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Abstract: Piazza dei Cinquecento, in Rome, is dedicated to five hundred Italian colonizing soldiers who died in nineteenth-century Eritrea. Contributing to the national narrative, the piazza constructs them as mere heroic victims. Simultaneously, the piazza is central in two novels that challenge normative discourses on Italianness: *L’aurora delle trans cattive* (2018) by Porpora Marcasciano and *La linea del colore* (2020) by Igiaba Scego. Marcasciano’s memoir contributes to the queer Italian archive by painting a picture of the 1980s through her experiences as a trans woman. Starting from her own arrest in the piazza, Marcasciano challenges the place’s history, describing it as a “luna park” of cruising. Similarly, Scego unearths the often-forgotten colonial Italian past connected to the piazza and brings it to the forefront. The piazza is the introduction to a narrative that intermixes the life of a black woman painter in the nineteenth century and a black writer in the twenty-first century. The paper focuses on Piazza dei Cinquecento as a de-normativized *lieu de mémoire*—a site not of national memory, but of memory of queer trauma and racialization, not a monument to national unity, but a space for (post)national intersectionality.

Keywords: intersectionality, queer temporality, black Mediterranean, *lieux de mémoire*

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Piazza dei Cinquecento: An Intersectional *Lieu de Mémoire* in Igiaba Scego and Porpora Marcasciano

ALICE PARRINELLO

Introduction

Placed right in front of Rome's main railway station, Piazza dei Cinquecento welcomes travelers upon their arrival into the capital and salutes their departure. While being at the epicenter of a bustling and ever-changing movement of people, the piazza also presents fixed characteristics which enable an investigation of contemporary Italian society. Indeed, the piazza's name fosters the memory of a specific event in Italian history, as it is dedicated to five hundred colonizing soldiers who died in 1887 in Dogali, present-day Eritrea, as part of an effort to build a colonial empire after the Italian Unification in 1861. The name contributes to the formation of a national identity, by employing an othering logic and by presenting colonizing forces as victimized heroes through the memory of a shared traumatic event. The Cinquecento were all (assumingly, for the most part) virile white, cisgender, heterosexual Italians, or they were represented as such, in order for them to become the blueprint for subsequent generations of compatriots. Alongside such a militaristic national image, the piazza also presents a connection to another relevant institution in Italy: a 7-meter-tall statue of Pope John Paul II by artist Oliviero Rainaldi, symbolically depicted in the act of opening his cloak to welcome and protect travelers.¹ While being criticized for its scarce resemblance to the Pope,² the statue nonetheless promotes the image of the Italian identity as tightly interwoven with the Catholic Church. Therefore, as soon as someone arrives in Rome, they are (not so) subtly reminded of how Italianness is produced and reproduced. As argued by SA Smythe, "the implication of how bodies get stratified, produced, and managed is clearly designated in cultural, ethnoracial, sexualized, and gendered terms. That process is consistently rendered conditional in relation to citizenship for racialized others and those who do not contribute to the white reproductive desires of the nation-state."³ Thus, the piazza's imagery fosters a specific national identity, one rooted in whiteness, Catholicism, and virility, which actively excludes other subjectivities.

While fostering a white cisheteropatriarchal nationalist ideal, the piazza is also the intersecting point of two literary works that are far from such a model: *L'aurora delle trans cattive: Storie, sguardi e vissuti della mia generazione transgender* (2018, *The Dawn of Bad Trans Women: Histories, Glances, and Experiences of my Transgender Generation*) by Porpora Marcasciano and *La linea del colore: Il gran tour di Lafanu Brown* (2020, *The Color Line: The Grand Tour of Lafanu Brown*) by Igiaba Scego. Marcasciano is a white trans activist, writer, and current president of MIT (Movimento Identità Trans, Trans Identity Movement), the first Italian trans association founded in 1979. Alongside *L'aurora delle trans cattive*, she wrote several texts that trace Italian trans history and constitute an archive, as they feature interviews, biographies, and stories of a vast constellation of trans people, and of trans women in particular.⁴ Similarly, Scego, a cis black woman, retrieves the hidden colonial Italian archive, as *La linea del colore* is the third instalment of a trilogy, comprised of *Oltre Babilonia* (2008, *Beyond Babylon*) and *Adua* (2016) dedicated to an investigation of colonial

¹ "Wojtyła, inaugurata statua a Termini ma molti romani sono perplessi."

² Boccacci, "E l'Osservatore Romano boccia la statua di Giovanni Paolo II."

³ Ross, Heim, and Smythe, "Queer Italian Studies: Critical Reflections from the Field," 407. It is also worth remembering the study on the "mixed-race" category in Italy and its history by Angelica Pesarini and Guido Tintori, titled "Mixed Identities in Italy."

⁴ For instance, *Tra le rose e le viole: La storia e le storie di transessuali e travestiti* (2002, *Between Roses and Violets: The History and Stories of Transsexuals and Cross-dressers*) and *Antologai: Sesso genere e cultura degli anni '70* (2007, *Anthology: Sex, Gender and Culture of the 1970s*). Marcasciano mostly refers to the history of trans women in Italy, saying that trans men were mostly invisible and that at that time they were not even referred to as trans. *L'aurora delle trans cattive*, 126-127.

violence against bodies.⁵ The piazza is also the point of connection to *Adua* and *La linea del colore*, as the place features in the ending of the former and the beginning of the latter.⁶ Indeed, the introductory pages of *La linea del colore* reference the history behind the piazza's name, which is intertwined with the stories of the two main characters: an American female painter of Chippewa and Haitian descent in the nineteenth century, Lafanu, and an Afro-Italian black writer in the twenty-first century, Leila.

Alongside having Piazza dei Cinquecento as a meeting point, both *L'aurora delle trans cattive* and *La linea del colore* present a similar working practice: Marcasciano and Scego follow the traces left by non-normative bodies in various Italian locations, bringing to the forefront an often-overlooked Italian history and generating short circuits in the nation-state mythography. As argued by Graziella Parati, the unveiling of a colonial Italian past through geography is a practice specific to Scego's work:

Through the centuries, the political/aesthetic imagination of Italians has engendered representations that celebrate colonial oppression by erecting looted monuments in Roman squares and giving streets and piazzas the names that contemporary historical narratives have condemned. The role of the narrator is to disclose the meaning of such unquestioned acts of memorialization.⁷

By focusing on overlooked monuments and their history, Scego unearths the Italian colonial past because, “thanks to the absence of colonialism in academic curricula, Italians were also ignorant of the meaning of memorializations cast in stone. These monuments represent an aspect of Rome to which the right to bear witness is denied through silencing.”⁸ Parati defined Scego's spatial resignification as a practice of “spacial justice ... to establish a new discursive practice about the urban space of Rome.”⁹ Similarly, Stefania Benini stated that Scego's autobiographical work, *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010, *My Home Is Where I am*), creates an affective map between Rome and Mogadishu, which uncovers the postcolonial traces left in both cities.¹⁰ In her autobiography, Scego's act of walking through Rome is of particular interest, as it challenges the political and collective amnesia related to Italy's colonial past.¹¹ Laura Sarnelli described Scego as “a modern flâneuse strolling along the busy streets of Rome, Igiaba embodies the figure of an urban spectator, an amateur detective that investigates the secrets and unspoken delusions of the city where she was born.”¹² Scego creates maps that intertwine her autobiography and history, both official and hidden.¹³

Analogously, Marcasciano's narrative interlinks the history of the Italian trans community with the memory of specific places. As Stefania Voli wrote to describe Marcasciano's work, “in questa autobiografia collettiva, le ‘geografie di resistenza’ narrate non tracciano semplicemente mappe di significati simmetrici ai poteri cui si oppongono, al contrario, esse portano alla luce modalità di abitare e concepire luoghi (e non luoghi) radicalmente *altre*” (In this collective autobiography, the narrated “geographies of resistance” do not trace only maps of symmetrical meanings to the powers that they oppose, on the contrary, they bring to light ways of living and conceptualizing places [and non-places] radically different).¹⁴ Indeed, her practice recollects the memory of specific places, described as trans, hidden, “non-places” of the period, which existed

⁵ Scego, *La linea del colore*, 360.

⁶ Scego, 361.

⁷ Parati, *Migrant Writers and Urban Space in Italy*, 17.

⁸ Parati, 173-174.

⁹ Parati, 147.

¹⁰ Benini, “Tra Mogadiscio e Roma,” 479-484.

¹¹ Benini, 492.

¹² Sarnelli, “Affective Routes in Postcolonial Italy.”

¹³ Sarnelli.

¹⁴ Voli, “Le parole per dire e per dirsi,” 13. This and the other quotations in Italian have been translated into English by the author.

in the dark and in the folds of history, since trans life could only happen in “interstizi,” exclusively “fuori dallo scenario convenzionale e convenzionato” (gaps ... outside of the conventional and conventioned scenario).¹⁵ For instance, in *L’aurora delle trans cattive* Marcasciano describes various places both in Rome and in Naples, such as Piazza dei Cinquecento or Piazza Vittoria respectively.¹⁶

While the existing literature on Marcasciano and Scego does indeed thoroughly tackle their individual engagement with locations, a comparative analysis fostered by Piazza dei Cinquecento is particularly necessary. The piazza’s image embodies the inequalities of the Italian society and its oppressive (and simultaneous) acts against racialized, sexualized, and gendered bodies. While both Scego and Marcasciano challenge the image promoted by the piazza, the former does not include a trans perspective in her novel, while the latter does not reference any black subjectivities in her work. In their individual narratives, a single-axis framework is perpetuated, which is a practice Kimberlé Crenshaw’s notion of intersectionality tried to overcome.¹⁷ By combining a black and trans perspective, this paper will link in an intersectional fashion the “geography of resistance” enacted by Marcasciano and Scego. This intersectional practice is essential to challenge Italy’s white cisheteropatriarchal homogenous national identity as fostered by the piazza, which is the main goal of this paper. The works by Marcasciano and Scego are ideal for this endeavor, as they present various similarities.

This paper will first show singular events in both narratives connected to the piazza and how they expand to include wider systems of oppression, which harm trans and black subjects. Afterwards, it will present the archival resistance that Marcasciano’s and Scego’s communities enact precisely in relation to the place, which involves retrieving a forgotten alternative history. The sense of community is central in both works, and it transcends norms and temporalities. Finally, the paper will hint at what is on the horizon for these communities and whose voices are still absent. Overall, the paper will analyze Piazza dei Cinquecento as a de-normativized *lieu de mémoire*.¹⁸ A site not of national memory, but of memory of queer trauma and racialization. Not a monument of national unity, but a space for (post)national intersectionality.¹⁹

Violence and Resignification

Given its location, Piazza dei Cinquecento should be a welcoming space for all. However, it is also deeply entrenched in histories of violence, which disappear behind its current façade and render it unwelcoming for marginalized people and welcoming for normative ones. In the works by Marcasciano and Scego, the authors retrace the oppressive history connected to the piazza, actively creating a retrieved archive. For this reason, the piazza is a *lieu de mémoire*, a definition coined by Pierre Nora to describe spaces that “originate with the sense that there is no spontaneous memory, that we must deliberately create archives, maintain anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and notarize bills because such activities no longer occur naturally.”²⁰ Marcasciano and Scego employ the narration of a single fact to point out larger and systemic injustices. Additionally, while they engage with a history of violence, Marcasciano and Scego also recover the piazza’s queerer history, which involves a resignification of the space enacted by marginalized subjects.

Marcasciano recounts that she was arrested precisely in Piazza dei Cinquecento while she was only walking by. She was returning home after a university class, one of the first times she

¹⁵ Marcasciano, *L’aurora delle trans cattive*, 38.

¹⁶ Marcasciano, 53-88.

¹⁷ Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex.”

¹⁸ Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*.”

¹⁹ While my position as a privileged white cis woman places me outside of the two intersecting communities I engage with in this paper, my main aim is to precisely use my positionality to bring to the front more marginalized voices and to promote intersectional practices, while problematizing white cisheteropatriarchal norms.

²⁰ Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*,” 12.

went outside wearing makeup, “*en travesti*,” when the police stopped her.²¹ Without even telling her the reason of her arrest, she was forced to follow them and to sign a detention paper. Subsequently, Marcasciano was incarcerated for three days:

Dov'ero? Cos'era? Cosa dovevo fare? Come dovevo comportarmi? Perché fossi lì neanche me lo chiedo, oggi più di allora, quel perché continua a ripassarmi nella mente, soprattutto per tutte quelle persone trans che lì dentro, come in tante altre galere, ci erano finite per gli stessi assurdi motivi, non dimentichiamolo mai! ... Le risposte, prima ancora degli storici, dovrebbero darle i rappresentanti di quel sistema che prevedeva, predisponeva o pianificava quell'abominio dal quale non si usciva mai più come prima.²²

The police accused her of being a sex worker and of being a “travestito,” as transitioning at the time was a felony (and almost always associated with sex work).²³ Marcasciano's arrest is inscribed into a larger system of state policing of trans bodies, as she reports that many (primarily) trans women were considered dangerous subjects in the matter of public security, and therefore deprived of a passport, driver's license, and the ability to vote up until 1982.²⁴ Moreover, the bodies and the movements of trans people were constantly monitored, as they could not be sex workers outside of their residency city and risked being incarcerated.²⁵ Indeed, the system was focused on filing people into a strict gender binary and deeming as criminal all those who did not fit into it. For instance, Marcasciano recounts seeing the pictures of a trans woman killed in Genova in the newspapers' crime section, as if her own existence was itself the crime:

Sotto quella foto sul documento campeggiava, come su tutti i documenti in quel periodo, la dicitura dei segni particolari: “evidenti caratteri femminili.” Una dicitura che era un vero e proprio marchio, rimasta in essere fino alla metà degli anni Ottanta. Quella foto del documento diventava spesso anche la foto segnaletica di schedatura. L'ordine del discorso riportava sempre e comunque alla criminalità, il segno fisico rimarcava lambrosianamente l'inclinazione alla devianza e alla delinquenza. La foto e le foto che circolavano ... erano concentrate sulla fisionomia, sui tratti, sui segni anormali o subnormali, quelli che facevano la differenza, che delineavano, quindi schedavano l'esistenza delle persone.²⁶

²¹ Marcasciano, *L'aurora delle trans cattive*, 53-54.

²² Marcasciano, 55. “Where was I? What was it? What was I supposed to do? How should I behave? I was not even asking myself the reason why I was there, today more than back then, that ‘why’ keeps coming back, especially for those trans people that inside there, as in many other cells, ended up for the same absurd reasons, let's never forget that! ... The answers, before coming from historians, should come from the representatives of that system that foresaw, prepared, or planned that abomination from which no one came out the same.”

²³ Marcasciano, 56. As Voli states: “In Italy, before the approval of Law 164/1982, it was illegal to change one's sex.” “Broadening the Gendered *Polis*,” 245.

²⁴ Marcasciano, *L'aurora delle trans cattive*, 174. As summarized by Voli, “transvestitism was governed by the Criminal Code as illicit concealment (Art. 85); alternatively, trans people were considered ‘habitual offenders’ (Art. 1) and, if judged ‘potentially dangerous to public safety or the national order’ (1931 Fascist Public Safety Laws, Royal Decree no. 733), the law could be enforced to the extent of confinement or special surveillance. Subsequently (pursuant to Law 1423/1956 ‘Preventive Measures against Those Threatening Security and Public Morals’), transsexuals were likely to be subjected to warnings, preventive measures, confinement, and the confiscation of their identity documents and driving licenses.” “Broadening the Gendered *Polis*,” 245.

²⁵ Marcasciano, *L'aurora delle trans cattive*, 46-47.

²⁶ Marcasciano, 44-45. “Beneath that photograph in the ID, as in all ID cards of the time, the distinguishing features section was dominating: ‘evident female features.’ A statement that was a mark, which existed until the mid-1980s. That photograph of the ID frequently became the picture of the mug shot. The discourse always revolved around criminality, the physical features underlined, in a Lombroso-like manner, the inclination toward deviance and delinquency. That photograph and the photographs that were circulating at that time were focused on physiognomic, on the physical features, on the anormal o subnormal marks, those that made a difference, which delineated, and so filed people's existence.”

Only in 1982 was the trans identity finally recognized by law (even if many trans people still had pending charges due to legal remnants).²⁷ In Marcasciano's work, her arrest in Piazza dei Cinquecento constitutes the springboard to investigate the wider systemic oppression of the trans community.

In a similar fashion, in *La linea del colore* the piazza is immediately associated with violence. The novel opens in 1887, as news spread around Rome of the death of five hundred Italian soldiers, to whom the piazza will be dedicated:

Le notizie provenivano dall'Africa Orientale, e furono accolte da Roma con uno sgomento di ora in ora più crescente.

...

Cento cadaveri sul campo di battaglia. Duecento cadaveri, poi trecento.

No, cinquecento. Cinquecento cadaveri italiani. Cifra tonda.

Cinquecento morti in Africa Orientale.

...

Ed ecco che all'improvviso un nome scoppiò tra le pagine di quei giornali europei.

Era il nome di Dogali.²⁸

After the news of Dogali, Lafanu was almost lynched by an angry mob while walking home because of her blackness, "in un attimo fu circondata da quelle persone. Sentiva i loro aliti estranei sulle guance accaldate, l'ombra delle loro dita furenti sui suoi capelli raccolti ... Lafanu era esplosa a piazza Colonna, esplosi i suoi capelli ricci da africana" (in an instant she was surrounded by the people. She felt their alien breath on her flushed cheeks, the shadow of their angry fingers on her tied-up hair ... Lafanu exploded in Piazza Colonna, her African curly hair exploded).²⁹ The violent impact of Dogali has immediate consequences on a black individual in Italy and a wider impact as well due to Italy's colonialism.

Just like Marcasciano, Scego unearths the history of the piazza not only through a singular occurrence, but by also retrieving the event connected to its name.³⁰ It is not a history of military glory, but of racialized violence. Indeed, Scego offers an overview of the battle of Dogali, which gave the name to the piazza, starting from the nationalist sentiment of the time of wanting to "conquistare un posto al sole per la patria" (to conquer a place under the sun for the country).³¹ Scego references the military situation preceding Dogali, the siege of Saati, the Ethiopian commander Alula Engida, and the Italian underestimation of the locals.³² Indeed, the Italian lieutenant colonel, Tommaso De Cristoforis, who oversaw the military action, planned the combat and his speech on the assumed white European superiority, "noi siamo superiori in razza e in intelletto. Possono anche essere cinquantamila uomini, ma noi li batteremo lo stesso, siamo bianchi, vero Soldati? E allora avanti! ... Viva l'Italia!" (we are superior in race and in intellect. They can even be 50 thousand, but we will defeat them nonetheless, we are white, right, soldiers? So let's go ... Long live Italy!).³³ Unsurprisingly, De Cristoforis was proved wrong in Dogali.

²⁷ Marcasciano, 58; 174. As summarized by Voli, after six months of deliberation the Italian parliament approved law 164 on April 14, 1982, "Norme in materia di rettificazione di attribuzione di sesso" (Norms regarding the correction of sex assignment). "Le parole per dire e per dirsi," 28.

²⁸ Scego, *La linea del colore*, 9. "The news was coming from Eastern Africa, and they were welcomed in Rome with a dismay getting bigger by the hour. ... One hundred bodies on the battlefield. Two hundred bodies, then three hundred. No, five hundred. Five hundred Italian bodies. A round number. Five hundred dead in Eastern Africa. ... And then suddenly a name exploded in the pages of those European papers. And the name was Dogali."

²⁹ Scego, 28.

³⁰ In the novel, Scego does not only resignify the piazza, but a variety of other places as well. Leila sees in Marino the Fountain of the Four Moors celebrating the Lepanto battle and the monument of the Four Moors in Livorno. Photographs of the two statues are featured in the book. Scego, *La linea del colore*, 59; 235; 304.

³¹ Scego, 11.

³² Scego, 11-13.

³³ Scego, 14-15.

However, after the defeat of their troops, the Italian government decided to turn the soldiers into acclaimed national martyrs by increasing the real number of dead from four hundred and twenty to five hundred, thus justifying another Italian invasion.³⁴ The battle can be inscribed into a long series of Italian violent and vile attacks in African territories that are often omitted from history books. Scego's work simultaneously retrieves a hidden history and challenges the image of the Cinquecento as heroic victims.

Moreover, not only focusing on the Italian colonization of African territories, Scego also engages with the colonization of the South of Italy by assuming the perspective of a white soldier from the South in the narrative, Franco Mussi.³⁵ His origins are significant, as they connect Italy's actions in Africa to internal racializing and colonizing processes in the South of Italy. As argued by Sandra Ponzanesi, Italian colonialism was caused by economic struggles and "it was engineered by the northern government as a solution for southern Italians in particular, who would escape poverty and social unrest by enrolling in the military campaigns in Africa."³⁶ Lacking the possibility of seeing the need for an intersectional approach, Franco does not realize the similarities between himself and his 'enemy.' He is unable to compare the two colonizing processes.³⁷

Marcasciano and Scego do not only engage with the piazza's history of violence, but they also tell a different, queerer, history. Indeed, Marcasciano resignifies the piazza as a trans place, a space not only of violence, but also of queer life. Piazza dei Cinquecento is described as, "era antistante la stazione Termini, come tutti i circondari delle stazioni e dei porti era luogo di passaggio, quindi di incontro, di sguardi, di struscio e rimorchio, marchette, *battuage*. ... Poco illuminata per cui ricca di penombre, equivoche da fuori e protettive all'interno. Il limite non era chiaro e definito."³⁸ While the piazza's name was supposed to exemplify a national white cisheteropatriarchy, in reality, the piazza was a place that queerly stood on the liminal space between norms and their disruption. A "luogo definito losco e malfamato, pasolinianamente conosciuto come punto di ritrovo per frocie, travestite, trans, marchettari, vagabondi e vaghe-bionde" (a place described as shady and infamous, in a Pasolini-sense known as a meeting place for dykes, transvestites, trans, hustlers, vagabonds, vaga-blondes) far from the image of military national identity suggested by the piazza's name.³⁹ The piazza was a place of adventure, a "luna park," almost an open-air brothel that rendered Rome similar to other great capitals of vice and mundanity.⁴⁰ Moreover, nearby there was a variety of motels by the hour and the famous cinema Volturmo, a theater "non apertamente a luci rosse ma di quello si trattava, sempre e comunque tutto esaurito dai gai avventori. Un gran bazar del sesso, della sensualità e della frocialità" (not openly red-light but that is what it was, always and in any case sold out by gay patrons. A great bazaar of sex, sensuality, and queerness).⁴¹ The piazza is a place of queer desire far from national

³⁴ Scego, 17; 18.

³⁵ He questions the idea of Italy itself and his superiors: "Franco Mussi che si era arruolato per bisogno ... *Viva l'Italia* era per gli ufficiali benestanti, pieni di denaro e di protezioni, per gli ufficiali che si limitavano a dare ordini lontano dal campo di battaglia" (Franco Mussi who enlisted out of need ... *Long live Italy* was for the wealthy officials, rich of money and protections, for the officials that limited themselves to give orders far from the battlefield). Scego, *La linea del colore* 16-17. Furthermore, Mussi's presence also challenges Italy's image; as stated by SA Smythe, "Italy has had to account for the colonial occupation of its Southern territories, which upsets the ideological narrative of the nation as a racially pure place." "Black Italianità," 11. This process of racialization continues today regarding LGBTQ+ rights and European homonationalism, as Mediterranean subjects are framed as "backward and grotesque." Colpani and Habel, "In Europe it's Different," 87.

³⁶ Ponzanesi, "Edges of Empire," 375.

³⁷ Scego, *La linea del colore* 18.

³⁸ Marcasciano, *L'aurora delle trans cattive*, 63. "The piazza was opposite the Termini train station, like all places nearby train stations and harbors it was a place of transit, so a place of meeting, of glances, of grind and hook-up, of hustlers, of cruising. ... It was barely illuminated, so full of ambiguous shadows from the outside and protective from the inside. The limit was not clear nor defined."

³⁹ Marcasciano, 53.

⁴⁰ Marcasciano, 64.

⁴¹ Marcasciano, 64.

norms. Antonia Anna Ferrante promoted a practice of micropolitics of resistance through affection to contrast assimilation, which in this case is enacted by the networks that are formed in the piazza.⁴² It was a place that was also attended by prominent Italian LGBTQ+ figures such as Pier Paolo Pasolini and Dario Bellezza.⁴³ Marcasciano does not only retrace the hidden trans Italian history through the piazza, but she also challenges its image of herald of the white cisheteropatriarchal state.

Furthermore, much like Marcasciano challenges the piazza's image by defining it as a "luna park," Scego also presents its alternative history. As part of her long-lasting effort of historical resignification, Scego and Rino Bianchi created *Roma Negata* (2014, Denied Rome), a volume that mixes text and image to depict the colonial traces that are left in Rome. As described by Sarnelli, several monuments are portrayed in the work as the background against which a black person is standing, "the bodies photographed in Bianchi's pictures become foundational to their project of rediscovery of the city, which involves reconfiguring the metropolitan stratification of Rome against the grain of dominant historiography, thus bringing to light subaltern views and forgotten traumas."⁴⁴ Amongst the places they analyzed, they described Piazza dei Cinquecento as a modern-day Babylon, a meeting point for migrants of various origins:

E poi Piazza dei Cinquecento, soprattutto per chi viene o è originario del Corno d'Africa, è un po' come stare a Mogadiscio o Asmara. Qui già dagli anni settanta del secolo scorso scorrazzavano donne somale con i loro *garbesar* multicolori e i candidi *shemma* delle asmarine. ... Qui si vedono i peruviani consumare pollo fritto e sibice, qui i filippini corrono verso Monti e alla funzione di Santa Prudenziiana, qui mamme nigeriane trascinano le bimbe a farsi le trecchine in uno dei tanti parrucchieri afro della zona. È questo il vero ombelico di Roma, quasi più del Colosseo, qui dove in una Babele folle le lingue si intrecciano e si contaminano con la lingua di Dante. ... E chi lo immaginava che proprio questa piazza babilonia fosse legata alla storia del colonialismo italiano? ... Una piazza postcoloniale a suo malgrado, quasi per caso.⁴⁵

Even if the symbolism offered by the piazza might suggest otherwise, the lived reality of the space challenges a white cisheteropatriarchal image. The piazza is "a 'non-place' of arrivals and departures where migrant identities get lost and intersect in a constant flow of encounters and new beginnings."⁴⁶ While Marcasciano and Scego describe two realities that do not overlap in their works, their communities were nonetheless inhabiting the same space simultaneously. Moreover, the subjectivities in the narratives were both challenged by gender-based violence, violence against trans women, and violence against black women, and they were able to survive it.

Due to its inhabitants, the piazza could be ascribed to Jin Hairtaworn's definition of "degenerate spaces," which are "associated with crime, disorder and dysfunction, such as the inner city, the prison and the asylum, which are segregated from 'respectable' spaces of 'proper' white middle-class life."⁴⁷ Such spaces are populated by subjects that "do not perform straightforwardly respectable gender and sexual identities. They are nevertheless legitimated as transitional

⁴² Ferrante, *Pelle queer, maschere straight*, 25.

⁴³ Marcasciano, 65-66.

⁴⁴ Sarnelli, "Affective Routes in Postcolonial Italy."

⁴⁵ Bianchi et al., *Roma Negata*, 68. "And then Piazza dei Cinquecento, it feels like being in Mogadishu or Asmara if you come from or are from the Horn of Africa. Already in the 1970s, Somali women with their multicolored *garbesar* and Asmara women with their white *shemma* were running around here. Here you can see Peruvians eating fried chicken and *sibice*, Filipinos running towards Monti and to Santa Prudenziiana mass, here Nigerian mothers drag their daughters to get braids in one of the many afro hairdressers nearby. This is the real center of Rome, even more than the Colosseum, here where a babel of languages mixes and is contaminated by the language of Dante.... And who would have thought that this Babylon-like piazza was connected to the history of Italian colonialism?... It is a reluctantly postcolonial piazza, almost by chance."

⁴⁶ Sarnelli, "Affective Routes in Postcolonial Italy."

⁴⁷ Hairtaworn, *Queer Lovers and Hateful Others*, 4-5.

phenomena in transitioning areas that were hitherto considered ungentrifiable.”⁴⁸ The piazza’s inhabitants contest its image and present an alternative history of the place by having reclaimed it. While the name and the statue remain intact, the piazza’s homogenous identity is continuously challenged by those who inhabit it.

Community Traces

The piazza’s historical resignification is meaningfully not enacted by an individual, but by whole communities. Such communal practices also connect the histories related to the piazza to the present of its inhabitants, as they create temporal connections. Indeed, the piazza is not only a queer degenerate space, but it arguably can be described as a queer *lieu de mémoire*, since Marcasciano and Scego connect the past with the present. For this reason, the temporality of both works can be tied to a notion of queer spectrality, as the present-day narratives are constantly haunted by the past and as they do not follow a linear narration.⁴⁹ As argued by Carla Freccero, queer spectrality blurs and mixes the past with the present.⁵⁰ It is “a phantasmic relation to historicity that could account for the affective force of the past in the present, of a desire issuing from another time and placing a demand on the present in the form of an ethical imperative.”⁵¹ Such a temporality can be connected to the act of looking back/backward, an approach explored in particular by Heather Love that describes the act of turning towards a painful past, to see “the persistence of the past in the present,” in order to urgently look at the political purposes of the future.⁵² Indeed, while Marcasciano and Scego narrate a painful past, they also underline the importance of today’s needs, and of community care.

For instance, right after Marcasciano’s arrest, she is brought to a prison cell without being told the reason for her incarceration. Thankfully, another trans woman was imprisoned nearby her and she was able to help Marcasciano. She told her that they were in the section reserved for “travestiti” and that Marcasciano had been sentenced for cross-dressing, as written on the plaque on her cell door.⁵³ In such a moment of great distress, Marcasciano was cared for and comforted by a member of her own community. Additionally, on the wall of the cell Marcasciano found various marks, “tacche,” engraved by former inmates to keep track of the days of their imprisonment alongside their names.⁵⁴ The marks were a testimony to the imprisonment of other trans women, signifying the way they were policed, but also the existence of a community. Indeed, in the words of José Esteban Muñoz, the marks were “ephemeral traces” that “assist those of us who wish to follow queerness’s promise, its still unrealized potential, to see something else,” pointing to “a queer feeling of hope in the face of hopeless heteronormative maps of the present.”⁵⁵ For Muñoz, queerness is “the work of not settling for the present, of asking and looking beyond the here and now.”⁵⁶ Ephemeral traces are the “remains that are often embedded in queer acts, in both stories we tell one another and communicative physical gestures.”⁵⁷ The marks looked back at a painful past, only to point not only to a future liberation from the cell for Marcasciano, but also to a larger liberation of the trans community:

⁴⁸ Haritaworn, 4-5.

⁴⁹ Freccero, “Queer Spectrality: Haunting the Past,” 196.

⁵⁰ Freccero, 196.

⁵¹ Dinshaw et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” 185.

⁵² Love, *Feeling Backward*, 18-20.

⁵³ Marcasciano, *L’aurora delle trans cattive*, 56.

⁵⁴ Marcasciano, 56.

⁵⁵ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 112.

⁵⁶ Muñoz, 113.

⁵⁷ Muñoz, 205.

Quel buco nero e quell'assurda situazione diedero più forma e sostanza alla mia visione delle cose, rendendone i contorni più chiari. Dai miei tanti perché, da quell'incubo, cominciava una coscienza più profonda dell'assurda situazione in cui erano tenute tante sorelle. Contando quelle "tacche" con tutti i pensieri e le visioni che mi attraversavano la mente, cominciai ad entrare nel favoloso mondo di Massimina, Luciana, Debora, Roberta. Quelle infinite, dolorose, preziosissime tacche impresse scandiscono il tempo che in questa narrazione non è dolorosa conta di giorni ma calendario di eventi straordinari che da quei cancelli segnano l'orgoglioso transito della mia/nostra liberazione.⁵⁸

From an enclosed and policed body, Marcasciano awakes to a sense of community and solidarity with her trans sisters. Marcasciano's narrative is collective, as it tells the story of Albertina, Massimina, Rosina, or Merdaiola, only to name a few. Their lives haunt Marcasciano, who often jumps to a present-day narrative to mention the deaths of each woman.⁵⁹ For instance, about her friend Merdaiola, Marcasciano writes, "oggi, 15 giugno 2017, sarebbe stato il suo cinquantanovesimo compleanno e siccome lei ci teneva a queste ricorrenze, poco fa mentre scrivevo di lei le ho acceso una bella candela" (today, 15 June 2017, would have been her fifty-ninth birthday and since she cared about anniversaries, I light a candle just now while I was writing about her).⁶⁰ Many trans women only left ephemeral traces behind, traces that were however collected and remembered by Marcasciano. Just like a sense of community supported her in the cell, Marcasciano helps her community back through her writings. Indeed, her work ends precisely with a long list of names of trans people, as "tutto questo è un lavoro collettivo, a più mani, di tutte le persone trans. È il frutto di tutte e tutti coloro che ci hanno messo la vita, con i cui nomi o soprannomi, almeno di quelle che ricordo, in maniera disordinata, voglio chiudere questo lavoro" (this is a collective work, by many hands, of all trans people. It is the result of all of those who lost their life, whose names or nicknames, at least those that I remember, in a disordinate way, I want to close the book with).⁶¹

In *La linea del colore*, Scego also employs a queer temporality to look back on the past and mix it with the present, as Lafanu's life is often paralleled by present-day characters. The connection might stem from violence, but it points to a queer regeneration. For instance, Lafanu's black body is not only policed and stopped from moving freely through space when the news of Dogali spread through Rome, but also in two other main occasions. For instance, when she was younger and attending college, Lafanu was gang-raped and severely beaten for daring to study and go to the opera.⁶² In a similar way, on her journey from the United States to Italy, Lafanu was forced to remain in London for six years instead of being able to move to Italy. The United States consulate assistant secretary refused to give her a visa to exit the United Kingdom because he did not consider black people to be US citizens and he said that black Americans did not exist, "non contribuite all'elevazione della nazione. Siete feccia" (you do not contribute to the country's elevation. You are scum).⁶³ He even argued that Lafanu deceived the consulate in the United States to release her a visa to exit the country, as she sent a white friend to collect it, "avete approfittato dell'ingenuità di un collega giovane e inesperto. Se vi avesse visto in faccia avrebbe infatti negato alla sua persona il documento che solo noi americani possiamo avere. Lei, signorina Brown, non

⁵⁸ Marcasciano, *L'aurora delle trans cattive*, 56-57. "That dark hole and that absurd situation shaped my vision of things, making them clearer. From my numerous questions, from that nightmare, a deeper awareness of the absurd condition in which many sisters were kept started forming in my mind. Counting those "marks" with various thoughts and visions crossing my mind, I started entering the fabulous world of Massimina, Luciana, Debora, Roberta. Those infinite, painful, precious marks mark the passing of time that in this narrative is not a painful counting of days but the calendar of extraordinary days that from those gates demark the proud transition of my/our liberation."

⁵⁹ Marcasciano, 67-68; 76-77; 157; 103; 30-31; 60.

⁶⁰ Marcasciano, 103.

⁶¹ Marcasciano, 216.

⁶² Scego, *La linea del colore*, 39-42.

⁶³ Scego, 220.

è cittadina del nostro paese ... Ha usato illegittimamente un documento che non le appartiene.”⁶⁴ The US secretary disregarded Lafanu, arguing that she did not have either an identity or a homeland, and was therefore not free to move. Lafanu’s struggles to move from the UK to Italy are often compared to Binti’s, Leila’s cousin who lives in Somalia and who tries to illegally migrate to Europe. Binti is kidnapped by traffickers, raped, only to return to Mogadishu severely traumatized. Her family regards her as ruined after her return and blames her dreams of Europe, while Leila disagrees, “non era una questione di Europa, accidenti, ma questione di diritto dei corpi al movimento” (it was not a matter of Europe, damn, it was a matter of the mobility right of bodies).⁶⁵ Much like the US assistant secretary refused to release a visa to Lafanu, Binti also has a passport problem; in her case she does not have a European passport:

“È così ingiusto il mondo, voi della diaspora e tutti i *gaal* avete dei passaporti forti, di acciaio quasi, e potete andare dove vi pare. Il nostro vale meno della carta igienica. E ci blocca qui, come rocce per sempre.”

Posai il telefono con un senso di colpa che non mi dava tregua.

Era vero. Il diritto al viaggio e alla mobilità era solo per gente che aveva un passaporto forte e poteva oltrepassare le frontiere. Per gli altri il viaggio era solo morte, sciagura, frontiere che diventavano muri.⁶⁶

Europe built walls that created borders; as Leila says, “che effetto mi avrebbe fatto vedere per la prima volta la cuginetta che tanto amavo, in quelle condizioni? E io, la cugina dell’Europa ricca, che effetto avrei avuto su di lei? Ci separava la geografia. Ci separava il passaporto. Io ero nella parte protetta, lei no.”⁶⁷ Scego looks back to the past, represented by Lafanu, in order to criticize the situation of today, embodied by Binti.

Furthermore, Binti’s present is connected to Lafanu’s past not only through the impossibility of movement but also through art, which is the main source of comfort for them. Lafanu finds the way to survive her rape through art, and Binti, several decades later, echoes her words, creating an ephemeral trace between the two. Additionally, after being inspired by Lafanu’s diaries and paintings, Leila creates the “I am Lafanu Brown” art exhibition to narrate Lafanu’s life and to intermingle it with her cousin’s experience, in order to denounce the impossibility of free movement for Africans. For this reason, Leila’s project showcases the works by Binti and by other Somali artists who had failed the *tabrib*, the trafficked journey. While Leila wants to bring the artists to the exhibition in Venice, the artists are not able to cross the borders because the Italian government refuses them a visa. They are only able to appear through a video:

Sorridevano. Raccontavano la loro vita, il dolore subito, gli stupri, le ferite, le cicatrici, quel numero che a volte tatuavano sul braccio alle donne per marchiarle come vacche. E poi senza perdere la loro tenerezza raccontavano di Lafanu Brown, del lavoro che avevano fatto con Uarda sulle opere di quella donna antica che non conoscevano e a cui ora volevano bene come a una sorella.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ Scego, 220-221. “You have taken advantage of the naiveté of a young and inexperienced colleague. If he had seen you in person, he would have denied you the document that only Americans can have. You, Mrs Brown, are not a citizen of our country. ... You illegally used a document that does not belong to you.”

⁶⁵ Scego, 141.

⁶⁶ Scego, 192. “The world is so unfair, you diaspora people and all *gaal* have strong passports, almost iron-made, and you can go wherever you want. Ours is worth less than toilet paper. And it confines us here, like rocks, forever.’ I put down the phone with a guilt that was not leaving me alone. It was true. The right to travel and to mobility was only for the people with a strong passport and who could cross borders. For the others the journey was only death, disaster, borders that became walls.”

⁶⁷ Scego, 288, “What effect would it have on me seeing for the first time my little cousin, whom I loved so much, in such a state? And what effect would I, the cousin from rich Europe, have on her? Geography separated us. Passports separated us. I was on the safe side, she was not.”

⁶⁸ Scego, 325. “They were smiling. They were telling their life story, the pain they felt, the rapes, the wounds, the scars, that number that sometimes people tattooed on women to mark them as cows. And then, without losing their

While in a difficult situation, the sense of community and of solidarity alleviates their sufferings. Scego has challenged the Italian national narrative, its mythography, and the history that it perpetuates.⁶⁹

Conclusion

On the one hand, Piazza dei Cinquecento fosters a form of nationalism connected to whiteness, cisheteronormative virility, and militarism. On the other hand, both Marcasciano and Scego use it as a springboard to tell alternative stories that disrupt the norms and simultaneously criticize the present by looking back at the past. However, the piazza is also haunted by the future.⁷⁰ Marcasciano and Scego dwell on the trauma only to look forward; as argued by Sara Ahmed, “to describe a queer archive as unhappy is not to reduce that archive to unhappiness. To narrate unhappiness can be affirmative; it can gesture toward another world.”⁷¹ Indeed, both works are haunted by the civil rights that still need to be achieved. Indeed, Scego looks at a fictional black painter from the United States and her visa problems to tell the contemporary mobility problems of many people from Africa, who could freely reach Italy before 1989, but to whom the journey is precluded today.⁷² As written by Scego:

Il documento somalo è agli ultimi posti del Passport index, che classifica i passaporti in base alla possibilità di viaggiare senza visti. Oggi un somalo non può andare da nessuna parte senza visto, e spesso è inutile chiederlo perché non si ottiene mai. A Mogadiscio le ambasciate servono solo per rappresentanza, non sono aperte per le pratiche burocratiche. ... Rispetto agli anni settanta e ottanta del novecento, per un africano è diventato complicato viaggiare dentro e fuori del continente. Sempre più spesso ci si affida a trafficanti senza scrupoli. Vediamo la fortezza Europa che crea lager, blocca navi, costruisce intere campagne elettorali sulla pelle di persone che vogliono solo muoversi. Si parla di un'invasione che in realtà non c'è. ... Gli stessi visti che venivano rilasciati una quindicina d'anni fa oggi sono negati.⁷³

Similarly, Marcasciano returns to the stories of many trans women in the 1980s and the way their bodies were policed to look at their condition today. While the trans identity has been recognized in 1982, as Marcasciano says, its approval and the 2016 civil unions are the only examples of LGBTQ+ legislation victories in Italy.⁷⁴ At the moment of writing, the discussion of ddl Zan (a

tenderness, they told the story of Lafanu Brown, of the work they did with Uarda on the works by that ancient woman who they did not know and who they loved now like a sister.”

⁶⁹ Scego also creates connections rooted in history and not only in her own narrative, as, in the novel's final remarks, she clarifies that Lafanu's character has been heavily influenced by the real-life Sarah Parker Remond and Edmona Lewis—two black American painters who lived in Italy in the nineteenth century. Scego, 347-349. *La linea del colore* successfully challenges Italy's false image of migration and its white history. As stated by Smythe, “where people of African descent are concerned, Italy has often cast them as perpetual ‘newcomers’”; for instance, Scego herself in 2003 received a prize for “migrant writers,” even though she was born in Italy. “Black Italianità,” 11.

⁷⁰ Papanikolaou, “Critically Queer and Haunted,” 178.

⁷¹ Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 107.

⁷² Scego, *La linea del colore*, 344; 355.

⁷³ Scego “Aprite Gli Aeroporti,” 2019. “The Somali document is in the lowest tier of the Passport index, which classifies passports according to the possibility of travelling without visas. Today, a Somali cannot go anywhere without a visa, and often it is useless applying for one because it will be impossible to obtain. In Mogadishu, embassies only work for delegation duties, they are not open for bureaucracy paperwork. ... Compared to the 1970s or 1980s of the twentieth century, for an African it has become difficult to travel in and out of the continent. More and more often one needs to rely on human traffickers without remorse. We see Fortress Europe creating lager, blocking ships, building campaigns against people that only want to move. They talk about an invasion that does not exist.... The same visas that fifteen years ago were released, today they are declined.”

⁷⁴ Marcasciano, *L'aurora delle trans cattive*, 185.

decree against homotransphobia, ableism, and misogyny) is being heavily obstructed, and its future is uncertain.⁷⁵ Furthermore, both works are haunted by the absence of characters that stand at the intersection of the trans and black community, who suffer from both systemic oppression and from the marginalization enacted by their own community.⁷⁶ For this reason, the literary representations that place black trans characters front and center are also extremely scarce in the Italian panorama. Hopefully, a comparison between the works of Marcasciano and Scego can highlight the need to tell black and trans stories, which are still in the hidden folds of history.

Both *L'aurora delle trans cattive* and *La linea del colore* engage with a piazza that seemingly support a white cisheteropatriarchal narrative. However, while the place does present such an image, it also offers layers of disruptiveness that only need to be unearthed. This alternative side of it is unveiled by the writings of Marcasciano and Scego, but it is produced by the presence of communal practices across space and time. The queer and black communities have left behind ephemeral traces that play an affective role in the present and shape their new members. While an individual can be policed, a whole community can resist, topple statues, and cover them in pink paint.⁷⁷ A community can tell a different story.

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⁷⁵ "E il ddl Zan?"

⁷⁶ Scego does represent an assumingly black and trans character in her short story "Dismatria," although she (wrongly) presents her as a drag queen and not as a trans woman. Ali, "Ugly Affects," 393.

⁷⁷ "Milano, le donne di 'Non una di meno' imbrattano di rosa la statua di Indro Montanelli."

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