's performance as Mussolini together with a black soldier singing for the American officer, and of the aristocrats' conversation expressing their appreciation for black soldiers, we understand the complexities of the relationships developed between Italian civilians and American soldiers. In contrast with Liliana Cavani, Spike Lee makes this linguistic, cultural, and social encounter the focus of his war movie *Miracle at St. Anna*. Lee explores freely Italian popular culture through the mediation of cinematic Neorealism, aptly expressing the agency of African American soldiers in the liberation of Italy from the Nazis.

### ***Spike Lee's Miracle at St. Anna (2008)***

In *Miracle at St. Anna*, the idiosyncrasy between the harsh reality of the war and the magic, supernatural elements inserted through the frame engenders a space for African American soldiers to engage with Italian history and culture. The film traces the story of the Fox Company of the 92<sup>nd</sup> Buffalo Regiment fighting in the mountains of Tuscany on the Gothic Line, in 1944. It combines the vicissitudes of the black soldiers,

their difficult relationship with the white commanders, and the alliance they established with Italian partisans and civilians. Spike Lee's unearthing of this forgotten history is particularly relevant in the movie's engagement with the Italian cultural context of its setting. In Lee's narrative, Buffalo soldiers are not only the agents of Italy's liberation from the Nazi army, but also of the recuperation of Italian cultural traditions. Nationality is not one of Spike Lee's concerns. As critic Carry Rickey states, "in this film with good and bad Germans, saintly and sinister Italians, humanistic and sadistic Americans, the subsidiary theme is: See the person, not the nationality" ("Black GI's in WWII Miracle" n. pag.). Indeed, nationality does not appear to be an obstacle to the special connection African American soldiers establish with the Italian community they encounter when trying to reach their camp after a very dangerous and deadly mission.

The film opens with a World War II black veteran, the Puerto Rican Negron, watching the war epic *The Longest Day* starring John Wayne as General Clark. As he watches he mutters: "Pilgrim, we fought the war too." Hence, we know that the movie is going to tell a story not yet told, that is, the participation of black American World War II soldiers in the defeat of Nazi-fascism. The usage of the word "pilgrim" significantly highlights how white Americans are back in Europe to help establish a freedom that they have not successfully implemented at home, despite the mythical foundational narrative of their country. The shot of the film Negron is watching focuses on American paratroopers hanging from trees in Normandy (St. Mère l'Eglise), immediately reminding the viewer of lynching, a perception reinforced by the line uttered by Negron. Spike Lee is declaring at once his directorial political agenda—to give long overdue credit to black



World War II veterans for their participation in the war effort, a participation made all the more significant by their disenfranchisement as citizens of the US

The black soldier Tray carries with him the head of a Renaissance statue he had recovered in Florence after the bombing of the famous Old Bridge—the oldest existing elliptical arched bridge in the world, as we learn at the beginning of the movie. He believes the statue's head makes him invisible to the enemy's bullets and constantly rubs it whenever he is in action. The first time we see Tray and his statue head is in the segment that recounts the crossing of the Serchio River by Tray's company. The black soldiers are caught in crossfire because their white commander did not believe they had given him the right coordinates of their position. They could not have possibly advanced so far; therefore, he refuses to send them help. This scene recalls the legend of St. Christopher who helps pilgrims to cross a deep river in order to serve God. According to the legend, a little child asks him to be carried over his shoulders to traverse the river, but Christopher, despite his great build and strength, can hardly move. Bewildered he asks the child how that was possible, hence learning that he was not carrying only the whole world, but the Creator himself. Whether Lee had this legend in mind or not, it is significant that in the movie there are multiple references to Tray as one of the biggest black men ever seen. In addition, the head of a Renaissance statue he carries with him, is a clear reminder of the peak of the Western humanist tradition. If the symbolism was not enough, we follow Tray accompanied by Bishop—the soldier most skeptical of African Americans' involvement in this “white man war”—rescuing an Italian child named Angelo. The child is the only survivor of the Nazi retaliation at St. Anna of Stazzema, Tuscany, in which nearly two hundred civilians were massacred for refusing to report the

head of the local partisan organization. Thus, the miracle of the title refers both to this child's survival and to the rescue and survival of the statue head, thus symbolically of Western civilization, by a black soldier. Tray's agency takes on a magical quality when the locals identify him with the "Sleeping Man," through which Lee enters the territory of Italian local folklore.

We had already heard of the legend of the "Sleeping Man" from Renata, the daughter of a local former Fascist, who informs the soldiers that the Nazis are everywhere in the surrounding valleys. When asked about the safer path to the nearest American camp, Renata answers that the only way is through the mountain of the "Sleeping Man," subsequently telling the story. Thus, we learn that the Sleeping Man was a shepherd who had fallen in love with a girl who did not reciprocate him. He then decides to lie down on the mountain to protect her from the wind and the rain; ever since, the shepherd has become the protector of the whole community but according to the legend, one day he will awake. Two days later, the white soldiers from their battalion arrive to the village to bring them back to the camp. Tray has a violent confrontation with Captain Noke, a racist white Southerner responsible for the massacre of the black soldiers during the crossing of the Serchio river. Tray refuses to obey Captain Noke's order to leave Angelo in the village, attacking the black lieutenant who tries to take Angelo away from him. In the extreme close-up of Tray's face, distorted by the physical effort of holding the man with one hand while strangling him, we see his profile set against that of the mountain of the Sleeping Man. The similarity strikes Ludovico, the former Fascist, who exclaims, "The Sleeping Man is awakening!" Clearly, the film connects the story of the Sleeping Man to the fate of African American soldiers, who are not reciprocated by

American society despite their sacrifice to protect the country's ideals and value in such a bloody war.

Whereas in Malaparte's novel African American soldiers were the conquerors of Italian civilians, in Lee's and Kuwornu's work, they fight side by side with the partisans, thus foregrounding the close connection that was established between the two groups. As a consequence of this equal treatment, the most debated theme by African American soldiers is the paradoxical situation of feeling freer in a foreign country than at home.

Commenting on this topic in his review for the Chicago Sun-Time, Roger Ebert says,

There is one "extraneous" scene that is absolutely essential. While in the Deep South for basic training, the four soldiers are refused service in a local restaurant, while four German POWs relax comfortably in a booth. Such treatment was not uncommon. Why should blacks risk their lives for whites that hate them? The characters argue about this during the movie, after boneheaded decisions and racist insults from a white officer. Sergeant Stamp has the answer: he's doing it for his country, for his children and grandchildren, and because of his faith in the future. The others are doing it more because of loyalty to their comrades in arms, which is what all wars finally come down to during battle. (N. pag.)

Fair treatment from Italian civilians and partisans increased the black soldiers' awareness of the absurdity in fighting for a country that gave them inferior citizenship. The importance of the World War II experience to the future development of the US Civil Rights movement is a well-known story. The closeness between black soldiers and

partisans in Italy is heightened by the fact that both were maverick groups within their own society and scanted by their official armies, as Kuwornu makes clear in his documentary.

According to many US critics, the references to a neorealist aesthetic undermine the critique of US racism pursued by the film. Angelo's ethereal look reminds us of the protagonists of Neorealist films; this is also his debut-acting role, a tenet specific to Neorealism. The film engages with history, both of film and official historiography. Italian critic Tullio Masoni argues that Lee's cursory take on historical events accounts for the unlikelihood of the reference to Neorealism made through the story of Tray and Angelo. Masoni critiques Lee for engaging with Neorealism without realizing that historical accuracy in post-war Italy took its strength from the immediacy of the events narrated—"il genere bellico, inoltre, dovette ben presto confrontarsi con una cinematografia che lasciava poco spazio alle approssimazioni spettacolari, il neorealismo italiano. In Rossellini non conta tanto l'accuratezza storica; la "fedeltà" verso la propria materia passa attraverso l'etica e lo stile" (9) ("The war genre had soon to confront itself with a style that gave little space to spectacular approximations, Italian Neorealism. In Rossellini's films, historical accuracy is not so important; faithfulness to one's material is expressed through ethics and style"; my translation).

Thus, according to Masoni, Lee's engagement with the war genre sixty years after the actual historical events should have taken into account the tradition rather than aiming at a "universal mysticism" which ends being a pallid reminiscence of the Neorealism that took its value from the momentum of history. It is significant that Masoni's analysis represents an example of the Italian historiographical tendency to draw an

insurmountable line between the rise of Fascism in World War II and any historical or cultural event that came afterwards. The total independence of the Neorealist filmmakers from the Fascist film industry is a myth, as Noa Steimatsky has convincingly argued in *Italian Locations: Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema* (2008). The anxiety to forget a humiliating social and political experience has produced a collective amnesia, which has been responsible, in turn, for the call to order, i.e., conservatism and “transformism” that Malaparte foresaw in *The Skin*. It is not by chance that the most negative criticism the film has received in Italy is due to the still on-going debate over the episode at the center of the plot. Spike Lee’s representation of the responsibility of the partisans in the Nazi retaliation at St. Anna of Stazzema is the target of Italian intellectuals, showing the extent to which the country is still unable to face with detachment and objectivity this phase of its history. According to the film the retaliation was caused by the betrayal of a partisan, and not by the civilians' s refusal to collaborate with the German army, which is the official version sponsored by the partisans association and by the majority of the official historiography on the resistance.

***Fred Kujo Kuworno’s Inside Buffalo (2009)***

This context of collective amnesia is the background for Kuworno’s documentary released in 2009. Kuworno admitted that the reason behind his work was to celebrate a moment of cross-cultural and transnational collaboration, in the face of the growing racism in Italian society. In his own words,

Diverse cose mi hanno spinto a dare vita a questo tributo ai Buffalo, non ultimo il clima di pregiudizi razziali e intolleranza che si respira da qualche anno in Italia. Ho voluto far sapere ai ragazzi italiani che parte della nostra libertà, compresa quella di essere intolleranti, la dobbiamo a gente di “colore”, ad africani ed Afro Americani che hanno consentito al nostro Paese di ritornare a godere della democrazia. (Interview with Luca Glicinella)

A multitude of factors have spurred me to make this tribute to the Buffalo soldiers. Among the main reasons is the climate of racial prejudices and intolerance that has been spreading in Italy for a few years. I wanted to let our younger generations know that we owe part of our freedom, even the freedom of being intolerant, to people of African descent who have contributed to the return to democracy of our country. (My translation)

Kuworno's documentary, which was selected for the 2010 *Pan African Film Festival* in Los Angeles, combines interviews with the protagonists of the events, historians, and James McBride, author of *The Buffalo Soldiers*, the novel on which Spike Lee's movie is based. Significantly, it alternates the interviews with historical footage on the racial clashes in the US at the time of the war. The frame opens with scenes of lynching in the United States and closes with Clinton and Obama finally awarding the Medal of Honor to black veterans.<sup>47</sup> The choral quality of the documentary supports its premise—that the

---

<sup>47</sup> Kuworno reminds the viewer that fifteen thousand African American soldiers fought in Italy, in addition to the thousands of African soldiers in the French and British armies.

victory over the Nazi-Fascist army was a collective effort of white and black peoples. To this end, the emphasis is on historical information combined with personal memories. The African American veterans recount profusely that they often owed their survival to the partisans' collaboration. Inadequately trained in the desert of Arizona, so different from the mountain valleys of Italy, left with little or no ammunitions, many more black soldiers would have died if it were not for the help of the partisans who knew the terrain and the strategies of the Nazis and the Repubblicchini, the Fascists who continued to fight side by side with the Germans after the Armistice. The value of such collaboration is supported by the fact that the first memorial to a Buffalo soldier, John Cox, was erected in Barga, Tuscany in 1979.

It is telling that this story had to wait to be taken up by an Italian director of African origins to be told. His position at the intersection of multiple cultures—by his own admission he grew up watching Spike Lee's movies, especially *Do the Right Thing* (1989)—has allowed him to look at Italian and European attitudes towards immigrants in particular and people of African descent in general, through the lens of US racial relations. Among the factors that account for the vexed reception of Malaparte's novel is the idealization of the Partisans (at the hand of leftist historiography) that has crystallized the memory of World War II as a Manichean fight between the good and the evil. Considering the long-standing anticolonialism of certain currents of the Italian Left—as evidenced by the historian Gianni Procacci in *Il socialismo internazionale e la Guerra d'Etiopia* (1978), the hyper-realistic depiction of the national debasement that included African and African American soldiers could not be tolerated. The criticism engendered by Lee's *Miracle at St. Anna*, which attributes the Nazi retaliation to the treason of a

Communist Partisan is symptomatic of the refusal to put aside ideology in the pursuit of collective reconciliation. Malaparte's equanimity in criticizing every political faction involved with Fascism, the war, and the restoration in the aftermath of World War II, runs against the myth of the Italian people as "good people," which despite its triviality has been employed to forget the collective participation in the Fascist Regime and in the atrocities committed in Ethiopia. The "skin" is not simply a biological fact, but an ideological and ethical synecdoche for the reduction of human life to its basic needs, which has foreclosed dialogue as the novel itself foresaw and Liliana Cavani's film reiterates. The long tradition of Italian World War II cinema confirms the uncritical representation of African American soldiers, which emphasizes the bodily presence over the human and cultural one, a tradition that would have been questioned had Malaparte's novel been read.

To set Italy's participation in World War II within the context of the black transatlantic means to unearth the idiosyncrasies of official historiography and the collective anamnesis that has hindered a serious debate over those events. The emphasis on the role played in the war by the soldiers of the African Diaspora constitutes a redressing of official narratives and the acknowledgement that European colonialism and imperialism are part and parcel of the annihilation of an entire continent. The works examined in this chapter speak to a reality in which the human body as mere commodity is the only measure of history, a practice that Europe and the US had previously imposed upon the African peoples.



### CHAPTER THREE

#### “Diggin’ in” Deep History: Ralph Ellison’s View of Roman Antiquity and Black Internationalism

I had this strange picture in my mind of Rome today wearing its own past as slyly as a savage decked out in the glass beads and metal crucifixes donated by missionaries.

(Kazin, *The Inmost Leaf* 180).

The mysterious side of Europe that according to the narrator of Malaparte’s novel defies Colonel Jack’s thrust in Cartesian rationalism is captured by Alfred Kazin’s words. His description of Rome, which he visited in 1947, speaks at once to the difficult situation of a city slowly recovering from the destruction of the war and to the memory of an imperial history marked by Christianity and colonialism in Africa. The same features would strike, almost ten years later, African American writer Ralph Ellison. The deep historicity of the city clashes with its chaotic life. With the postwar reconstruction well under way, its past irrupts strikingly into the modernization advancing at a fast pace. Ellison would capitalize on this dynamic in his writings about African American culture, the Civil Rights Movement, and anticolonialism.

Ellison’s stay as a writer in residence at the American Academy of Rome from 1955 to 1957 is the background for analysis of his engagement with deep history and

world black solidarity, as I illustrate in this chapter. In the first section I trace the “intuitive” correspondence between Ellison’s take on the workings of African American folklore within the American literary canon and his response to and interpretation of Italian architecture and history. My reading of Ellison’s work drafted in Rome and of his photographs is premised on the function of the architectural layers of Italian art cities and the ensuing simultaneity, which inform Ellison’s take on the relationship of African diasporic cultures with the Western cultural canon. By imaging African American folklore within an American literary canon interpreted through its imperialist history, Ellison acknowledges the diasporic dimension of African American culture without attaching it to a unidirectional relation to its African roots, with the corresponding simplification of African diasporic world cultures. Privileging the meaning of the prefix *dia-* in diasporic as “through and across” rather than “twoness,” he is able to mold his American, European and African legacies in his writing practice and personal identity. In the context of the universalistic discourses of the fifties accompanied by the uncertainties of the atomic era, preserving the complexity and multiplicity inherent to art demanded the writer to be a tightrope walker. Ellison reveals himself to be one by using the urban space of Rome as a historical palimpsest to read and to rewrite African American culture on.

In Rome, Ellison drafted his important essay “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” in which he shifts the emphasis from the African roots of African American folkloric archetypes to their significance as eminently American, that is, Western developments. This essay reaches beyond its entanglement with the Cold War context to

touch upon broader key issues of modernity and black diasporic cultures.<sup>48</sup> Ellison's attention to the international context and his reactions to the Italian environment are forcefully revealed in the correspondence from Rome with fellow writer and life-long friend Albert Murray, in which Ellison comments on Italian art, its historical legacy, and society, assuming an insider's perspective. In the essay "Society, Morality and the Novel," (1957) also drafted in Rome, he foregrounds the role played by European colonialism in the creation and strengthening of the genre of the novel, thus offering a contrapuntal commentary on Western cultural developments and Western imperialism. He further develops these reflections through the photographs he took in Rome, whose discussion concludes the first section. The photographs bring to full development his comments on coeval political and cultural events—namely the Civil Rights Movement and the struggle for independence of African nations—by offering what I call snapshots of deep history. Ellison's photographs produce crosscuts concretized in the varied urban spaces of Rome and their social life. This view connects the temporal layers of the architecture of the city to its everyday life, by excavating its temporal multiplicity and foregrounding the social and cultural tensions pertaining to its historicity. Furthermore, the photographs show Ellison's awareness of his own work as reader of the Roman environment and its history, thus constituting a valuable insight into his aesthetic and political praxis. Ultimately, Ellison's photographs overturn the temporal meaning of the

---

<sup>48</sup> The Cold War for African Americans meant, among other things, facing the political conflict between the alignment with the US official position towards anticolonial movements and Communism or facing the risk of jeopardizing the demand for equal civil rights. I will explore this issue in more detail in the section of the chapter devoted to the internationalist dimension of *Invisible Man*.

trope of the eternal city.<sup>49</sup> Rather than pointing towards the future, eternity stands here for the acknowledgement of the past in the present, a past that is conjured by the photographer, whose engagement with it transforms it into a present, at once individual and collective.<sup>50</sup> The photographs foreground the dialectic between imperial Rome, both as the Ancient Roman and the Christian Empires, and the progressive modernization in the everyday life of the city. The second section of the chapter addresses the internationalist dimension of Ellison's work and thought. Connecting his most circulated writings with lesser known public interventions, I will read his interview to *Preuves*, the French organ of the anticommunist left Congress for Cultural Freedom, in which he defines sentiments and movements of black world solidarity as produced by a common history of exploitation rather than to African roots of diasporic communities around the world. His method of excavation into the depth of time is revealed by his critique of the growing global financial capitalism and its potentially destructive social consequences.

Roberto Rossellini's film *Rome Open City* (1945) brutally depicted a city and its population violated by the war first and by the occupation of the allied army later. After the war, Rome takes on again its romantic role of eternal city for the privileged colony of foreign artists and intellectuals, whom Ellison mocks in an episode of *Three Days Before*

---

<sup>49</sup> See Stephanie Hom, "Consuming the View." Hom refers to Mircea Eliade's explanation of the topos of the eternal city—"Religious scholar Mircea Eliade argued in his work on eternal return that Rome as *urbus aeterna* was linked more to historical cycles and cosmic regeneration than imperial politics. ... Romans lived in great fear of an *ekpyrosis*, or "catastrophe that marked the transition of an age" (133-5), and they feared that an imminent catastrophe would cause Rome to disappear. Eliade noted that Augustus's ascension as emperor assuages these fears, [...] and Romans believed that the city could regenerate itself *ad infinitum*" (94). Hom concludes that transition empowered a secular vision of power that replaced the previous belief in cosmic powers.

<sup>50</sup> See Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*.

*the Shooting* (2011). At once cosmopolitan and provincial, aristocratic and proletarian, modern and ancient, the city is not only the center of state power, but also the port of call for immigrants from both Italy and Africa. At the time of Ellison's stay, the country was still recovering from World War II, a civil war, and a twenty-year dictatorship; the grandeur of its past, visible in its architecture, sharply contrasted with its socio-economic reality, marked by the devastation of the socio-economic fabric brought by the war, the failure of Fascism to "create" a modern, unified nation, and the swift changes engendered by the postwar reconstruction. Such contrasts are Ellison's fertile ground for reflection on Western imperialism and black modernity. Ellison follows in both the American and the Italian press the unfolding of world-historical events, such as the anticolonial movements in Africa, the political tensions caused by the Cold War, and the news coming from the US about the Civil Rights Movement, events that he discusses in his correspondence with Albert Murray, a friend and fellow writer, at the time stationed in the Casablanca US army base. The time lag produced by the competing temporalities of the city produces the space that engenders Ellison's reflections on black American experience in an international context. This experience is examined through its cultural production, i.e. the use of folklore, its critique of linear time and historical master narratives, and by way of its ties with the political developments of anticolonial movements and the increasingly central role assumed by former colonies in world history—especially after the Bandung Conference held in 1954, that had inaugurated "the *feeling* of political possibility presented through this first occasion of "Third World" solidarity, what was soon referred too as "the Bandung Spirit" (*Making a World After Empire*, ed. Lee 10).

### ***Black Folklore and Western Civilization***

Ellison's two-year residence at the American Academy of Rome, from 1955 to 1957, was not his first experience abroad. He had previously served as a merchant marine in World War II, stationed in Swansea, Wales, and had taught at the Seminar of American Culture sponsored by the US government in Salzburg, Austria, in September 1954.<sup>51</sup> His stay in Rome, however, was particularly relevant for his career, not only on account of its duration. It was in Rome, in fact, that he composed the important essays "Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke" (1958) and "Society, Morality and the Novel" (1957), besides drafting his last novel, elaborated during what are some of the most turbulent years of world history in the aftermath of World War II. I will analyze how the essays foreground the intricate relations between European Imperialism and the role played by African American culture within the foundation of Western civilizations.<sup>52</sup> A closer analysis of the texts written in this time of intense engagement with world events, I suggest, reveals how Ellison finds in the temporal simultaneity of Italian architecture an appropriate model to read black folklore as one of the foundational components of

---

<sup>51</sup>During World War II, Ellison served in the Merchant Marine and was stationed in Wales. This is the setting for an incident whose significance has been discussed by Daniel Williams in his article "'If We Only Had Some of What They Have.' Ralph Ellison in Wales" (2006). According to Williams, who analyzes two of Ellison's unpublished short stories, the experience in Wales marks a touchstone in the black protagonist's discovery of his identity. The short story titled "The Red Cross" evokes the importance of an international setting as well as the distinct treatment black soldiers received in Great Britain in enabling the protagonist to discover his American identity: "The plurality of identities expressed by the Welsh choir – from Welsh distinctiveness, to Britishness to socialist internationalism – creates a space where Parker [the protagonist] can ultimately, with "The Star Spangled Banner" as an accompaniment, identify himself as an American" (43). It is significant that this unveiling of the protagonist's identity takes place at the intersection of national identities with international socialism.

<sup>52</sup> For a discussion of Ellison's acknowledgement of the intertwinement between cultural development and imperialism, see Jonathan Arac's article, "Imperial Eclecticism in *Moby Dick* and *Invisible Man*: Literature in a Postcolonial Empire." Further references to *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison* are cited as *CE*.

American cultural tradition. This critique, which emphasizes disruptions and conflicts rather than continuities, accounts for the foregrounding of the local specificities of African diasporic experiences in the Americas and in Europe, within the long view of the history of imperialism. The architecture of Rome, by making the persistence of the past in the present literally visible, provides him with a structural model to connect seemingly disparate cultural traditions as black American folklore and the Renaissance, but to reject the idea of cultural commonalities among black world cultures.

***“Homeness or Chaos in the Renaissance?”***

A comment Ellison makes about his experience in Rome highlights the influence exercised by the foreign environment on his inquiry into his work as a writer, public intellectual and his search for a “synthesis” of the two. The autobiographical essay “Tell It Like It Is, Baby” was drafted in Rome in 1956, but completed and published only in 1965. Occasioned by a letter from a friend, who addresses him as an intellectual, albeit affectionately reminding him of his origins of “home boy,” asks him his opinion on the Southern Congressmen’s dismissive attitude towards the Supreme Court. Ellison begins the essay by reminiscing about the reasons why he had not been able to complete the essay at the time. He writes,

My wife and I were living the dormitory life of the American Academy in Rome and I was much preoccupied: with writing a novel, with literary concepts, with reviewing my own life’s resources for literary creation; with the experience of discovering a foreign culture in which the old structures and guides that

sustained my thoughts, emotions and conduct at home were so relaxed, whether awake or sleeping, that it was as though I was living in a barely controlled chaos. (*CE* 29)

To my knowledge this is the only instance in which Ellison admits the influence of living amidst a foreign culture. In the letter sent to the director of the American Academy in the mid-eighties and which I will discuss at length later, Ellison insists on the development of his Americanness through his life in Italy, refusing to acknowledge the influence on his work exercised by the experience abroad. More importantly, Ellison recognizes the loosening of “structures and guides” in the Italian environment, to the point that he feels like he’s living in “chaos.” His words are vague enough that it is hard to grasp the extent to which this experience represented a positive element, in its potential ability to engender a different perspective on the old conundrum of his intellectual practice. In any case, they speak to the specificities of the Italian context in which the absence of the strictly codified racial relations of US society result in dislocated points of reference; chaos, but a fruitful one if judged with regard to Ellison’s productivity over these two years. The official evaluation of his stay in Rome is contained in a letter addressed to Jim Melchert, Director of the American Academy in New York, who in 1985 offered again to Ellison the writer-in-residence appointment at the Academy in Rome. Though Ellison rejected the offer (due to previous publishing and lecturing commitments), in his response he still took the time to provide an interesting and ironic evaluation of his earlier experience in Rome:

As a fellow and wife of thirty years ago we recall quite vividly our acute problem of adjusting to the Academy’s dormitory accommodations, and there’s



nothing Fanny and I would like better than to return as privileged guests. For not only the discomfort recapitulates our college days, which were further behind us than those of the younger Fellows, but it marked our initiation into the mysteries of living for an extended time in a foreign culture. Even better, by providing us opportunities for meeting interesting American artists, scholars and writers, it made us more aware of the “homeness” of home and served to broaden, refine, and extend the process of “Americanization” through which the Academy of Rome makes it possible for its fellows to achieve themselves. (Ellison to Melchert, Ralph Ellison Papers, Library of Congress)

Two observations in this passage merit our attention. Firstly, that living in Rome has made Ellison and his wife “more aware of the homeness of home;” secondly, that the experience “has broadened their process of Americanization.” Certainly, it is not surprising that living in a foreign linguistic and cultural environment sharpens the awareness of one’s own cultural specificity. Yet in Ellison’s case, the development of his “Americanness” is engendered not so much by the estrangement within a foreign culture as by a sense of familiarity with it.

Ellison was conscious of this way of experiencing his stay in Rome not only retrospectively, but also in the moment of being there, as revealed by a passage contained in an October 1955 letter to Albert Murray. Shortly after arriving in Rome, the Academy offered its fellows a tour of the most artistically rich towns of central Italy; struck by an architecture that testifies to centuries of different artistic developments, Ellison confessed to Murray:

My eyes are still whirling and we simply must go back to some of the places to isolate and study those works, which most moved us. ... The Renaissance has sent my imagination on a jag ever since I was shooting snipes in Oklahoma, but here is around you everywhere you turn, the same sky, earth, water, roads, houses, art. And not only that, it's all mingled with the Romans, the Greeks, the Greco-Christians. At a table I hear the Classicists talking the stuff, who did what, when and why and where, and I feel lost in a world that I've got to get with or die of frustration. We've got one of the keys, though, for here is where the myth and ritual business operates in a context not of primitive culture but beneath the foundations of the West. ... As soon as I discover who knows what around here I plan to get a reading list so that I can orient myself in relation to the classical background. (Ellison to Murray, *Trading Twelves* 99)

Ellison's take on Rome as a culturally loaded site is eloquent. Despite claiming an inadequate knowledge of the classics and of the visual arts, he asserts to possess the tools to read the surrounding art. Most importantly, these tools are provided by the ways in which he sees myth and ritual functioning within Italian artistic history, in the heart of Western civilization.

If it is true that this displacement in Rome "broadened" his sense of "Americanness," it is significant that it does so from a position of immediate access to the Italian heritage, not so much through scholarly erudition, but rather in terms of a certain

cultural sensibility that allows Ellison to place himself, as an African American,<sup>53</sup> in a privileged position from which to read and to interpret the meaningfulness of the Italian city. In describing his impressions, Ellison grapples with the position of African Americans within Western civilization. Two questions underlie his statements: who is part of the West? Who is excluded from it? The answer to both inquiries is that black American culture is at the core of Western civilization to the extent that, as an African American, he actually possesses a key to interpret one of the richest legacies of this civilization: the Renaissance. Ellison sees “myth and ritual” operating “beneath the foundation of the West” rather than at the level of a “primitive culture”—which predicates the assumption that the categories of myth and ritual are components of traditional folklore, transcendent to and distant from contemporary cultures.<sup>54</sup> In other words, the stratification of architecture in Italy reveals a temporal simultaneity that makes visible the working of the past in the present. It is also worth noticing that among the books in Ellison’s reading list while in Rome are various texts on visual art theory. In particular, Panofsky’s *Meaning in Visual Art*, in articulating the “strata of meaning,” speaks to Ellison’s immersion in phenomenology in addition to the New Criticism derived method of close reading works of art. His vision of the Renaissance is so intimate that he is able to distinguish it as part of the natural elements, of the “sky, earth and water.” The Renaissance being in itself the result of the interaction of previous cultural

---

<sup>53</sup> It is reasonable to assume the pronoun that we refer to as African American, as Ellison uses it interchangeably with the word “mose,” a colloquial synonym of African American throughout the correspondence.

<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, in *Three Days Before the Shooting*, Ellison depicts a group of American expatriates as the “primitive” people, intent on a voodoo ritual set up in the hysteria that followed a heated argument over an old aristocratic lady.

legacies, such as the post-medieval European classical tradition, it belies for Ellison its transformative power, both of and in the present; that is, rather than the cultural climax of Western civilization Ellison sees the multiple creative and historical forces that have contributed to it. As Arac notes, “Eliot and Joyce provided the structural principle that allows Ellison to hold together the rich folkloric materials, which he draws from African American life rather than from Christian theology or Greek epic” (163). Next to Eliot’s “mythic method,” Arac quotes a passage from “Hidden Name and Complex Fate,” a speech Ellison gave at the Library of Congress in 1964, in which the writer claims that when studying music he was looking at Louis Armstrong’s compositions for “its discontinuities, its changes of pace and its hidden system of organization” (Arac 165). Ellison’s words arch back to his experience of Italian art, in which the present is the result of the accretion of different artistic epochs each intricately connected to one another. He is eager to understand its “hidden system of organization,” as he tells Murray of his plan to obtain a reading list from one of the resident scholars of the Academy. Later, upon informing Murray of his readings in visual aesthetics, he expresses the intention of “trying to dig where Malraux dug his digging .... I don’t know where this will take me but it’s damn interesting” (*Trading Twelves* 133). Hence, Ellison’s interest in the inner structures of cultural production finds fertile ground in Italian architecture. The combination of distinct temporalities, in which past epochs are not effaced but exalted by overlapping with more recent ones, offers itself as a pattern of cultural interpretation and historical validation of the tradition.

These impressions are consistent with the essay “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke,” written in response to the lecture given in 1957 at Brandeis University by Stanley

Edgar Hyman.<sup>55</sup> In his lecture, the comparative anthropologist and literary critic suggests the figure of the “darky entertainer” as the fundamental archetype in African American culture and sketches an analysis of the protagonist of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to exemplify his theory. As it is well known, Ellison critiques Hyman’s emphasis on the function of the archetype, reassessing the workings of black folklore within American culture in light of the complex American social context. According to Ellison the archetype of the “darky entertainer” is a product of the Anglo-American Protestant tradition rather than of the African heritage of black Americans. This is the basis for his analysis of the process through which folkloric elements enter and transform literature, revealing his interest in the structural patterns that help to explain the dialectic between elements from the tradition, especially myth and folklore, and what are considered higher literary genres. Hence he objects to Stanley Edgar Hyman’s “obsession with stereotype hunting” that prevents him, claims Ellison, from seeing how the cultural character of “the darky entertainer” is a truly American creation having little to do with Africa. The archetype of the “smart man playing the dumb” (CE 101) might be present in every culture, Ellison explains, but it is more intriguing to follow its development on American soil, where examples of this character are plentiful and eminent, from Benjamin Franklin to Washington and Lincoln (CE 109). In sum, what most interests Ellison is the trajectory taken by the archetype within the cultural canon, i.e. its status as a work in progress, an ever-mutating entity. The development of the archetype and its transformation into a

---

<sup>55</sup> Hyman’s lecture and Ellison’s response were published in *Partisan Review* with the title “The Negro Writer in America: An Exchange” (1958). As Rankine describes it, Hyman’s essay “offers a clear survey of scholarship on the ritual approach to myth and its relationship to Darwinian social theory” (*Ulysses in Black*, n. 7, 212).

narrative motif that speaks to the specificity of its context compels us to acknowledge traditional folklore as an active phenomenon at work within contemporary cultures. As Morris Dickstein argues, “Far from treating the vernacular as a dumbing-down of high culture, a view common among critics of popular culture in the 1950s, Ellison sees it as part of an ongoing process of self-renewal” (“Ralph Ellison, Race, and American Culture,” 2010, 53). Dickstein’s discussion centers on jazz, one of the eminently African American musical expressions, chosen to support his depiction of Ellison as spokesperson for US multiculturalism, a critical approach that wittingly overshadows Ellison’s critique of US society. Arguing that the black archetypes Hyman explained by their African origins were in reality American forms of cultural expression and were traceable within its contemporary canon, Ellison was debunking a distinction of value. Rather than a past tradition relegated to a temporally distant, hence allegedly backward cultural context, black folklore was woven into the fabric of modern US literature. Ellison’s approach seems to emphasize a lack, a sort of invisibility that sanctions the belonging of a traditional cultural element to contemporary literature. In a letter to Albert Murray dated June 1957, in describing his reactions to Hyman’s essay, Ellison claims that he had come to understand the value of folklore after discovering it at work in literature.<sup>56</sup> One of the shortcomings in Hyman’s essay, according to Ellison, is the lack of discussion regarding the novel, “the form which is itself a depository of folk and other

---

<sup>56</sup> It is well known that Ellison claimed T.S. Eliot among his literary ancestors. From the first short stories, his writings are replete of forms of African American folklore. For an overview of his use of folklore see Susan L. Blake, “Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison.” *PMLA* (94:1): 1979, 121-36. For an extensive analysis of Ellison’s use of Greek mythology, especially the Homeric figure of Ulysses, Patrice D. Rankine, *Ulysses in Black. Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature* (2006).

traditions reduced to formal order” (165). This observation recalls his description of the Renaissance in Italian art as “mingled with the Roman and the Greek”; the cultural forms of antiquity are still visible in their formal interaction with later artistic developments, as if the structures of ancient arts were a metaphor for folkloric archetypes that are alive and transformed into contemporary literature. In his letter to Murray, he continues:

I knew mose [African American] lore yes, but I really didn’t know it until I knew something about literature and specifically the novel, then I looked at Negro folklore with a shock of true recognition. I was trying to write novels in the great tradition of the novel, not folk stories. The trick is to get mose lore *into* [emphasis in the original] the novel so that it becomes a part of that tradition.  
(Ellison to Murray, *Trading Twelves* 166)

This shock of recognition is similar to his experiences in surveying the architectural stratifications of Rome, despite his admitted lack of erudition about classic cultures. It is the recognition of how past art forms enter the making of successive artistic developments, how the past itself is never an immutable entity fixed on a temporal and cultural plane that transcends the present. It takes a long process of distillation for current events to be elaborated meaningfully and to enter structurally the realm of literature. As with black folklore entering almost surreptitiously into the American novel, the cultural elements weaved into the architectural fabric of Rome need a work of excavation and exposure to be revealed. In this sense, the centuries of superimposition of the Greek and Roman traditions within the Renaissance function as a visual concretization of Ellison’s reflections on folklore, American literature, and the working of the tradition in the

present. In other words, the simultaneity of Roman architecture that so tantalizes him enables him to envision traces of past cultural epochs in the present. A previous notable visitor of the city, Alfred Kazin, had expressed a similar reaction to the Roman architecture in his *The Inmost Leaf*, in which he notes:

Rome keeps eluding me ... It is the greatest enigma of all. ... The classic and the baroque cities were casually interwoven with the greater modern city, resulting in a temporal ambiguity that rendered all periods of the past equidistant. ... The most diverse elements blended into an impossible unity of experience. ... How amazing [rather] that the city should still be able to absorb them all and keep us equidistant in time from each. (179-80)

Kazin's words, though referring to a much more individual take than Ellison's collective thinking, capture well the impossibility of a homogeneous cultural experience that becomes a productive imaginative tool in Ellison's fruition of Renaissance culture. His black American cultural background allows him a privileged perception of the artistic developments of the West. Against the stigma of backwardness and simplicity imposed on past cultures, particularly ascribed to black folklore, Ellison's acknowledgement of and fascination with the cultural conflation of past and present signifies also the recuperation of the African American tradition from the realm of the primitive. By identifying it "beneath the West," Ellison places his own traditional and oral legacy within the foundation of white Western civilization. Further, he affirms the role of this legacy as active agent within cultural modernity by distinguishing it from a temporal



conception that assigns primitive cultures to a distant past.<sup>57</sup> This view of cultural development that disrupts a linear understanding of time was present in *Invisible Man* (1952), in which the change brought in everyday life by the technological advancements of modernization is already envisioned in its dialectic with the past and its cultural traditions. John Wright, in assessing the intellectual import of the electric age in Ellison's first novel, compares him to other African American writers whose work was highly immersed in folklore. "None, however," writes Wright, "attuned these crucial facets of African American life as consciously as Ellison would to the new world of social and psychic meanings created by technological change" ("Experimental Attitude and Illumination" 163). The context of Rome allowed him to tackle this concern with tradition and the present from a wider perspective that included the very foundations of Western civilizations.

This move is an interesting affinity of sensibility with both earlier conceptualizations of historical time, most famously Benjamin's "now time" and "the image" which will be appropriated in theories of history. Benjamin's figurations of time plays an important part in Reinhart Koselleck's formulation of the concept of "horizon of expectations" and of "space of experience" in *Future Past*s (1979), a development of Hayden White's ground breaking study of the narrative quality of historiography. Koselleck's works on historical time are useful in literary studies in so far as they allow connecting the reflections on historical writing to the literary critique of received

---

<sup>57</sup> For discussions of African diasporic cultures as belonging to modernity rather than being its counterculture as Gilroy argues in *The Black Atlantic*, see Aldon Lynn Nielsen, "The Future of an Allusion: The Color of Modernity," in *Geomodernisms*, ed. Doyle and Winkiel; and Michael Hanchard's article, "Afro-Modernity."

historical narratives. “Koselleck’s *Zeitschichten* model is richly suggestive for unpacking the metaphoric representation of time through a stratified spatial image,” (Kerstin Bardt, “Layers of Time” 140). I am not interested, as per Bardt’s work, in the dialogue between conceptualizations of historical time and the politics of memory in museum-like spaces, choosing instead to focus on the ways in which Koselleck’s claim for the necessity of a theory of history, based on the acknowledgment of the historian’s positionality in time and in history, articulates the spatial apprehension<sup>58</sup> of time in Ellison’s reading of Italian architecture. Indeed, what Kazin called “an impossible unity of experience” (180) has become the flag of Ellison’s interventions into discourses of black internationalism, whether political or cultural. From the same cultural locale, the architectural stratification of Rome becomes the site from which to contest the cultural and political affinities among people of the African Diaspora, affinities trivialized in a romanticized vision of the diaspora itself, instrumental to the project of imperial colonialism.

The peculiarities of Italy’s history and society help explaining the ways in which this environment can be conducive of both an affective synthesis and a historical disconnect. Ellison’s comments on Italian contemporary culture and society clearly speak to his appreciation for the past of the country and the total condemnation of the present, to the extent that one would think he is speaking of two different countries. The awe produced in him by the past artistic achievements of the country and by its reflection in the very nature of the environment equals his disappointment for the present state of

---

<sup>58</sup> I use the word apprehension thinking of Beckett’s usage of it to define the first published draft of Joyce’s *Finnegan’s Wake*. In defending the work, Beckett claims, “You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*” (*Modernism* 1067).

Italian culture and the demeanor of its people. A brief account of Italy's outlook at this point in history is useful in illuminating Ellison's thought on the dialectic between history and social life.

### *Italy's Greatness Is in Its Past*

At the time of Ellison's visit, Italy was still recovering from the ruins of World War II and of twenty years of Fascist regime. During Ellison's sojourn in the fifties, the economic boom is well under way and Yet social disparities between the south and the north, the country and the cities, are still very strong. Italy is also a young nation-state—as a matter of fact, standard Italian will truly enter into everyday usage only in the late fifties, as the television set becomes part of everyday life for the majority of Italians. The city of Rome, geographically located on the border with southern Italy, is the quintessential representation of this social and cultural situation. At once cosmopolitan and provincial, aristocratic and proletarian, modern and ancient, the city is the center of the state power institutions and the port of call for immigrants from central and southern Italy. Monumental Roman and Renaissance architecture lives side by side with proletarian, often poor, neighborhoods. These contradictions are echoed in Ellison's recollections of his experience of the city. His enthusiasm for an antiquity that he perceive, organic to the natural environment and the everyday life of its inhabitants, coexists with his contempt for the current state of Italian culture, society, and economy. Arnold Rampersad's biography of Ellison stresses the role played by the writer's wife, Fanny, in keeping their ties with the outside world. She runs the errands for the family

and learns Italian well enough to work for the Christian organization called The Lamp of the Brotherhood. On the contrary, Ellison lives in isolation, obsessed with his writing. His letters to Murray are replete with comments about the hardship of everyday life in Italy, the impossibility of finding goods—from film and camera accessories to soap and decent coffee. Not only is the food of poor quality, he complains, but the chances of finding books in English and jazz records are so slim that he asks Murray to ship them from Casablanca. After a two-week visit to Japan, he thus compared the Japanese character to the Italian, “They are an efficient people—which is always a pleasure to encounter after these slackass Romans, unrelenting cheaters who will try to spill as much money from a foreigner as his or her ignorance of their language will allow them to” (Ellison to Murray, *Trading Twelves* 115).

Thus, Ellison speaks from a location that, in terms of social and economic development, is both within the West and outside of it. Italy’s geographical location has produced historical and cultural ties with Africa and the Middle East, as strong as those with countries such as Germany, England and France. And Yet compared to these countries, Italy had seen little migration from Africa, given its short-lived colonial experience. In other words, until the late 1950s, Italy had been a country of emigration rather than immigration; hence, racial relations were more porous than those in countries where a long history of colonialism had engendered an efficient, tightly coded system of racial interactions. Therefore, the social and economic developments produced by the country’s recent history are in contrast with the image of the cradle of Western civilization associated with its ancient and rich cultural heritage, an idiosyncrasy that informs Ellison’s experience of the West. In Italy, he could inhabit a more flexible space

of social relations, which explains at once his complaints about the backwardness of the country and his act of self-empowerment in using his own cultural background as a privileged point of entry to interpret Greek, Roman, and Renaissance cultures as they unfolded before his eyes.

***“A Snapshot of Deep History:” Ellison’s Photography in Rome***

I’m going to be a little nasty here and suggest that our written history has been as “official” as any produced in any communist country-- only in a democratic way: individuals write it instead of committees.

(Ellison, “The Uses of History in Fiction,” 147)

Among Ralph Ellison’s Papers at the Library of Congress there is a compelling series of photographs taken in Rome, which capture some of the defining idiosyncrasies of the economic and social developments the country was undergoing during the 1950s. In his letters to Murray, Ellison voices his dissatisfaction for the backwardness of Italy in mostly cursory and dismissive observations on the hardship of every day life, that for him especially meant the impossibility of finding jazz records, books in English, and most of all photographic equipment. It is in fact in his photographs that the Italian environment functions as a springboard for more nuanced reflection on modernity and the unfolding of history inscribed in the architecture of the eternal city. He portrays the elderly, children, and workers—ordinary people often seized in the marginal urban spaces between the old city and the growing proletarian periphery. In other words, Ellison employs photography

as a means of critical reflection on history and cultural production. More specifically, the Italian context proves to be a productive site for thinking through his life-long concerns with the relation of African American culture to the American canon and to the broader European tradition. This work of excavation performed through photography constitutes an active epistemological intervention at the intersection of literary aesthetics, social analysis, and political commentary.

Scholars have explored Ellison's interest in visual culture in connection to his novel *Invisible Man* (1952). One of the earliest studies is Karen Jacobs's *The Eye's Mind* (2001), which cites from Ellison's autobiographical essay "Hidden Name and Complex Fate" (1964) in which the writer, reminiscing about his childhood, recalls finding a photographic lens in a back alley as a significant event in his artistic beginnings; among more recent studies, Lena Hill's "The Visual Art of *Invisible Man*" (2009) delves into Ellison's practice of sculpture, and Sara Blair's "Ralph Ellison, Photographer" (2007) appraises the New York School of photography (early forties) as an important contribution to the aesthetics of *Invisible Man*. In contrast to these works that read visual art as a marginal field, I argue for its centrality in Ellison's understanding of history and American culture. His arrival in New York in the summer of 1936 meant the immersion in the radical and intellectual political climate of the Depression Era, which saw the explosion of photography as a mode of social documentary. Ellison's practice of photography, however, testifies more to his investment in aesthetics as a tool for the understanding of reality rather than its exposure.

The word photography, joining the Greek "photo" (light) and "graphein" (writing) to denote "writing with light," marks the beginning of photography as at once a magical

occurrence and the expression of technological modernity. Slowly making its entrance into the realm of “real art,” photography has contributed greatly to debates over representation and the conceptualization of time and space in art. One of the most fascinating considerations on this expressive medium is the attribution to it of the ability to represent death. As Michael North argues in *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (2007),

The visual image is almost always apparitional, evident of some absence or even of death. The Image, in this respect, is an apparition, a phantom, because it represents the return of a lost or dead object, a moment when the poet is haunted by reality. The spectral Image presents life imaged as death, a living death. What, in fact, could be a better definition of photography than ‘life imaged as death’? (31)

To represent death, we gather from North, means to stop time and space, to halt the flow of history; I propose that this idea of representation is very much on display in Ellison’s photographs, snapshots of reality made available for gauging. Immersed in the deep historicity of Rome, Ellison employs photography to excavate the historical and cultural layers of meaning contained in the city’s “living past.”

The historical and cultural layers Ellison simultaneously perceives in Italian architecture allow him to conceive of the Western tradition in its vexed relation to African American culture and world politics as the dynamic relations of multiple forces rather than the monolithic given in which that tradition has been transformed through its canonization. He employs the “privileged position” he assumes in the act of understanding the richness of Italian art, by “diggin’ in,” in his own words, the

foundation of Western civilizations. The Renaissance, in itself the result of the interaction of previous cultural legacies, such as the classical tradition in post-medieval Europe, is read by Ellison not as the cultural climax of Western civilization, but as the aggregate of the multiple creative and historical forces that produced it. Accordingly, the photographs he took in Rome interrogate the relationship between history as a lived space and the human presence that moves across the multiple historical temporalities. This method of inquiry consists of excavating the visual layers of deep history. The epistemological value of antiquity, specifically in studying national histories beyond Italy is pinpointed by Andrew Shryock and Daniel Lord Smail in their introduction to *Deep History: The Architecture of Past and Present* (2011). They argue:

The universal attribution of agency has become a recipe for historical research, as scholars, trapped in Hegelian logic, create new subjects by incorporating ever more voices. Politically, the consequences of this trend have been enabling. Where the straitjacketing of time is concerned, however, the consequences have been otherwise. In the hopes of granting speech and agency to those on the receiving end of European history, we have transformed the world's subalterns into characters of a suspiciously uniform type. ... As a result of this bind, the great questions that used to cut through the layer cake of time are not being asked. (10-11)

The historians' concern here is with the ever shrinking historical time under study in academia, which ends by being a repetition of the Enlightenment approach to confine to a state of nature, "the savage slot" as Michel-Rolf Trouillot defines "the holding tank



for all that is not civilized or part of the modern story” (10). What Ellison is doing through his photographic inquiry of Rome’s urban spaces is unearthing the deep history of the West and inscribing his African heritage into it.

His interest in the inner structures of cultural production—revealed by the essays discussed earlier, is nurtured by his passion for visual art. As he later wrote to Murray, in fact, he was deeply immersed in readings such as Viktor Panovsky’s *Meaning in Visual Art*, but also Rudolph Arnheim’s *Art and Visual Perception* (1954) on the phenomenology of art (i.e. art as apprehension of reality) and in Ellison’s own words, “a new Mentor ... *The Painter’s Eye* by Maurice Grosser (1956).” Together with readings in visual culture, he expresses to Murray the intention of “trying to dig where Malraux dug his digging ... I don’t know where this will take me but it’s dam [sic] interesting” (129), referring to Malraux’s three volume work *The Psychology of Art*. “To be an artist,” declares Ellison to Murray, “means to “see” first and foremost” (133), but he needed “to dig” in order “to see,” a method that was allegorized in the multiple temporal layers simultaneously visible in the architecture of Rome. The combination of distinct temporalities, in which past epochs are not effaced but exalted to the extent that they overlap with more recent ones, offers to Ellison a pattern of cultural interpretation and historical validation of African American culture within the American canon.

The concern with time, renewed by Italian architecture and art, coupled with the abrupt entry of contradictory (at times anachronistic) features of progress into the picture of the eternal city, conjures a “living representation of the past” that allows a greater insight into the historical forces that have engendered it. This is a very important political statement to make in 1956, when African Americans were still fighting political

disenfranchisement and social alienation. Photography as the possibility of suspending world-historical becoming allows the work of excavation through which “a different sense of time” can be figured or better, claimed as the “proof of African American modernity.” I borrow the expression “a different sense of time” from Ellison himself, discussing the latest news about the Civil Rights Movement in a letter to Murray dated April 4, 1957:

One of these days I’m really going to put the bad-mouth on these scobes; here Africans and West Indians are taking over governments and Montgomery Negroes are showing off their quality and *they* continue to act like this is 1915 . . . . Well, man, world events are justifying our position and interests of the thirties, not those of the administration or the campus heroes and politicians; we are operating out of a different sense of time and on a different wave length. Maybe Foster will see the light and be a man. (*Trading Twelves* 160)

Here Ellison highlights the anachronistic conservatism of white America vis a vis the demands made by African Americans for political enfranchisement. Such conservatism is all the more absurd when pitted against the backdrop of world-history, proving not only the legitimacy of black radical politics of the thirties, but also its prescience.<sup>59</sup> This radical stance is not novel to Ellison, neither is it confined to his private correspondence. I will later address in more detail his involvement with leftist politics in New York during the thirties, in order to highlight the internationalist aspects of *Invisible Man* and his

---

<sup>59</sup> The unsurpassed study on this topic is *Black Marxism: the Making of the Black Radical Tradition* by Cedric Robinson (1983, 2000), followed by Robin D. Kelley’s *Race Rebels*, and Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Autonomy of Black Radicalism.”

discussion of a “Negro World Culture” at the peak of the Cold War. It is useful here to recall Ellison’s “Harlem is Nowhere,” an essay analyzing African American urban life in New York pursued through a photographic work that excavates the city space to reveal the psychological and social tensions—both cause and effect of the urban reality.

***The Radical Thirties: “Harlem Is Nowhere”***

It is in the late thirties when collecting folk stories on the streets of Harlem for the Federal Writers Project (he joins it in 1938 with Richard Wright’s help, for which he mostly worked in the Project’s Living Lore Unit) that Ellison fully engages with working class issues and the psychological pressures of racism. In the same period, he uses photography to highlight the almost surreal reality of social life in Harlem, as testified by the essay “Harlem is Nowhere.” Written in the early forties, it deals with the only medical facility serving the black population of Harlem as a “symbol” of the social and political alienation of black people in the US. Gordon Parks was in charge of taking the photographs that were to complement the essay, but unfortunately, the plan for publication in ’48 *The Magazine of the Year* failed. What is left though, as Lawrence Jackson recounts in his biography of the writer, is a very detailed shooting script that Ellison had prepared for Gordon Parks, which had to render the underground and maze-like structure of the medical facility. In Jackson’s words,

Ellison intended his piece to appeal to the art world as much as to writers and intellectuals. He developed a shooting script with shots of stairways from extreme angles that might suggest a mugger’s crouched position. It was

important to show crowded areaways and tunnel-like passages overflowing with garbage, peopled by figures hustling through doorways and streaking across the picture frame. (373)

Jackson's description based on Ellison's papers highlights the central role the writer had in taking the photographs, which reflected his dedication to the mastery of the form as much as to social issues. Ellison explains the causes of this alienation:

Without institutions to give him direction, and lacking a clear explanation of his predicament—the religious ones being inadequate, and those offered by political and labor leaders obviously incomplete and opportunistic - the individual feels that his world and his personality are out of key. The phrase “I’m nowhere” expresses the feeling borne in many Negroes that they have no stable, recognized place in society. ... One “is” literally, but one is nowhere; one wanders dazed in a ghetto maze, a “displaced person’ of American democracy.” (*Shadow and Act* 300)

The denunciatory tone of the piece is not fully engendered by a detailed description of the grim reality of the clinic, but rather through rendering the hidden, labyrinthine, and crowded space where black people received medical care as an invisible yet lively urban space of New York. Hence, Ellison's use of photography accommodates his need to engage with the hard facts of history through the artistic imagination. The shift between documentary and experimental photography, already at play here, reaches its full evolution in Ellison's photographs of Rome. In addition to the fascination with

urban spaces in “Harlem is Nowhere” the photographs shot in Rome show an engagement with deep history made available by the architecture of the city. This combination engenders the possibility of defying the invisibility of modern black cultures by inserting them into the very foundation of Western civilizations. In terms of photographic aesthetics, Ellison’s work shares in the new aesthetic developed in the forties by the New York School. According to Sara Blair, the New York School

collapsed the stark distinction between art and documentary mode. Artists such as Weegee, Levitt, Louis Furer, Richard Avedon, and Lisette Model, were highly individualist, privileging images of marginality and solitude, they cohered in focusing on the city street as an interpretive site, on urban perception as a unifying subject, and on the visual experience of modernity. (2005, 121)

As catalyst of not only modernist social and political contradictions, but also of the most innovative artistic energies, the New York School constituted the ideal aesthetic mode for Ellison’s reflections on African American experience, at once at the core of modernity and written out of its official narratives. His photographs foreground the unsaid, the inner mechanisms of social reality and historical becoming, at once cause and consequence of the “different sense of time and the different wave-length” (*Trading Twelves* 145). He attributes to African American culture and politics. This idea of a gap in time and space, continuously negotiated, is refined by Ellison’s experience in Rome in the mid-fifties. Ellison is thus anticipating what scholars of African American culture

have later termed “the future anterior” of black modernity, indicating a presence that is always been there, but had to wait a later moment in time to be revealed.<sup>60</sup>

### *Campo de' fiori*

Following World War II, photographic practice had abandoned the documentary style, even more forcefully so with the start of the red bait. Sara Blair explains,

Siskind's turn from Harlem documentary to abstract expressionism, in the context of the pressure of red-baiting and postwar anomie, the story goes, social realism packed up and left town, superseded by an abstract expressionism 'utterly devoid of social content', rendered anachronistic by the swiftly morphing social contexts of liberal modernity. (*Harlem Crossroads* 48-9)

This series of photographs, portraying the workers of the daily farmers' market in a proletarian neighborhood of Rome, speaks to Ellison's method of engaging social themes through aesthetics. Most importantly, it shows his concern with labor issues in the international context of “liberal modernity,” that is, of progressive globalization of financial capitalism, discussed in relation to colonialism in a 1957 interview with the French journalist Marchand for *Preuves*.

---

<sup>60</sup> See Aldon Nielsen, “The Future of An Allusion,” in *Geomodernisms* (17-30). For a political and sociological account of temporality in the African Diaspora see Michael Hanchard, “Afro-Modernity.”



**Fig. 1.** Campo de' fiori—"W il PCI." Source: Ralph Ellison Papers; Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (reproduced by permission of the Ralph Ellison Estate).

Shot with his Laika, the photographs are paradigmatic of Ellison's reflections on living history in the visual convergence of workers of the daily farmers market, the heretic philosopher Giordano Bruno, and the unfinished quality of the architecture of the square. This square was a meadow prior to the first developments in 1400, whereas the traditional market dates back to 1869. It is the heart of what used to be a working class neighborhood, which, since the late 1980s has become a glamorous tourist area. Attesting to these rather modest origins, the architecture of the square is a jumble of different styles, as new additions were made throughout the centuries without consistent planning:

an amalgamation that resonates with Ellison's understanding of Italian architecture. Moreover, the unfinished quality of many buildings gives the square its peculiar sense of a work-in-progress and of spontaneous growth. Surrounded by alleys housing the laboratories of artisans and small traders, it is a space where arts and crafts are enmeshed in the everyday life of the working-class neighborhood, as well as the public space where the city authorities chose to carry out executions ordered by the Inquisition. It is in fact the statue of one of the most famous victims of the Inquisition, Giordano Bruno that dominates the square as well as Ellison's photographs. Bruno was a Dominican friar, philosopher, mathematician, and astronomer, who was burned at the stake by the Church in 1600 on account of his cosmological theories that proposed the existence of other worlds populated by intelligent beings. Bruno's statue is the focal point of each photo, thus connecting the intellectual with the workers, as if the latter were the heirs of the former. These workers are not the vendors themselves but the cleaners of the square who participate in the economy of the market in its most marginal, albeit indispensable, form. Significantly, Ellison shot a space filled with life only when the debris of the economic activity is left, thus revealing the labor going on behind the scenes that makes the economic activity possible. These photographs reveal a harmonic relationship between the architectural development of the square, the maverick intellectual whose memory dominates it, and the potential for social change expressed by the workers. By stopping the flow of time and of human activity, they function as an allegory of the inner workings of both the Renaissance and world-history. They cast Ellison's interest in Marxism and labor issues into dialogue with the idea of history as work in progress narrated by the architecture of Rome.





**Fig. 2.** Campo de' fiori—"Posing with Bruno". Source: Ralph Ellison Papers; Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (reproduced by permission of the Ralph Ellison Estate).

In the Figure 2 we see two workers amicably embracing each other, bodies comfortably propped against their working tools, looking at the camera with content smiles. It is tempting to imagine in this photo the revolutionary power of Bruno's ideas passed on to the masses of workers in present day society. Their expressions seem to indicate a comfort with their social position and work that figures them as a changing force, a vision of hope for legal equality and social inclusiveness that Ellison expected as the outcome of the Civil Rights Movement. Significantly, the strongest reactions to the events unfolding in the US are spurred by the observation of photographs in the Italian newspapers, as the international context mediates Ellison's concern with the Civil Rights Movement. Two years after the Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown vs. Board of Education* that mandated school desegregation in the country, Clinton High School in Tennessee still had to resort to the presence of the National Guard to protect the physical integrity of

their black students. Ellison's indignant reaction upon reading the news is heightened by the comparison of the domestic situation with the belligerence of African independentists:

You look in the Italian press and one day you see Egyptian belly dancers posing with rifles all set to blast the French and the British, in fact at all Christians, white folks and Jews, and the next day you see those crackers in Tennessee being stood off by the fixed bayonets of the all cracker National Guard. ... What the hell those crackers think they are doing? Mose is the only darker group who doesn't want to blast his kind from the face of the earth, who make [sic] any kind of allowance for their form of insanity. (Ellison to Murray, *Trading Twelves* 145)

"Belly dancers posing with rifles" is indeed a strong image; otherwise evocative of feminine grace and artistic skills, it serves here as the symbol of the "folly" of human kind, equaled only by the folly of white people in the US, who act as if "it was 1915."

1956 was a crucial year not only for the Civil Rights Movement and anticolonialism, but also for the fate of international Communism. The debates on imperialism and the social fragmentation caused by capitalism were key topics in Italian political life. Interestingly, one detail in the photo connects Ellison's concerns with the Civil Rights Movement to Italian politics. On the base of Bruno's statue we read the slogan, "Vote for the Communist Party." Italy at the time had the biggest communist party outside of the Soviet Union. Palmiro Togliatti, their national leader, was a charismatic figure who played a very important role in shaping labor policy in the

postwar industrialization of the country. In the year the photos were taken, the Soviet invasion of Hungary and the violent repression of the revolt had caused a lot of commotion among communist party members and sympathizers alike, inducing many intellectuals to distance themselves from Stalin's totalitarian and militaristic policy.

Photography is the medium that allows Ellison to "deal with reality most intensely" as he confessed to Albert Murray. As a means of reflection and analysis, photography is not ancillary to Ellison's writing; rather, it is the ground on which he develops the world-views that enter his fiction. Not by chance he was working on *Three Days Before the Shooting* while he was in Rome, a novel set during the Civil Rights Era that offers flashbacks set in Rome and Salzburg.

### ***Deep History and the Individual***

A second series of photographs reveals Ellison's excavation into the fabric of history to unveil unsaid details lost in its grand narrative, foregrounding the relation between history and the individual. The recurring element is the reflection on time and modernity. As Walker Evans argued in an insightful article published in 1931 in *Hound and Horn*,

The element of time entering into photography provides a departure for as much speculation as an observer cares to make. Actual experiments in time, actual experiments in space exactly suit a post-war state of mind. The camera doing both, as well as reflecting swift change, disarray, wonder, and experiment, it is

not surprising that photography has come to a valid flowering—the third period of its history. (Qtd. in North 185)



**Fig. 3.** The Pantheon. Source: Ralph Ellison Papers; Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (reproduced by permission of the Ralph Ellison Estate).

The imperial Rome of both Roman times and Catholic history seems to appeal to Ellison only in its relation between monumentality and the individual, as in the peculiar shot of a woman lying down in the shadow of the colonnade of the Pantheon (Figure 3). The resulting effect is total relinquishment of the human being to the protective shadow of the historical building. The medium shot shows the full bodies, emphasizing the contrast between the huge, imposing column and the frailty of the woman's body; her abandonment makes her look like a lifeless marionette. Yet rather than producing a sense of unease or impending danger, the woman appears at perfect ease, as if abandoning herself against the weight of history.



**Fig. 4. Via della Conciliazione.** Source: Ralph Ellison Papers; Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress (reproduced by permission of the Ralph Ellison Estate).

Figure 4 portrays Via della Conciliazione, the imperial road built by Mussolini after the Lateran Treaty, connecting the Basil of Saint Peter to the heart of the city. A man riding a bike is moving towards the photographer, emphasizing the monumentality of the neoclassical buildings lining the road that leads to the Basil of Saint Peter. The long shot foregrounds the grandness of the road, which in a reversal of the aesthetic logic of the previous photographs emphasizes the monumentality of the architecture in contrast with the smallness of the biker. The absence of life in the empty road suggests an uneasy, foreign relationship between the individual and Big History. Especially interesting is the focal point of the photograph on the base of the Egyptian obelisk standing at the the Basil of St. Peter's center. One of fifteen Egyptian obelisks scattered throughout Rome, it was

brought to Rome in 37 BCE by Emperor Caligula and was moved in 1586 to its current location by Pope Sisto V in remembrance of the martyrs of Christianity.

From his photographic work in Harlem to his reflections on the Civil Rights Movement via an encounter, ten years later, with both imperial and proletarian Rome, Ellison's images are snapshots of deep history, visual renditions of the "living past." Ultimately, by using the living contradictions of a palimpsestic Rome and by foregrounding its multiple historical layers, Ellison excavates the linear trajectory of Big History and foregrounds the fragmentariness and the cultural heterogeneity contained in the very foundation of Western cultures.

This was the project of the nameless protagonist of *Invisible Man*, who had been unable to integrate the linear time of official history into his own, the African American "different sense of time." The quality of the underground space is at once deadly and regenerating. The "cave" in which the abundance of light stolen from the Monopolated Power Company, in addition to Luis Armstrong's music, protect the nameless protagonist of Ellison's masterpiece. This underground cave, at once protective of both his identity and the invisibility he seeks to understand and overcome is reminiscent of the catacombs, the multiple underground layers of Rome, a space of "living death" at once the foundation of the visible city and the space where persecuted Christians hid and slaves were kept, a space that turned human beings into invisible individuals and social entities.

***World Black Solidarity, Affect, and Revolution***

It is from this location, between what were perceived to be two contrasting realities—advanced, liberal northern Europe and backward, colonial Africa—that Ellison attends to the developments of both anticolonialism and the Civil Rights movement of the mid-fifties. As it is clear from his essay “Society, Morality and the Novel” (1957), also written in Rome, that we have an Ellison deeply involved in the global struggle for independence and self-determination of black people. The attempt to address the internationalist aspects of his work seems doomed to failure, as we are accustomed to an image of Ellison as the spokesperson of American exceptionalism and its corollary individualism. Yet traces of this interest are so many (albeit scattered) that it is legitimate to think that critics, more than Ellison himself, have worked to carefully construct this image of the writer. As Brent Hayes Edwards suggests,

Internationalism is one of the many elements that outraced Ellison .... In other words, one might call the failure of Ellison’s second novel a particularly *postcolonial* failure, in that Ellison was unable to adjust his vision from the “possibilities for art” inherent in the politics of anticolonial internationalism in the 1940s and 1950s, on the one hand, to the rather different “possibilities” arising out of the politics of decolonization, nonalignment, and incipient globalization in the 1960s and 1970s, on the other. History left his fiction behind. At the same time, this persistent problem deposited a “built-in feedback” in the drafts of the second novel: a concern with antiracist internationalist

solidarity that is never entirely transcended or muted. (“Ralph Ellison and the Grain of Internationalism” 130)

If anticolonialism and movements of black world solidarity do not enter Ellison’s fiction, they are a concern addressed in his essays. When discussing the genre of the novel in “Society, Morality, and the Novel,” Ellison casts its development in the imperial history of Europe, asserting that,

In the nineteenth century, during the moment of greatest middle-class stability—a stability found actually only at the center, and there only relatively, in England and not in the colonies, in Paris rather than in Africa, for there the baser instincts, the violence and greed could destroy and exploit non-European societies in the name of humanism and culture, beauty and liberty, fraternity and equality while protecting the humanity of those at home—the novel reached its first high point of formal self-consciousness. (709)

Ellison claims that “the events of the Civil War are now a global concern and that the US failure to solve them and confront them is hindering the US world leadership and a full achievement of national identity” (*CE* 715). He sees a correspondence between the anticolonial struggles around the world and the civil conflict in US society, a consequence of the tensions between the US north and south, derived from the southern social and economic structures organized around slavery and post emancipation. In the face of the chaos of world-historical events, US writers are compelled to look at the past of the nation. He states,



We are not so crude now as during James's time, but we have even less stability and there is no longer a stable England to which to withdraw for perspective.

World War I, the Depression, World War II and Korea, the Cold War, the threat of the atom, our discovery of the reality of treason, and now Egypt and Hungary make us aware that reality, which during Dickens' time seemed fairly stable, has broken loose from its old historical base, and the Age of Anxiety is truly more than a poetic conceit. Closed societies are now the flimsiest of illusions, for all the outsiders are demanding in. (726)

In the exclusion of peoples under different historical contexts, Ellison sees the motives for the uprisings and the wars of his coeval world. In the face of such reality, he calls for a truly different approach to international relations, which has to spring from a true revolution within the national bodies. African Americans are the "outsiders demanding in" as much as the Egyptians under British rule and the Hungarians in the grip of Stalin's fist. "Progress now insistently asserts its tragic side" (CE 728), says Ellison, recalling the words of Leroy, the revolutionary taken out of the final draft of *Invisible Man*, who denounces the progress achieved through the "dehumanization and exploitation of black peoples" (qtd. in Foley 129).

Faithful to his own call to be a writer, Ellison asks the reader in which ways should the American novelist address the dilemma of modernity. How does the writer foreground the major dilemma about human life produced by modernity in such a way to surpass the specific experience of a group and yet include it? Ellison is dwelling here on the ever-lasting debate about African American letters as to its obligation to be protest

literature first and foremost, which will explode a few years later with the publication in *Dissent* of Irving Howe's famous essay "Black Boys and Native Sons" (1963), a reminder of the reductive imagination of white critics in dealing with minority writings and of the necessity of a white critic to raise the issue for them to exist officially. The dialectic between national and international is thus inscribed in Ellison's understanding of cultural formations. Despite the pressures of Cold War politics, the "Age of Anxiety" notwithstanding, he affirms unequivocally how Western humanism has been a tool in the exploitation of other peoples for the sake of economic advancement. In advancing the hypothesis that the novel had been created to deal with the chaos of human existence, he sees chaos residing in the human unconscious, "behind the façade of social organization, manners, customs, myths, ritual and religions of the post-Christian era" (CE 703). Ultimately, the acknowledgement by human beings of their marginality in the universe is the reason for the excesses of modernization. A clear indictment of humanism is expressed in his words, "despite the certainties which it is the psychological function of his social institutions to give him" man knows that "he did not create the universe, and that the universe is not at all concerned with human values" (CE 703). Ellison leverages on the connection between Western humanism and the progress engendered by modernization to critique its foundation on the exploitation of and violence on other peoples, which had been excluded from the benefits of economic development.

I agree with Ross Posnock's analysis of the politics of *Invisible Man*; he claims that the consistent foregrounding of chaos by the narrator of *Invisible Man* "breeds awareness of the insufficiency of liberal reason, for the latter is anti-political insofar as it would domesticate action by binding it to teleological restraints of previously formulated

rules and goals” (“Ralph Ellison, Annah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics” 212-3).

From within this context, Ellison expressed a clear view against US policy. When asked to comment on the relationship between industrial development and “the spiritual crisis of the negro people of our times,” in the inquiry conducted by *Preuves* (“Some Questions, Some Answers” 263, hereafter cited as SQSA), he clearly condemns imperialism:

It is not industrial progress per se which damages peoples or cultures, it is the exploitation of peoples in order to keep the machines fed with raw materials. It seems to me that the whole world is moving toward some new cultural synthesis, and partially through the discipline imposed by technology. There is, I believe, a threat when industrialism is linked to a political doctrine, which has as its goal the subjugation of the world. (SQSA 265)

Openly connecting economic exploitation to political subjugation, Ellison is a keen observer and critic of geopolitical power dynamics. Recognizing the right of colonized peoples and marginalized groups to self-determination in his letters to Murray, he and compares the Civil Rights Movement in the US with the anticolonial struggle in North Africa, events that he follows in both the Italian and American press. It is useful to recall here a passage analyzed earlier, in which Ellison comments upon the anticolonial movements taking place in Africa:

You look in the Italian press and one day you see Egyptian belly dancers posing with rifles all set to blast the French and the British, in fact at all Christians, white folks and Jews, and the next day you see those crackers in Tennessee

being stood off by the fixed bayonets of the all cracker National Guard. (Ellison to Murray, *Trading Twelves* 145)

Ellison was critical of Tuskegee's conservatism and moderate politics at a time when Africans and West Indians are taking over governments. Nonetheless, he expresses appreciation for "the Negroes, who are showing off their qualities" (146), emphasizing how the methods chosen by African Americans to pursue their battle for enfranchisement abide by the rules of the American constitution.

A vein of bitterness belies Ellison's frustration at the anachronistic reactions of white America to the demands of African Americans. These letters are marked by frequent inside jokes and by a colloquial language, which allows the reader to glimpse an image of Ellison free from public, official concerns. One significant example of this discourse is the recognition of the increasing global influence of African American music—"The world's getting blusier all the time, as Joe William and Count well know, and even though those Africans have Ghana they still haven't developed to the point where the blues start" (166).<sup>61</sup> This bitter statement voices Ellison's indignation at the disenfranchisement of African Americans at a moment when European colonies are gaining their independence, an indignation he contains by emphasizing the centrality of African American culture within modernism.

---

<sup>61</sup> Here Ellison is referring to Ghana gaining independent from the British rule in 1957. He is emphasizing the global currency of African American culture as a sort of compensation for the group's political disfranchisement, at a time of important political achievements of African and Asian countries around the world.

### ***Cold War Manicheism and African American Culture***

The disillusionment with Communism, which had been severely put under trial by the policy of the Comintern, was one of the main reasons for African American abandonment of the Communist Party. The committee of the Soviet foreign policy was more concerned with safeguarding national interests than with anti-colonial movements, which were gaining momentum within European colonies. Nevertheless, Black Americans' s political activities maintained strong international connections as Penny M. Von Eschen recounts in *Race Against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism 1937—1957* (1997). In tracing this history, Von Eschen reveals how closely black civil rights and anti-colonial activists worked, from DuBois' participation and leadership of the first Congress of the Pan-African movement in 1900 to the reorganization of “the communist popular front of the 1930s, [which] had a second incarnation after Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union and the formation of the US-British-Soviet wartime alliance” (19). One of the most important organizations on this front was the Committee on African Affairs, founded, among others, by Paul Robeson and Du Bois in 1937. Supported by various groups of Leftist activists, according to Eschen, the committee “would remain strongly effective until the dawn of the Cold War,” when “in a radically different political climate, the organization split over the question of its relationship to the left. [...] Most conflicts within CAA concerned the question of how to work effectively on anticolonial issues—with those close to the CP often lining up on different sides” (20). At this historical juncture, the Truman doctrine, assessing the key role of the United States as the guardian of “freedom” and “democracy” on the world stage, sparked

different reactions from black leaders, producing an irreconcilable fracture between Communist and anti-Communist activists. In order to support the national demand for civil rights, many African American leaders (including Walter White, president of the NAACP from 1913-1955) repudiated any previous association with leftist politics and aligned themselves with the anti-Soviet policy of the Truman's administration. As Von Eschen makes clear:

With the onset of the Cold War, direct criticism of American foreign policy or the terms of government or corporate involvement was beyond the bounds of legitimate debate. Supporters of Truman's foreign policy could retain their anti-colonialism—still the official position of the US government—but their acceptance of the idea of political exigencies in a bipolar world fundamentally altered its terms. (119)

Therefore, anti-colonialism was sacrificed on the altar of civil rights demands; associations such as the NAACP grounded their claims in anti-Communism and in support of US foreign policy and the Marshall Plan, although it implied the financing of European colonial powers to defend American imperialist policy.

### ***Ellison's Leftist Radicalism by Way of Invisible Man***

A brief detour via the context and the writing process of Ellison's masterpiece helps to foreground the consistency of Ellison's radical thought. Ellison's first biographer Lawrence Jackson discusses how the manuscript Ellison presented to Albert

Erskine, editor at Random House, was significantly different from the published text.

Jackson describes Erskine as a dreamer, “whose extensive travels, familiarity with the South, and ultimately his saturation in the New Criticism, made [him] an apt match for Ellison’s project” (426). Parts of the novel that fell under the editorial suggestions were those explicitly dealing with anti-colonialism, thus effacing its international concerns.

This editing was done by eliminating the character of Leroy, a young man who had lived at Mary Rambo’s house before the narrator arrives there, and whose journal has a fundamental role for the development of the narrator’s political consciousness. Jackson comments on Ellison’s difficulty in accepting these cuts:

It was difficult for him to shave his global perspective, in the era of decolonization movements and formidable anticolonial analyses, such as Frantz Fanon’s *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (1952). Some of the early section reads like entries from Ellison’s working journals, but they reflect an international political consciousness that made the hero decidedly less naïve. ... In some of the diary’s long exploratory passages, Leroy also writes about the nature of global color prejudice and the European domination of nonwhites. (*Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius* 427)

Barbara Foley’s analysis of the excised sections of the original manuscript supports this perspective on Ellison’s politics. Her analysis of the removal of Leroy’s journal from the last draft of the novel is central to her thesis that Ellison’s sharing of a Communist ideology in the late 30s and early 40s only slowly gave way to a harsh critique of the

political practices associated with it; that this shift has obscured the author's earlier radical activism and his participation in debates concerning black transnationalism.

In creating the characters of *Invisible Man*, Ellison was inspired in part by the interviewees he had met during his fieldwork for the Federal Writers Project on the streets of Harlem in the 1930s, but as Foley explains, he chose to eliminate the most radical voices from the 1952 text. Mary Rambo's boardinghouse, where the young Leroy had lived, is the place where these radical voices were set. Here, the narrator finds Leroy's journal, which explains the narrator's political development:

Would it be that we are the true inheritors of the West, the rightful heirs of its humanist tradition—especially since it has flourished through our own dehumanization, debasement, through our being ruled out of bounds; ... Doesn't the pattern of our experience insist that we seek a way of life more universal, more human and more free than any to be found in the world today? To be redeemed my life demands something far larger, broader: A change in the rules by which men live. For now for me to be more human is to be less like those who degrade me. Is to be more appreciative and respectful of those who differ from me in both my thoughts and my actions. I wish to be, in my thinking, neither black nor white, and in my acting, neither exploited [nor] [exploiter]. And yet I'm willing to accept the human responsibility of soiling my hands with the blood of those who spill my blood whether wearing a hood and using a gun or sending out the orders in a telegram. (qtd. in Foley 176)



Leroy is the spokesperson of radicalism, though he does not necessarily expound a Marxist orthodoxy. Likewise, the universalism mentioned by Leroy may well find its reason in the preceding statement of the exploitation of black people as a fundamental contribution to the development of the West. In rejecting the idea of replacing one exploiter with another, that is, the white with the black, Leroy voices the ideal of a radically different non-violent “way of life.” In this sense, his appeal to universalism is a positive if idealistic expression of hope, rather than expressing the idea of an abstract world of brotherhood. Foley also mentions another excised passage in which Leroy expresses contempt for Frederick Douglass, who “made the mistake of throwing his best energies into speeches. Had he spent his time in organizing a revolt he would have been a far more important man today” (177). Douglass was a hero for the CPUSA who advocated that the defeat of fascism was the most important goal at that stage in history, even if blacks had to fight for it in a segregated army; Leroy is thus shown to be a radical although not necessarily a Communist. Cutting of the character of Leroy produced the removal of other characters connected to him such as Treadwell, whose friendship with Leroy had been instrumental to uncovering his internalized racism. Treadwell represents all southern white male workers who, in his own words, are “trained to hate you, to suppress and repress you. ... And so thorough is the discipline [*sic*] that everything else that we’re trained to suppress becomes mixed up with it—hate for the father, mother, brother; sexual impulses, unclean thoughts, - everything becomes mixed up with the idea of suppressing you” (qtd. in Foley 177). Here Treadwell expresses the consciousness of “how white supremacy functions ideologically to bind white workers to their own oppression,” (Foley 177) but the elimination of these passages erased “the most concrete

demonstration of the openness of the black working class to a politics of class-conscious multiracial unity” (Foley 178). The extent to which Cold War *realpolitik* played a role in cutting these characters is a minor concern in the face of a text whose value resides in, among other aspects, its ability to ask fundamental questions about the African American experience by dialoguing with international politics, world-historical events and cultural debates. “Internationalism may be less institution than intuition,” says Edwards in discussing Ellison’s disengagement from the Communist Party and the Communist International (“Ralph Ellison and the Grain of Internationalism” 120), and certainly Ellison was not interested in the institutions that would straitjacket its members and its activities according to the rule of some leader’s agenda. As Claude McKay’s character in *Banjo* shows, serendipitous encounters and affective correspondences in the everyday life of those at the margins (the lumpenproletariat) may offer a more productive, if surreptitious, revolutionary practice.

### ***The World Congress for Cultural Freedom: Co-opting Black World Cultures***

The distinction between political and cultural spheres is the pivotal element of Ellison’s opinion of a “Negro World Culture,” which, as mentioned earlier, he discusses in his interview with the French journal *Preuves*. Ian Birchall provides a useful description of the political tendencies of this journal, which contextualizes Ellison’s interview: “*Preuves* was the journal of the Congress for Cultural Freedom, parallel to Encounter in Britain. This was a pro-US and anti-Communist outfit, but in France especially it sought to give itself credibility on the left by associating with anti-Stalinist

leftists. It was only in 1967 that it became public that it was financed by the CIA” (Birchall, “When Rosmer Reviewed Cliff”).

The brief biographical sketch that introduces Ellison’s answers informs the reader that the interview is given while the author is at the American Academy in Rome. Because Ellison had accepted the offer from the French branch of the World Congress for Cultural Freedom to cover their annual meeting in Mexico City in 1957, it is very likely that he could not reject the invitation to participate in the inquiry about “la culture noire” conducted by *Preuves*. The intellectual context is strongly charged by Cold War rhetoric and its influence on racial issues in the United States. In this delicate historical phase, Ellison’s position is complicated by his status as fellow of an American institution abroad, sponsored by American corporations (Carnegie and Vanderbilt are among the founders) and the US government. Additional complications arise from his being the first black writer to receive the Rome Prize in literature from the Academy. Notably, Ellison’s name was mentioned in the article “Amid the Alien Corn,” published by Time in November 1958, which was a tirade against black artists who had chosen to go abroad to escape the race problem. According to the article, so many African American artists moved to Europe after the end of World War II because it was impossible for them to find work and recognition in the US. This assertion instigated a heated polemic, which included accusations of fabrication from Richard Wright, who later claimed to have never been interviewed. Ellison, however, was infuriated at being called an exile. As he declared in a letter to the journal, he had not escaped the race problem, but was taking advantage of a prestigious award that had allowed him to dedicate two years to studying and writing (qtd. in Jackson, *The Indignant Generation* 472). Since France was facing the

Algerian war for independence, it was required that foreigners abstain from public political commentary if they wanted to maintain their visa. This is the climate that Ellison strives to navigate, negotiating his displacement in Europe while expressing his condemnation of the Eurocentric vision belied by the questions asked by journalist Jean-José Marchand. The interview, entitled “Enquête sur la culture Noire,” was published for the first time in *Shadow and Act* as “Some Questions, Some Answers” with no reference to the cultural and political context in which the interview was originally situated. The very vagueness of the English translation seems to belie the will to downplay the significance of the interview and of Ellison’s intervention on black international dynamics.

The survey comprised a series of eight questions for black intellectuals from different parts of the world. Other interviewees included a poet from Sierra Leone named Davidson Nicol, the Martiniquan Gilbert Gratiant, as well as African Americans Richard Wright and Richard Gibson. Clearly, Richard Wright was held hostage by his reputation as a writer of protest literature. His piece, entitled “Le ‘Noir’ est une création du Blanc” (“The Black is a Creation of the White”; my translation), is introduced by a small blurb in which the journalist sums up Wright’s thought as “La culture noire, même dans ses productions les plus admirables, est une culture d’oppression” (“black culture, even in its most valuable expressions, is a culture of the oppression [sic]”; 40), thus reducing black culture to a mere reaction to racism and colonialism. The second question posed in the survey is startling to say the least, stressing forcefully the cultural attitude of the journalist. Marchand asks whether, in the interviewee’s opinion there was, “before the arrival of Europeans a single Negro culture that all Negroes shared, or was it the case, as

among the whites, that there had been many different cultures, such as Judeo-Christianity, Brahmanism, etc” (SQSA 293). The question unequivocally belies the unrelenting Eurocentric ideological attitude that had supported the projects of colonization through humanistic reasoning, that is, the argument Ellison advances in “Society, Morality and the Novel.” He is not alone among the interviewed intellectuals to be startled in the face of such a reductive generalization. Both Gratiant and Gibson, for example, claim ignorance of African religious movements or sculpture, but in his answers, Ellison clearly makes an effort to distinguish the American specificity of his group, and he is the only one to point out explicitly this distinction, as Brent Hayes Edwards has already noted in his comments on the interview (Rowell, “An Interview with Brent Hayes Edwards” 796).

Ellison advances the most compelling, if unfinished argument in answering the question “What do you understand today by ‘Negro Culture’?” The first move he makes is to negate the very existence of such an entity as a “Negro World Culture,” switching in his answer to the plural of the word, “cultures.” He posits that not even in Africa has there ever been one black race, so this homogeneous whole is even more meaningless in a global context. Hence, he focuses on the problematic singularity of the word culture, deeming such unity a “fantasy,” an imperialist appropriation of a variety of African cultures and of the African Diaspora, as well as condemning the “trained incapacity” [of white people] to make or feel moral distinctions where black men were concerned.” After sketching a brief history of the presence of black peoples in the US, Ellison, alluding to the white obsession with racial purity, ironically claims that it would be an impossibly difficult task to explain how “genes bearing ‘Negro’ culture could so overpower those

bearing French or English culture, which in all other ways are assumed to be superior” (SQSA 291-2). The linguistic lag—or in Edwards’ term, “*décalage*,” that is, “the gap in signification that occurs in translation”(Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora* 11)—is apparent in the very first question, in which culture noire is rendered into English as “Negro culture” rather than “black culture.” The specific meaning of the term Negro in the late fifties corroborates Ellison’s standpoint, founded on the distinction between black culture as a broader, global entity and the specific signification that the word “Negro” has acquired in the US context. Abandoning the sterile ground of racial explanations of cultural phenomena, he proceeds to give his most extensive, if not fully developed, articulation of the concept of the African Diaspora. Although Ellison does not employ this term, he frames his elaboration of “Negro world culture,” in terms that prefigure future academic debates of this epistemological category. Charles Rowell characterizes the importance in Ellison’s treatment of this topic as one eventually considered “by a number of people [...] a key early definition” of the concept of Diaspora. It is worth quoting Ellison’s answer fully, since, as Edwards notes, “it’s one of the few times that Ellison ... is placed in a diasporic register.”<sup>62</sup> Ellison’s take is noteworthy beyond its prescience:

Thus, since most so-called “Negro cultures” outside Africa are necessarily amalgams, it would seem more profitable to stress the term culture and leave the term “Negro” out of the discussion. It is not culture, which binds the peoples who are of partially African origin now scattered throughout the world, but an

---

<sup>62</sup> The last four quotations are taken from Rowell, “An Interview with Brent Hayes Edwards,” 793-5.

identity of passions. We share a hatred for the alienation forced upon us by Europeans during the process of colonization and empire, and we are bound by our common suffering more than by our pigmentation. But even this identification is shared by most non-white peoples, and while it has a political value of great potency, its cultural value is almost nil. ( SQSA 293)

The opening statement confirms Ellison's opinion on the status of a "Negro World Culture," that is, he stresses the cultural specificities of each black group, according to its geographical, historical and political conditions. Hence, he refuses to speak on behalf of other black national groups and he resorts to the distinction between politics and culture to make the case for the specificities of African Americans. Whereas earlier in his career he had expressed unity of interests with the people struggling for their freedom in the colonies, he shifted here to "an identity of passions." A shared history of exploitation generates a shared sentiment. Hence, Ellison's take on the meaning of diaspora foregrounds the differences rather than the similarities among the cultures involved, an approach that prefigures later developments of this debate. As Edwards explains in "The Uses of 'Diaspora'," following World War II and the de-colonizing process, the term has shifted in time from the focus on Africa to a greater attention towards the specificities of black peoples scattered throughout the world (10). Therefore, when we put Ellison in the context of black internationalism, we associate him with this altered meaning of the term diaspora, marked by a break from the practice of internationalism typical of the interwar period. During this era, people of African descent displaced throughout the world were trying to independently establish ties of nationality

and cultural belonging, the most noticeable example being the Negritude movement. By the fifties, transnational alliances were acquiring a growing value. Diaspora does not curtail internationalism; what is curtailed is membership in the internationalist activism of orthodox Marxism.

According to Ellison's ecstatic reaction to the art of the Renaissance, its expression in the temporal simultaneity of the urban architecture registers as a functional similarity that grants him a privileged point of entry into the Western civilization via his African American identity. The mythical and ritualistic display of centuries of artistic development is manifest in Rome, that is, in the center of Europe and not in a "primitive" culture. Yet when the idea of a connection among black diasporic cultures is at stake, the same affective affinity does not have a cultural value, since geographical, historical and social specificities surmount cultural commonalities. Hence, in his reflection on black world culture, the affective association with Western artistic heritage that strikes him in Rome becomes the tool to foreground cultural disjunctions rather than connections.

In this manner, the "identity of passions" entails a political potential derived from a history of oppression and exploitation. As Edwards notes, Ellison conjures a "history of worldwide oppression ... an argument we don't expect from the Ellison we've been taught to know" (Rowell 795). Indeed, we have a radical Ellison, who speaks up against imperialism and political repression, notwithstanding the red bait. In the interview with *Preuves*, the delicate political climate existing in France due to the Algerian War does not prevent him from explicitly condemning the shortcomings of capitalist imperialism. Answering a question on the connection between industrial development and the spiritual crisis of "Negro peoples of our times," he points out that "it depends on how much



human suffering must go into the achievement of industrialization, upon who operates the industries, upon how the products and profits are shared” (SQSA 213). As Foley notes, by the end of World War II Ellison has rejected organized Communism but “he was still a union man in 1954” (67). Ellison’s refusal to associate culture with the politics of black internationalism is connected to his search for the structural development of cultures pivoting on the concept of deep history, which solely can constitute the material for fiction writing.

Twists and turns produced by the artist’s environment and sensibility sediments into historical layers that distinguish the work of art from the call to arms. Ellison’s vision of the meaning and usefulness of the category of “black world culture” is informed by the coeval projects of decolonization and self-determination, as well as the peculiarities of the Italian context. Here, the architectural simultaneity that displays centuries of artistic evolution without effacing any singular historical and artistic layers therein provides Ellison with a springboard from which to elaborate on the simultaneous interplay of past and present cultural practices. His interest in the mechanisms of cultural development and creation mingles with the impression of Italian art, especially the Renaissance that he recognizes even in the natural elements of the landscape. The privileged point of entry he claims to possess as an African American is key in understanding his view of history as Deep History and of culture as a stratification of multiple layers, which he has to “dig in” to understand and to own. Besides the essays “Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke” and “Society, Morality and the Novel”—both of which testify to this formulation of culture as accumulation of strata—the photographs he takes in Rome are paradigmatic of his excavation into the interplay of cultural

developments and social life, as well as the tensions produced by modernization and tradition. The ambiguity of Rome, positioned both in the West and outside of it, within which the past is synonymous with greatness rather than backwardness, emerges as fertile ground for reflection from such a tightrope walker of black internationalism as Ellison.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Performative History and Defiant Narratives in William Demby's *The Catacombs* and Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Notes for An African Oresteia*

Bill, the fictional narrator of William Demby's *The Catacombs*, tells the reader of his encounter with a young Italian film director, named P., who is shooting *La mamma*, likely referring to Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Mamma Roma* (1962) that pays homage to Roberto Rossellini and his neorealist masterpiece *Roma, città aperta* (1945). This web of citations comes full circle with the female protagonist of Pasolini's film, interpreted by Anna Magnani, who plays the role of a pregnant actress killed during the shooting of Rossellini's *Roma, città aperta*. The co-protagonist of *The Catacombs* is Doris, an African American actress and dancer who moves to Rome to pursue a career in Cinecittà's booming film industry.<sup>63</sup> Midway through the narrative Doris becomes pregnant, but she is uncertain about the father's identity. He might be the African American writer Bill Demby or the Italian Count she had been seeing mostly out of boredom, and because he spoke "a charming Queen English. [sic]" Doris disappears into the catacombs, leaving the world within the narrative suspended. This chain of reminders—Rome, mothers, Africa, film industry, reality and fiction—is reinforced by the characters' perception of the long view of history and a common engagement in excavating its potential to understand the present. The cultures of Greco-Roman antiquity

---

<sup>63</sup> For a detailed account of the cultural climate in postwar Italy and the collaborations between the American and Italian film industries in this period, see Torriglia, *Broken Time, Fragmented Space* (2002).

in relation to Africa are two additional historical and geographical strains that traverse this chapter on the black transatlantic identity of Italy in the 1960s. Demby's novel is pregnant with a subtext speaking to the African diasporic identity of the narrator, which unfolds through Egyptian history, Roman Africa, the Civil Rights Movement in the US and Christian missionary activity in the Congo. In contrast, Pasolini's *Notes for An African Oresteia* is a tentative film on the revolutionary potential of postcolonial African countries set in the times of Aeschylus's Athens and contemporary jazz. Both Demby's and Pasolini's work are metafictional in their open reflection on their own genesis and on the role of the author and narrator. They display an interest in history not as narrative from the past, but as an actual presence susceptible of being effaced by the economic development of the postwar reconstruction and the advent of mass communication and consumption. In Demby's novel, African American history is performed by characters literally cast into the stereotypical roles determined by the master narrative of Big History. The performative is present at multiple levels in Pasolini's documentary. The most obvious is that of Gato Barbieri's jazz band, which provides musical accompaniment to the performance of the chorus by Yvonne Murray and Archie Savage, two African American singers. A further level of performativity concerns Pasolini's work as he is the narrator of the documentary he is making, including a long conversation with a group of African students from the University of Rome. By alternating a montage depicting discussions of the future political and social evolutions of postcolonial countries with shots of the jazz performance and the chorus, Pasolini seems to suggestively portray African American music and politics as a source of inspiration. It is not by chance that Pasolini visited the US while shooting *Notes*, and in his recollections

speaks profusely of his encounters with exponents of the Black Panther Party, which will be the topic of the last part of this chapter. Before entering into my analysis of *Notes for An African Oresteia* (the last one of Pasolini's works on the "Third World") I will offer a reading of his previous approach to this historical and geopolitical entity, as given in "Black Resistance," a piece he wrote to introduce the anthology of black literature titled *La letteratura negra*, edited by Mario de Andrade in 1961. Here Pasolini expounds his reflections on the disappearance of traditional, local cultures and the growing diffusion of hybrid, contaminated cultures in a world where exclusion and marginality were as firmly rooted in the peripheries of the rich West as much as in the rural areas of the former colonized countries. In the face of this "pregnant times," to use Bill's words, William Demby and Pier Paolo Pasolini interrogate history by conjuring Greco-Roman antiquity and its relation to Africa.

### ***William Demby's The Catacombs***

"No, I feel not like God but rather like some benevolently mad theatrical impresario who eagerly, paternally, leafs through the press clippings of his countless actors and actress, dispersed monads, who like nomads are wondering over the theatrical caravan routes of the world."

(Demby, *The Catacombs* 195)

*The Catacombs* (1965), written by African American novelist William Demby, is set in Rome in the early 1960s. Demby had served in World War II on the Italian front

and, after the war, decided to move back to Italy to study Art History. By 1950, when the New York Times reviewed Demby's first novel *Beetlecreek*, the author had already returned to Rome, joining the more famous group of African American expatriates in Europe. As Jeff Biggers recounts,

Carting along a trunk full of fancy clothes, a clarinet, and \$75 in his pocket, with a vague idea of studying art, playing jazz, and writing novels; he planted himself in the burgeoning postwar literary, art, and film movements in Rome. His interracial marriage to Italian author Lucia Druidi [sic] was newsworthy in Europe for the times; the couple visited Richard Wright in Paris on their honeymoon. Fluent in Italian, Demby eventually served as the English translator for virtually all of the important Cinecitta films by AnTonyoni, Fellini, Visconti, and Rossellini; he took a turn as assistant director on Rossellini's *Europa 51*.  
(*TheBloomsburyReview.com*, 2004)

Biggers has visited Demby in Italy where he returned to live after residing in Long Island and teaching English in a college for two decades. A new novel Demby had just finished, titled *King Comus*, is the occasion for the article. Yet the manuscript was still awaiting a publisher and the conversation with Demby, besides a brief discussion of the novel, dwells over the author's exclusion from the American literary world. In spite of Demby's affiliation with famous exponents of the film industry and of the "dolce vita," his work has received attention mostly in collections of works of African American expatriates.

*The Catacombs* is a fictionalized account of the author's experience in writing his novel during the last three years of his stay in Rome. The incipit of the text highlights the

narrator's obsession with time, his concern with historiographical-political-fiction entanglement, and his ludic approach to modernist artistic techniques:

This is a day in March. Here in Rome it is nine o'clock in the morning. The sun has finally come out and my Rotella collages have begun to dance like gorgeous jungle flowers. I sit here at my desk waiting for Doris to come. With her approval I am writing a novel about her. I know that she has spent the night with the Count, and I am waiting for her to come and tell me about it in detail. In the meantime, I read my newspapers, five from Rome, one each from Turin and Milan. (3)

This dual accounting for both clock time and historical time is characteristic of the novel's sense of historicity, which is keenly attuned to symbolic as well as affective measures of experience. March marked the beginning of the year in the Roman calendar, a beginning accompanied by sunlight after the winter months. This sense of a new beginning, with its emphasis on time, prefigures the key structural elements of the text, in which past, present, and future coalesce into temporal and spatial simultaneity. As a work of historical metafiction, Demby's novel frames its opening scenes of writing and reading in a manner that establishes both the historical time of the writing project as well as its textual narrative conditions. We are informed that the narrator is assembling his story in real time as he waits for Doris, one of the characters, to narrate her life to him, thus foregrounding artistic agency and the referentiality of literary language as central concerns of the novel.

Early reviews accused *The Catacombs* of lacking clarity and coherence, emphasizing the alienation of the text from the African American experience. Edward Margolies and Klaus Hansen have described this experimental text as a late modernist attempt, which falls short of its theoretical promises. Robert Bone and the Italian scholar of American culture Andrea Mariani have, instead, expressed a more constructive criticism. In his introduction to the paperback edition, the former analyzed the text in terms of information theory, whereas Mariani explored the structure of the novel and its treatment of time in terms of abstract expressionism, positioning the text between the “heritage of modernism and the postmodern pastiche” (81). Andrea Mariani’s analysis hinted at the resistance to narrative offered by the text, yet failed to see the numerous references to cubistic time as an ironic engagement with Western modernist art. The paradoxical resistance to narrative—upon which critics and admirers of the novel each insist—triggers instead what I call the performance of history enacted by the written text. *The Catacombs*, I contend, performs history in the space between historiography and fiction, where the past —particularly the history of blackness —surfaces from the narrative in the guise of performed archaisms and cultural stereotypes that invoke primitivism and exoticism, as well as dramatic events such as slavery and the colonization of Africa. These emergent historical traces offer themselves in turn as “new” objects of inquiry. Performative history constitutes a form of critique in action of historical grand narratives. It foregrounds the contingency of historical events that engenders their understanding as distinctively lived experience rather than narrative of the past. The numerous interrogations of the writer’s authority in his self-perception as both the master puppeteer and a character in someone else’s work, in addition to



quotations from film scripts, art catalogues, and the layers of multiple performances acted out by the characters explained below, allow us to read the text through the concept of performativity. In *Between Theater and Anthropology*, Richard Schechner defines performance as “twice behaved behavior,” by which he means behavior that “is always subject to revision” (36). Such behavior, he explains, is detached from its original source and enables the continuous reinvention and reinterpretation of its meaning. This analysis, initially referring to traditional performances such as collectively performed rituals, has subsequently extended to the meaning of performativity at the intersection of anthropology, theatre studies, and philosophy. Hence, the performative quality of a written text indicates a narrative that, as with *The Catacombs*, shows a theatrical quality in attempting to narrate the characters’ actions and engagement with history “as if” in real time, but without the negative connotation of the term theatrical. Henry Bial points to performativity as “a variation on theatricality: something which is performative is similar—in form, in intent, in effect—to a theatrical performance.” He further notices how the term is preferred to his synonym “theatrical,” which carries “connotations of artificiality or superficiality” (*The Performance Studies Reader* 145). Bial traces the expansion of the concept of performativity from “Austin’s philosophical and linguistic concept of language that performs an action rather than making a statement,” to the likewise seminal work of Judith Butler and her exploration of gender as “a social role that one performs” (145). In Demby’s novel, the performance of social and historical roles is at once the admission of the impossibility of communication and the attempt at it made by the characters. In the diasporic context of cultural and linguistic displacement, the performance of one’s history on the stage of current happenings creates a space of

enquiry that allows the exiled characters to negotiate the dialectic between their personal history and the history of the hosting locale. This textual performance is produced by means of a narrative style that obliterates the distinction between past, present, and future, thus setting the performance in the “now time” of history, to borrow from Benjamin. The deep historicity of Rome, visible in its architecture, engulfs a narrator whose obsession with recording both the collective and his personal present accounts for the metafictional fabric of the narrative. As Patricia Waugh suggests in her *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, “only if one is self-consciously aware that ‘history’ like ‘fiction’ is provisional, continually reconstructed and open-ended, can one make responsible choices within it and achieve a measure of freedom” (125). Hence, the reflection on the fictional quality of the literary text intersects with the paratactical account of world-historical events and of the historical condition of the expatriate writer.

The novel conveys an approach to the connection between historiography and fiction writing that foresees the so-called “linguistic turn” in historical studies of the late 1970s, especially Hayden White’s theory of historiography as inevitably intertwined with literary narrative. Furthermore, Demby’s text anticipates concepts that will become key tenets of postmodern cultural studies in the 1980s, such as Jean François Lyotard’s critique of metanarratives and his formulation of “little narratives” as an asset of epistemology in *Le Differend*. As Demby explains in an interview with John O’Brien, the novel’s function is to offer a detailed snapshot of history:

The novel has to be like a tapestry upon which any number of things is happening: horses in battle, men being killed, troops lining up. You’re supposed to perceive it totally—not look around. ... If we disavow the

chronological-progression idea of history, then it [the novel] must be something like that tapestry, it must be made up at the same moment of the past, present, and future. I suppose that is the only service the literary artist can really perform. (41)

This concern is introduced in the opening paragraph of the novel, which makes a reference to the performativity of Mimmo Rotella's collages as "dancing like gorgeous jungle flowers" (4). These collages are made with advertising posters torn down off the walls of the city, patently a declaration of artistic intervention within the market and modernization as described by Nancy Hoffman in "Technique in Demby's *The Catacombs*." She argues that,

Rotella superimposes new advertisements on old events, as in his *Flask of Wine*, in which a bottle of Chianti is superimposed on a Renaissance building, to express the simultaneity of time. Just as Dos Passos' method of the Camera Eye is updated by Demby to a McLuhanesque sense of the simultaneity of time in newspaper headlines, Rotella's collages and their sense of the present imposed upon the past shocks his audience into seeing what their so-called real world is about. (13)

This creative manipulation of a market form of communication connects exile to capitalist exploitation. In the narrator's own words, Rotella represents the artist in exile, hence formulating a discourse that connects capitalism to the status quo of the black expatriate. Rotella's work, Bill states, "is in every page of this novel. Rotella, whose

collages give me a desperate tangible touchable feeling of here and now in Rome, who tears not in anger but with the neurotic compulsion of the caged exile seeking spiritual peace ... has been arrested” (210). Thus, the narrator voices his own artistic and social condition through the condition of an Italian artist, who is in exile within his own country.

Rotella came from Calabria, a region in Southern Italy, thus the narrator’s artistic personality is enmeshed in the complex issue of a regional identity traditionally perceived to be very distinct, and oftentimes inferior, by the official narrative of Italian-ness. In this way, he is exiled both because he is displaced in Rome and because he has been arrested under the accusation of drug trafficking, though the text makes clear that this is an excuse to silence a politically cumbersome artist. This displacement, then, can take place within one’s own cultural and historical tradition, as it is the case with Demby’s work itself. As James Hall argues in his poignant analysis of *The Catacombs*, the novel has been overlooked because it expresses a “poetic of dis-integration” (109) that runs counter to the ideology of progress prevalent in the sixties. In discussing Demby’s novel together with Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1984), Hall claims that these texts, “speak to the relationship of text and context. ... They are suggestive of grounds for action, even responsibility, as existing in the space somewhere *between* their literary dystopias and the hegemonic ideology of progress” (*Mercy, Mercy Me*, 2001, 94). This perspective is conveyed through a vision of history as a spiral, in Hall’s words: “History is never simply past. It literally circles back to find us, to demand that we take its lessons seriously. For Demby’s readers this ironically means that it is imperative that the novel’s attitude to the future be examined” (107). Bill’s take on the status of the

exiled artist goes beyond identifying exile as a dislocation across national borders. Instead, the notion of exile is literally connected, via the frequent use of the *mise en abyme*, to Mimmo Rotella's collages, one of the multiple instances of *mise en abyme* found in the text. The collages function by connecting the intellectual's experience of dislocation with the textual performance of history. The unsettled temporality of the collage and its intrinsic intertextuality, in addition to the reference to world economy and politics voiced by the posters used as raw material for the artwork, exemplify the infinite number of events and the equally infinite number of narrative possibilities. They also emphasize the performative quality of the text, its unfolding interpretation of numerous present historical events in relation to the individual. Thus, performativity constitutes a useful conceptual tool for understanding the enactment of historical events and cultural stereotypes alike within *The Catacombs*, as we see at work in the characterization of Doris, the ersatz narrator and main performer of Demby's novel.

### ***Colonialism and The Simultaneity of The Eternal City***

Doris is an African American dancer, cast as one of the handmaidens in the colossal film *Cleopatra* being shot in Cinecittà. In Demby's characterization and in her film part alike, she embodies the quintessential stereotype of blackness—a figure that collapses modern and primitive, American and African, clarity and obscurity. Doris herself is both fascinated and repelled by Rome. This “eternal city” is imbued with layers of temporal difference that frustrate her efforts to establish a meaningful connection between Big History and both her individual and group history. For Doris, this

homelessness itself becomes a metahistorical figure; an indictment of the violation of Africa by the West and a judgment strengthened in turn by her disappearance into the catacombs, one of the most significant remnants of the Roman Empire.<sup>64</sup> Her abstraction into the realm of the symbolic is signaled by Bill's introduction of her character as:

One of Elizabeth Taylor's handmaidens in Twentieth-century-Fox's *Cleopatra* colossal now being filmed in Rome and, though on several occasions I have tried to persuade her not to, she insists on wearing the grotesquely exotic but I must admit, for her, strangely appropriate—make-up she wears before the cameras; her hairdo, too, is authentically ancient Egyptian—a back-leaning cone of spider webs, a magical fertility symbol floating detachedly over the masklike beauty of her enchanted, nut-brown monkey face ... (3)

The narrator's irony is clear. Doris is endowed with the most stereotypical traits of African culture according to white Western standards, and Yet we are told that they are appropriate for her. He describes her hairdo as "authentically" Egyptian, but what is to be deemed authentic in her "masklike beauty?" Moreover, her exoticism is paired with her work in the entertainment industry, all the more significant since she is acting in a modern version of Shakespeare's tragedy *Anthony and Cleopatra*, shot in the heart of what once was the Roman Empire. The fictional layers grow exponentially to include the subplot of her relation with an Italian Count, a mere caricature of the Roman emperor.

---

<sup>64</sup> It is worth mentioning that Africa is the name the Romans gave to the northern part of the continent. Following the European conquest of sub-Saharan Africa, the name was extended to the whole continent. Hence, the catacombs, one of the most powerful symbols of the Roman Empire, foreground the history of European imperialism in the continent.

The narrator is clearly connecting his view of Doris to traditional cultural narratives of blackness. It is not by chance that as the embodiment of black history in the text, she has to “put on her best African queen act” (107) in order to socialize at the first party she attends in Rome. As she writes to her mother, it is here that she meets the Count:

He said his sister was a nun in Congo and that his father had been a famous explorer in Ethiopia and Kenya. Frankly, I didn’t appreciate all that talking about Africa and Africans, but I was so glad to be talking with anybody (and he speaks perfectly charming English) that I played along with him and tried to put on my best African queen act (I had to do the same thing once before in college with a refugee professor, but that’s another story—these Europeans all have a one track mind when it comes to us colored women—they expect us all to be African queens or kings!). (107)

The unquestioned association Italians make between women of color and Africa, disregarding at once her American origins, bothers Doris, yet she accepts “to play along,” performing the role of the character the Count expects her to be. The Europeans’ mental habit of connecting blackness with a romanticized image of the African continent is an obnoxious stereotype that nonetheless forces Doris to meditate on her identity and position in history. The author’s use of her character as an historical allegory makes Doris the primary vehicle for these reflections. Upon her appearance at his office, the narrator’s ironic voice goes so far as to juxtapose an idyllic, primitive past to his current writerly project:

I am suddenly filled with an almost overwhelming desire (ancestral?) to escape the uncomfortable present and take to the forest (how much memory, how many billions of years of ancestral memory can the human machine endure before vital action becomes imperative?), take to the forest and hunt and be hunted, abandon this dusty cowardly retreat, abandon the typeface and the sterile and deathly purity of paper, take to the forest and hunt and be hunted, and let history rest in peace, let history remain unwritten and unrecorded, let history (man's feeble scratching on the eternally shifting sands of the desert) ferment and through the never-to-be-solved mystery of memory at long last (alchemy of sacred wine) free and intoxicate the imprisoned human mind.... (12).

Within the metafictional framework of the novel, Bill weaves the fabrication of the text and his personal fate with his public agency as an expatriate intellectual. "I was in the last chapter of this novel," he says, "and I had by chance come to the Circolo degli Artisti and seen Doris, months after she had been abandoned by the Count, and she was trapped in the very special sewers of Rome, the Catacombs, which this terrifying city reserves for rebelling slaves" (85). Yet the mundane seems to predominate and the narrative voice moves to describe the scene at the Circolo degli Artisti with its international crowd, which according to the author, offered the ridiculous spectacle of "... pale American Negroes and 'Doris' dancing a parody of minstrel joy: How sad this sight!" (85). Interestingly Doris's name is given in quotation marks as the narrator doubts whether she is the real Doris or the character in the story he is writing. How does one distinguish between reality and fiction when everyone is always already playing a role?



Moreover, in a conversation Doris is having with the Count, the text notices how the very act of writing serves “to vampirize” reality. “That’s what Bill said yesterday afternoon,” says Doris in response to the Count’s jealousy of her friendship with Bill: “that he was a vampire, that he was vampirizing me because he was writing a book about me” (87). But if Doris’s existence is questioned, so is Bill’s—“What a character *he* is! Bill Demby I mean. ... It is as if he lives all by himself in a chic luxurious apartment he rents inside one of his eyeballs, probably the left eye, but that’s a private Roman joke. (No kidding, it’s worse than Harlem or Africa the way these Italians are superstitious about almost everything!)” (96). Bill’s play with modernist experimental techniques is emphasized by the reference to his living inside “one’s eyeball.” Doris tells us that the observer’s gaze brings reality into existence. Accordingly, the rejection of an objective reality allows Doris to make her life the narrator and subject of her own performance, endowing it with the same importance given to such different world-historical events as the suicide of Marilyn Monroe and the US Cuban missile crisis.

The novel’s Roman setting imbues the narrative with special temporal characteristics. Rome has been at once the city of the catacombs, where “rebellious slaves” were imprisoned; the capital of the Roman Empire henceforth, symbol of the earliest Western colonization of Africa; later, the capital of the fascist empire and its expansion in the horn of Africa, and finally the contemporary location of a flourishing film industry that has capitalized on this history of violation and appropriation. The intense historical charge that characterizes the city produces a flattening of historical time, in which multiple historical eras are interwoven. Thus, Rome provides an ideal setting for the historical simultaneity of performative history, best described by Alfred

Kazin's comments upon his visit to the city in 1947: "Rome keeps eluding me [...] It is the greatest enigma of all. ... The classic and the baroque cities were casually interwoven with the greater modern city, resulting in a temporal ambiguity that rendered all periods of the past equidistant. ... The most diverse elements blended into an impossible unity of experience" (179). Kazin's reflections are echoed by Doris's words to her mother, "here in Rome you get the historical perspective on things, you take the long view of history but you can't find out anything about your current place in history" (100). Her self-perception is hindered by the heavy historicity of Rome, where the ossified grand narrative of history is transposed into architecture, a living representation of the Western exploitation of African cultures. Doris does not feel at ease with classical culture. She had to interrupt her college education and, interestingly, the most vivid memory she has of this experience is the obnoxious harassment of a German history professor. As the educational moment foremost in Doris's memory, such an incident offers yet another reference to the danger of a history written and passed on by white male European historians.

Thus, it is not surprising that the catacombs are the space that motivates Doris's deepest aversion to Western culture. "Rome is beginning to give me the creeps," she comments after her visit; "all this antiquity, all this piling up dead things and dead people on top of each other, those Catacombs damn sure gave me the creeps. ... I don't like no graveyard where you have to pay to see dead peoples' bones ..." (15). The catacombs function as a museum in which human remnants are mementos of an imperial history, reminders of the capitalist logic of profit in which financial gain supersedes the value of human life. The spiritual dimension of what was at once the underground site of worship

and a cemetery for early Christians, a place of both death and rebirth, seems at first to be lost in Doris's search for her place in history. Yet as Klaus Benesch suggests, "she will find that place only by going underground: i.e., by leaving the surface plane of reality, and, symbolically, becoming entombed in the catacombs (which here stand for both, the historical site and the novel in which she plays a leading role) ..." (190). Indeed, the narrative itself makes an attempt at recuperating the spiritual dimension, as the catacombs function also as a topographical and architectural metaphor for the entangled narrative, whose open end sees Doris disappear in its maze. Their centrality as narrative setting enacts a spatialization of the past yielding to the irruption of history in the present. As Robert Bone argues, "Rome is a symbol of imperial power, of the white man's historic depredations into Africa. ... In Demby's novel, contemporary Rome becomes a stage on which a great historico-religious drama sweeps to its final act" (129). To underline the historical references of the catacombs, the narrator inserts the closing scene from a not well-specified film script *The Gladiator* translated into English. This scene reports the final encounter between Brenno and Fabiola, significantly focusing on the love story within the plot rather than on its historical and heroic aspects. Once again, the text privileges the private, individual point of view on history, which leads to a critique of the transformation of history into romance for the sake of the market, that is, the commodification of the culture of the colonized in addition to her economic exploitation.

***“Uttering the Horror of History”***

Demby’s strategy unveils how traditional historical narratives have turned black people into objects of Western economic and cultural consumption. The alternative to these narratives is the performance of history engendered by the interplay between metafictional and metahistorical levels in Demby’s text. This interplay allows for the historical logic of processes such as decolonization, imperialism, and slavery, to come to the fore, leaving intact their incommensurability, that is, refusing to represent them through a linear narrative that would perpetuate the victims’ silence. The novel’s performance of history offers an answer to Jean-François Lyotard’s concern over how to represent dramatic historical occurrences without reducing the protagonists to silence. The refusal of *The Catacombs* to produce yet another historical narrative of black history is best understood through Lyotard’s formulation of the historical trope of anachronism. Discussing the situation of the postmodern writer, Lyotard argues that,

The text he writes, the work he produces are not in principle governed by preestablished rules, and they cannot be judged according to a determining judgment, by applying familiar categories to the text or to the work. These rules and categories are what the work of art itself is looking for. The artist and the writer then are working without rules in order to formulate the rules of *what will have been done*. Hence the fact that the work and text have the character of an *event*; hence, also, they also come too late for their author, or, what amount to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (*mise en œuvre*) always

begin too soon. *Post modern* would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (*post*) anterior (*modo*). (*The Postmodern Condition* 81)

How, then, to write the history of slavery, colonization, and imperialism, without turning the victims of such violent historical processes into the silent objects of the observer's distant gaze? The plunge made by *The Catacombs* into the deepness of history, visible in the architectural layers of Rome, acknowledges this temporal disjunction without attempting to bridge it through an appeal to futurity.

*The Catacombs* turns to the primacy of performance over narrative in order to engender a new epistemology of history, one exemplified by the character of Doris and her enactment of white Western stereotypes of primitivism and exoticism. This performance produces a spectacle in which the object turns into the subject. Her own sarcastic version of US history opens the letter to her mother: "The Pilgrim Fathers ... when they got to be fat and prosperous and self-righteous they would hunt whales and transport Negro slaves! This is the kind of thinking that you do here in Rome" (99). Similarly, it is through a letter Bill is writing to a friend in Alabama that readers are first acquainted with the Civil Rights struggle taking place in the US. He mentions the miserable working conditions of his friend's husband, a black doctor: "How does he manage—one doctor for over ten thousand negroes?" (6). He then immediately abandons the topic to talk about the artistic crisis the woman is experiencing. These passages are examples of the modality the text employs to defer African American history to a further level of narrative, and Yet in doing so, to imagine the past as happening in the space between the text we are reading and the text Bill is writing. In so doing, the historical

narrative of the past is replaced by the performance of stereotypes in the present time of the writing process. One such instance is a discussion between Doris and Bill as to why blacks do not like dogs. “Did you ever noticed how our folks don’t go in much for dogs?” asks Doris before she goes on with a perfunctory remark, “Maybe ... because they still remember the hound dogs that used to chase runaway slaves” (69). A further example of what at first appears to be a lack of communication signals the impossibility of reciprocal understanding between the Count, the European male aristocrat, and Doris. Doris’ aspiration to become a social worker provokes a sarcastic and contemptuous comment from the Count; she is outraged at his misogynistic answer and replies with a quick lesson in family history—“Hold on a minute, Count—I’ll have you know my mother worked all her life as a maid, and her mother’s mother was a slave—so just what in the hell are you talking about anyway?” (21). Significantly, the dialogue is interspersed with the Count’s thoughts as he ponders over his inertia at vulgar comments directed toward Doris. Yet the only conclusion he arrives at consists of images of “black Bizantine madonnas, amulets, and incensed prayers” (20), with which he associates Doris. Not only is she appraised for her exotic beauty, but she is also the performer of mystical rituals, taking on the role of spiritual healer amidst the decayed and spiritually drained European civilization. Such a role acquires a special meaning in light of the novel’s open end, as it tells of a pregnant Doris disappearing into the catacombs.

The novel is set in a time of catastrophic events that range from the Algerian war to the assassination of President Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe’s suicide. The fear of an atomic war looms over the world. As the narrator describes this state of affairs,

We go around carried along by strange surging spiritual strides, like homing pigeons, like salmon ... until we end up at a terrifyingly lurid bar, filled with gold-covered chocolate Easter eggs that line the wall and hang suspended from the ceiling, like bombs about to fall, or drops of dew. ... I *know*: Something is going to happen, somewhere a dewdrop shall fall, eggs shall fall, bombs shall fall. (40-41)

The potentiality of the happening is maintained by the open-endedness of the novel, which replaces any eschatological charge. As the future is transformed into the present of the textual performance, there is no tension towards the typical future of linear narratives. As mentioned above, it is within the allegorically charged space of the catacombs that Doris may give birth to a premature child who represents a potentially positive future in race relations. The baby is referred to as “the third thing” (189) since Doris does not know whether the father is the white Count or the black man with whom she has had an affair. At the same time, in line with the continuous interplay between private and collective, the “third thing” refers also to potential political outcomes of the Cold War. “I wanted to name the baby John, you know, because of Pope John, and John Kennedy, for what they both did” (190). This conversation between Doris and Bill about the naming of the baby is framed by Bill’s trip to the US where he meets an editor. They discuss current politics, the fear of the rising level of violence spreading throughout the country, two days before President Kennedy is assassinated. Hence, Doris’s pregnancy takes on the meaning of a collective event, whose uncertainty reflects the confusion and fear that strike the human mind at the mercy of power struggles that threaten to destroy

humanity. Within the frame of her performance of the white stereotype of African and African American cultures, this pregnancy also functions to exteriorize black history. The fixed interiority of the historical grand narrative represented by Roman architecture is set in contrast to black history, which, manifested in the pregnancy, comes to the surface by becoming epidermal.

The *Zeitgeist*, like Doris, is pregnant, and the text multiplies itself in segments of narrative generating others. An effective example of this textual parthenogenesis is the third chapter of the novel, which constitutes a *mise en abyme* of the entire narrative. Bill is seated in a café at Piazza del Popolo with a British friend who asks him to talk about the novel he is working on. Thus, in a prolepsis of the text, we learn that the father of Doris's baby is the Count, who cannot marry Doris and suggests that she abort. It is Bill who convinces her not to, because in his own words, "There must be some continuity in flesh and blood as well as in dream and memory"; he also announces that "the life cry of the child shatters the underground silence of the martyrs' tomb. That is how the novel ends" (36-7). As the vital element in the unfolding of the story Bill recounts, Doris openly associates the writing of the novel with her pregnancy and her status as an expatriate. She tells Bill:

You know what I have learned from all this? This funny experience of ours—I mean since you started writing a novel about me? [...] That having a baby makes the mother be born. ... What I was trying to say is that the baby gets born later, maybe when it's thirty or forty years old, even! But the mother gets born right away. ... I tell you, just that moment when the lights come on and you see it, the baby I mean, well that's when you get born, you're torn loose from some



fuzzy kind of roots, and you're alone again, you can fly, that's what I mean by being born. (187)

By claiming to be born while giving birth—that is, by reversing the traditional subject-object relationship—Doris claims the legitimacy of the act of writing herself into existence while rejecting historical narratives she has been taught to share and to accept. Doris's statement about giving birth as “being torn from some fuzzy kind of roots,” is consistent with the denial of historical metanarratives. She is thus creating her version of black history by eluding, through the open ending of the novel, the stereotypical roles assigned to a black woman by white Western history. She literally removes herself from the written narrative where she had previously performed the white stereotypes of African cultures, and claims the right to choose and live her way through her act of disappearance. The reader is left with the uncertainty of Doris' future, an open end that points to a potentially liberated subject from the all-inclusive history in which she was only a walk-on, as she is in the movie *Cleopatra*.

The fact that Doris carries a hypothetical future into an underground place, which signifies both death and life, acknowledges the impossibility of historical teleological narratives, but it also questions the “value” of narrative itself. The catacombs become the actual, historical space that Doris re-inhabits to engender yet another different historical narrative that sheds light on the future anterior of black history. It is a movement without point of arrival, as the narrator tells us, “Doris must conform to that most sacred of universal laws, ... the embarrassing, the terrifying, the unembalmable law of changeless change” (200). The act of procreation as that of creation—the pregnancy of the literary

text—allows for a continuous evolution of Doris in her experimentation with identity and historical position. The fluidity of her identity is such that she is compared to mystics. “She is the same person, this Doris of mine” (199), and yet her identity is multiplied: at the beginning of the story she is the joyful girl who inspired the novel, the lover of an Italian Count, one of Elizabeth Taylor’s handmaidens in the colossal *Cleopatra*, but toward the end she is compared to famous mystics like “Catherine of Siena, Margherita of Cortona, Irene of Poland” (203). Doris, the black dancer, performs as an Italian mystic at the end of the novel. She is consciously unaware of “her current place in history” because she is subsumed by the deadly historical stratification of Rome, and Yet she is the agent of the more radical mutation in the text. The idea of the progress of civilization, which posits the existence of a fixed, stable point of origin, is rejected in favor of “Penelope’s laws of changeless change” (209). She is the one who admits that giving birth means to get rid of some sort of “fuzzy roots” and to be created anew. It is not clear what this re-creation consists of, as Doris disappears into the catacombs at the narrative’s end. There is no projection onto the future or reassurance from the past, only a momentary revelation in the precariousness of the “now time,” the most powerful result of a history being radically rethought.

### ***The Catacombs as Postmodern Historiography***

The silence surrounding black history in the narrative becomes a well-heard cry in the face of racial conflict in the US and news of the Algerian war for independence. The association of the catacombs with the Western colonization and exploitation of Africa

and its peoples signals a return to narrative, but a narrative that fails, ingurgitated by the underground space itself. The negative outcome attributed to narrative as a way of fixing reality and its meanings can be fruitfully put into dialogue with Lyotard's elaboration of the concept of "unspeakable history." The performance of history at play in *The Catacombs* is a modality of testifying to unspeakable events, in recognition of the irreconcilability of the communicative codes involved, an instance of Lyotard's notion of the *differend*.<sup>65</sup> Demby does not attempt to narrativize—and thus to interpret—the violent events of the Civil Rights era, instead refusing to frame them within a linear, rational narrative of black history. Thus, his novel suggests that any possibility for living history otherwise occurs in the gaps and lacunae of narrative, only insofar as this is the space of performativity. The interpretation of history can only take place as a performative act, that is, an act relying on the continuous present time of its enactment for meaning and epistemological validity.

The narrator's refusal to provide the reader with overarching narratives of the most violent events of the Civil Rights struggle speaks to the performative quality of this text. The bombing of a Negro Sunday School in Birmingham, Alabama, is reported in a dry journalistic style: "Then, on a Sunday afternoon, my sister phoned me from Alabama to tell me that someone had thrown a bomb in a Negro church in Birmingham, killing five girls who were attending a Sunday school class ..." (194). The cursoriness of the remark made by the narrator, "And the supersonic dog whistle inciting the nation to violence blew stronger and stronger" (194), is emphasized by the juxtaposition of minor

---

<sup>65</sup> As Lyotard explains, "A case of *differend* between two parties takes place when the 'regulation' of the conflict that opposes them is done in the idioms of one of the parties while the wrong suffered by the other is not signified in that idiom" (Lyotard, *Differend* 9).

events with this devastating news. In the same paragraph we are told about the return to Italy of the Count's sister, who is a nun in Congo, and of some stolen silverware the narrator's wife had bought. This modality of representing tragic historical events amidst trivial ones is symptomatic of the author's refusal to provide the reader with a definitive historical account of the events reported. His narrative that resists narrative testifies to the awareness that writing the event is an act of creation, thus questioning the call for objectivity and truthfulness of modernist history. Hence, we are reminded of Lyotard's "event." "In sum," says Lyotard, "there are events: something happens which is not tautological with what has happened" (*The Differend* 79). The event we are witnessing here is happening in the text via the narrator's report of the news fragment, but there is a slippage between "what has happened" and the event we are reading about. Demby recovers and maintains this slippage to avoid inscribing the victims of the events in the metanarrative of the novel with the entailed danger of engendering an all-encompassing interpretation of the events. The Middle Passage, the exploitation of Africa, racial segregation in the US and the mind-blowing violence during the Civil Rights struggle are *events*, which Bill Readings explains as "the occurrence after which nothing will be the same again" (*Introducing Lyotard* 57). Lyotard's formulation of the unspeakable event is conversant with the ethical implication of the performative quality of black history, thus suggesting the inevitable entanglement of the text with coeval discussions of historiography and literature and its prefiguring of Lyotard's "little narratives as the quintessential forms of imaginative invention" (*The Postmodern Condition* 60). Hence, *The Catacombs* exposes the epistemological and ethical limits of narrative as a means of cultural representation. By revealing the performativity of narrative, the novel

foregrounds the mechanisms at play in the writing of history. Instead of producing the umpteenth historical narrative of the black past, the novel offers this past as a space to be questioned in order to engender continuous creation of meanings. Within the European context, whose hegemony has silenced the history of Africans and African Americans, this past irrupts in the present of world history. It does so precisely in the space of the catacombs and the performance of *The Catacombs*, exercising a historical causality as determinative and as ancient as European history itself.

### ***Expatriate Intellectuals and Historical Agency***

The narrator's consciousness of his own historicity is unquestionable. He openly discusses his own role in writing history, his position as a black expatriate in Rome, his creative ability and his agency in the sacred scheme of things. Inevitably, such questions engender a text that blurs the lines between fiction and historiography, object and subject, as well as space and time. The African American past irrupts within the historical present of the text; not in the register of narrative, but rather in the register of performance, accounting for the most upsetting historical events coeval to the writing of the novel, i.e. decolonization movements, the African Diaspora, the Civil Rights struggle in the US and neocolonialism. Individual and collective events are forcefully entangled, as is the case with the so-called third thing, the baby with which Doris is pregnant. It can well be interpreted as the "third way" of the Non-Alignment movement, an uncertain narrative manifestation of the past in the present. "No. I don't think you're crazy," says Bill to Doris, "The world's maybe crazy. No one wants birth anymore. Everybody's afraid of the

Event ... *advent*. Everybody's afraid of what the *third* thing might turn out to be ..."

(190). How much of the Cold War, the violence for the political independence of colonized countries, the struggle in the US for the enfranchisement of black citizens, is in the past? Demby searches for viable answers to these questions by replacing historical narrative with a performative act, in which the objects of representation finally retrieve their long-denied yet still unspoken role as active agents.

The issue of agency is at the core of this text, whose narrator constantly questions the viability of his writerly project. In a manner that recalls his Doris's sense of being vampirized by Bill's writing about her, he admits to feeling "vampirized" by reality in reiterating throughout the text the perception that reality dictates itself to him. He doubts his authorship when he wonders, "Who's doing the weaving and who's being woven?" (95) and, likewise, earlier he confesses to, "feel[ing] like a figment of Pirandello's fertile mind" (45). Immersed in the whirlwind of contemporary history, Bill seems resigned to the role of spectator, "vicariously observing" a reality that only apparently progresses, as if he were subsumed by the simultaneous unfolding of the past in the present of the narrative. It is from within this textual suffusion that Bill explains how the idea of writing this book has formed in his mind, stemming from the belief that "everything and everybody, real or invented, characters in book [sic] or in newspapers, the 'news' itself, stones and broken bottles *do* matter, *are* important, if only they are looked at, if only they are observed" (208). Hence, Bill addresses the individual's responsibility to take notice of

history, raising an ethical discourse that does not concern the expatriate alone, or for that matter, the intellectual alone.<sup>66</sup>

Towards the end of the novel, Bill goes back to the United States to take part in the March on Washington while Pope John XXIII visits the Holy Land and Doris disappears into the catacombs. The highly symbolic value of these three scenes is exaggerated by their simultaneity, a sort of filmic montage that reaffirms Demby's conception of the novel as an assemblage of simultaneous events. The conflation of private and public is made evident again by the insertion of Bill's meditations on his own status as a writer and an expatriate, in the middle of news reports from the US. As Bill tells us at the very beginning of the novel and reiterates throughout, he is an observer, his trade being that of the writer: "As yet nobody knows what the Penelope threads of this tale are being woven into, and for that matter nobody knows ... who is doing the weaving, who is being woven, pazienza!" (95). There is a sense of resignation involved in the exclamation "pazienza" which seems to signal Bill's acceptance of his (and of humankind's) partial agency. To complicate the matter, his personal fate is explicitly interwoven with the fate of the novel,

This is a dark depressing time for the novel, a strangely critical time in my life. It is a Janus-time of looking back and forward, looking forward toward Birth, looking backward toward Death. In the meantime I'm weightless and suspended: I can eat, sleep, urinate ... But suddenly the mirror has clouded, I have no knowledge of myself. ... This [*sic*] streets and noises are unfamiliar to me. I am

---

<sup>66</sup> On the ways in which the historical event as rupture empowers the subject to acquire agency, that is, in Demby's text to escape from the cage of language, see Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*.

here and *there* ... and now, saying this, I am no longer afraid, nor do I feel *divided*. (135)

As the novel progresses and the news coming from the United States reports a society on the verge of a civil war, Bill's role as the weaver of the tale we are reading is less and less clear. For Bill, writing and living are intricately connected; to produce meaning out of the historical events and more locally his own life depends on his ability to narrate them. At this point he decides to return to the US, flying to New York the day before the Freedom March on Washington. From being a mere observer, he throws himself into the very heart of historical events by participating in the Freedom March, which significantly marks the conclusion of his narrative.

It's August 23, 1962. As the marchers flow through the National Mall in Washington, the Pope is on his pilgrimage to the Holy Land, both events hailed as important signs of hope for the future of humanity. Bill asks himself: "I don't know what we are doing here, where we are going. To a *tomb*?" (179). As the marchers move towards Lincoln's tomb the Pope is visiting the Holy Land where Christ died. At the same moment, we see Doris with the Count in a restaurant on the Ancient Appia, waiting to enter the catacombs. Bill's thoughts during the march reveal his concern with the writer's agency:

The initial feeling of triumph and exhilaration begins to fade. I become an intellectual again, my critical faculties become alert, and I can no longer join in the holding of hands and singing. Suddenly an insidious cynical voice starts whispering in my ear, that what I am witnessing, participating in, is only a



summer pageant of brotherhood. ... Obviously history was being made that hot day in August in Washington, DC. But who was making it? ... This I suppose is only a contemporary version of that ancient theatrical riddle: What is true and what is an illusion? If history now is to become televised theatre where are we intellectuals to stand? In the audience? On the stage? Or in the prompter's cramped and dusty pit? (195)

Again, the feeling of being vampirized by reality or of being a figment of someone else's imagination prevents him from participating fully in the event. It is not by chance that among the roles he envisions for the intellectual, the theater prompter seems to be the more viable one. The prompter, in fact, functions in a state of emergency; his words have to be given "here and now" in the urgent present of the live performance. The fragments he suggests to the interpreters are vital for the success of the representation. Moreover, they represent the enactment of a written text, the foundation upon which performance, with its infinite number of improvisations and recreations, takes place. Thus, Demby's paratactic envisioning of the individual's engagement with history produces a proliferation of meanings, each one simultaneously following its own thread in composing the narrative's tapestry-like structure.

By envisioning the writerly act as performative, *The Catacombs* questions traditional narratives of cultural foundations and places historical becoming in the space between Bill's metafictional narrative and the reader's experience of the text. Demby's novel acknowledges the historical framework of the Enlightenment-derived account of history, but does so implicitly by weaving the performance of past events and cultural

stereotypes with the recording of the present time. The protagonists' personal experience of geographical and cultural dislocation sweeps through centuries of world history, engendering a temporal simultaneity that halts the optimistic progressive narrative of traditional historiography. The ensuing narrative is one that exposes its own gaps and lacunae in the space between historiography and fiction, between the writerly and the readerly acts, the space in which the continuous performance of history takes place.

### ***William Demby at Cinecittà***

Throughout *The Catacombs* we can trace references to films, actors, and directors. Demby was not, however, simply referencing what has likely been the fastest growing artistic genre since the end of World War II. He had a direct knowledge of the film industry in Italy, having worked on a vast number of film productions as a translator of screenplays, actor (in *Ann's Sin*, 1952, with Ben Johnson), and a collaborator to the realization of *Congo Vivo* (1962), a film on the assassination of president Lumumba and the civil war in Congo. He co-wrote with Luigi Berto the film *La smania addosso* (1963), distributed in the US under the title *The Eye of the Needle*. Together with Tonino Guerra and Alberto Moravia he wrote *L'occhio selvaggio* (1967) (*The Wild Eye*, 1969). Of all these collaborations, his most significant was with Roberto Rossellini, for whom he was assistant director in the production of *Europa 51*, titled in English, *The Greatest Love* (1952). The international prestige of Rossellini aside, the two artists shared a penchant for historical narratives and the representation of history in art. Italian critic Pasquale Iaccio emphasizes the centrality of history in Rossellini's movies, speaking of

Rossellini's war movies, especially *Paisan* and *Roma, città aperta*, as historical documents—"I film di Rossellini hanno influenzato la storia stessa. Roma, città aperta e Paisa per esempio, sono trattati alla stregua di documentari di Guerra e immagini autentiche dell'epoca" ("they have had an influence on history itself. *Rome, Open City* and *Paisan*, for example, are treated today as war documentaries and other authentic images from the same period"; "La storia tra cinema e televisione" 136).

According to Iaccio, Rossellini's approach to history is informed by the Annales School. "Rossellini carries on a meticulous work of research and documentation," says Iaccio, "he looks for the remote causes that have determined a historical event, no matter how short the historical frame is. He draws on the interpretative categories of the Annales School, informed by the concept of the 'long durée' of history" (151). This approach is evident in the narrator of *The Catacombs* in his obsession with how to narrate reality, how to render adequately current historical events run through by the subtext of African American history. While writing *The Catacombs*, Demby was co-writing the screenplay for the film *Congo Vivo*, a French-Italian production released in 1962. The protagonist of *Congo Vivo* is an Italian journalist reporting on the newly born Democratic Republic of Congo. The style of the film is a mix of documentary and narrative film, showing interviews with the President of Congo and with Lumumba, scenes of violence between the opposed political factions, as well as the life of the poor Congolese in contrast to the rich Belgian colonizers. The journalist is involved in a love story with a Belgian lady, a subplot that is paralleled by a love affair between two young Congolese who are trying to build their future in the newly independent country. As Demby was working on this project while writing his autobiographical metahistorical novel, themes and narrative

techniques overlap between the two works. For example, in the film the narrator is a journalist who authors the reportages that inform the documentary sections. The concern with different modalities of narrating history and the necessity to provide the background to the current historical events were spread among post-Annales historiographers, a school of thought that flourished in those years. The Annalists, according to Amy Elias, tend to integrate poststructuralist theories about language and reality into their evaluation of historical process. The results are theories of histories that question the difference between fiction and non-fiction; problematize the notion of objectivity by reintroducing, in a poststructuralist sense, the concept of narrative in or as history and see the fragmentation of their object of study as a goal rather than a hindrance of historiographical inquiry. (36)

Demby's interest in narrating history, without reinforcing existing master narratives, does not entail the rejection of official history. Rather, he exposes them in order to reveal the role of silenced subjects, one of the main characteristics of his own narrative.

***In Search of A New Language: The Literary Context of Pasolini's Tiers-Mondisme***

*The Catacombs* was written and set in Italy during the early 1960s, a time of cultural turmoil characterized by the urgency to narrate the present amidst widespread disillusionment with the country's post-World War II cultural and political trajectory. The narration of historical events, the tenets of social realism and the growing criticism

of the elitist Hermetic School in poetry, the critique of modernization (blamed for the progressive disappearance of regional cultural traditions), were the issues that animated the Italian literary scene, as recorded by Demby.<sup>67</sup> The search for new forms of relation between cultural production and social, political, and economic realities, informed by French structuralism and the semiotic turn, led to a recoup of the neorealist aesthetic approach to film making and to the creation of the so-called Group 63 in poetry. A new attention to the representation of reality became the landmark of these debates. It is in this context that Italo Calvino, referring to Robbe-Grillet's idea of a "non anthropomorphic space," speaks of a "surrender to objectivity" as indicative of the post-World War II period: "La resa all'oggettività, fenomeno storico di questo dopoguerra, nasce in un periodo in cui all'uomo viene meno la fiducia nell'indirizzare il corso delle cose" ("The attitude of yielding to objectivity, as a typically postwar historical phenomenon, is born in a moment in which man's confidence in his agency, is shaking"; 45). This attention to language reflected the anxiety in rebuilding a national cultural identity under the growing globalization. It goes hand in hand with the formulation of a new poetic language to express first and foremost a new take on reality and the dismissal of old aesthetic tenets, especially the well-radicated concept of literary creation as intuition and sudden illumination, which was one of the main tenets of Hermeticism. As literary critic Caterina Verbaro explains: "questa apertura alla lingua del reale deve leggersi in un senso tutt'altro che mimetico, come reinvenzione e conflitto continuo col linguaggio, col

---

<sup>67</sup> Noa Steimatsky's *Italian Locations: Rehabilitating the Past in Postwar Cinema* represents a sophisticated analysis of the ways in which cinematic Neorealism was an outgrowth of the Fascist cinema industry and how this legacy is interpreted in later debates on modernity in Italian culture and society.

referente, con la comunicatività lineare” (“This opening to the language of the real has not to be read in a mimetic sense. Rather, as a continuous reinvention of and conflict with language, with the referent, with linear communication”; 72). In the article “Il mare dell’oggettività” (*Il Menabò* 1960), Calvino affirms that in the face of such a complex reality, in which “things” seem to move by themselves, the most heroic gesture is the effort to understand. Hence, he continues, “In mezzo alle sabbie mobili dell’oggettività potremo trovare quel minimo d’appoggio che basta per lo scatto di una nuova morale, d’una nuova libertà?” (“In the quicksand of objectivity, we are able to find that minimum of support, enough for a new moral attitude, a new freedom”; 78). Due to the urgency to narrate recent historical events, the legitimacy of autobiographical narratives and first person narrations was at its peak after World War II. The experiences of the war and the Resistance were deemed to be apt material to share with one’s readers. As Verbaro notes, “È infatti nel racconto partigiano e nella memorialistica di Guerra che va ricercata la genesi di questa rinata idea di un rispecchiamento della realtà, del valore esemplare della propria esperienza e della possibilità di comunicarla al lettore che ne condivide la storia” (“It is in the partisans’ stories and in war memoirs that one has to look for the genesis of this newborn idea of a mirroring of reality, of the exemplary value of one’s own experience and of the possibility to communicate it to the reader who can share the story”; 51). The literary neorealism of these years is born of a growing need to communicate and understand the vicissitudes of recent history in addition to the present situation of a divided and occupied country. This urgency to tell produces the most innovative results in poetry, culminating in the linguistic experimentations of the group I

novissimi, with the publication in 1961 of the anthology *I Novissimi—Poesie per gli anni '60* (edited by Alfredo Giuliani). According to John Picchione,

This provocative and revolutionary anthology shook up the Italian literary scene and opened the way to the formation of the Gruppo 63, a group of writers and critics that was soon identified as the Italian *neoavanguardia*. ... They championed an alternative language capable of expressing ambiguity, estrangement, and disorder. ... For the Novissimi, writing had to become a blasphemous activity, a programmatic laceration and fragmentation of language, and a project aimed at thwarting the reader's habitual horizon of expectations.

(7)

Estrangement is the mark of Pier Paolo Pasolini's work, both literary and filmic. Outspoken against the cultural homologation brought forth by globalization, Pasolini is one of the most troublesome figures of twentieth-century Italian culture. His attention to and defense of local cultural specificities are deeply informed by an internationalist vision. Consistent with the scope of my work, I will focus on the part of his production closely connected to the black transatlantic.

Pasolini was an active participant in the experimental movements of the 1960s. In a 1957 article titled "La libertà stilistica" published in the journal *L'Officina*, he claimed the right of younger artists to a new experimentalism, equidistant from both the elitist avant-gardes heir to the Hermetic tradition and from artistic productions subdued by Marxist orthodoxy. This approach resulted in pedantic exercises bound to realize the tenets of Lukacs' theory. Against both the old idealism and the Marxist orthodoxy,

Pasolini claims the right to a type of experimentalism in which “persiste un momento contraddittorio o negativo: ossia un atteggiamento indeciso, problematico e drammatico” (“it is persistent a contradictory or negative moment, a hesitant, problematic and dramatic attitude”; 12). The conflict between language and reality is a central issue in Pasolini’s work; his interest in the gap between everyday and literary Italian points to the concern for communicating to his ideal audience, that is, the masses. Interested in the idea of telling history from below, his experimentalism points to the limits of language and claims the cinematic image to be the most effective alternative to the written word.

Cinema had been at the heart of the cultural turmoil that led to poetic experimentation and heated debates over language-reality conflict since the late Forties. The international prestige of De Sica, Antonioni, and Fellini developed a robust market for Italian cinema. Amidst this new generation of directors, Pier Paolo Pasolini is perhaps the most controversial figure. Indebted to Neorealism for the practice of employing non-professional actors, natural lighting, and on-location shooting, his approach to reality was nonetheless distinct from the Neorealists; it pointed, above all, to the exploration of spirituality in the pre-industrial peasant world of a disappearing Italy. By now cult films, his *Medea*, *Il Vangelo Secondo Matteo*, and *The Decameron* address contemporary themes through distant historical settings. Pasolini saw Italian national issues of economic disparities and cultural homologation as global in scope. The Global South for him was present within the First World itself, in the peripheries of Rome, in the ghettos of American cities, in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro. The controversial intellectual—he declared himself Communist and Catholic, and courageously admitted being homosexual—had already approached African diasporic cultures in 1961 with an essay



titled “La resistenza nera” (“Black Resistance”). Introduction to *La letteratura negra*, a two-volume anthology edited by Mario de Andrade, which contained an impressive number of poems and prose pieces by black authors from Africa and the Americas, it is reminiscent of the famous antecedent “Orphée noire” (1948) by Jean Paul Sartre.

Pasolini’s piece frames the analysis within a hopeful depiction of black intellectuals as the only potential revolutionaries in the face of neo-capitalism, cultural homologation, and an advancing consumerism. In *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siecle* (1991), Chris Bongie offers an in-depth analysis of Pasolini’s *tiers-mondisme*. He argues that Pasolini’s exoticism was produced by the writer’s interpretation of black writing and cultures as corresponding to European poetic decadence, based on the distinction between “prehistory” and “history.” I will engage with Bongie’s reading to counter some of his conclusions and to expand upon it by adding an analysis of *Notes for an African Oresteia*, shot several years after the time frame considered by Bongie.

Of Pasolini’s *tier-mondiste* period identified with the years from 1958-1963, which thus exclude the years in which the ethno-documentaries were shot (late 1960s-early 1970s), Chris Bongie says, “Pasolini is buoyed up by the possibility of political and literary transgression, on both the domestic and the international front. He begins to explore the futural dimension absent from the world of the Ceneri” (198). *The Ashes of Gramsci* (1957) symbolizes the ways in which he stands as a phantasmal figure, an absence in the hell of contemporary society. Envisioning a possibility of change in Italy, Pasolini returns to the class struggle. As Bongie explains, “modernity, he [Pasolini] will claim, can be surpassed through a qualitative leap forward—as we see, for instance, in his

account of the difference between dissent and revolution” (199).<sup>68</sup> The conundrum of Bongie’s analysis is his interpretation, in terms of European decadentism, of Pasolini’s distinction between “prehistory and history.” Argues Bongie, “Pasolini’s commitment to the idea of future comes as no surprise, given his avowedly humanist and socialist point of view: the object for him is not, ultimately, to go “beyond” man, but to redeem man by going ‘beyond.’ The Third World holds out a promise that this project can be realized.” This premise, says Bongie,

draws him into making an untunable, and dehumanizing, distinction between ‘prehistoric’ and “historical” man. Once this distinction has itself broken down, all that will remain to this fervid humanist is the knowledge that the object of his desire is truly a thing of the past—and in this bitter renunciation of the future, ironically enough, Pasolini turns out to be a much thoroughgoing visionary of the end of man than Foucault ever was. (204)

This interpretation is problematic for two reasons. First, Pasolini strives to keep alive traditional cultures that are being destroyed by cultural globalization, their geographical location notwithstanding. The second objection is premised on the fact that Pasolini’s valorization of a state of nature and of the sensual apprehension of reality is part and parcel of his belief in the impossibility of yielding the humanity of the human being. He was a very keen observer of social and cultural changes and was concerned

---

<sup>68</sup> In “Picasso,” an essay contained in *Passione e ideologia* (1953), Pasolini explains that dissent is “irrational and religious, caught up within what he contests.” He identifies three types of dissent: “the heretical, the anarchical, and the humanitarian.” This stage is preparatory for “the qualitative leap, betrayal, of Marxism” (qtd. in Bongie 199).

with the homogenization of cultures and societies as well as the shift from a relationship “between individuals” to one between “the individual and the masses”—a shift in which agency and accountability are lost.

Pasolini was well aware that the cultural representations of Italian peasants, the proletariat of the new urban peripheries, as well as the inhabitants of the Third World, could only transform them into rhetoric, into a metaphor. It is significant, then, that his ethno-documentaries will never be realized as finished works, existing instead only as “notes,” of works in progress. Without discounting the exotic language Pasolini employs in his encounters with the Third World, the awareness of the objectifying outcome of his projects speak to his credit. In an interview, Pasolini declares, “Years ago, I dreamed of *contadini* [peasants] coming up from Africa with the banner of Lenin, taking with them the Calabrians and marching toward the West. ... Today it seems to me an idea that ought to come to a better reckoning with historical reality, with reality, with the truth.” He later adds, “relations are no longer between one individual and another but between individual and masses” and critically admits the need to do away with “a Third World idealized stupidly by the rhetoric of a Left that has read only Fanon” (qtd. in Bongie 218). His words are prophetic; African immigrants in contemporary Italy organize protests and forms of civil disobedience to challenge the exploitation of labor at the hand of local crime organizations that control the agricultural sector.

It is worth repeating here one of Pasolini’s statements in “Black Resistance,” an important comment concerning poetic language. Pasolini describes the poetry of the Resistance as “La Resistenza—appunto perchè soprattutto azione—non produce, neanche qui—come in Italia, come in Europa negli anni quaranta—un prodotto culturalmente

autonomo. Si tratta quasi sempre di un ibrido, di una contaminazione culturale” (“The Resistance, exactly because it is action, does not engender, here like in Italy, or in Europe in the forties, a product culturally autonomous. It cannot but be a hybrid, a cultural contamination”; XV). Bongie reads the following passage as proof of the divide between “prehistory” and “history”—“A pastiche of styles, it is a hybrid poetry,” characterized by “the coexistence of a culturally anterior language, already stylistically fixed, and a newborn language, as yet stylistically without any tradition” (qtd. in Bongie 205). According to Bongie, this continuity, identified by Pasolini, “works against the interruptive aims of the resistance, putting into question the proposed break between colonialism and an emancipated, decolonized world” (205). I disagree with this interpretation, as Pasolini is recognizing the complexity of the history lived by former colonies and validating this transitory phase of liberation as the productive movement of creative engagement. Moreover, he explicitly attributes the “unfinished” quality of the Resistance poetry to the primacy of action over the contemplation necessary to refine the poetic language. The chaotic reality of the struggle in progress does not allow for the time necessary to consolidate a new poetic. Hence, the language is a contamination between local cultural traditions, influences from the colonizer’s culture, and the impetus for action. Pasolini avoids here the bad faith of the Western intellectual in search of the pure expression of an uncontaminated African world. He is acknowledging that such a reality does not exist in the modern world; it is a fantasy of the colonizer. Pasolini was well aware of this danger in his own works, avoiding it by employing traditional Italian cultural forms and even language to infuse them with experimentalism and present day concerns, putting the tradition in dialogue with the present. In so doing, he claims the

phantasmagoric status of the future as a clean slate, or of a future identified with Afroasia, the Bandung world. Identifying surrealism or romanticism in the poetry of the Black Resistance, Pasolini asserts that, “quanto più queste fonti in un poeta sono insieme riconoscibili e assimilate, tanto più direi, è altro il valore, anche di novità, di quel poeta” (“the more these sources are both visible and deeply integrated, the higher, I would say, is the value and the novelty of the poet”; xvii). Hence, he is not looking for the pure exotic expression of Caribbean or African poetry, but rather to foreground its hybridity. In *Notes for an African Oresteia*, several years after the shooting of *Il padre selvaggio* (set in post-independence Congo) and of *Viaggio in India*, the two scripts Bongie discusses, Pasolini has less idealistic expectations regarding the revolutionary potential of the proletariat. He foregrounds the status of in-betweenness of the newly independent African states. Nature is again used to counterbalance the spiritual and creative poverty of the advancing, consumerist society, both within the heart of the West and in its colonies or former colonies. Pasolini’s interest in these countries springs from the potential for new forms of political thought and cultural production, engendered by the continuous negotiation of opposites. The political and cultural alternatives available to developing countries during the process of nation-building are relevant insofar as they do not represent a return to an original, pre-colonial moment.

This interest is evident in *Appunti per un’Orestide Africana*, shot in 1969, which explores the emergence of national identities in newly independent nations. Their straddling of capitalism and communism, progressivism and conservatism, tradition and innovation, makes them pregnant (to cite Demby) with the potential to challenge the distortions of Western cultures and societies. The African and Italian setting of *Notes*

notwithstanding, Pasolini's perspective was marked by his visit to the US, an experience that reveals the centrality of the black transatlantic in his thought.

Shot between Tanzania, Mali, Uganda, and Rome, Pasolini is careful in *Notes* to capture the complex reality characterizing African nations. It portrays their kaleidoscopic reality, in which Western educational institutions, technologies, and economic advancements coexist with local markets, stretches of uncontaminated environment, and local traditions. There is no romanticization of their lifestyle, rather a portrayal of that complexity as the latest frontier of neo-capitalism, conquered through colonization and neo-colonialism. The nefarious legacy of European colonialism is shown through the insertion of real footage from the Biafran War. People and nature are characters of equal importance: Orestes is played by a university student from Tanzania, for the role of Clytemnestra he chooses a medicine woman from Uganda, Agamemnon is to be played by a Masai warrior, and the Eeriness was represented by a wounded lioness from the bush. The section set in Rome alternates between a conversation with African students at the University of Rome and images of a jazz band filmed while recording the documentary's soundtrack, which includes two African American singers performing the chorus of the tragedy. In *Notes* there is no contraposition between a modern and a backward reality—from Uganda through Rome and the US, each setting and culture participates in Pasolini's concerns surrounding industrialization and cultural homologation, with each context represented as contaminated by outside forces.

***Black Power and the Italian Quest for Revolution: Pasolini's Notes for an African Oresteia***

In October 2011, Italian scholar of American culture Alessandro Portelli presided over a four-day event titled “The Other America.” The program listed a series of films, documentaries, and book presentations centered on what was called the “dissident America,” described as “the America of the black ghettos, of the black power, the America of the mines workers, of anarchist unions and, finally, the America of the angry white proletarians.”<sup>69</sup> Whether or not inspired by the recent “Occupy Wall Street” movement, the event offers a measure of the interest that the Black Power has sparked in Italy since its inception; participants in any form in the student movement of 1968 had replaced her family’s Bible with the anthology *Black Fire*. Interestingly, the description is in the present tense, that is, presented as a social and political movement alive and well, at least if looked at from the point of view of the Italian academy and underground left-leaning culture.

Pasolini’s work testifies to this long-standing interest. Within his filmic production, the aforementioned *Notes* is the most exemplary in this sense. It is an adaptation of Aeschylus’ s tragedy set in Africa, in which the potential for a transnational alliance of the lower classes of the world is figured to take place through the revolutionary leading role of the African American Black Power movement, which Pasolini had known directly in 1966 when he visited the US.

---

<sup>69</sup> They screened films such as *Panther* by Mario van Peebles, *The Weather Underground* by Sam Green and Bill Siegel and presented a book by Portelli, a collection of testimonials gathered in Harlan County, Kentucky.

Pasolini embraces the transnational call to arms of the Black Power, especially as exemplified in Huey Newton's philosophy of "Intercommunalism." It represented the attempt to move beyond racial essentialism while recognizing in black Americans the avantgardist role in bringing forth true change in US society. In embracing it, Pasolini expresses the belief for the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, be it the Italian peasants of the South or the industrial worker of the North. Most importantly, he connects such potential to the alliance with other oppressed or exploited groups, whether the peoples of former Western colonies or minorities and proletarians of the metropolises of the West. Pasolini's adaptation of Aeschylus's tragedy speaks to the relevance of initiatives of black world solidarity to the development of revolutionary thought in Italy.

Between shooting on location in Africa and the release of the documentary, Pasolini visited the US in 1966 and again in 1968. He thus comments on the social and cultural situations he sees in the US:

In America, even in my very brief stay, I lived many hours in the clandestine struggle, of revolutionary urgency, of hope that belonged to the Europe of '44 and '45. In Europe, everything is finished, in America you get the feeling that it is about to begin ... people are living there as on the eve of great things.

(Qtd. in Schwartz 502)

He later wrote,

In Harlem one night ... I shook hands (but they shook my hands suspiciously, because I was white) with a group of young blacks wearing on their sweaters the sign of the panther—an extremist movement that is getting ready for a real



armed struggle ... I accompanied a young black trade unionist who took me to visit the cell of his movement. (Qtd. in Schwarz 503)

Thus, Pasolini's work on the Global South passes through his encounter with the revolutionary ideology of the Black Panther. In particular, Huey Newton's philosophy of intercommunalism echoes the Italian director's acknowledgement of the transnational dimension of the loss of Italian sociocultural traditions. Pasolini was very critical of the consequences of the reckless industrialization and the spread of petty bourgeois values, which were engendering economic exploitation, social injustice, and cultural homologation. These issues inform Newton's "revolutionary intercommunalism," in Robyn Spencer's words,

US capitalist imperialism, according to this theory, had transformed understandings of sovereignty and self-determination that underlay the concept of nationhood to the point where nations no longer existed, 'because of the development of technology, because of the development of the mass-media, because of the fire-power of the imperialist, because of the fact that the US is no longer a nation but an empire.' ... In this new world order, Newton suggested, race, and even ideology had declined in importance. The indispensable basis of global solidarity, rather, was common experiences of oppression.

("Transnational Blackness" 223-4)

Hence, the development of an understanding of transnational solidarity that moved beyond national identity and cultural specificities.

In 1967, one year after visiting the US, Pasolini traveled to Uganda and Tanzania to shoot “notes” as he called them, for a filmic adaptation of Aeschilus’ tragedy, the *Oresteia*.<sup>70</sup> *Notes for an African Oresteia* (1969) can be loosely divided in three sections: in the first one we see Pasolini with his troupe searching for the actors and locations; the second is set at the University of Rome where Pasolini shows footage from his documentary to a group of African students and discusses his project with them; finally, the third part is the *mise en scene* of the tragedy in a recording studio. According to Luca Caminati’s analysis, “this documentary on the making of a movie represents the ‘visualization’ of the intention to translate the *Oresteia* in Africa—becomes the revelation of an existential political and personal dilemma: Pasolini’s project of making ‘poetic cinema,’ joining anthropology with cinematographic experimentation” (69). The inclusion in the film of Pasolini himself functions as a reminder of the subjectivity of cultural representation and emphasizes the uneasy position occupied by the Western intellectual talking about Africa.

The artificiality of cultural representation is revealed by the first shot of the *Appunti*, which juxtaposes a copy of the *Oresteia* with a geographical map of Africa. Not only is there the physical superimposition of the Greek text on the map of Africa, but also the emphasis on the political outlook of Africa, whose political map reminds us of the partition of the continent at the Congress of Vienna in 1815. A further central element is the consistent attention to places where culture is produced within the spaces of everyday

---

<sup>70</sup> It is interesting to note that Vittorio Gassman chose Pasolini’s translation from the Greek, for a representation of the tragedy staged in the same year in Rome.

life. This strategy reveals Pasolini's stand on the relationship between traditional culture and the progress imposed by modernization, which he feels should integrate tradition rather than destroy it, a position that applied to Italy as well as Africa, Asia, and South America. In the opening scene we see the Italian translation of the tragedy on the right and the map of Africa on the left, reminders of the imperial project and of the culture that has sustained it, which *Notes* will endeavor to revisit and reinterpret. Luca Caminati argues that, "the analogy between text and actuality was a permanent feature of Pasolini's film. The classical text is juxtaposed to the present day reality" (86). What is more significant is that it is in Africa that Pasolini envisions the meaning and message of the Greek tragedy to assume its significance again.

The connection between tradition and innovation is central to the poetic of the *Appunti*, in which "the transformation of the Furies into Eumenides, that is the savage, untamed natural element transformed into a more symbolic element, constituted by language, and symbolizing the passage to democracy in the tragedy" (Caminati 88) stands for the crossroads at which many newly independent African nations stood in the late Sixties. Pasolini chooses Uganda as exemplary of this historical phase and opens the documentary by showing the political alternatives the country is faced with. Uganda, similar to other newly independent African nations, was straddling between two political and economic alternatives, socialism and neo-capitalism, between Mao, whose Red Book stands out in the shot that shows the window of a bookshop, and Uncle Sam. It is significant that the sign of the African American Institute in Dar-Es-Salam stands for the potential American alternative.

The connection with the growing international currency of the Black Power is made via the soundtrack. In contrast to the long silences that characterize the majority of his works, in this documentary the soundtrack serves a crucial function. The director himself tells the viewers that a sudden idea came to him, that is, to have the chorus of the Greek tragedy sung by two African American singers and the whole documentary accompanied by the live music of a jazz band. Hence, we see Yvonne Murray and Archie Savage interpreting the chorus while Italian saxophonist Gato Barbieri improvises with Donald F. Moye on drums and Marcello Melis on double-bass. During the opening sequences Pasolini had already noticed how the neo-capitalism of Western democracies was a strong influence on the process of nation building pursued by former colonies. From the same country, however, comes the powerful example of the revolutionary thought in the Black Panthers, represented by the language of jazz. The documentary concludes with Pasolini's comments on the international import of African American political thought: "È evidente che venti milioni di Afro-Americani sono i leaders di qualunque movimento rivoluzionario nel Terzo Mondo" (*Per il cinema* 1185). ("It is self-evident that twenty millions of black Americans are the leaders of any revolutionary movement in the third world"; my translation). In Greek tragedies the chorus offered the background of the dramatic events, and more importantly, the collective voice that expressed a commentary on the action. Pasolini orchestrates the music and chorus with a style that problematizes the images presented, emphasizing the incommunicability between the culture of the director, the Western observer, and the subjects. This problematic is put in dialogue with another main theme, that is, the complexity and

tensions inherent in the project of shaping a national identity around models inherited from the colonizer.

Interestingly, in Pasolini's adaptation, the jazz singers' voices are strident and discordant and the words hardly intelligible. As Rohdie comments, a consequence of Pasolini's rejection of the modernist myth of progress and the belief that poetic meaning lies in the symbolic value of ancient cultures in which the connection to the irrational (represented by the Furies, i.e. natural elements) is intact. Pasolini's connection between Southern Italian peasants and Africans existed already in the imperialist thought of nineteenth-century Italy, but Pasolini did not subscribe to

the progressist myth, which had justified imperialism, but [to] a regressive one that criticized it. The South in Pasolini's universe, Italian or third world, belonged to an order, which reversed the values of progressism. He constructed the primitive as morally and culturally superior to the civilized by the fact of being in touch with the irrational which was for him the source of poetry and beauty ("Marx and Freud" 144).

The director's insistence on the preservation of traditions and local specificities is clear, and the scenes shot at the University of Rome further develop this aspect. It is significant that despite the fact that African students were rather dismissive and critical of Pasolini's project, the director includes the footage in the final montage (Caminati 73). Besides paying homage to the relevance of the students' movements for political change throughout the world, the inclusion of a negative critique of his own work reinforces the

problematic nature of the project itself and of any attempt at creating a linear, teleological narrative of historical events. Its most powerful suggestion, though, is the possibility of communication, of exchange between a text representing the imperialist culture and those exploited by the imperialist project. As one of the students replies to Pasolini, the experience of studying in the colonizer's country may represent solely the individual curiosity of knowing a different reality, rather than assuming a collective meaning representative of a whole generation of African youth "buying into" the colonizer's world. In other words, individual reasons and copying strategies make that linear history and the devouring quality of master narratives, impossible.

In order to reflect the reality of nation building, Pasolini decided while shooting, that the best form for his material was that of a work in progress. In the postscript, he argues that, "such a project cannot be transformed into a 'regular' film because the raw material—ideological, social and political—is too much (*Per il cinema* 2681). The implications of such a stylistic choice seem to me to belie an ideological position, as the live and therefore unfinished project that constitutes the subject of his work prevents its organization into a coherent, causal narrative. A further implication of this formal choice is the foregrounding of the film director's role as outsider observer, or better, a denunciation of the objective, implicit superiority of the Western intellectual who testifies, interprets, narrates the reality of an exotic world. In choosing to give his work an open, in-progress form, he withholds his own authorial power.

Cesare Casarino reads Pasolini's identification of the Italian dispossessed peasants with Third World peoples in terms of the non-identitarian universalism of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961). The critic extends Said's reading of Fanon to

Pasolini in saying, “Pasolini’s problematic misrecognition of the Third World as Roman proletariat and of the global South as the Italian South ... points toward a transnational universalism based on common potential and common projects—rather than pointing towards the various essentialist and identitarian types of universalism” (“The Southern Answer” 688). This evaluation brings us back to Huey Newton’s words, “we say that the world today is a dispersed collection of communities” (qtd. in *Transnational Blackness* 163). Newton defined revolutionary intercommunalism as “a higher level of consciousness than nationalism or internationalism” which is “the need for unity and solidarity among the dispersed communities against the US” (166). Hence, Pasolini’s documentary speaks to the relevance of decolonization and of the African American political thought to the understanding of Italian political avant-garde in the last century.

Demby and Pasolini, albeit with different modalities and outcomes, both testify to the possibilities offered by the Italian context in engaging with the present through the long view of history. The choice to search for the true meaning of a Greek tragedy in the context of the decolonization of Africa and of molding a language capable of expressing the fast-changing reality of the Italian sixties, in the music and politics of contemporary African American culture, speak to the centrality of the black transatlantic within Italian intellectual history. The glamorous and creative Rome of Fellini’s *La dolce vita* (1960) was very far from the reality of misery and destruction of Rossellini’s *Roma, città aperta* (1945). Yet the cultural and social tensions already visible in the Neorealist masterpiece continued to play out through the sixties, when the universalism of the revolutionary movements would finally shake the reactionary structure of Italian society.

## CONCLUSION

This work has shown how the “anxious vacancy” symptomatic of the polite avoidance of African immigrants by the inhabitants of Valbrona, as described by Homi Bhabha in 1995, is symptomatic of a larger cultural and political national habit. Through the conscious effacement of its presence within the black transatlantic, Italy has written itself out of the most crucial debates over contemporary European social and cultural identity. The invisibility of black peoples in a white-dominated Italy finds its complement in the absence of political and cultural reflections on migratory phenomena that has defined European identity for centuries.

My work opens up the cultural archive of forgotten documents produced by encounters of artists and intellectuals of the African Diaspora with Italian history and culture in the twentieth century. The exchanges between African American and Italian cultures in the context of the black transatlantic engendered an alternative relationship between the individual and the official national historical narratives, one I have called “living history.” Living history, I maintain, is a discursive strategy at the intersection of historiography, literature, and cultural history, whose practice is characterized by the engagement with deep history and a transnational geographical space. The deep history made evident by the architectural stratification of Italian cities, coupled with the traces of the country’s long history of exchanges with the African continent, are constitutive features of the transatlantic circulation of ideas instantiated by the authors and directors examined here. The trajectory followed by this dissertation shows a reversal from the initial invisibility of black people to the sensationalist conception of blackness, by means of a consistent Africanist discourse, conducive of a reversal that is both metaphorical, as with Curzio Malaparte’s use of skin as the measure of history, and literal, as with Spike



Lee's filmic representation of the Buffalo soldiers' history. Pier Paolo Pasolini's work in the late sixties resorts to the cultures of the black transatlantic in his analysis of the recurrence of history and the relation between the individual and the masses, which was central to the Africanist discourse in the work of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Marcus Garvey, and George Schuyler. The dialogue with the cultures of the African Diaspora informed Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's proto-fascistic nationalism. His domestication of Africa is a key element of the exceptional individuality of his Futurist new man, who is celebrated for his close relation with the masses, his racial hybridity, and the transnationalism of his cultural formation. His "corporate personhood" becomes the figure of twentieth-century mass movements, and the invisibility of the black individual is turned into the spectacle of Marcus Garvey's imperial parades.

Navigating the history of the century, moreover, the relationship between the individual and the masses is played out in a dialectical reinscription of the past in the present, the "performed" history of individual experience and fiction writing. Pier Paolo Pasolini's rewriting of Aeschylus' *Oresteia* in an African setting, with African American singers interpreting the chorus, testifies to the trajectory taken by the "new man": from corporate individual to the multitude, from nationalistic rhetoric to the preoccupation with globalization. The epistemology of "living history" is offered as alternative to the Middle Passage with its emphasis on the concept of origins, and Italy as the "cradle" of Western civilization becomes the crossroads at which narratives of belonging and of agency within the black transatlantic are unsettled.

I have chosen to analyze the most symptomatic moments in which Italian artists have resorted to African Diasporean cultural production, usually moments of crisis in the

formation of the country's national identity. I have suggested that the specificities of Italian culture and history facilitate African American artists' engagement with history, specifically the history of the African Diaspora. These engagements with their European and African legacies by way of the symbolic value of Italy as cradle of the Western civilization represent an intervention in the master narrative of history, which has traditionally excluded black peoples. This symbolic value acquires further meaning when we consider Italy's long history of contacts with the African continent. The in-betweenness of Italy's history and culture, as well as its vexed belonging to the West, is revealed in the architectural simultaneity of its cities that functions as open-air museums, as spaces where one can inhabit history in the present. African American and Italian writers complicate this setting by inscribing it within the black transatlantic network with a twofold move. On one hand, they redress Italy's isolation from the modern exchanges of the African Diaspora, while on the other they manifest an African American belonging to the West, rewriting history through the performative act of inhabiting it.

African American artists' engagements with their African and European legacies by way of Italy, result in an artistic output that troubles the very notion of Western cultures as white and European. By approaching history as deep history, the African American and Italian artists examined here question the understanding of belonging as founded on a primitive, original, and unchanging past. They conceptualize belonging as the always-unfinished process of appropriation and rewriting of received cultural narratives. The African presence Ellison finds in the antiquity of Rome is thus written in the West as much as Marinetti's African characters are alter egos of the modern, Futurist man.

In dialogue with current discourses on the multiplicity of modernity, this dissertation highlighted the ways in which modernist works already contained a transnational and transcultural perspective that moved beyond the centre-periphery model of historiography. In other words, by putting in dialogue two cultural traditions considered minor in the developments of twentieth-century Euro-American culture, within the network of the black transatlantic, I have suggested another perspective from which to read the cultural production of the African Diaspora. Thus, a new archive of transnational modernisms inclusive of the black transatlantic is offered as a repository of literary and cultural documents that lends itself to further expansion and investigation. This investigation can take various directions, among which are the nineteenth-century phenomenon of the “Grand Tour” of Italy by African American artists and political activists, the activity of Italian Communists within such transnational associations as the Friends of Ethiopia, the cinematic production on Africa by both Italian and African Diasporan artists, in addition to more theoretical explorations of narrative and historical time in diasporic literature and of the archive as both an imagined and real referent of a canon, necessarily produced in-between national borders and cultural traditions.

## WORKS CITED

- Adamson, Walter L. *Avant-Garde Florence: From Modernism to Fascism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993. Print.
- . "Fascism and Culture: Avant-Gardes and Secular Religion in the Italian Case." *Journal of Contemporary History* 24:3 (1989): 411-35. Print.
- . "How Avant-Gardes End—and Begin. Italian Futurism in Historical Perspective." *New Literary History* 41 (2010): 854-75. Print.
- Allen, Beverly, and Mary Russo, eds. *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1997. Print.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. and extended ed. London, New York: Verso, 1991. Print.
- Ann's Sin*. Dir. Roberto Rossellini. Ponti-De Laurentis, 1952. VHS.
- Arac, Jonathan. "Imperial Eclecticism in *Moby-Dick* and *Invisible Man*: Literature in a Postcolonial Empire." *Boundary 2* 37:3 (2010): 151–65. Print.
- Arnheim, Rudolph. *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. Expanded and rev. ed. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1974. Print.
- Badiou, Alain. *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham. London, New York: Continuum, 2005. Print.
- Bain, Alexander. "Shock Americana!: George Schuyler Serializes Black Internationalism." *American Literary History* 19:4 (2007): 937-63. Print.

- Baldacci, Luigi. Introduction. *La pelle*. By Curzio Malaparte. Trans Baldacci. Milano: Mondadori, 1984. i-xx. Print.
- Ballerini, Luigi. Introduction. *Mafarka il futurista: Romanzo Africano*. By Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Milano: Mondadori, 2003. i-xxv. Print.
- Barndt, Kerstin, "Layers of Time: Industrial Ruins and Exhibitionary Temporalities." *PMLA* 125:1 (2010): 134-41. Print.
- Barnhisel, Greg. "Perspectives USA and the Cultural Cold War: Modernism in Service of the State." *Modernism/Modernity* 14:4 (2007): 729–54. Print.
- Baucom, Ian. *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2005. Print.
- Beckett, Samuel. "Dante ... Bruno ... Vico ... Joyce." *Modernism: An Anthology*. Ed. Lawrence Rainey. Malden, MS: Blackwell, 2005. 1060-72. Print.
- Bell, Michael. *Primitivism*. London: Methuen, 1972. Print.
- Benelli, Graziano. *La Negritudine in Italia. A. Césaire, L.G. Damas, L.S. Senghor, 1950-1994*. Roma: Bulzoni, 1995. Print.
- Benesch, Klaus. "Notes From Underground. William Demby's *The Catacombs* and The Diasporic Roots of African-American Modernism." Fabre and Benesch 181-93. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Thesis on the Philosophy of History." *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. Trans. Harry Zohn. New York: Schocken Books, 2007. 253-64. Print.
- Berghaus, Günter. *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944*. Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996. Print.
- , ed. *International Futurism in Arts and Literature*. Walter de Gruyter: Berlin,

2000. Print.

Bergoglio, Franco. "Pavese, Mila, Gramsci. Letteratura, jazz e antifascismo nella Torino degli anni trenta." *L'impegno* 20:2 (2000). <<http://www.storia900bivc.it/pagine/editoria/bergoglio200.html>>.

Bhabha, Homi K. "Black and White and Read All Over." *Artforum International* 34:2 (1995): 16-8. Print.

---. *The Location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge, 1994. Print.

Bial, Henry, ed. *The Performance Studies Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.

Biggers, Jeff. "William Demby Has Not Left The Building. Postcard from Tuscany." *The Bloomsbury Review* 24:1 (2004). *TheBloomsburyReview.com*. Web. 3 Oct. 2008.

Birchall, Ian. "When Rosmer Reviewed Cliff." *International Socialism Journal* 103 (2004). Web. 12 Nov. 2011.

Blair, Sara. "Ellison, Photography, and the Origins of Invisibility." *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*. 56-81. Print.

---. "Ralph Ellison, Photographer." *Harlem Crossroads: Black Writers and the Photograph in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2007. 112-59. Print.

Blake, Susan L. "Ritual and Rationalization: Black Folklore in the Works of Ralph Ellison." *PMLA* 94:1 (1979): 121-36. Print.

Bone, Robert. "William Demby's Dance of Life." *Triquarterly* 15 (1969): 127-41. Print.

Bongie, Chris. *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism, and the Fin de Siècle*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1991. Print.

Borruso, Paolo. *Il PCI e l'Africa indipendente*. Firenze: Le Monnier, 2009. Print.

- Brackett, John. "Imagination of Renaissance Italians." *Matteo* 74-89. Print.
- Byfield, Judith, ed. *Rethinking the African Diaspora*. Spec. Issue of *African Studies Review* 43:1 (2000). *Project Muse Web*. 11 May 2009.
- Calvino, Italo. 1960. "Il mare dell'oggettività." *Una pietra sopra*. Milano: Mondadori, 1995. 47-54. Print.
- Caminati, Luca. *Orientalismo eretico. Pier Paolo Pasolini e il cinema del terzo mondo*. Milano: Mondadori, 2010. Print.
- Casarino, Cesare. "The Southern Answer: Pasolini, Universalism, Decolonization." *Critical Enquiry* 36 (2010): 687-8. Print.
- Cecchi, Emilio. *America Amara*. Padova: F. Muzzio, 1995. Print.
- Clark, Elizabeth A. *History, Theory, Text. Historians and the Linguistic Turn*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004. Print.
- Clark Hine, Darlene, Trica D. Keaton, and Stephen Small, eds. *Black Europe and the African Diaspora*. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 2009. Print.
- Cohen, Robin. *Global Diasporas: An Introduction*. Seattle: U of Washington P, 1997. Print.
- Congo Vivo*. Dir. Giuseppe Bennati. Rotor, 1962. Film.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. 1902. London: Penguin, 2007. Print.
- Dal Lago, Alessandro. "La porta stretta. L'Italia e 'l'altra riva' tra colonialismo e politiche migratorie." *California Italian Studies Journal* 1:1 (2010). Web. 8 Nov. 2011.
- De Leone, Enrico. *Il vero volto dell'anticolonialismo italiano*. Roma: Istituto Italo-Africano, 1955. Print.

- Del Boca, Angelo. *L'Africa nella coscienza degli italiani: miti, memorie, errori, sconfitte*. Roma: Laterza, 1992. Print.
- Demby, William. *Beetlecreek*. 1950. Jackson, MI: Mississippi UP, 1998. Print.
- . *The Catacombs*. 1965. Boston, MA: Northeastern UP, 1991. Print.
- Do the Right Thing*. Dir. Spike Lee. 40 Acres and a Mule, 1989. DVD.
- Doyle, Laura. "Towards a Philosophy of Transnationalism." *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 1:1 (2009): 1-29. *EScholarship*. Web. 2 Jan. 2012.
- Doyle, Laura, Laura, Winkiel, eds. *Geomodernisms. Race, Modernism, Modernity*. Bloomington, IL: Indiana UP, 2005. Print.
- Dufoix, Marcel. *Diasporas*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2008. Print.
- Ebert, Roger. "Miracle at St. Anna." *Chicago Sun-Times*. 25 Sept. 2008. Web. 15 May 2010.
- Eburne, Jonathan P, Jeremy Braddock. "Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic." *Modern Fiction Studies* 51:4 (2005): 731-40. *Project Muse*. Web. 6 June 2008.
- Edwards, Brent H. "Introduction: The 'Autonomy' of Black Radicalism." *Social Text* 67:19, 2 (2001): 1-13. Print.
- . *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2003. Print.
- . "Ralph Ellison and the Grain of Internationalism." *Globalizing American Studies*. Eds. Brian T. Edwards and Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010. 115-34. Print.
- . "The Uses of Diaspora" in *African Diasporas in the New and Old World*. Fabre and Benesch, 3-38. Print.



Elias, Amy. *Sublime Desire: History and Post-1960s Fiction*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP, 2001. Print.

Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *The Sacred Wood*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1921. Web. 27 May 2012. <<http://www.bartleby.com/200/sw4.html>>.

Ellison, Ralph. *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. Ed. John Callahan. New York: Modern Library, 1995. Print.

---. "A Very Stern Discipline." *Collected Essays* 730-58. Print.

---. "Change the Joke and Split the Yoke." *Collected Essays* 101-12. Print.

---. "Harlem Is Nowhere." *Collected Essays* 320-27. Print.

---. "Hidden Name and Complex Fate." *Collected Essays* 189-209. Print.

---. *Invisible Man*. New York: Vintage International, 1995. Print.

---. Ralph Ellison Papers. Library of Congress. Manuscript Division. Washington, DC.

---. *Shadow and Act*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972. Print.

---. "Society, Morality and the Novel." *Collected Essays* 698-729. Print.

---. "Some Questions, Some Answers." *Collected Essays* 291-301. Print.

---. "Tell It Like It Is, Baby." *Collected Essays* 27-46. Print.

---. *Three Days Before the Shooting*. New York: New Modern Library, 2011. Print.

---. "The Uses of History in Fiction." *Conversations with Ralph Ellison*. Eds. Maryemma Graham and Amritjt Singh. Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 1995. 141-72. Print.

Ellison, Ralph and Stanley E. Hyman. "The Negro Writer in America: An Exchange." *Partisan Review* 25 (1958): 197-211. Print.

Ellison, Ralph and Albert Murray. *Trading Twelves. The Selected Letters of Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray*. Ed. John F. Callahan. New York: Modern Library,

2000. Print.

Esedebe, Olisanwuche P. *Pan-Africanism: The Idea and Movement, 1776-1991*.

Washington, DC: Howard UP, 1994. Print.

*Europa 51*. Dir. Roberto Rossellini. Ass. Dir. William Demby. Ponti-De Laurentis, 1952.

DVD.

Fabre, Geneviève and Klaus, Benesch. *African Diasporas in the New and Old Worlds:*

*Consciousness and Imagination*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004. Print.

Fabre, Michel. *From Harlem to Paris. Black American Writers in France, 1890-1940*.

Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1991. Print.

Fanon, Frantz. *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952. Print.

---. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove, 2004. Print.

Fischer-Hornung, Dorothea. *Folklore and Myth in Ralph Ellison's Early Works*. Diss.

Stuttgart: Hochschulverlag, 1979. Print.

Fluderik, Monika, ed. *Diaspora and Multiculturalism: Common Traditions and New*

*Developments*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003. Print.

Foley, Barbara. *Wrestling with the Left. The Making of Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man*.

Durham NC, Duke UP: 2010. Print.

Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. London, New York: Routledge, 2002.

Print.

Susan, Stanford Friedman. "Planetary: Musing Modernist Studies."

*Modernism/Modernity* 17:3 (2010): 471–99. JSTOR. Web 14 April 2011.

Gaonkar, Dilip P. Ed. *Alternative Modernities*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2001. Print.

Garvey, Marcus. "America and Abyssinia." *The Blackman* (1945): 1-2. Print.

---. *Message to the People. The Course of African Philosophy*. Dover, MA: Majority Press, 1986. Print.

Gazzola, Giuseppe. *Futurismo: Impact and Legacy*. Stony Brook, NY: Forum Italicum, 2011. Print.

Gentile, Emilio. "The Conquest of Modernity: From Nationalism to Fascism." *Modernism/Modernity* 1:3 (1994): 55-87. JSTOR. Web. 10 May 2012.

---. *La nostra sfida alle stelle: futuristi in politica*. Milano: Laterza, 2009. Print.

---. *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism*. Westport, CT.: Praeger, 2003. Print.

Giardino, Alessandro. "Liliana Cavani's *La pelle*. Debunking the Fake Promises of Postmodern Sexual Emancipation and the Silencing Effect of Cultural Oblivion." *Carte italiane* 2:7 (2011): 101-21. EScholarship. Web. 2 April 2012.

Gikandi, Simon. "Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism." Doyle and Winkiel 31-50. Print.

Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. London: Verso, 1999. Print.

Giuliani, Alfredo. *I Novissimi: Poesie per gli anni '60*. 1963. Torino: Einaudi, 2003. Print.

Glicinelli, Luca. "Inside Buffalo. Incontro con il regista Fred Kuworno." 7 January 2010. *Blaluca.wordpress.com*. Web. 19 July 2010.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Lettere dal carcere*. 5<sup>th</sup> ed. Torino: Einaudi, 1992. Print.

---. *Letters From Prison*. Frank Rosengarten ed., Raymond Rosenthal trans. New York: Columbia UP, 1994. Print.

---. "Marinetti il rivoluzionario." 1921. Kolocotroni, Goldman and Taxidou 214-17. Print.

---. *Quaderni del carcere*. Torino: Einaudi, 1975.

Grant, Colin. *Negro with A Hat: The Rise and Fall of Marcus Garvey and His Dream of MotherAfrica*. New York: Oxford UP, 2008. Print.

Graves, Robert and Laura Jackson R. "From *Modernist Poetry*." 1926. Kolocotroni, Goldman and Taxidou. 433-39. Print.

Grosser, Maurice. *The Painter's Eye*. New York: New American Library, 1956. Print.

Gruesser, John C. *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing About Africa*. Lexington, KY: UP of Kentucky, 2000. Print.

---. *Confluences: Postcolonialism, African American Literary Studies and the Black Atlantic*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia P, 2005. Print.

Guerri, Giordano B. *L'arcitaliano: vita di Curzio Malaparte*. Milano: Bompiani, 2008. Print.

Gunn, Daniel. "'It Is the Fate of Europe to Become Naples': Curzio Malaparte and the Plague of Benevolent Interventionism." *International Literary Quarterly* 1 (2007). Web. 3 Jun. 2010.

Hall, James C. *Mercy, Mercy Me. African American Culture and The American Sixties*. New York: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.

Hanchard, Michael. "Afro-Modernity: Temporality, Politics and the African Diaspora." *Public Culture* 11:1 (1999): 245-68. *Project Muse*. Web. 9 Mar. 2011.

Hansen, Klaus P. "William Demby's *The Catacombs*: A Latecomer to Modernism." *The Afro-American Novel Since 1960*. Eds. Peter Bruck and Wolfgang Karrer. Amsterdam: B. R. Gruner Press, 1982. 1234-43. Print.

- Hardt, Michael, and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2001. Print.
- Härmänmaa, Marja. "Beyond Anarchism: Marinetti's Futurist (Anti-)Utopia of Individualism and Artocracy." *The European Legacy* 14:7 (2009): 857-71. Web. 4 Aug. 2011.
- Harris, Chandra. "Who's Got the Power? Blacks in Italian Cinema and Literature, 1910-1948." Diss. Brown University, 2004. *ProQuest*. Web. 2 Oct. 2008.
- Harris, Joseph E. *African American Reactions to War in Ethiopia, 1936-1941*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State UP, 1994. Print.
- . *Global Dimensions of the African Diaspora*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Washington, DC: Howard UP, 1993. Print.
- Harris, Laura A. "Hybrid Italians, Diasporic Africans: Who's/Whose Meticcio." *Callaloo* 31:2 (2008): 600-8. *Project Muse*. Web. 11 Jan. 2009.
- Hegel, Georg W. F. *Lectures on the History of Philosophy 1825-6*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006. Print.
- Hewitt, Andrew. *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetic, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*. Stanford, CA, Stanford UP: 1993. Print.
- Hill, Lena. "The Visual Art of *Invisible Man*: Ellison's Portrait of Blackness." *American Literature*. 81:4 (2009): 775-803. *Project Muse*. Web. 26 Apr. 2010.
- Hill, Robert A. "Making Noise: Marcus Garvey Dada, August 1922." *Picturing Us: African American Identity in Photography*, Deborah Willis ed. New York: The New Press, 1994, 181-98. Print.
- Hoffman, Nancy Y. "Technique in Demby's *The Catacombs*." *Studies in Black Literature* 2 (1971): 10-13. *Project Muse*. Web. 9 Sept. 2011.

Hom, Stephanie. "Consuming the View: Rome, Tourism, and the Topos of the Eternal City." *Annali d'Italianistica*. 28 (2010). 94-116. Print.

Huyssen, Andreas. *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1986. Print.

Iaccio, Pasquale, ed. *Antologia di Cinema e Storia. Riflessioni, testimonianze, interpretazioni*. Napoli: Liguori, 2011. Print.

Indiana, Gary. "A Million Little Thesis." *Bookforum*. Summer 2006. *Bookforum.com*. Web. 9 Dec. 2011.

*Inside Buffalo*. Dir. Fred Kujo Kuworno. Fkk filmz. 2009. DVD.

Izzo, Carlo, ed. *Poesia americana contemporanea e poesia negra*. Milano: Guanda, 1949. Print.

Jackson, Lawrence. *The Indignant Generation. A Narrative History of African American Writers and Critics, 1934-1960*. Princeton UP: Princeton, NJ, 2010. Print.

---. *Ralph Ellison. Emergence of a Genius*. Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 2007. Print.

Jacobs, Karen. *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001. Print.

James, C. L. R. *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, rev. New York, Vintage Books, 1989. Print.

Kalaidjian, Walter. *American Culture Between the War: Revisionary Modernism and Postmodern Critique*. New York: Columbia UP, 1993. Print.

Kaplan, Amy and Donald E. Pease, eds. *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993. Print.

Kazin, Alfred. "From an Italian Journal." *The Inmost Leaf: A Selection of Essays*.

- Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974. 174-83. Print.
- Kelley, Robin D. G. *Race Rebels. Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. Toronto, New York, Macmillian, 1994. Print.
- Khouma, Pap. *Io, venditori di elefanti*. 1990. Ed. Oreste Pivetta. Milano: Garzanti, 2011. Print.
- Kolocotroni, Vassiliki, Jane Goldman, and Olga Taxidou, eds. *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1998. Print.
- Koselleck, Reinhart. *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*. Trans. and introd. Keith Tribe. New York: Columbia UP, 2004. Print.
- Labanca, Nicola. *Oltremare. Storia dell'espansione coloniale italiana*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2007. Print.
- Lee, Christopher J., ed. *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives*. Columbus, OH: Ohio UP, 2010. Print.
- Lemke, Sieglinde. *Primitivist Modernism. Black Culture and The Origins of Transatlantic Modernism*. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 1998. Print.
- Longanesi, Leo. *In piedi e seduti: 1919-1943*. Milano: Longanesi & C., 1948. Print.
- The Longest Day*. Dir. Ken Annakin. Twentieth-Century Fox, 1962. DVD.
- Luti, Giorgio, Caterina, Verbaro. *Dalla Neorealismo alla Neoavanguardia: Il dibattito letterario in Italia nel tempo della modernizzazione, 1945-1969*. Roma: Le lettere, 1995. Print.
- Lyon, Janet. *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1999. Print.
- Liotard, Jean-François. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Trans. George Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1988. Print.

---. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. 1979. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1984. Print.

Maher, Vanessa. "Immigration and Social Identities." *Italian Cultural Studies: An Introduction*. Eds. David Forgacs and Robert Lumley. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1996. 160–77. Print.

Malaparte, Curzio. *Kaputt*. Firenze: Vallecchi, 1964. Print.

---. *La pelle: storia e racconto*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Roma: Aria d'Italia, 1950. Print.

---. *Tecnica del colpo di stato*. 1931. Milano: Bompiani, 1948. Print.

---. *The Skin*. Trans. David Moore. New York: New American Library, 1952. Print.

---. *Viaggio in Etiopia e altri scritti africani*. Firenze: Vallecchi, 2006. Print.

---. *Viva Caporetto! La rivolta dei santi maledetti*. Milano: Mondadori, 1981. Print.

Malraux, André. *The Psychology of Art: Museum without Walls*. New York: Pantheon, 1954. Print.

*Mamma Roma*. Dir. Pier Paolo Pasolini. Arco Film, 1962. VHS.

Manning, Marable, Vanessa, Agard-Jones. *Transnational Blackness. Navigating the Global Color Line*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. Print.

Manning, Patrick. *African Diaspora: A History through Culture*. New York: Columbia UP, 2009. Print.

Mao, Douglas, and Rebecca Walkowitz. *Bad Modernisms*. Durham: Duke UP, 2006. Print.

Marchand, Jean-José. "Enquête sur la culture noire." *Preuves. Cahiers mensuels du Congrès pour la liberté de la culture* 87 (1958): 33-43. Print.

Margolies, Edward. "The Expatriate as Novelist: William Demby." *Native Sons: A*



*Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Black American Authors*. Philadelphia:

Lippincott, 1968. 173-89. Print.

Mariani, Andrea. "The Catacombs di William Demby: dal cubismo all'espressionismo astratto." *Letterature d'America* 15:60 (1995): 81-106. Print.

Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso. *Africa generatrice e ispiratrice di arti e poesia*. Roma:

Accademia d'Italia, 1938. Print.

---. *Filippo Tommaso Marinetti: Critical Writings*. Trans. Günter Berghaus. New ed. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2008. Print.

---. "Il negro. Consigli di vita a una signora scettica." 1922. *Novelle con le labbra tinte: Simultaneità e programmi di vita con varianti a scelta*. Milano: Mondadori, 1930. 183-95. Print.

---. "Il patriottismo futurista." In *Teoria e invenzione futurista*. 368-76.

---. *Il tamburo di fuoco. Dramma africano di calore, colore, rumore e odore*. 1922. Web. 15 October 2009. <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/34735/34735-h/34735-h.htm>>.

---. "La democrazia futurista." *Teoria e invenzione futurista* 409-26.

---. *Mafarka il futurista. Romanzo Africano*. Milano: Mondadori, 1993. Print.

---. *Mafarka le futuriste. Un Roman Africaine*. Paris: Sansot, 1909. Print.

---. "Manifesto of Futurism." In *Critical Writings*, 2008. 11-13.

---. "O'Neill futurista americano." *Filippo Tommaso Marinetti Papers*. Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library. New Haven, CT.

---. *Teoria e invenzione futurista*. Ed. Luciano De Maria. Milano: Mondadori, 1968. Print.

- Marrone, Gaetana. "Il mito di Babele in *La pelle* di Curzio Malaparte: *Pathos*, veggenza, e l'invenzione nel racconto cinematografico." *Rivista di studi italiani* 19:2 (2001): 219-32. Print.
- Martelli, Luigi. *Invito alla lettura di Luigi Malaparte*. Milano: Mursia, 1977. Print.
- Martin, Tony. Introduction. *Message to the People: The Course of African Philosophy*. By Marcus Garvey. Dover, MA: Majority Press, 1986. Print.
- Masoni, Tullio. "Miracolo a Sant'Anna di Spike Lee." *Cineforum* 479. Nov. 2008. Web. 3 Apr. 2010.
- Matteo, Sante, ed. *ItaliAfrica: Bridging Continents and Cultures*. Stony Brook, NY: Forum Italicum, 2001. Print.
- McBride, James. *Buffalo Soldiers*. London: Hodder, 2002. Print.
- McKay, Claude. *Banjo. A Story without A Plot*. 1929. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1970. Print.
- Mikkonen, Kai. "Artificial Africa in the European Avant Garde. Marinetti and Tzara." *Europa! Europa?: The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*. Eds. Bru, Sascha, Jan Baetens, Benedikt Hjärtarson, Peter Nicholls, Tania Ørum, and Hubert Berg. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009. 391-407. Print.
- Miracle at St. Anna*. Dir. Spike Lee. 40 Acres and a Mule, 2008. DVD.
- Moe, Nelson. *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture And the Southern Question*. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2006. Print.
- Mondaini, Gennaro. *La questione dei negri nella storia e nella società nord-americana*. Torino: Fratelli Bocca, 1898. Print.
- Moroni, Mario and Luca Somigli, eds. *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture Between*

- Decadentism and Avant-Garde*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004. Print.
- Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Random House, 1992. Print.
- Mudimbe, V. Y. *The Idea of Africa*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1994. Print.
- Nielsen, Aldon Lynn. "The Future of an Allusion: The Color of Modernity."
- Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*. Doyle and Winkiel 17-30. Print.
- North, Michael. *Camera Works. Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word*. Oxford, New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.
- O'Brien, John. *Interviews with Black Writers*. New York: Liveright, 1973. Print.
- Paisà*. Dir. Roberto Rossellini. OFI, 1948. VHS.
- Panofsky, Erwin. *Meaning in Visual Art*. New York: Doubleday, 1957. Print.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *Appunti per un'Orestiade Africana*. Eds. Walter Siti and Franco Zabagli, eds. *Per il cinema*. Milano: Mondadori, 2001. 989-1006. Print.
- . *Appunti per un'orestiade africana* 1975. Dir. P.P. Pasolini. BMG Video, 1995. DVD.
- . "La libertà stilistica." *Saggi*. Milano Mondadori, 1989. Print.
- . "Picasso." *Passione e ideologia*. Milano: Garzanti, 1960. Print.
- . "La resistenza negra." Intro. Ed. Mario De Andrade. *Letteratura Negra*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1961. XV-XXIV. Print.
- . "Viaggio in India." *Per il cinema* 1009-24. Print.
- La Pelle*. Dir. Liliana Cavani. Opera Film Produzione. 1981. DVD.
- Picchione, John. *The New Avant-Garde in Italy: Theoretical Debate and Poetic Practices*. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2004. Print.
- Piccioni, Leone. *Letteratura dei negri d'America*. Milano: Academia, 1949. Print.

- Pinkus, Karen. *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising Under Fascism*. Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 1995. Print.
- Portelli, Alessandro. "The Problem of the Color Blind: Notes on the Discourse of Race in Italy." In *CrossRoutes: The Meanings of "Race" for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Eds. Paola Boi and Sabine Broeck. Münster: Lit Verlag, 2003. 29–40. Print.
- Posnock, Ross, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2005.
- . "Ralph Ellison, Hannah Arendt and the Meaning of Politics." *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison* 212–3.
- Procacci, Gianni. *Il socialismo internazionale e la Guerra d'Etiopia*. Roma: Editori Riuniti, 1978. Print.
- Ramazani, Jahan. "A Transnational Poetics." *American Literary History* 18:2 (2006): 332–59. *Project Muse*. Web. 4 Nov. 2009.
- Rampersad, Arnold. *Ralph Ellison: A Biography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2007. Print.
- Rankine, Patrice D. *Ulysses in Black: Ralph Ellison, Classicism, and African American Literature*. Madison, WI: U of Wisconsin P, 2006. Print.
- Readings, Bill. *Introducing Lyotard: Arts and Politics*. New York: Routledge, 1991. Print.
- Ribeiro Sanches, Manuela, Fernando Clara, Joao Ferreira Duarte, Leonor Pires Martins, eds. *Europe in Black and White. Immigration, Race, and Identity in the 'Old Continent'*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Press, 2011. Print.
- Rickey, Carrey. "Black GI's in WWII Miracle." *The Philadelphia Inquirer* 28 Sept. 2008.

Web. 5 Jul. 2009.

Rimondi, Giorgio. *La scrittura sincopata: jazz e letteratura nel Novecento italiano*.

Milano: Mondadori, 1999. Print.

Roach, Joseph R. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York:

Columbia UP, 1996. Print.

Robinson, Cedric J. *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel

Hill, NC: U of North Carolina P, 2000. Print.

Rohdie, Sam. *The Passion of Pier Paolo Pasolini*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1995.

Print.

*Rome, Open City*. Dir. Roberto Rossellini. Cinecittà, 1945. VHS.

Rowe, John C. *Literary Culture and US Imperialism: From the Revolution to World War*

*II*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.

Rowell Charles H. and Brent Hayes Edwards. "An Interview with Brent Hayes

Edwards." *Callaloo* 22.4 (1999): 784-97. *Project Muse*. Web. 4 Feb. 2008.

Said, Edward W. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage, 1994. Print.

Sanches Manuela R., Fernando Clara, Joao Ferreira Duarte, Leonor Pires Martins, eds.

*Europe in Black and White. Immigration, Race, and Identity in the 'Old*

*Continent'*. Bristol, UK: Intellect Press, 2011. Print.

Sartini Blum, Cinzia. "Incorporating the Exotic: From Futurist Excess to Postmodern

Impasse." *A Place in the Sun: Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-*

*Unification to the Present*. Ed. Patrizia Palumbo. Berkeley, CA: U of California

P, 2003. 138-62. Print.

---. *The Other Modernism. F. T. Marinetti's Futurist Fiction of Power*. Berkeley, CA: U

of California P, 1996. Print.

Savinio, Alberto. "Cantare come i negri rimedio alla nevrastenia." *Opere* 1001-14. Print.

---. *Opere. Scritti dispersi. Tra guerra e dopoguerra (1943-1952)*. Ed. Leonardo Sciascia.

Milano: Bompiani, 1989.

---. "Pianista negro." *Opere*. 1016-18. Print.

Sbacchi, Alberto. *Ethiopia Under Mussolini. Fascism and the Colonial Experience*.

London: Zed Books Ltd., 1985. Print.

Schechner, Richard. *Between Theater and Anthropology*. Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania

P, 1996. Print.

Schleifer, Ronald. *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science and Culture, 1880-1930*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2004. Print.

Schuyler, George. *Black Empire*. Ed. Robert Hill and Kent Rasmussen. Ann Arbor, MI:

Northeastern UP, 1991. Print.

---. *Black No More. Being an Account of the Strange and Wonderful Workings of Science in the Land of the Free, A.D. 1933-1940*. Ann Arbor, MI: Northeastern UP, 1989.

Print.

---. *Revolt in Ethiopia: A Tale of Insurrection Against Italian Imperialism*. Robert Hill ed.

Ann Arbor, MI: Northeastern UP, 1994. Print.

Schwartz, David. *Pasolini Requiem*. Firenze: Mursia, 1996. Print.

Shryock, Andrew, and Daniel Lord Smail, eds. *Deep History. The Architecture of Past and Present*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: U of California P, 2011. Print.

Singh, Nikhil Pal. *Black Is A Country. Race and the Unfinished Struggle for Democracy*.

Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2004. Print.

- Spackman, Barbara. *Mafarka and Son: Marinetti's Homophobic Economics*.  
*Modernism/modernity*. 1:3 (1994): 89-107. *Project Muse*. Web. 26 April 2008.
- Spencer, Robyn. "Transnational Blackness." *From Toussaint to Tupac. The Black International Since the Age of Revolution*. Eds. Michael Oliver West, William G. Martin, Fanon Che Wilkins. Durham, NC: U of North Carolina P, 2009. 215-31. Print.
- Steimatsky, Noa. *Italian Locations. Reinhabiting the Past in Postwar Cinema*.  
 Minneapolis, MN: U of Minnesota P, 2008. Print.
- Stein, Gertrude. "Composition as Explanation." Ed. Ulla E. Dydo. *A Stein Reader*.  
 Evanston, Illinois: NorthWestern UP, 1993. 493-503. Print.
- Stephens, Michelle A. *Black Empire: The Masculine Global Imaginary of Caribbean Intellectuals in the United States, 1914–1962*. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2008. Print.
- Stewart-Steinberg, Suzanne. *The Pinocchio Effect. On Making Italians, 1860-1920*.  
 Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2009. Print.
- Sweeney, Carole. *From Fetish to Subject: Race, Modernism, and Primitivism, 1919-1935*. Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2004. Print.
- Taketani, Etsuko. "Colored Empires in the 1930s: Black Internationalism, the US Black Press and George Samuel Schuyler." *American Literature* 82:1 (2010): 121-49. *JSTOR*. Web. 9 Jan. 2011.
- Thompson, Mark C. *Black Fascisms: African American Literature and Culture between the Wars*. Charlottesville, VA: U of Virginia P, 2007. Print.
- Tölölyan, Khachig. "The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies." *The Diaspora*

*Review* 27:3 (2007): 647-55. Print.

Tomasello, Giovanna. *La letteratura coloniale italiana dalle avanguardie al fascismo*.

Palermo: Sellerio, 1984. Print.

Torgovnick, Marianna. *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*. Chicago, IL: U of Chicago P, 1990. Print.

Torriglia, Anna M. *L'Africa tra mito e realtà. Storia della letteratura coloniale italiana*.

Palermo: Sellerio, 2004. Print.

---. *Broken Time, Fragmented Space: A Cultural Map for Postwar Italy*.

Toronto: U of Toronto P, 2002. Print.

Trachtenberg, Alan. *Reading American Photographs: Images as History. Mathew Brady to Walker Evans*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1989. Print.

Von Eschen, Penny M. *Race against Empire: Black Americans and Anticolonialism, 1937-1957*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1997. Print.

Vico, Giambattista. *La scienza nuova*. 1725. Milano: Bompiani, 2009. Print.

Walters, Wendy W. *At Home in Diaspora: Black International Writing*. Minneapolis, IL: U of Minnesota P, 2005. Print.

Waugh, Patricia. *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*.

London: Methuen & Co., 1984. Print.

White, Hayden V. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore, John Hopkins UP, 1990. Print.

---. Introduction. *The Practice of Conceptual History*. Reinhart Koselleck. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2002. Print.

---. *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore:



Johns Hopkins UP, 1973. Print.

White, John J. *Literary Futurism: Aspects of the First Avant-Garde*. New York: Oxford UP, 1990. Print.

*The Wild Eye*. Dir. Paolo Cavara. Filmscript by William Demby, Tonyno Guerra, Alberto Moravia. 1962. VHS.

Williams, Daniel G. “‘If We Only Had Some of What They Have’: Ralph Ellison in Wales.” *Comparative American Studies: An International Journal* 4:1 (2006): 25-48. *Project Muse*. Web. 19 Apr. 2011.

Williams, Louise B. *Modernism and the Ideology of History*. Cambridge UK: Cambridge UP, 2002. Print.

Williams, Raymond. *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*. London: Verso, 1989. Print.

Wilson, Ivy G. *Callaloo and the Cultures and Letters of the Black Diaspora: The Second of Four Special Thirtieth Anniversary Issues*. *Callaloo* 30:2 (2007). *Project Muse*. Web. 30 Sept. 2011.

Wilson, Rita. “(Re)Creating Reality. Marinetti and Africa. *Studi d’Italianistica dell’Africa Australe/Italian Studies in Southern Africa*. 6:1 (1993): 21-36. Print.

Wong, Aliza. *Race and the Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861-1911. Meridionalism, Empire, and Diaspora*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. Print.

Wright, John S. “Ellison’s Experimental Attitude and the Technologies of Illumination.” *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Ellison* 157–71. Print.

**Vita**  
**Sara Marzioli**

**Education**

PhD *Comparative Literature*. The Pennsylvania State University, May 2013.

MA *Comparative Literature*. The Pennsylvania State University, 2007.

**Professional Experience:** The Pennsylvania State University

Instructor, CMLIT 101: Race, Gender and Identity in World Literature. Fall 2012.

Instructor, CMLIT 153: International Cultures: Literature and Film. Fall 2012.

Graduate Assistant, The Center For Global Studies. Fall 2011-Spring 2012.

Teaching Assistant, CMLIT 101: Human Rights and Literature. Fall 2010.

Instructor, CMLIT 105: The Development of Literary Humor. Summer 2009 and 2010.

Instructor, ENG 015: Rhetoric and Composition. Fall 2008-Spring 2009.

Instructor, First, Second, Third Semester Italian Language. Summer 2006-Spring 2008.

**Publications**

“The Subterranean Spaces of History between Harlem and Rome.” *African American Review* (forthcoming Spring 2014).

“Ralph Ellison’s Exceptional Diaspora: The View From Rome.” *Atlantic Studies* 9.4 (December 2012): 447-66.

**Selected Conference Presentations**

“Ralph Ellison’s Use of Photography as Social Criticism in Harlem and Rome.”

Special Session on Ralph Ellison and the Civil Rights Movement.

Modern Language Association, Seattle, January 2012.

“The Unspoken History of Black Expatriates in Rome. The Case of William Demby.” Modernist Studies Association, Montreal, Canada, November 2009.

“Dynamics of Stillness: Historical and Ontological Inquiries in William Demby’s *The Catacombs*.” American Comparative Literature Association, Long Beach, California, April 2008.

**Grants and Awards**

Alumni Dissertation Award. Pennsylvania State University, Spring 2013.

Samuel Bayard Award for Outstanding Graduate Student Achievement in Comparative Literature. Pennsylvania State University, Spring 2012.

Graduate Research Grant, Center for American Literary Studies. Pennsylvania State University Spring 2012.

Transatlantic Summer Institute Fellow, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN. July 2011.

Research Grant. Africana Research Center. Pennsylvania State University, Spring 2008 and Fall 2010.

Dissertation Enhancement Award. Alumni Association. Pennsylvania State University, Summer 2009.

Fulbright Fellowship. Italian-American Commission. 2005-2006.