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Sleights of Hand: Black Fingers and Curzio Malaparte's *La pelle*

Marisa Escolar

La pelle [1949], written towards the end of Curzio Malaparte's rather colorful political career,¹ has long been used as a litmus test for its author, helping critics confirm their belief in a range of divergent and often contradictory interpretations. At one end of the spectrum is the view that he was an unscrupulous "chameleon" who distorted the reality of the Allies' Liberation of Italy to suit his own interests.² At the other is the claim that he was a true artist whose representations of the horrors of war absorb historical details into what is a consummately *literary* work.³ In other words, *La pelle* has been read either as a vulgar deformation or a poetic transcendence of the historical moment it purports to represent.⁴ And yet Malaparte's narrative of the myriad social transformations following the Armistice actually *combines* concrete historical events (the Allies' arrival in Naples and in Rome, the eruption of Vesuvius on March 22, 1944, and the battle of

1 Malaparte, born Kurt Erich Suckert, joined the *Partito Nazionale Fascista* in September 1922 and resigned in January, 1931 just before moving to France. Upon his return to Italy in October 1931, he was expelled from the party (despite having already left it) and sentenced to political exile on Lipari for five years of which he served less than two (Martellini *Opere scelte* xcii-xciv). On his deathbed, he was granted membership in the Partito Comunista Italiano by Palmiro Togliatti himself (ibid. cii). American film director Walter Murch summarizes his varied career: "The contradictions and collisions of his life seem like a sped-up film of the first half of the twentieth century: German-Italian, Protestant-Catholic, soldier-pacifist, Fascist-Communist, journalist-novelist, editor-architect, film director-composer, diplomat-prisoner." For the only complete political biography, see Pardini.

2 According to Giuseppe Pardini, the originator of the "chameleon" epithet and the most influential of the anti-Malapartian critics was Antonio Gramsci, who described Malaparte's character as marked by "uno sfrenato arrivismo, una smisurata vanità e uno snobismo camaleontesco" (205). Indeed, the chameleon has symbolized—and justified—decades of dismissive readings of Malaparte's oeuvre (Pardini 16n.5; Guerri *Arcitaliano* 97; Perfetti 9). Other particularly negative readings can be found in *Storia della letteratura italiana*, where Emilio Cecchi calls Malaparte "un fabbricante di bolle di sapone terroristiche" and condemns *La pelle* for its degrading portrayal of the Italian people (688). Edoardo Cione dedicates an entire book to proving that *La pelle* not only "falsa la verità storica" (73) but it is not even an "opera d'arte" (21). Another commonly cited "accusation" that recurs in condemnations of Malaparte was noted antifascist Piero Gobetti's superlative claim that Malaparte was "la più forte penna del fascismo." The declaration, however, seems much less inflammatory when considering that it comes from the 1926 preface to Malaparte's *Italia barbara*, published by Gobetti himself. The decontextualized quotation is repeated by Walter Adamson (233), Patrizia Dogliani (24) and Sergio Luzzatto (78). Atillio Cannella (v) and William Hope (x) also refer to the remarks, but explain the relevant context. Giancarlo Vigorelli (xvii) and Pardini (63) describe Gobetti's relationship with Malaparte as one of sincere friendship.

3 Malaparte's staunchest proponents include Vigorelli, Pardini, Perfetti, Luigi Martellini, and Edda Suckert Ronchi, Malaparte's sister and editor of the volumes of his published papers.

4 If this sort of strict generic categorization was par for the course in the literary criticism of the early postwar period, it is striking that even today, when the blending of fact and fiction has become a genre of its own, such a binary still governs readings of *La pelle*. Take Luigi Baldacci's 1978 claim that *La pelle* is poetic not political: "Ma non c'è dunque una politicità, una valenza politica della *Pelle*? Io credo di no. O se c'è, è allo stato di mero pretesto esterno" (xi), and then consider Milan Kundera's 2008 reading which offers either a literary interpretation or a historical one, only to choose the former as "correct." John Gatt-Rutter, who contextualized *La pelle* historically (in terms of its representation of post-Liberation Naples) and literarily (in terms of other writings on Naples), is a notable exception to this trend.

Monte Cassino in May of the same year)⁵ with literary allusions from the epic to the surreal.⁶ For instance, the description of the typhus outbreak that ravaged the city of Naples explicitly signals its roots in the Western literary tradition through direct citation of Boccaccio's account of the plague in the *Decameron* (29).⁷ A number of more recent readers of *La pelle*, such as Milan Kundera and Gary Indiana, have argued against trying to cull *La pelle's* facts from its fictions and claim that the *blurring* of the two is precisely the book's point.⁸ Taking this last perspective as my point of departure, I address the question of how to read the knotty relationship between history and literature in *La pelle*, analyzing how this tangle works itself out and to what ends.

Despite the incontestable generic ambivalence of *La pelle*, Malaparte insisted that his authorial focus was aesthetics rather than history and asked critics to leave politics aside and instead judge the book solely on artistic merit (Parks 4).⁹ Proponents of *La pelle* (Kundera, Indiana, Luigi Baldacci, and others) have complied. Shifting the question away from the truth of the text's *letter*, they affirm the truth of its poetic spirit; that is, they maintain that *La pelle* represents "lies that show us the truth" (Indiana 179) and thus keep *truth* at the heart of their discourse. The novel's opponents, however, predictably reverse these claims, denouncing *La pelle's* falsity (as evinced in Italian newspapers following the 2008 publication of Kundera's essay).¹⁰

5 The effects of this oscillation between fact and fiction can be gleaned from early reviews, as critics on both sides of the Atlantic were divided in their approach to *La pelle*. The *Gazzetta del popolo* and the *Times Literary Supplement* both viewed it as fiction (and expressed amazement that it be read otherwise): "Stupisce che tanta brava gente le abbia prese tremendamente sul serio, consideri le pagine de *La pelle* come un contributo spregiudicato al quadro degli orrori della guerra" (Gigli 60). Indeed, perhaps due to Malaparte's reputation as a journalist, the bulk of the critics took *La pelle's* non-fiction status for granted and gauged its success or failure accordingly. Among those who found *La pelle* to be (accurate) non-fiction were the *British Review*, which declared, "*The Skin* is no story of fiction; on the contrary it is too true, too cruelly uncompromisingly true, too factually and degradingly correct to a detail" (296), and *Oggi*. Giovanni Spadolini in *Il messaggero* sustained that if certain details were *deformed* they were "veri nell'essenziale" (50). William Barrett's *New York Times* review was suspicious of *La pelle's* veracity as was Giulio Vallese. In *Italica*, Vallese recognized *La pelle's* goal to be the production of a "resoconto più genuino," only to declare it a failure: "vi risulta solo un insieme di quadri staccati e assurdi su una falsa vita di Napoli" (191).

6 The various rhetorical registers Baldacci identifies in his introduction to *La pelle* include the mythic-aesthetic, the D'Annunzian, the surrealist, the "counterfeit" serialized novel, and the "Neapoletan thread" (for instance, as practiced by Matilde Serao).

7 All citations of *La pelle* are from the 1978 Mondadori edition. On the allusion to the typhoid epidemic, see Gatt-Rutter (59-60).

8 Kundera stresses that *La pelle's* ambivalence offers its readers a choice of two very different readings: "le cose cambiano radicalmente a seconda che il lettore gli si avvicini come un reportage capace di ampliare le sue conoscenze storiche, o invece come un'opera letteraria in grado di arricchirlo con la sua bellezza e la sua conoscenza dell'uomo" (176). However, regardless of what a reader's expectations might be, in *La pelle*, "The line between fact and fiction, perception and imagination, is not always easy to draw" (Rubin 20). This confusion may in part be attributed to the fact that "Malaparte is Malaparte. He lives among real persons, witnesses real events. More complicating still, Malaparte sometimes was where he says he was, though quite often he wasn't, and his version of what happened makes florid use of his imagination" (Indiana 178). Gatt-Rutter makes a similar claim: "A large part of Malaparte's talent lies in his ability to make the invented seem real and the real invented" (61). To avoid confusion, I will refer to the character and narrator as Captain Malaparte, and the historical figure as Malaparte.

9 In an appendix to the 1959 Vallechi edition, editor Enrico Falqui published a letter Malaparte wrote to a critic in which he made a similar request (Baldacci vi).

10 In response to Kundera, Eugenio Scalfari—founder of *La Repubblica*—launched a dismissive condemnation of Malaparte as "quel giornalista-dandy-artistasciupafemmine-comunista-fascista-avventuriero" (44). In addition, the drop-head of Raffaella La Capria's article in *Corriere della Sera*, announces: "Le cose che racconta Malaparte sono inverosimili perché sembrano false, ed è il modo come sono raccontate a falsificarle" (37). A contemporary review in *La Repubblica* by Marc Fumaroli stays within the parameters of "truth" but weighs in positively, finding that over the years *Kaputt* and *La pelle* "guadagnano in verità."

At the heart of the debate to embrace or forget *La pelle* is an either/or proposition: did Malaparte deform reality for his own self-interest or transform it in the name of literature? Is he a false chameleon or a true artist? Those who maintain the former deploy the rhetoric of betrayal, while those who assert the latter counterbalance these accusations with the language of fidelity. The possible responses, then, are two; the possible readings lost in between, many. In order to avoid perpetuating this by now canonical true-false debate and offer a new interpretation, this article draws on contemporary translation scholarship which, after centuries “obsess[ed]” with the very same categories of “the faithful and the unfaithful...loyalty and betrayal” (Niranjana 50), has turned a critical eye on its foundations. Notably, poststructuralist translation scholars have worked, in Barbara Johnson’s formulation, to *take fidelity philosophically*.¹¹ In Naomi Seidman’s interpretation, this means understanding “translation as transformation,” thus “steer[ing] clear of the assumption that translation must proceed through a strict equivalence, a fidelity to original sources, if it is not to risk their absolute betrayal” (10). From this position, other questions may be posed about how translation constructs and obstructs relations of power.¹² Informed by this branch of poststructuralist and post-colonialist translation theory, instead of making claims about *La pelle*’s fidelity, I will examine how questions of fidelity are constructed in and around *La pelle*, and moreover, what—or who—is sacrificed in answering them.

Translation scholarship is relevant not only because of this shared theoretical preoccupation with fidelity. It also is thematically germane to *La pelle* whose protagonist, Captain Malaparte, is himself an interpreter. Confronting the “babele di lingue creatasi con l’occupazione,” his job is to “tradurre e di agevolare i rapporti, spesso tutt’altro che facili, tra gli stranieri e i napoletani” (Hochkofler 145).¹³ Nevertheless, *La pelle* calls into question the very possibility of interlingual translation: even as the Armistice transforms the Allies into *allies*, translation fails to bridge these peoples despite their common military cause. Linguistic boundaries are erected throughout the text, as certain phrases only appear in English: the Neapolitan women’s ubiquitous cry, “*Five dollars!*” is a reminder that they are for sale only because the Allies are buying; Captain Malaparte is insulted as, “*you bastard, you son of a bitch, you dirty Italian officer;*” not because of a lack of Italian equivalent, but because Italy changed sides and in so doing “betrayed” Germany, according to some.¹⁴ These untranslated phrases do not present specific *linguistic* difficulties, and, for this initial reason, it can be argued that *La pelle* does not represent a *failure* of translation. Rather, it is only a failure in its conventional

11 Here, I refer to the title of Johnson’s article in which she argues, “Derrida’s entire philosophic enterprise, indeed, can be seen as an analysis of the translation process at work in every text. Derrida follows the misfires, losses, and infelicities that prevent any given language from being *one*. Language, in fact, can only exist in the space of its own foreignness to itself” (145). From this poststructuralist perspective, language is always already translated and thus, the original/derivative hierarchy is shown to be a fiction, since the “original” does not precede the “translation” but only assumes that privileged position through the act of translation itself. See Derrida *Writing and Difference*. For more on Derrida’s influence on deconstructionist translation theory, see Gentzler.

12 See Tymoczko and Gentzler, and Bassnett and Trivedi for anthologies containing recent contributions to post-colonialist translation studies. See also Robinson, Spivak, and Cheyfitz.

13 Matilde Hochkofler’s comments refer to Liliana Cavani’s 1981 film *La pelle*, but the description of the protagonist’s duties holds.

14 Captain Malaparte reflects, “Ridevo pensando che tutte le lingue della terra, perfino il bantù e il cinese, perfino il tedesco, erano lingue di popoli vincitori, e che noi soltanto, noi italiani soltanto, in Via Chiaia a Napoli, e in tutte le vie di tutte le città d’Italia, parlavamo una lingua che non era un popolo vincitore” (48; I laughed as I thought that all of the languages of the earth, even Bantu and Chinese, even German, were the languages of victorious peoples, and that we alone, we Italians alone, in Via Chiaia, Naples, and in all the streets of all the cities of Italy, spoke a language which was not that of a victorious people” [48-9]). All citations from *The Skin* are from the 1997 Northwestern University Press edition, translated by David Moore.

sense, if we understand translation's goal to be forging a bridge between peoples and languages through linguistic equivalence. However, post-colonial translation scholars, in particular Tejaswini Niranjana, have shown the fallacy of an 'empirical science' of translation that underwrites the possibility of this equivalence. Instead of bridging a gap between peoples, Niranjana argues that "The 'empirical science' of translation comes into being through the repression of the asymmetrical relations of power that inform the relations between languages" (60). In its representation of translation at the fall of fascism, *La pelle* does not repress these asymmetries but instead, underscores them, demonstrating the fraught dynamics that characterize the relationship between Italian and English.

This reading of representations of translation in *La pelle*, then, takes such attempts at linguistic mediation to be part of a broader intercultural preoccupation. Thus, the scenes analyzed subsequently are understood more generally to be about efforts to mediate the gap between peoples—through words, gestures, or bodily contact—and the power relationships evinced and obscured therein. Instead of evaluating the fidelity of these translations, this reading is informed by Maria Tymoczko and Edwin Gentzler's claim that "The study of translation in charged political contexts illustrates the relationship between discourse and power, and shows that, as a site where discourses meet and compete, translation negotiates power relations" (xix).¹⁵

Central to *La pelle* is the vexed relationship between the Allies and the Italians (and specifically, the Neapolitans), at once that of liberator-liberated *and* of conqueror-conquered (4). *La pelle*, however, neither simply laments the victor-vanquished dynamic nor reverses it (for instance by suggesting how the 'ancient' laws of Naples work to confound the hyper-rational Allies; cf. "La peste"). Rather, it goes beyond the binary model with which it plays by means of its representation of two liminal, racially marked groups: French colonial soldiers—Moroccan *goumiers*—an elite fighting division whose original function was as "paramilitary police whose primary assignment was to maintain order among the fiercely independent tribes of their own region" (Bimberg 4), and American *soldati negri*, from "the 92nd Infantry (Buffalo) Division, the only so-called 'black' infantry division to see combat in Europe" (Hargrove vii).¹⁶ The *goumiers* and the *soldati negri* provide a focal point for examining the tension between literature and history in *La pelle* precisely because of the textual paradox they embody. On the one hand, they are historical groups who were defined at the time as a problematic presence in Italy, represented here (and elsewhere) as hypersexualized deviants.¹⁷ On the other, they appear in the narrative

15 My understanding of translation is also shaped by Bassnett and Trivedi who call it "part of an ongoing process of intercultural transfer." They continue: "Translation is not an innocent, transparent activity but is highly charged with significance at every stage; it rarely, if ever, involves a relationship of equality between texts, authors or systems" (2).

16 Hargrove comments on the group's controversial position from a historical perspective: "Created in a season when complete segregation was prevalent in America, it was beset continuously by controversy because of the same rigid policy of segregation in the Army" (vii).

17 The most famous literary representation of the *goumiers* as sexual aggressors is from Alberto Moravia's 1957 novel, *La Ciociara*, which Vittorio de Sica produced as a film in 1960. Although both book and film represent what has come to be known as *marocchinate*—a contentious term referring to the alleged victims of mass-rape perpetrated by Moroccan soldiers "on Italian women in Southern Lazio during World War II" (Jewell 18)—Ellen Nerenberg notes that "They are variously described in the film as 'Turks,' 'Moroccans,' thus making their exact national identity ambiguous" (84). This historic basis of the alleged mass-rape has been investigated by a few scholars including Edward Bimberg who writes that "[the *goumiers*]" were not popular with the Italians. This was the result of the off-duty conduct of some of them in the mountain villages and isolated valley farms they passed through along the way. In truth, certain elements among the Moroccans had engaged in a wild spree of rape and pillage across the Italian countryside when they were not busy killing Germans" (63). On the subject of rape, Robert Weisbord and Michael Honhart relate the following: "Fairly typical of the allegations is the following, which originated in the

precisely at moments when the text seeks to assert its *literary* status and to deny the literal significance of the figures it has thus employed. The title itself shouts that “skin” is a major thematic concern, yet the metaphoric focus on the moral question of “saving one’s skin” (cfr. “La peste”) has shifted critical attention away from the crucial narrative role played by black-skinned figures. By following these two racialized figures throughout the text and by analyzing the tensions produced when the one is read in terms of the other, I will offer a new interpretation of *La pelle* that argues for understanding the *goumiers* and the *soldati negri* concomitantly as metatextual symbols *and* historical characters.

Indeed, reading the *goumiers* and the *soldati negri* either in terms of their historical position or their symbolic function would offer interpretive possibilities. In regards to the former, Karl Britto notes that, from the perspective of the French colonial imaginary, the subaltern as soldier “occupies a particularly fraught position...with respect to the production of hierarchies of difference” (145), a position whose complexity is further intensified in the context of the liberation of Italy, where conventional racial hierarchies collide with the political reality.¹⁸ In *La pelle*, too, the *goumiers* and the *soldati negri* are in a subaltern role with respect both to the Allied army *and* to the Italians—one dinnertime anecdote suggests in fact that “negro” is not a racial but a relational term, indicative of the lowest social ranking (232). However, viewed according to the military situation, the *goumiers* and the *soldati negri* occupy the superior ‘conqueror’ position with respect to the Italians, who compete for the chance to shine their shoes or to engage in sex with them. In terms of the latter, their symbolic function is similarly paradoxical, appearing at moments when a gap is to be bridged between the Allies and the Italians through the verification of some form of truth. In Chapter Two, “La vergine di Napoli” (The Virgin of Naples) a girl’s virginity is tested, penetrated by a *soldato negro’s* finger; in Chapter Ten, “La bandiera” (The Flag), Malaparte’s literary authority—challenged by French officers—rests in the (severed) hand of a *goumier*, which he “proves” he has cannibalized by artfully arranging a series of animal bones on his plate. However, in order to make these claims of fidelity, the text encourages the marginalization of the very bodies it deploys by converting them into metaphors. As Captain Malaparte tells us, the penetration of the virgin is to be understood as a metaphor for victory wherein she represents Italy and the soldier, the Allies. Likewise, the false “cannibalization” is to be read as a metaphor for art in which the animal bones, artfully displayed to resemble a hand, represent Malaparte’s texts, true to the spirit once stripped of their fleshy fictions.¹⁹ By reading these two episodes as examples of how *La pelle*

town of Ceccano, where 150 civilians gathered to ask the Americans to protect them. They claimed that Moroccan troops, units unknown, violated approximately seventy-five women ranging in age from seventeen to seventy-five.... Nine of the women were well advanced in pregnancy” (406). Moshe Gershovich singles out Bimberg for criticism, when he argues that, “Authentic and reliable as some of these anecdotes may be, they smack of an anachronistic and distinctly paternalistic colonial attitude that ought to be treated with a degree of skepticism” (142).
18 Keala Jewell explains this complex position with regards to Tommaso Landolfi’s *Racconto d’autunno*, “These colonial soldiers are, of course, Allies, yet in the narrative they also despise a powerful part of their own group: their European colonizers. The Allied nations had not only colonized North Africa but now their generals order the North Africans to undertake the most dangerous missions: to crack fortified German defenses in remote mountain areas. As part of his critique of the Allied coalition, the author highlights the point that not all the nations and peoples that comprised the Allied formation had joined it freely” (16).

19 Here, my characterization of these episodes as “translations” is bolstered by the fact that penetration and cannibalism are two common metaphors for translation, metaphors which represent the idea of making the ‘other’ culture comprehensible in a rather intrusive manner. Indeed, each implies a literal, corporeal fusion via the reproductive and digestive systems respectively. For penetration as a metaphor for translation, see Seidman. For cannibalism, see Bassnett and Trivedi. Later, I will discuss how these metaphors represent gender and racial hierarchies and suggest how these dynamics may be threatened by the very notion of corporeal fusion on which the

both asks and answers questions of referential fidelity, I argue that it insists upon, obfuscates and, ultimately, *critiques* hierarchies of racial and sexual difference.

“*La vergine di Napoli*” and “*La bandiera*”

With its provocative content, *La pelle* was subject to wholesale censorship after publication, both by the Church and by the city of Naples. Even prior to publication, however, Malaparte was forced to defend specific sections of the novel from colleagues and editors. One particularly problematic chapter was “*La vergine di Napoli*,” in which Captain Malaparte and his friend Jimmy join a group of Allied soldiers who line up and pay a dollar to watch a *soldato negro* verify a girl’s virginity with his finger. He fought successfully to preserve the scene in Italian and in French,²⁰ but eventually acquiesced to the elimination of some parts from the British and American versions.²¹ Here and subsequently, when quoting the English translation, the underlined portions indicate the censored lines, and therefore those translations are mine.

Here is the central moment of the scene, the verification of virginity:

‘She is a virgin. You can touch. Put your finger inside. Only one finger. Try a bit. Don’t be afraid. She doesn’t bite. She is a virgin. A real virgin,’ disse l’uomo spingendo la testa dentro la stanza per lo spacco della tenda.

Un negro allungò la mano, e provò col dito. Qualcuno rise, e pareva si lamentasse. La ‘vergine’ non si mosse, ma fissò il negro con uno sguardo pieno di paura e di odio. Mi guardai intorno: tutti erano pallidi, tutti erano pallidi di paura e di odio.

‘Yes, she is like a child’ disse il negro con voce rauca, facendo roteare lentamente il dito.’

‘Get out the finger,’ disse la testa dell’uomo infilata nello spacco della tenda rossa.

‘Really, she is a virgin’ disse il negro ritraendo il dito (43-44).

metaphor depends.

20 While working on the French translation, *La peau*, René Novella presented “*La vergine di Napoli*,” to a group of his colleagues, at Malaparte’s request. Novella describes its reception: “Erano stati quasi unanimi nel dichiarare che Malaparte pronunciava contro il proprio Paese una requisitoria di un’esagerata violenza e di un’inaccettabile cinismo. Certe scene venivano considerate addirittura come meramente sadiche e ognuno si chiedeva quale sarebbe stata l’accoglienza del pubblico a queste descrizioni, il cui realismo oltrepassava i limiti della decenza” (Malaparte and Novella 50). In his negotiations with Italian publishers who were squeamish about some of the book’s cruder passages, Malaparte bragged that the book would appear “whole” not just in France, but also in England and America, which proved to be untrue (Martellini “*La pelle*” 1553).

21 In accepting Houghton Mifflin’s cuts, Malaparte expressed, in vain, his hopes that the same cuts would be “suitable also for the British public” (as cited in Suckert Ronchi *Malaparte: Vol. X* 347). Although both English language versions of *The Skin* share a single translator, the translations differ on a number of counts, including phrasing, proverbs, etc., a detailed study which will be completed elsewhere. The most obvious difference between them is that the British version is missing an entire chapter, “*The Sons of Adam*” (“*I figli d’Adamo*”), which depicts a communist, homosexual, cross-dressing birthing-ritual-turned-orgy. Upon receiving the published text, Malaparte’s complaints are folded into a thank you note to British publisher Alvin Redman: “I have just received the package with the six copies of *The Skin*, and I wish to thank you for your kindness. Apart from some observations about the text of the translation, I am quite satisfied with the simplicity and elegance of the edition” (ibid. 202).

‘She is a virgin. You can touch. Put your finger inside. Only one finger. Try a bit. Don’t be afraid. She doesn’t bite. She is a virgin. A real virgin,’ said the man, thrusting his head into the room through the gap in the curtain.

A Negro stretched out his hand and tried with his finger. Someone laughed and (it seemed a lament). The ‘virgin’ did not move, but stared at the Negro with eyes full of fear and loathing. I looked about me. Everyone was pale – pale with fear and loathing.

‘Yes, she is like a child,’ said the Negro with a raucous voice, slowly making his finger rotate.

‘Get out the finger,’ said the head of the man stuck through the tear in the red tent.

‘Really, she is a virgin’ said the Negro, retracting his finger [44]).

At first glance, these two passages seem to support the age-old platitude that something is lost in translation. Here, however, what is ostensibly *lost*—the act of penetration—already holds a rather tenuous place in the scholarship of the ‘original.’ Giampaolo Martelli describes the scene as “l’esibizione della ‘vergine’ in un misero tugurio davanti a un pubblico di militari i quali per *one dollar*; cioè per cento lire, possono prendere visione della ‘rarietà’” (154). Gatt-Rutter’s characterization of the girl also remains squarely in the realm of the visual: “the virgin whose father displays her hymen for inspection” (61). Gianni Grana refers to “la vista rarissima di una vergine” (108). This emphasis on the visual corresponds to the question Jimmy asks Captain Malaparte at the start of the chapter, “‘Non hai mai visto una vergine?’” (37; ‘Have you ever seen a virgin?’ [37]). However, as the scene unfolds, sight is not the requisite sense for establishing virginity, but rather touch. Thus, in their word choice (*exhibition, look, sight, display*), these critics themselves perform an act of censorship similar to the one enacted in the American version, truncated at the moment the soldier sticks out his hand. Despite the Italian text’s insistence that “il negro provò col dito” [the Negro tried with his finger], the critics shift from black finger to disembodied gaze, and in so doing, skirt the vexed question of how virginity—not a scientific reality but a cultural construct—is actually to be verified.²² Moreover, these critics ‘whitewash’ the racial implications of the episode, as the *soldato negro* becomes soldiers in general, for Martelli and an American soldier for William Hope (92). In Grana’s and Gatt-Rutter’s accounts, he vanishes altogether, as the hymen is displayed to no one in particular.

This censoring, performed by critics and translator alike, is not simply imposed upon the text; instead, it is actually encouraged by *La pelle*. From the first pages, liberation, more than a conquest of Italy’s territory, is represented as a penetration of its secrets, hitherto inviolable (15). In “La vergine di Napoli,” however, the Allies are not attempting to discover the abstract secrets of Naples. but the most intimate secret of a Neapolitan girl through the literal act of penetration. And as if the conquest-as-penetration metaphor were not made sufficiently clear in the virgin episode itself, it is then analyzed for two full pages by Jimmy and Captain Malaparte after they leave the room. Captain Malaparte spells out the connection between the metaphorical, military penetration of Italy and the literal penetration of the ‘virgin’: “‘quando tornerai in America...ti piacerà raccontare che il vostro dito di vincitori è passato sotto l’arco di trionfo delle gambe delle povere ragazze italiane’” (45; ‘when you go back to America...it will give you pleasure to

²² Working in a Derridian frame, Seidman questions, “Within what regime does virginity function and by whose testimony is it established? Does it signify a presence—an intact hymen—or the absence of a husband or lover?” (117). See Derrida *Dissemination*.

recount that your victor's finger passed through the Arc de Triomphe of the poor Italian girls').²³ However, although the figure of penetration-conquest is ostensibly meant to stabilize the relationship between Allies and Italians by producing a narrative of victory to be brought back home, this attempt at verifying both virginity and victory has quite the opposite result. Jimmy's response is neither triumphant nor loquacious. Instead, he begs Captain Malaparte to stop speaking (45). The soldiers, too, after witnessing the penetration, are stunned and leave "impacciati e vergognosi" (44; overcome with shame and embarrassment [44]).

This is the 'virgin's' paradox: she exists in order to confirm the men's role as conquerors, to offer them knowledge, narrative, and power. Yet she ultimately emasculates and silences; her displayed legs, which the text compares to lobster claws, cut off their power of speech. The allegorical reading of this scene, articulated by Captain Malaparte, suggests the ambivalence of victory: possession of the desirable virgin turns her into a whore. However, the literal "truth" of virginity is only an incidental concern; the girl's narrative function is to destabilize the notion of American superiority. This is exactly the same strategy Captain Malaparte employs with the blonde pubic wigs—introduced in the following chapter—meant to facilitate couplings between the *soldati negri* and the Neapolitan women, because, as a salesman explains to Jimmy, "Ai vostri negri piacciono le bionde, e le napoletane sono brune" (70; 'Your Negroes like blondes, and Neapolitan girls are dark' [72]). At the conclusion of the episode, the wigs are converted into symbols for war: "Tutta l'Europa non è che un ciuffo di peli biondi. Una corona di peli biondi per la vostra fronte di vincitore" (78; 'The whole of Europe is nothing but a tuft of fair hairs. A crown of fair hairs for your victorious brows' [80]). However, this insistence on "discard[ing] the literal in order to concentrate on the figural" (Spackman 165), should be read with suspicion, leading us to ask why the virgin-whore and *soldato negro* are made the privileged site of truth, only to be censored.

In the economy of *La pelle*, the *soldato negro's* role in the penetration is not incidental. Instead, it allows for racial difference to re-establish the collapsed us/them, victor/vanquished distinction, replete with moral implications insofar as the *black* Allies are the ones guilty of debasing the *white* Italians (a motif continued in "La bandiera").²⁴ However, if racial difference allows for the reassuring reestablishment of boundaries effaced with fascism's collapse, the superimposition of racial *and* sexual difference is more problematic. The "virgin" and the "wigs" represent not simply an interracial encounter, but a sexual one as well that furthermore, takes place with frequency on the streets of Naples. Converted into metaphor, however, this contact is denied: the wigs, the literal *covering figure* of the whore's genitals, are thus made to *stand in* for military conquest. Here, racialized soldiers again represent generic conquerors, as per Captain Malaparte's assertion, "Per i popoli vinti...tutti i vincitori sono uomini di colore" (206; 'To conquered peoples...all conquerors are men of color' [215]). Thus, the virgin and the *soldato negro* are called upon to produce an allegory for conquest, figured not as a struggle between Allies and Italians but instead, between black and white, male and female.

Much is at stake in formulating and reiterating this allegory: were these interracial sexual encounters to remain literalized, the result would be the contamination of the one boundary the text consistently defends—the boundary between races. As stated above, *La pelle* represents transformations of every sort, between classes, genders, even species. Among the fantastic metamorphoses described are a man who turns into a woman giving birth ("I figli di Adamo"

23 The Moore version reads, "it will give you pleasure to tell about that poor Italian girl" (46).

24 Millicent Marcus discusses the racial dimension of the rape in the film *La ciociara* in similar terms: "If the rapists had to be Allies, at least make them exotic and 'other,' nonwhite and therefore capable of committing any bestiality that the racist mind thinks them capable of" (284 n. 30).

[The Sons of Adam]) and a crucified dog who turns into a Christ-figure (“Il vento nero” [The Black Wind]). And yet the one category of identity that cannot be changed is the color of one’s *skin*—precisely the feature singled out by the book’s title. The possibility that a black soldier can turn white is in fact raised, but only as a ridiculous dinnertime anecdote:

‘I soldati negri’ disse Consuelo ‘per convincere le ragazze napoletane a fidanzarsi con loro, raccontano di esser bianchi come gli altri, ma che in America, prima di imbarcarsi per l’Europa, sono stati tinti di nero, per poter combattere di notte senza esser visti dal nemico. Quando, dopo la guerra, torneranno in America, si raschieranno via dalla pelle la tintura nera, e torneranno bianchi.’ ‘Ah, que c’est amusant!’ esclamò Jack, ridendo così di cuore, che gli occhi gli s’empiron di lacrime (223).²⁵

(‘In order to persuade the Neapolitan girls to become engaged to them,’ said Consuelo, ‘the Negro soldiers say that they are white like the others, but that in America, before sailing for Europe, they were dyed black so that they could fight at nighttime without being seen by the enemy. When they go back to America after the war they will scrape the black dye from their skins and become white again.’ ‘Ah, que c’est amusant!’ exclaimed Jack, laughing so heartily that his eyes filled with tears’ [232]).

While race is not subject to radical transformation, it is, however, ‘contaminable,’ as Brackette F. Williams underscores. In a brief, insightful reading of Malaparte’s “virgin” episode, she asserts the importance of the womb as a repository for cultural ideals and the attendant preoccupation with its defense. Calling the scene “an enactment of ritual humiliation,” Williams uses it, along with the episode of the “wigs,” to argue that “the metaphysics that informed nationalism may have, as Malaparte intoned, created a history of tradition to be stored in male genitals and retrieved through wombs, but it still had to confront the problematic of how to keep the womb symbolically static in a world of moving, real women” (22). In the case of the virgin and the wigs, this metaphoric conversion sufficiently neutralizes the threat of miscegenation, thus maintaining the racial boundaries the text requires. Is the virgin a virgin?—in response, a black finger is deployed, only to be converted by Captain Malaparte into an allegory for American victory—the black “dye,” so to speak, is scraped away from the *Skin*, as both characters and critics ignore the racial dimension of the episode. However, when a similar conversion is repeated in “La bandiera” the stakes are raised, as Captain Malaparte seeks to verify the “truth” of his previous wartime novel, *Kaputt*, and, once again, black fingers—now the *goumier*’s—provide the answer.

In one sense, the *goumier* and the *soldato negro* can be read as polar opposites: the *goumiers* are shadowy figures, afforded only slivers of narrative attention; the *soldati negri* are a spectacle, placed at the center of a number of key episodes.²⁶ As a counterpart to the garrulous,

25 Jack’s blend of laughter and tears in response to this racially charged anecdote echoes the ambivalent laughter-lamentation of a soldier who is observing the virgin’s penetration (see page 6 above). My thanks to Albert Ascoli for noting this connection.

26 In “La peste” [The Plague] they are unwittingly “bought” and “sold” by the Neapolitans as the narrative reverses the victor-vanquished dynamic and makes the Allies (and particularly the *soldati negri*) the Neapolitans’ clueless,

naïve, woman-hungry *soldati negri*, the *goumiers* are mysterious pederasts, “avvolti nei loro scuri mantelli” (9; enveloped in their dark robes [8]; see also 117-8). Furthermore, while *La pelle* delights in extensive descriptions of the body of the *soldati negri*, the *goumiers* are a series of discrete, menacing body parts—face, eyes, and significantly, fingers. In ‘purchasing’ the Neapolitan boys, it is their fingers that judge the merchandise and contract the price: “Li tastavano, alzavano loro le vesti, ficcavano le loro lunghe, esperte dita nere fra i bottoni dei calzoncini, contrattavano il prezzo mostrando il dito della mano” (112; They touched them, they lifted up their clothes, they stuck their long, expert fingers between the buttons of their shorts, they contracted the price by showing the fingers of their hand).

Despite these apparent contrasts, the *soldato negro* and the *goumier* occupy analogous positions in terms of both their historical positioning and their role in the narrative dynamics. Having examined this rather explicit intercultural, interracial “penetration”—one which we are told not to take literally—I now turn to the *goumiers* and offer a reading that considers the textual tension between literature and history. Having temporarily left the American troops of the Fifth Division with whom they are stationed, Captain Malaparte and his friend, American soldier Jack Hamilton, meet up with the Moroccan division led by French General Guillaume and Lieutenant Pierre Lyautey on the outskirts of Rome. Whereas the *goumiers* have previously been depicted as pederasts, here they pose a threat to the local women: “i *goumiers* miravano con occhi avidi la folla femminile che passeggiava tra gli alberi nel parco della villa papale” (261; the *goumiers* gazed with avid eyes at the crowd of women promenading among the trees in the park of the papal villa [276]). At lunch, General Guillaume tells his guests that he has received an order from the Vatican to keep the Moroccan Division out of the Eternal City, and, by way of an off-color joke, he intimates that the reason for their exclusion from Rome is not their *religion*, per se, but their sexual voracity (265-6).²⁷ While dining, an explosion is heard and the news reaches the table that the third Moroccan soldier of the day has set off a mine, but whereas the earlier explosions resulted in death, this ‘lucky’ soldier has only lost his hand. The General adds,

cheerful victims: “Cinquanta dollari erano il prezzo massimo che si pagava per comprarsi un negro a giornata, cioè per poche ore: il tempo necessario per ubriacarlo, spogliarlo di tutto quel che aveva addosso, dal berretto alle scarpe, e poi, scesa la notte, abbandonarlo nudo sul lastrico di un vicolo. Il negro non sospettava di nulla. Non si avvedeva di esser comprato e rivenduto ogni quarto d’ora, e camminava innocente e felice tutto fiero delle sue scarpe d’oro lucente, della sua uniforme attillata, dei suoi guanti gialli, dei suoi anelli e dei suoi denti d’oro, dei suoi grandi occhi bianchi, viscosi e trasparenti come occhi di polpo” (17; Fifty dollars was the maximum price that was paid to hire of a Negro for a day, that is for a few hours—the time to make him drunk, to strip him of everything he had on, from his cap to his shoes, and then, after nightfall, to abandon him naked on the pavement of an alley. The Negro suspects nothing. He is not conscious of being bought and resold every quarter of an hour, and he walks about innocently and happily, very proud of his shoes, which glitter as though made of gold, his smart uniform, his yellow gloves, his rings and gold teeth, his great white eyes, viscous and translucent like the eyes of an octopus [17]). In addition to the “negro” protagonist in “La vergine di Napoli,” another one appears in “Il vento nero” [The Black Wind]: “un negro scendeva lentamente il declivio. Era un giovane alto, magro, dalle gambe lunghissime. Aveva un sacco sulle spalle, e camminava un po’ curvo, sfiorando appena il terreno con le soles di gomma: spalancava la rossa bocca gridando: ‘ohoh! Ohoh!’ e dondolava il capo come se un immenso, allegro dolore gli bruciasse il cuore” (169; we saw a Negro. He was slowly making his way down the slope, over the reddish stones and through the blue, mist-shrouded junipers. He was a tall, thin young man, with very long legs. He carried a sack on his shoulders, and he stooped slightly as he walked, so that the rubber soles of his shoes barely touched the ground. ‘Oho! Oho! Oho!’ he shouted, opening his red mouth wide [176]).

²⁷ According to Weisbord and Honhart, this order by the Vatican—which has since been recovered in the archives—was likely motivated by this commonly held perception, of “the Moroccan soldiers who formed part of the French expeditionary force attached to General Mark Clark’s 5th Army...[as] sexually out of control” based on a preponderance of “complaints of murder, looting, armed robbery, rape, and homosexual sodomy” (405-6).

“Non sono ancora riusciti a ritrovar la mano . . . chi sa dove sarà andata a finire!” (267-8; ‘They haven’t yet succeeded in finding the hand . . . Who knows what will become of it?’ [283]).

After glibly dismissing these frequent occurrences with another joke about the Moroccans’ barbarity, the subject switches to their current, modest meal—and how Captain Malaparte might transform it in his next book. Guillaume speculates that, based on what he has read in *Kaputt*, “nel suo prossimo libro, la nostra povera mensa da campo diventerà un banchetto regale, e io diventerò una specie di Sultano del Marocco” (‘In his next book you will find our humble camp meal transformed into a regal banquet, while I shall become a kind of Sultan of Morocco’). Lyautey then inquires, “cosa c’è di vero in tutto quel che raccontate in *Kaputt*” (‘How much truth is there in all that you related in *Kaputt*?’) opening what has become a “famous” exchange (Covino 217): “Non ha alcuna importanza se quel che Malaparte racconta è vero o falso. La questione da porsi è un’altra: se quel ch’egli fa è arte o no” (268; ‘It does not matter at all if what Malaparte recounts is true or false. The question to pose is another: if what he does is art or not’ [284]). The French officers, however, refuse to pose the proper question and are punished with a rather gruesome sleight of hand as Captain Malaparte recounts an event that has taken place before their very eyes. Describing the meal course by course takes two full pages before arriving at the climax of his story, the couscous, which contains a rather unusual piece of meat:

‘Era una mano d’uomo. Certamente era la mano del disgraziato *goumier*, che lo scoppio della mina aveva recisa di netto, e scagliata dentro la grande marmitta di rame, dove cuoceva il nostro *kouskous*. Che potevo fare? Sono stato educato nel Collegio Cicognini, che è il migliore collegio d’Italia, e fin da ragazzo mi hanno insegnato che non bisogna mai, per nessuna ragione, turbare una gioia comune, un ballo, una festa, un pranzo. Mi son fatto forza per non impallidire, per non gridare, e mi son messo tranquillamente a mangiar la mano. La carne era un po’ dura, non aveva avuto il tempo di cuocere’

...

‘Se non mi credete... guardate qui, nel mio piatto. Vedete questi ossicini? Sono le falangi. E queste, allineate sull’orlo del piatto, sono le cinque unghie’ (271-272).

(‘It was a man’s hand. It was undoubtedly the hand of the unfortunate *goumier*, which the exploding mine had neatly severed and hurled into the great copper pot in which our *kouskous* was cooking. What could I do? I was educated at the Collegio Cicognini, which is the best college in Italy, and from boyhood I have been taught that one should never, for any reason, interrupt the general gaiety, whether at a dance, or a party or a dinner. I forced myself not to turn pale or cry out, and calmly began eating the hand. The flesh was a little tough. It had not had time to cook.

...

‘If you don’t believe me... look here, on my plate. Do you see all these little bones? They are the knuckles. And these, ranged along the edge of the plate, are the five nails’ [287-8]).

In response to Captain Malaparte's cannibalistic declaration, Lyautey is left "verde in viso, premendosi una mano sulla bocca dello stomaco" (272; green in the face, and he pressed his hand to his stomach [288]) as Guillaume gulps down a glass of wine. However, if his declaration surprises Guillaume and Lyautey, it merely confirms the suspicions about barbaric Italians expressed in "Il pranzo del Generale Cork," when Mrs. Flat refuses to eat a 'siren fish' who bears an uncanny resemblance to a boiled girl. As she does so, she switches from Italian into English, adding a linguistic dimension to the moral distance she seeks to create between them: "lasciamo a questo [let's leave this] *barbarous Italian people to eat children at dinner. I refuse. I am an honest American woman. I don't eat Italian children!*" (214). In "La bandiera," Captain Malaparte attributes his act of cannibalism not to barbarism but to his extreme cultivation. Regardless, if this move at once confirms suspicions about the Italians (insofar as they are cannibals) *and* unsettles them (insofar as they are cultivated cannibals), to those 'in-the-know' (the reader and Jack), Captain Malaparte has not so much *eaten* a hand but gained the upper one. After they leave the group, the two discuss the event, congratulating Malaparte on the impact of his artistry: "Hai visto che faccia hanno fatto? Credevo che stessero per vomitare!" (273; Did you see their expressions? I thought they were all going to be sick! [289]). This exchange represents a marked departure from previous scenes where the line between truth and fiction is often elusive. For instance, in "Il pranzo del Generale Cork," it is never explicitly stated that the uncannily human-looking siren fish is not, in fact, a little girl. However, that line is clearly drawn when Captain Malaparte brags at having made sheep bones appear human: "Hai visto con che arte avevo disposto nel piatto quegli ossicini di montone? Parevan proprio le ossa di una mano!" (273; Did you see how skillfully I arranged those little ram's bones on my plate? They looked just like the bones of a hand! [289]). Captain Malaparte thus shows that the French are utterly lacking in their ability to distinguish, confusing sheep bones with human bones, a moment of artistry with an act of cannibalism. Read in isolation, the episode iterates Captain Malaparte's literary mastery. However, this "lesson" has unexpected consequences in the overall economy of the text: in ridiculing the French officers for translating animal bones into a *goumier's* hand, "La bandiera" illustrates that barbarism is not a question of objective truth but of perception and representation. Indeed, it shows how the *goumiers* who never utter a single word, are translated—perhaps more often than not *mistranslated*—by their colonizers and commanding officers through the representation of their hands, which the text itself signals as a literary construction. Here "La bandiera" allows for a critical rereading of the other dismembered *dita nere*—not only the *goumiers'* long, expert fingers, but the *soldato negro's* as well.

This potential self-critique is, however, dampened, as critics, taking their cue from Jack, read the episode as an artistic manifesto, as Baldacci calls it, "un caso molto singolare – e anche molto rivelatore – nel quadro dell'esperienza retorica di Malaparte" (vii). Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti provides an excellent example, parsing the episode into several levels—first, a literal 'joke' at the expense of the skeptical French officers, and then, a metaphor of the horrors of war. Despite the fact that the bones on Captain Malaparte's plate refer to a fictional hand, Bàrberi Squarotti maintains, "Il fatto che Malaparte abbia o no, per ironica cortesia di uomo ben educato, taciuto e abbia mangiato la mano capitatagli nel piatto come se fosse un pezzo di montone non inficia affatto l'orrore della guerra, l'atrocità della mutilazione, il dolore del ferito." In his reading of the episode's literal significance, the colonial implications are of central importance. Indeed, Bàrberi Squarotti notes that the episode is all the more horrific when considering the context—the "pleasant" conversations of the officers, who are dismissing the "backwards" way of life of North Africans. However, he also argues for a deeper level of meaning whereby the

episode can be interpreted metatextually as “la spiegazione della natura profonda della letteratura, di dover essere verosimile, non necessariamente vera” (287). Here, the *goumier* is surpassed in favor of abstract concerns about the nature of literature, specifically a confirmation of Malaparte’s artistry. As Baldacci puts it: “Il poeta, insomma, ci persuade che è vero il suo linguaggio, non la favola che di quel linguaggio è il pretesto” (v).

However, one critic’s treasure is another’s false gold. After summarizing the episode, La Capria concludes, “Malaparte vuol dire che ciò che conta è disporre con arte le parti di un racconto in modo da dare l’impressione della verità. È questo quello che conta, secondo lui. Secondo me qui l’arte non è quella vera, ma è l’arte del prestigiatore” (37). The author’s metaphorical hand—with its falsifying *prestidigitations*—recurs in condemnations: Cecchi criticizes his “mani profane” (689), and Tahar Ben Jelloun, as he laments Malaparte’s false representation of the *goumiers* as sexual maniacs, notes that “ha lavorato da scrittore, ha forzato la mano, come si fa in letteratura.” In light of all this insistence on the hand of the artist to the exclusion of the (fictional) hand on the plate, I note that while some critics claim *La pelle* is true (art) and some claim it is false, *on both sides* of this fidelity debate as it plays out in “La bandiera,” the casualty is the fiction itself and what—or who—is underwriting its construction. In his haste to refute Kundera’s contention that *La pelle* is one of the great novels of the last century, La Capria’s summary of the episode leaves out any number of details, including the hand’s ostensible ‘origin.’ Although Bàrberi Squarotti addresses the *goumier* in his discussion of the episode’s historical significance, he erases him when shifting to questions of the ‘true’ nature of literature, much in the same way that Captain Malaparte insists the ‘virgin’s’ open legs and the *soldato negro’s* finger represent conquest in general.

Here, then, the stakes of my reading of these “translations”—these attempts at verifying ‘truth’ across cultural and linguistic borders—become clear. Rather than read them for the truth they produce about war or literature, I show how this truth-seeking operation censors the very actors on which it depends. Stripped of their literal skin, the *goumier’s* fingers are used to ‘bridge the gap’ between Captain Malaparte and the French officers (as proof of his narrative authority); stripped of their historical skin, they serve as a point of contact between the critics and the text (as a measure of *La pelle’s* literary value), for instance when Marino Biondi converts Captain Malaparte’s plate into Curzio Malaparte’s canvas: “Si tratta in quel caso di uno scherzo...di un’invenzione, ma non importa. Lo effetto è lo stesso della verità. Anche la guerra è un piatto forte, e raro. E Malaparte lo condisce con tutte le spezie della sua arte” (75).²⁸ However, if this translation were read metatextually, not with an eye towards *verifying* truth but rather towards showing how that truth is *constructed*, it evinces a basic precept of postcolonial discourse. Here the construction, phalange by phalange, of the (non-Western) other underwrites the construction of the self and—as Captain Malaparte congratulates himself for his *unfaithful* but *beautiful* “translation”—*signals its own fictionality*.²⁹

As I argued in the case of “La vergine di Napoli,” converting the *goumier* into an ahistorical metaphor for artistic “truth” functions as a censorship mechanism, obscuring the text’s reliance on racial difference in order to represent Italy’s conquest/liberation and its collapse of political, moral and social boundaries. Along the same lines, I argue that the conversion of the *goumier* into a symbol of “the explanation of literature’s profound nature” is not innocent. Indeed, this conversion neutralizes specific anxieties (both textual and critical), in terms of the

28 Baldacci makes a similar claim about the *kouskous*: “quell’episodio è vero: l’eccezionalità, e quindi la verità, non stanno nell’episodio ma nel modo di dirlo” (vii).

29 This is in keeping with the centuries-old trope, known as *le belles infidèles*, which holds that translations can be either beautiful or faithful, like women, but not both. See Chamberlain.

threat he poses to the established hierarchies, by being at once colonized (with respect to the French) and colonizer (with respect to the Italians). However, despite the episode's apparent metatextuality, there is a certain textual ambivalence insofar as it is one of few chapters that depict historical characters with their actual names.³⁰ To wit, *La pelle*'s representations of Guillaume's impressions of the *goumiers* are in line with the opinions of the historical figure Augustin-Léon Guillaume, who "from the early 1920s on...had become particularly associated with the Goums" (Bimberg 19).³¹ Pierre Lyautey, too, is a historical character, "the Goumier liaison officer whose duties took him all over the front lines among the Goumiers and the 3rd DIA (Division d'Infanterie Algérienne)" (Bimberg 123)—who also wrote about his experience, alluding in his diary to a nocturnal "crisis" brought on by the proximity of "overly" beautiful Italian women, curious to see the "color" of the *goumiers*.³²

Taking a cue from the text, then, I advocate reading the episode both metatextually and in its broader historical context—a context provided, if obliquely, by *La pelle* itself. Indeed, the importance of a twofold reading of this scene becomes more apparent in light of the double significance of the *goumier's dita nere*: despite the emphasis on the *goumier's dita nere* as a sign of Captain Malaparte's narrative authority, they, like the finger of the *soldato negro*, also point to a sexual encounter, one much larger in scale with a concrete referent in the Italian postwar imaginary: the alleged assault committed by the *goumiers* "on Italian women in Southern Lazio during World War II" (Jewell 16). Recently, accounts of this mass rape, including *La pelle*'s, have been met with questioning: Ben Jelloun singles out *La pelle* as an example of this "specialità italiana," the tendency to stereotype Moroccans as rapists. In the passages cited above where they "squeeze" the human "merchandise" in negotiating a price, they certainly are portrayed as hypersexualized, and losing a hand in a mine could be seen as the *contrappasso* for having used their hands to such depraved ends. However, if we read the course-by-course description of the meal that precedes Captain Malaparte's famous *prestidigitation*, a more ambivalent account of the *goumiers'* position emerges. Indeed, more than a menu, the passage offers a complex portrayal of the relationships between the *goumiers*, their French commanders, their German enemies, and the Italian civilians.

With the first course, prosciutto from the Fondi mountains, Captain Malaparte recalls the battle sites the French officers have just traveled across in Lazio, specifically in the area known as Ciociaria: "Avete combattuto su quelle montagne, che sorgono alle spalle di Gaeta, fra Cassino e i Castelli Romani, e saprete perciò che sulle montagne di Fondi si allevano i migliori maiali di tutto il Lazio e di tutta la Ciociara" (269-270; 'You have fought over those mountains—they rise behind Gaeta, between Cassino and the Castelli Romani – and you will therefore know that in the Fondi mountains they breed the finest pigs in the whole of Latium and the whole of Ciociaria' [285]). The idyllic mountains give way, in the second course, to a river, the Liri, and as the suggestion of battle becomes a reality, its green banks are dotted with the corpses of the *goumiers*: "Sulle sue verdi rive molti dei vostri *goumiers* sono caduti col viso nell'erba, sotto il fuoco delle mitragliatrici tedesche" (270; 'On its green banks many of your *goumiers*

³⁰ Kundera has noted that whereas *Kaputt* is replete with historical characters, they are absent from *La pelle* (172)—a generally correct statement that does not, however, apply to "La bandiera."

³¹ According to John Ellis, "At one time Guillaume himself reported to [General Alphonse] Juin: 'The goums... have retained intact the qualities and the weaknesses of their race; indisputable valour in war, but unreliability under stress; an offensive spirit exalted by success, but soon dissipated by failure; an innate courage in infantry combat, but a tendency to become unsettled in the face of modern weapons; a peasant hardiness and an innate sense of ground, but an aversion to hard work and discipline'" (115).

³² Lyautey writes, "Quelques cris dans la nuit. Des Italiennes trop belles et trop peu farouches ont voulu voir de près la couleur de nos soldats" (85).

have fallen before the fire of the German machine guns—fallen face downward in the grass’ [285]). In this account, the battle is being fought between *your goumiers* and the Germans—with the French present not as engaged soldiers, but as a possessive pronoun.

With the third course—the (in)famous couscous—the mountains of Itri in Ciociaria return:

‘è un’erba con la quale le donne incinte fanno una bevanda propiziatrice dei parti, un’erba ciprigna, di cui i montoni di Itri sono ghiottissimi. È appunto quell’erba, la *kallimeria*, che dà ai montoni di Itri quell’adipe ricco di donna incinta, e quella pigrizia muliebre, quella voce grassa, quello sguardo stanco, e languido, che hanno le donne incinte e gli ermafroditi’ (271).

(‘From it pregnant women make a potion that facilitates childbirth. It is a pungent herb, and the rams of Itri devour it greedily. It is, indeed, to this herb, *kallimeria*, that the rams of Itri owe their rich fat, so suggestive of pregnant women; because of it they have the weary, languid eyes of pregnant women and hermaphrodites’ [286]).

More than a lesson on local flora, this insistence on pregnant women in Ciociaria resonates with the earlier suggestion that the Vatican’s interest in keeping the *goumiers* out of Rome was due to concern about their sexual voracity.³³ Although *rape* per se is never discussed, insistence on the fears of the locals and of the Vatican, makes it a credible, but inarguably oblique, referent. From this perspective, a truly ambivalent scenario is painted: the *goumiers* rape the women of Ciociaria who, impregnated, eat the same *erba* that is fertilized by the dead bodies of the *goumiers*. Subsequently, the French officers eat the mutton of a ram that, having gorged itself on that same plant, actually *tastes* like pregnant women. Thus, they are given a taste, as it were, of their responsibility for their colonized subjects, for their sacrifice on behalf of the Italian people, and their transgression against them. This reading points out the cost of dismissing any political valence of *La pelle* as a “pretesto esterno” (Baldacci xi). Read only in historical terms, this episode enacts and critiques Western European racism; read only in metatextual terms, it obfuscates complex power dynamics between Italians, French, Moroccans, Americans, and Germans, between men and women, black and white. Indeed, in a narrative that flaunts the collapse of boundaries, their metaphorical deployment testifies to the centrality of racial and sexual difference yet also to the fear of their superimposition. If “La vergine di Napoli” insists on figuring interracial penetrations *as* conquest, it is no surprise that “La bandiera” refuses to narrate the literal interracial penetrations *of* conquest, leaving the pregnant women of Ciociara as part of Italy’s war-torn landscape.³⁴

Indeed, the products of interracial couplings would threaten to alter *La pelle*’s Edenic vision of Italy’s rebirth, which is represented in terms of Adam and Eve in “La pioggia del fuoco” (The Holocaust), “appena partoriti dal caos, appena risaliti dall’inferno, appena risorti dal sepolcro” (259; just...born out of chaos...just returned from hell...just risen from the grave

33 On the historical basis of this fear, see Note 28 above.

34 Nelson Moe locates a similar refusal in his analysis of the text of the Neapolitan song “Tammurriata nera”: “This narrative amounts at some level to a denial that a real, and specifically sexual, encounter between two different peoples and cultures has taken place, leaving indelible traces among Neapolitans” (438).

[273]).³⁵ However, whereas the text has emphasized “dark” coloring of the Neapolitan women (specifically in terms of their pubic hair in “Le parrucche” [The Wigs]), this reborn “Eve” is *bianchissim[a]* [very white]:

Una donna vestita di rosso, seduta sotto un albero, allattava il suo bambino. E il seno, sporgente fuor del corpetto rosso, era bianchissimo, splendeva come il primo frutto di un albero appena sorto dalla terra, come il seno della prima donna della creazione (259).

(A woman dressed in red sat beneath a tree suckling her child. Her snow-white breast protruded from her red blouse, splendid as the breast of the first woman in creation, or the first fruit from a tree that has but lately emerged from the earth [272]).

Leaving history aside and following this symbolic thread, the violated, shadowy “virgin” of “La Vergine di Napoli”—also dressed in red (*La pelle* 42, *The Skin* 43)—can be restored to her snow-white, Edenic state.

On its way to this fantastical, pristine Eden, *La pelle* travels a complex terrain in which interracial, intercultural encounters or “translations” take place, encounters in which the racialized, sexualized bodies of the *goumier*, the Buffalo soldier and the virgin-whore are censored by the text itself and by its fidelity-seeking critics. Translation-as-censorship, particularly in the post-colonial context, has become a common critical trope.³⁶ Yet having demonstrated both the narrative’s and the critics’ paradoxical refusal of *and* dependence on representations of these bodies (specifically, their skin), I hope to have advanced an understanding of translation and, in turn, of censorship not as simple repression or loss but instead, in the words of Michael Holquist, as two “strategies to control meaning that are unavoidably insufficient” (18).³⁷ Taken literally, the *goumier*, the Buffalo soldier, and the virgin-whore threaten to contaminate the single boundary *La pelle* defends from the “plague” of Liberation—race. Instead, censored at the literal level through a narrative and critical insistence on a solely metaphoric reading, they speak to the poetic integrity of author and text. However, once we step outside the parameters of fidelity and consider how the text undoes its own metaphorical conversions, it becomes possible to juxtapose the literal and metatextual implications of these intercultural translations. In so doing, they show that the choice of vehicles is not incidental. Instead, these narrative and critical sleights of hand suggest an anxiety about the presence of foreign bodies in Italy and, at the same time, indicate the difficulty of narrating

35 These figures are sitting on grass that is insistently described for its new, virginal quality, unlike the grass implicated in pregnancy and death in “La bandiera”: “Un verde ancora vergine, sorpreso nel momento della sua creazione” (257; a green still virginal, glimpsed without warning at the instant of its creation [270]).

36 Post-colonial scholars have shown how, historically, translation has operated as “linguistic transfer in service of empire” (Evans 149) and, thus, they locate a specific violence against the colonized enacted through translation that goes hand-in-hand with the colonial endeavor: “The processes of translation involved in making another culture comprehensible entail varying degrees of violence, especially when the culture being translated is constituted as that of the ‘other’” (Dingwaney 4).

37 For the productive dimensions of translation and censorship from a Freudian perspective, see Derrida as well as Levine.

the transitional moment of liberation without the racial and moral categories of black and white—a reading pointed to precisely by these “censored” fingers.

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