

ARTICLE

Italo Calvino's Colour Blindness and the Question of Race among Einaudi Intellectuals

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Italo Calvino is acknowledged as an important voice in post-war Italian literature. Together with other important Einaudi intellectuals, such as Elio Vittorini and Cesare Pavese, Calvino helped shape the narratives around, and the legacy of, the Italian resistance and anti-fascism. Through his work as an editor at Einaudi and his membership of the Communist Party, Calvino was strongly involved in post-war debates on inequality and societal change. This article investigates the connections between these interests of Calvino and important Einaudi intellectuals with reflections on Italy's colonial past and the struggle for civil rights and racial equality (especially in the United States). The Marxist framework through which Calvino approached these matters made him somewhat colour blind, causing him to erase differences and disregard possible connections between colonial and post-colonial struggles for civil rights.

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'A scrivere sono io, certo, ma in questo io bisogna riconoscere la parte che ha il fatto che sono un bianco eurocentrico consumista petrolifago e alfabetifero' (Calvino, *Saggi* 2825). When Calvino writes this, in the short essay *Identità* of 1977, he is addressing the problems that are inherent in his 'neutral', 'blank' whiteness, his 'universal' Europeanness and accompanying universal values. An important silence is very briefly brought into the open, even if the thread is not pursued any further. Arguably, however, Calvino's silences, his removals, the 'blank spaces' on his map, tell an important tale not only of the cosmopolitan intellectual Calvino, but also of the broader cultural and intellectual environment of the (post-)war decades in Italy. How do discussions on racism and colonialism fit in that environment – if at all?

For Charles Leavitt, 'impegno nero' indicates the way in which important Italian intellectuals in post-Second World War Italy adopted a 'self-reflective hermeneutics' towards the American situation (meaning mostly the struggle for the rights of – and against the wrongs inflicted upon – African Americans), demonstrating 'their desire to uncover the Italian connotations of the American situation' (Leavitt 2). Leavitt contrasts this with the much more uncritical attitude vis-à-vis the same topics of intellectuals in fascist Italy, when criticism of the racism in the United States was not effectively reflected in a critical attitude towards fascist practices in Italy and its (prospective) colonies. Some of the names (besides Calvino, also Vittorini, Cecchi and Pavese) in his interesting analysis return in this article too, which adopts a more

critical stance towards the 'impegno nero' of these intellectuals. Taking Calvino as the pivotal example, I explore how the African American struggle and the Italian colonial legacy are present(ed) in Calvino's reflections, in order to establish how 'self-reflective' Calvino proved to be in this particular respect. An important underlying question is in what way the legacy of the *Resistenza* and anti-fascism was translated into new forms of resistance and anti-fascism after the Second World War. Several moments in Calvino's communist and post-communist period are singled out: starting in the post-war years, the article opens with the reflections on the meaning and the legacy of the *Resistenza* and anti-fascism by important leftist intellectuals and journals. Thereafter, Calvino's (and Cecchi's, Pavese's and Vittorini's) encounter with the works of Richard Wright, especially *Black Boy*, is scrutinized. This is followed by an analysis of Calvino's appraisals and readings during the 1950s of books such as Roberto Battaglia's *La guerra in Africa* and Mario Tobino's *Il deserto della Libia*. Lastly, Calvino's long travel to and through the United States in 1959–1960 and his encounter with African Americans and their struggle for recognition is a key episode in understanding Calvino's reflections on civil rights and racial equality. In order to establish how self-reflective Calvino's stance is, the attachment or detachment that transpires from his writings on African American and post-colonial causes, and the interconnections he mentions or fails to mention until 1964 are taken into account.¹ Using fairly unknown and marginal writings, it will be argued that Calvino fails to reflect upon Italy's colonial past and that Calvino's Marxist-informed, universalist views on inequality and injustice prevent him (and other prominent Einaudi intellectuals) from fully and convincingly engaging with issues of colonialism and racism.

Resistenza* and anti-fascism, Vittorini and *Il Politecnico

When one tries to define, anthologize, summarize, objectively 'capture' the true nature of the *Resistenza*, the Italian anti-fascist resistance during the Second World War, Calvino is undeniably a central figure for critics. His 1964 preface to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* is still considered a crucial, and – more importantly – objective account of both the spirit of the resistance and the atmosphere after the end of the war, when Italy needed to be re-edified and re-educated (Caesar 253; Milanini 26). In the first years of his writing career, Calvino learned important lessons about the trade of the writer and the editor from Vittorini and Pavese – an influence that is arguably also to be seen in the 1964 preface, which shows remarkable similarities with another revisional preface of a debut novel, Vittorini's 1948 preface to *Il garofano rosso* (this is no coincidence, considering the ample attention that Calvino reserves for this preface in his 1948 review of *Il garofano rosso*) (*Saggi* 1260–3). Calvino's crucial role in delineating the essence of Italian resistance and post-resistance is also noted by Neelam Srivastava, in her *Italian Colonialism and Resistances to Empire, 1930–1970*. She recognizes the 'instrumental' role of Einaudi as a publishing house in 'reconstructing Italian culture in the postwar period', also acknowledging the 'highly committed and politicized' nature of Einaudi's activities. Einaudi played 'a determining role in promoting the idea of a "*letteratura della Resistenza*" between the 1940s and the 1960s', especially because of the editorship of Calvino who took 'an active lead' in publishing resistance-writing (Srivastava, *Italian Colonialism* 216). Srivastava's focus is on the intriguing connections between the anti-fascist elements of the Italian resistance and the later anti-colonialist and anti-racist stance of some of the ex-partisans. Srivastava does acknowledge that it is important to remember that 'the relationship the postwar Italian left had with anti-colonialism was contradictory and ambivalent, to say the least: on the one hand, there was great support for anti-imperialist struggles [...] on the other, a puzzling amnesia in relationship to Italy's own colonial past' (Srivastava 4).

¹ 1964 is the year of the important preface to *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno*.

'Amnesia' suggests a straightforward removal of the recent colonial past, but it was the active anti-imperialism of leftist intellectuals that made a total removal difficult. This process of remembering and forgetting is very subtle; it is part of a cultural negotiation during those years, made up of silences and marginal discourses, which needs to be traced in grey areas of uncertainty and instability.

For Srivastava, as for Leavitt, Calvino seems to share the route of others such as Giovanni Pirelli from anti-fascism as local resistance to anti-fascism as universal resistance. Calvino's preface of 1964 is mentioned for its embodiment of 'resistance aesthetics' through its focus on a 'choral dimension' and a 'collective authorship' (Srivastava 220) that shaped the narrative of the resistance. After extensively quoting Calvino's preface on this sense of collective authorship, Srivastava ties Calvino's words to Fanon: 'This awakening of collective consciousness finds an echo in the writing of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (published just a few years before Calvino's preface)' (Srivastava 220).

The question seems justified, though, as to what the resistance narrative excluded. In the narrations and celebrations after the war, resistance was framed as communist and international, but was it also colonial? When one writes about *the* 'Resistenza', in its singular and capitalized form, the implication is that it is one, instead of multiple and different *resistenze* – although this logic can be reversed, for example as by Pasolini in his *Resistenza negra* (Pasolini). Not all forms of anti-fascism are necessarily included in the specific, context-bound term *Resistenza*. If Calvino's influence is so undeniable, one may wonder if his silences are equally influential as his words. It is true, for instance, that Calvino paid due attention to both Carlo and Primo Levi, to Ginzburg and Rigoni Stern, to Fenoglio and Ottieri. However, on the contrary, Ennio Flaiano, the only one of this generation of authors to write about a different form of war, outside the borders of Italy and, crucially, with Italians as the aggressors and dominators, is completely absent from Calvino's attention. The 'spirito della Resistenza [...] animato da generosità, ansioso di far propria ogni causa generosa' seems to have overlooked Flaiano's doubt-ridden reflection on possible Italian culpabilities (Baranelli and Ferrero 60).²

The year 1947 was an important one in Italian publishing, in which not only Calvino's debut novel, but also Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* and Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* appeared. This last book even won the first edition of the Premio Strega, thus receiving enough popular attention to mark the absence of Calvinian references to the book as a definite omission. This omission is, however, certainly not unique to Calvino: Flaiano's book was quickly forgotten and only fairly recently has there been a revival of interest in it (Re). Moreover, that Flaiano is not included in Calvino's essays is fairly logical, considering the *Resistenza* frame that he uses and the choral, anthological nature of resistance literature as Calvino describes it. It should also be stressed that, in essays such as *Il romanzo italiano di oggi*, Calvino writes of Italian literature in general as non-novelistic. Flaiano does not fit either framework, nor does he depict the euphoria of narration in the aftermath of the war, stemming from the wish to tell the heroic stories of the resistance or the idea of somehow emerging victorious from the war. But precisely because of the exclusive nature of all frames, the *Resistenza* frame can serve to simplify accounts of the Italian role in the war, by leaving other elements out of the picture. Calvino and Flaiano are sometimes mentioned together on a purely contextual, historical basis, in consideration of the fact that both published important books on the war in the same year. Lucia Re mentions Calvino on several occasions in her reappraisal of Flaiano's first and only novel, pointing out the similarities between Calvino's and Flaiano's contributions rather than the differences – although she does recognize that Flaiano's book can be said to

² Flaiano was not published by Einaudi, whereas another 'different' voice, a book about the experiences of an ex-militant *against* the partisans – Giose Rimanelli's *Tiro al piccione* – was; cf. Calvino, *I libri* 21–3.

be even more courageous and innovative, depicting a much less 'visible' side (both geographically and socially) of the repercussions of war (Re).

Calvino belonged to a different generation than Vittorini, Pavese and Flaiano, with different experiences of the fascist era and the Second World War. Calvino was a child during the interwar years and it is likely that he experienced the Italian colonial wars largely through his beloved *Corriere dei Piccoli* and similar comics, which were certainly not immune to fascist propaganda (Palma). Yet, it is important to point out that Calvino himself very effectively stressed the generational aspect not only of his interwar experience but also of his war experience, just as Vittorini had done for his fascist experiences. *Il sentiero dei nidi di ragno* is told from a child's perspective, which Calvino himself confesses to be a 'regressione', adding distance and relative innocence to his war descriptions. Pin is an orphan and thus even more effectively severed from his parents' generation. The war for Pin, and the narration of the war for Calvino, are clearly a sort of rites of passage into adulthood; they form the start of adult life, something that influences the way in which the tale is told. In his preface of 1964, Calvino writes of the war as an experience shared by everyone, of the feverish wish to tell and exchange stories, of the feeling of being victorious. This is certainly not the same feeling of Flaiano, for example, or Vittorini, or Pavese.

Attention to Ethiopia and the struggle of the colonized for visibility and recognition was present already in the first programmatic sketches of Vittorini for *Il politecnico*: 'Il colpo fascista in Etiopia. Quali interessi agirono. Evoluzione della mentalità imperialistica e fascista: dall'imperialismo patetico all'imperialismo presuntuoso. Conseguenze psicologiche nel popolo italiano' (Vittorini 217). Thereafter, Vittorini included his personal history, the fact that during the war in Ethiopia he still saw himself as a revolutionary fascist, in his reflection *Fascisti i giovani?* of January 1946: 'L'aggressione all'Etiopia, che riconciliò col fascismo tutti i residui prefascisti della reazione italiana, mi mise dentro i primi dubbi. Era questo che sapeva fare il fascismo? Ripetere, nel secolo XX, imprese da epoca mercantile?' (Vittorini 267). This is, of course, an implicit revision of his earlier stance on fascist aggression in Ethiopia, which, in his fascist period, he commented on in much less humane terms as an anti-capitalist mission in which individual sentiments were to be ignored for the greater good(s). The 'indigeni' were rendered as an abstract presence by Vittorini, even though it was not possible to 'sgombrare del tutto dagli indigeni le zone destinabili alla colonizzazione'. Ethiopia itself was the 'immenso territorio deserto ricco di possibilità industriali' that fascist propaganda had promised it to be, a sort of Eden where a new and just anti-capitalist society could be constructed out of nowhere. This mission thus had nothing to do with the exploitative 'colonialismo vecchio stile' (Panicali 179–80). The presumed difference of Italian colonialism with respect to British and French 'established' colonialism had been propagated early on in Italian writings on its colonies and still sounds through in Vittorini's description (Choate).

It is important to recognize this personal history as well as the collective one in order to properly contextualize the post-war *impegno* of Vittorini and other Einaudi intellectuals. It is no coincidence that Vittorini's different reading of colonial matters in the post-war years coincided with his brief (officially) communist period. The *mea culpa* of Vittorini was not so pronounced, considering that his main culprits are not intellectuals but 'fascism' itself (which remains unspecified): 'la cultura non ha potuto impedire gli orrori del fascismo [...] né erano "suoi" i cannoni, gli aeroplani, i carri armati che avrebbero potuto impedire l'avventura d'Etiopia' (Vittorini 235). As Alberto Asor Rosa very critically wrote of Vittorini in 1965: 'A questo punto si può già cominciare a pensare quanto questo modo oltretutto affrettato e superficiale, di fare i conti con se stessi e con il passato, abbia pesato sulla ideologia e sulla letteratura della Resistenza' (Asor Rosa 125). While Asor Rosa writes about Vittorini here, he broadens his scope towards the exclusions of *Resistenza* literature and ideology. On the

other hand, Vittorini's effort to include other forms of resistance is clear in the *Politecnico*, which is broad in scope and extends beyond local anti-fascism. In May 1946, the *Politecnico* includes translations of Richard Wright, Melvin B. Tolson and Langston Hughes (*Politecnico*). At the beginning of 1947, Vittorini proposed an issue on (post-)colonial changes on a global scale, writing an introduction entitled 'Dai sottosuoli coloniali escono all'aperto della storia', in which he states:

Il "cambiamento del mondo" che forse ha più importanza in questo dopoguerra è la coscienza di vita e di storia [...] manifestata da popoli che sono stati, quasi finora, muti e misteriosi, enigmatici o semplicemente addormentati, nello sfondo chiamato coloniale della civiltà moderna [...] Molti piangono in Italia sopra il trattato di pace anche perché "ci spoglia" delle "nostre colonie". Ma "le colonie" [...] oggi non sono più terre, miniere, prodotti, beni; esse sono ormai "uomini". (Vittorini 422–3)

The parallels with the struggle of the lower classes of Italian workers were clear for Vittorini (Leavitt 6, 10). Nonetheless, some of the words used ('addormentati'; 'non sono più') and the fact that Vittorini locates the change only *after* the Second World War, point to the residue of unresolved blind spots in Vittorini's worldview.

Civil rights and *Black Boy*

Vittorini's relative lack of engagement with the colonial past can be compared with the conspicuous absence in his *Americana* of any reference to the the US Civil War, slavery or any form of black culture (Marazzi 47). Even though the oversight was certainly not Vittorini's alone, *Americana* was a very important anthology, that, in 1941, introduced Italian audiences to modern American literature. Its influence is undeniable, as can be seen from the need for compilers of subsequent anthologies to openly relate to (and distinguish their anthologies from) this important predecessor. This is clearly the case for Carlo Fruttero and Franco Lucentini's *La verità sul caso Smith*, published in 1963, which was in part conceived – according to the preface – as an update of Vittorini's anthology, to show new American literature from the 1940s to the 1960s. This literature, in the eyes of Fruttero and Lucentini, offered something very different (and ultimately more worthwhile) from that of the earlier generation. But it can be said that in their anthology the absence of African American literature is even more conspicuous: only in a footnote in which exclusions are explained, can one phrase be found about 'i rappresentanti della letteratura negro-americana che avrebbero un interesse principalmente "di genere"' (Fruttero and Lucentini xv). This is a clearly derogatory tone, which is even more surprising when we consider that it comes from Fruttero and Lucentini, who worked against precisely such canonical distinctions between highbrow and lowbrow and emphasize that aspect strongly in this particular preface. It is clear that for Fruttero and Lucentini the new literature, that which challenges the old guard and represents a significant rupture with respect to the texts of the famous 'tempi in cui scoprivamo ancora l'America' (to use the title of the famous piece of Pavese, discussed below) does not include the work of African American writers. It is therefore not surprising that Fruttero and Lucentini argue that '*engagement sociale e politico*' has disappeared from American literature, except for the reference to the 'tipica "vittima" di ieri, il negro' [emphasis mine] who turns out to be a 'scroccone [...] bugiardo e sfaticato' in the story *A Gift from the City* by John Updike (Fruttero and Lucentini ix–x).³ The literature that they offer in the anthology clearly represents in their

³ This is far too simple a summary of the racial element in the story. For a more detailed analysis of race in Updike, see Prosser.

view a new phase at which Italian literature has not yet arrived, a phase in which 'intolleranze razziali' seem to be left behind (Fruttero and Lucentini xii). Calvino, for his part, was not convinced that this anthology represented '*la letteratura americana*', declaring himself 'nato alla letteratura attraverso quell'America là che voi condannate (quella di Pavese e di Vittorini) [...] E lo stesso si dica per i miei rapporti con la letteratura engagée: ci sono passato, l'ho criticata, la critico, ma ancora non posso scavare che in quella direzione' (*Lettere* 788, 790; Micheletti 254–5). The divergence of thought on the topic between Lucentini and Calvino is clear from their letters, but none of them includes literature by African American writers in the discussion. The reception of the work of Richard Wright can help to contextualize and illuminate the reasons for this absence.

In the years following the Second World War, Richard Wright forms a surprising point of contact between Italian (leftist) writers and the debates on civil rights, as part of a relatively brief surge in attention given to African American writing in the immediate post-war years (which was only to recommence properly in the mid- to late 1960s) (Francescato 187–8).⁴ Wright makes his way into the *Politecnico* in the issue of 19 January 1946, where his *Black Boy* is introduced through images and an accompanying (unattributed) text, in which there is a strong emphasis on Wright's blackness: 'Richard Wright è americano, è negro ed è scrittore'. Wright is introduced as someone who, for the first time, does not write 'nel modo stesso dei bianchi' but 'nel modo in cui, finora, i negri avevano scritto poesie o cantato con una pienezza di musica d'organo'. The last lines read: 'Ma bisogna leggere il libro per capire che cosa sia l'intensa vita dei negri d'America. Non è un libro che accusa. È un libro che spiega e avverte. Speriamo che presto qualche editore italiano lo pubblichi tradotto' ('Libri nelle immagini'). In fact, Einaudi would publish the book the following year.

The awareness of the writings of and on Richard Wright is not immediately evident in Calvino's essays and letters (Calvino's work was not included in an important overview of texts on African American literature until 1975) (Piccinato). Although it is conceivable that Calvino met Wright at the premises of the *Politecnico* in Milan, Wright seems only a footnote in Calvino's post-war reflections (Del Boca 84). Yet, this impression is misleading. First of all, Calvino publishes a review of Wright's *Black Boy*, in which he writes in a way that can be connected meaningfully to Vittorini's influential call for *Una nuova cultura* in the first *Politecnico*. Leavitt rightly points out that Calvino's 'storia di una cultura che da cultura come consolazione, diventa cultura come arma di difesa e di conquista' in reference to Wright is a thinly veiled allusion to Vittorini's 'tentativo di far sorgere una nuova cultura che sia di difesa e non più di consolazione dell'uomo'. This can, as Leavitt suggests, be seen as a 'self-reflective' act on Calvino's part, in the sense that he reads Wright through a lens that reveals him as well aware of the clear analogies in the role culture can play in re-edifying and re-educating a society, preparing it for change and acceptance of difference. Leavitt, however, states this more emphatically: 'It was this sense of shared struggle [...] that gave to Italo Calvino's resonant 1947 review of Richard Wright's *Black Boy* its underlying ethical and political charge' (Leavitt 5–6). In other words, for Leavitt, Calvino connects the civil rights movement to the Italian resistance against fascism. How strong this sense of shared struggle was for Calvino, and how resonant his review actually proved to be, is traced below.

The second way in which Wright is present under the surface of Calvino's essays is through (indirect) references to reviews of, for example, Pavese. When Calvino writes his preface to Pavese's *La letteratura americana*, he points out that a crucial shift can be found in Pavese's attitude towards the United States. He refers in particular to *Sono finiti i tempi in*

⁴ This is, of course, also the period in which Angelo Del Boca starts to debunk the myth of 'italiani brava gente', revealing painful truths about Italy's colonial past.

cui scoprivamo l'America, with its emblematic title. He fails to mention, though, that this title is not the original one (which was *Un negro ci parla*), and that the original radiophonic review of 1947 was of Wright's *Black Boy* – the only instance in which Pavese comments on an African American writer (Portelli 27; Leavitt 15). In his combined roles as editor and writer of the preface, Calvino shifts the focus of Pavese's piece away from Wright. Instead, the piece is framed as a watershed in Pavese's (and more broadly, Italian intellectuals') attitude towards the United States: the title is changed, only one aspect of the content singled out and neither Wright nor black culture are mentioned (Pavese xxii).

Pavese's comments on Wright are nonetheless intriguing, and indicative of the period and culture in which they have been produced. He calls *Black Boy* a 'bel libro di quelli che ci toccano a fondo e ci costringono a riesaminare in fretta e furia esperienze e convinzioni e pigrizie passate', stressing that there is nothing of the fabulous, exotic, sensual, dreamy atmosphere, the 'riso nero', the 'alleluia', the plantations in this book (and this list of absences reveals most of all what Pavese himself would usually expect from an African American writer). Instead, Pavese finds 'un'esperienza che noi tutti abbiamo fatto, un rovello e una pena che abbiamo sofferto identici nelle nostre famiglie'. He concedes that this may not be true of the daily hunger, the blind terror of the whites ('i "nemici"') and of being lynched by those whites: 'Forse. Quando il libro fu scritto c'erano pochi europei, pochi bianchi, che sapevano questo. Ma adesso? C'è qualcuno di noi, qualche bianco, che non abbia visto in faccia la fame e il terrore razziale, che possa giurare che questi spettri non risorgeranno?' Pavese clearly ends up stressing the similarity of experience, implicitly letting the 'bianco/europeo' share in fairly indiscriminate victimhood. He even avows that 'Succede, leggendo questo libro, che ci si dimentica di trovarsi tra negri, tra pelli nere' – a way to indicate the universality of the issues that Wright's account explores, but, arguably, also a manner of erasing important differences, of homologizing culturally and historically rooted disparate experiences (Pavese 189–92). Something similar can be said of Vittorini's statement 'Quanti milioni di europei non potrebbero, oggi, unire le loro voci, non fosse altro per fame, freddo e delusione, a questo vecchio canto dei negri d'America?' It is true, as Leavitt writes, that Vittorini 'thus sought to universalize, or rather to Italianize', but, I would add, it is the *suffering* that concerns 'all of us', which is a potentially problematic and imprecise universality that only remembers selectively (Leavitt 15–17).

Considering Vittorini's budding attention for emancipation of neglected groups on a national and global scale after the Second World War, it is logical that he reserved some attention for Wright as well. For Vittorini, who was not too positive about *Black Boy*, considering it less innovative than Pavese did, the main point of interest was clearly connected to Marxist ideas.⁵ Vittorini saw in the book 'non la vecchia lotta a tutti nota del povero negro circondato da un mondo ostile, ma una lotta in cui proletariato negro e proletariato bianco sono compagni di disperata speranza' (Vittorini 59–60). Calvino's reading of *Black Boy* is similar in this respect. Calvino's review is from May 1947, only some months after Vittorini's comments on the 'sottosuoli coloniali'. Calvino does recognize that Wright has written a 'storia di razza e storia di classe insieme', but he emphasises the latter, while practically ignoring the former. Within the framework of Marxism, the reason for this seems plausible, because 'antichi schiavi diventano proletariato con industrializzazione'. The conclusion Calvino arrives at is therefore straightforward: 'Non per nulla Richard Wright milita nel partito comunista americano' (*Saggi* 1463–5).

This last, limpid statement serves, however, more to hide possible fractures than to participate in the ambivalence of Wright's book or of his conflicted career as a politically engaged

⁵ Vittorini even gave his 'parere sfavorevole' on the publication of *Black Boy*, as reported in the 'verbali' of the Einaudi meeting of 25 June 1945 (*I verbali 1943–1952* 33).

black writer. Apparently, whereas Emilio Cecchi still considered the 'negro' unsuited for revolutionary purposes due to his fundamentally bourgeois mentality, aiming at the 'utile immediato' without a true revolutionary spirit, Vittorini and Calvino saw Wright's membership of the Communist Party as a way to overcome racial distinctions by class (Cecchi, *America amara* 88). But, factually speaking, Wright was no longer part of the US Communist Party as of 1944 (Bergin, *Bitter With the Past* 91). Cecchi shows himself much more informed when he writes in his review on Wright (from 1948) about 'la sua clamorosa uscita dalle file del comunismo ortodosso' (Cecchi, 'Richard Wright' 348). Cecchi writes mainly on *Paura*, the Italian translation of Wright's *Native Son*, for the launch of which Wright also visits Rome. Cecchi discusses several other books by Wright as well (including *Ragazzo negro* and *I bambini dello zio Tom*), comparing their qualities and shortcomings while citing influential American critics such as Alfred Kazin. Although he feels compelled to stress that Wright should not be read in the context of primitive art, spirituals and blues, he does acknowledge that 'per una ragionevole valutazione di *Paura*, oltre al vero e proprio criterio artistico, deve concedersi un forte rilievo all'intento razziale', putting Wright (even if briefly) in a context of proponents of African American rights and black writers such as Countee Cullen, W. E. B. Du Bois, Paul Laurence Dunbar and James Weldon Johnson (stating that since the death of the latter, Wright is considered by some 'la maggiore personalità della letteratura negra contemporanea') ('Richard Wright' 347–8).

Only a year later, an important publication would confirm that Vittorini and Calvino had presented a drastic oversimplification of reality, proving Cecchi, in this instance, better attuned to the colour line (even though, besides Wright, many black writers saw their work published in the *Politecnico* during the immediate post-war years). The publication of *The God that Failed* (in which ex-communists explained their disillusionment with communism) was an event with which leftist intellectuals of the time had to reckon, its success quickly becoming proverbial. When the book appears in 1949, Vittorini writes *Le vie degli ex-comunisti* in response and proposes to publish an 'antidoto [...] fatto da scrittori che, pur accettando il comunismo, fanno le loro obiezioni' (Vittorini 619). The (indirect) references to *The God that Failed* that can be found in Calvino's letters for many years after betray its importance (*Lettere* 279–84, 644, 1400–1). However, Calvino was sceptical and declared himself not too interested in this type of book.⁶ Calvino would himself leave the Communist Party after the events in Hungary of 1956, but its title and the reference to communism as a theology were enough to deter Calvino (at least, so he claims) from reading the book. The reading of the chapter in which Richard Wright explains how he left the Communist Party (or rather, how the party abandoned him), would have provided a potential source of insights for Calvino. Wright's blackness is undeniably at the centre of his narrative (Crossman 138). But even without this source, it is now difficult to see how for Pavese, Vittorini and Calvino the issue of blackness was eclipsed in reading *Black Boy*. Even in the 'better' North of America the protagonist of the book leads a life that is determined by the colour of his skin, which causes his continuously anxious psychological state, shame and humiliation. Emblematic in this respect is the chilling episode in which he is made to fight against another African American for the entertainment of white spectators (Wright 255–66).⁷

Some other books of Einaudi in this period deserve a brief mention. In 1952 Einaudi published *I negri in America* by Arnold Rose, in which there are significant doubts about the

⁶ Almost a decade later, in January 1957, Calvino was interested in writing in a proposed weekly of ex-communists and dissident communists that did not, however, ever materialize (*Lettere* 474, 510). Moreover, he published 'La gran bonaccia delle Antille' in *Città Aperta*, a journal of 'comunisti dissenzienti' (De Nobile 189).

⁷ Wright's book was also published as number 12 in the Einaudi series for the scuola media, before Fenoglio, Sciascia and Primo Levi.

possibility of a productive relation between communism and (poor) African Americans. Doubt is also cast on class solidarity, since 'where there are ethnic or religious splits in the lower income groups, these lower-class groups will [...] take care of keeping each other subdued' (Rose 26–7, 165–6). Another of Wright's novels that critically dealt with the relation between his black identity and communism was published in Italian in 1955 as *Ho bruciato la notte* [*The Outsider*], however (like the books mentioned by Cecchi) not by Einaudi but instead by Mondadori.⁸ The minutes of an Einaudi meeting of 13 December 1961 offer a glimpse of a colonial mirror image: a book by Richard Pankhurst, who (like his mother Sylvia Pankhurst) would develop into a strong voice on and for Ethiopia, comes up in this meeting. Franco Venturi comments: 'Se abbiamo un po' di coraggio, è da fare' (*I verbali 1953–1963* 520). However, Pankhurst's history of Ethiopia's early economy before 1800 would not be published by Einaudi. The question thus arises: does the matter of hierarchies of power, of colonial wrongdoings, of some sort of colour line, appear at all in Einaudi's projects and in Calvino's discourse on inequality in the wider world?

The colonial in Calvino: Libya, Ethiopia and Algeria

A good starting point for discussion of Calvino's point of view on colonial issues is one of his most beloved writers, certainly in the early years of his career: Joseph Conrad. In 1949 Calvino writes that Conrad looks without scruples at the new world of industry and colonial exploitation, of 'compagnie coloniali senza moralità o con utopistici ideali, che finivano "insabbiati nella colonia", abbruttiti dall'alcol o dal fatalismo, o da qualche malsano fanatismo morale.' *Heart of Darkness*, for Calvino, is a 'saggio acutissimo sul significato e sulle conseguenze dell'incontro di due civiltà; è una denuncia dei folli crimini del colonialismo (nella fattispecie quello belga) come di rado ci è stato dato di leggere' (*Saggi* 812). The remark in parentheses serves to slightly distance Conrad's description of colonial crime, and – even though 'colonialismo' returns in reference to Conrad in a letter of 1973 – it is not the predominant note in Calvino's dissection of his works (*Lettere* 1200). This is not surprising: the 'post-colonial' Conrad would only surface significantly later, also in academia (Manai). It is nevertheless important to acknowledge that Calvino does not pursue this line of reasoning, nor does he in any way explicitly refer to Italian colonialism. Even if we cannot talk of 'silence' in this case, there is little evidence of a sustained reflection on this topic.⁹

Calvino's many editorial activities and readings do include other moments of contact with the topic of colonialism. In 1950, Calvino writes to Roberto Battaglia in reference to a conference that Calvino had attended in Venice on 'La resistenza e la cultura', which saw an impressive number of important participants from the worlds of politics and culture. Calvino inquires if Battaglia is willing to write a book on the same subject, which the latter in fact goes on to deliver in 1953 – a hefty volume entitled *Storia della Resistenza italiana* (*Lettere* 275). In this tome, the first tentative examinations of the Italian presence in Ethiopia can be found. Of course, fascist myths are debunked and the fascist regime is envisioned as the main culprit, but the word 'slavery' is adopted too and the formulation is not mild:

⁸ Another similarly critical series of essays by James Baldwin was published in 1964 by Rizzoli (*Mio padre doveva essere bellissimo* [*Notes of a Native Son*]). In 1956 Einaudi did publish Ralph Waldo Ellison's *Uomo invisibile* [*Invisible Man*], another book that highlighted the fact that (American) communists were alien to the reality of black neighbourhoods. Other of Wright's books that were published in translation by Mondadori are *Potenza nera* [*Black Power*], *I figli dello zio Tom* [*Uncle Tom's Children*], *Cinque uomini* [selection of five stories] and *Ma nel settimo giorno...* [*Savage Holiday*].

⁹ In 1968 Calvino writes in similarly detached terms to Guido Piovene about Tournier's *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* (for which Calvino wrote the 'sopracoperta'). He calls it a very good book, a sort of *Robinson Crusoe* 'reinterpretato secondo la coscienza che oggi noi abbiamo di tutto ciò che è antropologia, storia delle religioni, archetipi, economia, colonialismo etc.' (*Lettere* 1018).

La stessa guerra diviene una scuola di antifascismo pratico [...] Ed i giovani, gli ufficiali di complemento che s'erano illusi di andare in Africa per una missione di civiltà, constatano giorno per giorno le menzogne della propaganda fascista, si accorgono che non per sciogliere dalla schiavitù il popolo abissino, ma per ribadirne le catene stanno ora subendo i sacrifici della guerra coloniale. (Battaglia, *Storia della Resistenza* 29)

The double role of Italians during the Second World War, as dominators and dominated, is clear from the fact that Battaglia also uses the term 'trattamento coloniale' for the way the allies treated the Italians (Battaglia 155). This is in line with the double meaning that the word 'colonie' had had for the Italian 'emigrant nation' (Choate). Needless to say, in a book on Italian resistance, the emphasis falls on the just resistance and not on shameful domination – as we have seen in the case of Calvino's essays on the same topic.

Battaglia would thereafter write another book that was of interest to Calvino, one that singles out an Italian colonial war: *La prima guerra d'Africa*.¹⁰ In a letter to Aldo Camerino, Calvino writes of a 'grosso studio storico interessantissimo e divertentissimo di lettura'. He proceeds in this rather light tone by asking Camerino 'Chi potrebbe parlarne sul "Gazzettino"? Ne verrebbe un articolo coi fiocchi' (*Lettere* 560). To Battaglia himself Calvino comes with a surprising proposal from Giulio Einaudi for an interview with none other than Haile Selassie in the *Notiziario Einaudi* (*I libri* 255). Again, there is a certain offhandedness to this proposal (which in fact does not convince Battaglia) that comes as something of a surprise. Little transpires of the suffering that can be found in the voluminous study, most of all the drama of the Italian soldiers of the time, whose story had not frequently been heard since the publication of *L'unità* and *Lo stato operaio* during the Ethiopian campaign (Battaglia, *La prima guerra* 791, 807). But there is plenty of evidence of ignominious behaviour by some Italians, long before the days of fascism. Early in the volume, Battaglia cites Carlo Piaggia's *Il selvaggio e la civiltà* (from 1875): 'cosa volete ottenere da un popolo selvaggio da parte di un popolo che li guerreggia, li ruba i figli per venderli, li assassina per le raccolte dei viveri, li maltratta in stato di schiavitù, e li percuote con armi di distruzione?' Piaggia adds: 'La nuova scienza attuale non sa più dominare se non usa armi di distruzione, createsi per sola ambizione di moderni e materiali iddii' (Battaglia, *La prima guerra* 25). Vittorini would write similar words in the *Politecnico* of 10 November 1945, underlining the destructive way that science and culture were co-opted under fascism and the dangerous potential of a repetition of this role ('Perisca').

Calvino's comments on the book in Einaudi's *Notiziario* (*La prima guerra d'Africa vista dai nostri padri e vista dagli abissini*) share the same light tone, stressing the 'romanzesche' as well as 'ariostesche' qualities of Battaglia's work. The main reason for praise is the vivid picture full of adventure it paints of a period from Italy's past that could ignite new interest and even become 'una nuova moda' (*Saggi* 1757–64). Interestingly, Calvino hints at the fact that the book contains some information that 'sappiamo dai banchi della scuola' (*Saggi* 1759). But the most surprising element is the comparison Calvino makes between native Americans and Ethiopians, even if, again, he adopts a romanticizing tone concerning a story which 'scommetto che non tarderemo a vedere sugli schermi panoramici'. The opening of the piece is emblematic: 'L'italia ha la sua epopea western. È l'Abissinia, la guerra del 1895–96 [...] Gli abissini sono un po' i nostri pellirosse.' Calvino does mention the 'cattiva coscienza' but also (in the same sentence) the 'strana fraternità' that bound the Italians to the Ethiopians;

¹⁰ It is not clear from the *Verbali* who proposed the project to Battaglia. The choice of Battaglia did raise some eyebrows in the Einaudi meeting of 5 December 1954, as Francesco Cataluccio, author of *La questione coloniale nell'età moderna* (1950), was considered a more logical choice (*I verbali* 1953–1963 168).

'Ce li avevamo anche noi, il colonello Cody e Toro Seduto, solo che sotto questa luce non ci avevamo mai pensato.' Then there is a brief flash of what came after: 'Poi, verso il '35, quei ricordi, quelle suggestive immagini, s'andarono a confondere con nuove mitologie, e più tardi, a colorarsi del malessere dei cattivi sogni' (*Saggi* 1757). The 'cattivi sogni' that, for example, Flaiano's novel embodies, however, are quickly set aside; after a cursory warning (similar to Vittorini's remark in 'Dai sottosuoli') that 'Non mi sto augurando una moda di esotismo decorativo (o peggio ancora, di nostalgie imperiali); la stagione è passata; ora è chiaro a tutti che non aver colonie è la maggiore delle fortune', and a general reminder that 'le storie italo-abissine hanno tutte una loro morale e ben si prestano a una definizione dell'Italia d'allora e non solo d'allora, dei suoi mali e delle sue virtù', Calvino moves on to the vivid portraits of noble individuals who were against slavery (such as the abovementioned Piaggia) (*Saggi* 1757–8). The very important fact that Battaglia uses sources from the Abyssinian side is highlighted by Calvino, but again this is mostly to enliven the picture rather than to question the Italian presence in the first place, which seems taken to have been very much part of the spirit of the period described (a period that, already in the title, is linked to 'i nostri padri'). What animates Battaglia, for Calvino, is the 'passione della scoperta d'un'Italia vera, una passione da uomo del Risorgimento' (*Saggi* 1761–2). History is being made here, the history of a united Italy, of the 'passione' of the Risorgimento that would later lead to the *Resistenza*. The Italian soldiers are mentioned at the end of the piece, their 'destino fino all'ultimo infelice': 'l'anno scorso un quotidiano romano in vena di nazionalismo si mise in cerca dei reduci d'Adua ancora viventi, e scoperse che erano tutti poveri vecchi che vivevano in miseria' (*Saggi* 1764). The history of the other side, the side of the 'Other', is less relevant to Calvino, maybe because the Abyssinians are outside history in his portrayal, part of the 'immobile realtà di quella società feudale' (*Saggi* 1762).

Later in the same year, Roberto Battaglia would write an article ('Le tradizioni anticolonialiste nella classe operaia italiana') in an issue of *Rinascita* that directly looked at the *Crepuscolo del colonialismo*. In this issue, which is not often mentioned, discussions of the British Empire, American anti-colonialism and the African and Asian contexts also lead to a section entitled 'L'Italia e la crisi del colonialismo', in which Battaglia's article appears (*Rinascita*). In 1964, the year of Calvino's preface to *Il sentiero*, Battaglia's *Risorgimento e Resistenza* was published, which included this article but also an extensive reflection on the legacy of the *Resistenza*. Battaglia points to the fact that 'tutta l'umanità intende essere libera, libera ovunque' and foretells a 'storia della Resistenza sempre più approfondita, inserita nella storia contemporanea, intesa come storia internazionale' (*Risorgimento* 382).

Battaglia was not the only intellectual connection that Calvino had to colonial wars. With the French aggression in Algeria, *L'unità* was again highly involved in anti-colonialist writing, on some occasions inviting intellectuals to have their say on the matter. Especially in the issue of 11 June 1958, the memory of the Italian 'missione civilizzatrice' in Ethiopia is clearly alive among those interviewed. The title and subtitle ('L'atteggiamento degli intellettuali torinesi di fronte a De Gaulle. Per combattere il fascismo in Francia bisogna anche vigilare in casa nostra') show that the situation in Algeria is an occasion for self-reflection. The intellectuals are said to have 'ritrovato la loro unità antifascista' – a statement that can also be read as a reflection on the role of *L'unità* itself, which is at its most worthwhile as 'unità antifascista'. The term 'Resistenza' is foregrounded in the piece ('la Resistenza ha avuto ed ha radici troppo solide a Torino perché si possa restare perplessi sulla natura del fenomeno francese') and the French behaviour is explicitly denounced as 'fascism', implying that the different causes and cases interrelate meaningfully. Then, 'prof. Franco Antonicelli' reminds the reader that 'noi italiani conosciamo come nascono, come si svolgono ed anche come finiscono queste avventure', and therefore the only truly appropriate reaction is to 'vigilare attentamente in

casa nostra'. The publication by Einaudi of the 'allucinante testimonianza di Henri Alleg sulla tortura' in Algeria is mentioned, 'un documento che i nostri lettori conoscono bene, giacchè ampi stralci sono già apparsi su queste colonne'. Calvino's words receive the amplest space in the columns of *L'unità*, and his reading confirms the threat of this new 'fascism': according to Calvino, there could be no illusion that this was not fascism. Calvino's solution is strongly Marxist: 'L'unica cosa che potrà modificare la situazione francese è soltanto la ripresa della lotta da parte delle masse popolari.' The consensus among the interviewees is that indifference and fatalism have to be fought – and here Calvino does refer to Italy, if only to those who still vote Democrazia Cristiana, 'anche se i pericoli che si corrono nel nostro Paese sono di altra natura'. Calvino calls for a 'controllo popolare diretto', to 'ridare vita alla democrazia dal basso, riformando l'unità antifascista'. This 'dovrebbe essere [...] il primo compito delle organizzazioni operaie'. Except for a brief reference to the fact that 'qui ci troviamo di fronte a gente che applica e teorizza la tortura', Calvino is not quoted as referring much to the concrete situation in Algeria (*L'unità* 3).

An intriguing road that Calvino chose not to take was the one proposed to him by composer Luigi Nono at the end of the 1950s. The source for this episode is a letter by Calvino himself from 1984, addressed to Theodor Vogt. Nono asked Calvino on several occasions and quite insistently to write a libretto on torture in Algeria, inspired by the controversial book *La Question* by Henri Alleg. Calvino did not recognize himself in the 'passione politica' (a note reads: 'cassato l'aggettivo "rivoluzionaria"') of Nono and declined the repeated offer to collaborate on a 'tema così atroce e cupo'. Nono ended up working with Angelo Maria Ripellino instead, producing *Intolleranza* – a piece that has a migrant in Italy as protagonist and describes a wide range of atrocities, including racial violence (as Eugenio Montale's review highlights) (*Lettere* 1524–5; Nono 41–3). A later piece by Nono that struck Calvino was *A Floresta* of 1965–6, for which Nono collaborated with Giovanni Pirelli (Nielinger-Vakil 148–9). Pirelli is probably best known for his books that present the letters of those who were sentenced to death during the Italian (and, later, European) resistance. However, Pirelli was also the first Italian translator of Frantz Fanon, and important in the dissemination of the works of Fanon in Italy. Several of Fanon's books were in fact published by Einaudi (Srivastava, 'Translating Resistance'). The road from (involvement and) interest in the Italian resistance, through the European resistance, to colonial matters and Fanon had been a logical one for Pirelli and the connections between the ideals of the resistance and the colonial struggle continued to come to the fore (Srivastava, *Italian Colonialism* 246–53). A significant instance in which this can be seen is when *The Wretched of the Earth* was awarded the Premio Omega Della Resistenza in 1962. The jury included a writer with an important voice in the delineation of the meaning of the *Resistenza* in post-Second World War Italy: Italo Calvino. Srivastava states of this occasion: 'the prize highlighted the clear continuities between anti-fascist and anti-colonial struggle; according to one journalist, after the awards ceremony, the audience and the jury all stood up and sang the renowned partisan song "Bella Ciao"' (Srivastava, 'Frantz Fanon' 323).

Nonetheless, Calvino seems rather selective in his borrowings from Fanon. In the famous preface of 1964, the retelling of the context in which his debut novel, about the Italian resistance was published – which arguably would have provided the perfect occasion to include ampler contextualization – neither the colonial aspect nor Fanon are to be found. The remarkable influence of this preface makes this a missed opportunity, all the more so because in the same year Calvino does mention Fanon in his *L'antitesi operaia*, a dry, theoretical and relatively unpopular essay. Here he writes about 'nuove geniali teorizzazioni'; what he sees in specific countries and contexts ('coloniali, semicoloniali ed ex coloniali') is precisely the

possibility of an 'antitesi operaia' that mirrors the 'lunga storia dietro di sé' of 'alcuni teorici italiani della "questione meridionale" contro l'industria e il movimento operaio del Nord' (*Saggi* 134).¹¹ As is often the case with Calvino, these reflections build upon earlier essayistic layers. Already in *La belle époque inaspettata* (1961), Calvino writes, predominantly in economic terms, about the situation in the (ex-)colonies, the south and migration, explicitly mentioning the Calabrese that come to Liguria (*Saggi* 91–2). And in the well-known *La sfida al labirinto* (1962) he remarks: 'la classe operaia dell'Ovest non è più sicura d'essere l'*antitesi* fondamentale del capitalismo perché ora le forze decisive sembra possano essere altre (e non più solo i "rapporti di forza" Est-Ovest ma il "terzo mondo" come *antitesi* e problema fondamentale degli altri due)' (*Saggi* 106, emphases mine). The African countries, in this conception, are therefore still largely meaningful just as a possible blank slate, an alternative battleground for a more just society. It is important to note here that, when in the United States, Calvino will point to precisely the 'antitesi [...] propria del meccanismo di pensiero hegeliano e poi marxista' as missing within American society (*Saggi* 2655).

Another encounter with colonial matters is provided in a novel by Mario Tobino that Einaudi published: *Il deserto della Libia*.¹² In spite of the difficult relationship of Tobino with Giulio Einaudi and other important figures from Einaudi (which ended up publishing, relatively unsuccessfully, only two of his books), Calvino's judgment is positive: 'il più bello di tutti [i suoi libri], a mio avviso' he writes to Tobino – although admittedly this in a letter of 25 September 1954 aiming to convince Tobino to return to publishing with Einaudi. When Tobino concedes to the republication of the former *Gettone* in the more prestigious *Coralli* series, Calvino writes a very flattering 'scheda bibliografica' that states: 'è da considerarsi una delle opere più significative della narrativa italiana di questi anni' (Tobino, *Opere* 1170–1). However, there is little evidence that the effects of the novel on Calvino were profound, even though he does mention it in a letter of 1957 (*Lettere* 521).

It is likely that Tobino's debut was a confirmation of what Calvino had learned from Roberto Battaglia's volume on the resistance: written predominantly from the perspective of Italian soldiers, the book tells the story of their (often involuntary) presence in the Libyan desert, of the difficult conditions in which they live, of their longing for Italy. Nevertheless, there are important passages that depict Italians as cruel dominators, showing not only the uselessness but also the unjustness of their presence as 'disumano straniero'. Graziani is mentioned and the myth that Italians in Libya were 'tutti eroi' is firmly denied (Tobino, *Il deserto* 110). Tobino writes of a history that, so he claims, has been completely misunderstood in Italy and which deserves to be written about. Of course, he refers to the largely forgotten Italian soldiers in Libya, but he also reminds the reader that 'Il negro ormai si era liberato e urlava in loro [the local people] senza ritegno' (Tobino, *Il deserto* 115–16). For Tobino, this past is a burden that presses on Italians, even if still too silently (Tobino, *Il deserto* 102). The fact that Calvino read Tobino's book is interesting, even if its influence is difficult to trace.¹³

¹¹ 'Semicolonial', part of the Marxist (and Gramscian) vocabulary, was used early on by W. E. B. du Bois to describe the condition of African Americans in the United States (Rabaka).

¹² *Guerra in camicia nera* by Giuseppe Berto was also read by Calvino. In the Einaudi meeting of 5 May 1954, he calls it a 'libro molto semplice e onesto, dà un quadro abbastanza chiaro dell'assurdità della Guerra in Africa' (*I verbali 1953–1963* 102).

¹³ There is, however, a biographical detail that ought to be mentioned in this context: in 1963 Calvino travelled to Libya for a lecture in Tripoli, entitled *Natura e storia nei romanzi di ieri e di oggi*. This lecture was probably (almost) identical to an essay from 1958 entitled *Natura e storia nel romanzo*. Unfortunately, it is not possible to establish whether Calvino had made any changes to adapt this essay, nor to unearth more details about his stay in Tripoli.

The United States: Civil rights

A (potentially) pivotal moment in Calvino's reflections on civil rights, discrimination and worldwide hierarchies of power was his long trip to the United States in 1959–60. The *Diario americano 1959–1960*, as it was titled when published posthumously – and against Calvino's wishes – is a series of letters to Einaudi containing observations of his travels. But many other remarks on the same theme were published in journals in the years immediately following Calvino's travels.¹⁴ This means that there is a certain overlap, and sometimes whole passages are copied by Calvino from his initial letters to Einaudi. The American insights of Calvino have both been criticized and praised, but they certainly serve to unearth some less-known layers of Calvino's personality and *impegno* (Beynet; Marazzi 134–5). In several instances, the author is confronted with what he calls the 'calderone' or the 'crogiolo di razze' of the United States. San Francisco is a city with one 'giallo' every three or four people you meet. But he concludes, 'E per chi paventasse questa prospettiva, devo dire obiettivamente che essa non ha un aspetto affatto allarmante: una città bianco-gialla ha un'aria di calma, compostezza e pulizia maggiore delle normali città bianche o bianco-negre' (*Saggi* 2598). Almost sixty years later, the language of Calvino here still strikes as very rigorously tripartite 'white-yellow-black', and his 'objective' statements about racial mixture are not enlightening examples of naturalness in relation to this environment. For Calvino, 'la strana mistura di popoli' makes it difficult at times to distinguish 'perché c'era sempre la possibilità d'una gradazione intermedia, d'un meticcio magari con tre o quattro componenti'. There is an undertone of curiosity in Calvino's words through which we can see the newness of this 'mistura' for him. His own 'colour' or context is far from these reflections, though, except for further on in this passage where he asks 'Sarà il Pacifico il nuovo Mediterraneo d'una civiltà mondiale di domani?' There is no satisfactory answer, and certainly not one that addresses the 'mistura'. He limits himself to stating 'Come fedele del Mediterraneo, l'entrare in confidenza col Pacifico mi è difficile' (*Saggi* 2597–9).

Calvino's predecessor during the fascist period, Emilio Cecchi, had mentioned the conditions of life for African Americans, but, even more importantly, he also stressed the 'dimostrazioni, anatemi, falò, pazzie' that he encountered in Harlem in response to the Ethiopian war – in response, in other words, to Italian military aggression. Cecchi also paid attention to what we might anachronistically call the 'fake news' (at least from Cecchi's point of view) of the 'giornali negri' which told 'le più assurde novelle sulla situazione etiopica' (*America amara* 75, 77). This contradiction causes Leavitt to ask the question: 'should Cecchi's sensitivity to the plight of American blacks not also have led him to oppose Italy's incursion in Ethiopia? [...] Cognizant of America's moral failings and rhetorical contradictions, Cecchi might have developed a more consistent and coherent approach to questions of racial justice' (Leavitt 24). In his 1984 article in *La Repubblica*, Calvino was similarly critical of Cecchi's lack of true empathy and identification with the American context (*Saggi* 1038–9).

Calvino himself foregrounds the links between African American culture and its African roots already in his introduction to the *Fiabe africane*, which he ends with a self-reflective search for the presence of white people in the selection: 'E i bianchi? La loro presenza s'avverte di rado in queste fiabe [...] Poi segno sicuro dell'era coloniale, compagno più volte i fucili e "la medicina" per il fucile, cioè la polvere da sparo'. White people are thus coterminous with violence. This is an important remark on Calvino's part, but it is relegated to a preface for a fairy tale collection that is, in itself, a peripheral presence on the book market (a lot more

¹⁴ The material that was published during Calvino's lifetime in different journals (*ABC*, *Tempo Presente*, *L'Illustrazione Italiana*, *L'Europa Letteraria* and *Nuovi Argomenti*) can be found in *Saggi* 2499–679.

marginal, for instance, than Calvino's selection of Italian fairy tales, published a year later) (*Saggi* 1545).

In the *Diario americano* Calvino also mentions the connection and is even surprised when this African heritage is denied or not acknowledged by African Americans. He comments:

Il culto dei negri per il loro passato africano sta nascendo adesso, come tendenza intellettuale, da quando essi cominciano a vedere un legame tra le loro rivendicazioni d'uguaglianza e il movimento d'emancipazione del mondo coloniale. I negri cominciano a capire che l'Africa non è un motivo di vergogna, come sempre i bianchi hanno fatto loro credere, ma può essere un motivo d'orgoglio.

Of course this 'culto' was not that new at all; instead, there was an important and inflamed reaction to the Italian invasion of the only thitherto uncolonized African country in the 1930s, Ethiopia.¹⁵ Although Calvino argues that 'una tale tendenza [...] rischia di diventare una risposta al razzismo in termini razzisti', at the same time it represents 'l'acquisizione del senso d'appartenere a una "storia", da parte di chi ne era stato sempre escluso' – that part, I might add, which emerges from Vittorini's 'sottosuoli' (*Saggi* 2658–9). It should also be noted that Calvino's reference to the risk of a 'risposta al razzismo in termini razzisti' is very similar to Sartre's opinion on *négritude*, that 'le nègre [...] se crée un racisme antiraciste' (Orphée xl). Sartre pointed out the limits of such an attitude that attempts to positively embrace otherness in the form of *négritude*. Fanon, in turn, strongly criticized Sartre for this stance, responding in his *Peau noire masques blancs* (1952) that the abstract dialectics of the 'hégélien-né' [Sartre] did not leave the possibility for a more concrete form of resistance to the straightjacket of white society (*Peau noire* 107–8).

Without a doubt, the strongest push towards self-reflectiveness occurs when Calvino goes to Montgomery, Alabama, to meet Martin Luther King and other representatives of the civil rights movement, but also those of the opposite, openly racist, white side. In his letters this immediately becomes clear: 'Montgomery, Alabama 6 marzo. Questa è una giornata che non dimenticherò finché campo. Ho visto cosa è il razzismo, il razzismo di massa accettato come una delle regole fondamentali della società' (*Eremita* 115–16). This reaction is common among European intellectuals travelling to the United States in these years (Pivano, 'Letteratura negra' 155). Calvino knows the background; he mentions the recent bus strike, the closing of public parks and the Ku Klux Klan (*Eremita* 116, 118). He has seen a 'comico nero' perform on the issue of the 'questione razziale' in New York, has read 'invettive contro i negri' in a toilet in a bar in Cleveland and has seen (but not appreciated) the 'paternalismo inter-razzista' to promote 'attività culturale commune tra bianchi e colored', through theatre, museum exhibitions, artisanship and education (*Eremita* 47, 66–9). In Montgomery he witnesses a (failed) instance of black silent protest, when after a service in the Baptist church those present cannot leave in silent procession as planned, but instead have to move away in little groups while being taunted and harassed by a waiting white crowd – a process that is overseen and guided by police forces.¹⁶ These pages present Calvino as involved, almost despite himself, in what happens around him. Here, he cannot simply be the 'allegorist' – a (positive) judgment about Calvino's American writings that is frequently used (Leavitt 16, 18, 21–2; Raveggi). He struggles openly with his stance and even his identity, shifting position

¹⁵ The international and, to a lesser extent, African American and Ethiopian reaction to the Italian invasion received ample attention in *L'unità* in 1935 and 1936.

¹⁶ The setting of the Baptist church had also been important in the anti-imperialist protests in Harlem, when the 'Abyssinian Baptist Church literally rocked with the spirit of militant struggle against Italian fascism' (Bergin, *African American* 226).

continuously, betraying the unrest and the uncertainty that the heated atmosphere around him produces. He emphasizes more than once his role as an outsider, 'uno sconosciuto straniero', 'un europeo', armed with an 'elasticità d'atteggiamenti – prima dote del viaggiatore che vuole inglobare in breve tempo il massimo di conoscenze possibili', who wants above all to 'restare a vedere fino in fondo', even if he does not identify with the 'ceffi sempre più patibolari', the 'teppaglia' that surrounds him (*Saggi* 2512–16). This perspective entitles Calvino to certain judgments that convey a sense that this is first and foremost a specifically American problem: 'La cosa che più colpisce un europeo è come una situazione del genere sussista in una nazione che per tre quarti non è segregazionista' (*Saggi* 2518).

The first image is that of poor, ignorant, racist whites (all these adjectives serve to distance these people from Calvino himself, who is of course the focalizer of the description), people of whom their racism can even be understood up to a certain point, since their misery provokes a reaction which is not incomprehensible, even if reproachable, for Calvino. But soon he starts to differentiate, to appreciate that he finds himself in a situation in which mere curiosity or impartiality is simply impossible. The police are unmasked by Calvino as anything but impartial (which is the way they are described by the newspapers the day after): they treat the white people present much more indulgently and mildly than the black bystanders, who are confronted in a more aggressive and demeaning manner. But the most disturbing presence, for Calvino, are the 'borghesi dall'aria tranquilla, famigliole coi bambini [...] fotografi dilettanti', who are characterized not by fanatical racial hate, but by 'derisione mista a curiosità e sorpresa, come vedessero delle scimmie che chiedono diritti civili. Pare che nessuno qui avesse mai supposto che i negri potessero mettersi in testa queste cose.' In a crescendo, Calvino sees this detached superiority as the most terrible form of racism, 'quest'assoluto razzismo nella bonarietà'. These bourgeois whites clearly represent, among those present, the group with which Calvino intuitively (and socio-culturally) identifies, as he himself recognizes. The shock is therefore doubly acute:

Ogni tanto mi pare di vedere tra i bianchi un volto che non è né feroce né allegro: forse – penso – è uno venuto qui come me solo per rendersi conto, per sapere. Ma ecco che un mascalzone bianco lancia una battuta oscena, infligge un'umiliazione a un negro: e la faccia dello sconosciuto s'illumina, una risata sale, turpe, alle sue labbra.

The effect this produces in Calvino is devastating: 'Ora mi vergogno d'essere bianco. Ma devo restare fino in fondo [...] Anche quando vorrei sprofondare sotto terra dalla vergogna e dall'impotenza' (*Saggi* 2512–16).

After this, the continuous moving between two opposite sides produces ever more unease in Calvino, even if he has committed himself to being as malleable and detached as possible. Immediately after the scene just described, he has an appointment with a rich (white) lady, a member of one of the best-known families in town. He is still 'con i nervi tesi' and has difficulty appreciating the tour that she provides of the most important places in town. The woman is someone who, so he confesses, 'in un altro momento giudicherei simpatica', but now he cannot be but silent at certain remarks concerning what happened earlier that Sunday:

questi negri... ma pensi un po', i poverini!... si sono messi in testa... ah, ah... di avere eguali diritti! [...] e rideva, sicura, come sempre sono assurdamente sicuri i bianchi del Sud, d'avermi dalla sua parte, di farmi condividere il suo sarcasmo, di sentirmi complice. "Ma ora glie n'è passata la voglia" ... – ride. (*Saggi* 2522–3)¹⁷

¹⁷ In the letters, Calvino adds that the southern whites are not used to this courage of African Americans, and that 'non sanno dire altro che ci sono infiltrazioni comuniste' (*Eremita* 118).

Calvino does not hide his consternation, his passionate feeling about what he has witnessed, which has forced him to become involved and abandon his role as impartial outsider. This is also evident from how he writes on what Martin Luther King has made possible. King provided a dignity and a style for the African American cause, allowing the proponents of civil rights to go from a mere passive resistance towards a more dignified manner: 'pur sconfitti e dileggiati, avevano uno stile che sanciva la loro superiorità, di fronte all'informe sguaiataggine bianca.' Moreover, and more importantly even, Calvino attributes to King the merit of having the 'negri del Sud' understand that 'essi non sono soli, legandosi ai motivi morali del movimento di liberazione, dei popoli ex-coloniali' (*Saggi* 2519).

Nonetheless, in spite of the important and seemingly heartfelt insights that Calvino gathered from this occasion, the main thread of his analysis is economic and class based as, for him, this surpasses the black–white dichotomy: 'la situazione vera che fa da sfondo alla questione razziale: un'economia povera, da paese sottosviluppato, senza prospettive né per bianchi né per i negri.'¹⁸ Calvino's pages are interspersed with references to underdevelopment, comparisons to Lucania, Calabria, the borgate romane, Pietralata, Alberobello.¹⁹ The implication is thus that the situation is hardly that different, except for the fact that 'nelle zone sottosviluppate italiane non puoi sfuggire alle responsabilità, al rimorso di far parte di un mondo privilegiato; qui puoi dimenticartene. Il segreto dell'America sta tutto in questo oblio dei rimorsi' (*Saggi* 2511). Instead of reflecting more deeply on matters of race and colonialism with respect to the Italian context, Calvino projects a more abstract, largely Marxist, reading onto the American situation. From this perspective, the 'indiani' are advantaged by the 'coscienza sporca degli americani bianchi' and their revenues from tourism (*Saggi* 1511). The phrase 'coscienza sporca' echoes the 'cattiva coscienza' which, as we have seen, was used by Calvino only two years before in reference to Italy's presence in Ethiopia. But there does not seem to be a lot of 'coscienza sporca' in Calvino, in spite of the human drama that does reach him and the fact that he recognizes his whiteness and the meaning of the colour of his skin, at least in this context.

As in the earlier case of Richard Wright, what ultimately counts for Calvino here is not so much blackness but poverty, 'l'impalpabile colore della miseria'. For Calvino, 'il colore della povertà negli Stati Uniti è rosso bruciato, come i fabbricati di mattoni dei quartieri più umili. Oppure è la tinta sbiadita delle villette di legno ormai in cattivo stato' of the 'quartieri fangosi' (*Saggi* 2578). This is the opposite of the other colour of America, 'quello veramente suo [...] il color parcheggio [...] il colore soporoso e sfumato della prosperità' (*Saggi* 2501). This is also what he, as an outsider, reproaches both ends of the spectrum, stating that the racial question 'hypnotizes' them: 'non si sa parlare d'altro; la politica ha solo quel tema; i negri paiono escludere la possibilità d'inquadrare i loro problemi in un più vasto piano di rinnovamento sociale e produttivo' (*Saggi* 2525). Wright also wrote about the distinction between writing 'as a negro' and writing 'as a white person', something that Fernanda Pivano discussed already in 1948, precisely to argue against the white-centric recurring cliché that 'i negri "non sanno parlare che di negri"' (Pivano 143). Nonetheless, for Calvino, this is why 'di tutti, il dramma che si sente più forte è quello degli uomini di sinistra del Sud, dei sostenitori dei diritti dei negri, tenuti lontani dalla società bianca come traditori, e naturalmente inclini a vedere la situazione nella luce più disperata' (*Ottimista* 187–8). The similarities with the 'speciali civiltà delle colonie' in Africa are evident to Calvino (or even more so to 'un mio amico francese che è stato per anni funzionario in Africa'), but, nonetheless, in the United States 'manca l'elemento

¹⁸ Cf. 'L'incancrenirsi del problema razziale nel "profondo Sud" è comprensibile solo in questo quadro d'arretratezza e stasi economica', p. 2524. See also pp. 2605–6, 2674–5.

¹⁹ The other way around, at an Einaudi meeting on Goffredo Fofi's *Un meridionale a Torino*, Calvino's negative reading of the book ends with a comparison with the United States: 'Il modello di questa fusione è l'America [...] dove è accaduto ben altro, e più tragicamente', *I verbali 1953–1963*, p. 810.

del popolo colonizzato, cioè la principale caratteristica, contraddizione, vitalità e significato di tutte le colonie. Sopravvive solo in alcuni luoghi [...] ma senza *forza dialettica*, cioè senza futuro, quasi a identificarsi con la muta enigmatica natura' (*Saggi* 2549) [emphasis mine].

Some naïveté on Calvino's part is also undeniable. The solution that he offers to American friends whenever the racial question is discussed is the light-hearted 'decretare che si facciano solo matrimoni misti' (*Ottimista* 210). The 'pathos negro' is something he mentions even if only to declare its absence (reminding us of Cecchi and Pavese), and when he admires the 'tremila negri' in a student meeting in a church (Martin Luther King is among the speakers), among which Calvino is 'il solo bianco', he confirms some clichés: they have 'visi diversissimi tra loro' (as if this ought to come as a surprise), some marked by an 'antico torpore', and the women, 'dai nobili lineamenti di gazzelle intellettuali', are half animal, half rational human being (*Saggi* 2521, 2631, 2650). But the most striking aspect, the most conspicuous lacuna, is to be found in the aftermath: after Calvino's return to Italy there is no mention of what he has seen, of Martin Luther King, of the struggle for civil rights, of any of this.²⁰ The episode remains solely there, published only in *ABC*, the context is only American and once back home it seems a distant echo. In this light, his mention in the *Diario* of a 'rimozione', or at least of an aspect of that day in Montgomery that he did not catch himself but learns of the day after from the newspapers, is intriguing. Whereas he had formed the image of 'una lotta tra le razze totale, di un razzismo accettato come la regola fondamentale della società', instead, apparently, that day there was also a 'gruppetto di bianchi che parteggiava per i negri' (*Saggi* 2518). Calvino, however, did not notice them – nor does he make this choice himself, by returning to what he has seen. Thus, he does not, self-reflectively, add to a putative 'impegno nero'.

From perceived silence to true silence?

The reflections of Calvino discussed above pertain to a specific period; they more or less coincide with his communist phase and clearly diminish with his move to Paris, going from a marginal discourse, easy to overlook but nonetheless there – in journals, letters, travelogues or mere presence as jury member or 'witness' – to something that comes very close to a total silence. Angelo del Boca's first influential book on the Italian colonial wars stems from 1965, two years before Calvino's move to Paris, but also at a moment that is often read as a turning point in Calvino's career, especially in terms of his type of *impegno* (Burns). Furthermore, around the same moment, more writings start to appear in Italy on civil rights in the United States. The move from reflections and narrations on resistance to involved participation in the study of colonialism was shared by several Italian intellectuals connected to Einaudi in the post-war years, such as Pirelli, Battaglia and, of course, Del Boca. Calvino himself reflected on colonial issues, as well as on civil rights, coming into contact with these topics and moving between different environments in which they were discussed. These reflections were part of a broader, if hesitant, encounter of Italian intellectuals with both colonial and civil rights issues, and show a willingness that is undeniable but also clearly limited. Their reflection did not necessarily involve self-reflection. Probably unconsciously, Calvino strays and stays within the safe boundaries of an abstract, universal rhetoric that does not really reckon with the deepest roots and repercussions of inequality in the form of racism or colonialism. The Marxist lens proves useful up to a certain point, simplifying and ironing out inequality across

²⁰ When Guido Davico Bonino, in an Einaudi meeting of 18 september 1963, with Calvino present, brings to bear the fact that 'alcuni suoi amici chiedono perché non si fa un "libro bianco" [a book series] sul razzismo in America', a note reads 'Informarsi da chi sono uscite le prediche di Luther King' (*I verbali 1953–1963* 796). King will be published in Italy only from 1968 onwards, and not by Einaudi (whereas Malcolm X will appear in Einaudi's catalogue with several volumes) (Piccinato).

class lines. It does not genuinely perceive the perpendicular colour line that complicates and fractures class distinctions, that probes ethics, morals and values in a much more embodied manner. Glimmers of awareness can certainly be observed in the writings of Calvino, Vittorini and other leftist (Einaudi) intellectuals at the time, but they are more refractions of what was happening in the world than true self-reflections that take into account not only one's own stance, but one's place in the world: the deceptively simple acknowledgement of where and of whom one is born, in front of which societal mirror. If the 'carri armati' in Hungary cause Calvino to formally leave the Italian Communist Party, his reaction to the black protests in the United States shows that there was no such clear rupture of his Marxist framework. In a similar manner, the Italian tanks of twenty years earlier had an equally devastating impact as those in Hungary, but the binary reasoning in terms of fascist/anti-fascist, communist/capitalist, resistance/compliance proved yet too strong to allow for a different, more pluralistic historical narrative.

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