

ARE ITALIANS BROWN? CATEGORICAL MISCEGENATION AND EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY ITALIAN HOMOSEXUALITY*

di John Gerard Champagne

Introduction

Rather than continuing to understand the late Victorian invention of homosexuality as a moment of singular and absolute abjection, let us consider the possibility of the homosexual as a practical, if accidental, agent of neocolonial expansion [...] serviceable both to modern nation building and to transnational flows of capital.¹

In *A Taste for Brown Bodies*, Hiram Pérez challenges queer theory to interrogate the roles race and racism played in the 19th century invention of the modern homosexual. However, rather than simply propose that race, gender, sexuality, nationhood, and class constitute «multiple axes of oppression»,² Pérez insists that race and sexuality are not discrete, even if intersecting, but instead «mutually constitutive operations».³

In this essay, I begin to explore the “difference” of Italian homoeroticism by juxtaposing it with Pérez’s claims. My objects of analysis are works of early to mid-twentieth century travel literature in which homoeroticism is portrayed, some in which Italians travel abroad in search of sexual encounters, and one in which northern Europeans travel to Italy. In all cases, my aim will be to explore the historical and discursive co-constitution of early 20th century homosexuality, Italian national identity, and race. In her groundbreaking work on constructions of race and gender in modern Italy, Gaia Giuliani pays particular attention to «the transit of racist scripts across different discursive domains – propaganda, cultural products, government policies, scientific knowledge, and legislation – and material power relations».⁴ In this essay, I will be concerned with travel literature as a particularly rich discursive domain for the transit of racist scripts, and one that might sometimes contradict or at least complicate other discursive domains like scientific knowledge.

Pérez’s analysis of the co-constitution of race and (homo)sexuality is indebted to Rey Chow, who proposes the term «categorical miscegenation» to indicate that modern race, national identity, and sex are for the most part «indistinguishable and undifferentiable from each other».⁵

* This essay benefitted from the generous comments of Vetri Nathan, Rebecca Bauman, and the other members of the Columbia Seminar in Modern Italian Studies, as well as the editors of the «Giornale di Storia».

¹ H. Pérez, *A Taste for Brown Bodies, Gay Modernity and Cosmopolitan Desire*, New York, New York University Press, 2015, p. 6.

² C. R. Snorton, *Nobody is Supposed to Know, Black Sexuality on the Down Low*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2014, p. 23

³ H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 36

⁴ G. Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender in Modern Italy, Intersectional Representations in Visual Culture*, London, Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, p. 6.

⁵ J. K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages, Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017, p. 206. Puar here is paraphrasing R. Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2002, p. 7.

Re-reading Michel Foucault's notion of biopower,⁶ Ann Laura Stoler insists that it is impossible to comprehend the late 19th century inventions of race and sexuality minus one another.⁷ Siobhan B. Somerville has argued that «questions of race – in particular the formation of notions of “whiteness” and “blackness” – must be understood as a crucial part of the history and representation of sexual formations».⁸ And, as Sharon Patricia Holland puts it, «The taxonomy of post-Enlightenment life requires that we order sexuality and racial belonging. One can think of these movements as coterminous rather than separate and distinct».⁹ All of these efforts respond to Holland's concern that, as a discipline, queer theory risks proving incapable of interrogating historical instances of «the collusion of desire with domination and oppression».¹⁰

According to Pérez, the late Victorian (white) homosexual found its conditions of possibility in a «range of mobilities, transformed or generated by industrialization (i.e., class privilege, whiteness, transportation technology, mass media, tourism)»¹¹ – historical circumstances tied to so-called modernization. Crucial to the formation of this homosexual subject is what he terms «the brown body», a figure «to signal the fluidity and racial ambiguity at work in the way a gay cosmopolitan imagines an idealized primitive figure that functions both as an object of desire and as the repository of disowned projections cast temporally and spatially backward».¹² Playing a constitutive role in «the formation of a cosmopolitan» male homosexual identity,¹³ that brown body «is alternately (or simultaneously) primitive, exotic, savage, pansexual, and abject».¹⁴

This new, homosexual subject stakes his modernity on the primitiveness of his imaginary brown double:

The very notion of civilization requires a fantasized, primitive space onto which repressed desires are projected and disavowed. This idyllic space, populated by pansexual, uninhibited brown

⁶ On biopower, see M. Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended Lectures at the Collège France, 1975-1976*, New York, Picador, 2003. Briefly, biopower describes the type of power exercised by disciplinary society to determine who lives and who dies. As one writer puts it, «Urban planning, demography, statistics, welfare systems as well as institutions like psychiatric hospitals and police are all technologies developed to govern population from above».

A. Righi, *Biopolitics and Social Change in Italy*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 3.

⁷ L. A. Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1995.

⁸ S. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line, Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2000, Kindle Edition, p. 5.

⁹ S. P. Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2012, p. 63

¹⁰ M. P. Hames-García, *Can Queer Theory Be Critical Theory?* in W. S. Wilkerson and J. Paris (eds.), *New Critical Theory: Essays on Liberation*, Lanham, Maryland, Rowman and Littlefield, 2001, pp. 201-22; cited in S. P. Holland, *The Erotic Life*, p. 43. My concern, however, with such formulations: they risk substituting a sociological understanding of desire for a properly psychoanalytic one and, in the process, denying the complexity and autonomy, however relative, of sexual fantasy.

¹¹ H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 104.

¹² *Ivi*, p. 25.

¹³ *Ivi*, p. 1

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 25. For an alternative employment of the term brown, see H. E. Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2020. Note, however, the way Southern Italians and Italian American immigrants correspond to Muñoz's definition. For example, people are rendered brown «by their personal and familial participation in South-to-North migration patterns»; their «accents and linguistic orientations [...] convey a certain difference». Their «spatial coordinates are contested»; their «right to residency is challenged by those who make false claims to nativity»; and their «everyday customs and everyday styles of living [...] connote a sense of illegitimacy», p. 3. According to these terms, Italian Americans were once brown, but, according to the logic of the Lega North and “Padanian Nationalism”, the Italian south is “still” too brown for comfort.

bodies – bodies without shame – promised liberation from Victorian restrictions on same-sex desire.¹⁵

And while it might seem that this modern white homosexual subject is embodied exclusively in the so-called “gentleman traveler”, this emergent species also includes itinerant working-class figures (for example, sailors and cowboys) who

convey the brown body to the traveling eye of gay modernity. They do so through their legendary encounters with the primitive, by themselves embodying brownness (or modes of primitivity), and by acting as intermediaries for cosmopolitan identification.¹⁶

As Pérez demonstrates, the Anglophone literature of this period is peopled by both this gentleman traveler and his itinerant working-class companion. The implications of Pérez’s formulation here is that, via their proximity to the primitive, some “white” sailors and cowboys may be, if not “brown”, then not quite as white as the gentlemen who pursued them.¹⁷

1. *The Italian Case, Queer Italy and Race*

Given his location in the US academy, Pérez explores how the modern homosexual risks assisting the Anglophone world in its colonialist and neocolonialist adventures. How might these insights apply, however, to modern Italy? Clearly, the Italian context is different from that of the UK, the US, Germany, or France, as Italy was a site where this late Victorian personage called the homosexual further consolidated his sexuality, national identity, and whiteness.¹⁸ That is, Italians were frequently perceived by other Europeans and Americans as “brown” – «a position of essential itinerancy relative to naturalized, positivist classes such as white, black, Asian».¹⁹ It was to Sicily, for example, that gentlemen travelers like Wilhelm von Gloeden went in search of brown bodies to photograph; it was to Italy that Winkelmann went in search of sex with working-class men. For, as Roberto M. Dainotto has argued, around the eighteenth century, Europeans, seeking to produce a knowledge of themselves minus any *externalized* other like the so-called Orient, turned to Italy: «the deviant, the internal Other of Europe, is a southerner».²⁰ Italy was construed as primitive, non-modern, a site of backwardness and underdevelopment but also a site of nostalgia for an arcadian homoerotics – according to Pérez, nostalgia being a signal characteristic of the modern homosexual male subject.²¹

¹⁵ H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 105.

¹⁶ *Ivi*, p. 2.

¹⁷ On the need to open up the category of whiteness to its «historical contradictions and embodied differences», see J. Pugliese, *Race as Category Crisis: Whiteness and the Topical Assignment of Race*, «Social Semiotics» 12, 2, 2002, pp. 149-168, DOI: 10.1080/103503302760212078

¹⁸ For an important historical overview of homosexuality and British tourism in southern Italy, see C. Beccalossi, *The ‘Italian Vice’: Male Homosexuality and British Tourism in Southern Italy*, in V. P. Babini, C. Beccalossi, and L. Riall (eds), *Italian Sexualities Uncovered, 1789-1914*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 185-206.

¹⁹ H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 103. He adds, «I make use of ‘brown’ provisionally myself – and tactically – to demystify how bodies are situated outside white/black or white/Asian binaries to consolidate cosmopolitan, first world identities. [...] It is black and not black, Asian and not Asian, white and not white» pp. 103-104 – the latter in particular capturing the well-remarked upon status of Italian immigrants in the context of the 1920s US. See J. Guglielmo and S. Salerno (eds), *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, New York, Routledge, 2003.

²⁰ R. M. Dainotto, *Europe (In Theory)*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2007, p. 54. According to Dainotto, the concept of Eurocentrism logically depends upon this attempt by Europe to define itself minus references to an external other like the so-called Orient.

²¹ H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 7: «Nostalgia characterizes the modern gay male subject’s emergence in the late nineteenth century, constituting perhaps the signal modernity of his person», pp. 8-9; «a nostalgic mode of identification defines gay cosmopolitanism, animating exotic mise-en-scènes fundamental to the emergence and perpetuation of

The examples of travel literature I will analyze were chosen because they do indeed portray Pérez's cosmopolitan homosexual white voyager in search of brown bodies.²² All were written during the fascist Ventennio, a period in which, in Italy, homosexuality, while not against the law, was sometimes vigorously prosecuted by the police.²³ This accounts for the fact that the Italian-language examples were not published until years after the fall of the regime.

It is well-remarked that men from France, the U.K. and Germany traveled to Italy for homoerotic encounters, often with minors, homosexuality being illegal in both Germany and the U.K.²⁴ The notorious Paragraph 175 of the 1872 German Penal Code made homosexuality illegal throughout the Empire. Britain's 1885 Criminal Law Amendment Act made any homosexual male act, witnessed or not, illegal. France, however, abolished anti-sodomy laws with first the Revolution and then the Napoleonic Code, and Italian Unification coincided with «a period marked by important developments in customs and the legal mentality, in which homosexuality transformed itself from an *abdominal offence* punishable by burning at the stake into a private act with which no law interfered [italics in the original]».²⁵ The Italian Criminal Code did not treat homosexuality as a criminal offense, and, according to Barbara Pozzo,

gay modernity and its complicities with U.S. empire». As I have suggested elsewhere, this nostalgia was a means whereby modern homoerotic subjects recognized themselves in historical precedents like Ancient Greece and the Renaissance, and it obviously signified differently in Italy than elsewhere. J. Champagne, *Queer Ventennio: Italian Fascism, Homoerotic Art, and the Nonmodern in the Modern*, Oxford, Peter Lang, 2019. See also S. Arcara, *Hellenic Transgressions, Homosexual Politics: Wilde, Symonds and Sicily*, «Studies in Travel Writing» 16, 2, 2012, pp. 135-147.

²² An initial effort towards a much longer project, this essay could and should be extended in a number of directions. For example, the “Italian” novels of E.M Forster provide a rich site of analysis for the ways in which allegedly “positive” images of Italians are sexed and raced as “brown”. Although she does not discuss the racialization of characters, Suzanne Roszak gestures in this direction when she reminds us that Forster indulges in «primitivist, patronizing depictions of Italian spaces and people». S. Roszak, *Social Non-Conformists in Forster's Italy: Otherness and the Enlightened English Tourist*, «Ariel, A Review of International English Literature», 45, 1-2, p. 167. Another area of inquiry might be other media: while painter John Singer Sargent left little overt written evidence of his erotic preferences, he had both an Italian manservant and model, Nicola D'Inverno, and frequently employed an African American model, Thomas McKeller. As one writer suggests, «In Sargent's work, the attraction he felt for McKeller is palpable, whether or not it led anywhere past his yearning. McKeller matched Sargent's longstanding appreciation and obvious desire for lithe men of varied ethnic descent – Italians, Arabs, African Americans» E. E. Hirshler, *John Singer Sargent: Academician*, in *Boston's Apollo, Thomas McKeller and John Singer Sargent*, N. Silver (ed.), Boston, Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, 2020, p. 112. While more difficult to access, the ways in which the Italian sex partners of these Northern tourists understood the racial and power dynamic of the relationship needs also to be explored. In writing her biography of George Norman Douglass, for example, Rachel Cleves located letters to the writer from some of his former sex partners. R. H. Cleves, *Unspeakable: A Life beyond Sexual Morality*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2020.

²³ See, for example, L. Benadusi, *Il nemico dell'uomo nuovo. L'omosessualità nell'esperienza totalitaria fascista*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 2005; L. de Santis e S. Colaone, *In Italia Sono Tutti Maschi*, Bologna, Kappa, 2010; G. Romano, *The Pathologisation of Homosexuality in Fascist Italy, the Case of G*, Cham, Switzerland, Palgrave Pivot, 2019.

²⁴ On homoerotic sex tourism to Italy, see, for example, R. Aldrich, *The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art, and Homosexuality*, London, Routledge, 1993; C. Beccalossi, *The Italian Vice*; M. Bolognari, *I ragazzi di von Gloeden*, Naples, La Città del Sole, 2012; R. H. Cleves, *Unspeakable*; C. Gargano, *Capri pagana, uranisti e amazzoni tra Ottocento e Novecento*, Capri, Edizioni La conchiglia, 2007. On the laws around homosexuality in Germany at this time, see R. Beachy, *Gay Berlin, Birthplace of a Modern Identity*, New York, Vintage, 2014; on the U.K. see H.M. Hyde, *The Love That Dared Not Speak Its Name: A Candid History of Homosexuality in Britain*, Boston, Little, Brown and Company, 1970.

²⁵ B. Pozzo, *Male Homosexuality in Nineteenth-Century Italy. A Juridical View*, in L. Benadusi, P. L. Bernardini, E. Bianco (eds.), *Homosexuality in Italian Literature, Society, and Culture, 1789-1919*, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017, p. 104. Pozzo's essay provides an excellent, detailed account of the development of the Italian Criminal Code and its reticence to punish homosexual acts.

«Judicial practice had – *de facto* – decriminalized acts between consenting adults throughout a large part of Italy even before a reform to that effect had been formalized within the future Italian Criminal Code».²⁶

While there is a growing body of work on sex tourism to Italy in general and Naples, Capri, and Taormina in particular, this literature typically stops short of analyzing the ways in which representations of travel treat racial difference. It is more likely, rather, to examine the obvious Orientalism at play in representations such as the photos of Von Gloeden. Aracara in particular has noted the way late 19th century aesthetic Hellenism played a central role in how John Addington Symonds and Oscar Wilde understood homoeroticism, as well as the way, for both men, Sicily could signal both Greece and the so-called Orient: «because of its geographical position on the margins of Europe where the naval routes to Africa and the Levant intersected, Sicily, with its Arabic history and paganizing Catholicism, was also perceived as exotic and “Oriental”».²⁷ While the analysis of Orientalism is vital, I hope to push the exploration of race further by adopting Pérez’s term “brown”. In all cases, my goal is to demonstrate that modern articulations of homoerotic desire and racial difference are so intertwined that it is – or perhaps ought to be – impossible to analyze one minus the other.²⁸

If whiteness and homosexuality were co-constitutive, and Italy was “brown” then Italian instances of same-sex compartment are not reducible to their European counterparts. There is now much historical work on queer Italia that argues that «the modern gay male identity often traced to the late Victorian constructions of “invert” and “homosexual”» did not have the same cultural currency in Italy as it did elsewhere.²⁹ (This is one reason why, however anachronistically, I describe Italian men of the Ventennio who had sex with other men as “queer” rather than gay or even homosexual.) How might this require us to revise Pérez’s argument that this figure of modern homosexuality occupied a «locus instrumental to projects of war, colonialism, and, ultimately, neoliberalism»?³⁰

One concern I have with Pérez’s analysis is that, in its determination to constitute the white Victorian homosexual gentleman traveler as the “forefather” of today’s white, modern gay male cosmopolitan, it risks simplifying history.³¹ In its linking of modern homosexuality (and queer theory) to both race and racism, Pérez of necessity flattens and homogenizes both homosexuality and whiteness. For formulations like «the modern gay male subject’s emergence

²⁶ B. Pozzo, *Male Homosexuality*, p. 125.

²⁷ S. Arcara, *Hellenic transgressions*, p. 136.

²⁸ Given that it was an international movement, eugenics is an important reference point for discussions of race, nation, gender, sexuality, and perhaps even class as co-constitutive. On eugenics in Italy, see, for example, F. Cassata, *Molti, sani e forti, L'eugenica in Italia*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 2006, which begins by reminding us that «un rapport dell’International Commission of Eugenics, pubblicato in “Eugenical News” nel 1924, elenca ben quindici paesi in cui l’eugenica ha assunto una connotazione istituzionale: Inghilterra, Germania, Stati Uniti, Italia, Francia, Belgio, Svizzera, Olanda, Danimarca, Svezia, Cecoslovacchia, Norvegia, Argentina, Cuba e Russia», p. 10.

²⁹ H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 3. On Italian queer history in its specificity, see, for example, C. Beccalossi, *The ‘Italian Vice’*; L. Benadusi, *Il nemico dell’uomo nuovo*; J. Champagne, *Queer Ventennio*; A. Ponzio, ‘Ragazzi squillo,’ ‘Ballerini’ e ‘Battoni.’ *La Prostituzione maschile nell’Italia post-Merlin*, «Giornale di Storia» 34, 28, 2020, <<https://www.giornaledistoria.net/saggi/ragazzi-squillo-ballerini-e-battoni-la-prostituzione-maschile-nellitalia-post-merlin/>>, accessed 25 May, 2021. Ponzio’s work suggests that this specificity extends into the 1960s such that young men could continue to have sex with older men minus a sense of themselves as possessing a homosexual identity. See also in this context C. Rinaldi, *Uomini che si fanno pagare. Genere, identità, e sessualità nel sex work maschile tra devianza e nuove forme di normalizzazione*, Roma, DeriveApprodio, 2020.

³⁰ H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 3.

³¹ «I use the notion of the primitive, brown body to locate that ambiguous but charged fantastic object that cathects Victorian male same-sex desire into modern gay male identity». H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 17.

in the late 19th century»³² must deliberately ignore the competing and contradictory ways in which, in this period, homosexual relations were understood – in Italy in particular. That is, they risk securing the «modernity, knowability, and coherence of “modern homosexuality”» *at the price of Italy*.³³

Simply put, if the Victorian gentleman traveler came to Italy not simply to “become” white but also a modern gay cosmopolitan, by implication, Italian forms of same sex eroticism must be construed as primitive and pre-modern. What is lost, then, in Pérez’s analysis is precisely what genealogy seeks. Via historicism, Italian «residues of past understandings of same-sex behavior that persist, though incoherently, under the cover of modern notions of sexual identity»³⁴ are rendered invisible, as are «the alternative visions of queer affiliation, politics, and kinship» they might foster.³⁵

Pérez’s homogenization of modern white cosmopolitan gay identity via the figure of the Victorian gentleman traveler also inadvertently colludes with Queer Theory’s own “forgetting” of that disreputable figure, the modern pederast, who, according to Kadji Amin, has the potential to «trouble contemporary queer orientations toward novelty and futurity» underwritten by queer studies’ unwitting debt to liberalism.³⁶ Amin’s analysis highlights how figures like Genet, Wilde, Proust, Cocteau, Whitman, Gide, and even James Baldwin were not simply modern versions of “our” alleged modern gay identity. Rather, they were what he terms prominent examples of a

homosexualized pederasty – one which could no longer be understood as simply a “masculine” act of sexual domination not animated by a distinct sexuality, but which was not yet simply a sexual orientation to “men” as a gender category uninflected by age, class, and racial/colonial divisions.³⁷

In other words, this homosexualized pederasty was historically “between” a prior pederasty that neither compromised the status of either actors as men nor marked them as possessing a specific sexual identity (that is, a pederasty prior to the division of subjects into heterosexual and homosexual) and a subsequent homosexuality that designated a same sex object choice – but did not necessarily indicate anything about an attraction to differences of age, class, and race/ethnicity.³⁸

Given Italy’s “difference” that this present essay hopes to explore, it is not coincidental that one of the most articulate examples of a modern homosexualized pederasty is Umberto Saba’s

³² H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 7.

³³ I am borrowing here, from a different but related context, the words of K. Amin, *Disturbing Attachments, Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2017, p. 29.

³⁴ K. Amin, *Disturbing*, p. 28.

³⁵ *Ivi*, p. 29. These words are Amin’s account of what genealogy strives to accomplish.

³⁶ *Ibidem*, Why queer theory should be troubled by pederasty is a motif throughout Amin’s work. By modern pederasty, Amin is referring to same sex relationships that «also required a meaningfully eroticized difference of age or status», p. 110.

³⁷ K. Amin, *Disturbing*, p. 41.

³⁸ While one model may have followed one another historically – pre-homosexualized pederasty, homosexualized pederasty, homosexual cosmopolitanism – I am not suggesting any kind of teleology from one to the next. As Amin’s definition of genealogy suggests, previous historical models of sexuality continue to exist and exert their influence. Note that these three different “formations” are themselves discontinuous; the first one is not an identity, the second is an identity defined by age and same sex object choice, the third is an identity define by same sex object choice alone.

Ernesto.³⁹ In the novella, which is set «negli ultimissimi anni dell'Ottocento»,⁴⁰ Ernesto's older lover is not simply attracted to men but rather men younger than he is, «solo a quei ragazzi che avevano, nella loro adolescenza, quella particolare curiosità».⁴¹ Unlike historically prior forms of pederasty, however, the working class lover's object choice of boys is exclusive: to the question of whether he is married, he responds «Mi no – disse – son puto. No me interessa le babe (donne)».⁴² That is, he recognizes himself as having made a particular kind of object choice different from other men. This particular model of homosexual relations necessarily complicates Pérez's argument that late 19th homosexuals were white cosmopolitans in search of brown bodies – the case of Ernesto further complicating the critic's claim by the fact that the boy's older lover was both «un bracciante avventizio» and «il suo aspetto aveva qualcosa lontanamente zingaresco».⁴³ That is, Ernesto is younger but of a superior class position to his lover and perhaps even construed as white in contradistinction to his lover's "brownness". The shared spatial identity of the two characters (in the case of *Ernesto*, Trieste), means not only that Ernesto does not need to resort to travel to find a brown body but may himself be construed by other Europeans as (irredentist) "Italian" and therefore "brown" himself. Of obvious significance here is Ernesto's fascination with *Le Mille e una Notte* and his identification with one of its younger brown characters.⁴⁴ In my reading of Giovanni Comisso's *Gioco d'infanzia* that follows, I similarly argue that the "brown" boy with whom the protagonist – himself a boy, too – falls in love is, like the narrator, Italian.

As Amin reminds us, the fiction of Western modernity as egalitarian and democratic has been buttressed by persistently projecting pederasty «*outside modern Europe* – consigned to the distant past and ascribed to Western modernity's racialized and colonized others [italics in the original]».⁴⁵ Racism demanded that the love objects of these traveling Victorian homosexualized pederasts *could not be white*: «Horror at white boyhood perverted, white masculine autonomy called into question, and white innocence stolen» all insured that the young men with whom the Victorian gentleman traveler had sex were of necessity racialized as non-white. In order to draw a tight causal connection between the co-constitution of whiteness and modern homosexuality, Pérez must ignore both the "pre-homosexualized pederasty" portrayed by writers such as Comisso in *Gioco d'infanzia*; the homosexualized pederasty of *Ernesto* not characterized by national difference; and the homosexualized pederasty of the German, French, American, and British men who came to Italy in search of von Gloeden's boys – some of whom also did not understand their attraction to boys, however, as exclusive – one of the most notorious examples being British writer Douglas.⁴⁶ Even beyond the figure of the homosexualized pederast and his younger lover, from a historical point of view, Pérez's account is overly broad. As works as varied as Whitney Davis's on "queer beauty"⁴⁷ and Robert Beachy's on gay Berlin⁴⁸ demonstrate, there was no single modern male homosexual subject, even among "cosmopolitans"; no single understanding of the significance of same-sex attraction linked these white Victorian gentlemen.

³⁹ U. Saba, *Ernesto*, Torino, Giulio Einaudi, 2005, 1975.

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 3.

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 19. Ernesto's lover is twenty-eight, p. 6. Ernesto is sixteen, p. 3.

⁴² *Ivi*, p. 6.

⁴³ *Ivi*, p. 3.

⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 67.

⁴⁵ K. Amin, *Disturbing*, p. 42.

⁴⁶ In other words, Douglas's pederasty was not homosexualized, to use Amin's term.

⁴⁷ W. Davis, *Queer Beauty, Sexuality and Aesthetics from Winkelmann to Freud and Beyond*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2010.

⁴⁸ R. Beachy, *Gay Berlin*.

In addition, then, to rupturing the historicist and perhaps even teleological linking of the Victorian gentleman traveler with modern sexuality that Pérez posits – again, a link that risks rendering Italian same sex desire “premodern” (in that, in Italy in this time period, *pace* Ernesto’s lover, sexual acts between an older and younger man were not always seen as expressing an exclusively homosexual orientation, as Bolognari’s anthropological work on Taormina’s history of homosexual tourism demonstrates)⁴⁹ – Amin’s analysis assists us in recognizing precisely what Pérez cannot – Italy’s “brownness”.

2. *White Queer Cosmopolitan “Italians” Overseas: Henry Furst and Giovanni Comisso*

My project is not to rescue Italy from Pérez’s neocolonialist critique. Italian homosexuality might however inadvertently have assisted fascism, for example, in its coding of the Italian body as white, and I want to heed Holland’s warning that we not be in a rush to move beyond or “get over” the black/white binary: the colonization of East Africa, the brutal conquest of Ethiopia, and the 1938 anti-Jewish laws were all moments in fabricating for Italians an Arian heritage.⁵⁰ Furthermore, Gaia Giuliani’s analysis of race, gender, and nation in modern Italy charts the historical shift «between the symbolic exclusion of (non-white) southern Italians from racialized representations of the Liberal national society [...]. and its symbolic inclusion by Fascism through the concept of *stirpi italiche*, the Italic kinships [italics in the original]».⁵¹ It is not difficult to see, then, how, had they actually been published when they were written, some Italian fictional representations of male homoeroticism could have assisted in a process of ratifying Italian whiteness. Even minus publication, they provide discursive evidence of the project of co-constituting whiteness and homoerotic relations – if not exactly a homosexual identity, which, for reasons I have already indicated, none of these fictional characters possess.

Both Giovanni Comisso and Henry Furst wrote Italian language novels in which white characters travel in search of homosexual encounters with willing “foreign” bodies. Their efforts can be understood as congruent to the historical attempt to “whiten” Italians. As Giuliani proposes,

By positioning blackness outside the national borders, the notion of Italic kinship – and its equivalence to race, civilization, nation, and people – managed to discursively establish the meaning of Italianness-as-Mediterraneanness and distinguish it from the racial identity of the colonized subjects (Mediterranean but African).⁵²

Contemporaries and friends, both Comisso and Furst also traveled extensively in Africa and Asia and wrote accounts of their travels, and so their biographies replicate aspects of the white homosexual gentleman traveler; the two men were also friends and colleagues of Gabriele D’Annunzio at Fiume.⁵³ While Furst was born American, he spent a great deal of his life in Italy. We should not expect him to understand his own racial identity in a way similar to, say, Comisso, and yet I think it premature not to consider in his writing the relationship between

⁴⁹ M. Bolognari, *I ragazzi*.

⁵⁰ On constructions of whiteness in modern Italy, see G. Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender*.

⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 26.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ On Comisso, see J. Champagne, *Queer Ventennio*; on Furst, see J. Champagne, *Queer Ventennio*; J. T. Schnapp, *Un ponte sull’oceano. Henry Furst, traduttore*, Italiamerica, 2008, pp. 13- 42; M. Soldati, *Mario, L’Ultimo Don Chisciotte, Ricordo di Henry Furst*, in H. Furst, *Il Meglio di Henry Furst*, Orsola Nemi (ed), Milano, Longanesi, 1970, pp. iii-xxv; G. Talbot, *A Micro-History of State Censorship in Italy, 1931-39: The Case of Henry Furst*, in G. Bonsaver and Robert S. C. Gordon, (eds), *Culture, Censorship and the State in Twentieth-Century Italy*, Oxford, Legenda, 2005, pp. 86-95.

race, homoeroticism, and even national identity. As all national identities are, as Benedict Anderson proposed, “imagined”, what constitutes “Italianness” cannot be taken for granted, and Furst’s imaginary identifications as an Italian are just as worth considering as Comisso’s.⁵⁴

Written in Italian in the 1930s, *Simun* was first published in France, in French, in 1939, under the title *Simoun*.⁵⁵ When, in 1965, the book was finally published in Italy by Longanesi, for whom Furst and his wife Orsola Nemi translated authors as varied as Edgar Allen Poe, Vita Sackville West, and Herman Melville, it contained a preface absent from the French version.⁵⁶ (Furst translated into Italian queer author Patrick Dennis of *Auntie Mame* fame and, into English, Benedetto Croce). While *Simoun* is subtitled *roman*, the Italian version contains no such label, and, in the preface, it is referred to variously as a manuscript, a work, and a book. In fact, the preface leads one to believe that it is a work of nonfiction.⁵⁷ Given that it is a first-person narrative, the reader might assume it speaks of and for Furst; thus, the perceived necessity of the preface.⁵⁸

Signed by Furst, this preface explains that the manuscript was written by a cousin of his named Enrico (Henry) Fox, who entrusted it to Furst in 1940. That cousin – who, like Furst, «da molti anni abitava in Italia»⁵⁹ – is now dead, a casualty of the First World War. The purpose of this preface is not simply to provide an account of the novel’s genesis but to ward off criticism of its apparently scandalous, prurient content, «un eccessivo preoccuparsi dei propri casi personali!».⁶⁰ For what the preface offers is a defense of that content, particularly as regards its use of Catholic imagery.

Called the first openly gay Italian novel,⁶¹ Furst’s high modernist experiment is named for the ship of the French sailor with whom the novel’s first-person narrator and protagonist Enrico is in love. Applying Pérez’s insights, we can recognize the sailor as one of those itinerant working-class men whose «legendary encounters with the primitive»⁶² are suggested by the ship’s name and its association with French colonization and Orientalism. As we will see, what is called bisexuality in another novel from the period is also associated with brownness, and so it seems significant that Enrico competes (unsuccessfully) with a woman for his sailor’s attention.

The narrator defines for the reader the word *simun* (from the Arabic; in English, *simoom*) as «d’uno dei più insidiosi e violenti venti dell’Africa».⁶³ The novel draws a particularly close connection between the name of the ship and the sailor: when Enrico and the sailor first meet, they do not exchange names, but Enrico recalls seeing the ship’s name on the ribbon of the sailor’s beret. Enrico uses this name to track him down. The connection between the sailor, the

⁵⁴ B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, London, Verso, 1983.

⁵⁵ H. Furst, *Simoun*, Paris, Éditions La Bourdonnais, 1939.

⁵⁶ H. Furst, *Simun*, Milano, Longanesi, 1965.

⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 11

⁵⁸ The coincidence of certain aspects of the novel with Furst’s own life has led some readers to construe the book as autobiographical: G. Dall’Orto, *Simun. I turbamenti masochistici d’un omosessuale cattolica*, 12 February 2005. <http://www.culturagay.it/recensione/10641>. Accessed January 19, 2017. The character’s mother dies in the US, for example, p. 108, when he is only six, p. 24; Furst turned thirty-seven, the age of his novel’s protagonist, in October of 1930, making them roughly the same age. At that time, however, he was working in the US at the Library of Congress and did not leave the position to move to Italy until 1932; Soldati, p. XX; Referring to Furst’s biography, Schnapp dates the romantic relationship recounted in the book to February of 1917, p. 24.

⁵⁹ H. Furst, *Simun*, p. 11.

⁶⁰ *Ivi*, p. 12.

⁶¹ J. Schnapp, *Un ponte sull’oceano. Henry Furst, traduttore*, p. 29.

⁶² H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 2.

⁶³ H. Furst, *Simun*, p. 54.

name of his ship, and the exotic, wanton sensuality both represent is further underlined when the narrator remarks that he had considered “simun” as a title for a *Don Giovanni* he is writing. As the book’s title, the word would refer to a wind «per accompagnare il vecchio Don Giovanni, oramai schiavo delle sue libidini, nella notte tempestosa malato e febbrile in cerca d’una ultima avventura».⁶⁴ Perhaps the age difference between the narrator, who is thirty-seven, and his sailor, who is twenty, is also significant here. This difference suggests that their relationship is another example of modern (if pre-homosexualized) pederasty – which, according to Amin’s logic, would render the sailor, if not brown, then at least a different kind of white (given Europe’s projection of pederasty somewhere else).⁶⁵

The sailor’s exoticism – and the association of homosexuality with the exotic – is flagged from the outset of his encounter with Enrico, as is homosexuality’s primitive lure. The first time Enrico meets his sailor, he “penetrates” a hellish street «nel quartiere orientale» of Paris «e di rado cercavo di mescolarmi ai demoni che funzionavano in questa bolgia».⁶⁶ Visiting a dance hall where he watches «coppie pansessuali giravano senza grazia», he is unable to hold himself back [*trattenersi*] from cruising the sailor.⁶⁷ Echoes with this exoticism occur throughout the novel: in one of the numerous passages musing upon the meaning of love – and one in which he is seeking his sailor – he describes the moments waiting to reunite with a lover as «la notte del Buddha» but also references Peer Gynt peeling his onion.⁶⁸ The heavily metaphorical quality of the novel’s prose increases the likelihood of these kinds of “primal”, symbolic associations.⁶⁹

Having lost track of his sailor and resigned never to see him again, Enrico travels to Italy: «O Calipso Italia! [...] Sui liguri scogli dove Zaratustra amava balzare come una capra, sotto il Cielo che è più limpido di qualsiasi altro, mi sentii rinascere».⁷⁰ From this exotic Italy he travels first to Nice and then toward Toulon to visit friends, all in an attempt to fool himself out of his loneliness. There, he hears that his sailor’s ship will soon arrive in Marseilles. He soon learns, however, that the sailor is ill with tuberculosis.

Set in the time and space of the narrator’s consciousness (and perhaps even unconscious) and featuring numerous temporal and spatial ellipses, the plot of *Simun* is difficult to comprehend. Even so, what is clear is that Enrico embodies the white gentleman traveler in search of his sailor lover who represents an exotic, “brown” sexuality – despite the fact that he is described as having, like a Norman farmer, straight blonde hair that falls across his forehead.⁷¹ As Pérez’s account suggests, the figure of the working-class itinerant white homosexual mediates the relationship between Enrico and the primitive and may signal race in competing and even contradictory ways.

In a lengthy soliloquy on the meaning of existence – of which there are many – the narrator reminds us of his previous encounters with dark worlds: «Ho smarrito la strada nei deserti di Asia e non ho avuto paura; ho carezzato la voluttuosa schiena di una tigrina ed essa non mi fece

⁶⁴ *Ibidem*. Ultimately, however, Enrico rejects the title as «troppo esotico e frusto e letterario», p. 55 – an ironic disavowal of the love story we are now reading: beyond being called Simun, the book warns us in its preface of its «troppe allusioni mitologiche», p. 12.

⁶⁵ K. Amin, *Disturbing*, p. 42.

⁶⁶ H. Furst, *Simun*, p. 45.

⁶⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁸ *Ivi*, p. 50.

⁶⁹ The novel includes numerous examples of symbolic figures, from Mary the mother of Jesus to Psyche to a prisoner on death row in the US.

⁷⁰ H. Furst, *Simun*, p. 55; the reference is to Nietzsche’s time spent in Liguria, but obviously, the figure has Orientalist overtones.

⁷¹ *Ivi*, p. 126.

nessun male». ⁷² Contemplating the relationship with the primitive sailor, he acts «sotto l'impulso d'un bisogno vitale» ⁷³ and describes that pursuit as «un salto nel più profondo mare, come un pescatore di perle, per non usciarne più, forse». ⁷⁴ When he learns that his sailor is in a Paris military hospital, he recalls «la virtù dell'Oriente: di fronte agli ostacoli, pazienza». ⁷⁵ Musing over the stamp he places on a letter to his sailor, he states, «Per una tenue somma il nostro messaggio può penetrare fino al centro dell'Asia or dell'Africa, a Samarcanda o a Bokhara, mentre la lettera al nostro vicino di casa può anche disperdersi per strada». ⁷⁶

Such a sentence implies a “here” and a “there”, an “us” and a “them”, a penetrator and penetrated that takes for granted a white speaking subject; even the critique of modern life, where a letter to a next-door neighbor can be lost, contrasts, in primitivist fashion, with those pre-modern places our letters can travel. The whiteness of that subject is further ratified when, contemplating bringing the sailor to convalesce in the outskirts of a large Swiss city where Enrico spent part of his childhood, he tells us that despite all the time he vacationed in this city, the only thing that remains strongly impressed in his memory is «la figura e il nome d'un ragazzino egiziano, snello e bruno come una pantera, occhi a mandorla, profilo purissimo e sorriso dolce». ⁷⁷ Given that Enrico is in this city to search for a place for his sailor to recuperate, this Egyptian boy is linked, via the power of association, to the sailor. This animal imagery is then further associated with the tubercular sailor in a passage where, while still searching for housing, Enrico first describes his attempt to free a calf from slaughter ⁷⁸ and then insists that all of his life, he has sought to defend the weak. ⁷⁹

Enrico's mobility is signaled in a variety of ways. When the relationship with the sailor is, thanks to the presence of his female lover, going poorly, to the point where he contemplates suicide, the narrator imagines a future happiness of exploration and discovery:

Puoi ancora percorrere le pianure dell'Iran sopra un purosangue, puoi ancora bagnarti d'estate nelle onde del Tirreno, e arrampicarti sulle più solitarie vette dell'Appennino. Vi sono ancora tante cose belle da vedere, tanti superbi libri da leggere e da scrivere; pensa alla poesia araba che è ancora rimasta un tesoro chiuso per te! La terra è grande: vi è ancora la Grecia e la Spagna e L'Egitto da visitare. ⁸⁰

Minus even a discussion of sexual tourism, the passage illustrates the relationship between homosexuality and mobility, a relationship that queer critical race theory reminds us is evinced in the phrase “coming out”. Obviously, this mobility is predicated upon privileges of gender, race, and class. Also interesting is the linking of Greece, Spain, and Egypt as exotic, “brown” destinations.

In a groggy state from sleeping pills and on the verge of dying, Enrico re-reads some lines he has written: «Natura, mia natura,/cittade senza strade,/e senza porto, mare./Natura, dis-

⁷² H. Furst, *Simun*, p. 68. Subsequently he tells us that, unlike the blind stars and planets, he sees “l'occhio della memoria” not only Liguria, Tuscany, and Venice, but also “le oscure valli d'Armenia e i dorati deserti dell'Iran,” p. 96.

⁷³ *Ivi*, p. 88.

⁷⁴ *Ivi*, p. 89.

⁷⁵ *Ivi*, p. 90.

⁷⁶ *Ivi*, p. 91.

⁷⁷ *Ivi*, p. 106. Despite the feline imagery, Enrico does remember his name, Paul de Bustos.

⁷⁸ *Ivi*, p. 111.

⁷⁹ *Ivi*, p. 112.

⁸⁰ *Ivi*, p. 197.

natura/a te non chiedo guida/Ariana senza filo!/Nel labirinto tuo/contento di morire».⁸¹ The poem overtly links Enrico's searching for a lover with both his nature and travel. Rousing himself from his suicide attempt, he cries, «Non *morire*. Contento di *soffrire*. *Soffrire e gioire* [italics in the original]».⁸² He immediately runs to the window to open it: «Era una mattina radiosa e allegra», and in the courtyard below, he sees the reassuring figures of a mastiff and a whistling young man delivering milk, to whom he calls for a glass.⁸³ Although the relationship with a sailor is at an end, another working-class figure, the boy, associated with nature via the «il bicchiere de latte candido e spumeggiante»⁸⁴ he brings to Enrico, reminds the narrator of life's sexual possibilities.

The end of the novel, however, is less sanguine. A passage in which Enrico has been hired by a retired ship owner and sailor turned farmer to tutor his daughter – an innocent, “poor”, and simple young Ligurian country girl named Tina – and her female cousin is subsequently revealed to be a dream. The twelve years of happiness Enrico fantasized with the girls was an illusion, and he wakes alone in his bed in Milan, in the same time and place where he began recalling the story of the sailor.

The revealing of his pastoral bliss to be a fantasy reconfirms Enrico's whiteness, as it suggests he is not able to find a place with these “primitive” people in their «nuovo e puro» world surrounded by the voices of playing children.⁸⁵ Regardless of their actual class position, the primitiveness of these country folk is attested to when Tina's fiancé – the son of a rich neighbor who is an old friend of her father – discovers she is in love with someone else. This discovery leads the jilted fiancé to follow «una vecchia usanza di quei montanari» in which he climbs a high mountain at dawn, and «con un corno di bue gridò il nome della ragazza ai quattro venti, accompagnandolo con atroci ingiurie».⁸⁶ Tina's true love avenges the insult by killing the fiancé and is then sentenced to thirty years in prison. In this scenario, Ligurian atavism is contrasted with Enrico's cosmopolitanism; Tina and her family's “brownness” is contrasted with Enrico's whiteness.

What we see in *Simun*, then, is an instance of the white cosmopolitan Italian gentleman, Enrico, traveling to Africa to have sex with a sailor who, although white, represents the brown body via his proximity to the primitive and exotic.⁸⁷ The class position of soldiers, sailors, and cowboys is precisely what brings them into this proximity, and so it, too, may provide a «transit point» for racist scripts.⁸⁸

⁸¹ H. Furst, *Simun*, p. 201. The phrase «Natura, dis-natura» perhaps resonates with early homosexual rights advocate John Addington Symonds understanding of his homosexuality as both «innate and aberrant»; J. A. Symonds, in A. K. Regis (ed.), *The Memoirs of John Addington Symonds, a Critical Edition*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 240. Later, he adds, «Nature bade me indulge my sexual instincts; but these were so divided that I shrank alike from the brothel and the soldier», p. 256 – the latter once again raising the specter of itinerant working-class figures who truck with the primitive.

⁸² H. Furst, *Simun*, p. 201.

⁸³ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁴ *Ivi*, p. 202.

⁸⁵ *Ivi*, p. 207.

⁸⁶ *Ivi*, p. 208.

⁸⁷ H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 2.

⁸⁸ G. Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender*, p. 6. While a full-fledged class analysis is beyond the scope of this essay, we might argue that, in their encounters with “brown” bodies, Comisso's heros are “whitened” by their class position. On how Italians in Italy achieved whiteness, see Giuliani, pp. 31-64 in particular. I am also reminded of

While *Simun* is a work of fiction, Furst also wrote travel essays in which race, nationhood, and homosexuality are intertwined. A particularly pertinent example is an essay originally published in 1934 in the pages of «L'Italia letteraria» of July 14, 1934.⁸⁹ It, too, illustrates the ways in which there is no necessary continuity between axes of identification. The vignette includes the portrayal of naked young men. However, in an ironic twist, the three are English rather than Black, brown, or Asian, the whiteness of one is emphasized, and the essay includes a queer joke: Furst is traveling with his pet falcon, and they come across the young men sleeping. Seeing them, the bird flew from Furst's hand and

Afferrò le spalle del più roseo e succulento dei giovani angli. L'effetto fu elettrico; la vittima si svegliò, temendo sotto quel battere d'ali di subire la sorte di Prometeo, mentre non era nemmeno in pericolo di finire come Ganimede.⁹⁰

The reference to skin tone paradoxically marks the young soldier as racially other and thus recalls the trope of the working class, itinerant white figure who mediates the primitive.

The tale is also not lacking in Orientalism, however; in Iran, Furst sends a nameless «ragazzo persiano dalla faccia scura come quella di un negro, coperto di vesti bianche e svolazzanti» to the bazaar to fetch the bird some mutton liver.⁹¹ Equally problematic is his account of «le strade infestate di mosche e sull'aura di decadenza lunare che sembra affliggere ogni luogo dove l'Oriente incontra l'Occidente».⁹² Furst characterizes the meeting of the east and the west as embodied in certain colonial capitals as similar to the sterile mating of the horse and the donkey, their offspring containing the defects of the father minus the qualities of the «passionate» mother. These modern capitals of the east are neither sufficiently Oriental nor Western: «Port-Said, Bombay e Beirut hanno perduto lo splendore abbagliante dell'Oriente senza acquistare il portamento, l'austera dignità di coloro che per tanti secoli furono i signori».⁹³

Yet the story of the falcon also contains a critique of British imperialism. While at Fiume, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Furst had made the youthful «mistake» of officially recognizing the Irish Republic.⁹⁴ As a result, a decade or so later, the British were not inclined to grant him the visa he needed to travel from Iran to India. Furst realizes that in recognizing the Republic he had

Aggredito l'impero britannico; mi sono allontanato dal sentiero della verità sino al punto di averlo tacciato di voracità, e desiderio imperioso di regnare sugli altri; mentre tutti sanno che il suo impero gli fu imposto a forza, dal suo fatale fascino e alla tenerezza del suo cuore leonine, che gli impedisce di respingere gli indigeni desiderosi di unirsi a quella libera associazione di popoli.⁹⁵

Foucault's premise that, historically, sexuality was initially a bourgeois phenomenon. M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

⁸⁹ The original title of the essay was *Morte di un falchetto a Bushir*. H. Furst, *Il Meglio di Henry Furst*, Milano, Longanesi, 1970, pp. 317-327.

⁹⁰ H. Furst, *Il Meglio*, p. 321.

⁹¹ *Ivi*, pp. 323-324.

⁹² *Ivi*, pp. 321-322.

⁹³ H. Furst, *Il Meglio*, p. 322.

⁹⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*.

Continuing in this vein, he argues that, while the coast of Iran is nominally under Persian sovereignty, «il Golfo Persico era un solo grande e bollente lago inglese».⁹⁶ Later, he notes with irony how the Imperial Bank of Persia is actually an exclusively British enterprise.⁹⁷

When he continues to face obstacles from the British, he realizes the true power of Empire to control his movements: «Eccomi in un paese indipendente senza la possibilità di tornare in Europa se non ottengo il permesso di un'altra potenza».⁹⁸ The story then details the additional obstacles he faces in leaving, all of them voiced by the British officials «con modi molto cortesi e con un perfetto accento di Oxford che farà perdonare qualsiasi cosa».⁹⁹ The story ends with a poignant metaphor: having been given the advice to try telegraphing His British Majesty in Teheran for a visa to travel to Bombay, Furst heads back to where he was staying in Iran, anticipating his reunion with his falcon.¹⁰⁰ «Durante molti mesi non eravamo stati mai separati, né di giorno, né di notte. Egli era stato il confidente unico di tutti i miei segreti, perché lui solo far i miei compagni capiva il mio linguaggio».¹⁰¹ Unfortunately, the bird has died, the sun having proven too hot for him.¹⁰²

Both of these examples of Furst's writings illustrate how it was possible for homosexuality to be simultaneously abject *and* a means of articulating whiteness. Early in *Simun*, at the demise of his relationship with a woman, Enrico concludes that, «oramai a me il mondo Borghese era precluso», but he then insists that we live in «un bell'inferno di nostra propria creazione e tagliato proprio su misura per noi soli».¹⁰³ Throughout the essay on the falcon, we see both racism and sympathy for colonized subjects, the most contradictory symbol of the latter being the falcon himself. In typical racist fashion, colonized people are represented via an animal (as the previous citation of the donkey also suggests). Yet Furst's narrator queerly identifies and feels in sympathy with the bird, whose death is the result of the neglect to which he has been subject, itself the indirect result of British imperialism. Furst's works remind us that homosexuality can be a “spoiled” identity that nonetheless «reproduces some heteronorms».¹⁰⁴ As Puar has it, in what she terms «societies of control», subjects «orient themselves as subjects through their disassociation or disidentification from others disenfranchised in similar ways in favor of consolidation with axes of privilege».¹⁰⁵ Modes of subject constitution can be discontinuous with one another rather than simply intersect.

As I have already written elsewhere on race and orientalism in the work of Comisso,¹⁰⁶ I will concentrate only on a few ways in which his works both confirm and call us to extend Pérez's argument. Both Comisso's *Gioco d'infanzia* and, as its title attests, *Amori d'oriente*, feature protagonists traveling eastward in search of sex with brown, black, and Asian bodies, male and female, and, in *Gioco*, even in those cases where the men its protagonist Alberto

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 325.

⁹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 324.

⁹⁹ *Ivi*, p. 325.

¹⁰⁰ *Ivi*, p. 326.

¹⁰¹ *Ivi*, p. 326.

¹⁰² *Ivi*, p. 327.

¹⁰³ H. Furst, *Simun*, p. 42.

¹⁰⁴ J. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*, p. 28

¹⁰⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰⁶ J. Champagne, *Queer Ventennio*.

pursues are white, they, too, are associated with brownness via their connection to travel to “the Orient” and their liminal status as itinerant. Traveling to Africa, Alberto hopes to reconnect with his childhood friend and sex buddy Pietro, for example, whom he worries may have been «deformato dal clima infernale».¹⁰⁷ Pietro got to Africa via the assistance of a mysterious male friend and is now in a hospital in Asmara. Another friend, Hans Müller, is fleeing Europe for a Buddhist convent in Bangkok.

Perhaps the most interesting character in this regard is Alberto’s acquaintance Giorgio Viani’s unnamed friend. Viani, who works on the ship on which Alberto is traveling, has invited Alberto to go on a gazelle hunt in Eritrea with him and this friend. When Alberto first meets this friend, he is immediately enchanted by this tall, blond young man whose thighs «mostravano una carnagione bianchissima sulla quale pareva che il sole tropicale non riuscisse a fare presa»;¹⁰⁸ later, after a false alarm over a potential hunting accident, he reassures Viani that «il suo bellissimo amico offer ancora al sole la sua pelle bianchissima».¹⁰⁹ Via this figure, the novel seems to want to have its cake and eat it to, for Viani’s friend is both “brown” and “white”. His association with Africa and the primitive is disavowed via the paleness of his skin and its contrast with both Enrico’s and the nameless Black men who assist them in the hunt.

These works of Comisso’s and Furst’s confirm that, in some works of Italian fiction, discourses of whiteness and homosexuality are mutually constitutive. But given Italy’s history as brown, the relationship of white Italian homosexual subjects to racialized others is more complicated than Pérez’s model initially allows, as that “other” always risked collapsing into the self. In Comisso’s *Gioco d’infanzia*, for example, one of the “brown bodies” employed by the protagonist and narrator Alberto to discover his homosexuality is another Italian one, that of his youthful friend Mario. Mario is a shepherd, and the scene in which he and Alberto have a sexual encounter is literally pastoral, the two of them wrestling together under a tree.¹¹⁰ Furthermore, the novel recounts how the boys «giocavano ai selvaggi con gli archi e frecce e Mario con un turacciolo bruciato si tingeva di nero il volto».¹¹¹

Recall that Pérez employs the term “brown” to designate a racially ambiguous figure, an idealized primitive that functions in the white homosexual imaginary as both «an object of desire and as the repository of disowned projections cast temporally and spatially backward».¹¹² “Brown” seems directly applicable to the character of Mario – except that Mario is himself Italian. In his identifications with Mario, Alberto is both the brown body and its other, and, thanks to Italy’s historical racialization, the degree to which Alberto can “disown” these temporal and spatial projections is limited. Alberto risks “becoming” Mario in a way that, for example, he does not risk becoming the anonymous Indian man with whom he has sex at the novel’s conclusion. And, as readers of the novel know, this conclusion requires Alberto to “return” to the memory of Mario in order to reclaim for himself a “queer” subject position (“queer” in the sense of “not quite as white” as the late Victorian homosexual is typically imagined). While heteronormative critics have read this moment as a sign of Alberto being “trapped” in an infantile state, I would instead suggest that it represents his making use of Italy’s past to refashion himself as queer and not homosexual. While the product of a racist logic,

¹⁰⁷ G. Comisso, *Gioco D’infanzia*, Milano, Libri Scheiwiller, 1987, p. 26; the novel tells us that the two had had a *menage à trois* with a female prostitute, pp. 16-17.

¹⁰⁸ *Ivi*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁹ *Ivi*, p. 84.

¹¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 88.

¹¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 89.

¹¹² H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 25.

Italy's brownness opens up a however problematic and contradictory space for a queer Italian identity, an identity distinct from late Victorian white homosexuality, to historically emerge.

3. *Traveling to Italy in Search of Queer Brown Bodies*

«There are moments when even those of us who are most infatuated with the Latin culture have horrid doubts about it, and when domination by the Nordic races seems really after all the only possible solution of life's problems». Compton Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*.¹¹³

I now turn to a novel in English in which an Italian queer performs for an audience of white cosmopolitan readers as an «idealized primitive figure».¹¹⁴ In this novel, the «pansexual brown body» that «promised liberation from Victorian restrictions on same-sex desire»¹¹⁵ is indeed Italian. This novel describes how metropolitan European male subjects traveled to Italy to “become” both white and homosexual, one mutually constituting the other, with Italy's brownness playing a crucial role, for the sexual object of these metropolitan homosexual subjects is an Italian. Their whiteness and homosexuality are forged in contrast to his Italianness and pastoral bisexuality. The author's attitude to this process is contradictory and ambivalent, for, while he is critical of white European homosexual gentleman travelers to Italy, rather than deconstruct this co-constitution of race and sex, he reaffirms Italy's “difference” – of race, of sexuality. But in proper primitivist fashion, he valorizes it.

In an essay on British travel literature, Andrew Canepa argues that the eighteenth-century witnessed a transition in the Italian stereotype from, as Canepa's title suggests, «scoundrel to noble savage».¹¹⁶ «His pristine innocence, natural honesty and heightened sensitivity excused old vices and transmuted them into enviable virtues».¹¹⁷ Interestingly, Canepa insists that such sentiment was «*not based upon a feeling of innate racial superiority*» [italics in the original].¹¹⁸ It was not until the late 19th century that Italy's “difference” became a racialized one, articulated by Italians themselves like criminologists Cesare Lombroso and Alfredo Niceforo via the trope of the “social atavism” of the Italian south.¹¹⁹

Concerning the French and German contexts, in his brilliant analysis of theories of modern Europe, Dainotto demonstrates how Charles Louis de Secondat, the baron of Montesquieu, employed theories of climatology to argue that the excess heat of southern Spain and Italy produced a “breed” of humans who were «savage, non-European, and with a brown skin».¹²⁰ Dainotto proposes that the modernity of Montesquieu's theories are signaled by the fact that «the Orient – once the Persian, later the Muslim and the Turk – has ceased to represent any menace at all».¹²¹ Rather, it is the internal but alien European south that produces the Other over and against which modern Europe invents itself. As Dainotto argues, this requires a wholesale rewriting of the story of European's origins:

¹¹³ C. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, New York, George H. Doran, 1927, p. 225.

¹¹⁴ H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 25.

¹¹⁵ *Ivi*, p. 105.

¹¹⁶ A. M. Canepa, *From Degenerate Scoundrel to Noble Savage: The Italian Stereotype in 18th Century British Travel Literature*, *English Miscellany*, 22, 1971, p. 107.

¹¹⁷ *Ivi*, p. 134.

¹¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 131.

¹¹⁹ See R. Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)*, pp. 54-55; on Italy's own treating of the south as both «internal abject» and of belonging «to a different kinship», see Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender*, pp. 31-43 in particular.

¹²⁰ R. Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)*, pp. 60-61.

¹²¹ *Ivi*, p. 63.

Roman laws (in political terms, monarchical absolutism) belonged to an ancient cycle of history that had by now ended with the fall of Rome; German Laws (i.e., monarchical power mediated by the nobility) had opened yet a new historical cycle – modernity – that had now climaxed in France.¹²²

Developing this pattern of thought, Voltaire will later propose that «the south of Europe, very much like the exotic Orient, is a place of nature. It owes nothing to progress, history, or the arts and sciences».¹²³ It is no wonder, then, that some Frenchmen in search of primitive, atavistic homosex with brown bodies, might venture to Italy, where, thanks to poverty and “the Italian vice,” willing partners could be found.¹²⁴

As for Germany, one of the goals of Madame de Staël’s *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* was to “translate” Montesquieu’s idea of a Francocentric Europe to a new Germanocentric one.¹²⁵ Subsequently, Europe will be «the sole stage for Hegel’s true theater of history»,¹²⁶ history defined here as the dialectical negation of previous historical periods: «The south was, then, the necessary antithesis that Hegel’s Germanic north had to imagine in order to imagine itself as progress and modernity – in order, namely, *to be Europe*» [italics in the original].¹²⁷

Concerning homosexual tourism to Italy, one historian proposes that «a wide range of different nineteenth-century accounts, both British and Italian, regarding the sexual attitudes of southern Italy emphasise the fact that there existed certain social conditions that made it easier to accept same-sex practices».¹²⁸ Some writers have argued that, until the mid-1930s, fascism tolerated the sex trade between Northern Europeans and Italian boys and young men.¹²⁹ One suggests, for example, that

child sex work was common in southern Italy during the interwar era because the nation was impoverished, families were large, and many adult males had either died in the war or emigrated, leaving children desperate to earn money for food and school supplies.¹³⁰

In her biography of George Norman Douglas, for example, Rachel Cleves provides evidence that the writer’s child sex partners, including a twelve-year-old Florentine boy named Emilio Papa, did not find the relationship exploitative and harbored feelings of affection for him into adulthood.¹³¹ Cleves also explains Douglas’s desire for “brown bodies”, both male and female:

¹²² *Ivi*, p. 79.

¹²³ *Ivi*, p. 95

¹²⁴ For an account of homosexuality as the Italian vice, see C. Beccalossi, *The Italian Vice*, pp. 185-206. As Beccalossi argues, «Among the tropes that circulated in Europe and Italy even prior to the mid-eighteenth century was that of a sodomy endemic to the Italian peninsula, just as it purportedly was among “inferior” people outside Europe». p. 185.

¹²⁵ R. Dainotto, *Europe (in Theory)*, pp. 143-150.

¹²⁶ *Ivi*, p. 169.

¹²⁷ *Ivi*, p. 171.

¹²⁸ C. Beccalossi, *The ‘Italian Vice,’* p. 203. See also R. Cleves, *Unspeakable*, pp. 50-58. On male homosexual prostitution in Italy, see also M. Bolognari, *Taormina and the Strange Case of Baron Von Gloeden*, in L. Benadusi, P. L. Bernardini, E. Bianco, and P. Guazzo (eds.), *Homosexuality in Italian Literature, Society, and Culture, 1789-1919*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2017, pp. 155-184, and B. Pozzo, *Male Homosexuality in Nineteenth-Century Italy. A Juridical View*, in *Idem*, pp. 103-128; C. Rinaldi, *Uomini che si fanno pagare*.

¹²⁹ R. Cleves, *Unspeakable*, p. 213.

¹³⁰ *Ivi*, p. 208.

¹³¹ *Ivi*, 162-163.

«Northern Europeans, like Douglas, characterized southern Europe [...] as wild and passionate, qualities that made them sexually desirable».¹³²

Written in 1927, Scottish writer Compton Mackenzie's roman à clef *Vestal Fire* describes an English and American colony of expatriates inhabiting the island of Sirene – a thinly veiled pseudonym for Capri. While, frequently exposing the hypocrisy of its characters, the novel is highly satirical, it is also obsessed with both homosexuality and race, the whiteness of the expatriates frequently brought into sharp relief by pointed references to non-white others, including some Italians. The heterosexually identified Mackenzie (1883-1972) was an extremely prolific writer of both fiction and nonfiction, and more than one of his novels deals with homosexuality. According to one critic, «Mackenzie's writing was most densely voiced, complex and ambivalent when he tried to reconcile his rejection of the homosexual identity with his interest in same-sex desire».¹³³

Spanning from the late nineteenth century to the years between the First and Second World War, the novel's thin plot revolves around the arrival on Sirene of «a handsome fair young man with rose cheeks», the homosexual French-Danish count named Robert Marsac-Lagerström, affectionately referred to as Count Bob.¹³⁴ The Count is portrayed as a petty, effete, effeminate, and misogynist decadent of a «pretentiously styled Uranian temperament».¹³⁵ As the expatriate community learns of the Count's having served prison time for a «rather unsavoury mess in Paris» involving male minors,¹³⁶ it must decide whether to continue to accept him into its social circles.¹³⁷ As one character, «a little dried-up American lawyer»¹³⁸ asks, «Sirene has been a refuge and a consolation for sinners for a good many generations, has it not?».¹³⁹

This image of Capri as a refuge for sinners is reinforced by frequent references to the Emperor Tiberius and his alleged years of sexual debauchery on the island. The primitivist «collapsing» of the Italian past and present via the analogy with the however fictive Capri of the retired Tiberius assists the expatriates in their efforts to «go native». Tiberius is one of the many Italian «others» who authorize the expatriates' encounters with the primitive. Another is a work of art: Nigel Dawson, a twenty-five-year-old American homosexual, confesses that «several people have said that I reminded them of the Narcissus in the Naples museum».¹⁴⁰

¹³² *Ivi*, p. 54.

¹³³ H. J. Booth, *Experience and homosexuality in the writing of Compton Mackenzie*, «English Studies» 88, 3, 2007, pp. 320-331. DOI: [10.1080/00138380701270457](https://doi.org/10.1080/00138380701270457). Accessed 20 May 2021.

¹³⁴ R. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 34. More than one source identifies the «real» Count Bob as Jacques d'Adelsward Fersen and his Italian secretary as Nino Cesarini, who also modeled for photographer Guglielmo Plüshow. C. Gargano, *Capri pagana*; J. James, *Pagan Light, Dreams of Freedom and Beauty in Capri*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019. D'Adelsward died in 1923 – roughly, he year in which the novel portrays Count Bob's passing.

¹³⁵ R. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 246. The closest the novel comes to naming homosexuality occurs when, having heard the Count exclaim how, had the «Greek ideal» survived, he and Carlo would be fighting alongside one another in the war, John Scudamore scribbles a note for his book on Roman morals: «*Effects of Hom. on mil. strat. Jul. Caes. etc.*» (355 italics in the original) – a reference to Julius Caesar's alleged homosexual liaison with Nicomedes IV.

¹³⁶ R. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 156.

¹³⁷ The novel explains that the count escaped prison by paying «a sufficient number of mental specialists to declare him temporarily insane» and then taking a voyage around the world to regain his health and absent himself from France for a year (156-57). Here is a fascinating suggestion of how biological accounts of homosexuality could be employed by homosexual subjects as a Foucauldian «reverse discourse», the Count in effect saying, «You want me to be mentally ill? Well, I am!»

¹³⁸ R. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 154.

¹³⁹ *Ivi*, p. 157.

¹⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 26.

Clues concerning Nigel's sexuality are sprinkled throughout the narrative. The first time he speaks, it is characterized as possessing «enthusiastic languor».¹⁴¹ A few lines later, he possesses «a smile that came near to being a simper».¹⁴² The first long paragraph introducing Nigel describes him as «tall, slim, good-looking young man of about twenty-five, whose chief of many vanities was a desire to be taken for eighteen, in which he often succeeded». Already we see here the portrait of the homosexual as vain, duplicitous, and perhaps even infantile. As for his sexuality, the first line to confirm it reads «several people had hinted at the most extraordinary things about Nigel».¹⁴³ Just a few sentences later, we learn of «his habit to shoot his arrows at all he met»,¹⁴⁴ and his desire to tempt a recent male acquaintance with «all that was evil in himself» (26) – à la Dorian Gray.¹⁴⁵ Later in the novel, his name is specifically linked with that of British apologist for homosexual pederasty John Addington Symonds.¹⁴⁶

We also learn that Nigel had been tutored by «a half-caste Hawaiian» in how «to dance the hula-hula which was such a feature of parties on Sirene».¹⁴⁷ These representations of homosexual miscegenation occur in a novel consumed with consolidating whiteness by juxtaposing it with allusions to nonwhite Others, as when Count Marsac invites the entire expat “colony” to a “Japanese tea” at which «Japanese costume was indispensable».¹⁴⁸ This is not the only instance in which the Count costumes himself as “Asian”,¹⁴⁹ in proper Orientalist fashion, he travels to China, and he develops a fondness for smoking opium that ultimately takes its toll.

The racialized character of Marsac's homoerotic desire is further evinced by what the narrator calls the Japanese tea party's «pièce de resistance», «a beautiful and genuine» boy from Ceylon «who salaamed» with «a sinuosity that no European could expect to achieve».¹⁵⁰ Reiterating this categorical miscegenation of desire to race, the author has an “ecstatic” Nigel exclaim, «“Do you think I could bow like that?”»¹⁵¹ Given that the narrator has already insisted that no European could move with such serpentine grace, the question only serves to highlight Nigel's whiteness. In both these instances, homosexual and white subjectivities are linked and corroborated via their juxtaposition with a non-white other who is an object of homoerotic desire.

At more than one point, the novel warns of the dangers of miscegenation. As the American John Scudamore, who is hard at work on a history of Roman morals, observes, «“If the black races ever conquer the white races it will be because the white women will have been corrupted by negro dances”».¹⁵² The negative consequences of miscegenation are embodied in the brothers Alberto and Enrico Jones, who are real estate speculators, buying land on Sirene cheap and then reselling it to expatriates at exorbitantly inflated prices; as their surname suggests, while their mother is Italian, their father is British. The two are portrayed as “brown”, dangerous hybrids advertising the dangerous of intermarriage: «broad and burly with a suave manner that should not have left the least observant creature in even a minute's doubt of the brutality it

¹⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 23.

¹⁴² *Ivi*, p. 24.

¹⁴³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴⁴ *Ivi*, p. 25

¹⁴⁵ *Ivi*, p. 26.

¹⁴⁶ *Ivi*, p. 172.

¹⁴⁷ *Ivi*, p. 24.

¹⁴⁸ *Ivi*, p. 78.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example, C. Makenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 175.

¹⁵⁰ C. Makenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 80.

¹⁵¹ *Ivi*, p. 81.

¹⁵² *Ivi*, p. 139.

cloaked. Both were dark with black moustaches and imperials à la mode». ¹⁵³ The narrator explains that it is their Latinness that predominates in the brothers, and that they are illustrations of the «wise old saw: The Italianate Englishman is the devil incarnate». ¹⁵⁴ This racialized imagery is repeated later in the novel when their «swarthiness» and «jet black» mustaches are contrasted with the whiteness of their teeth, ¹⁵⁵ and, in his roman à clef, the Count describes one of the brothers as a «half-breed Englishman, a shark with a mackerel's tail». ¹⁵⁶

The “primitive” qualities of Italians are further described by the English butler Mossop: «Italians for him represented a class of human beings that were hardly removed from the monkeys with which he had all his life associated them». ¹⁵⁷ This is an instance where this novel, too, seems to want to have its cake and eat it too. While the narrator reveals the foibles of many characters, including the corrupt Mossop, the frequent use of indirect discourse makes it difficult to discern the point of view the implied reader is to adopt. Combined with the way the narrator makes sport of nearly everyone, it is often truly difficult to discern whom the novel is “for” and whom it is “against”. ¹⁵⁸

Nearly every Italian character is incidental to the novel's plot, providing “local color” to contrast with personalities like the aforementioned «little dried-up American lawyer». ¹⁵⁹ These Italians hover in the background as domestics, builders, restaurant owners, or carriage drivers. Early in the novel, for example, we are introduced to Don Luigi Zampone, the owner of a café described as «the focus of the island's life». ¹⁶⁰ Even accounting for the time period, the description of Zampone is startling:

He was a fat man in a grey alpaca jacket with a closely-trimmed beard and large hooked nose, and he wore a skull-cap that gave his personality a most definite suggestion of the ghetto [...] He had amassed wealth in youth by lending money and foreclosing on mortgages. ¹⁶¹

Whether we are to conclude he is Jewish is not clear, though he is additionally compared to a spider and described as possessing «cunning and cynicism and greed». ¹⁶² While his wife is described in kinder terms, she is, not surprisingly, associated with primal but benevolent nature: «to receive from her hands a glass of vermouth was to drink deep from the prodigious breasts of Mother Earth». ¹⁶³

The single Italian character that features heavily in the plot is the Count's friend and “secretary” Signor Carlo di Fiore. First describing him as «a young Italian like Antinous»; ¹⁶⁴ a

¹⁵³ *Ivi*, p. 71.

¹⁵⁴ In the novel, the words are presented in Italian minus translation: “L'inglese italianato/È il diavolo incarnato”.

¹⁵⁵ *Ivi*, p. 250.

¹⁵⁶ *Ivi*, p. 251.

¹⁵⁷ *Ivi*, p. 200.

¹⁵⁸ This is why I might quarrel with Booth's claim that “there is no sympathy for the north European homosexuals” in *Vestal Fire*. For example, in making his case, Booth quotes the character Duncan Maxwell's “I've no patience with these soulful pederasts” p. 233. But in this same passage, the character, comparing pederastic poetry to the howling of a tom-cat, claims, «there's precious little to choose between a tom-cat's howling and Shakespeare's sonnets» p. 233. Is the implied reader being ask to endorse this reading of Shakespeare? This is not to deny, however, the vicious homophobia that informs the portrayals of both Nigel and the Count. But in his zeal to prove his point, Booth mistakenly concludes that Nigel dies young. In fact, the novel reads, «Nigel may still be seen on the Piazza. He is close on fifty now» p. 370.

¹⁵⁹ C. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 150.

¹⁶⁰ *Ivi*, p. 56.

¹⁶¹ *Ivi*, p. 57

¹⁶² *Ibidem*.

¹⁶³ *Ivi*, p. 58.

¹⁶⁴ *Ivi*, p. 38; this comparison is repeated several times.

page later, the novel refers to «Carlo's pastoral beauty»;¹⁶⁵ musing upon his time on Capri, another homosexual character remembers, in an act of recursive miscegenation, how «*finally Marsac arrived [on the island] with his secretary*» and his boy from Ceylon.¹⁶⁶ This offhanded comment contrasts the white Marsac with his two brown pals in tow, certifying the racial difference between the count and his proteges. Carlo and the unnamed young man from Ceylon are again linked when they are both seduced by the count's (female) Rumanian housekeeper.¹⁶⁷ As we will see, according to the novels' own logic, while homosexuals are white, "bisexuals" are brown. Confirming his brownness, Carlo arrives at a costume party «dressed in, or rather wrapped scantily round with a leopard's skin»;¹⁶⁸ like the image of Antinous, another links him to pre-modern Italy: the gardens of the Count's villa include a «life-size bronze of Carlo as a nude Hylas».¹⁶⁹

Midway through the novel, the narrator makes a supreme effort to rescue Carlo from charges of homosexuality, providing an apologia for his relationship with the Count and a critique of the neocolonialist sex trade. This apologia proposes that despite – or even because of – his brownness, Carlo is not really a homosexual; rather, he has been made to act as one by the count and his money. But in order to make the apologia stick, the narrator must underline Italy's racialized, economic, and even hereditary difference from the rest of Europe. Rather than challenge the characterizing of Italy as underdeveloped, the narrator, in proper primitivist fashion, celebrates Italian cunning:

Carlo shivered. Five years of luxury with Marsac had not been long enough in which to forget the misery of his childhood in that swarming Trastevere alley. To whatever there was abnormal in his relations with Marsac he had become easily habituated in that strange bisexual pause in the growth of a normal adolescence. He had the capacity for facing facts which is the birthright of every young Italian male or female, and though there might be moments when the temptation to be normal was irresistible (of which the Roumanian had taken advantage) he recognized that his life with Marsac was a career. The long Latin civilization has had time to incorporate so much of masculine experience, so much of feminine wisdom that the sentimentality of a semi-barbaric culture like the American or English is obnoxious to a Latin. The Latin individual is capable of what seems to the Anglo-Saxon a cynicism in sexual relations utterly beyond his comprehension. A decent Englishman would have despised Carlo; but a decent Italian would not have despised him, however much he might abominate his detestable situation. A decent Italian would have blamed Marsac's wealth and would have deplored the outraged dignity of his nation in the abuse of a humble compatriot, would have felt precisely that emotion of resentful pride at the way the world treats his whole country like a *filie de joie* to which Mussolini had known how to give practical and rhetorical expression.¹⁷⁰

The reference to Mussolini here is jarring in that the novel has not up until this point made direct reference to then contemporary (1927) Italian national politics; later, it references World War I and its aftermath. This is also the novel's single reference to *Il Duce*. Finally, something appears amiss in the sentence's syntax, as presumably it is «resentful pride» to which Mussolini has given practical and rhetorical expression, and not the way the whole world treats Italy like

¹⁶⁵ *Ivi*, p. 39

¹⁶⁶ *Ivi*, p. 103.

¹⁶⁷ *Ivi*, p. 211.

¹⁶⁸ *Ivi*, p. 153.

¹⁶⁹ *Ivi*, p. 209.

¹⁷⁰ *Ivi*, p. 212-213.

a prostitute.¹⁷¹ Perhaps faced with the presence of Mussolini, the novel can no longer hide its racist leanings.

The episode begins with the Count returning from Paris to Sirene, composing pastoral versus in praise of Carlo. In Sirene, his pastoral mood continues, and he muses upon the famous first line of Virgil's Second Eclogue, which recounts the passion of the shepherd Corydon for the young Alexis.¹⁷² This Eclogue has long been a vehicle for modern homosexuals to legitimate their "archaic" desires by tracing them back to classical Rome, and, as in Comisso, modernity's "categorical miscegenation" risks rendering the shepherd both pansexual and brown.¹⁷³ Once reunited with Carlo, the count expresses his suspicion that his secretary has been entertaining Nigel Dawson. The novel's point of view then shifts to Carlo's, who shivers at the thought of losing his position and returning to «the misery of his childhood in that swarming Trastevere alley».¹⁷⁴ the adjective obviously signaling Rome's "primal squalor". Via indirect discourse, the narrator then begins his apologia for Carlo's prostituting himself to Count Bob.

The narrator explains that «to whatever there was abnormal in his relations with Marsac he had become easily habituated in that strange bisexual pause in the growth of a normal adolescence».¹⁷⁵ As Pérez insists, «The cosmopolitan calls upon the native bodies to authenticate the underdevelopment (in every sense) and innocence of these 'welcoming' destinations».¹⁷⁶ This apologia serves the purpose of establishing Carlo's pastoral innocence – and, by extension, Italy's underdevelopment – and that innocence includes an "arrested" bisexuality (the development of the individual recapitulates the supposed developmental trajectory of the nation).

It is this innocence, combined with a Latin pragmatism around sex and commerce, that allows Carlo to see his life with Marsac as a career, a pragmatism the narrator describes as «the birthright of every young Italian male or female».¹⁷⁷ Birthright is a telling trope, as if Carlo has «inherited» from «the long Latin civilization» the «masculine experience» and «feminine wisdom» that results in this sexual pragmatism characterized by an easy accommodation to the abnormal. As Pérez reminds us, brown bodies are without shame.

Like the trope of the noble savage who serves to highlight European degeneracy, the narrator simply reverses the usual terms of the discussion: in their moral outrage at this Latin sexual pragmatism, American and English cultures are "semi-barbaric" when compared to Italy.¹⁷⁸ Despite the rest of Europe's attempt to render Italians an "unhealthy" brown, the narrator makes clear that, regardless of how he has been treated by the Count, Carlo «was now a perfectly healthy, perfectly normal young man of nineteen».¹⁷⁹ Not culturally sophisticated enough to

¹⁷¹ Later in the novel, the narrator again breaks the diegesis to explain how, during the time in which the novel is set, it was possible to bribe Italian politicians: "in those days, when Italy still relied upon the parliamentary system" (284). Is it too heavy-handed to read these descriptions of the corruption of pre-Fascist Italian politics as an implicit endorsement of Mussolini's government? The novel's tone is so ironic that it is difficult to read.

¹⁷² C. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 211.

¹⁷³ I am reminded here of Caravaggio's homoerotic images of pastors, whether they be John the Baptist or a "pastor friso". On this reading of the so-called Capitoline Saint John, see L. J. Slatkes, "Caravaggio's 'Pastor Friso'." «Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek (NKJ) / Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art», 23, 1972, pp. 67-72. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/24705648. Accessed 10 May 2021.

¹⁷⁴ C. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 212.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁶ H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 107.

¹⁷⁷ C. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 213.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

suffer from degeneracy – an affliction «usually restricted to states of high civilization»¹⁸⁰ – Italians exhibit a healthy, “easy”, ability to sexually adapt and persevere.

We then learn that Carlo’s career as Marsac’s “secretary” «had been chosen for him by his poverty-stricken parents in that Trastevere slum».¹⁸¹ Rather than see their child starve, Carlo’s parents “sold” him into homosexual slavery; he was thirteen at the time.¹⁸² In his role as secretary, Carlo represents one of those itinerant working-class bodies that, as Pérez reminds us, embody brownness (or modes of primitivity) and act as intermediaries for cosmopolitan identification.¹⁸³

Note that the narrator does not deny Carlo’s racial, sexual, and class difference. Rather, the opposite: he insists upon it, but so as to free Carlo from the negative associations with those degenerate white homosexuals Nigel and Count Bob, who represent their own separate species –«one of those».¹⁸⁴ In the world of the novel, homosexuals are wealthy, guilty, and white; Italians are poor, innocent, and brown.¹⁸⁵ Nigel and the Count are subjects; Carlo is the object of their affection. Nigel and the Count have agency; Carlo can only go along for the ride, and any pleasure he might receive from this “unnatural” vice is an innocent one, the result of a “universal” bisexuality that a primitive, premodern, eternally Latin country like Italy is more willing to acknowledge than the corrupted, degenerate societies of the US and Northern Europe.¹⁸⁶ Nigel and the Count are modern; Carlo and his fellow Italians exist on a different spatiotemporal plane, where present and past are collapsed into one another. Degeneracy is a term reserved for the Count.¹⁸⁷

This “difference” between Carlo and the Count is also emphasized when the Count’s behavior becomes so troublesome that he is banished from Sirene, for rather than asking him to give up his vice, it is suggested twice that, should he want to return to the island, it is Carlo he must permanently give up.¹⁸⁸ And while the Count’s opium smoking makes him look ten years younger than his age, it makes Carlo look older.¹⁸⁹ Carlo’s pastoral innocence is tainted by his association with the homosexual Count. Primitive Italy, however, has restorative powers, for «Carlo revived rapidly in the airs of his own country»,¹⁹⁰ and, when he receives a Christmas leave from World War I to return to the Count, «he looked a great deal better than he had looked for years».¹⁹¹ Though Carlo remains loyal to the Count until the latter’s death from an overdose of cocaine, the war «had given him a new confidence in himself»,¹⁹² and at the novel’s conclusion, we hear that «he is probably married now, and happy».¹⁹³

¹⁸⁰ S. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, New York, Basic Books, 1975, 1962, p. 5.

¹⁸¹ C. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 213.

¹⁸² *Ivi*, p. 401.

¹⁸³ *Ivi*, p. 2.

¹⁸⁴ C. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 177.

¹⁸⁵ C. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*. When World War I breaks out, Carlo is called up, p. 342, while the Count dodges service, p. 352. Nigel, too, is a draft dodger p. 352.

¹⁸⁶ Mackenzie is not beyond, however, “racializing” even some working-class Americans, like the overtly homophobic “wild-eyed heavy-weight” Aston Duplock, “one of those virile primitives” pp. 186-187. Categorical miscegenation gives biopower the flexibility it needs to cast and recast certain bodies as more valuable than others.

¹⁸⁷ C. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 156, p. 169, p. 186, p. 305, for example.

¹⁸⁸ *Ivi*, p. 267, p. 283. The “decree of banishment” against the count is ultimately rescinded via bribery to a local political candidate. This insistence that he leave Carlo is made again near the novel’s conclusion, this time, by a priest counselling him on converting to Catholicism. C. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 372.

¹⁸⁹ *Ivi*, p. 308.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹¹ *Ivi*, p. 355.

¹⁹² *Ivi*, p. 401.

¹⁹³ *Ivi*, p. 411.

Conclusion

This initial and admittedly modest survey of “Italian” homoerotic travel literature reveals several important characteristics of the history of homosexuality, both in Italy and abroad. The variety of ways in which homoeroticism is figured in these texts provides historical evidence to support a more nuanced reading of how homosexuality was initially put into discourse. It is of a piece with, for example, Chiara Beccalossi’s claim that histories of Italian psychiatry may over-state the degree to which sexual inversion was deemed pathological.¹⁹⁴ This in turn requires that we rethink, as Pérez asks us to do, the idea of the early homosexual as always and everywhere abject. It also calls into question teleological histories of homosexuality that work backwards from the violence and homophobia to which LGBTQ people have been subject in the 20th century to 19th century accounts of sexual pathology, and perhaps even the degree to which homosexuals were Italian fascism’s number one enemy.

These works also complicate any attempt to affix the singular characteristics of the modern homosexual. To rewrite Foucault: what characterizes the invention of the modern homosexual is not a shift from a notion of the subject of sodomy as a sinner to that of one possessing an «interior androgyny»,¹⁹⁵ or even, as some of Foucault’s followers have put it, from sexual acts to sexual identity. Rather, what happened in the late 19th century was an explosion of discourses concerning same-sex behavior *and* identity. Was homosexuality congenital? Was it acquired? Was it something between the two (as Freud suggests)?¹⁹⁶ Was it, in Freud’s words, “amphigenic”? Was it “contingent”? Was it a “universal” condition or a minority identity? Was it characterized by gender transitivity? Was it characterized by a heightened masculinity? Was it (still) a matter for the church? Was it a matter for lay institutions like medicine and the law? It is the *proliferation* of these questions – rather than any specific, unequivocal answer to them – that characterizes “our” modern (homo)sexuality; most of these questions were virtually “unthinkable” prior to the late 19th century inventions of sexology, eugenics, and psychoanalysis.

And, while Pérez is correct that modern sexuality is always also racialized, how it is so is not always as neatly embodied as it appears to be in the homosexual white Victorian gentleman traveler. For each of these questions above in turn has a somewhat differently inflected relationship to issues of race. In Weimar Berlin, for example, homosexuality was co-constituted with both on the one hand German nationalism, antisemitism, and even Nazism (in the guise of masculinism) and, on the other, Jewishness and, in the words of its critics, «an Oriental sensibility» (given the pioneering work of Hirschfeld).¹⁹⁷ For the masculinists, homosexuality presumed “Aryan-ness”; for Hirschfeld, it was a universal condition present in a subset of all populations; for Hirschfeld’s critics, it was a symptom of Jewishness. Therefore, while these works illustrate the degree to which post-Enlightenment definitions of sexuality often pre-supposed race and nation (as well as gender and class), they remind us that they do not do so in any simple, non-contradictory way. That a writer like Pérez can claim that whiteness is characteristic of the modern homosexual, while another critic can point to «the co-constitutive production of blackness and queerness», illustrates the complexity of understanding both the

¹⁹⁴ C. Beccalossi, *Madness and Sexual Psychopathies as the Magnifying Glass of the Normal: Italian Psychiatry and Sexuality c. 1980-1910*, «Social History of Medicine» 27, 2, 2013, pp. 303-325. See also C. Beccalossi, *Nineteenth-Century European Psychiatry on Same-Sex Desires; Pathology, Abnormality, Normality and the Blurring of Boundaries*, «Psychology & Sexuality» 1, 2010, pp. 226-238.

¹⁹⁵ M. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume One, an Introduction*, New York, Vintage, 1990.

¹⁹⁶ S. Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey, New York, Basic Books, 2000, p. 43.

¹⁹⁷ On both, see Beachy, *Gay Berlin*, p. 229

racialization of sex and the sexualization of race.¹⁹⁸ Finally, these works highlight both the degree to which whiteness itself is not a monolith but contested terrain, as well as the contradictory and even fluctuating racial identity of Italians both in Italy and abroad. My hope is that this essay contributes to the ongoing project of resisting the positing of «an ahistorical and disembodied use of whiteness as a racial category»,¹⁹⁹ instead locating whiteness in specific historical circumstances (like interwar Italy) and bodies – even some fictional ones.

Vestal Fire in particular demonstrates that the modern period is indeed characterized by categorical miscegenation, the confusing and conflating of race and sex (and gender and class). As a result, no analysis of either race or sexuality can ignore the other. What is perhaps unique about *Vestal Fire*, however, is that it provides an example in which a *heterosexually* identified writer who is ambivalent at best about homosexuality employs fiction to co-constitute whiteness and homosexuality. It is the writer Mackenzie who portrays the Count's ideal of youthful beauty – as represented on the cover of the first issue of a literary review the Count produces – as a boy with «thick dark hair in a fringe» who has «a large hooked nose, slanting lascivious eyes, and a long-fingered vicious hand resting upon his hip».²⁰⁰ Such constructions suggest that we need to rethink Pérez's proposal: that is, «homosexuality as a moment of singular and absolute abjection» may exist *alongside*, rather than *in contradistinction to*, «the homosexual as a practical, if accidental, agent of neocolonial expansion».²⁰¹ The contradictions of capitalism are such that its varying modes of subject constitution may not always “intersect” but instead work alongside each other, and for contradictory ends.

Capitalism saw in the white Victorian gentlemen traveler an incipient niche market. It also recognized, however, the potential threat to the reproduction of relations of exploitation his non-fecundity represented. It employed brownness to code certain subjects into lower positions in its international, hierarchized division of labor – while simultaneously employing some brown bodies as privileged managerial intermediaries between workers and owners. It sought to integrate Italy into the worldwide division of labor but to also maintain Italy as brown, lower on the hierarchy of nation-states. It is only by being attentive to the contradictions of capitalism that we can understand how categorial miscegenation is possible. Disarticulating those contradictions requires us to imagine the ways in which even abjection can be employed, for example, in neocolonialist expansion. This is perhaps the most painful – but most urgent – lesson of queer critical race theory.

¹⁹⁸ C. R. Snorton, *Nobody is Supposed to Know*, p. 3. While some readers might point to the difference here between homosexual and queer, as I suggested previously, even among Victorian gentleman, not all men who had sex with other men understood this to be an exclusive option or even one characterized exclusively by same-sex object choice (rather than also age or racial difference). In other words, some of those Victorian gentlemen may also have been queer.

¹⁹⁹ J. Pugliese, *Race as Category Crisis*, p. 149

²⁰⁰ C. Mackenzie, *Vestal Fire*, p. 238.

²⁰¹ H. Pérez, *A Taste*, p. 6

Giornaledistoria.net è una rivista elettronica, registrazione n° ISSN 2036-4938.

Tutti i contenuti pubblicati in questa rivista sono Copyright degli autori e, laddove non diversamente specificato, sono rilasciati con licenza Creative Commons: [Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International \(CC BY-NC-ND 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)



Per ogni utilizzo dei contenuti al di fuori dei termini della licenza si prega di contattare l'autore e/o la Redazione, al seguente indirizzo email:
redazione.giornaledistoria@gmail.com