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'White queens' and 'Nubian fiends': Early Italian American fiction and the problem of colonialism

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*The article analyses the transatlantic influence of colonialist discourse regarding Italian colonial wars in East Africa, by focusing on literary texts. Research on Italian-language newspapers and political activism in America (1890s-1930s) has shown that the Italian community in America was sensitive to Italian colonialism, and often endorsed it to ameliorate the public image of Italians in America. This significant link between emigration and colonialism as part of Italian identity abroad has not been explored so far in its literary dimension. In the emerging Italian American literature, two works by key authors reflected on the impact of colonialist propaganda in the Italian America. Emanuel Carnevali's 'Tale One' (1919) centers on his aunt's experience in Eritrea around the time of the battle of Adwa (1896). The oral narrative that comes from that experience presents many elements of racist colonialist discourse in its depiction of Africans. However, Carnevali re-uses such imagery in a text that makes use of its migrant vantage point to criticise Italian nationalism and the established gender roles of the time. Pietro di Donato's novel *Christ in Concrete* (1939), on the other hand, features a chapter in which he depicts the impact of the nationalist propaganda centering on the battle of Adwa on the Italian working-class community in New York. The author elaborates on the colonialist discourse to expose and ridicule nationalism, in his general call for immigrant workers to fight for their rights and dignity in America. The analysis of these two texts, which rewrote and challenged the central elements of nationalist propaganda, offers a unique chance to understand the complex relationship between nationalist discourse and diasporic communities, in a textual form—migrant literature—that by definition re-uses and combines elements from different cultural spaces to make sense of the experience of displacement.*

Cultural and political connections between Italian emigration to the Americas in the decades following the 1861 national unification, and Italian colonialism in Africa in the same historical period are several and significant. Colonialism had an impact on Italy's international image, and consequently on the self-perception of Italians in America, who responded to colonialist discourse and propaganda. This article examines the reception of this discourse by two Italian American literary texts, with a view to considering some issues faced by a migrant literature in its embryonic phase: namely, a dependence on the historical context of emigration, an uneasy relationship with the migrant community and the difficulties of establishing a dialogue between migrant authors in the absence of a recognised canon.

Writing twenty years apart from each other, Emanuel Carnevali (in 1919) and Pietro di Donato (in 1939) existed at different points of a continuum that for decades linked the colonial enterprises of the newly unified nation with the painful issue of emigration. The 'immediate goal' of colonial conquest was to 'escape from Italy's subordinate position on the continent' (Ben-Ghiat 2006, p. 386); colonial endeavors were in turn 'bound up with the state attempts to manage the drama of emigration' (Ben-Ghiat and Hom 2015, p. 6). Giovanni Pascoli's famous 1911 speech in favor of the Italian conquest of Libya started by enumerating the difficulties that countless emigrated Italian workers faced. For Pascoli—as for many others—colonial expansion meant an Italian redemption from international humiliation, turning emigrants into colonisers: 'Là i lavoratori saranno, non l'opre, mal pagate mal pregiate mal nomate, degli stranieri, ma, nel senso più alto e forte delle parole, agricoltori sul suo, sul terreno della patria' (Pascoli 1911).¹ There was a widespread belief that the exploitation of overseas colonies would both attest to Italy's status as a new international power and redeem what was perceived as the shame of emigration. However, while the idea of 'emigration packaged as colonialism' was successful, it largely stayed on the rhetorical level, as 'conditions at home were not alleviated and little attention was paid to the character of those emigrating masses' (Verdicchio 1997, p. 49). Italian emigrants received this propaganda within the context of their own contested and often subaltern status in Italy and America.

In 1911 (the same year as Pascoli's speech), the President-appointed Dillingham Commission on Immigration published its findings in the United States, 'separating southern Italians from northern Europeans and linking them with perceived darker races' (Vellon 2010, p. 27). As noted by Verdicchio in *Bound by Distance* (1997), this means that Southern Italians were caught between a position of subordination in Italy, and racial discrimination in the US. Therefore, while Italian immigrants initially had but a vague consciousness of the color line in the United States, they 'quickly learned that to be white meant having the ability to avoid many forms of violence and humiliation' (Guglielmo 2003, p. 3). Italian Americans progressively adopted a position that would emphasise their whiteness to escape discrimination. The Italian American intelligentsia and institutions employed 'costly narrative strategies of denial (of particular aspects of Italian-American history, for

example, as well as of the proximity of the dark-skinned other in that history)' and 'projection (holding the dark-skinned other responsible for social forces that threatened the community)' as well as explicit disassociation (Orsi 1992, p. 339).

In this view, Italy's colonial enterprises in Africa often had the role of catalysing the expectations, identifications, perceptions and divisions of Italians in America. A recent analysis of Italian-language press in the United States has underlined how references to Italian colonial wars often fulfilled a two-fold role in newspapers, directed at both fellow migrants and host community:

It is not at all inconceivable that the rhetoric of Italian civilizing missions in Africa ameliorated immigrant self-consciousness, as well as informed a concerted effort to impress American detractors who questioned the racial suitability of Italians. (Vellon 2014, p. 47)

In this atmosphere, the 1896 battle of Adwa, where the Ethiopian army defeated the Italian troops and halted the conquest of the region for decades, catalysed much of the nationalist (and anti-nationalist) sentiment in the years to come, both in Italy and among Italian Americans. The defeat was a devastating blow to Italian colonial aspirations, leading the Crispi government to resign, and changing the course of Italian colonial projects (Makki 2008, p. 741). In decades to come, politicians and journalists often used the shock of Adwa to stimulate a nationalist consciousness in the Italian public. That also was the case among the Italian communities of America. For example, in 1911 'the New York City-based Italian-language daily *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* hailed Italy's initial victories [...] in a colonial campaign to occupy Turkish-held Libya as a vindication for Adowa' (Luconi 2007, p. 472). Adwa was rooted in the public consciousness not only at home, but also across the Atlantic: how did the first Italian American authors put this image to use in the creation of a diasporic consciousness?

The elements of colonialist discourse that were popular in Italian American communities in the years between Adwa and World War II also reached two authors, who incorporated this imagery in their fiction. Emanuel Carnevali's 'Tale One' from the series 'Tales of a Hurried Man' (1919) built upon his family's experience in Eritrea and Ethiopia, while Pietro di Donato's novel *Christ in Concrete* (1939) included a discussion of Adwa as orally transmitted by Italian bricklayers in New York. It is important to note, before we start, that these two texts do not explicitly interact with each other: by the time di Donato was writing, Carnevali was back in Italy and largely forgotten in the American milieu. However, their use of colonial imagery reveals the permeability of colonialist rhetoric and imagery in the Italian American context from a different point of view, as well as the way in which authors acted on the social and political reality surrounding them.

These passages were only a part of their authors' interpretations of the role of Italian migrant writers, a part of their response to the racial tensions of America and to the challenges of being Italian in New York.

They represent only an episode of Carnevali's rebellion against the constraints of Northern Italy and attempt to establish himself as a learned American author; and a part of di Donato's epic of the Southern Italian worker in America. While not focusing preeminently on Italian colonialism, the two texts make use of narratives and discourses of colonialism that were available in Italy and America at the time. They present some differences, but both used irony to rework elements of nationalistic discourse (the shock of Adwa, the racist depiction of Africans) into a critique of bourgeois nationalism and propaganda.

Carnevali's Subversive Use of Orientalism: 'Tales of a Hurried Man—Tale One' (1919)

Emanuel Carnevali's 'Tale One' appeared in 1919, the first of a series of 'Tales of a Hurried Man'. It featured in *The Little Review*, one of the most important outlets for modernist writers in America—the same issue featured entries by Ezra Pound, Sherwood Anderson and William Carlos Williams. It came in a brief moment of literary consecration for the New York-based twenty-two-year-old Florentine who could not speak English only five years before. Carnevali had emigrated in 1914 at the age of sixteen, and after a few years spent doing menial jobs in New York had decided to start writing poetry in English. His first poems came out in 1918, and in those years he also wrote short fiction and criticism, as well as translating some of his Italian contemporaries (Papini, Palazzeschi, Govoni) into English. When 'Tale One' came out, he was also about to take on the job of assistant editor at the prestigious magazine *Poetry* in Chicago. He was known for his direct, strong and colloquial style of poetry inspired by Whitman, as well as for his controversial and uncompromising attacks on the bourgeoisie.

'Tale One' is about the author's aunt Melania Piano, a woman who played an important part in Carnevali's education, taking care of him after the death of his mother Matilde Piano. The narrative, however, is mostly about Melania's troubled life, as she went from being the daughter of a wealthy army official in Africa to dying in poverty in Italy, ostracised for having had two children without being married. The narrative put the American readers in contact with gender issues of the Italian society of the time, as well as with images of Italian colonialism in the Horn of Africa. Carnevali's treatment of Italian colonial history is evidently indebted to mainstream representations of Africa and race that were circulating around the time of Italy's first colonial expeditions, and that Melania communicated to the author. However, a closer look at Carnevali's choice of imagery, as inserted within the context of the author's work, reveals that while he appeared oblivious of the race issues inherent in his aunt's tales, he subtly used the imagery to subvert nationalist rhetoric. Carnevali was not, as Pietro di Donato or Arturo Giovannitti, a politically active author; yet his works often present an ironic critique of nationalism and national feeling, together with a strong polemic against bourgeois society in Italy and America.

'Tale One' opens with the narrator looking at the photographs of his grandparents, and it appears to reproduce the discourse of *fin-de-siècle* Italy on colonial expeditions, construing images of the soldiers and explorers as adventurers in a dangerous, uncivilised territory. His grandfather appears to have 'the heart of a knight; crowned with the well-balanced smile of the successful man' (Carnevali 1919, p. 16). Colonel Federico Piano's life is described as 'an adventure in gallantry—women and war' (Carnevali 1919, p. 16). This stereotypical portrayal of the coloniser as an adventurer, by appealing to the vocabulary of ancient heroism ('knight', 'gallantry') precludes Carnevali's use of Orientalist images to describe Italian colonialism in Africa. Both Carnevali's description of his maternal grandfather and his use of colonial imagery are better understood, however, within the context of his move away from Italy and from his family.

Reportedly, Carnevali emigrated because his father had come to know of his homosexual relationship with a classmate. He always showed his distrust of the Italian bourgeoisie, of national pride and of father figures. In his posthumously published *Autobiography*, he would confess to stealing money that he had collected as a student for the 'Society for the Redemption of Trent and Trieste', claiming that this money was 'almost all [Italy] gave to [him]' (Carnevali 1967, p. 61). Recalling his departure for New York, he stated categorically: 'I felt no great sorrow or nostalgia, for Italy meant my father to me...' (Carnevali 1967, p. 63). Buonomo (2003, pp. 54–55) explains Carnevali's emigration in terms of an Oedipal rebellion: 'where could a young man who had repudiated his father go if not a nation that was, by definition, 'young' and whose very birth had originated from a violent rebellion against its fatherland?' Emigration gave Carnevali a new linguistic medium and a new audience. Writing in English allowed him to use irony and polemical force to comment on the dominant nationalist discourse in Italy. English was not only his medium of choice, but the instrument that freed him from an oppressive fatherland (in the sense of father-land) and gave him the possibilities of speaking against the aspects of modern life that he did not tolerate. At the end of 'Tale One', English makes the difference between Melania who dies helpless and alone, and Emanuel who becomes an American writer.

At the beginning of the story, though, English is mainly the medium through which he reproduces the Italian colonialist discourse of Melania's youth. Major historical events from the wars of colonial conquest find their way into Carnevali's story, heavily filtered by a racist discourse shaping Italian visions of Africa at the time. This sentence summarises the image of the African colonial experience as Melania told it to a young Carnevali:

She had lived well and happily in Africa, so she used to tell us children, all beautiful tales of hyenas, pestilence, devoted negro servants and Ras Alula and Ras somebody else. (Carnevali 1919, p. 16)

The oral nature of these accounts turns colonial violence into 'beautiful tales' for the entertainment of children. This passage provides an insight into how often Italians back home were exposed not to the reality of the colonial enterprise, but to a colonialist fantasy. Similar accounts were central in the construction of a sense of pride at home: 'from travelers' tales, and not only from great institutions [...], colonies were created and ethnocentric perspectives secured' (Said 1977, p. 117). The colonial enterprise gained much of its significance in a narrative which was brought back to the imperial centre and informed colonialist self-perception. During Carnevali's childhood, Italian children were exposed to colonialist rhetoric, as textbooks included increasingly more information on the Italian expeditions, and Africa was represented in Italian schools 'in terms of the Orientalist perspectives adopted by other Europeans at the time, in which civilisation and barbarism were crudely juxtaposed' (Pes 2013, p. 602). Looking at Melania's oral narrative in relation to contemporary propaganda, the passage underlines how the public usually came to know about colonial reality through 'beautiful tales'. It is interesting at this point how Carnevali assimilated and re-used this imagery, seemingly oblivious of the racist connotations but at the same time intent on denouncing the nationalist, upper-class idea of Italian society.

An Orientalist perspective is born first and foremost as mechanics for conceptualisation. It originates in the European coloniser's capacity to 'make out of every observable detail a generalisation and out of every generalisation an immutable law about the Oriental nature, temperament, mentality, custom, or type' and most importantly to 'transmute living reality into the stuff of texts' (Said 1977, p. 86). The mention of 'devoted negro servants' seems to come straight out of a turn-of-the-century adventure novel, so blatantly generic it is, oblivious of both the ethnic complexity of Africa and of the actual interplay between coloniser and colonised. Tropes such as 'hyenas' and 'Negro servants' contribute to the atmosphere of African exoticism, making stories of danger, violence and war safe for children and even reassuring.

The mention of Ras Alula—one of the most important military leaders in Ethiopia during the Italian defeats at Dogali (1887) and Adwa (1896)—brings the concrete reality of history to the fore, in a covert way. Carnevali's irony turns the name of one of the key figures in the Ethiopian wars into a half-remembered exotic name from a children's tale, coupling it with 'Ras somebody else'. The interplay of military violence, national humiliation and colonial domination is not obliterated, but exposed as exotic fantasy in the multiple passages from reality to rhetoric, and from Italian oral narrative to English fiction. This last passage is crucial as it represents the decisive liberation of the text from its Italian constraints and the possibility of re-using it for the migrant author's concerns.

The main concern in 'Tale One's' critique of nationalism, made possible by translingual emigration, is not race but gender. A particularly

relevant episode in this sense is the one about a 'famous explorer' who fell in love with Melania Piano in Africa. The fact that, according to Carnevali, 'there is a monument erected to his memory in the city of Parma' (1919, p. 16), may lead to identify this figure with Vittorio Bottego, since Parma dedicated a statue to him as early as 1907 (Von Henneberg 2004, p. 45). Bottego was present in Eritrea in the years 1887-1897, first as a military official and then as an explorer (Bono 1971), and may indeed have met Melania Piano. It is not relevant whether the two may have had a relationship or not, as Carnevali's retelling of his aunt's stories implies.

Through Melania's relationship with the explorer, Carnevali reworks gender constraints in early-twentieth-century Italy. Melania Piano is described as a clever, independent woman who defied the conventions of her time. Her intelligence grants her power over men, at least in the colonial setting:

He gave her a doll once, on her nineteenth birthday, and she was very angry. He told her once: "You are not attractive, Miss, but your mind has infinite beauty and I beg to let me take you for my wife". But she was too young and a bit too happy to understand a thing like that. And he was naive, and she was not, she was very well-read... (Carnevali 1919, p. 16)

Melania refuses the explorer's courtship and his attempt to constrain her within established gender roles through the gift of a doll. The colonial setting, though fixed in its racial hierarchisation, represents an unexpected chance to reverse established gender roles: in the passage, Carnevali often repeats how 'well-read' Melania was and how this made her more emotionally and socially able to function than the explorer ('he was the scientist kind, earnest and inelegant'). This links Melania to the other 'Italian middle-class women' who 'found in the African colonies a space for political participation, while mobility and racial superiority provided an empowering means of subjective identification' not always available in Italy (Lombardi Diop 2005, p. 145). An analysis of the memoirs of another Italian woman who lived in Eritrea in the same time span, Rosalia Pianavia Vivaldi, revealed a sense of empowerment associated with the African experience:

'Liberation' and 'freedom' constitute recurrent motifs in Pianavia Vivaldi's travelogue, where they are usually linked to the climate and landscape of 'Africa' and to the relaxation of social restrictions associated with this environment. (Polezzi 2006, p. 197)

Yet, in Melania's case, this independence caused her demise once she came back to Italy. She may have been empowered by the colonial norms of Eritrea, but then she fell victim to the strict gender roles of her time. Abandoned by the father of her first child, lacking support from her own dead father, Melania resorts to manual work and becomes progressively ostracised. The narrative does not imply disapproval of her moral conduct; rather, Carnevali remarks on several occasions on her pride and determination. Comparing Melania's Italian demise with

her previous colonial exploits, Carnevali builds on the same colonial fantasy that she had employed in her tales of Africa:

She was proud. She never forgave the man. Because she was honest and hard she wasn't a loose girl, and she gave herself for love. She was honest and magnificently aloof and the negro servants in Africa thought she was a great Queen, the great White Queen: the way she was majestic and sweetly hard with them. (Carnevali 1919, p. 17)

Melania's representation as 'the great White Queen' seems to allude to an empowerment. This empowerment however depended on colonial power relations, rather than an actual advancement in gender roles in Italian society. In this fantasy of empowerment, the 'White Queen' is complemented by the childlike 'negro servants'. Czajka observed that, while the Orientalist tradition tended to represent members of the Orient as 'often barbaric and savage', but at the same time possessing 'exoticism, eccentricity, sensuality and fascinating queerness', a similar tradition characterised Africans 'exclusively by their baseness, infantile behavior and psychological immaturity' (2005, p. 126). There is an interesting paradox in how the very context that empowered Melania, bringing her beyond the appointed role of a woman in late nineteenth-century Italy, depended on the violent racial discourse of colonialism. In this narrative, as in colonialist discourse, 'the indigene is a semiotic pawn on a chess board under the control of the white signmaker' (Goldie 1995, p. 232). Carnevali mimics the rules of the colonialist game, but he complicates the colonialist narrative and assumptions in the mismatch between Melania's aspirations and her final demise.

It is worth noting at this point that Carnevali never resolves or redeems the racist imagery in his story: the 'negro servants' remain voiceless throughout, stuck in the same type of imagery that the coloniser's gaze created for them. Carnevali's lack of empathy towards the African people in the story can probably be ascribed to the fact that he was not accustomed to consider racial relations outside the discourses that both Italy and America presented to him. There are a few hints in his works that point to the fact that probably Carnevali had, before going to America, no more knowledge of racial relations than the second-hand narrative of his aunt, and an Italian discourse that was fed by Orientalist, exotic imagery. A passage of his *Autobiography*, relating to a time that was only a few years before 'Tale One', highlights how non-European individuals appeared completely new to him:

In one rooming-house there was a negress, a real negress with enormous lips, white or yellow eyes, and pink palms to her hands which seemed to me very strange. (Carnevali 1967, p. 86)

In the passage, blackness is a new thing for the newcomer, something 'strange' and part of the unfamiliar, uncanny New World. There is no aversion in this scene, but wonder at seeing for the first time a person whose existence had until then been relegated to exotic tales. It is one of the many images that he chose to epitomise the encounter between

the diverse, chaotic and often incomprehensible reality of Manhattan, and a young man from a small-town, shabby-genteel Italian background.

Carnevali was probably aware of living in a society where—among many other ethnicities—Italians occupied a certain slot in the racial hierarchy, and African Americans another. However, his critique of the establishment in those years never addresses the racial gap, but rather gender norms and social hierarchy. In 'Tale Three' for example, Carnevali speaks for all outsiders, lashing against the living conditions that alienate and relegate certain categories to the margins of society:

I am a roomer. In a furnished room house. One of the homes of the homeless, of the orphans, the whores, the pimps, the poor spinsters, the poor bachelors, the homosexuals, the young stenogs who won't make good, waiters and doormen, the homes of the useless and the strangers. (Carnevali 1920, p. 54)

Carnevali mostly overlooked the racial issue within a social critique that was never intended to appeal to specific groups (not even Italian Americans, as we shall see) but built on his own predicament and anti-bourgeois aspirations instead.

At the end of 'Tale One,' after a touching description of Melania's death, Carnevali makes a connection between what he learned from Melania Piano's life and his experience of American society. The two things are linked by gender-based domestic violence in a bourgeois context:

But I read the newspapers, I see rouge-and-powder faces and sometimes, as I pass alongside your houses with my hurried heart for a moment attentive to your noises, I hear children, being beaten, yelling; and today I have seen one of those women whose eyes have ceased to look at the world. (Carnevali 1919, p. 22)

Carnevali's comment on gender-based violence is that it is 'Melany Piano's curse that is working out', and that she herself had 'been accursed, also, by a thousand other women like her, who had lived before'. He hints at a universal experience of violence and suffering hiding behind the façade of the Western world of the early twentieth century, affecting all the weaker members of society.

'Tale One' was an important point in the development of Carnevali's anti-bourgeois critique and it drew from his Italian background. In contrast to the society that had suffocated outsiders like Melania Piano, Carnevali exalted the expressive possibilities given by literature, especially because, as a migrant writer, he felt free from social constraints and ready to begin anew:

I'm on a journey beyond you and your things, you and your colors and words. On the mountains, over this city and that, I am the bird that has no nest, I am the happy stranger, I'm sailing under the sun. (Carnevali 1919, p. 22)

'Tale One' ends with a moment of poetic liberation from the national ideal. Several elements in the short story present a particularly progressive world-view in the sense of national belonging and gender roles, representing a step towards overcoming restrictive views of society. In the wider context of Carnevali's radical beliefs, he takes rhetorical elements of nationalist propaganda and exposes them for their empty, rhetorical nature. By discussing colonial rhetoric as 'beautiful tales' told to children, fantasies of 'White Queens' and 'devoted negro servants' and half-remembered names of leaders ('Ras somebody else'), the text shows both their capacity for permeating the public's imagination and their nature of propaganda. Carnevali's irony exposes nationalist discourses that were penetrating the Italy of his childhood as well as the Italian America of his youth. The text on the other hand does not explicitly address the question of race, other than through the ironic representation of the same colonialist discourses.

Another notable absence in this picture is that of the author's fellow Italian Americans, who in the same years 'yielded to jingoistic feelings' over World War I and the conquest of Libya (Luconi 2007, p. 474). Carnevali's attitude towards the other Italian immigrants was, after all, rather complex: writing mostly for the American literary circles, he sometimes attempted to defend his compatriots, but tended to do so from a perceived position of intellectual superiority, and a very little degree of interest in the communal dimension of Italians in America. In another one of his 'Tales of a Hurried Man' he wrote:

I could have written a tremendously happy treatise to show why the wops break one and every law of the United States. But they don't—and it wouldn't have sufficed—and reform is reform and I chose revolution—I quit. (Carnevali 1920, p. 54)

Carnevali was a rather independent figure within the Italian community. He hardly had any presence in the Italian-language press or any American-based Italian public forum: a choice dictated both by a troubled relation with his Italian background and aspirations toward the target culture.ⁱⁱ Carnevali chose to publish in a literary magazine that was mostly read by American literati, focusing on his own presence in American literature rather than on the debate in the migrant community. While he did not abide nationalist propaganda, he did not address the Italian American public to speak against this propaganda. The lack of attention towards Italian American masses, and the lack of empathy towards the African people who appear in the story, are the signs of a critique conducted on an eminently personal level. The English language provided Carnevali with the possibility of escaping the constraints of bourgeois Italy, and a medium with which he could speak against those constraints. Yet, this liberation happened on an entirely personal level, without the intention of participating in the forum of Italian American literature—which, at that time, was in its purely embryonic phase.

On the contrary Pietro di Donato, the second author examined in this article, had strong links with the Italian American working class: his anti-

nationalist irony resonates more strongly when he addresses the same historical period covered by Carnevali's 'Tale One.'

Di Donato's racial dynamics and the ghost of Adwa in *Christ in Concrete* (1939)

Twenty years passed between Carnevali's 'Tale One' and Pietro di Donato's masterpiece, *Christ in Concrete* (1939). Yet, due to Mussolini's recent conquest of Ethiopia, the battle of Adwa continued to exert its symbolic influence over the colonial aspirations and fantasies of Italians in Italy and around the world. The regime, in an attempt to redress emigration for propaganda purposes, created in 1931 the *Commissariato per la migrazione e la colonizzazione interna* (Internal Migration and Colonisation Commission) with the intention of creating a community 'that could include the nine million Italians who lived abroad as immigrants as well as those who were destined to (re)populate the African colonies in the name of fatherland and fascism' (Derobertis 2012, p. 164). Di Donato's novel took shape in this climate.

Christ in Concrete shows a higher degree of connection to social and community dynamics of Italians in America with respect to Carnevali's work. While Carnevali remained largely an outsider, attempting to write himself into the American canon, di Donato's novel was a crucial step towards the establishment of an Italian American literary presence. Di Donato was 'the authentic type of the millions of immigrants who bent their spine without hesitation under the weight of exploitation', writing 'in order to push on the dream of redemption from a life of hardships and violence' (Lombardo 2011, p. 106). He was a fine linguistic experimenter, with a sense for the complexity of urban ethnic communities and their multiple languages and discourses. *Christ in Concrete's* language is 'at once a high modernist prose [...] and a powerful mix of realist intention and daring experimentation 'boiling over' into expressionistic effect' (Polezzi 2010, p. 140). The novel brings the emotions and voice of a community of Italian bricklayers in New York into the literary discourse of his time.

The protagonist of *Christ in Concrete* is Paul, a twelve-year old boy who starts working as a bricklayer after the death of his father, Geremio, at the beginning of the novel. Paul stands for a younger version of the author, placing the story of the novel around 1923, only a few years after Carnevali's story. The novel often expresses a sense of racial injustice towards Italians: several characters, especially belonging to American institutions, use racial slurs such as 'dago' and 'wop.' These words often point to the small value that these characters attribute to Italians, treated as cheap, easily replaceable sources of manual labor. For example, shortly before the accident that kills the protagonist's father, a contractor asks: 'Hey, Geremio! Is your gang of dagos dead?' (Di Donato 1939, p. 5). When Paul contacts the police to inquire about his father's accident a policeman tells him that 'the wop is under the wrappin' paper out in the courtyard' (Di Donato 1939, p. 26).

When it comes to the speech of Italian Americans on the other hand, Di Donato's peculiar style reproduces Italian and dialectal elements, employing the similarities and differences between Italian and English to give the immigrants a voice to express their dreams, concerns and aspirations. In a section titled 'Fiesta', the migrants find temporary respite from the Job (which Di Donato always capitalises, personifying it as a malignant entity), and launch into a celebration of Italian civilisation. In this scene, which sees elements of nationalist discourse pitted against an expressionist, vividly exaggerated description of a spaghetti meal and a tarantella, the battle of Adwa makes its appearance.

The community of immigrants uses the feast to build on staples of Italian culture—religion, food, dance, nationalist rhetoric—and elaborate them in a vivid, exaggerated performance to justify and make sense of their existence as migrants. In this context, several characters show the impact of nationalist propaganda in the Italian America as they remark on the 'greatness' of Italian civilisation, using it to compare themselves favorably to other cultures and overcome a sense of discrimination. The imagery that they use is compatible in many regards with the racial and political discourse popular in Italian America at the time, which employed both historical heritage and racist/colonial discourse to argue for Italians' inclusion in the white American community. Di Donato's inclusion of such discourses, on the other hand, is far from an uncritical acceptance of nationalist propaganda. The language, and the interplay of voices with which the author represents such discourses deserves attention, for its underlying ironical subversion of the same nationalist discourse it apparently expresses. While Carnevali's subtle irony exposed colonialist discourse as it had been part of the national pedagogy in turn-of-the-century Italy, di Donato taps into the phrases and slogans that one might have heard at nationalist rallies, exaggerating them for comic effect:

The ladies persuaded Maestro Farabutti to perform. He placed himself near the window. Then flinging his arms wide:

'We are Italians! Know you what that means? It means the regal blood of terrestrial man! Richer than the richest, purer than the finest, more capable than an-y! an-y! race breathing under the stellar rays of night or the lucent beams of day!-

'What a man so gr-gr-grand...' sighed the Regina. '—the I-tal-ian-ne is the flower of Christians—' (Di Donato 1939, p. 198)

Maestro Farabutti's monologue, as the narrator points out at the beginning of the passage, is to be interpreted as a performance. Both the monologue and the *paesani's* enthusiastic responses seem to draw from a rhetoric strategy that was frequently in use in Italian/American public forum at the time. Studies on Italian-language newspapers in the US in the time when *Christ in Concrete* is set have individuated forms of a similar rhetoric use of Italian history and heritage for self-aggrandising purposes:

In an effort to cultivate a more palatable representation of their countrymen, Italian mainstream newspapers employed the language of civilization and savagery and pleaded their case for full inclusion based upon a bourgeois construction of an Italian race deemed superior by virtue of a past linked directly to the glory of Rome, the Renaissance, and the Risorgimento. (Vellon 2014, p. 8)

Although there is no direct reference to Italian language newspapers, the scene takes place at a time in which this discourse was dominant in the public forum of Italians in America. The other characters elaborate on the discourse, dropping names (Michelangelo, Raffaello, Cellini, Dante) to demonstrate that 'in the sacred realm of Arts the children of Italia beautiful have achieved celestial heights' (Di Donato 1939, p. 198). When the Maestro claims that 'our brother Dante Alighieri [...] has scribed all that need be read', a character named Orangepeel-Face Mike agrees: 'the *Comedy Divine* is said to contain all the verities mundane and spiri-tual' (Di Donato 1939, p. 198). To the members of the migrant community, in their attempt to redeem themselves from discrimination, the actual contents of the *Commedia* are not as important as its role as signifier of Italian cultural relevance in the West. The author employs a style that conveys the Italian origin of the speech through English words that sound close to Italian, such as 'scribed' for 'scritto' and 'verities' for 'verità'. This is 'the language of neither Italy nor America', belonging 'to a people whose expression arises in two countries, employing the mythical dignity of a mythical Italy as a consolation for, as an incantation over, a real Italian America' (Viscusi 2006, p. 56). The Maestro's lofty tones in particular reproduce, in a parodic manner, the style with which the Italian language press intended to raise nationalist feelings among immigrants.

Given the cultural climate in which the scene takes place, it is no wonder that Adwa makes its appearance:

Yellow-Fever Giuseppe mapped out lines with wine-soaked biscuiti upon the tablecloth showing to Amedeo the fateful battle between Baratire and Menelik.

"Here, here, here and here were columns of Italia, my father in the third, then—Zthaaa! out from the earth sprang millions and millions of hell-toasted charcoal Ethiops ... signs of the cross made the sons of Italia and spine to spine they took to them each a hundred cutlass-in-mouth Nubian fiends ... Forward, Baratire! Forward!"

And fighting the battle singlehanded he crushed biscuiti after biscuiti to crumbs on the table:

"Ztaa Ztaa! Ztaalztaalztaa! Up, Baratire! Ztaa! ztaa-ztaa!" (Di Donato 1939, p. 202)

Like the one in Carnevali's short story, this appears to be another second-hand account. Both accounts are interesting for their intersections of the personal and the nationalist discourse, with a key moment of Italian colonial history entering the individual's life. Such a

highly personal experience of the historical event is evident in the distortion of names in both texts. Whereas Melania Piano could not remember the names of all the Ethiopian commanders, speaking of 'Ras Alula and Ras somebody else' (Carnevali 1919, p. 16), Yellow-Fever Giuseppe keeps distorting the name of general Oreste Baratieri into 'Baratire'. By employing second-hand accounts that mix nationalist propaganda with imprecisions and distorted impressions, both Carnevali and di Donato make a subtle commentary on the second-hand nature of colonialist propaganda. In their works, colonialist discourse is able to permeate collective consciousness; and yet its use by the final recipients show an empty discourse, evidently disconnected from the reality of colonial experience. The difference is that the accounts used by di Donato are deeply rooted in orality, showing the link that Gardaphé individuated between early Italian American texts and 'the oral traditions of Italian preindustrial culture' (1996, p. 25). In *Christ in Concrete*, the reader witnesses the birth of a literary perspective out of the tales and moods of a community.

This depiction of Adwa concentrates on the perspective of the common soldier, rather than the perspective of the daughter of Colonel Piano in 'Tale One'. It seems a rather less idealised account—or rather a different form of idealisation: not the bourgeois, romanticised idea of colonialism as an adventure for officers, explorers and 'White Queens', but a sympathetic tale about the heroism of the common soldier who risks his life for his country away from home. In Yellow-Fever, Giuseppe's account, the 'sons of Italia' show courage and are defeated only by the numbers and ferociousness of the Ethiopians. The Italian soldiers' deaths are presented with a high degree of sympathy, underlining both their tragic deaths and their distance from home:

'One hundred to one—two hundred to one, headless, limbs scattered, half a world separate from his dear mother, drowned in his own regal blood, and yet the hearts of Italia fights on ztaa! ztaa! Down, Menelik! Avanti, Baratire!' (Di Donato 1939, p. 203)

The emphasis on their links with their distant families is repeated as Giuseppe speaks of 'mothers' sons flung like grain in the wind' (Di Donato 1939, p. 203). In a novel such as *Christ in Concrete*, where family is the crucial institution and often the individual's only protection from a hostile world, this is not surprising.

Di Donato's characters make use of the myth of Adwa in a way that is coherent with mainstream nationalist discourses of the time, while at the same time the text operates on a subtler level to undermine those discourses. The characters appear receptive of arguments that, trying to justify successive colonial expeditions, made use of the defeat of Adwa to insinuate a sense of revenge in the Italian public. For example, they exhibit a sense of diffidence and competition against other European powers that was crucial in the construction of Italian colonialist discourse. Discussing international responsibilities in the Adwa defeat, they comment that 'wherever there is trea-cher-y you will find the whoreface English' (Di Donato 1939, p. 202) and that 'the

German will eat his own family and friends in the cold blood' (Di Donato 1939, p. 203). The characters in *Christ in Concrete* may be speaking from 1923, but di Donato seems to be aware of much of the propaganda around the time of the subsequent Italian invasion of Ethiopia, which took place in 1935-36. Not only was the need to avenge Adwa often taken by the Fascist regime as justification of the 1935 invasion, but Italy's imperial aspirations often pitted the nation against the other major European powers, fueled by 'fascist myths of national victimhood and [...] anxieties about Italian subalternity' (Ben-Ghiat 2006, p. 386). *Christ in Concrete* shows how this element of propaganda reached Italian Americans and resonated with their own feelings of subalternity in the adopted country, resulting in widespread support and enthusiasm for the colonial wars. Again, di Donato shows this type of discourse to be empty when it reaches the migrants, exemplified by the generic remarks on the 'whoreface English' and the *paesani* blaming now this, now that European power for the defeat, without a sense of the actual politics involved.

Racist imagery is also faithfully reproduced, but its exaggeration fits the tone of a scene where nationalist discourse is exposed in its purely rhetorical nature. Ethiopian soldiers are viewed as 'hell-toasted' and 'charcoal'-coloured fiends, reprising countless racist depictions of the black man in the decades of colonialism. While 'Ethiops' is closer to the Italian 'Etiopi' than 'Ethiopians', the adjective 'Nubian' (not particularly apt to describe Ethiopians in the geographical sense) is often used in English to indicate Sub-Saharan people. The Ethiopian soldiers at Adwa exist in this account only as supernatural foes, fighting with savagery ('cutlass-in-mouth') and appearing in supernatural numbers on the battlefield ('millions and mi-li-ions'). African soldiers are depicted through the insisted use of a precise set of imagery which served nationalist rhetoric both in Italy and in Italian America.

However, while di Donato's emigrants seem to comply with nationalist discourse as it was present in Italian America in the 1920s and 1930s, the authorial voice contributes to complicate the character's adherence to it. In the nationalist discourse, the 'people' are the 'cutting edge between the totalising powers of the 'social' as homogeneous, consensual community, and the forces that signify the more specific address to contentious, unequal interests and identities within the population' (Bhabha 1994, p. 146). Their subsuming within a unified nationalist narrative and its pedagogical function happens at the cost of specificity. This is all-the-more true when the nationalist narrative is applied in a diasporic setting, and reproduced in a language that all but undermines simple notions of national belonging. *Christ in Concrete* juxtaposes nationalist messages and speeches with moments of uncontrollable shouting, dancing and bantering on the Italians' part. After proclaiming Italy as a beacon of civilisation, Maestro Farabutti sings 'Ritorno Vincitore'—but his performance does not appear to have the qualities of classical composure and refinement: 'He went the gamut of chest-beating, hands-wringing, forehead-slapping and finger-biting' (Di Donato 1939, p. 199). Shortly after Farabutti's declamation of Italy's greatness, the men at the feast engage in a competition of no-

hands spaghetti eating, and that is framed in national terms as well: 'The cockos who call themselves Italian line up with hands tied behind and eat from the table with only the face!' yells one of Paul's older colleagues (Di Donato 1939, p. 199). Yellow-Fever Giuseppe's account of Adwa is continuously juxtaposed and interrupted by calls to dance the Tarantella; his frantic reenactment of the battle follows the same rhythm of the dancers' calls. The whole scene ends after a frantic crescendo with the *paesani* exhausted by their savage celebrations. Nationalistic tones are more and more exaggerated as the scene progresses, and paired with scenes of spontaneous, primordial frenzy. This contributes to make nationalist claims sound hollow, demonstrating their vagueness and purely rhetoric nature by setting them against the real context of the Italian community in America. The very name of Maestro Farabutti seems to indicate that he is not to be trusted: 'farabutto' in Italian means 'scoundrel' or 'crook'. This seems to be di Donato's commentary on the nationalism endorsed by Farabutti.

Christ in Concrete's ironic and expressive re-use of nationalist rhetoric ultimately undermines it, which fits the scope of a novel that is really a call for universal brotherhood. Di Donato was a communist activist, and by 'directing his characters' rage at the employers who exploit immigrant laborers' he argued 'for solidarity among American workers and require[d] that they look to each other to solve their problems' (Gardaphé 1996, p. 72). The novel concentrates almost exclusively on Italians, but there are scenes of mutual understanding and collaboration among ethnic communities, with Paul befriending a Jewish boy. Its language and background are quintessentially Italian American, but the use of English is also a vehicle for its universalist message. The rare appearance in *Christ in Concrete* of an African American character never puts him or her on a lower status with respect to the Italian protagonists. When Paul's mother Annunziata goes to see a neighborhood soothsayer whom she thinks can put her in contact with Geremio's ghost, there is a 'Negress' among the other women who wait to speak with the spirits of their loved ones (Di Donato 1993, p. 109). Other African Americans appear to share the Italians' predicament: in a scene at Paul's building site, a foreman shouts orders and 'under his command Irish, Italian and Negro laborers swiftly loaded the scaffolds' (Di Donato 1939, p. 177). While di Donato appears to understand very well the nationalist and racist propaganda that was being built in Italy and in the Italian America around the Ethiopian wars, he also deconstructs it, and bends it to his own agenda, whose driving force is sympathy towards the workers of America, regardless of their race.

Conclusion

The analysis of Carnevali's and di Donato's literary texts shows that elements of the public discourse about Italian colonialism were known and used by some of the authors in the nascent Italian American literary milieu. It also shows that, while analysis of the activities of Italian language newspapers and associations have underlined generalised tendencies in the treatment of such discourses for propaganda

purposes, these writers used their knowledge and experience of Italian colonialism for their own agendas. Carnevali used his family's history to refer to colonial discourse in *fin de siècle* Italy, and subtly reworked elements of Orientalist discourse within his overarching critique of national consciousness and bourgeois society.

Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* looks more deeply involved with the social, racial and political predicament of Italian America in the 1920s, and incorporates elements from the racist and colonialist propaganda that was specifically aimed at Italian migrants in America. However, a closer look at the style of the scene in question shows that di Donato used this discourse with social critique in mind, exaggerating nationalist rhetoric. It is interesting to note that neither Carnevali nor di Donato, while criticising nationalism and concentrating on the outsiders and the outcasts, gave voice to the African people in their accounts of Adwa. This is something that they share with some of the radical and anarchist Italian papers in America which, at the time, criticised colonialism while at the same time catering 'to the belief in a hierarchy of civilisation that was not only understood but also acknowledged' (Vellon 2014, p. 40).

At a general level, a look at the two texts presents an Italian American literature that was attentive to the implications of Italian colonialism not only at newspapers or associations level, but also in minor measure at a literary level. The connection between Italian emigration and Italian colonialism existed at multiple levels—political, social, cultural, economic. This represented both a source and a challenge for a literature which could call itself Italian and American, in its early stage and without a definite direction or acknowledging shared ground.

Carnevali and di Donato used English to talk about this eminently Italian topic, telling the American public about the reality of Italy and of the Italians in New York. They interpreted the role of the migrant writer in two different ways, but their common linguistic choice indicates that the preferred audience was in both cases the American public. While their two Englishes were quite different, and di Donato especially maintained a close relationship with the linguistic and expressive habits of his fellow Italians, the choice of the language itself brought them closer to a different audience. It brought them also—especially Carnevali—away from the Italian forums that were actively discussing the social and political issues of Italians in the United States. At the same time, they both brought Italian issues and symbols within the context of American modernism—issues that only they could treat with that level of insight. The turn towards English separated their works from their Italian origin, but it also liberated their speech, freed it from the constraints of the motherland and allowed it to respond freely to the highly hierarchical matter of colonialism.

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Notes:

ⁱ 'There [in Libya], the workers will not be underpaid, underestimated, underappreciated by foreign employers; they will cultivate, in the highest and strongest sense of the word, the soil belonging to the fatherland'. (my translation).

ⁱⁱ On the relationship between Carnevali and the Italian American community, see also Ciribuco, A 2013, 'Carnevali's Cultural Translation: Modernism, Dante and the Italian America', *Scritture Migranti*, vol. 7, pp. 43-64.

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