

“THIS IS YOUR FOURTH SHORE”: HISTORICAL AMNESIA AND THE RETURN OF THE COLONIAL PAST IN ANTONIO TABUCCHI’S *PIAZZA D’ITALIA*

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À l’évidence, il existe en chacun de nous le désir de dialoguer avec ce qui a été, d’interroger les habitants d’outre-tombe pour savoir ce que signifia pour eux vivre, puis cesser de vivre.

Antonio Tabucchi, *L’atelier de l’écrivain* (Gui and Tabucchi 197)¹

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Antonio Tabucchi belongs to a genealogy of Italian writers who envisioned literature as a means of political contestation.² The epigraph quoted above speaks to the ethical imperative he maintained as incumbent upon himself; namely, the necessity to engage with the legacy of the past and its inscription into the present. Writing on behalf of the downtrodden and marginalized—be it the anarchists and communists Tabucchi evidently favoured, or others who opposed the forces of the nation and ended up on the losing side of history—he applied his inquisitive zeal to reveal the myriad elisions involved in collective memory-making. His historiographical scepticism perhaps comes out more sharply, for all its humour and charm, in his first novel, *Piazza d’Italia*, published in 1975. In a nimble and elegant prose, Tabucchi compacts in very few words a sweeping chronicle of Italy’s modern history, filtered through the eyes of a Tuscan family on the periphery of society, from the country’s unification under Garibaldi to its post-Second World War reemergence as a fledgling republic. The symbolic quality of *Piazza d’Italia* as a locus of the nation-state is most conspicuously implied by its title, but the piazza also refers to a physical location in the book: a public square in the centre of Borgo, the small fictional village where the story takes place, in which a monument to the homeland has been erected.³ The significance of the memorial as the site where the nation is constructed—and reconstructed, as statues of great men are toppled and replaced several times whilst the country undergoes political upheavals and regime changes—carries aspects of the allegorical satire. Far from merely being an ironic statement on the “interchangeability of

power” (Hanna 209),⁴ the repeated motif of the cast-down statue also sows doubts as to the viability of top-down, state-sanctioned historical narratives imposed as truth: if the monument is the symbolic repository of the nation’s memory, it is one that is perpetually being rewritten as power changes hands. Tabucchi further plays up the dialectic between remembrance, forgetting, and oblivion by transforming the *piazza* into an execution site at several pivotal moments during the course of the action, most notably in the opening and closing scenes that retell the murder of Garibaldi: “In quel momento si senti uno sparo. Uno solo. Garibaldi sciolsse l’abbraccio della statua e lentamente si girò su se stesso. Aprì il pugno alzato e il sasso rotolò sulla piazza. Mentre gli andava dietro gorgogliò qualcosa, ma lo udirono in pochi” (236).⁵ Killed during a violent skirmish between local communist demonstrators and police forces in the first years of De Gasperi’s reign,⁶ Garibaldi’s last words at the feet of the monument are but a confused mumble: “Ma invece la lingua liberò un gorgoglio squaccheroso che udirono solo i pochi che gli stavano vicino [...] nel breve tragitto dal monumento alla polvere, [...] la nebbia della morte gli aveva confuso proprio l’ultima frase” (13).⁷ By lending symbolic weight to Garibaldi’s useless heroism at the *piazza* and his inane, inaudible last words, the bookend structure of the narrative begets the central question of the novel: whose voices are stifled in the memorialization of national history?⁸

Given these considerations, it may come as no surprise that Tabucchi experimented with newly emerging historiographical methods in the writing of *Piazza d’Italia*. As Flavia Brizio-Skov deftly demonstrated in her study *Antonio Tabucchi: Navigazioni in un arcipelago narrativo*, a hallmark of Tabucchi scholarship, the young author drew extensively from Carlo Ginzburg’s *microstoria*, a genre of history writing that emerged during political and cultural debates in the social sciences in the 1970s. Critical of large-scale investigations of the past slanted towards large social groupings and long-term historical trends, microhistorians advocated for a reduction in scale, for the study of the individual instead of the group; in short, for the epistemic utility of “asking large questions in small spaces” (Joyner 1). This sensitivity to the individual experience often went hand-in-hand with a tendency to shift the focus on the people at the base of the social pyramid, on those inhabiting the fringes rather than the centre—a penchant Tabucchi likewise displayed in his work:

Mentre la grande Storia, quella ufficiale, quella basata sui documenti, sui trattati, sulle leggi di chi ha il potere, tende a cancellare l’individuo, a ignorare le classi periferiche, marginali, il microstorico opera in maniera opposta; infatti, cerca di riportare alla luce l’esperienza dell’individuo, di ricreare dalle “evidenze” una certa mentalità, da una parte il tutto [...] Da quando la Storia non è più fatta di “re e battaglie,” la nuova storia parte dalla base della piramide sociale e, attraverso donne, bambini, criminali, emarginati, minoranze etniche o religiose, e il loro interagire con le leggi, il potere, le classi del clero o della nobiltà, ricostruisce tutta una società. (Brizio-Skov 29-31)⁹

By including the margins into the historical record, *Piazza d’Italia* may hence be conceived of as a cultural artefact; to wit, as the repository of memories typically

occluded or excised from official narratives. Plucking his heroes from amongst history's rubble, Tabucchi avails himself of the novelist's privilege to read into the gaps, weaving the disparate threads of their existence together whilst fraying the cords of careful national mythologies.

PIAZZA D'ITALIA AND THE LEGACY OF ITALIAN IMPERIALISM

Piazza d'Italia takes on the lineaments of a counterhistory, to frame it in Foucauldian terms, inasmuch as it "puts practices of remembering and forgetting in the context of power relations, focusing not only on what is remembered and forgotten, but how, by whom, and with what effects" (Medina 9). On one hand, the novel's gesture of witnessing embodies the essence of a *lieu de mémoire* that comes into being, as theorized by Pierre Nora, through "a will to remember [...] to stop time, to inhibit forgetting, to fix a state of things, to immortalize death, and to materialize the immaterial" (Nora 55-68). Yet, it is likewise essential to its purpose as a counterhistory that it should testify to the silences of collective memory and map out places of erasures. *Piazza d'Italia* therefore constitutes an indictment of willful amnesia, of policies of remembrance often condoned by the state and embraced by the individual that are predicated upon systematic forgetting.

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Perhaps tellingly, although numerous scholars have endeavoured to dissect the layers of memory that compose *Piazza d'Italia*, its depiction of Italian colonialism has, to date, received scant academic attention. Liz Wren-Owens, in an otherwise brilliant article on imperial representation in Tabucchi's body of work, suggests that the "Italian empire is all but absent from Tabucchi's writings", appearing "fleetingly" in *Piazza d'Italia* and the 1981 collection *Il gioco del rovescio*, and then only "in the barest terms" ("Tabucchi's Brutal Empires" 723).¹⁰ I would argue quite the opposite: the novel articulates critiques of imperialism that are of paramount importance to its overarching themes, and also establishes dynamic resonances between domestic and imperial modes of domination. Remnants of empire haunt *Piazza d'Italia*, from banalities of the everyday that are lifted into the sphere of the significant—in the chapter "Un impero sui francobolli" (An Empire on Stamps), for instance, names of colonial military victories (or, rather cheekily, defeats) are given to newborns, and letters are adorned with postage stamps illustrating colonial scenes, as if to emphasize how the colonial imbued every facet of day-to-day life in fascist Italy¹¹—to the anchoring presence of the character Asmara, whose name is a *topos* of Italian imperialism. Considering that *Piazza d'Italia* fused the methods of the microhistorian with those of the novelist, it would not be implausible to suppose its writing to have been equally influenced by another major development in the historiography of the period: the reexamination of the imperial legacy put into motion by the rediscovery of colonial atrocities perpetrated under Fascism.

Generally thought of as a byproduct of fascist hubris, Italian colonialism in fact predates Mussolini's rise to power. Following the country's unification in 1861, the ruling classes channelled nascent nationalism into a more assertive foreign policy as they sought to cement Italy's place as a regional power through a belated attempt to join the "Scramble for Africa" alongside the other great European nations. Another impetus for the pursuit of empire was the lack of internal cohesion in the newly constituted Italian state, which was divided along social, cultural, and economic lines between the northern and southern part of the country. It was hoped that overseas military ventures would nurture a sense of nationhood, and that the acquisition of territories would provide new outlets for population pressures at home. Competition from the much stronger France and Great Britain nonetheless thwarted the young republic's ambitions and stalled its imperial growth. By 1914, the Kingdom of Italy consisted merely of the colony of Eritrea, in addition to protectorates in Somalia and in Libya. Imperialism would once again become a favoured theme shortly after the

240 Fascists came into power in 1922. Beginning in the 1930s, Mussolini embarked on an ambitious project of wholesale colonization of Libya, Somalia, and Eritrea, together with further aggrandizement of the imperial domain. This policy culminated in the ruthless invasion of Ethiopia in 1935 and its ensuing occupation until 1941 (Del Boca, *I gas*; Labanca).

Italy's defeat in the Second World War spelt the demise of its short-lived colonial experiment, simultaneously banishing the memory of the empire to the "national unconscious" and making it more amenable to latter political manipulation (Ponzanesi 55). The abrupt breakup of the empire spared the peninsula from the decolonization conflicts of the 1950s and 1960s that resulted not only in the dissolution of Europe's great imperial ensembles, but also in a reckoning with their brutal legacies. Consequently, Italians remained largely insulated from the anticolonial discourses that were gathering momentum elsewhere (51-56). Likewise, the distance in time and space from the empire afforded a safe, hazy vantage point from which to retrospectively romanticize recollections of Italian Africa. One of the most insidious self-consolatory myths that became commonplace in the postwar period was that of *Italiani brava gente*, which framed the nature of Italian colonialism as distinct from other imperial systems: as a less repressive, more humane, and, all told, relatively benign tutelage of subject peoples (Del Boca, *Italiani*). The seemingly innocuous, albeit flattering, self-representation of Italians as inherently decent people precluded, however, the possibility of any honest critical appraisal of the imperial past. It was suggestive as well of a wider pattern of denial and obfuscation of guilt that was intended, in the words of Gianni Oliva, "to exculpate the country from any responsibilities and to give back to the Nation a sort of moral virginity" (cf. Favero 147).¹²

The publication in the mid-1960s of the pioneering research by historian Angelo Del Boca on the heinous crimes exacted by the Fascist regime on African soil—which included, amongst others, the use of chemical gas, the establishment of concentration camps, mass massacres, and the deportation of civilian populations—broke the

deafening silence surrounding histories of colonial and racial violence (Del Boca, *La guerra*). In the following decades, his investigation would come to be regarded as a watershed moment in the evolution of public discourses on colonialism as it shattered the absolving image of an empire that had been "più mite, più umano, più tollerante, più costruttivo" (cf. Wren-Owens, "Tabucchi's Brutal Empires" 723).¹³ Yet, at the time of their publication, his findings were met with hostility, derision or were trivialized. Neither the state—which had no interest in relitigating the fascist era, and had, in fact, been guilty of impeding previous efforts to shed light on the issue of fascist violence¹⁴—nor the population at large—who had by then wholeheartedly embraced their status as victims of Nazi occupation—would lend credence to the documents Del Boca unearthed. Despite overwhelming evidence of acts of utter barbarity, the reality of ruthlessness of Italian imperialism barely registered until other historians, following in Del Boca's footsteps, corroborated his findings in the late 1980s and early 1990s; some of these historians include Nicola Labanca and Gianni Oliva, to cite a few. Arguably, to this day, the colonial legacy remains contested terrain, subject to a prolonged taboo.¹⁵

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Tabucchi himself alluded to this process of collective forgetting in an interview in *Raison publique* in 2012 on the heel of the publication of *Tristano muore*, which recounts the harrowing tale of a soldier in Italian-occupied Greece. Bringing up "the terrifying documents detailing the depredations wrought by Italians in Libya and Abyssinia," he deplored their deletion from the public record in tandem with the evasions of the "politics and institutions of our country" that favoured the more palatable fiction of the "good Italian soldier who had nothing to do with the Nazi" (Tabucchi, "Entretien"). In the same breath, he disclosed the impetus behind *Tristano muore*: to write "the unspeakable, the dark history my country willed itself to forget" ("Entretien").¹⁶ Presumably, the writing of *Piazza d'Italia* derived from a similar desire to turn silence into a site of presence.

THE RETURN OF THE COLONIAL REPRESSED

The dearth of scholarly work on the colonial motif in *Piazza d'Italia* may be due to the complexity inherent in the analysis of a work written under the sign of the unspoken. As Alessandro Iovinelli rightly notes, absence plays a fundamental role in Tabucchi's writing system: "Eppure con Tabucchi siamo tentati di azzardare che—al fondo del suo complesso sistema di scrittura—il non-detto, l'inespresso, il non avvenuto, il mancato, insomma *quel che non c'è*, abbiano una funzione se non decisiva, di certo tra le più decisive" (Iovinelli 150-51).¹⁷ Pushed to the margins of awareness, the unspoken appears remote, yet it constantly borders on the threshold of consciousness. I propose a reading of *Piazza d'Italia* as an archive of lacunae, as a memory-riddled space composed of enduring, albeit concealed, vestiges of the past. The reader thus finds him/herself plunged into a world of absences and presences,

of hidden signs and symbolic correspondences. From thence, he/she must become an active participant in the reading of the absent and search for what is inscribed in the spaces between what is said and left unsaid, meandering through this mnemonic landscape to make the trace legible. Very little is spelt out in *Piazza d'Italia*; the novel is rich in symbolic overtones that give greater scope for interpretation. As a result, one may easily run the risk of relegating the imagery to the realm of the poetical and divorcing it from its socially critical implications. Yet, even as its most oneirically opaque, the novel's symbolism remains subordinate to its social criticism.

242 Tabucchi's coded language of silence, with its pregnant omissions and pointed allusions, acts as a rebuttal of heavy-handed historiographical accounts that neatly rearrange events retrospectively to incorporate them into a cohesive whole imbued with meaning, a process that Hayden White famously described as "emplotment" (7-11). Contrarily to these straightforward narratives, *Piazza d'Italia* readily admits the disorderly into its structure as it lurches back and forth between temporalities, introducing elements of disruptive uncertainty. By way of illustration, the novel opens with an epilogue, thereby creating an elliptical paradox where the story, turned upside down, "begins at the end of history" (Smith 77). Additionally, Tabucchi's mistrust of dominant narratives is apparent in his subversion of the trope of the national hero. The transmission of the name Garibaldi down the male line of a family composed entirely of social outcasts, anarchists, communists, and other would-be revolutionaries—a derisive homage to Garibaldi given the incompetent heroism displayed by the men so christened—hearkens back to the idea of a repetitive cycle, of an endless beginning anew that must be interpreted in light of the curse that befalls the patriarch Plinio and his descendants: nearly all of them end up lame, crippled by their participation in the great political events of their time. Plinio is wounded in the foot by shrapnel during the capture of Rome of 1870; his grandson Garibaldi loses three toes to gangrene in the First World War. Undoubtedly, the conflation of the figure of the hero and the cripple is meant to challenge our perception of the national epic. Whereas official histories become nesting places for teleological accounts of great men and great feats, Tabucchi's generational tale is one of a nation in stasis, written under the sign of a tragic continuity (Abbrugiati 266-68).

To go back to the question of how the amnesic imperial memory fits into this framework of absence, one must bear in mind that in *Piazza d'Italia*, the colonial repressed always finds means of resurfacing. Traces of the colonial indeed abound, but they are deployed in incongruous contexts and, seldom overt, obliquely alluded to, therefore creating a sense of unnatural intrusion upon the text that challenges the reader to reckon with their presence. An example of the return of the colonial might be found in the puzzlingly named chapter "La quarta sponda," which tells of the efforts of Asmara, the wife of the last Garibaldi, to save Borgo from the wrath of German forces during the Second World War. *La quarta sponda*—or *fourth shore*—was an expression, now fallen out of usage, closely tied to fascist imperial aspirations that depicted the African Mediterranean coast as the 'natural' fourth shore of the

Italian peninsula (Labanca 347). As if to further emphasize these colonial overtones, Asmara herself, as a toponym of the Italian empire, evokes the historical and existential horizon of Italian Africa. The figure of the double, an omnipresent motif in *Piazza d'Italia*, manifests itself in the paralleling of the trauma of colonial conquest with that of the German occupation. In so doing, Tabucchi merges together two different histories of suffering, one familiar to Italian reading audiences and one less so, resulting in a feeling of uncanniness that forces the reader to grapple with the violent correspondences between the two. Of particular interest, Borgo's saviour, Asmara, embodies both the history of colonialism and that of the *Resistenza*, a seemingly odd juxtaposition considering how the *partigiani*'s armed conflict with the *Repubblica di Salò* and Fascist remnants in the liberated South shaped the very image Italians had of themselves as victims rather than perpetrators of war crimes.¹⁸ The mythification of the Resistance in the aftermath of the European conflict further allowed Italians to morally dissociate themselves from the atrocities committed under Fascism in the interwar period and in the early years of the Second World War. The conflation of the figure of the colonized and of the partisan within the novel disquiets this postwar rewriting of official and popular memory. With the partisan acting as a stand-in for the defiant colonized subject, the novel points to the shared legitimacy of their liberation fight, to the erasures of national history, and to the duty of remembrance.

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Drawing on the theory of multidirectional memory conceptualized by Michael Rothberg, I wish to present some of the sites of encounters that Tabucchi maps for communities of suffering in *Piazza d'Italia*. According to Rothberg, to consider memory as multidirectional is to provide a way out of the sterile competition between bearers of memory often envisioned to be, in essence, antagonistic and hostile to one another: "Against the framework that understands collective memory as competitive memory—a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional: as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not private" (3). In short, the witness does not have to chase away another to be heard. Rothberg argues just the opposite: by engaging in fecund dialogic exchanges over their respective experiences of violence, bearers of memories reinforce one another, thereby creating unexpected forms of memorial solidarity.¹⁹ This process is unequivocally at work in *Piazza d'Italia*. The novel's amalgamation and entanglement of the memories of victimized communities underline resonances across time and space between their trajectories, and reveal hitherto unsuspected points of connection between them. I propose to explore two instances of dialogic memory in the novel that pertain to the colonial experience of Italian Africa: first, how Asmara exists at the intersection of both colonial and gender modes of oppression, and thereafter, how Tabucchi proceeds to a *mise-en-abyme* of colonial history within his retelling of Nazi occupation.

FEMININE ALTERITY AND THE COLONIAL OTHER

244 The colonial repressed returns in the guise of Asmara, whose name, as mentioned above, locates her firmly within the confines of imperial cartography. Located on the northern tip of the Ethiopian plateau, the city of Asmara remains to this day an important physical and symbolic site of memory of Italian imperialism, in part because its colonial-era built heritage has survived the demise of Mussolini's febrile dreams of a renewed Roman Empire. Seized by force by Italy in 1899, and subsequently made the capital of the colony of Eritrea in 1900, the city underwent a massive modernization in the 1930s, transformed under Fascism into an administrative nexus of the empire. Mussolini's reinvigorated commitment to Rome as *caput mundi* served as the ideological underpinning of Asmara's urban development, which was understood as the capitalization of the Fascist empire straddling the Mediterranean (and, hopefully, one day beyond that point). With newly constructed buildings in the neoclassical style flanking avant-garde Futurist cinema halls adjacent to street plates bearing the names of Italian statesmen, heroes, or locales—such as Corso Italia, Via Camice Nere, or Viale Badoglio—Asmara's reshaped urban landscape laid bare the aspirations of its imperial masters. Henceforth known as *piccola Roma* or *seconda Roma*, the city, hollowed of its indigenoussness, was radically Italianized as if to convey the image of a seamlessly integrated colonized space, nearly indistinguishable from the metropolitan centre. In addition to this process of de-Africanization, Asmara's new layout enforced strict spatial boundaries in line with the regime's policy of apartheid. By the mid-1910s—nearly twenty years before the promulgation of the infamous *leggi razziali* (racial laws)—its cityscape was already segregated into *nazionali* (white) and *indigeni* (black) districts (Tecle-Misghina).

Considering Tabucchi's well-known partiality for symbolically charged names, it would not be farfetched to presume he intended Asmara to serve as a metonym for the colonial experience, albeit one where the subaltern subject is brought to the fore to destabilize narratives of the past. The deterritorialized presence of Asmara, metaphorically uprooted from her native land and carried across the Mediterranean, carves out the possibility for a deconstructive reading of colonial maps, as well as for the reappropriation of spaces now vacated by the empire but that have not yet entirely escaped its imprint. Leaving momentarily aside the question of her African inheritance,²⁰ Asmara is also presented in *Piazza d'Italia* as the embodiment of female otherness, thereby suggesting a connection between colonial and gender oppression. One must bear in mind that the novel's reliance on the feminine voice to counter the effects of the amnesic colonial memory stems from the idea, common within feminist and literary circles in the 1970s, that female dissidence is entrenched in an ethics of alterity. Such an inference, however debatable by today's standards for being too essentialist, is rooted in the belief that the feminine offers alternative modes of thinking to the systems of significance by which patriarchy abides, and may hence be leveraged to bring about shifts in consciousness. Italian philosopher Aldo Gargani

thus argues in his essay *La voce femminile* for the use of the feminine voice as an epistemological device. According to the essayist, the inquisitive quality of the feminine voice conveys a fundamental uncertainty that undermines the patriarchal order's monopolistic claim on facts and reason:

La voce femminile [...] si caratterizza per un tono che è fondamentalmente quello dell'interrogazione [...] Lo stile della voce femminile si estrinseca più nella forma della interrogazione, della domanda, che non in quello dell'affermazione. [...] Non brama e non accetta il possesso che sui fatti rivendicano gli uomini, quel possesso dal quale si finisce per essere posseduti, perché avverte nel possesso lo sbarramento dell'intenzione, della volontà, del significato [...] L'eticità della voce femminile risplende nella chiamata che essa rappresenta nei confronti di tutti i segni, tracce, voci, che sono state dimenticate e disattese. (Gargani 16)²¹

This ethical duty to probe the forgotten and disregarded, to go behind and beyond what has been imposed as truth, allows the feminine voice to lend itself to the articulation of otherness in its myriad manifestations. Several female characters in *Piazza d'Italia* indeed wholly embody such a posture of questioning, whereby they appear more allegorical than flesh-and-blood. Estelle Ceccarini points to the melancholic Esperia, who sees little blue flames light up on her fingertips as she nears the end of her life, as a figure outside of history and a figure of the unknown, whose cryptic presence alludes to mysteries not to be fathomed, beyond human understanding (par. 30). Asmara, a woman of serial identities, equally interrogates, albeit in a different capacity. Over the course of the novel, she assumes identities that are significant for the symbolic patriarchal order—the communist, the woman, the partisan, the colonial subaltern—in order to undo and subvert them, or, in turn, to reveal truths hitherto hidden. Subjected to both colonial and gender violence, Asmara calls attention, for instance, to how imperialism abroad and patriarchy at home tend to intersect. Not only are these two systems of domination predicated upon mass subservience, but the erasure of their violent legacies is achieved through similar means of concealment: by relegating colonial subjects and women to their own separate segregated spheres. Asmara lurches from the sidelines of the novel to transgress these established boundaries, to collapse the dichotomies on which power operates, and to turn silence into a space of utterance. From the outset, she expresses the desire to break free from patriarchal shackles. She is described in her first appearance as a proud and wilful young woman, indomitable like the herd of wild horses with whom she feels a kinship:

Asmara aveva un sorriso altero e il naso a punta, da caparbia. Avrebbe voluto andare buttera ai cavalli delle piane e invece l'avevano messa al telaio. Per questo sentiva gli uomini come rivali. "Si credono superiori perché pisciano al muro," diceva. E dei cavalli selvatici aveva le ombre, e le froge umide e dilatabili per fiuto e per rabbia. (91-92)²²

Asmara eschews as well the gender-coded linguistic performance of polite conversation that is rooted in the masculine ideals of how women should behave. Her incapacity of using polite pronouns is played for comedic effect, but her egalitarian

tu nonetheless poses a clear challenge to social hierarchies: “Asmara dava del *tu* per abitudine, perché non conosceva l’uso di altri pronomi. Se azzardava il lei dopo un po’ sbagliava verbo” (99).²³ Asmara’s unruly nature undoubtedly pays tribute to the Italian women’s movement, which was at its apex from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. Her linguistic insubordination is suggestive of what feminists had by then uncovered: that the oppression of women did not stem solely from social and economic determinants, but from structures of power that operated at the level of the symbolic, and of which language is a component. Feminist activism also led to significant shifts in the national literature landscape during the 1970s. Female-centred narratives experienced a noted surge in publication and in popularity with Italian feminists using the literary medium, at the nexus between the cultural and the political, to expose their ideas to the public (Malagrega 83-84). This change is reflected to a degree in *Piazza d’Italia*. Whilst the novel’s second and third acts are nominally Garibaldi’s, it is truly Asmara who shines as the moral pivot of the story and whose sensibilities shape major dramatic climaxes.

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Estelle Ceccarini contends that Tabucchi’s treatment of female characters in his fiction is indeed singular, made all the more remarkable in that, like their male counterparts, they are confronted with history and the necessity of political engagement (par. 22). The novelist may have been influenced in this regard by the distinct evolution of Italian feminism, which had developed in close proximity to the labour movement and mass parties of the New Left. Until the 1970s, women’s networks had established a strong presence within leftist political parties, especially within the Communist Party. Relationships with institutionalized leadership, however, would become increasingly fraught as women grew frustrated at having their demands side-stepped in favour of more narrow and traditional interpretations of class struggle. These issues compelled many feminists to coalesce into new autonomous organizations such as *Lotta Femminista*, that made the capitalist sexual division of labour and the issue of unpaid reproductive and domestic work their central themes (Cunninghame par. 1-17). Tellingly, Asmara, forced against her will to work the loom, does spend a fair amount of her time weaving and embroidering floral dresses and dainty collars in peppery hues of blue and yellow. Despite her feminine exterior, she nevertheless remains rebellious against ascribed gender roles and partakes in radical forms of struggle. Her defiant temperament leads her down the path of political action, although she is at first ridiculed by her husband: “‘Chetati,’ disse Garibaldi, ‘cosa vuoi capire te di queste cose.’ Asmara illividì e lo spinse fuori. ‘Vai via, fammi il piacere, perché stasera non ti sopporto. Ti credi bravo perché pisci al muro’” (141).²⁴ Yet Asmara succeeds where all the Garibaldos fail, her accomplishments perhaps made all the more astonishing and comical for her girlish accoutrements. She joins the Communist Party in the interwar period, and quickly rises up the echelons to become the unseen but omniscient guiding hand of her husband, an ironic statement on the frequently invisible contributions of women in the political realm, and a criticism that Italian feminists would level at communist leaders in

the 1970s (Malagrec 80). She takes up arms against the occupying German forces, braves Fascist Melchiorre, and saves Borgo from imminent destruction. Meanwhile, Garibaldi hides from German soldiers in a tomb, playing dead. When her position as higher up in the Communist ranks is disclosed to her husband, Garibaldi first reacts with incredulity, but he soon yields to anger. Asmara mockingly dismisses his irate tirade and sneers that his sense of self-worth depended upon her silence:

Asmara si alzò con un sospiro, aprì una cantera e prese un tesserino. "Siamo compagni," disse buttandolo sulla tavola. Garibaldi la guardò senza capire, come se lo prendesse in giro [...] Garibaldi si sentì prendere fuoco. Batteva i pugni sulla tavola, paonazzo [...] "Oh, senti," tagliò corto Asmara, "eri così tronfio, così sicuro del fatto tuo. Voi uomini vi credete bravi perché pisciate al muro." (216-17)²⁵

Asmara's commitment to political resistance is coupled with a direct confrontation with history, as she attempts to thwart the fate predicted by Zelmira's horoscope, of dying a virgin, or else having her son or her husband die at thirty years of age: "'Devo rompere un oroscopo,' tagliò Asmara" (138).²⁶ Her efforts initially appear to result in failure: Garibaldi dies, albeit at sixty, having been granted thirty extra years through her self-sacrifice of a son. Yet, unbeknownst to her, Asmara at long last breaks the family's curse by halting this doomed lineage of losers and cripples. By refusing to bear Garibaldi's child, the providential female figure "apparaît ici comme celle qui tente d'arracher l'homme à une destinée funeste inscrite dans son histoire familiale, comme si, pour rompre la fatalité du sort il fallait rompre la chaîne des générations" (Ceccarini par. 36).²⁷ Asmara thus stands as one of the rare characters bestowed true agency, which asserts itself through her ability to alter the course of time, and to, quite literally, bring the narrative to a close as the novel ends with her husband's death. Similarly to the failed male heroes that preceded her, Asmara defies history, but unlike them, she never yields to its brutal course.

Still, any feminist reading of Asmara would be incomplete without recognition of how her deviation from the social norms foisted upon women runs in parallel with her contestation of imperial mastery over African territories, and—as is particularly relevant here—bodies. That the novel tirelessly conjures up the image of wild horses in relation to Asmara is far from trivial. Indicative of her combative nature, it is also a historically layered connotation: Abyssinia had been, and still was then, renowned as a land of horses, mythical or otherwise—the legend of the Ethiopian Pegasus was first recorded in Pliny's *Natural History*—as well as a nation of fearful warrior horsemen. Moreover, horse worship in Abyssinia had merged into the ubiquitous cult of St. George, the country's patron saint since the fifteenth century. Few churches in Ethiopia are not adorned with murals depicting the equestrian saint, sitting astride his white horse, driving his lance into the slain dragon. By the late nineteenth century, as the kingdom staved off a series of attacks from foreign invaders, the figure of the religious martyr was reinvested with new political symbolism. Ethiopian artists of the period appropriated the iconography of St. George in large battle scenes portraying the horseman as the hero-saviour assisting the nation to victory.²⁸ In the

painting below, commemorating Abyssinia's crushing victory over Italy in the Battle of Adwa of 1896,²⁹ the saint appears on horseback, hovering above the troops, successfully repelling the threat of European colonialism.

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Figure 1. Unknown Ethiopian artist, *The Battle of Adwa*, 1940s.

The British Museum: The Museum of the World,

britishmuseum.withgoogle.com/object/the-battle-of-adwa-painting.

Above all, Italian colonialism was an enterprise reflective of masculine aspirations and impulses, such as bravery, aggressiveness, or strength. Combining white superiority with male heroism, the colonial soldier would hence come to incarnate the apex of masculinity in the fascist era. The conquest of Ethiopia thus represented a golden opportunity to actualize, in the words of Ruth Ben-Ghiat, the “fascist myth of national regeneration”; an ambitious scheme to socially engineer a “new type of humanity”, one in which the Italian man “no longer becomes a soldier, [but] is a soldier, naturally” (Ben-Ghiat 123). “[L]e palme, le distese di sabbia dorata con palazzi di mattoni abitati da regine misteriose chiamate a tavola da gong di bronzo, tesori sepolti in caverne, foreste piene di avventure” (125):³⁰ the mysteriously exotic Africa that fills Melchiorre’s daydreams is a fanciful, if not downright farcically naïve, vision conjured up by the propagandistic novels, illustrations, and songs he avidly consumes. Conversely, it is a land where masculinity itself is fantasized, just as the colonial marches the weak and sickly Melchiorre whistles fetishize men whom he strives to emulate but will never resemble: “Delle cose fasciste ciò che amava di più erano le canzoni, perché parlavano di uomini come avrebbe desiderato essere” (125).³¹

The image of the colonial soldier was also fuelled with sexual potency, as can be gleaned from the rhetoric extolling the conqueror's virility that frames the speech to the troops delivered by Fascist marshal Rodolfo Graziani³² reproduced below:

Rappelez-vous que la passion des colonies est la plus masculine, la plus fière et la plus puissante qu'un Italien puisse nourrir; aimez-les plus encore pour les sacrifices qu'elles nous ont coûtés et qu'elles nous coûteront que pour les richesses qu'elles pourront nous apporter. Préparez-vous à mesurer dans les colonies votre force de dominateur et votre pouvoir de *condottiere*. (cf. Le Houérou 50)³³

The lexicon of love and passion is telling of the carnality that underlies the imperial consciousness: the conquest of territory is akin to an act of sexual surrender, with the male colonizer fertilizing the female continent. Africa is a land to be mastered, to be subjugated, not unlike the unyielding Asmara for whom Melchiorre longs and seeks to subdue, but whose resistance is an affront to his masculinity. As if to emphasize this point, the colonial imagery in *Piazza d'Italia* is highly feminized and eroticized, as evidenced by the novel's numerous allusions to fictional African queens—from Dido, the tragic lover of Aeneas, to the cruel Sofonisba from *Cabiria*—through which the empire takes corporeal shape. It is nonetheless the "sanguinaria e bellissima" (125)³⁴ Queen Luana, the main antagonist in Melchiorre's fascist stories, that most eloquently typifies the alluring tension between danger and desire that informs the colonial relationship. A ludicrous assemblage of colonial fantasies and phobias borne out of propaganda, Melchiorre's overblown melodramas, at once demeaning and exploitative, reveal the many ways through which the patriarchal order was projected upon the dominions. His stories centre on Italo Ferro, a young scientist suffering from a condition of excessive thirst—much like Melchiorre himself whose affliction is but a thinly veiled metaphor for his insatiable need for supremacy—and the struggles he incurs as he travels to Africa to procure a cure for his illness. There, he falls prey to the ruthless Luana who lures him with her charms and keeps him captive. Rebuffing her advances, he flees with the help of Nubia, a devoted slave, but not before gifting "la luce della civiltà di Roma al popolo oppresso dalla tirannica regina" (125).³⁵ In a scene borrowed from *The Aeneid*, the queen, "ripudiata dal suo popolo e ferita nell'amore" (125),³⁶ throws herself on a burning funeral pyre whilst her palace collapses in an earthquake inferred to be divine judgement.

Neither *femme fatale* nor servile, the good-hearted but resolutely free-willed Asmara contrasts sharply with the trite female archetypes exemplified by Luana and Nubia. Although he professes to love her, Melchiorre endeavours to win her favour through displays of strength that are reminiscent of the brutality of the *camicie nere*. "Col moschetto e col pugnale andrò in Africa Orientale..." canticchiava Melchiorre" (142);³⁷ humming imperial ditties, he barges uninvited into Asmara's house, effusively raving about the colonies: "Asmara doveva ascoltarlo parlare malinconicamente di africane conosciute attraverso la propaganda: il tè e le banane, la quarta sponda, le grandi cascate, la civiltà di Roma" (144).³⁸ In one of the culminating moments of the novel, the scorned Melchiorre sets out once again for her house, his patience worn

thin, behaving for the first time openly like a Fascist: “Si sedette da gerarca, per la prima volta in quella desiderata casa ostile: con le gambe incrociate e una mano sul panciotto” (159).³⁹ He then confesses his crime: maddened by his unrequited love, he has denounced to the occupying Germans the partisan activities of Garibaldi, his cousin and love rival. In response, Asmara slaps him twice; at the second blow, he falls to his knees and delivers a quivering, teary apology that amounts to little more than a denial of responsibility: “Diceva che non te poteva più, che lo aveva costretto, aveva abusato, quel pezzente, coi tedeschi qui, che figura ci faceva ogni giorno i manifesti sul monumento a chiamarli assassini, a sbottere, a incitare alla ribellione” (160).⁴⁰ At last, Asmara orders him to leave, threatening him with a pair of scissors. Deflated and humiliated, Melchiorre recoils and flees in such haste that he leaves behind his hat, a symbol of male authority and power. The moment of confrontation moves towards a reversal of power dynamics. Menaced by Asmara, who brandishes her sewing scissors, an emblem of domestic life, as if they were a lethal

250 weapon, Melchiorre, in whom dual forms of oppression are personified, lets his cowardly nature show through. For all his rhetoric of male courage and colonial mastery, the would-be Fascist is exposed as merely a paper tiger, defeated by a slip of a girl.

THE QUARTA SPONDA AND THE TRAUMA OF OCCUPATION

Melchiorre's betrayal foretells of the tragedy that is to befall Borgo. In next to no time, German troops descend upon the town illuminated at nightfall by “un chiarore collaborazionista” (167).⁴¹ None of the men are to be found, having deserted to find refuge in the mountains. It is the women and the children who are left to bear the brunt of German wrath, with the *piazza* again becoming the site of slaughter of the innocent. Forcibly gathered in the city's square, the women engage in a final act of silent defiance as they refuse to reveal—or are perhaps unaware of—the safe haven to which their husbands and sons have retreated: “Intorno al monumento, spalla a spalla per farsi coraggio, sentirono l'ultimatum dell'ufficiale che voleva sapere il tutto del niente che sapevano. ‘Chi parla per tutte?’ Il brusio si smorzò. ‘Bene.’ E fece un cenno” (173).⁴² Perhaps out of a sense of decency, Tabucchi spares us the most harrowing details of the carnage; he does not withdraw, however, from the nightmarish vision of the town being set aflame:

Le SS fecero l'inferno [...] un muro di fiamme alte e crepitanti, piene di urla. Ma lo fecero artificiale, con la benzina, e lo collocarono nella chiesa, e il crepitio era lo scoppio della mitraglia, che buttava fuoco sul fuoco. [...] Le fiamme riverberavano il paese a giorno. Ora si erano fatte bluastre, perché per il calore dovevano essere saltate le pietre tombali del pavimento e i morti antichi bruciavano assieme ai morti recenti. (172-75)⁴³

The graves—always favoured sites of the uncanny—have burst open, their repelled

contents obscenely returning into view: the scene of mourning verges on the haunting. Burnt anew, the buried dead are unearthed, their ashes mingling with those of the recently deceased until one becomes unable to tell them apart. This gesture of spectral communion speaks to a shared fate, to a transgenerational trauma mute with suffering.

Whilst the exhumed dead remain unnamed, *Piazza d'Italia* provides several hints to help surmise their identity. The trail of clues begins in the chapter "Forse *Cabiria*," which foreshadows the dramatic events soon to unfold in Borgo. The chapter's title is an obvious allusion to the 1914 historical drama *Cabiria*, a classic of the silent film era, whose action unfurls during the Second Punic War between hereditary enemies Rome and Carthage. The wildly successful epic's intrigue revolved around the rescue of its eponymous heroine, an innocent Roman child enslaved and sold to be sacrificed in a barbaric arcane ritual in Carthage. Referenced numerous times throughout *Piazza d'Italia* in connection with a cinema house under construction in Borgo—a major happening in the sleepy town—the lurid melodrama serves as an anchor point of the narrative. The movie's literal and symbolic presence acts as a powerful reminder that artistic and cultural practices are neither harmless nor neutral: they produce meaning within a larger sociopolitical context, and whilst they can unsettle and disrupt power, they may just as well facilitate it. Indeed, released on the heel of the Italian invasion of Libya in 1911, *Cabiria* reflected a nascent national confidence derived from victory. It likewise functioned as an ideological lens through which modern Italians, harnessing the unique potentials of the cinematic medium, could project their better selves onto the idealized past of Ancient Rome, and define themselves in contrast to a savage, uncouth Other. Mary P. Wood thus remarks that the movie's thematic framework is founded on stark dichotomies—law and disorder, justice and injustice, compassion and brutality—that are embodied by two very different sets of people: "From quite early in the film, the connotations of good, worthiness, and civilization stack up on the Roman side; Africans and Orientals are bad" (68). She adds further on that *Cabiria* also underpinned the subservient logic that informed the colonial relationship as it suggested that the "wild mobs" of the Carthaginians "would benefit from some self-discipline and direction from a superior society" (68), as did the tamed, deferential Nubian slave Maciste by virtue of his intimacy with his Roman master.⁴⁴ Subsequent depictions of colonialism would seldom stray from this template. These colonial tropes are satirized with biting humour in *Piazza d'Italia* through Melchiorre's silly writings. Amounting to little more than tired pastiches, his African tales are deliberately reminiscent of *Cabiria*: "ed ora stava scrivendo un terzo episodio di Italo alle prese con una tribù di negri piccoli e lascivi che andavano a rapire ragazze bianche sulla costa per sacrificarle ai loro idoli di pietra" (126).⁴⁵ Beyond the laughably grotesque racism of his stories, a disarming irony is embedded in the fact that it is Melchiorre himself who ultimately sacrifices the women of the village on the altar of his wounded pride. Melchiorre, it turns out, is no Italo; the light he brings to Borgo is not that of civilization, but of German hellfire.

Whilst at first glance the chapter's title, "Forse *Cabiria*" ("Maybe *Cabiria*"), may appear to voice an innocuous question—will *Cabiria* be screened once the movie theatre is completed?—it portends a terrible omen for Borgo. The novel's description of *Cabiria*'s movie poster eerily points to the unsettling similarities between Carthage and Borgo, two cities besieged and set ablaze by occupying forces (Rimini par. 69): "Pendeva già, accanto al portone chiuso da due tavoloni incrociati, il manifesto di una donna vestita di candido, con le mani intrecciate e gli occhi strabuzzati, sullo sfondo di una città in fiamme" (134).⁴⁶ Tabucchi is once again playing with representations in this passage. Although hinted at, the sack and burning of Carthage is in fact never shown in *Cabiria*; it is instead the Roman fleet that is set aflame onscreen. The novel's ubiquitous motif of the double is reinterpreted here as the mirrored, intertwined fates of Italian Borgo and African Carthage. That both scenes of destruction should show violence being exerted upon women is far from inconsequential: in these men's games, it is the women who burn. The chapter "Si apre con una farsa tragica" ("It
 252 Opens with a Tragic Farce") constitutes another indicator of how Tabucchi thematically uses *Cabiria* as a *mise-en-abyme* of Italian history. On the day of the cinema's grand opening, the long-awaited screening of *Cabiria*, a "filme fascista" (156)⁴⁷ as per Garibaldi, is interrupted by Mussolini's announcement of Italy's entry into World War II:

"La danno! Questa volta la danno per davvero, Cabiria!" [...] Invece si sentì un vocione slittante, e la piazza ammutolì, presa a tradimento. Le prime parole erano: "Combattenti di terra, di mare!" Fu il primo spettacolo dello Splendore. E fu anche l'ultimo, perché era scoppiata la guerra. (155-57)⁴⁸

The spectators' exhilaration as the curtains open has dimmed to despair with the proclamation of war, hence the "tragic farce" being played on Borgo's inhabitants (Rimini par. 73). The audience's delight in the *mise-en-scène* of colonial antagonism; its cruel pleasure in watching Carthage smoulder to the ground: all these manifestations of the vapid enjoyment of violence being exacted upon others subside when confronted with Mussolini's betrayal and the imminence of war. Tabucchi implicates imperialism in the genesis of militaristic nationalist ideologies that led to the outbreak of the Second World War, with the African conflict acting as the literal prelude, or first act, of the European war: violence, it appears, begets violence.

"È l'Asmara!" (176),⁴⁹ the opening line of the chapter "La quarta sponda," celebrates the return of Asmara guiding the surviving villagers of Borgo to safety on the morning of the German massacre. Reunited with Garibaldi, she retells, in what constitutes by far the longest monologue of the book, her rescue mission and her last tussle with the traitorous Melchiorre. In a novel so typified by its commanding narrative voice, the fact that Asmara wrests control of the discursive space away from Tabucchi is significant. At last, Asmara has carved out her space of enunciation within the narration, granting no one else, not even Tabucchi, authority on her story. "Mi sono vestita da morte" (179);⁵⁰ it is in the guise of death, camouflaged with the

uniform of a deceased soldier, that she sets out to confront Melchiorre and exact revenge for the bloodbath. The military garments are loose and ill-fitting on her body, as if to imply that the role of executioner is fundamentally at odds with her true self. After arriving at Melchiorre's house, she realizes that she is too late: he is already in the thralls of agony, having quenched his insatiable thirst by ingesting a full bottle of rat poison. No longer able to bear the gruesome sight of the carnage, he awaits death in a room drenched in darkness. Asmara, implacable, opens wide the windows and forces him to apprehend the destruction he has wrought. Tellingly, it is as the embodiment of the spirit of liberation, as a *partigiana*, that Asmara gives voice to the grievances of the colonized subject, evoking the victims of imperialism alongside those of Borgo:

Sono andata alla finestra e l'ho spalancata. Guarda, gli faccio, guarda maledetto topo avvelenato, cosa fanno i tuoi compari. Entrava il riverbero del fuoco, come un sole rosso. [...] Poi la mitraglia ha spento i lamenti. Cos'è, chiede lui. È la tua quarta sponda, gli faccio. Ha cominciato a piangere, singhiozzava. Ah, ora piangi, ho detto io, ora piangi. Ho passato la notte alla finestra. Lui si era assopito. L'ho scrollato e l'ho tirato su. Devi morire sveglio, gli ho detto, e ricordartene per sempre. (179)⁵¹

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Here is your fourth shore, she chastises Melchiorre; here is the violence the yearning for colonial mastery fostered. Her participation in the resistance is thus first and foremost entrenched in a practice of empathy and of memorial solidarity. She forces Melchiorre's gaze open, denying him the solace that sleep, darkness, or death would bring. The scene draws contrast with their previous confrontation. Melchiorre, now truly repentant and shamed, appeals to her pity, pleading with her to take his hand into her own and to close his eyes: "Voleva che gli dessi la mano. Riprende a singhiozzare. Perché non ho mai avuto il coraggio, balbettava. [...] Chiudimi gli occhi, mi fa, per carità, chiudimi gli occhi" (179).⁵² Neither merciless nor cruel, Asmara relents. Her final kindness, however, must not be misinterpreted as either forgiveness or absolution. No longer concealed, the Fascist's crimes are laid bare for all to see in the morning light: "Gli ho chiuso gli occhi. Era già giorno" (181).⁵³

NOTES

1. Clearly, there lies in each of us a yearning for dialogue with what has been, with those who passed over to the afterlife, to uncover what it meant for them to live, and then to die. (All translations are mine except where indicated.)
2. For a thorough discussion of Tabucchi's commitment to engaged writing, see Wren-Owens, *Postmodern Ethics*.
3. Moreover, the name Borgo—translatable from Italian as "town" or "village"—is suggestive of a reality that extends beyond the locality of the small Tuscan town to encompass the whole nation. On the symbolic correspondences between Borgo, the *piazza*, and the nation, see Hanna 212-14.
4. No matter how transient the reign of victors or how benevolent they may ostensibly appear to be, the enduring presence of the monument lays bare the true nature of power; that of an implacable force,

always reborn anew. Perle Abbrugiati thus interprets the statue as a palimpsest that, even if torn down and replaced, bears traces of its previous incarnations. Political transformism never lives up to its promise of revolution; it merely masks the impossibility of genuine change and the permanence of brutality as the *modus operandi* of power. Garibaldi's doomed attempt to climb up the monument—an action that signals his desire for political agency but, ultimately, seals his death—further illustrates that the historical dimension, as embodied by the statue, is made of a deadly rigidity (Abbrugiati 270-72).

5. At that moment a shot was heard. Only one. Garibaldi loosened his embrace on the statue and spun around slowly. He opened his raised fist and the stone rolled across the square. As he followed its movement in his fall, he gurgled something, but few heard him.
6. The novel's exact chronology is left a bit unclear, but Garibaldi's uprising could coincide with the "exclusion crisis" of May 1947 when the Christian Democrats (CD), led by De Gasperi, increasingly fearful of electoral defeat and under pressure from their American allies, removed members of cabinet belonging to the Communist Party of Italy (PCI) and the Italian Socialist Party (PSI) from the coalition government.
7. But his tongue produced a noisome gurgling that only the few near him heard. [...] in his brief journey from the monument to the dust, [...] the fog of death had clouded his last words.
8. Tabucchi's cynical outlook might have been shaped by having begun his writing career under the long shadow of the *anni di piombo* (years of lead), a period that saw Italy spiralling into social unrest under the threat of terrorism on both far ends of the political spectrum from the late 1960s until the early 1980s. One of the lasting legacies of these chaotic years, particularly within left-wing circles, was a persistent mistrust of the state and its institutions, suspected of tolerating, if not aiding and abetting, right-wing violence. As a matter of fact, several of Tabucchi's later works would directly contend with the legacy of the "Years of Lead." On this subject, see Klopp.
9. While great historical narratives and official narratives based on the documents, treaties, and laws of the ruling classes tend to erase the individual, to ignore the peripheries and the marginalized, microhistories work in the opposite direction; indeed, they try to recover the experience of the individual, to recreate from "evidence" a certain mentality [...] This novel historiographical approach, as opposed to accounts of "kings and battles," starts its inquiry at the bottom of the social pyramid, expanding the subjects of history to include women, children, marginalized peoples, ethnic and religious minorities, and examining their interactions with the law, the powerful, the clergy and the nobles, to piece together a whole society.
10. In her article, Wren-Owens makes the compelling case that Tabucchi's shifting representations of Portuguese colonial rule in his fiction, from an idealized to a repressive regime, were influenced by the debates on the legacy of colonial rule then occurring in Italy. She alleges further that Tabucchi's depictions of the Portuguese colonial ensemble allowed him to engage by proxy with Italian imperialism.
11. "Qualche bambino nato in quei giorni si prese il nome di Macallè. I francobolli descrivevano imperi meravigliosi" (142). (A few children born during those days received the name Macallé. The postage stamps depicted wonderful empires.)
12. With Italy coming out on the victorious end of the conflict, the widespread belief that Italians were a good, unthreatening people would henceforth become deeply ingrained in the nation's psyche. It would prove most instrumental in establishing a moral distinction between, on the one hand, regular Italians, and on the other, Fascists and their Nazi allies. Nowhere is this process more plainly at work than in the aptly named *Italiani brava gente*, a 1964 war movie directed by Giuseppe De Santis and Dmitri Vasilyev. Set on the Eastern Front, the movie maligns Germans and Fascists as little more than brutal, merciless thugs, while simultaneously offering a much more compassionate view of average Italians, who are shown to be patriotic family men and unwilling combatants, if perhaps hapless and naïve. *Italiani brava gente* would hold particularly resonant consequences for later assessments of colonial rule as it had been from its inception closely associated with imperialism. Indeed, Paolo

Favero traces the origin of the expression to the historical failure of the imperial push of the end of the nineteenth century, when it was first developed as a cultural justification for the country's pitiable results. Enjoying renewed popularity under Fascism, it would then be used to depict the regime's colonial expansionism as a benevolent, civilizing undertaking (Favero 145-48).

13. More lenient, more humane, more tolerant, more positive.
14. The Italian Republic had, for instance, shown great reluctance to put on trial Italians suspected of war crimes, many of whom, to complicate matters, had been given important political functions under the new political system. An infamous case is that of Marshal Pietro Badoglio, one of Mussolini's chief commanders who, amongst others, had approved the use of poisonous gas during the Ethiopian campaign. Having participated in the ousting of Mussolini in 1943, he was subsequently sworn in as Prime Minister and began negotiating an armistice with the Allied forces. Although forced to step down after Germany's surrender, he was able to evade justice, in part because he was seen as a stalwart against communism in postwar Italy. Another indicator of the state's complicity in the erasure of fascist crimes was its unwillingness to grant historians full access to archives and documents of the period. Worse, it deliberately concealed the most odious documents, as revealed by the 1994 discovery of the *armoria della vergogna* (cabinet of shame), a hidden cabinet housing hundreds of files detailing crimes perpetrated in Italy under Fascism and during German occupation. For more on the politics of erasure of fascist crimes, see Oliva, *Si ammazza troppo poco*.
15. The national political crisis that erupted in 2012 over the decision to erect a mausoleum on the tomb of Rodolfo Graziani—one of the few Fascists to have been convicted of war crimes for his actions in Northeast Africa—is emblematic of this ongoing failure to reckon with Italy's past. In addition, many historical representations continue to adhere closely to discredited, if tenacious, colonial myths. Filmmaker Gabriele Salvatores's *Mediterraneo* (1991), to give an illustrious example, recounts the horrific occupation of Greece by the Axis powers as a heartwarming iteration on the theme of the "good Italian" in which a ragtag group of lovable Italian soldiers find peace and happiness on a paradisiac island of the Aegean Sea.
16. The short quotations are taken from a longer discussion on the memory of Italian war crimes and colonial atrocities reproduced here in the original French: "Les Italiens ont voulu laisser de côté beaucoup d'épisodes de leur histoire. Récemment, de jeunes historiens ont retrouvé des documents absolument terrifiants concernant les exactions des Italiens en Abyssinie, en Lybie et en Éthiopie. Tout cela a été effacé par la politique et les institutions de notre pays durant l'après-guerre. On a créé le mythe du bon soldat italien, qui n'aurait rien à eu à voir avec le soldat nazi. Je ressens l'invasion de la Grèce comme une chose particulièrement grave et honteuse. En agressant ce pays, l'Italie a transgressé un tabou, commis un péché irrémédiable: elle a voulu, culturellement parlant, tuer sa mère. La culture italienne, la latinité dans son ensemble, ne pourraient exister sans la Grèce. L'occupation de la Grèce est doublement honteuse, sur le plan humain et sur le plan culturel. Elle symbolise dans mon roman l'indicible italien, la zone d'ombre que mon pays a voulu oublier."
17. Yet we are tempted to venture that—within Tabucchi's sophisticated writing system—the unspoken, the unvoiced, the unrealized, the unfulfilled, in short, *what is not there*, serve a function that, if not the most decisive, is amongst the most crucial.
18. The *Repubblica di Salò* was a German-controlled Fascist state hewn in the northern half of the country from September 1943, when an armistice agreement was signed between the Kingdom of Italy in the South and the Allied powers, until Germany's surrender in Italy in April 1945. The occupation was witness to episodes of large-scale bloodshed, with Nazi and Fascist forces participating in the mass slaughter of civilians and partisans in their gradual retreat up the peninsula. Among the most horrific massacres committed during this period were those of Sant'Anna di Stazzema and of Marzabotto, where children and women were butchered—and of which Borgo's destruction might be a fictional counterpart. The *partigiani* in the North and in the South undoubtedly played a pivotal role in combatting Fascism and Nazism. An insidious aftereffect of the sacralization of the Resistance, however, was the retelling of the Second World War from the Italian viewpoint as a war of liberation that dramatically downplayed the violent events that had transpired prior to the armistice of 1943.

On the ideological use of the *Resistenza* as an “alibi,” see Oliva, *L'alibi della Resistenza*.

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19. In his book, Rothberg explores how the emergence of the public memory of the Holocaust coincided, and aligned with, the historical process of decolonization. To quickly summarize some key takeaways: on one hand, the memorial authority of the Shoah paved the way for other victimized groups to come forward with their own histories of violence; on the other, the memorialization of the Holocaust itself benefitted from the decolonization process which reaffirmed, for instance, the primacy of human rights (6-7).
20. Incidentally, Tabucchi is strikingly evasive on Asmara's physical appearance, perhaps to maintain an ambiguity around her ethnicity. All he reveals is that she has a proud smile, a pointy nose, and wild black hair blowing in the wind: “Asmara aveva un sorriso altero e il naso a punta, da caparbia” (91) (Asmara had a proud smile and a pointy, stubborn nose); “Era proprio lei, la si distingueva nitidamente fra i cespugli bassi, che avanzava coi capelli neri al vento di marzo, fra le ginestre” (177) (It really was her, she could be seen distinctly among the low bushes, among the broom, stepping forward with black hair blowing in the March wind).
21. The feminine voice [...] is characterized by a tone that is fundamentally that of interrogation. [...] The style of the feminine voice expresses itself more in the form of interrogation, of questioning, than in that of affirmation. [...] It does not crave, nor does it accept the mastery over facts claimed by men, a mastery through which one inevitably ends up mastered, because it senses that such mastery stands in the way of intention, of will, and of meaning. [...] The ethical nature of the feminine voice shines as it calls for acknowledgement of all signs, traces, and voices that have been forgotten or disregarded.
Gargani's view of the masculine voice as overly assertive and authoritarian is best exemplified in *Piazza d'Italia* in Fascist Melchiorre's manner of speech: “Parlare poco, non dare giudizi personali ma drastici, considerare le cose dall'alto, erano la migliore maniera di ottenere il rispetto” (126) (Talking little, expressing impersonal but definitive opinions, looking down on things, were the best way to gain respect). This shared language emphasizes how Fascism was, in fact, redolent of patriarchy.
22. Asmara had a proud smile and a pointy, stubborn nose. She would have liked to herd the horses of the plains, but instead they had forced her to work the loom. That is why she saw men as rivals. “They think they are superior because they piss against walls,” she said. She had the dark temperament of wild horses, and humid nostrils that dilated under the effect of odours and anger.
23. Asmara used *tu* out of habit, because she was ignorant of the correct usage of other pronouns. When she ventured to address someone formally, it was not long before she stumbled over the verbs.
24. “Be quiet,” Garibaldi said, “what can you really understand about these things.” Asmara turned pale and pushed him outside. “Do me a favour and go away because I can't stand you anymore tonight. You think you're so clever because you piss against walls.”
25. Sighing, Asmara stood up, opened a chest of drawers, and took out a small card. “We are comrades,” she said, throwing it on the table. Garibaldi looked at her with a blank expression, as if she were pulling his leg. [...] Garibaldi felt himself boil up. He was banging his fist on the table, red-faced from anger. [...] “Oh, listen,” Asmara cut him short, “you were so smug, so confident in what you were doing. You men think you're clever because you piss against walls.”
26. “I have to break a horoscope,” Asmara replied to cut him short.
27. Emerges as the one to wrest man away from a fatality inscribed in his family history; as if, to break man's fate, it was necessary to break the generational chain.
28. For a more thorough overview of the iconography of St. George and other equestrian saints in Ethiopia, see Chojnacki, “The Iconography of St. George in Ethiopia,” Parts I and II.
29. The Battle of Adwa was the final and most critical battle of the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1895-1896). It culminated in the resounding defeat of the Kingdom of Italy and was perceived as a national humiliation. The Fascist regime revived this shame in the interwar period to garner popular support for

their imperial ambitions. They appealed to the wounded pride of the Italian people and justified the conquest of Ethiopia as a means to avenge national dishonour.

30. [P]alm trees, expanses of golden sand with brick palaces inhabited by mysterious queens called to the table to the sound of bronze gongs, treasures buried in caves, forests brimming with adventures.
31. Out of all things fascist, what he liked the most were the songs, because they were about men as he wished to be.
32. Branded the "butcher of Ethiopia," Graziani was sentenced to nineteen years for war crimes in 1948, although he was released after barely serving four months in prison.
33. Remember that the passion for colonies is the most masculine, the proudest and the fiercest that an Italian can nurture; love them all the more for the sacrifices they cost and will cost us, than for the riches they procure us. Be prepared to measure up your domineering strength and your power as condottiere in the colonies.
34. Bloody and beautiful.
35. The light of Roman civilization to the people oppressed by the tyrannical queen.
36. Repudiated by her people and wounded by love.
37. "I'll go to East Africa with musket and dagger..." sang Melchiorre.
38. Asmara had to listen to him speak wistfully of Africas known to him through propaganda: tea and bananas, the fourth shore, the great waterfalls, Roman civilization.
39. For the first time, in that hostile but desired house, he sat down as a *gerarca*: with his legs crossed and a hand on his waistcoat.
A *gerarca* was a higher officer of the National Fascist Party.
40. He said that he could no longer take it, that he had forced his hand, that he had gone too far, this tramp, with the Germans here, what did he look like with the posters on the monument every day calling them murderers, mocking them, inciting rebellion.
41. A collaborationist glow.
42. Standing shoulder to shoulder around the monument to give each other courage, they heard the ultimatum of the officer who wanted to know everything about the nothing that they knew. "Who will speak for you all?" The hubbub subsided. "Good." And he made a sign.
43. The SS made hell [...] a wall of massive, crackling flames, fraught with screams. But they made an artificial hell with gasoline, and placed it in the church, and the crackling was the rounds of machine guns, setting fire to the fire. [...] The flames lit up the village as if it were broad daylight. They had now turned bluish, for the heat had blown up the tombstones and the ancient dead burned alongside the recent dead.
44. Incidentally, with Maciste proving enormously popular and set to star in his own movie series, his origins were retconned: the character, initially played by an actor in blackface, was transformed from African slave to white northern Italian strongman (Reich).
45. He was now writing a third episode where Italo faced a tribe of lascivious little n***** who kidnapped young white girls on the coast to be offered as sacrifices to their stone idols.
46. Beside the front door barred by two large crossed planks, one could see a poster representing a woman dressed in white, goggle-eyed and with her hands clasped, against the backdrop of a city in flames.
47. Fascist movie.
48. "They will show it! This time, they'll show it for real, *Cabiria!*" [...] Instead, a heavy drawling voice was heard, and the square fell silent, as if betrayed. The first words were: "Fighters of land and of sea!"

It was the Splendore's first screening. And it was also to be its last, for war had broken out.

49. "It's Asmara!"

50. I dressed up as death.

51. I went to the window and opened it wide. Look, I motion, look, you cursed poisoned rat, look at what your friends are doing. The glow of the fire reverberated through the room like a red sun. [...] Then the machine guns silenced all laments. What is this, he asks me. It's your fourth shore, I tell him. He began to cry, he was sobbing. Ah, now you cry, I said, now you cry. I spent the night by the window. He had dozed off. I shook him to wake him up. You must die awake, I told him, and remember this forever.

52. He wanted me to hold his hand. He started sobbing again. Why did I never had the courage, he stammered. [...] Close my eyes, for pity's sake, close my eyes.

53. I closed his eyes. It was already morning.

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