

*The forbidden city: Tombolo between  
American occupation and Italian  
imagination*

Book or Report Section

Accepted Version

Leavitt, C. (2019) The forbidden city: Tombolo between American occupation and Italian imagination. In: Bonsaver, G., Carlucci, A. and Reza, M. (eds.) Cultural Change Through Language and Narrative: Italy and the USA. Legenda, London, UK. ISBN 9781781888766 Available at <http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/74251/>

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from the work. See [Guidance on citing](#).

Publisher: Legenda

All outputs in CentAUR are protected by Intellectual Property Rights law, including copyright law. Copyright and IPR is retained by the creators or other copyright holders. Terms and conditions for use of this material are defined in

the [End User Agreement](#).

[www.reading.ac.uk/centaur](http://www.reading.ac.uk/centaur)

## **CentAUR**

Central Archive at the University of Reading

Reading's research outputs online

## **The Forbidden City: Tombolo Between American Occupation and Italian Imagination**

By Charles L. Leavitt IV, University of Reading

Silvio Micheli was awarded the 1946 Premio Viareggio for *Pane duro* (Hard Bread), a novel whose moving account of the iniquities of Italian society under Fascism attracted stellar reviews, elevating Micheli, for a time, to the ranks of the great Italian writers of his generation. In his next novel, *Paradiso maligno* (Evil Paradise, 1948), Micheli sought once again to diagnose the ills of Italy, focusing this time not on the inter-war years, as he had done in *Pane duro*, but instead on a post-war society struggling under U.S. occupation. *Paradiso maligno* depicts the challenges that followed from Italy's liberation—the destruction of Italian cities, the desolation of Italian families, the deprivation of Italian society—not only with devastating realism but also with remarkable concision. Indeed, Micheli sums up the challenges of post-Fascist Italy in a single word, which recurs throughout the novel, punctuating its narrative and reinforcing its critique. That word is ‘Tombolo’.

When Nunzia, the novel's protagonist, stumbles upon her best friend flirting with the U.S. soldiers who occupy her town, she recalls that ‘[m]i dette una rabbia vederla così [...]. Tombolo? mi veniva da dire [it made me so angry seeing her like that (...). Tombolo? I wanted to say]’.<sup>1</sup> The others in the town express a similar disappointment, a shared disgust at such behaviour: ‘Tombolo? dicono alle ragazze che la sera stanno all'incrocio della Via Aurelia [Tombolo? they say to the girls who stand at the intersection of the Via Aurelia at night]’.<sup>2</sup> When Nunzia is forced to join her friend in working at a local hotel that caters to U.S. clientele, she is similarly assailed: ‘il personale ce l'ha con me. Mi guardano infatti. E

---

<sup>1</sup> Silvio Micheli, *Paradiso maligno* (Turin: Einaudi, 1948), p. 112. All translations are my own unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

non so a chi dicevano, ma è già la terza volta che sento mentovare Tombolo quando passo nei corridoi. Ho una voglia matta di farmela col Capitano anche per questo [all of the employees are angry with me. In fact, they look at me. And I don't know who they were saying it to, but it's already the third time that I've heard Tombolo when I pass by in the hallway]'.<sup>3</sup> When Nunzia becomes the lover of one of the hotel's clients, a U.S. Captain, who takes her on an extended holiday across the Italian peninsula, she is thus relieved to be free of her fellow townspeople and their incessant mockery: 'A Firenze non mi vergogno più per le strade con lui abbraccetto. Nessuno mi conosce né dicono: Tombolo? [In Florence I'm not ashamed to walk the streets with him, arm-in-arm. No one knows me and no one says: Tombolo?]'.<sup>4</sup> She is surprised, therefore, when even in Florence, even in Rome, even in Naples the accusatory word seems to be on everyone's lips: 'da un negozio escono davanti a noi due signorine con un moro, e un ragazzo fa dalla strada: Tombolo? [two women and a black man leave a shop in front of us, and a boy from the road says: Tombolo?]'.<sup>5</sup> Startled as she is to hear this rebuke so far from home, Nunzia is entirely resigned to hearing it once her holiday ends and she has to return to her town: 'ho idea che qualcuno si metta a gridare: Tombolo? Anche se non lo dicono, l'hanno nel cuore, lo so [I have this idea that someone will shout: Tombolo? Even if they don't say it, they have it in their hearts, I know]'.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, this result is so thoroughly predictable, this fate so clearly assured, that Nunzia has internalised the critique, pre-empting it by berating herself before anyone else even has the chance: 'mi prende da piangere, col cuore che batte negli orecchi come a dire: Tom-bo-lo [I want to cry, with my heart ringing in my ears as if it were saying: Tom-bo-lo]'.<sup>7</sup> The refrain of Nunzia's

---

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 174.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 227.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 259.

conscience, this single word encapsulates the humiliation and corruption that Silvio Micheli's novel identifies in the miasma of post-war Italy, and that it dramatizes in the demise of its female protagonist.

In order to achieve this effect, *Paradiso maligno*'s characteristic metonymy requires historical and cultural knowledge that is no longer as commonplace as it was when the novel was first published. Addressing an audience who could be expected to know what he meant, Micheli needed neither to gloss his terms nor to decode his message. Tombolo was so central to Italian culture and politics that even allusive references to the term could conjure the doubt, anxiety, and indignation of a society working to recover after the war. As one reporter put it at the time, 'Tombolo [...] è l'esempio più espressivo e sintomatico di quello che ci ha lasciato il dopoguerra [Tombolo (...) is the most expressive and symptomatic example of what the post-war period has left us]'.<sup>8</sup> While that period continues to attract substantial scholarly interest, however, Tombolo has been largely forgotten. This essay, which presents the preliminary findings of a research project still in its early stages, is an attempt to begin to re-consider Tombolo's significance in Italian cultural history.<sup>9</sup>

A pine forest located between Pisa and Livorno, Tombolo was the site of a U.S. military encampment and a key staging site for the Allied invasion of Italy, due to its close proximity to Livorno's port. After the war, it became the site of a flourishing black market, attracting large numbers of Italian prostitutes, the so-called *signorine*, who were drawn to the camp by the free flow of U.S. dollars.<sup>10</sup> Because many of the soldiers served by these

---

<sup>8</sup> Antonio Meucci, 'La guarigione di Tombolo. Una spina nel cuore dell'Italia', *L'Unità*, 3 April 1947, p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Several books have explored the topic, including Aldo Santini's novelistic *Tombolo* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1990) and Tiziana Noce's exacting *Nella città degli uomini. Donne e pratica della politica a Livorno fra guerra e ricostruzione* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2004). My work seeks to build on these significant predecessors in order to situate the Tombolo case within both the Italian and American contexts from which it emerged.

<sup>10</sup> On the etymology of this term, including its connection to Tombolo, see Alberto Menarini, *Profili di vita italiana nelle parole nuove* (Florence: Felice Le Monnier, 1951), pp. 185-187.

*signorine* were African American, Italian fascination with and opposition to the prostitution and black marketeering in Tombolo were framed in overtly racial and often racist terms. The resulting mix of prurience and prejudice made Tombolo a kind of Italian obsession after the war.

This obsession was continually fed by the Italian media, who sold the public on lurid tales of white slavery, murder, kidnapping, money laundering, and thefts totalling billions of *lire*.<sup>11</sup> Virtually every Italian newspaper sent reporters to provide exposés of the squalid and sensational goings-on in the pine forest. Indro Montanelli filed a series of reports from Tombolo for the *Corriere della Sera*.<sup>12</sup> So did Milziade Torelli.<sup>13</sup> Gustavo D'Arpe stopped off there as part of his tour of Italy, commissioned by *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*.<sup>14</sup> *L'Unità* similarly commissioned several investigative series on Tombolo, with multiple articles by both Davide Lajolo and Riccardo Longone, who looked to Tombolo in order to explain to his readers, as the title of his series intoned, 'Quanto ci costa l'occupazione alleata

---

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, 'La "città proibita" ingoia un'illusa milanese. Una sorella la ritrova morta e descrive gli orrori delle boscaglie di Tombolo', *Corriere d'informazione*, 21-22 May 1946, p. 2; 'Un uomo ucciso nei pressi di Tombolo. Rapina consumata da frequentatori della malfamata pineta?', *Corriere d'informazione*, 7-8 Dec. 1946, p. 1; 'Un bestiale delitto. Giovane massacrata da un negro suo ex-amante', *La Stampa*, 18 Dec. 1946, p. 1; 'Storia triste di una quattordicenne. Le tre sciagurate tappe: Livorno, Tombolo, Firenze', *Corriere d'informazione*, 5-6 June 1946, p. 2; 'Militare americano autore di vari omicidi arrestato con la sua amante', *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, 4 Feb. 1947, p. 1; 'Negro tradito dall'amante rapisce il figlio e fugge', *La Nuova Stampa*, 9 March 1947, p. 1; N., 'Negli intrighi segreti di Tombolo. È stato il negro "pazzo" a rapire la bimba mulatta', *Corriere d'informazione*, 7-8 April, 1947, p. 1; 'Ingenua ragazze condotte alla perdizio', *La Nuova Stampa*, 24-25 June, 1947, p. 2; 'A Tombolo un miliardo di merci asportate', *L'Unità* 1 Nov. 1947, p. 1; Gino Serfogli, 'Miliardi sepolti tra i pini di Tombolo. I tedeschi tornano a recuperare i tesori', *L'Unità*, 28 Aug. 1947, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Indro Montanelli, 'C'è un negro pazzo che urla nella pineta', *Corriere della Sera*, 30 March 1947, p. 3; Indro Montanelli, 'Inchiesta sulla villeggiatura', *Corriere d'informazione*, 1-2 April 1947, p. 1; Indro Montanelli, 'Vive a Tombolo un uomo che si fa ricco con l'onestà', *Il Nuovo Corriere della Sera*, 10 April 1947, p. 1; Indro Montanelli, 'Più della Casbah la pineta di Tombolo', *Corriere d'informazione* 26-27 May 1947, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Milziade Torelli, 'Montagne di merci comperate a prezzi irrisori rivendute a dieci volte tanto', *Corriere d'informazione*, 27-28 March 1947, p. 1; Milziade Torelli, 'Alla fortuna si va per mare', *Corriere d'informazione*, 9-10 April 1947, p. 3; Milziade Torelli, 'C'è un'armata a Viareggio ma è di placidissimi bagnanti', *Corriere d'informazione*, 3-4 June 1947, p. 1; Milziade Torelli, 'San Rossore non è più tabù ora vi regnano le "signorine"', *Corriere d'informazione*, 23-24 June 1947, p. 3; Milziade Torelli, 'Sbarcano a Livorno truppe per la Germania', *Corriere d'informazione*, 17-18 Oct. 1947, p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Gustavo D'Arpe, 'Conclusione di un'inchiesta. Sorge una città carceraria civile consorzio di redenzione', *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, 6 Dec. 1949, p. 3.

[What the allied occupation costs us]’.<sup>15</sup> Thanks to the pervasiveness of such reporting, brimming with scandalous detail, Tombolo began to figure as a symbol for all of the depredations of the post-war period, achieving the emblematic status that Silvio Micheli drew on in his 1948 novel.

Micheli was far from alone in assigning to Tombolo this symbolic role. Cesare Pavese’s *Tra donne sole* (Among Women Only, 1949), for instance, relates a conversation on the subject between two characters at a party: one of them ‘[p]arlava dei negri del Tombolo [was talking about the Negroes in Tombolo].’ ‘Erano sempre ubriachi di liquori e di droghe. Di notte facevano orge e si tiravano coltellate. Quando una ragazza era morta, la sotterravano nella pineta e ci appendevano alla croce le mutandine e il reggiseno. Giravano nudi [They were always drunk or on drugs (...). At night they had orgies and pulled knives. When a girl died they would bury her among the pines and hang her pants and brassiere on the cross. They went around naked],’ he says. ‘Erano primitivi autentici [They were authentic primitives]’. ‘Dopo nessuna guerra sono mai successe cose simili [Nothing like that has ever happened after any other war]’. The other responds glibly: ‘Peccato che sia finita [...]’. Sarebbe stata una bella villeggiatura [Shame it’s all over. It would have made for a fine holiday resort]’.<sup>16</sup> Tombolo, and the salacious tenor of the conversation it inspired, does much of the work of characterisation here. It plays a similar role in Carlo Cassola’s *Un matrimonio del dopoguerra* (A Post-War Wedding, 1957), where a fascination with Tombolo

---

<sup>15</sup> Riccardo Longone, ‘Quanto ci costa l’occupazione alleata. Il gran parco dei divertimenti’, *L’Unità*, 11 Sept. 1946, p. 1; Riccardo Longone, ‘Quanto ci costa l’occupazione alleata. I negri sulla giostra’, *L’Unità*, 14 Sept. 1946, p. 1; Riccardo Longone, ‘Quanto ci costa l’occupazione alleata. Alla “Metallurgica” si balla’, *L’Unità*, 15 Sept. 1946, p. 1; Riccardo Longone, ‘Quanto ci costa l’occupazione alleata. Glynn Ross ha trovato l’America’, *L’Unità*, 24 Sept. 1946, p. 1; Riccardo Longone, ‘Quanto ci costa l’occupazione alleata. Ora che arriva la IV Armata’, *L’Unità*, 27 Sept. 1946, p. 1; Riccardo Longone, ‘Quanto ci costa l’occupazione alleata. L’ostinata difesa delle nostre officine’, *L’Unità*, 3 Oct. 1946, p. 1; Riccardo Longone, ‘Quanto ci costa l’occupazione alleata. Borsa nera sotto le tende di Anders’, *L’Unità*, 6 Oct. 1946, p. 1; Riccardo Longone, ‘Quanto ci costa l’occupazione alleata. Un lungo treno per pochi soldati’, *L’Unità*, 13 Oct. 1946, p. 4.

<sup>16</sup> Cesare Pavese, *Tra donne sole*, in *Tutti i romanzi*, ed. by Marziano Guglielminetti (Turin: Einaudi, 2000), 676-778 (p. 770).

marks a character as both amoral and apolitical, more devoted to crime than to any political conviction.<sup>17</sup> In Leonida Répaci's play *La Madre Incatenata* (The Enchained Mother), Tombolo stands in for Italy's post-war transformation. First performed in 1925, the play was revived in 1948, with the addition of a fourth act in which, playing the role of author, Répaci discusses the play's shifting meaning over time, noting that '[n]oi non siamo più quelli di ieri, ecco la verità. Ci pesa addosso tutto quel che è accaduto nell'arco di due guerre [we are no longer the same as we used to be, that's the truth. Everything that happened across the two wars weighs upon us]', he says, listing among the heaviest of those weights, along with the atomic bomb and the Nazi death camps, 'l'epopea delle "segnorine" culminata nella repubblica di Tombolo [the ordeal of the "segnorine" that culminated in the Republic of Tombolo]'.<sup>18</sup> In Alba De Céspedes's epistolary novel *Il rimorso* (Regret, 1963), Tombolo similarly serves to mark out distance in time, but now it is the distance from the post-war moment, which has been replaced by the conservative cultural and political climate of the early 1960s. 'Sono passati vent'anni dalla Resistenza. I mulatti nati dai soldati negri e dalle prostitute di Napoli e di Tombolo, tra un anno o due saranno chiamati loro sotto le armi [Twenty years have passed since the Resistance. In a year or two the mulattoes born from the Negro soldiers and the prostitutes of Naples and Tombolo will themselves be called to arms]'.<sup>19</sup> In each instance, the same word is invoked suggestively to conjure a cultural moment.

Tombolo could serve this function because it had become a virtual commonplace of Italian literature after 1945. For instance, in the pages dedicated to 1947 in *Quasi una vita* (Almost a Life, 1950), Corrado Alvaro's diary of the post-war years, Tombolo is

---

<sup>17</sup> Carlo Cassola, *Un matrimonio del dopoguerra* (Turin: Einaudi, 1957), p. 159.

<sup>18</sup> Leonida Répaci, 'La madre incatenata', in *Omaggio al Teatro*, ed. by Giampaolo Rugarli (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino Editore, 2003), pp. 109-175 (p. 163).

<sup>19</sup> Alba De Céspedes, *Il rimorso* (Milan: Mondadori, 1963), p. 667.



symptomatic of the iniquities, the ‘abietta miseria [abject misery]’, that followed Italy’s liberation from Fascism.<sup>20</sup> For the protagonist of Giorgio Caproni’s 1948 short story ‘Il bagno di Luce’ (The Bath of Light), it is a sign of the desolation of life in post-war Rome, appearing on the tarnished visage of his housekeeper, prematurely aged by her time as a *signorina* in Tombolo and by the memory of the black baby she aborted there.<sup>21</sup> In the poems that make up Luciano Luisi’s *Piazza Grande* (1949), a collection dedicated to Caproni, Tombolo is little more than a tissue of clichés—‘le mani dei negri [the hands of the Negroes]’, ‘una bianca prostituta [a white prostitute]’, a ‘Signorina livornese [*Signorina* from Livorno]’, and a ‘Lamento del soldato negro [Lament for the Negro Soldier]’—formulaic references to cultural commonplaces.<sup>22</sup> No less clichéd are the portraits offered in Enrico Pea’s *Zitina* (1949), where Tombolo, that ‘boscaglia nera e maledetta [black and cursed wood]’, is identified as the source for the paltry luxuries that manage to enter the Pisan marketplace, and in Silvano Ceccherini’s semi-autobiographical *Dopo l’ira* (After the Anger, 1965), wherein a U.S. soldier named Joe Sharpe—‘il negro [...] enorme, mostruoso [(the) enormous, monstrous (...) Negro]’—steals the narrator’s girlfriend the first night they find themselves under the same roof.<sup>23</sup> Fear of African-American virility similarly structures Alberto Moravia’s short story ‘Il negro e il vecchio dalla roncola’ (The Negro and the old man with the scythe, 1948), which recounts the sexual humiliation of a nineteen-year-old Italian at the hands of an African-American soldier. Moravia never once names Tombolo, but he suggestively sets his story in a ‘pineta’, a pine forest: ‘Dappertutto, addossate ai tronchi

---

<sup>20</sup> Corrado Alvaro, *Quasi una vita*, in *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. by Libero Bigiaretti (Milan: Mondadori, 1974), pp. 873-1392 (pp. 1364-1365) [First published by Bompiani, 1950].

<sup>21</sup> Giorgio Caproni, ‘Il bagno di Luce’ in *Racconti scritti per forza*, ed. by Adele Dei (Milan: Garzanti, 2008), pp. 295-298 (p. 297) [First published in *L’Italia socialista*, 11 Dec. 1948].

<sup>22</sup> Luciano Luisi, *Un pugno di tempo* (Parma: Guanda, 1967), pp. 33-47.

<sup>23</sup> Enrico Pea, *Zitina* (Florence: Vallecchi Editore, 1949), p. 212; Silvano Ceccherini, *Dopo l’ira* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1965), pp. 63, 67.

dei pini o ai cespugli, macchine militari, verdi con la stella bianca dell'esercito americano [Everywhere, leaning against the bushes or the trunks of the pine trees, were military vehicles, green with the white star of the American army]', the narrator relates in preparing the scene.<sup>24</sup> From this description alone, Moravia's contemporaries could have been expected to grasp the source of the social, political, and sexual anxieties that drive his narrative.

After all, the cultural discourse of the time was suffused with references to Tombolo. On the stage, the most anticipated play of the 1946 season at Milan's Teatro delle Arti was Enzo Mancini's *Città proibita* (The Forbidden City), a show, set in the infamous Tuscan *pineta*, which dramatized an illicit affair between an African-American soldier and an Italian woman.<sup>25</sup> At the cinema, two prominent neorealist films were similarly set in the much-discussed U.S. encampment: Giorgio Ferroni's *Tombolo, paradiso nero* (Tombolo, the Black Paradise, 1947), and Alberto Lattuada's *Senza pietà* (Without Pity, 1948); a third, Luigi Zampa's *Campane a martello* (Alarm Bells, 1949), begins there. This setting was so familiar, in fact, that Tombolo became a kind of neorealist convention, such that the dance sequence in Giuseppe De Santis's *Riso amaro* (Bitter Rice, 1949)—a film set not in Tuscany but in Piedmont—was dismissed as a 'scena da Tombolo [scene from Tombolo]', a cynical and sensational attempt to recall 'la famigerata pineta livornese. Tanto che c'eravamo, perché non farci entrare anche un robusto negro? [the infamous Livornese pine forest. As long as we were going there, why not include a strapping Negro?]', sarcastically asked a critic in *L'Unità*.<sup>26</sup> Little wonder, then, that Micheli believed he could refer repeatedly to Tombolo without ever explaining the term, or that Moravia felt he could count on his audience to

---

<sup>24</sup> Alberto Moravia, 'Il negro e il vecchio dalla roncola', in *Opere*, vol 2, *Romanzi e racconti 1941-1949*, ed. by Simone Casini (Milan: Classici Bompiani, 2000), pp. 1381-1391 (p. 1381) [First published in 1948]

<sup>25</sup> R. S., 'Corriere degli spettacoli. *La città proibita* di Enzo Mancini', *Corriere della Sera*, 22 Dec. 1946, p. 2; 'Stagione teatrale', *Il Dramma* 23.29 (15 Jan. 1947), 52.

<sup>26</sup> Francesco Leone, 'Una lettera su «Riso amaro». Mondine in celluloid', *L'Unità*, 2 Oct. 1949, p. 3.

recognise his story's setting without ever pronouncing the name: even when narratives took up seemingly unrelated events, even when they took place in quite distant locales, Tombolo seemed to occupy everyone's attention.

If that situation no longer obtains, it is due in no small part to the concerted effort made by Italian political and cultural authorities to remove Tombolo from the public consciousness through deliberate acts of obfuscation, suppression, and censorship. Ferroni's *Tombolo, paradiso nero*, for instance, was pulled from theatres after its first showing and only returned in a heavily-edited form.<sup>27</sup> After just one performance, Mancini's *Città proibita* was shut down completely at the behest of Italy's theatrical censorship board, and was never again staged.<sup>28</sup> The Italian press, too, was similarly censored. The editor of *Crimen*, a tabloid devoted to stories of true crime, was charged with public indecency and faced eight months in prison for the exposé of Tombolo's *signorine* his paper published in 1946.<sup>29</sup> Such censorship did not go unopposed: Luigi Russo was among those to speak out against the hypocrisy inherent in banning such cultural expressions while ignoring what he called 'il fenomeno della città verde del Tombolo o di Migliarino, a cui approdano le ragazze anche di buona famiglia [the phenomenon of the green city of Tombolo or of Migliarino, which attract even girls from good families]'.<sup>30</sup> Russo, like many of his contemporaries, recognised that Italian authorities were more interested in hiding the problem from view than they were in remedying it. That may have been true, but they do seem to have succeeded eventually in

---

<sup>27</sup> For contemporary accounts of this censorship, see *salg.*, 'Prime sullo schermo. *Tombolo* di G. Ferroni', *L'Unità*, 9 Dec. 1947; Marco Cesarini, 'Anche in Italia censura contro i films antifascisti', *L'Unità*, 17 Dec. 1947, p. 1; 'Foggia. Vicende di Tombolo', *La Gazzeta del Lunedì*, 1 March 1948, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> For contemporary accounts of this censorship, see Vito Pandolfi, 'Perché la censura?', *Il Dramma* 23.34 (1 April 1947), 63; X., 'Non rivedremo al Parco ciò che avvenne a Tombolo', *Corriere d'informazione*, 27-28 Dec. 1946, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> 'Gerente di una rivista assolto dell'accusa di oltraggio al pudore', *Il Nuovo Corriere della Sera*, 26 Jan. 1947, p. 1.

<sup>30</sup> Luigi Russo, 'Cavatemi dalla testa questo Bruto', in *De vera religione. Noterelle e schermaglie, 1943-1948* (Turin: Einaudi, 1949), pp. 259-269 (p. 268).

hiding it. Perhaps as a result, Tombolo cannot be said to figure in histories of post-war Italy to the same extent to which it figured in accounts written at the time.

To understand the motivation both for this censorship and for the cultural discourse it sought to silence, I propose approaching Tombolo as an instance of what Mary Louise Pratt has termed the ‘contact zone’: ‘the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict’.<sup>31</sup> Borrowing Pratt’s term and approaching Tombolo as a ‘contact zone’, I mean to indicate that this space figured so large in the Italian imagination because it represented both literally and symbolically the fraught confrontation with the American Other. But I mean to say something more than this as well. When we consider the ‘radical inequality’ of the social relations in Tombolo, it is important to recognise that this inequality existed not only between the American occupiers and their Italian hosts, but also within each camp. Put differently, in Tombolo, what Pratt calls the ‘conditions of coercion’ and ‘intractable conflict’ characteristic of the ‘contact zone’ not only pitted American against Italian but also white against black, northern against southern, man against woman, right against left. If the conflicts in Tombolo were inflamed by the occupation, therefore, they were fuelled by conditions that pre-existed the arrival of the U.S. army on Italian soil. In particular, Tombolo became the ‘contact zone’ for the competing racial regimes of Jim Crow and Fascism, and for the resistance against those regimes: the nascent U.S. Civil Rights movement and Italian anti-Fascism.

The multi-dimensional conflicts to which Tombolo gave rise deserve to be explored in detail. For reasons of space, however, in this essay I can only sketch out some of the contours of this complex and over-determined historical phenomenon. In the first instance, the experience in Tombolo was shaped, in part, by the African-American struggle for

---

<sup>31</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

equality, and by the racist backlash that rose up in opposition. Fighting in a racially segregated military and on behalf of a racially segregated country, black soldiers sought to link the battle against European Fascism to the battle against American racism, launching what came to be called the ‘Double V’ campaign: ‘Victory over our enemies at home and victory over our enemies on the battlefields abroad’, in the words of the editor of the *Pittsburgh Courier*.<sup>32</sup> Explicitly paralleling the racist violence in the United States to its counterpart in Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy, they decried the hypocrisy of those who called the Second World War ‘a crusade for freedom’, as Richard Wright put it, while demonstrating through their treatment of racial minorities that they would still ‘categorically reject the very concept of freedom and democracy’.<sup>33</sup> That the African-American troops who liberated and subsequently occupied Italy reported better treatment from the Italians than from their white U.S. compatriots was an unmistakable sign of such hypocrisy.<sup>34</sup> This point was articulated with particular clarity by the black soldier who sent to Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo, a virulent segregationist, a picture of himself kissing an Italian woman, including with it a note that read ‘I am sending you this picture because I know that it will be making you happy [...] since you are strictly for democracy’.<sup>35</sup> The free exercise of such sexual democracy appears to have inflamed still further white American racial hatred, which found its outlet in the frequent round-ups, in reality violent incursions into Tombolo, whose

---

<sup>32</sup> *Pittsburgh Courier*, 13 Dec. 1941, reported in Christine Knauer, *Let Us Fight as Free Men: Black Soldiers and Civil Rights* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Wright speech to the Fourth American Writer’s Conference in June 1941, reported in Dan Shiffman, “‘12 Million Black Voices’ and World War II-era Civic Nationalism”, *African American Review*, 41.3 (2007), 443-458 (p. 443).

<sup>34</sup> See Silvia Cassamagnaghi, *Operazione Spose di guerra. Storia d’amore e di emigrazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2014), p. 130; as well as the accounts of African-American soldiers in Carolyn Ross Johnston, *My Father’s War: Fighting with the Buffalo Soldiers in World War II* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2012), pp. 95, 106.

<sup>35</sup> The letter is quoted in Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement and the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), p. 49.

ostensible purpose was to capture black deserters, traffickers, and bandits, along with the prostitutes they frequented. Each roundup led not only to hundreds of arrests but also to increasingly ferocious clashes between the military police and the inhabitants of Tombolo.<sup>36</sup> The nature of these round-ups, as revealed by their coverage in the Italian press, makes evident that they were a form of racial violence, a targeted assault on African-American soldiers. Thus, for instance, recounting what it called a ‘Sanguinoso conflitto [Bloody conflict]’, ‘una vera battaglia [a real battle]’, which took place in August 1946, one Italian newspaper reported that

sono intervenuti i carabinieri contro i quali i negri si sono ribellati cominciando a sparare. È allora entrata in azione in forze la ‘celere’, che ha fatto uso dei mitra, mentre i negri, sistematisi a difesa fra le macerie del Duomo, continuavano a sparare accanitamente. La battaglia si è prolungata nell’oscurità per un paio di ore ed anche vari civili hanno riportato ferite di arma da fuoco. Cinque di essi sono stati ricoverati mentre quattro negri sono rimasti uccisi.

the Carabinieri got involved, and the Negroes rebelled against them, starting to shoot. At that point the Military Police got involved, using machine guns, while the Negroes, taking shelter in the ruins of the Cathedral, continuing to fire furiously. The battle continued in the darkness for a few hours and a few civilians reported gunshot wounds. Five of them were hospitalised and four Negroes were killed.<sup>37</sup>

Events such as this, a kind of internecine civil warfare, can only be explained in the context of the racial segregation—and race hatred—that predominated in this period. Indeed, John A. Williams, whose 1972 novel *Captain Blackman* contains a lengthy chapter on Tombolo, claimed that these raids were merely a pretext for an extended clandestine assault on African-American soldiers, in which hundreds of men were murdered by the U.S. Army. Evidence for a massacre on this scale is scarce, even if reports of casualties in the round-ups were not

---

<sup>36</sup> ‘Nella ‘città proibita’ la battaglia alleata dà buoni frutti. Retata di negri, Tedeschi e “signorine”’, *Corriere d’informazione*, 20-21 Aug. 1946: 1; ‘Rastrellati soldati negri, prigionieri tedeschi, donne di malaffare’, *La voce del Po*, 2 Jan. 1947: 1.

<sup>37</sup> ‘Sanguinoso conflitto a Livorno provocato da soldati negri. Incidenti a Mestre fra alleati e civili’, *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, 26 Aug. 1946, p. 1.

infrequent.<sup>38</sup> Yet '[t]he black grapevine says it happened', Williams told an interviewer at the time, and suppression and censorship might help to explain the lack of verification.<sup>39</sup> Even if they did not reach the level of casualties alleged by Williams, the deadly confrontations in the 'contact zone' of Tombolo served to demonstrate the U.S. racial regime's encroachment onto Italian soil.

They also demonstrate the persistence of the racial regimes of Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany. The area around Tombolo housed several U.S. camps for prisoners of war, and for the German and Italian detainees held there, the presence of African-American troops, some of them entrusted to stand guard, seemed an intolerable offence. That these black soldiers were often found sleeping with Italian women was an even greater affront. One of the prisoners, describing his transfer to Coltano, the largest of the camps, with over 33,000 detainees, recalled seeing Tombolo as he neared the gates: 'Nessuno di noi immagina che il folto della pineta è impenetrabile anche per gli MP e che negli anfratti, in mostruosi abbracci, negri disertori e "segnorine" danno l'ultimo colpo alla "difesa della razza" [none of us imagined that the dense pine forest was impenetrable even to the MPs, and that in its nooks and crannies, Negro deserters and *segnorine*, with their monstrous embraces, gave the final blow to the "defense of the race"]'.<sup>40</sup> In his memoir of a Fascist youth, *Un ragazzo di Salò*, Benito Bollati, future Deputy of the far-right Movimento Sociale Italiano, recalled encountering Tombolo as a result of his own post-war imprisonment by the Allies: 'Vedevo

---

<sup>38</sup> After a raid in May 1947, *La Gazzetta del Lunedì* noted ominously that 'the Commander of the Military Police has decided to rid the area of numerous undesirable elements once and for all. 'La zona di Tombolo sarà ripulita', *La Gazzetta del Lunedì*, 19 May 1947, p. 1. The next week, a morning raid conducted jointly by 90 members of the U.S. Military Police and 100 Carabinieri led to over 300 arrests, and further round-ups would follow until the encampment of Tombolo was destroyed and its inhabitants scattered, imprisoned, or killed. G.S., 'Nella pineta di Tombolo è passata la scopa del colonnello Meely', *Corriere d'informazione*, 14-15 May 1947, p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> John Williams and Dan Georgakas, 'John Williams at 49: An Interview', *Minnesota Review*, 7 (1976), 51-65.

<sup>40</sup> Pietro Ciabattini, *Coltano 1945. Un campo di concentramento dimenticato* (Milan: Mursia Editore, 1995), pp. 48-49.

gruppi di donne in compagnia di soldati d'ogni razza. Attorno a quei campi si consumava la vergogna di una sconfitta che si era voluto contrabbandare in vittoria [I saw groups of young women in the company of soldiers of every race. Around these encampments there lay the shame of a defeat that they wanted to smuggle into victory]', he wrote; 'sembrava dimenticato tutto il passato e la dignità di un popolo, la sua civiltà e la cultura che gli italiani avevano offerto al mondo [they seemed to have forgotten all the history and the dignity of our people, the civilisation and the culture Italians had offered to the world]'.<sup>41</sup> A similarly bitter patriotism, and a similar sense of wounded pride, may have precipitated the deadly brawls that broke out between Italian locals and the American soldiers in and around Tombolo. It may also have inspired the fear of brown babies—'fanciulli reduci da Tombolo [the young veterans of Tombolo]', 'i bambini mulatti con padre a Kansas City [the mulatto children with fathers from Kansas City]', 'bambini che facevano pensare più all'Africa che al paese della madre [children who made you think more of Africa than of the country of their mothers]'—that permeated press accounts of the time.<sup>42</sup> Such accounts make clear that the U.S. held no monopoly on racism.

If African-American soldiers and their offspring were the targets of Italian bigotry, so too were the *signorine*, and the round-ups in Tombolo were frequently accompanied by vigilante assaults on these women as they fled the police. From the numerous and disturbing accounts of these assaults in the Italian newspapers, it emerges that the women were despised not only for sleeping with African Americans but also for their own southern Italian

---

<sup>41</sup> Benito Bollati, *Un ragazzo di Salò* (Milan: Mursia, 1998), pp. 235-237.

<sup>42</sup> Quoting, respectively, 'Una città dei ragazzi in un vecchio convento', *La Provincia* 31 Dec. 1948: 1; Indro Montanelli, 'Non se l'aspettava la morigerata Marina di Pisa', *Corriere d'informazione*, 19-20 March 1947, p. 1; 'Siamo partiti da zero. Ci arrangiamo così. È proprio vero?', *L'Europeo* 9.23 (1953). See, on this point, Silvana Patriarca, 'Fear of Small Numbers: "Brown Babies" in Postwar Italy', *Contemporanea*, 4 (2015), 537-568.



heritage.<sup>43</sup> They were victims, in other words, of the *anti-meridionalismo* that has endured in some quarters of Italian society since unification. ‘After the violent battle waged yesterday against the *segnorine*, the echoes still reverberate among the citizenry’, reported *La Provincia del Po* following an August 1947 attack.

Chi sente ancora un senso di dignità nazionale, soprattutto dopo aver constatato, in questi due anni, il duro trattamento alleato nei nostri riguardi, non può che schierarsi dalla parte del popolo di Livorno che ieri sera ha vissuto una grande ora. [...] [I]n diversi punti della città alcuni gruppi di giovanotti si sono sfogati contro le malcapitate ‘segnorine’ che incontravano per strada. Essi hanno iniziato una vera e propria caccia alle ragazze, affrontandole e denudandole dovunque; nei bar, nei ritrovi, per le vie e per le piazze. Una decina di esse, completamente nude, sono state accompagnate in giro per il centro da una turba di gente che gridava loro: ‘Tombolo, Tombolo!’. Un clamore indescrivibile in tutta Livorno; urla, fischi, invettive accompagnavano le ‘segnorine’ sequestrate, molte delle quali, completamente nude erano accompagnate ai posti della polizia.

Whoever still feels any sense of national dignity [...] must take the side of the people of Livorno, who lived it up last night. [...] At several points throughout the city groups of youth unloaded on some of the *segnorine* they met in the street. Launching a real hunt for the girls, they confronted them and stripped them naked wherever they found them: in the bars, the hangouts, the streets and the piazzas. A dozen or so of the girls were marched through the city centre by a crowd screaming ‘Tombolo, Tombolo!’. An indescribable commotion ran throughout Livorno: screams, whistles, and invectives accompanied the captured *segnorine*, many of whom were brought, completely nude, to the police station.<sup>44</sup>

Once captured, the *segnorine* were driven out of Tuscany and forcibly shipped back to their native regions.<sup>45</sup> This was done with such cruelty that a petition was prepared by 168 fathers of arrested girls, in which the U.S. authorities were asked to intervene to prevent treatment described as ‘disgusting, brutal and inhuman’.<sup>46</sup> Despite these protests, however, the mob

---

<sup>43</sup> On the hatred engendered by the *segnorine*, see Chiara Fantozzi, ‘L’onore violato: stupri, prostituzione e occupazione alleata (Livorno 1944-47)’, *Passato e presente*, 99 (2016), 87-111 (pp. 94-107).

<sup>44</sup> ‘Nude le segnorine cacciate dalla folla’, *La Provincia del Po*, 5 Aug. 1947, p. 1.

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, ‘Le rastrellate di Tombolo transitano per Bari’, *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, 14 Jan. 1947, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Franco Ferrarotti, ‘Le «segnorine» contro la Military Police. L’ultima da Tombolo la raccontiamo noi’, *L’Unità*, 12 June 1947, p. 1; ‘22 ‘segnorine’ di Tombolo sono giunte ieri a Roma’, *L’Unità*, 4 July 1947, p. 2; ‘Arrivo da Tombolo di trentotto “segnorine”’, *L’Unità*, 12 Aug. 1947, p. 2; ‘Le recluse di Alberobello. 102 straniere sparse dalla guerra per le vie del mondo attendono di essere rimpatriate’, *La Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno*, 22 Jan. 1947, p. 1.

violence continued, as did the process of involuntary resettlement. As one newspaper recounted at the time, '[o]gni mese la polizia rastrella la città quattro, cinque, dieci volte. Ogni mese impacchetta dalle 600 alle 1000 ragazze provenienti da tutte le parti d'Italia. Le esamina, le cura, le munisce di un foglio di via obbligatorio e di regolare diffida, rispedendole al paese d'origine [every month there are four, five, ten police round-ups. Each month they put away between 600 and 1000 girls from all over Italy. They are examined, cured, given an expulsion and a cease and desist order, and sent to their cities of origin]'.<sup>47</sup> If Tombolo's anti-black violence is evidence of the extension into Italy of the U.S. racial regime, the violent removal of the *segnorine* is evidence that the tensions of this 'contact zone' exacerbated Italian prejudices as well. Tombolo compelled the social conflicts of two continents to intersect, reinforcing—indeed, intensifying—local and national hatreds through the collision not only of conflicting cultures but also of competing racial regimes.

Traces of this collision can be found in all of the many literary, cinematic, dramatic, and artistic representations that Tombolo inspired in the years after the war, and not only in Italy. After Curzio Malaparte's exploration of what he called 'la forêt du Tombolo, où les nègres avaient créé une espèce d'horrible casbah, une jungle habitée par des fauves à l'aspect humain [the forest of Tombolo, where the Negroes had created a kind of horrible Kasbah, a jungle inhabited by wild beasts with a human appearance]', countless lurid accounts would follow in the French popular press, as would novels like Jacques Strezza's *Avec les filles de Tombolo* (Among the Girls of Tombolo, 1950), Piero Lucetti's *Les Déserteurs* (The Deserters, 1954), and Jacqueline Dana's *L'Été du diable* (The Devil's Summer, 1985).<sup>48</sup> There were likewise a number of English-language publications exploring this theme,

---

<sup>47</sup> F. B., 'Tormentata Livorno dopoguerra. Nessuno può sgominare l'esercito delle "segnorine"', *Corriere d'informazione*, 19-20 Aug. 1947, p. 1.

<sup>48</sup> Curzio Malaparte, *Deux Chapeaux De Paille D'Italie* (Paris: Les Editions Denoël, 1948), p. 54. Preceding even this account was W. F., 'La pinède en folie', *L'Impartial*, 23 Nov. 1946, p. 3.

including John A. Schillace's *The Tragic Forest* (1951), and Nicholas Fersen's *Tombolo* (1954) and *The Hideout* (1965), in addition to the aforementioned *Captain Blackman*. Tales of Tombolo, Italy's 'città proibita', its forbidden city—the name made popular by Gino Serfogli and adopted as the title for Mancini's banned play—once captivated audiences worldwide.<sup>49</sup> Then they were forgotten.

They are worth recollecting and reconsidering today, in order better to understand why, at a fateful historical juncture, Tombolo loomed so large in the Italian imagination. My explanation is that this so-called forbidden city represented for post-war Italians a contact zone, a locus of cultural change and thus of social instability. That is certainly how it functions in Micheli's *Paradiso maligno*, where Tombolo, a transformative space, facilitates the kinds of cross-cultural encounters that can both improve one's fortunes and seal one's fate. Nunzia, Micheli's protagonist, comes from a poor family, and is drawn to Tombolo in the hopes of supporting her elderly father and her four young brothers. Even as the money begins to come in, she recognises the risks she is running. She is afraid of winding up like the aging prostitutes who line the Via Aurelia, ridiculed by the Italians and ignored by the GIs. She is likewise afraid of those same GIs, and particularly the African-American soldiers. At the same time, however she sympathises the soldiers, and identifies with them. 'A me fanno pena e anche paura [I feel bad for them and I'm afraid of them]', Nunzia says.

Sono pericolosi. Dopo la liberazione, mica si poteva uscire, con quei mori che appena scuriva t'assalivano anche fra la gente. [...] Ma anche sono come bimbetti a saperli pigliare e ce l'hanno coi bianchi per colpa degli americani. Infatti tutti quelli di Tombolo sono mori che non vogliono più tornare fra gli americani che li trattano come schiavi, specie ora che in Italia han trovato da far bene e possono avere donne bianche che in America guai se azzardano alzarci gli occhi soltanto!

---

<sup>49</sup> See, for instance, G. S., 'La "città proibita" di Tombolo calamita delle ragazze smarrite', *Corriere d'informazione*, 14-15 May 1946, p. 1.

They're dangerous. After the liberation, you couldn't even go out, with those Blacks who would assault you as soon as it got dark, even with other people around. [...] But at the same time they're like little children if you know how to take care of them, and they hate white people because of what the Americans have done to them. In fact, Tombolo is filled with Blacks that don't want to go back to live with the Americans who treat them like slaves, especially now that they've found that they can do well for themselves in Italy and they can have white women who in Italy they couldn't even look at!<sup>50</sup>

Despite the retrograde racial attitudes, the substance of Nunzia's sentiments here is apparent.

Tombolo is a land of opportunity for the African-American soldiers, as it is for Nunzia herself. Yet, in light of the racial regimes there enforced, the opportunities made possible in Tombolo carry with them grave risks as well. *Paradiso maligno* thus dramatizes how, by bringing into contact—and into conflict—the social hierarchies of Italian and American culture, Tombolo challenged the structural norms of two societies. My hope is that further study will help to reveal how the contact and conflict of Tombolo re-shaped those societies in the years that followed the conclusion of the Second World War.

---

<sup>50</sup> Silvio Micheli, *Paradiso maligno*, pp. 176-177.