

Rereading Italian Travellers to Africa: Precursors, Identities and Interracial Relations in Narratives of Italian Colonialism

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Abstract: This essay considers a number of travellers' writings about Africa which are reread to construct and deconstruct Italian colonial identity. It focuses on Cesare Cesari's *Viaggi africani di Pellegrino Matteucci* (1932), which deems Matteucci a precursor of Fascist colonialism and contributor to Fascist "colonial science". The essay then moves on to explore the more recent rereading by Angelo Del Boca and Igiaba Scego of respectively Indro Montanelli's *XX Battaglione Eritreo* (1936) and Errico Emanuelli's *Settimana nera* (1961). By bringing together and rereading these texts, the essay maps the transformations of Italianness from colonial to postcolonial times and reveals how colonial identity relied on a series of gender, racial and sexual tropes of exploration and conquest.

Keywords: Africa, colonial identity, race, sex, gender

1. Introduction

In the chapter entitled "Italian Travel Writing" of the *Cambridge Companion to the History of Travel Writing*, Nathalie C. Hester maps out the vast production of this genre by travellers from the Italian peninsula, in a trajectory leading from the texts of "medieval merchants" to "autobiographical texts by contemporary migrants" (Hester 2019, 206). I believe this trajectory to be a productive one, especially given the focus of this volume, as it points to insightful links in the production, transmission and *rereading* of travel writing associated with the Italian peninsula across the ages, and in the post-unification period in particular. Hester claims that this trajectory consists of three distinct phases, albeit with some continuity between them: the early modern stage, the post-unification stage and the contemporary stage. She finds continuity in particular in "the conditions of production and reception of Italian travel writing, currents that point less to philosophical or political consideration than to a notion 'capable of representing complex repertoires of allegiance, identity, and interest'" (206). Hester refers to the first stage as the cosmopolitan-humanist stage and includes writers from the pre-unification city-states, republics, duchies and kingdoms of the Italian peninsula working for their local courts or other European powers, such as Marco Polo, Odorico da Pordenone and Christopher

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Fabrizio De Donno, *Rereading Italian Travellers to Africa: Precursors, Identities and Interracial Relations in Narratives of Italian Colonialism*, © Author(s), CC BY 4.0, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-579-0.05, in Beatrice Falducci, Emanuele Giusti, Davide Trentacoste (edited by), *Rereading Travellers to the East. Shaping Identities and Building the Nation in Post-unification Italy*, pp. 65-82, 2022, published by Firenze University Press, ISBN 978-88-5518-579-0, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-579-0

Columbus. The cosmopolitanism of these authors, Hester goes on to say, is identifiable in “the duration and breadth of [their] itineraries and in the multi-lingual nature of their texts’ transmission” (206). The humanist dimension, on the other hand, derives from the fact that early modern travel writers borrowed from the literary works of authors such as Dante, but especially Petrarch and Boccaccio, as they all “foreground travel and movement in their works, from the otherworldly allegorical voyage of the *Divine Comedy*, through the spiritual and geographical restlessness in Petrarch’s poetry and letters, to the vivid tales of Mediterranean mobility in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*” (208).¹ As Italian humanism was based on the revival of classical antiquity, and it was “conceived as exportable and universally applicable” (208), Hester finds an element of cosmopolitanism here too, even though she does not address its Eurocentrism. The next stage identified by Hester is the post-unification period—the real focus of this essay and volume—when “attention to travel was part of the impulse to create a narrative of Italian identity and belonging” (216), including an Italian colonial identity. She mentions the growth in the production of travel texts, as well as biographies and histories of travellers from the Italian peninsula across the ages, who are *reread*—in essence, appropriated and “Italianized”—through the lenses of national identity and belonging, as well as colonial expansionism and foreign policy. As part of the trend of rereading earlier travellers, Hester mentions works such as Pietro Amat di San Filippo’s *Biografia dei viaggiatori italiani* (1881), before moving to the Fascist period with the 18-volume series entitled *Viaggi e scoperte di navigatori ed esploratori italiani*, published by Alpes Publishing between 1928 and 1932. Interestingly, however, Hester tells us that cosmopolitanism returns to Italian travel writing in the last phase, especially through migrant autobiographical writings such as Salah Methnani and Mario Fortunato’s *Immigrato* (1990), or the work of second-generation Italian-Somali writer Igiaba Scego who in her *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010) talks about “her hybrid cultural and linguistic identities” as well as “Italy’s inability to acknowledge its colonial past” (220). This is the phase, in short, “when travel writing offers new ways of understanding Italianness as plurilingual, pluricultural and cosmopolitan” (220).

The distinctions as well as the claims of continuity in this trajectory are particularly useful as they invite reflections on how identitarian notions of Italianness (as well as Europeanness and Westernness) and cosmopolitanism alter across the different stages. Even more importantly, they point to how identities, allegiances and interests are transformed by the geopolitical dynamics of the changing times, which is a crucial element to consider in the rereading process. What Hester’s discussion of cosmopolitanism does not account for, however, is the long genealogy of Eurocentrism in early modern and modern European

¹ As Mary Watt (2017, 34–46) has shown, many travellers to the New World, and in particular Columbus, appropriated Dante’s imagery of the netherworld to describe the topography and anthropology of the Caribbean.

travel writing.² The question that arises here is: how do we approach the identity politics of cosmopolitanism throughout the three stages once we recognize that the notion of “cosmopolitanism” varies dramatically depending on whether the objective is self-aggrandizement (through essentialism) or genuine pluralism?

Columbus may well have been a cosmopolitan in that he wrote in Spanish and not Italian, and worked for imperial Spain rather than the Republic of Genoa. However, at the same time he wrote about the Caribbean in Eurocentric and essentializing ways (borrowing from the imagery of Dante’s hell to construct a Caribbean otherness) that inspired the later production of Eurocentric (and racist) travel writings by other European nations, including Britain and France, and later on, post-unification Italy. Is it not striking, for instance, that in the aftermath of the 2020 Black Lives Matters campaigns the statues of travellers like Columbus were attacked to condemn western identity and racism against blacks as a legacy of European colonialism? And so we will see below how Columbus and other early modern explorers from the Italian peninsula were appropriated and Italianized in post-unification narratives of colonial explorations so as to turn them into the precursors of modern Italian colonial exploration.

Moreover, the rereading of earlier travellers, which often went as far back as the Roman times, also served the purpose of establishing traditions and continuity within “Italian” history between the ancient, medieval and early modern (city-) states of the Italian peninsula, and post-unification Italy. This “Italian” history was also used as a means to cultivate Italianness within modern Europeaness by emphasizing the central role of these “Italian” travellers as constitutive symbols of European colonial identity. The legacies of these earlier travellers were thus used in Italian post-unification narratives of colonial explorations to place the newly formed nation at the heart of European colonialism once more. Writing genealogies and traditions of “Italian” travellers thus became a powerful tool of colonial identity-building for the new nation as it sought a new place on the European and world stage. It is a process that would intensify under Fascism, with what has been called the mystique of the “precursors of fascist imperialism” (Chelati Dirar 1996, 29).

As I engage with Hester’s overall trajectory, and focus on the series *Viaggi e scoperte di navigatori ed esploratori italiani*, I attempt to investigate the construction of these genealogies of exploration by placing the rereading of earlier travellers in the context of Fascist “*scienza coloniale*”.³ I look at the last of the 18

² Kwame Anthony Appiah provides an example of Eurocentric and essentializing cosmopolitanism as he discusses British Orientalist and explorer Sir Richard F. Burton’s interest in non-European peoples, languages and cultures. Appiah attributes this interest to Burton’s self-aggrandizement (and British imperialism) rather than cultural pluralism *per se* (Appiah 2007, 18–26). For insightful discussions of cosmopolitanism, see also Braidotti, Hanafin, and Blaagaard (2013).

³ The term “colonial science” was coined by Nicola Vacchelli (1928) to refer to an interdisciplinary body of works aiming to produce colonial knowledge. As will be seen below, in his discussion of geography as a new discipline, he stresses its crucial role and function in the colonial epistemological field. See also Atkinson (2005) below for further details on the development of this body of colonial science and geography’s central role in it.

volumes of the series—army general Cesare Cesari’s *Viaggi africani di Pellegrino Matteucci* (1932)—and explore how Matteucci was not only turned into a heroic precursor of Fascist colonialism, but also situated in the great tradition of Italian travellers and explorers across the ages such as Columbus and Polo. I then place this and other rereadings of Italian travellers to Africa by Cesari in dialogue with the more recent postcolonial rereading of Indro Montanelli’s *XX Battaglione eritreo* (1936) and Enrico Emanuelli’s novel *Settimana nera* (1961) by Angelo del Boca and Igiaba Scego respectively, in which they address the amnesia of Italian colonial history and identity. I am interested in the transformations of Italian colonial consciousness from construction and celebration to postcolonial amnesia and shame: if Fascism reread travellers to appropriate and sacralize their enterprises and celebrate colonial identity, Del Boca and Scego’s present-day, genuinely pluralist rereading of colonial travellers— as per Hester’s last phase in her trajectory—can help us reconfigure how Italian colonial identity was constructed and existed in theory and practice, especially through racial, gender and sexual metaphors. We can also understand how it was then forgotten and replaced by the myth of “*Italiani brava gente*” (Italians [are] good people), until it resurfaced in the public consciousness, especially in contemporary expressions of racism in Italy.

2. Fascist genealogies of “Italian” exploration: *Viaggi e scoperte di navigatori ed esploratori italiani*

Viaggi e scoperte di navigatori ed esploratori italiani, populated with some of the most important exploratory efforts of figures related to the Italian peninsula, including Ludovico De Varthema, Antonio Pigafetta, Marco Polo, Christopher Columbus, Niccolò de’ Conti and Odorico da Pordenone, was one of the largest series of its kind to be published in Fascist Italy. The general editor of the series, Rinaldo Caddeo, was also author and editor of the first volume, which clarified the main purpose of the series. The aim was to emphasize the “primacy” of “Italian” explorers—mainly explorers from the medieval republics of the Italian peninsula, and especially those of Genoa and Venice—in passing their pioneering skills in the maritime, geographical and commercial sciences to the Portuguese, Spanish, French and British explorers, thereby shaping European colonialism (Caddeo 1928). Caddeo’s production of works on Italian travellers was actually a momentary digression from his greater interest in the history of the Risorgimento—the Italian independence movement—the subject of his most original work, with texts such as *Uomini, vicende e tempi* (1931) and *Storia e critica* (1934). A nationalist of Mazzinian convictions and interventionist in World War I who contributed to the development of the idea of irredentism, Caddeo may have been put under pressure to edit this series by the regime, owing to the Fascist intensification of the “Italianization” of earlier explorers from the Italian peninsula. Indeed, Caddeo also edited the famous (and controversial) volume in the series by Fernando Columbus, Christopher’s son, *Le historie della vita e dei fatti di Cristoforo Colombo*, first published in 1571, and already

reissued several times before Caddeo's version (1930). In this edition, Caddeo spells out that the many critiques of the previous editions by American and other European scholars, in particular concerning Columbus's Italianness, were just out of "envy". As such, Caddeo sets out to restore the denied "authenticity" of the volume by Columbus' son, reclaiming "Italian" ownership of Columbus's achievements and visions, and using them to give impulse to the Fascist colonial campaigns. He writes: "*Colombo è nostro: l'evento che iniziò l'era moderna e diede una nuova fisionomia al mondo, è nostro*" (Caddeo 1930, lxvii–lxviii). It was not a note of exaggerated national pride, he goes on to claim, but defence of the historical truth from "foreign attacks". It is Fascist Italy, Caddeo concludes, that must make Columbus's work its own in its attempt to claim "il posto che le compete sotto il sole" (lxviii).⁴ Caddeo's claims – which placed the Italian city-states and their pioneering explorers at the root and heart of modern European imperialism, and were a way to make it up for the fact that post-unification and Fascist Italy were in actual fact *late participants* in the process – encapsulate the whole objective of the series: to provide new impulse to Fascism's late-1920s' resumption of Italian colonial campaigns and international relations. The emphasis here is not only on the appropriation of Columbus' enterprise as a way of legitimizing the Italian and Fascist "right" to imperialism, but also on stressing that the age when "Italian" explorers worked for "foreign" powers (what Hester calls the cosmopolitan age) was now over. Given that, for the greater part, the series intended to affirm the relationship between travel, exploration and colonialism, and given that Italian colonialism developed primarily in East Africa, I focus on Cesari's rereading of Pellegrino Matteucci as the greatest of the Italian travellers to Africa, placing him in the tradition of Columbus and other early modern and modern travellers from the Italian pre-unification states.

3. From Matteucci to Cesari's Matteucci: geography, heroism and martyrdom

As one of the European pioneers in the exploration of the unknown parts of Africa in the 1870s and 1880s—the period that then became known as the "heroic" age of African exploration—Matteucci was an appealing symbol. Born in Ravenna in 1850, after dropping out of medicine, Matteucci studied Arabic, ethnography and the natural sciences on his own accord. He soon developed an interest in geographical exploration, and in Africa in particular. In 1875, he published a booklet entitled *La spedizione italiana all'Africa equatoriale* in order to persuade the newly established *Società Geografica Italiana* (hereafter SGI) to organize an expedition to equatorial Africa. In 1879, he embarked on his first expedition to Sudan and the kingdom of Gallas (part of contemporary Ethiopia) with Romolo Gessi, publishing a book entitled *Sudan e Gallas* about the experience (1879). Matteucci then participated in another expedition to Ethio-

⁴ "*Columbus is ours: the event which began the modern era and gave a new physiognomy to the world is ours [...] its due place in the sun*" (italics original).

pia organized by the *Società d'Esplorazione Commerciale* in Africa, where he was asked to evaluate the potential for Italian commercial relations with Ethiopia. As a result of this expedition, he wrote *In Abissinia: Viaggio* (1880), in which he famously warned the Italian government that Ethiopia was not a suitable place for commercial relations with Italy, and therefore was not suitable for Italian colonialism (Matteucci 1880, 281).⁵ What made Matteucci famous worldwide, however, was his third expedition, in which he crossed Africa from the Red Sea to the Niger Delta together with Navy lieutenant Angelo Maria Massari, at the end of which he caught malaria and returned to Europe on an English ship en route from West Africa to England. He died in London in 1881. Matteucci wrote little about this last journey, which was tentatively reconstructed posthumously by another explorer, Giuseppe Dalla Vedova (1885).

Matteucci and the development of the discipline of geography were certainly central to the early post-unification attempts to get the Italian colonial campaign under way. As David Atkinson has discussed, the aggressive imperialism of the period spanning the 1860s to the 1880s saw a dramatic increase in interest in geography, with about 80 geographical societies springing up in every part of Europe (Atkinson 2005, 17). The practice of scientific geography included the “practical construction of colonial territory”, as well as the transformation of abstract geographical imaginations into “legible, knowable places with their dimensions, topographies, and characteristics enshrined in cartography and scientific survey” (16). Indeed, due to colonialism taking centre stage in Mussolini’s policies from the late 1920s and early 1930s, Fascism made an even greater commitment to the interdisciplinary field of geography in the colonial context (20). The director of the *Istituto Geografico Militare*, Nicola Vacchelli, also spelt out how geography could make a contribution to the developing field of “*scienza coloniale*”, whose mission “entailed the collection, organization, and dissemination of all relevant knowledge about overseas territories to develop Italy’s colonial consciousness, reinforce the colonial domain, and enable effective governance” (Atkinson 2005, 20).⁶ Luigi Federzoni, president of the SGI and former leader of the *Associazione Nazionalista Italiana*, was then made minister of the colonies, thus strengthening the link between geography and colonial expansionism even further.

Like Federzoni, army general Cesari was part of this colonial science network and collaborated with the *Istituto Coloniale Fascista*. Like some of the oth-

⁵ This is the statement by Matteucci in Italian, which I paraphrased in English: “in Abissinia, non conviene illudersi, la ricchezza è in potenza e non in atto, e se noi Italiani cerchiamo di guadagnare la fortuna in una prima impresa, possiamo cambiare via, perchè questo in Abissinia non è possibile”.

⁶ Vacchelli himself wrote that this “colonial science” had to provide a profound and accurate knowledge of the geographical environments and the societies inhabiting them. In this sense, with the support of and in dialogue with disciplines such as botany, geology ethnography, anthropology, orientalism, and the political and economic sciences, geography would fulfil these criteria and provide the ultimate scientific basis for colonial and foreign policies (Vacchelli 1928, 159).

er volumes in the series, his rereading of Matteucci is an example of the attempt to revamp geography and construct a narrative (and a tradition) of “Italian” geographical and colonial exploration through the refashioning of past figures, symbols and identities—a narrative allegedly rooted in scientific rigour, and contributing to the wider objective of Fascist colonial science to persuade the Italians “to conceptualise themselves as an ‘imperial people’” (Atkinson 2005, 24). However, while the choice of Matteucci may have been related to the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the explorer’s death, there are two other reasons that made him particularly appealing to both Cesari and Federzoni: firstly, the idea of making a peculiarly Fascist celebration of a martyr of the *patria* who died for the “cause” of colonial exploration, as a precursor of Fascist colonialism, and a heroic symbol of explorational vigour; secondly, the need to urgently correct Matteucci’s conclusion about the lack of any potential for commercial relations with Ethiopia, when Mussolini was already planning its occupation for the foundation of his empire in East Africa.

Given the context of geographical colonial science in which Cesari’s rereading of Matteucci occurs, it is not surprising that the volume comes with a “preface” by Federzoni himself. Here Matteucci is celebrated with the typical liturgical and solemn language of Fascism which, as Emilio Gentile has famously shown, is often borrowed from Christian worship in order to sacralize political action (Gentile 1996). Matteucci thus becomes a heroic symbol of colonial exploration and an example of Fascist martyrology, rhetorically staging what Roger Griffin has termed the “palingenesis” of Fascism, or the national rebirth promised by Fascism, especially by exalting the suffering and sacrifices of the nation’s heroes (Griffin 1993). Matteucci is remembered alongside the heroic travellers of the “past”, including those that served foreign powers, with Fascism ensuring that from now on Italian colonial explorers would serve the Italian nation alone. Federzoni is the author of this identitarian rhetoric, stressing that Matteucci inaugurated a new chapter in the history of Italian exploration after the “loss” of the last of the Italian “grandi conquistatori per conto dello straniero”, Pietro Sarvognan di Brazzà, “creatore del Congo francese” (Federzoni in Cesari 1932, xi). Federzoni completes his construction of Matteucci’s “Fascist” identity by calling him a young hero, alluding to his tragic death and constructing the figure of the spiritual, heroic and patriotic martyr: he praises his “energie stimolatrici” and “supreme idealità umane” (Federzoni in Cesari 1932, xii),⁷ and compares him to other glorious patriotic heroes such as Goffredo Mameli or Ippolito Nievo who, like him, died “sul primo fiorire dell’ingegno e della fede”, making them “spiriti” imbued with “una più pura luce di poesia e di eroismo” (xix).⁸

⁷ “[...] great conquerors on behalf of foreigners [...] creator of the French Congo [...] stimulating energies [...] supreme human ideals”.

⁸ “[...] at the first appearance of their brilliance and faith [...] spirits [...] a purer poetic and heroic light”.

4. Matteucci's pious colonial exploration: race, gender, religion, and anti-slavery?

Fascism no doubt exploited the more spiritual aspects of Matteucci's work. In his own writings, Matteucci comes across as a patriotic explorer, with a strong enthusiasm for exploration, religion, science and the development of geography in Italy. His (nationalist) cosmopolitanism is ambiguous in that it aims to claim a primacy for Italy on the world stage through colonialism and international relations, but also through anti-slavery narratives. For instance, he begins his book *Sudan e Gallas* by exalting the role of the SGI in the new explorations of post-unification Italy, and compares his age (and himself) to the ages (and figures) of Polo and Columbus (Matteucci 1879, 1). Matteucci also praises the role of the Catholic missions in Africa, stressing their supremacy in relation to other missions, thus bringing together a set of primacies in travel, exploration and the missionaries themselves (14).

There is no doubt that Matteucci's work at large, and especially his most interesting travel diary, *In Abissinia*, is sophisticated ethnography. Matteucci calls himself a pseudo-geographer, but his prose is imbued with philological, anthropological, archaeological, cartographical, topographical and political references. There is curiosity in his wanting to define racial types, and above all, in condemning slavery, though every consideration he makes alludes to the civilization the indigenous people lack, and the potential role of Italy in bringing it to them, first through commercial relations, and then colonial conquest. It is therefore important to pause for a moment on the way in which race, colonial exploration and the issue of slavery are addressed in Matteucci's work. In *In Abissinia*, for instance, Matteucci writes relatively positively about the Ethiopians and claims that

In Africa non credo vi sia una razza più corretta di questa; sono Europei con tanto di guadagnato nella costituzione fisica, e con una diversità di colorito che offre tutte le gradazioni nella scala dei colori dal nero d'ebano al bronzo chiaro (Matteucci 1880, 10).⁹

The emphasis is, of course, on women. He explains that when they are maidens, "sono estremamente seducenti"; when they become women, "sono procaci"; and when they are old, "divengon venerande".¹⁰ Matteucci's Eurocentrism and patriarchy are relatively subtle here: he stresses that the only thing missing from these "voluptuous" women is "civilization", and it is Italy (and primarily Italian men) that will remedy this by bringing it to them, so that they will really "look beautiful, even if they are black" (Matteucci 1880, 10–11).¹¹

Here Matteucci is using gender, racial and sexual metaphors which were, of course, central to the discourse of European colonial exploration and conquest.

⁹ "I believe there is no better race than this in Africa; they are Europeans with a lot of advantages in their physical constitution, and with a variety of colouring that offers all the gradations from ebony black to light bronze."

¹⁰ "[...] they are exceedingly enticing [...] they are busty [...] they become venerable [...]".

¹¹ In the original, Matteucci uses (in italics) a Latin expression: "*Nigra sum sed formosa*".

As Clare Midgley (1998, 2) reminds us in relation to the British Empire, these metaphors were central “to the description of colonial exploration and conquest as the penetration of virgin lands”, as well as “to the femininized representations of colonised men”. More generally, gender was a signifier in “relationships of power” (2), while “masculine subjectivities” were imagined in relation to colonial explorers and soldier heroes. These dynamics are applicable to Italian colonial discourse too, which was broadly shaped on the model of Britain and France. Moreover, with particular regard to the question of gender, and the myth of the virgin land, Anne McClintock (1995) points out that in these patriarchal narratives, “to be virgin is to be empty of desire and void of sexual agency, passively awaiting the thrusting, male insemination of history, language and reason”. It is therefore not a surprise that, in colonial narratives, “the eroticizing of the ‘virgin’ space also affects territorial appropriation, for [...] white male patrimony is violently assured as the sexual and military insemination of an interior void” (30). One more reference to Columbus seems apt in this context as he himself wrote that the Earth was not round, but “shaped like a woman’s breast, with a protuberance upon its summit in the unmistakable shape of a nipple toward which he was slowly sailing” (21). Though common to the genre of travel writing across the early modern and modern periods, these sets of gender tropes and metaphors about travel, discovery and conquest betrayed not only male anxiety and longing for the female body, but also pointed to the same image of the female body “as marking the boundary of the cosmos and the limits of the known world, enclosing the ragged men, with their dreams of pepper and pearls, in her indefinite, oceanic body” (22). In short, as summed up by McClintock, “women are the earth that is to be discovered, entered, named, inseminated and, above all, owned” (31). Far from being limited to colonized women, this ownership also extended to colonized men as a result of their “femininization”. As will be seen, interracial relations often involved a sense of the colonizer’s ownership of the colonized (female and male).

In Cesari’s celebration, Matteucci’s use of gender and racial metaphors to address colonial power are given a more pious connotation. I am particularly interested in how race and abolitionist attitudes were instrumentalized by Fascism to put forward a rhetoric—not a reality—of anti-racist justice for Fascist colonialism and foreign policy (as opposed to the supposedly more racist British and French policies). I will then move on to compare this with some other accounts of interracial relations where racism and “unofficial slavery” are prominent.

Cesari’s Matteucci is presented as an adventurer, but also as a scholar and a man of deep religious feelings, whose work is sacralized as “un apostolato di scienza, fede e civiltà” (Cesari 1932, 6).¹² Cesari mentions the “redemptive” nature of Matteucci’s work in its concerns with racial issues and abolition, especially his study on the Akka and African races. This work, published in 1877,

¹² “un apostolato di scienza, fede e civiltà”.

was somehow employed by Fascism as a rhetorical tool pointing to the allegedly emancipatory nature of Italian colonialism:

In Pellegrino Matteucci furono tutte le doti di un giovane educato all'indagine scientifica, seria e rigorosa [...] [egli] sentì la nobiltà di una missione di redenzione, [aveva] un animo aperto a sentimenti elevatissimi di civiltà e di patriottismo; anche di patriottismo perchè mai perdetto di vista il sogno di un'Italia grande nella sua opera di colonizzazione, particolarmente in Africa. Per tali requisiti Matteucci non poteva sentirsi che un antischiavista convinto (Cesari 1932, 6).¹³

Matteucci did actually claim to be an anti-slavery campaigner, and he did place abolitionist campaigns at the heart of his narrative in his *La spedizione italiana all'Africa equatoriale* (1875), a short pamphlet addressed to the Marquis Orazio Antinori, secretary of the SGI. In this account, epistemology as well as religious and humanitarian concerns come together in the promise that colonialism would bring benefits to Africa through the production of knowledge, the fight against slavery and the introduction of Catholicism (Matteucci 1875, 5). Cesari, of course, is quick to exploit and amplify Matteucci's piousness, and thus writes that his was the voice of a visionary who could see what was "good" for both Africa and Italy (Cesari 1932, 9). It is on these "civilizational" and "emancipatory" objectives that Cesari based his rereading of Matteucci's journeys.

5. Matteucci's journeys and other journeys in Fascist colonial science and propaganda

Cesari's text is divided into three main accounts of the three journeys, which consist of quotations from publications and letters written by Matteucci, and Cesari's own (rather superficial) prose commentary. There is also an appendix with "documents", that is, mainly letters Matteucci wrote to institutional figures, friends, patrons, fellow travellers and family. I have already touched on some of the more significant elements of his commentary, but below are some of the most relevant points of Cesari's accounts.

Of the first journey, it is worth mentioning how Cesari praises the travellers' virtues, as both Matteucci and Gessi embarked on their expedition alone and with few resources, uncertain whether to admire more "il loro ardimento o la loro modestia" (Cesari 1932, 13).¹⁴ In Khartoum, for example, Matteucci is said to have produced some of the most vivid impressions of his journey relat-

¹³ "[...] an apostolate of science, faith and civilization [...] Pilgrim Matteucci embodied all the qualities of a young man educated in serious and rigorous scientific investigation [...] [He] felt the nobility of a mission of redemption and [had] a soul open to feelings of civilization and patriotism; patriotism because he never lost sight of the dream of a great Italy in its work of colonization, especially in Africa. As a result of his qualities, Matteucci could not but deem himself a convinced abolitionist."

¹⁴ "their passion or their modesty".

ing to his anti-slavery concerns and pious idea of colonialism, on one occasion witnessing—and perhaps even taking part in—the liberation of some slaves by cutting their chains (15).

In the narration of the second journey, Cesari makes reference to the “movimento espansionista italiano” (29),¹⁵ which he traces back to Matteucci and the early days of the SGI, and the enthusiasm and faith in his aspirations. Like many of the other texts in the series, however, his concern with Matteucci was also aimed at rectifying the general understanding of the lives and work of these travellers, as well as their findings, allegiances and identities. In Matteucci’s case, it was his view of Italian colonialism in Ethiopia that needed to be rectified. Cesari, like Federzoni, was interested in reviving this impulse in the present, especially in relation to Ethiopia, and so was keen to dismiss Matteucci’s warning against any commercial relations with the country. For this reason, Cesari claims that Matteucci’s *In Abissinia* is “un’opera di impressioni più che di realtà assoluta” (51).¹⁶ Apart from this exception, Cesari’s commentary conveys the enthusiasm of the expedition, and gives prestige to the figure of the Italian travellers coming from “l’Impero d’Italia” (even though the Italian Empire was only proclaimed four years later by Mussolini), claiming that they were treated with the utmost respect by the African kings, sultans and rulers, thus reinforcing a colonial identity for Italians via geography and exploration.

Of the third journey, except for the claim that Matteucci had been the first to have crossed Africa, most of the commentary gives accounts of routes, encounters with local kings and princes, and fellow European travellers. Cesari pauses once again on Matteucci’s reflections on areas with a potential for Italian colonization, as well as on how such potential could be fulfilled through various kinds of commercial and political relations with the Wadai Sultanate and the Bornu Empire (93). Here Cesari uses Matteucci’s journeys as a “handbook for exploration” in the renewed colonial climate of Fascism, proposing new itineraries of conquest and epistemological approaches and interracial attitudes towards Africans. In typically Fascist fashion, Cesari’s accounts of Matteucci’s journeys are at once celebratory, symbolic, spiritually invigorating, and most importantly, masculine and virile, even if pious (in relation to slavery). Cesari’s conclusive remarks stress that Fascism has finally achieved Matteucci’s dream of providing Italy with the “prestigio di grande potenza colonizzatrice”, thanks to its overseas possessions. The celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of his death was hence an opportunity to once again evoke liberal and Fascist Italy’s dream of colonial conquest, thus placing Matteucci’s name among Fascism’s colonial precursors and in the “Pantheon delle glorie nazionali” (136).¹⁷

After writing *Viaggi Africani*, together with manuals of colonial history on the origins of the Italian colonial possessions (Cesari 1937), Cesari went on to write

¹⁵ “Italian expansionist movement”.

¹⁶ “a work of impressions rather than of absolute reality”.

¹⁷ “prestige of a great colonial power [...] Pantheon of national glories”.

other genealogies of travellers to Africa that were broader in scope, but even more superficial in essence. For instance, in his *Gli italiani nella conoscenza dell’Africa* (1933), Cesari continued his work of documenting Italy’s “primacy” among European nations in the exploration of the continent across the ages, from ancient Rome to Fascist Italy. All these “Italian” travellers (Cesari provides hundreds of names) are praised for their discovery, knowledge, civilization, spirituality, conquest and, of course, for having made the *patria* great.¹⁸ However, in his *Orme d’Italia in Africa* (1938), Cesari contradicts what he had said in his previous work. Here he argues that the real pioneers of Fascist colonialism were those “Italian” scientists, missionaries and explorers that had travelled to Africa from 1820 to the present day, and that really paved the way to Italy’s domination of North and East Africa, culminating in the conquest of Ethiopia and the proclamation of the Italian Overseas Empire (Cesari 1938, 8).¹⁹ The rhetoric of this book is dominated by the trope of imperial Rome and its tradition of colonialism, which this time would also serve as an outlet for Italian emigration and, more importantly, to “liberare milioni di schiavi”²⁰ and bring civilization to barbaric Africa (171).

Having established how Fascism’s rereading of Matteucci’s (and others’) journeys contributed to the construction of a colonial identity by celebrating the heroism of the “Italian” colonial explorer and the implied gender, racial and sexual tropes, it is interesting to compare the anti-slavery slant used by Cesari in his rhetorical praise of Matteucci’s (and Fascism’s) colonial ethos to other propaganda texts published around the same period and more centred on interracial relations. From the early 1930s, and even more so from the implementation of the racial laws in the Fascist empire in 1937 up until 1941, there was a considerable growth in the body of propaganda materials about Fascist ideas on race and empire, which ranged from ethnography and colonial novels to travel writing, Orientalist scholarship, race theory, political pamphlets and imperial historiography (De Donno 2019, 295–323). Moreover, a great deal of Fascist propaganda also dealt with interracial relations and the promise of sexual adventure in the colonies so as to allure young Italian men to join ranks in Africa. Countless colonial novels depicted the life of Italian men in the colonies

¹⁸ The Roman explorers and geographers include Aelius Gallus, Gaius Suetonius Paulinus, Septimius Flaccus and Claudius Ptolemy, to mention a few, before moving on to the Middle Ages with the Vivaldi brothers, Malocello Lanzarotto, the Pizzigani brothers, Nicoloso da Recco and Angiolino de’ Corbizi, up to Antoniotto Usodimare who began the tradition of working for foreign powers (in this case Portugal). The list of all the later travellers goes on with the well-known travellers and missionaries from Columbus and Pietro Della Valle and the “Italian martyrology” of missionaries such as Antonio di Pietra Bagnara and Lodovico da Laurenzana. The last couple of chapters include nineteenth- and early- twentieth-century travellers, military and missionaries to East Africa in particular, including, of course, Matteucci and Gessi, up to Fascist travellers such as Carlo Citeri, Attilio Giuliani and Eugenio Ruspoli, among others.

¹⁹ Even in this text the list of travellers is long and includes Massaia, Stella, Sapeto, Negrelli, Miani, Piaggia, Matteucci, Massari, Cecchi, Chiarini, Gessi, Casati and others.

²⁰ “to free millions of slaves”.

through sexual relations and their position of absolute power over female but also male indigenous people (Campassi and Sega 1983; Pickering-Iazzi 2000). A case in point is the novel *Femina Somala* by Gino Mitrano Sani published in 1933—one year after Cesari’s volume about Matteucci—in which the “*madama*”, or the “acquired” temporary African wife of the Italian colonizer is depicted as “una cosa del capitano, una serva, una schiava senza valore che deve dare il suo corpo quando il maschio bianco ha voglia carnale” (Mitrano Sani 1933, 146).²¹ Mitrano Sani’s novel is a useful example of the way in which the travellers’ colonial identity is enacted through interracial relations and was far from being shaped by genuine anti-slavery concerns. At the same time, it is evidence of the unsurprisingly contradictory nature of Fascist colonial propaganda, as well as the variety of text types produced in relation to colonial identity construction that imply travel, race, gender, sexuality and conquest.²²

6. Rereading Montanelli and Emanuelli: from colonial memory to a new postcolonial cosmopolitan pluralism

By way of conclusion, to touch on the last of Hester’s stages (and thus bring the three stages together), I would like to briefly draw on Del Boca’s rereading of Montanelli’s *XX Battaglione eritreo* and Scego’s rereading of Emanuelli’s *Settimana nera*, writings by travellers originally produced outside of propaganda contexts. Hence, they can provide an even greater sense of the reality surrounding the enacting of Fascist colonial identity through (inter)racial, gender and sexual metaphors. Clearly, this is a very different kind of rereading to Cesari’s, relevant here as it points to the stage when Italianness moves towards a cosmopolitan pluralism and comes to terms with the memory of Italian colonial identity and its deconstruction.

Montanelli is a particularly interesting case in point as a colonial traveller and prime symbol of Italian colonial identity. As is well known, in the aftermath of George Floyd’s murder in May 2020 protesters in the streets of Milan turned to the statue of Montanelli to do precisely the same thing that US protesters had done with the statue of Columbus in Boston, that is, deface it and spray it with graffiti. Montanelli took part in the colonial war leading to the occupation of Ethiopia in 1936 as a lieutenant in a battalion of *Askari* (Eritrean soldiers of the Italian Colonial Army) and was a convinced Fascist at least until the end of the Ethiopian war. He was also the “owner” of a 12-year-old Eritrean girl called Destà, whom he “acquired” for the price of 350 liras through the infamous practice of *madamato*. Therefore, Montanelli is now widely considered to be the embodiment of Italian colonial abuse.

²¹ “a thing owned by the captain, a servant, a slave with no value who must give her body when the white man has carnal desire”.

²² Other important examples of racist rhetoric in relation to the peoples of East Africa published in the same period include the works of anthropologist Lidio Cipriani (1931, 1932, 1935) and Orientalist Carlo Conti Rossini (1935).

XX Battaglione Eritreo was first published by Panorama in 1936 and obtained great success. However, it was never published again until the very recent edition by Rizzoli, which came with the addition of some unpublished letters. Montanelli, Del Boca explains, had sent the various fragments of his “war diary” to his father Sestilio, who, in turn, had given it to Massimo Bontempelli. The latter liked it and published it, while Ugo Ojetti, who liked the fact that the text was not mere propaganda, wrote a review in which he compared the young Indro to a Rudyard Kipling in becoming. Montanelli was in Africa from May 1935 to September 1936, not only for the Ethiopian war, but also, as he put it, “per ragioni letterarie” and, rather ironically, given the abuses he committed, to find a “una coscienza di uomo” (Montanelli 2002, 23).²³ As the historian tells us in the introduction, Del Boca’s new edition and rereading of *XX Battaglione Eritreo* has two purposes: one is personal, and is to shed more light on the famous disagreements between himself and Montanelli about the crimes of Italian colonialism and the use of mustard gas in the Ethiopian war (Montanelli denied the claims of Del Boca); the other is related to the revived interest in the history of Italian colonialism in Italy, prompted by Del Boca himself, which has now regained consideration after decades of “amnesia” (Del Boca 2010, 11–12). The daily abuses enacted by Italians in interracial relations through colonial identity were also part of the amnesia of colonialism that Del Boca challenges—hence the relevance of Montanelli’s new edition in debates around colonialism in postcolonial Italy. Though not mere propaganda, Montanelli’s text is concerned with the interracial relations between the *Goitana* (the Italian officer, “lord” or colonizer in general) and the *Askari*—a relationship mediated through Italian/European colonial identity. This Italianness, but also Europeaness, builds on issues of military, masculine, sexual and racial notions in the colonial context.²⁴ Montanelli tells us that the *Goitana* is not just an “ufficiale” or simply a “signore”, but “l’Assoluto” (Montanelli [1936] 2010, 25).²⁵ Italian and European identities are negotiated as Montanelli explains that *Goitana* is an African word that encapsulates a non-European concept (whereby non-Europeans regard Europeans as deities) (25).²⁶ The absolute power the Italian has over the African is further described with a touch of paternalism as Montanelli tells us that, when the *Askari* deal with the Italians, “scompaiono le loro volontà e coscienze, si rassegnano nelle sue mani”. They become like “una tenera pietra che puoi ridurre all’espressione che ti pare” (19).²⁷ This relationship, Montanelli writes, “impon[e all’ufficiale] d’essere un Dio”, which is a feeling that “ti da

²³ “for literary reasons [...] a moral conscience”.

²⁴ Including homosexual interracial relations in colonial contexts—a subject studied by Aldrich in the broader European context (2003).

²⁵ “an officer [...] a lord [...] the Absolute”.

²⁶ Montanelli writes: “Tu ufficiale ricordati che sei ‘Goitana’ e impara – l’ascaro stesso è che te lo insegna – che questa parola racchiude un concetto non europeo.”

²⁷ “their will and conscience disappear as they place themselves in the Italians’ hands [...] a tender stone which [the Italian officers] can reduce to the expression [they] wish”.

quasi le vertigini". Indeed, this "abitudine al padreternismo è il vero mal d'Africa,²⁸ quello della patologia umana, non soltanto letteraria" (26).²⁹ Montanelli constructs this relationship on the assumption that it is the Africans themselves who regard the Italians and their "government"³⁰ (or Fascist regime) as a *Goitana*, in that they look up to them as superior beings (28). This father-child and master-slave narrative can also be sexual, not just in a metaphorical sense, like in the humorous account of a special *Goitana*, Sassahà, as he was called by his *Askari*. Sassahà often visited Terù, his favourite Eritrean soldier, who, instead of taking part in conversations around the campfire at night with the other *Askari*, "preferiva addormentarsi presto perchè venisse Sassahà nella notte accanto a lui e gli parlasse con la sua dolce voce" (139–40).³¹

But sexual interracial relations as a way of negotiating colonial identity were of course even more popular, or at least more explicit, with female African natives. This is certainly the case narrated in Enrico Emanuelli's *Settimana nera*,³² a novel set at the time of the Italian protectorate of Somalia, when the Italians were expected to teach democracy to the Somali and lead them to independence. Despite the parallels with Mitrano Sani's *Femina somala*, this was not a propaganda novel. However, the novel still depicts how Italians continued to exercise a form of colonial power over Africans through interracial relations (featuring both heterosexual relations with African women and hinting at homosexual relations with African men). The character in the novel is an Italian man in his forties who hunts monkeys for an American pharma company that is developing a vaccine against polio. He has his servant Abdi with him, whom he treats as his personal possession. Eventually, he is drawn into an erotic affair with Regina, the *madama* (Somali temporary wife) of Farnenti, a former Fascist hierarch who has remained in Somalia and encourages the protagonist to "own" Regina for a week while Farnenti is away. Even though the protagonist condemns the violent behaviours of Farnenti, and pretends to develop feelings of love for Regina, he too eventually falls prey to his desire for her and treats her

²⁸ The expression *mal d'Africa*, referring to nostalgia for Africa and especially the exotic and literary experience of the white colonizer in the African colony, was made famous by Riccardo Bacchelli (1935) in his homonymous novel. In his use, Montanelli, however, places emphasis on the nostalgia for the God-like feeling and sense of absolute power that the Italian colonizer felt in the East African colonies.

²⁹ "demands of [the officer] to become a God [...] almost gives you vertigo [...] becoming accustomed to this God-like feeling is the real *mal d'Africa*, that of human pathology, not just of literary pathology".

³⁰ Montanelli describes how the *Sciumbasi*, or the Eritrean man of the highest rank among the *Askari*, naively regards the Fascist regime as a *Goitana*: "Il Governo è per lui un Goitana imprecisabile, un Goitana più Goitana di tutti gli altri, un Goitana che sta a Roma" (Montanelli [1936] 2010, 28).

³¹ "preferred to go to bed early, because soon Sassahà would come to lie next to him to speak to him with his sweet voice".

³² Emanuelli was primarily a travel writer and journalist who wrote about Spain and Ethiopia during Fascism, and about Russia, China and India in the post-war period.

as abusively as Farnenti: he behaves ambiguously between the recognition and condemnation of colonial violence, and his eventual and conscious embracing of it, of which he also becomes ashamed. Indeed, his shame with regard to his sexual, gender and racial attitudes to Regina become metaphors to address the violent nature of colonial identity. This is the foundation on which a postcolonial identity for Italy can be built.

While this novel is the only real literary attempt to decolonize Italian consciousness and conscience and to come to terms with Italian colonial identity after Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* (1947), Scego's rereading of and "preface" to the new 2021 edition—the first after the 1961 edition—points to the lack of a debate about decolonization and the erasure of Italian colonial identity in the early (post-1960s) postcolonial period. To use Hester's parlance, Scego is herself a symbol of a plurilingual and pluricultural cosmopolitanism. Her postcolonial rereading looks at previous constructions of Italianness, from colonial identity to the post-war myth of "*Italiani brava gente*", only to denounce colonial amnesia and propose a new consciousness that acknowledges the crimes and cruelty of Italian colonialism and its legacies of racism. She says that the rereading was "la prova che cercavo" (Scego 2021, 7) to make Italians face their colonial responsibilities, as well as the responsibilities of the period of the Somali protectorate, when the myth of "*Italiani brava gente*" became that of "*Italiani bravi insegnanti*".³³

Both myths are in fact easily discredited: the character of Regina is reduced to a state of slavery by Farnenti who, by dint of his "ownership", "lends" her to the protagonist of the novel. As Barbara Tonzar points out, the whole point of the novel is to explore the conscience of the protagonist as he relates ambiguously to the exploitative and bestial behaviours of former Fascist colonialists such as Farnenti, or his homosexual friend, Contardi, whose eventual suicide signals the horrors of the violence not only of the colonial period but also of the Italian protectorate of Somalia between 1950 and 1960 (Tonzar 2017, 130). Emanuelli courageously recognizes the horrors of Italian and Fascist colonialism and colonial identity,³⁴ but for this very reason the novel was quickly dismissed in the climate of colonial amnesia of post-1960s Italy. Scego's rereading of Emanuelli's fictional travels to Somalia, in line with Hester's trajectory, is therefore timely and crucial in understanding the current transformations in postcolonial Italianness, and reckoning that a true cultural decolonization is only just beginning to take place in postcolonial Italy. The hope is that contemporary pluricultural Italianness will build further on these representations of Italian colonial violence while continuing to look at the critical moments of Italian colonial identity and their legacy through a truly cosmopolitan pluralist lens.

³³ "the proof [she] was looking for" [...] "Italians [are] good people"[...] "Italians [are] good teachers"

³⁴ As the protagonist admits, "era ipocrisia volerla nel letto quando mi risvegliavo" ("it was hypocrisy to want her in my bed when I woke up") (Emanuelli [1961] 2021, 193).

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