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Italian unification's blind spot: Verga's "Libertà" and Vancini's *Bronte: Cronaca di un massacro che i libri di storia non hanno mai raccontato*

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Abstract

In this article, I analyze the short story "Libertà" by Giovanni Verga and the film *Bronte: Cronaca di un massacro che i libri di storia non hanno mai raccontato* by Florestano Vancini. I also bring into my discussion Benedetto Radice's essay *Nino Bixio a Bronte* to weave a critique of general Nino Bixio's bloody repression of the Bronte peasants' revolt. Contemporary scholars, like Leonardo Sciascia and Salvatore Lupo, criticized Verga's story because of its omissions of historical facts, accusing him of not taking a political stance. In contrast, I contend that Verga's omissions are due to his subaltern position, as a Sicilian writer working for northern readers and publishers. Then, I turn to Vancini's film that foregrounds Garibaldi's broken promise and the *Risorgimento's*

shortcomings. Vancini's film addresses also the North and South's cultural divide, and the ensuing deep incomprehension between the two political and geographical regions. This cultural divide has been the site of a race discourse, which is still active in Italy today, and, at the same time, the locus of an agrarian elite that was able to manipulate a weak central government for its own gains to the detriment of the rural masses.

Keywords

galantuomini, Garibaldi, Garibaldi's edicts, North and South divide, race and ethnicity, Risorgimento, Sicilian rural masses

Giovanni Verga's short story "Libertà," in *Novelle Rusticane* (1883), deals with a deplorable historical incident that took place in Bronte during Garibaldi's revolution in Sicily. The story describes how Garibaldi's edict of June 2—which abolished the flour tax and recognized the peasants' right to common lands (Radice, 1963: 44)—indirectly incited a crowd of hungry and desperate peasants to rebel against the oppression of the town's powerful men, who were then viciously axed down. Afterwards, General Bixio arrived at Bronte and ruthlessly repressed their bloody revenge. My work focuses on both Verga's decision to purge his narration of the event of any historical reference and Florestano Vancini's filmic response to the Sicilian writer's omissions in *Bronte: Cronaca di un massacro che i libri di storia non hanno mai raccontato* (1972) (Gambetti, 2000: 49). For comparison and contrast, I also bring into my discussion Benedetto Radice's essay *Nino Bixio a Bronte* (1891), which both Salvatore Lupo (1988: 13) and Leonardo Sciascia (1963: 15) consider exhaustive in its research and accurate in its rendition of the event. Although I explore the meaning of both the peasants' rioting and the unjustified violence of their repression, my interest mainly lies in what the story and the film are silent about and the reasons for that silence.

Both Lupo and Sciascia criticized Verga for his story's omissions. Lupo argues that Verga's interest in the event seems to reside mostly in the representation of the violent and uncontrollable social clash, typical of any of rural society. The explosion lasts only for a moment and confirms the inescapable destiny of the protagonists who, in the end, find themselves in the same unequal, yet functional relationship (Lupo, 1988: 15). Sciascia seems unable to forgive Verga for his art's mystifications that supposedly coincide with the author's mystifications about the *Risorgimento*. Sciascia underlines how Verga's *crispina* and monarchic attitude led him to a radical *omertà* in the name and for the sake of the nation, including that part of the nation that lost (Sciascia, 1963: 17). In contrast, my analysis of the story's omissions is premised on Sicily's colonial position within the Italian kingdom and Verga's post-colonial condition as an author writing from the margins of the national discourse. My use of the term "post-colonial" is in line with Padmini Mongia (1996: 2) who refers to "post-colonial" as methodological revisionism to better critique structures of power, rather than a simple periodization.

In recent years, many revisionist scholars have argued that Italy's unification was carried out through the colonization of Sicily—and of the South of Italy. For instance, Anita Virga contends that the Savoy monarchy militarily annexed the South and that "I Savoia svilupparono una relazione di tipo coloniale con i nuovi territori annessi, cui estesero le leggi piemontesi ... senza farsi garanti di nuove regolamentazioni che tenessero conto delle esigenze di tutte le regioni del nuovo stato" (Virga, 2017: 2). Furthermore, Virga argues that a post-colonial reading of Sicily and the Sicilian writer is useful for two reasons: "La prima è di tenere in maggior considerazione il quadro storico—coloniale—nel quale Verga si trova a scrivere e operare" (Virga, 2017: 104). The second reason is even more significant to my discussion: "Avvicinarsi di più al contesto storico aiuta ad affondare l'analisi su elementi concreti e a basarsi sul testo, deviando quindi il fulcro dell'attenzione dall'ideologia verghiana che avrebbe informato l'opera ... Propongo ... di spostare ... la critica all'interno del contesto storico

coloniale” (Virga, 2017: 104). What were the traits “del contesto storico coloniale” within which the Sicilian author lived and worked, though?

In answering this question, it is important to keep in mind that historically colonization was both ethically justified and politically premised on the construction of an inferior and barbaric culture that needed civilizing (Said, 1978: 3–4). As Claudia Petraccone contends, in Italy the conceptualization of two highly different cultures, the civilized North and the barbaric South, took shape even before the *garibaldini*'s landing in Sicily. Garibaldi's revolution further advanced the anti-Southerner propaganda, as the democrat *garibaldini*—who landed at Marsala with the idea of liberating the South from its Bourbon oppressor—were forced to confront a reality that was too different from theirs to be fully comprehended. Their negative experiences were reported in books that amplified the South's “black legend” all over Italy (Petraccone, 1994: 512, 515–516).

When in 1876 the Historical Left's victory in Parliament was assured by southern votes, moderate liberals like Sidney Sonnino, Pasquale Villari, and Leopoldo Franchetti worried that the barbaric South might taint the new state. Sonnino and Franchetti published their analyses of Sicily's economic and social state of affairs in *La Sicilia in 1876*, where they wrote, “La coesistenza della civiltà siciliana e di quella dell'Italia medio superiore ... è incompatibile colla prosperità della nazione ... Una di queste due civiltà deve dunque sparire” (quoted in Petraccone, 1994: 529–530). The above-mentioned quote calls for the elimination of the Sicilian culture and elucidates well Verga's position as a writer, working from the margins of the national discourse.

Already in 1979, Romano Luperini pointed to Verga's marginalized position as Sicilian intellectual within the national project, as he reports, “L'esclusione di Malpelo si rivela metafora dell'esclusione stessa dell'artista dalla società, con quanto ciò comporta di rivendicazione intellettuale e ... di disperato senso di scacco e d'inferiorità sociale” (quoted in Virga, 2017: 116). Expanding on Luperini's words, Virga (2017: 116) argues, “Questa posizione di ‘emarginato’ all'interno del discorso ufficiale nazionale rende, dunque, il narratore ... a fare da tramite tra il mondo subalterno siciliano, cui non appartiene, e il mondo borghese cittadino del Nord, cui anche non appartiene.” Thus, the author moves in the difficult *in-between* terrain, as he is simultaneously “colonized,” as Sicilian, and “colonizer,” as a member of the land-owning class and a supporter of national unification (Virga, 2017: 13–14). Living and working in this difficult terrain, Verga “[rappresenta] una [realtà] (quella subalterna siciliana) agli occhi dell'altra (quella borghese nazionale), notando i punti di rottura del progetto nazionale all'interno del mondo subalterno siciliano” (Virga, 2017: 16–17). In his *in-between* position, Verga shifts from paternalistically looking at the “subalterni siciliani” to underlining “tensioni provenienti dal mondo popolare e controdiscorsi che screziano quello dominante” (Virga, 2017: 140).

How can Verga weave a counter discourse within the national culture and history from his intellectual position at the margins? Or, as Shail Mayaram (2003: 3) queries, “How to bring the marginalized into representation when they exist only as the stigmatized other?” Or, to expand on Mayaram's words, how can the marginalized, when they exist only as the stigmatized other, represent a national historical event? Mayaram suggests that narratives of resistance “construct and reconstruct identity and social being, and they also order the past through broken histories” (Mayaram, 2003: 3). It follows that history narrated from the margins is never linear and complete; rather, it is narrated also through omissions. Marginalized individuals engage in struggles thanks to the relative autonomy of their memory: “The role of imagination suggests how memory is not a representation of the past but a *re-presentation*. ... Human memory interprets, classifies, evaluates, and organizes. Even the ability to forget is an integral part of memory” (Mayaram, 2003: 3, 14). Narratives of resistance inevitably present history under a cloak created by both memory and imagination. Imagination is needed, I would argue, to fill in those gaps where silence is required. Hence, the importance of forgetting and the ability not to mention that which cannot and should not be mentioned, which is the technique Verga uses in “re-presenting” Bronte historical events.

In his film, Vancini also makes ample use of omissions through which he “re-presents” the *Risorgimento* to underscore its shortcomings—above all, the failed agrarian reform that was supposed to change the economic and political power structure in Sicily—and a race discourse that informed many of the political and military actions in pre- and post-unification Italy. Verga’s omissions in the story set Vancini to investigate the Bronte event, which led him to Radice’s book; in 1960, he decides to write the script for the film, *La libertà*, based on the story (Gambetti, 2000: 49, 73). As he starts writing, he hires Sciascia to help him with the “Sicilianness” of the subject, and their intent was to create a *film-denuncia* (Micalizzi, 2002: 85). However, when Vancini is ready to shoot, the producer, Dino De Laurentiis, puts two American actors, Kirk Douglas and Frank Sinatra, in the main roles—and the deal is off (Gambetti, 2000: 73). It is not until 1971 that RAI decides to make Vancini’s script into a three-episode film, *I fatti di Bronte*, which in the end it refuses to broadcast. One year later, Vancini finally debuts the film *Bronte: Cronaca di un massacro che i libri di storia non hanno mai raccontato*, which is appreciated only by a small number of intellectuals (Gambetti, 2000: 78). When Bettino Craxi was prime minister (1986–1987), RAI broadcasted the film very late at night and with a very ambiguous introduction to mitigate the film’s message. After all, Craxi was one of Garibaldi’s most faithful fans and an obsessive collector of his paraphernalia. RAI never broadcasted *I fatti di Bronte* (Gambetti, 2000: 78), indicating that Bixio’s massacre at Bronte was still a controversial subject in the late 1980s.

The story begins with a group of peasants hanging a three-color scarf, representing the Italian flag and, thus, Garibaldi’s revolution that would presumably end their oppression. The hoisting of the flag is followed by the peasants’ shouts for freedom, by which they mean the end of any abuse by the hands of the powerful who are, subsequently, systematically slaughtered: the baron, the priest, the rich, and finally the cop, representing the aristocracy, the church, the *galantuomini*, and the law. Like a foaming sea, the peasants take hold of the town’s public places: the public square, the *galantuomini* club, the church, and the city hall (Verga, 1982: 319). Garibaldi’s edict empowered the peasants who, believing in his revolution, appropriated the town’s public spaces as sites of power.

Unlike Verga, Radice’s essay begins with Garibaldi’s proclamation on May 14, 1860 in Salemi, “Siciliani! ... All’armi dunque! Chi non impugna un’arma è un codardo o un traditore della patria ... per ora un’arma qualunque basta, impugnata dalla destra di un valoroso” (Radice, 1963: 36). Garibaldi is inciting Sicilians to do exactly what the peasants did in Bronte: they rose up and fought against their oppressors. Rightly, Radice comments:

La plebe non vedeva solo nel Garibaldi il liberatore della tirannide borbonica, ma il liberatore della più dura tirannide, la miseria; ed impaziente aspettava che fosse tolta la tassa sul macinato, e fatta la divisione del demanio comunale ... ordinate da Garibaldi. (Radice, 1963: 44)

Aware of his island’s social and political tensions, Francesco Crispi convinced Garibaldi to promise the peasants the right to common land to gain their support (Macry, 2012: 83). However, as the peasants started making claims on contested land, they directly threatened the interests of Sicilian landowners, whose backing was paramount for the success of the dictator’s expedition (Davis, 1988: 51). The landowners soon took up arms to defend their lands and privileges; consequently, rural insurrections often became wars between the oppressed peasants and their oppressors, the town’s landowners and notables. Faced with the risk of a civil war, Crispi and Garibaldi decided to crush those insurrections in blood, restating the old status quo (Cucinotta, 1996: 176).

Verga (1982: 323) describes Bixio’s repression in his story: “Il giorno dopo si udì che veniva a far giustizia il generale, quello che faceva tremare la gente.” The idea of “far giustizia” is negatively contrasted with that of “far tremare la gente,” since “far giustizia” should generate a sense of relief and not fear in people, as in the general’s case. The description of the general’s threatening presence in Bronte continues: “Fece portare della paglia nella chiesa, e mise a dormire i suoi ragazzi come un padre. La mattina, prima dell’alba ... subito ordinò

che gliene fucilassero cinque o sei ... I primi che capitarono" (Verga, 1982: 323). As Bixio arrives at Bronte, he puts his men to sleep in the church, "come un padre." The image of "un padre" clashes with the general's order to randomly shoot five men without trial, the morning after his arrival. In contrast with Verga's account, Radice writes that Bixio had the five men tried by a military tribunal before having them shot. Nevertheless, Radice describes the trial as improperly carried out, as Bixio threatens the judges, "Sembrandogli lento il procedere dei commissari, li taccia di poltroni e li minaccia" (Radice, 1963: 111). Bixio arrives at Bronte on August 6; on August 9, he leaves Bronte to crush an insurgency in Regalbuto. Radice records that leaving at dusk, Bixio "raccomanda alla commissione celerità e giustizia severa." As one of his letters testifies, on August 8 he made up his mind and ordered the tribunal members to sentence the five men to death (Radice, 1963: 115), thus obstructing the course of justice.

Verga eliminates the trial completely. Naturally, this is one of his major "mystifications," as Sciascia defines them. According to Sciascia, the reason for this mystification resides in Verga's unwillingness "a caricare il generale di feroce ipocrisia; e voleva invece, a conferma della leggenda, darlo soltanto, e con indulgenza, come intemperante" (Sciascia, 1963: 19). In contrast, I argue that Verga's omission(s) might be due to the impossibility of publishing a story about a national hero's ruthless, unjust, and even illegal actions in 1883. Three days before Bixio's arrival at Bronte on August 3, the Piedmontese constitution, the *Statuto Albertino*, was extended to Sicily (Riall, 1998: 90). Prime Minister Massimo d'Azeglio gave great independence to the courts, and not even the king had the power to influence them (Piazza, 2012: 11). Moreover, art. 26 of the *Statuto* states: "La libertà individuale è garantita. Nessuno può essere arrestato, o tradotto in giudizio, se non nei casi previsti dalla legge e nelle forme che essa prescrive" (Storiologia, n.d.). Hence, the historical necessity for Bixio to have a trial. By eliminating the trial, Bixio's action becomes illegal, and he is portrayed as acting not only like "un intemperante" but also like a negligent officer. Without a trial, his action is rooted only in what appears to be a furiously irrational and vicious behavior, and his violence stands out as much (if not more) as the peasants'. Unlike the peasants, he was supposed to be *super partes*, establishing law-sanctioned order.

As a result, in the story Bixio seems to have a natural tendency for irrational and violent behavior, which the anthropologists of the Italian School of Positivist Criminology—founded by Cesare Lombroso—considered to be the traits of an inferior race and pinpointed on the Southern race (Wong, 2015: 47). Thus, the text allows for a reading that demonstrates the fallacy of the race discourse, so prevalent at that time, as it shows Bixio having traits that were constructed as typical of Southerners to demonstrate their supposed inferiority. This reading is particularly significant, as Bixio is infamously known as the author of one of the most quoted examples of writing that created Southerners as racial "Otherness." Famously, in a letter to his wife he wrote, "Questo insomma è un paese che bisognerebbe distruggere o almeno spopolare e mandarli in Affrica a farsi civili!" (quoted in Vittoriano, 1942: 143).

It is also significant that in the story Bixio curses in a church, which he enters on a horse, "La mattina, prima dell'alba, se non si levavano al suono della tromba, egli entrava nella Chiesa a cavallo, sacramentando come un turco. Questo era l'uomo" (Verga, 1982: 323). This description needs some unpacking. First, the general enters in the sacred space of the House of God on a horse, showing the utmost disrespect for it. Then, he uses such profanities as to be compared to a Turk. Turks, besides being Muslim, were considered among the most ferocious enemies who attacked Italian cities during its history, and the idiomatic expression "Mamma li turchi" still testifies to Italians' atavistic fear towards that people. Last, the sentence "Questo era l'uomo" denounces Bixio's behavior in church as not accidental; rather, it was inherent to his nature and essence. It was part of whom he was. The above description strips Bixio of any vestige of Christianity, in a time and place that saw Christianity as the benchmark of civility. Even today, the colloquial expression "comportarsi da cristiano" calls for conducting oneself with civility, which was the cornerstone of orderly, educated, and polite civil society as conceived of by 19th-century liberalism (Williams, 1977: 13).

The trial is not the only major omission in Verga's account; Bixio's name is never mentioned. However, the author's description of the general leaves a very visible trace on the text. Writing about historical time, Ricoeur writes:

A trace is a vestige left by the passage of a human being ... On the first level, the physical, the trace as a substitute must be a *mark* left by something ... On a second level, the noetic, there is a trace only for one who can appreciate the mark as a present sign of an absent thing. (Ricoeur, 1991: 345)

Ricoeur's quote refers to Edmund Husserl's differentiation between the noematic and the noetic. Very simplistically, we can say that the noetic is that which perceives the reality and the noematic is that which is perceived (Husserl, 1982: 216–217). Bixio is the trace that was left in Bronte. On the first level, the physical (the noematic), his action left a substantial mark on the bodies of the shot people. On the second level, the noetic, Bronte peasants perceived the mark of Bixio's unjust action and their faith in Garibaldi's revolution becomes "a present sign of an absent thing."

De Certeau describes historical discourse as that which "forces the silent body to speak" (De Certeau, 1988: 3). During the Bronte event, the "silent body," by which de Certeau means the "social body," acquires the eerie physicality of the gunshot corpses. Whether they were shot after a mock trial or no trial at all is not significant. What matters most is that those people's lives could and should have been spared, and that that was "un'ingiustizia che poteva essere veduta da quelli stessi che la commettevano" (Sciascia, 1963: 16). Ultimately, Bixio's trace in the story foregrounds Verga's accusation of the general's actions. Once again, the story conveys the idea that Bixio, by acting on his racism, inflicts an injustice, ironically becoming the embodiment of lawlessness, disorder, and inferiority.

My contention is that the text allows for two intertwined readings. On the one hand, the text creates Bixio as the "orientalized other"—an operation that had already been used to describe and delegitimize the Southerners. On the other hand, the illegality of Bixio's order becomes representative of the new state's illegitimacy. As John Davis observes, "The legitimacy of the new state was also widely and openly challenged." Mostly due to the political and administrative uncertainty of the new state, "Legal Italy," as a mere bureaucratic artifact, was too often contrasted to "Real Italy," which strongly relied on arbitrary methods and frequent violations of the rule of law (Davis, 1988: 11–12). Because of its congenital weakness, the Italian central government soon learned to give in to local power-holders in Sicily, and in the South in general, creating a politics of patronage and clientage, further undermining "Legal Italy" (Pezzino, 1997: 53).

Ultimately, the story allows for a reading that creates a counter discourse to the national narration of Bixio's heroism. Here again, we need to think of the author's difficult *in-between* position within the national project. As Sciascia remarks, Verga's "esperienza ottica" in telling the story makes it certain that the author witnessed the event, as he, supporting Italy's unification, had joined the *Guardia Nazionale* and was stationed in Catania (Sciascia, 1963: 20). Conceivably, Verga did not just witness the event but also the injustice, hypocrisy, and even illegality of the actions of a general who supposedly came to Sicily to liberate it. Even Sciascia reports, "Sui fatti di Bronte ... gravò il complice silenzio di una storiografia che si avvolgeva nel mito di Garibaldi, dei Mille, del popolo siciliano liberato" (Sciascia, 1963: 15). How could Sicilians have been liberated and oppressed at the same time and by the same people? How could Verga have reported anything against the national historiography and myths?

As Michael Rössner (2013: 312) writes:

From Verga to de Roberto, Sicilian writers communicated to their fellow Italians the reality of their island. But it is obvious that their *verità* (*verismo*) was a "truth" prepared and communicated in a hybrid world: the editorial centers (Florence, Milan, and Turin) were outside of Sicily.

Rössner's words point to Verga's position as the subaltern voice who can speak only within the paradigms of the dominant national discourse. In his post-colonial condition, Verga contributed to "a literature that depicted Sicilian reality for the needs and expectations of a Milanese public" (Rössner, 2013: 312). This would explain why some of Verga's writings seem to play into the national hegemonic discourse, contributing to the propagation of the myth of Sicily's picturesque-ness and dismalness, especially when compared to Milan's modernity (Moe, 2002: 253).

Writing from the margins meant that Verga needed to be cautious in presenting his island's agony in the process of unification, as any negative writing about it and its heroes would have been particularly hazardous to him as a writer. After all, history is always written by the winners. Expanding on this idea, Michel de Certeau (1988: 68) observes:

The historiographical institution is inscribed within a complex that permits only one kind of production and prohibits others ... It makes certain research possible But it makes others impossible This combination of permission and interdiction is doubtlessly the blind spot of historical research.

According to Michel de Certeau, "the historiographical institution" allows the production of only one version of any historical event, and all the others must be suppressed. In line with de Certeau, Radice informs us that, although a Bourbon version of the facts existed alongside a liberal one, liberal historians were "i più letti e più creduti perchè primi scrissero [e] misero in malavocce la città di Bronte" (Radice, 1963: 128). In their intent to support and shed a positive light on Garibaldi's revolution, the hegemonic liberal versions tended to amplify the peasants' animal brutality, marked by "stupri di donne ... squartamento di bambini ... chierici trucidati nel seminario ... monache violate ... seni recisi e maciullati di fanciulle" (Radice, 1963: 128). This narrative was used to justify Garibaldi's harsh orders and glorify the *garibaldini's* actions. All liberal versions, Radice mentioned in his essay, were written between 1862 and 1910 (Radice, 1963: 128); it is only logical to think that Verga read the books written before 1883 and understood what he was up against, while writing his account of the event.

After the erratic shooting of five men, Bixio sends the rest of the rioters to Catania to be tried: "Li facevano alzare in piedi uno a uno ... gli avvocati armeggiavano fra le chiacchiere ... i giudici sonnechiavano ... di faccia erano seduti in fila dodici *galantuomini* stanchi, annoiati" (Verga, 1989: 325). The *galantuomini* are described as "annoati" and the judges "sonnechiavano" and thus, one would imagine, are not paying attention to what they are called to do, which is to ensure justice for all. The trial's total insignificance and *ennui* become an allegory of History's indifference towards that event, its historical meaning, and its memory, as the title of Vancini's film suggests. At the end of the trial, the cops handcuff the charcoal man who, perplexed, asks, "Dove mi conducete? – In galera? – O perchè? Non mi è toccata neppure un palmo di terra! Se avevano detto che c'era la libertà!" (Verga, 1989: 325). The story ends dramatically with the charcoal man's arrest and his total confusion about what happened in court. His questions, left unanswered by the judges and by his own trial, assume historical significance: if Garibaldi brought freedom to Sicily, why was he imprisoned? If Garibaldi recognized the peasants' right to common lands, why didn't he get even "un palmo di terra?" And why was the possession of even "un palmo di terra" considered a crime?

These historical questions bring us to Vancini's (1972) film, *Bronte: Cronaca di un massacro che i libri di storia non hanno mai raccontato*. Unlike Radice's and Verga's accounts, Vancini's film starts with the peasants' demand for their right to common land and the ensuing friction between them and the land-aristocracy and the *galantuomini*. In the very first scene, we see a group of *gabelloti* beat a man and his son for stealing wood on common land. To fully understand this scene, we need to consider the complex situation regarding common land in Sicily. Rural towns constituted the primary unit of civil administration and were endowed with common land to meet the peasants' need for survival and the cost of local administration. Common land—which either was the property of the Crown (*beni demaniali*) or belonged to a town (*beni comunali*)—had been eroded by lay

and ecclesiastic feudatories' usurpations and enclosures, especially during the second half on the 18th century (Davis, 1988: 41–42). In Sicily, the relationships between the land aristocracy, the Bourbon king, and the rural towns had never been easy. Sicilian land-aristocrats had been challenging the Bourbon monarchy's central power since the second half of the 18th century, exasperating the king, who began "to encourage the *comuni* to bring suits against the neighboring feudatories for usurpations of common lands ... [over time,] such actions heightened the *comuni's* awareness of both their collective identities and collective rights" (Davis, 1988: 44).

In Bronte, the situation was even more complex, as King Ferdinand IV donated the *ducea di Bronte* to Admiral Nelson and his heirs "per compenso dei servizi resigli col soffocare nel sangue dei più grandi patrioti napoletani i moti del 1799 contro la mala Signoria" (Radice, 1963: 45). Furthermore, the town's *galantuomini* were divided into two parties: *comunisti*, who were for the peasants' right to common land, and *ducali*, who were against it (Radice, 1963: 47–49). The *comunisti's* leader was the enlightened, liberal lawyer Nicolò Lombardo, and Vancini gives him a central role in his film. In contrast, Verga does not even mention him, although he is one of the five people executed by Bixio's platoon. In the film's opening scene, father and son get a hard trashing, because they have been collecting wood on common land within the Nelson's Duchy, as legally recognized by Garibaldi's edict of June 2. However, Nelson's heir, Franco Thovez, opposed that edict and sends his men to punish them. In the film, Garibaldi's edict is the fulcrum of the Bronte massacre: in the second scene, as the peasants are taking to the town's streets, they shout their right to the lands, "Vogliamo le terre."

Then, the camera shows us a group of peasants meeting Lombardo coming from Catania, where he had been in talks with the new governor appointed by Garibaldi. Although Lombardo is highly skeptical of Sicilian men of power and their chameleonic nature, he believes that Garibaldi's revolution is bringing a real change:

Garibaldi ha portato la rivoluzione e noi la stiamo facendo. Noi, io, voi, tutti quanti ... Se la rivoluzione dice che la terra si deve spartire, chi impedisce la divisione è un traditore della rivoluzione e della legge della rivoluzione.

He has faith that the "liberal revolution" will free Sicily from the oppression of the Bourbons, the land aristocracy, and the *galantuomini*, and he invites the peasants to stay calm and to not engage in violence. He believes that the law is finally on the peasants' side and that any action needs to be taken within its boundaries. In his trust in the revolution, he challenges the *ducale* Luca Cesare who argues that Garibaldi is using the peasants only for his own gain.

Lombardo's political position is contrasted with that of both the *ducale* Luca Cesare and Gasparazzo, the charcoal man. The latter incites the Bronte peasants to steal as the only way to achieve justice, as the town's aristocrats and notables have accumulated wealth through their physical labor. Gasparazzo and his men run through the town shouting, killing, stealing, and destroying. In contrast, Lombardo is physically static, using his words as the only vehicle to bring justice to Bronte: "Pace ... tutti i torti saranno ripagati ... i colpevoli saranno puniti dalla legge ... la legge di Garibaldi, che è la legge del popolo, verrà applicata in nome di questa bandiera che significa libertà, pace e giustizia." The film dramatizes the contrast between these two antithetical political leaders: Gasparazzo and Lombardo. Gasparazzo rejects Lombardo's words, inviting his people not to trust a *cappeddu*, not even Lombardo, to bring justice to the peasants. The latter's naive belief in Garibaldi's words and revolution will turn out to be both his mortal mistake and political debacle, as the conservative and repressive power of the town's land-aristocracy and notables will remain untouched.

As the Sicilian Colonel Poulet enters the town and brings order without any violence, Gasparazzo leaves the fight and goes back to the mountains, while Bixio does not hide his repugnance toward Sicily and Sicilians. He insults the surviving *galantuomini* for not defending themselves from the rioting scum and, addressing Thovez, communicates all his disgust for them: "Se non fosse per lei, per gli impegni che Garibaldi ha assunto con il

rappresentante del suo governo, lascerei che questa buona gente continuasse a scannare questi bravi galantuomini ... They are cowards.” Like Radice, Vancini points to the English intervention in the Bronte affair as Garibaldi’s main reason to send Bixio to crush the revolt, which he does by setting up a military tribunal. As head of the tribunal, Bixio appoints a northern lawyer, giving him the order, “E’ necessario dare un esempio.” Nonetheless during the trial, the town’s men, even the *ducali*, refuse to name the people involved in the rioting, defending Lombardo as one of the most esteemed lawyers in town. Then, the victims’ wives are called to testify, and their testimony will lead Lombardo and four others in front of the firing squad.

On this point, Vancini’s film diverges from Radice’s account, as the latter reports, “Segrete denunce, accuse manifeste dei più accaniti nemici, accusarono il Lombardo ... ma più che contro gli altri, le ire e vendette si avventarono contro il Lombardo, temuto capo del partito avverso” (Radice, 1963: 116). In the film, Lombardo does not have a party around him and acts alone. Yet, Radice even gives us the names of the *comunisti*, who were not as numerous as the *ducali* who included “quasi tutta la classe dei civili” (Radice, 1963: 49). How can we interpret these omissions? I would argue that Bronte men’s *omertà* stresses the “color line” between them and the Northerners, who came to try and convict them without understanding their world and culture.¹ Although I am aware that I am using the term “color line” in a totally different context than that of WEB Du Bois (1994 [1903]) in his *The Souls of Black Folk*, I argue that his conceptualization of a division between men due to racial prejudices works well in this Sicilian context. When Bixio gets frustrated with the *galantuomini* recanting their accusations, the English Thovez illuminates him: “You see, a stranger can be a danger. That is why they do not speak. This is Sicily.” As Sciascia (1979: 13) documented in many of his writings, Sicilians have a congenital mistrust of foreigners, who colonized their island for centuries. This may explain the *galantuomini*’s unwillingness to have northern, and thus foreign, judges convicting their people.

The North and South division is well marked in the film. As Fulvio Orsitto (2005: 249) observes, “In Vancini’s film, incomprehension is also analyzed along ethnic lines,” and the division between Northerners and Southerners is present also in “the soundtrack of the film and in the proxemic patterns established in a number of the film’s frames.” While the Sicilian *picciotti* sing serenades in a happy but disorderly fashion, the *piemontesi* soldiers arrive at Bronte singing “La Bella Gigogin” in a perfectly organized harmony (Orsitto, 2005: 249). Moreover, Orsitto notices that in these scenes the soundtrack is recorded only in Sicilian and Piedmontese dialects, further suggesting the division of the two peoples who, speaking different languages, can hardly understand each other. Even Poulet and Bixio are shown to be unable to communicate, although both are aristocrats and generals in Garibaldi’s army (Orsitto, 2005: 249).

Although Orsitto points to ethnicity as a marker for the North and South divide, I would argue that more than ethnicity, we can detect the workings of a race discourse that, as Petraccone indicated, started even before Garibaldi’s landing at Marsala. Karla Holloway makes the following distinction between ethnicity and race: “Race is an identity that is conferred that can support stereotypes and prejudices. Ethnicity, on the other hand, evolves through complex associations of linguistic, national, cultural, and historical identities Ethnicity is a self-determined and defined construction” (Holloway, 1995: 106). According to Holloway, agency is the most significant difference between ethnicity and race. Whereas ethnicity is self-conferred and the individual freely decides to which group to belong, race is conferred; the individual cannot choose to which group to belong. More importantly, race can support stereotypes and prejudices; thus, “ethnicity” becomes “race” when it is conferred and used to discriminate and deny access to power to specific groups. In other words, “Sicilian” determines someone’s ethnicity; nonetheless, that ethnicity becomes race when it is used to mark someone as inferior, creating an “Otherness.”

In the film, Poulet chooses to be Italian and to fight for it; Bixio, though, does not treat him as his equal. After scolding him for failing to make any arrest in Bronte, he states: “E’ proprio questa la cosa più intollerabile, la sua passività, la sua accondiscendenza verso questa banda di malfattori. Il fatto che lei è siciliano non serve a

scusarla.” For Bixio, Poulet’s Sicilian ethnicity cannot completely excuse his incompetence, indicating that his Sicianness was already a handicap making him into an inferior officer, a priori. Bixio’s discriminatory and prejudicial remarks transform Poulet’s ethnicity into race, as he is denied equality to Garibaldi’s officers due to “il fatto che è siciliano.” When Bixio gets frustrated with Poulet because “Non ha impedito che la canaglia mettesse mani sulle carte del municipio,” he paternalistically reminds him, “Non siamo venuti in Sicilia per ritoccare i confini sulle mappe catastali ... il nostro compito è quello di lasciare alle spalle province ordinate.” Then, he hushes Poulet’s attempts to explain the peasants’ right to those lands, underscoring his perceived sense of superiority vis-a-vis Poulet and local people. Not only does he describe the people of the area as “incomprensibili, rozzi anche nei lamenti e nelle preghiere,” when assisting a funeral, but he also insults Poulet, calling him “minchione.” Bixio’s accusations evoke many of the rhetorical trappings through which southern identity was constructed. He reproaches Poulet for “la sua passività,” and passivity is the opposite of activity, the hallmark of progress and modernity.

Bixio’s modernity is actualized in his constant movement: through Bronte, in the convent where he is staying, and throughout the countryside. Bixio walks to Bronte from the outskirts, where Thovez brought him with his coach. As Thovez tries to convince him to be dropped at Bronte, an annoyed Bixio remarks, “Ho fatto a piedi mezza Sicilia.” Here, de Certeau’s (1984: 93) words comparing walking to writing a text may be suggestive of Bixio’s appropriation of Bronte history. While Bixio’s body is young and muscular, emanating strength and authority, Poulet’s body is heavy, slow, and old. Yet, Poulet was able to bring order without any shooting, since he was willing to communicate with the peasants. In contrast, Bixio is portrayed as a man of action with no interest in communicating with local people because of his self-perceived superiority. Radice’s essay does not report the dialogue between Bixio and Poulet, substantializing Vancini’s accusations of both the *Risorgimento*’s shortcomings and the race discourse.

Vancini’s ideological position, toward the *Risorgimento* and its failings, comes powerfully to the fore through Lombardo’s defense in front of the military tribunal. While comparing the trial’s quickness and arbitrariness to the Spanish viceroy’s *ex-abrupto* verdict, Lombardo states:

Quando in Sicilia c’erano i viceré, [si sentiva] spesso l’espressione: - sua eccellenza ... gli diede un’ora di termine. E voleva dire che il viceré ... [dava] al presunto reo un’ora per presentare le proprie discolpe, dopo di che decideva la condanna. Era il così detto giudizio *ex-abrupto*.

Lombardo laments that, “Noi abbiamo ricevuto un giudizio *ex-abrupto* nell’anno 1860, quando in Sicilia non ci sono più i viceré, ma Giuseppe Garibaldi in nome della libertà.” By comparing Garibaldi’s power to that of the viceroys, Lombardo is underlining the trial’s lack of legitimacy, the revolution’s hypocrisy—as it left the balance of power totally unchanged in Sicily—and the new state’s appropriation of Sicily as colonized land.

Moreover, according to Lombardo, the people who represented “la nuova Sicilia e la nuova Italia” committed two horrible injustices: “Dentro la grande ingiustizia, l’ingiustizia storica che si consuma dentro questo popolo, c’è quest’altra particolare ingiustizia che si commette contro di noi.” In Lombardo’s words, the injustice of the Bronte trial— “[questa] particolare ingiustizia che si commette contro di noi”—is inserted into “la grande ingiustizia” that can be read on two different levels and temporal planes. On one level, “l’ingiustizia storica che si consuma dentro questo popolo” may signify the injustice committed against the Bronte people on those specific, historical days. On another level, that sentence may signify the injustice perpetrated against Sicilians, as a people, by Garibaldi’s arrival in 1860, which continued throughout Italian history. In this second reading, Lombardo’s words about the historical injustice would acquire an almost prophetic tone, validating Vancini’s denunciation of the *Risorgimento* as a failed revolution, as Gramsci argued (Davis, 2014: 14). After all, no revolution happened in Bronte, nor in the rest of Sicily, since the democrat Crispi and Garibaldi were not able—or, as Luca Cesare cynically states, they were not willing—to carry out a real agrarian reform.

At the end of the film, the deep incomprehensibility between the Sicilians and the Northerners is left unresolved. This lack of synthesis between the two cultures and peoples represents the “residual” nature of post-unification Italy. Raymond Williams defines the residual as an element of the past that is still active in a cultural process as an effective element of the present: “thus certain experiences, meanings and values ... are lived and practiced on the bases of the residue” (Williams, 1977: 122). The historical and cultural distance and incomprehensibility between North and South are still an active element in contemporary Italian society. At the same time, many of the values Italians tend to attach to their current political and cultural experiences are still premised on this deep and un-dialectical divide. The cultural division between North and South has been the historical source of a race discourse and the site where “a powerful and headstrong southern ‘dependence elite’ succeeded in influencing the evolution of the process of political and social modernization over the last two centuries by playing the weakness of the state against its own persistent autonomy” (Pezzino, 1997: 56). By “dependence elite,” Pezzino means a social class that uses up the resources brought to the region without generating any wealth, contrasting it with the “development elite,” which generates wealth and promotes the independent development of a region (Pezzino, 1997: 58). In his film, Vancini constructs both the workings of this “dependence elite” and the inability of the new state to contrast its power as the *Risorgimento*’s failings, as they prevented a true agrarian reform that would have changed Sicilian peasants’ economic and political status within the Italian kingdom.

Conclusion

By following Virga’s lead, I explicated Verga’s story through a postcolonial lens that allowed me to read the author as a subaltern voice resisting and inhabiting the dominant national discourse. As a Sicilian intellectual, who strongly believed in Italy’s unification but felt marginalized within the new state, Verga lived and worked in the difficult *in-between* position. Thus, his story’s omissions are due to the author’s subaltern condition that made it impossible for him to denounce a national hero’s unjust, hypocritical, and even illegal actions; hence his silence. Almost 100 years later, Vancini brought the events at Bronte to the screen to present the *Risorgimento*’s main shortcomings: the failed agrarian reform and the North/South divide, which Italy’s post-unification governments were not able to resolve. This divide has been both the source of much of Italy’s race discourse and the site for the agrarian elite to control a politically and administratively weak central government for its own personal gain and to the detriment of the rural masses. Vancini’s exposé film was subversive enough that even in the 1980s RAI was reluctant to broadcast it.

Two elements come to the forefront in both Verga’s and Vancini’s renditions of the Bronte event: Bixio’s totally dissonant presence in Bronte and Garibaldi’s betrayal of the revolution. Bixio stands out as the stranger who does not want—maybe he is not able—to apprehend Sicily’s complex reality. Instead, he acts out of his own prejudices rooted in a race discourse already active before Italy’s unification. Garibaldi’s edict of June 2 turned out to be deceiving for the peasants who did not receive what had been promised to them even though they had taken part in the revolution.

Notes

1 In his essay “Of the Dawn of Freedom,” Du Bois (1994 [1903]: 9) writes: “The problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line, – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men.”

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