

# eScholarship

## California Italian Studies

### Title

Italo Calvino's Earliest Translations into English by Rome-Based African American Translator and Editor Ben Johnson

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/11r3w1qc>

### Journal

California Italian Studies, 12(1)

### Author

Sherazi, Melanie Masterton

### Publication Date

2023

### DOI

10.5070/C312159672

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2023 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

# Italo Calvino's Earliest Translations into English by Rome-Based African American Translator and Editor Ben Johnson

*(Notes from the Field)*

**Melanie Masterton Sherazi**

The Summer 1954 issue of *Paris Review*, just the sixth in its run, opens with Italo Calvino's debut short story in English, "Last Comes the Raven" ("Ultimo viene il corvo") translated by Ben Johnson (Benjamin Tanner Johnson, Jr.), an African American translator and editor based in postwar Rome. It has gone all but unremarked upon in critical discourse that several of Calvino's early short stories, including his first appearance in English, were translated by Johnson.<sup>1</sup> Though information is still relatively skeletal regarding Johnson's career in postwar Rome's vibrant literary scene, these notes share some initial findings to plant seeds for future research and compile a print cultural record that recovers Calvino's earliest appearances in English as well as some of his Roman ties in the 1950s.

The *Paris Review's* contributor notes for Calvino and Johnson merit being quoted in full for their presentation of these respective figures in this pivotal moment of Calvino's English-language debut:

Italo Calvino is considered one of the most gifted of the Italian post-war writers. He is the author of a number of highly-praised books; his work has appeared in all the major literary magazines in the country: *Ponte*, *Botteghe Oscure*, and *Paragone*, among others. He is a senior editor with the Einaudi Publishing House. *Last Comes the Raven* is Mr. Calvino's first appearance in English.<sup>2</sup>

When read nearly seventy years later, this striking final detail presents a vital record of transatlantic exchange. Johnson is presented in the issue's front matter as an advisory editor; his contributor note relates that:

Ben Johnson has lived in Italy for the past seven years. He has published essays and translations in the *Hudson Review*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *New World Writing*, and a number of other reviews in Europe and the U.S. He is completing a translation of Giose Rimaneli's *Tiro al piccione* to be published by Random House this autumn.<sup>3</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Italo Calvino, "Last Comes the Raven," trans. Ben Johnson, *Paris Review*, no. 6 (Summer 1954): 2–14. "Ultimo viene il corvo" was first published in Milan's *L'unità* on January 5, 1947. A recent 2021 edited collection of Calvino's short stories takes *Last Comes the Raven* as its title and includes Johnson's translation, alongside stories translated by Archibald Colquhoun and Peggy Wright, Ann Goldstein, and William Weaver. The collection first appeared in Italian as *Ultimo viene il corvo* with Einaudi in 1949.

<sup>2</sup> "Contributor Notes," *Paris Review*, no. 6 (Summer 1954): 138.

<sup>3</sup> Rimaneli's novel *Tiro al piccione* was translated by Johnson with the title *The Day of the Lion* (New York: Random House, 1954). This reference to Rimaneli's novel is of great significance as much has been written of its controversial manuscript passing into Cesare Pavese's hands at Einaudi, where, with Calvino's help, it was approved by the editorial board and set in proofs. After Pavese's death by suicide, however, the publication was delayed; it was ultimately published by Mondadori in 1953. Einaudi eventually reissued the novel, with praise from Calvino. The first edition's

He is the translator of *Last Comes the Raven*, the story in this issue by Italo Calvino.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to introducing Calvino to an English-language readership, the issue also notably includes Johnson's lengthy "Art of Fiction" interview with Alberto Moravia, conducted in collaboration with Italian poet and translator Anna Maria de Dominicis.<sup>5</sup>

It remains to be determined precisely how Johnson and Calvino first came into each other's orbit, but these notes offer some possibilities and a preliminary exploration of their intersecting literary ties with a focus on Johnson's highly productive but now obscure time in Rome. Though many readers will likely associate Calvino's English-language publications with translator William Weaver, or with his early works of fiction being translated by Archibald Colquhoun, Johnson's translation work is the initial bridge for Calvino to an English-language readership. Contemporaneous with the *Paris Review* issue featuring "Last Comes the Raven," Johnson also published his translation of the Calvino story "One Afternoon, Adam" ("Un pomeriggio, Adamo") in the 1954 collection *Modern Italian Short Stories*.<sup>6</sup> The story appears in the collection's final section, "The New Era," signaling Calvino's vanguard status. Johnson's role in delivering groundbreaking Italian modern fiction in English is on full display in this collection, which also features his translations of stories by Giuseppe Berto, Carlo Levi, Vasco Pratolini, and Italo Svevo.

Prior to Johnson's career in Rome as a translator and editor, he served in Italy during World War II in the 336<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment, then completed his degree at Fisk University, a historically Black university in Nashville, Tennessee. At Fisk, Johnson became close friends with aspiring writer William Demby, who had also served in Italy. The two were mentored by writer and Fisk University librarian Arna Bontemps and worked as editors on the long-running *Fisk Herald* under the mentorship of poet Robert Hayden. Johnson and Demby maintained their friendship upon returning to Rome to study and work in the late 1940s; Demby completed his degree in 1947 and moved to Rome on the G.I. Bill to study painting—though he quickly turned his attention to writing—while Johnson returned in 1949 to study Italian language and literature as a Fulbright fellow.<sup>7</sup> Providing a rare glimpse into Johnson's earliest translation work in Rome, among his Fisk mentor Bontemps' papers are a handful of letters Johnson sent him from Rome in 1951 in which he shares his ambitious plans to translate Svevo's unpublished writings into English, working in concert with the late writer's estate; Johnson seeks Bontemps' support for a John Jay Whitney fellowship to support his translation work, then writes again in 1952 with news of his having been

---

trajectory presents a possible point of initial contact between Johnson and Calvino. Johnson also went on to translate Rimannelli's novel *Peccato originale* with the title *Original Sin* (London: Heinemann, 1958). The *Times Literary Supplement*'s review praised the translation, observing that "Mr. Ben Johnson has done the original prose the service of skillfully rendering it into the plainest English with no false picturesqueness." Eithne Wilkins, "Children of the Soil," *Times Literary Supplement*, April 25, 1958, 230.

<sup>4</sup> *Paris Review*, no. 6 (Summer 1954): 138.

<sup>5</sup> Alberto Moravia, "Art of Fiction," interview by Ben Johnson and Anna Maria de Dominicis, *Paris Review*, no. 6 (Summer 1954): 17–37.

<sup>6</sup> Marc Slonim, ed., *Modern Italian Short Stories* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1954). Johnson's translations appear alongside those of several notable translators including Weaver and D.H. Lawrence. Like "Last Comes the Raven," the story "One Afternoon, Adam" would become the title of a Calvino short story collection published as *Adam, One Afternoon* (New York: Random House, 1992). In this period, Johnson also translated a Corrado Alvaro short story, "The Black Mare," for *Harper's Bazaar*.

<sup>7</sup> See the Fulbright Grantee Directory. <https://us.fulbrightonline.org/alumni/grantee-directory>

awarded the selective fellowship.<sup>8</sup>

Of special note, Johnson and Demby acted together in Rome in this period in Camillo Mastrocinque's 1952 film *Il peccato di Anna* (*Anna's Sin*), a retelling of *Othello* set in postwar Rome.<sup>9</sup> Johnson stars in the film and Demby has a substantive role. Though this is the only known film in which Johnson acts, Demby would forge a career in the Italian cinema, serving as assistant director of dialogue on Roberto Rossellini's *Europa '51*, and working as a prolific script translator, screenwriter, and occasional actor and television host. Fellow African American veteran John Kitzmiller was already well on his way to becoming a star of the Italian cinema with his breakout role in Luigi Zampa's *Vivere in pace* (*To Live in Peace*).<sup>10</sup>



A still from *Il peccato di Anna* featuring Anna Vita and Ben Johnson.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Arna Bontemps Papers, Box 15, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, Syracuse, New York. Though translating Svevo's writings became a long-term project, many of Johnson's Svevo translations were published in periodicals and collected in Italo Svevo, *Short Sentimental Journey, and Other Stories* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967), a uniform edition of Svevo's works that also features translations by Beryl De Zoete and L. Collison-Morley. In the late 1960s, Johnson published his extended translations of Svevo's unpublished writings as *Further Confessions of Zeno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), with the final section in the text, a three-act play, translated by P.N. Furbank.

<sup>9</sup> *Il peccato di Anna*, directed by Camillo Mastrocinque (1952; Rome: Giaguaro Films). Johnson was cast in the lead role following esteemed African American actor Canada Lee's untimely death. Written for Lee and produced by its female lead, Italian actress Anna Vita, *Il peccato di Anna* follows an Italian actress and an African American actor who fall in love while working on a production of *Othello*. The film was progressive for its time, as it ends happily for the lovers. For more on the film, see Shelleen Greene, "Noir Expatriatism: Black Subjectivities in *Anna's Sin*," *African American Review* 55, nos. 2–3 (2022): 137–50, and Melanie Masterton Sherazi, "Projection Liberation in Postwar Italian Cinema: Scenes of Desegregation in 1950s Rome in *Anna's Sin* (1952), a Retelling of *Othello*," *Pacific Coast Philology* 56, no. 1 (2021): 78–98. For more on Demby's career in Rome as a novelist, journalist, script translator, screenwriter, and occasional actor, see Melanie Masterton Sherazi, Ugo Rubeo, and James C. Hall, eds., "New Perspectives on William Demby," special issue, *African American Review* 55, 2–3 (2022).

<sup>10</sup> *Vivere in pace*, directed by Luigi Zampa (1947, Italy: Lux-Pao).

<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from <https://www.cinema.ucla.edu/events/2021/07/22/annas-sin>.

In the mid-1950s, Johnson married Liana Macellari (née Lilitana Macellari, and later known as Liana Burgess after she married the writer Anthony Burgess), a literary scholar who would become a prolific translator of English-language literature into Italian.<sup>12</sup> In 1953, Demby married Lucia “Tatina” Drudi, an Italian literary translator, poet, novelist, screenwriter and literary agent. The two couples maintained close ties. Demby would later write in his semi-autobiographical novel *The Catacombs* (1965) that his marriage to Drudi was one of three “‘mixed’ marriages” in Rome, along with Johnson’s to Macellari, and Anglo-English translator Patrick Creagh’s to Lola Segre, who hailed from Jamaica and whom Creagh met at Oxford.<sup>13</sup> Creagh was the first translator of Calvino’s Norton Lectures (*Six Memos for the Next Millennium*), known in Italian as *Lezioni americane*.<sup>14</sup> Much research remains to be done to contextualize Macellari’s and Drudi’s respective literary careers in these years and their collaborative roles in Johnson’s and Demby’s cultural work in Rome.<sup>15</sup> Such intimate, interracial modes of literary labor open new pathways for thinking through this period as one of radical sociocultural transformation as well as of transnational, transcultural circulation of literature to complex reading publics.

Alongside his translation work, Johnson also wrote literary criticism that reveals the extent to which he presented Italian literature to American readers with an editorial eye. In “Rome Letter,” a 1952 review essay for *Hudson Review*, Johnson characterizes an insatiable American appetite for postwar Italian literature: “the present enthusiasm for Italian writing is matched only by that of Elizabethan times, when Machiavelli, Castiglione, Boccaccio and others became as well known in literary circles abroad as Elio Vittorini and Moravia today.”<sup>16</sup> Johnson links this “renaissance” both to “Anglo-American publishers[’]” desire to turn a profit, as well as the “critical successes” in the United States of neorealist films, including “*Roma, città aperta, Sciuscià, Vivere in pace, Paisà, and Ladri di biciclette*.”<sup>17</sup> Some sixty Italian literary titles were translated into English after the War but most were “flims[y],” in Johnson’s estimation. In contrast, Johnson hails Carlo Levi’s *Cristo si è fermato a Eboli* (*Christ Stopped at Eboli*) as among the best of postwar Italian literature and praises work by Berto, Mario Soldati, and Guglielmo Petroni. “Rome Letter” concludes with

---

<sup>12</sup> Prior to marrying Macellari, Johnson was first married to a fellow Fisk alum, Carline Johnson, with whom he moved to Italy; *Ebony* magazine reported that Johnson was remarried to African American actress Pamela Winters, his castmate in *Il peccato di Anna*. “Anna’s Sin: Italian Film about Interracial Romance is the First to Allow Negro Lover to Win Girl,” *Ebony*, March 1954: 33–36. According to Liana Burgess’ obituary, Johnson and Macellari met in Massachusetts, where Macellari was a 1953 Fulbright fellow in literature at Mount Holyoke College. She and Johnson lived together in Rome in the 1950s into the early 1960s but then separated and were officially divorced by 1967. She remarried writer Anthony Burgess in 1968 and continued translating a number of experimental English-language works into Italian. Her translations include novels by Burgess, James Joyce, Lawrence Durrell and Thomas Pynchon. Christopher Hawtree, “Liana Burgess,” *The Guardian*, December 15, 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2007/dec/15/guardianobituaries.booksobituaries>.

<sup>13</sup> William Demby, *The Catacombs* (New York: Pantheon, 1965), 52. Creagh’s wife died by suicide in 1960. Segre’s tragic death, including her funeral, is referenced several times in Demby’s novel.

<sup>14</sup> Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Creagh (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1988). On Creagh as translator see Lucia Re, “Translator Patrick Creagh and the Sound of Italy,” *California Italian Studies* 4, no. 1 (2013), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2jz2g35b>. On the relationship between Calvino’s Norton lectures and the volume *Lezioni americane. Sei proposte per il prossimo millennio* published by Garzanti in 1988, see Laura Di Nicola’s essay in this issue of *California Italian Studies*.

<sup>15</sup> Demby published articles in Italian, for instance, in outlets like *Epoca* for which Drudi provided invaluable editing and feedback. Again, Demby was himself a prolific translator of Italian-language scripts into idiomatic English. In the early 1960s, he and Drudi co-wrote screenplays including for the films *Congo vivo* (released in English as *Eruption*) and *Marcia o crepa* (released in the US under the title *Commando*).

<sup>16</sup> Ben Johnson, “Rome Letter,” *The Hudson Review* 5, no. 2 (Summer 1952): 270–75.

<sup>17</sup> Johnson, “Rome Letter,” 270.

a list of Johnson's ten recommendations, followed by a separate entry reserved for one woman writer, a gendered distinction he underscores: Gianna Manzini, whose writings and status in Italy are comparable, in his characterization, to that of Virginia Woolf.<sup>18</sup> Johnson, in effect, curates for English-language readers a reading list in "Rome Letter." In the *Hudson Review*'s following issue, Johnson's pivotal translation of Svevo's "This Indolence of Mine" ("Il mio ozio") appears: the seed for Johnson's long-term project translating the author's unpublished writings.<sup>19</sup> Significantly, news of Johnson's success abroad as a translator traveled across the Atlantic in Black print culture. An early 1953 blurb in *Jet* magazine relays that Johnson was "sole translator for [Giuseppe] Berto, author of *The Sky is Red*. Johnson just signed a contract with New American Library and Farrar and Straus to do their translations."<sup>20</sup> This print cultural record invites our active participation to recognize transnational literary networks and diverse reading publics, where once vital connections, such as those between Johnson and Calvino, have fallen into obscurity.

Johnson's "Rome Letter" also relays to an American readership the significance of Anglo-American expatriate Marguerite Caetani's multilingual Rome-based literary review *Botteghe Oscure* and her anthology *The New Italian Writers*.<sup>21</sup> Johnson himself would work on *Botteghe Oscure* as a translator, proofreader, and then an editor, along with Giorgio Bassani and Anglo-American expatriate writer Eugene Walter. Johnson was the chief editor (*redattore*) for volume fourteen of the journal (1954). Perhaps this is the cultural site that put Calvino and Johnson in contact? Calvino was published (in the original Italian) in *Botteghe Oscure* in 1952, volume 10 ("La formica argentina" ["The Argentine Ant"]), and later in 1957, in volume twenty ("La speculazione edilizia" ["Property Speculation"]).<sup>22</sup> Another possible point of connection is that a great number of poems collected and published beginning in the late 1940s by Caetani for *Botteghe Oscure* in appendices, or *quaderni*, were translated from English into Italian by Salvatore Rosati, an expert in British and American literature, who was Johnson's Rome-based mentor in Italian language, literature and translation. Both Rosati and Calvino exchanged letters with Caetani; Calvino even sent her a letter in English written from New York, dated December 23, 1959, to thank her after he received the Ford Foundation grant for young writers that allowed him to travel to and inside the United States for six months.<sup>23</sup>

Johnson also translated Italian poetry into English in these years. At a 1952 party thrown by Caetani, Count Umberto Morra introduced Anglo-American poet James Merrill, newly arrived to the Eternal City, to Johnson.<sup>24</sup> Although a long-time resident of Cortona, Morra was a cultural

---

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 275.

<sup>19</sup> See Note 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Jet*, January 1, 1953, 45.

<sup>21</sup> Marguerite Caetani, ed., *The New Italian Writers* (New York: New Directions, 1950). Between 1948–1960, *Botteghe Oscure* published cutting-edge writing twice a year from Rome. The journal was remarkable for its global distribution and for publishing authors in their original languages. For recent scholarship situating *Botteghe Oscure* in transnational literary contexts and networks, see Cristina Giorcelli, *Botteghe Oscure e la letteratura statunitense* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2021), and Francesca Billiani, Daniela La Penna, Mila Milani, eds., "National Dialogues and Transnational Exchanges Across Italian Periodical Culture, 1940–1960," special issue, *Modern Italy*, vol. 21, no. 2 (2016); in particular, in the same special issue, see Sara Sullam's essay, "Illuminating *Botteghe Oscure*'s British Network," 171–84.

<sup>22</sup> *Botteghe Oscure Index: 1949-1960* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1964), 84.

<sup>23</sup> Letter published in Stefania Valli, ed., *La rivista Botteghe Oscure e Marguerite Caetani. La Corrispondenza con autori italiani, 1848-1960* (Rome: Fondazione Camillo Caetani-L'erma di Bretschneider, 1999), 133–34.

<sup>24</sup> Morra was an intimate friend of Bernard Berenson's. For more on Count Morra as a cultural fixture in Roman circles and an antifascist intellectual, see Robert Cumming, ed., *My Dear BB... The Letters of Bernard Berenson and Kenneth Clark, 1925-1959* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 489–93. Massimo Bacigalupo draws on James Merrill's autobiographical account in *A Different Person: A Memoir* (New York: Knopf, 1993) for details regarding Merrill's

fixture in Rome's literary circles and known affectionately as "Il Conte Rosso" for his staunch antifascism.<sup>25</sup> Morra proposed that Johnson help Merrill translate a few of Eugenio Montale's poems into English—a difficult task that the pair soon took up, working on poems selected by Johnson.<sup>26</sup> Their collaborative labor produced translations of poems from Montale's *Le Occasioni* (1939; *The Occasions*) and *La bufera e altro* (1956; *The Storm and Other Things*): "La casa dei doganieri" translated as "The House of the Customs Men" (1952) and "New Stanzas" (1956) and "L'anguilla" as "The Eel" (1953).<sup>27</sup> As another point of contact, if only a literary and not a literal one, Calvino much admired Montale's poetry, as is clear from his reference to the poet's "Piccolo testamento" (1953; "Little Testament") in "Leggerezza" ("Lightness"), the first of Calvino's *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*. In his memoir, Merrill presents a brief (and somewhat harsh) portrait of Johnson as being serious to the point of "mak[ing] culture itself—sound prosaic and depressing, like a branch of the civil service."<sup>28</sup> Merrill also includes an anecdote of his mother being greatly offended by his hosting a party for her in Rome at which Johnson and another Black writer, likely Demby, were guests with their wives.<sup>29</sup> Merrill's mother's explicit racism registers Jim Crow's portability and presence abroad even as Johnson's and Demby's thriving careers and personal lives in Rome evidence interracial relationalities and ways of being in the world that were often foreclosed in the United States.

By the decade's end, Johnson edited his own collection and wrote an Introduction to *Stories of Modern Italy: From Verga, Svevo, and Pirandello to the Present* for Random House, further instantiating his key role in circulating Italian literature in English translation.<sup>30</sup> This 1960 collection includes two stories by Calvino translated by Johnson: a reprint of "Last Comes the Raven" and "UNPA Nights" ("Le notti dell'UNPA"). Alongside the Italian luminaries announced in the title, the collection's table of contents enumerates a veritable inventory of the period's most respected Italian writers, with stories by Moravia, Natalia Ginzburg, Corrado Alvaro, Ignazio Silone, Cesare Pavese and others; the majority of the collection's twenty-six stories are translated by Johnson himself.<sup>31</sup>

Key details in *Stories of Modern Italy*'s front matter afford further insights into Johnson's time in Rome. Johnson, credited as a lecturer at the University of Rome, Sapienza, dedicates *Stories of Modern Italy* to the aforementioned Italian scholar and translator Salvatore Rosati. Johnson also pays homage to Rosati in the volume's acknowledgments for being his longtime guide into Italian literature and his mentor in the "difficult art of translation." Johnson expresses his gratitude to his wife, Liana Johnson, as well for her feedback and work with him on the manuscript. Such details help build a context in which it may be possible to acknowledge more

---

collaboration with Johnson, though Merrill does not name the poems themselves. See pages 107–08. See Bacigalupo, Massimo, "Melville to Merrill: Italophile American Poets," *Paideuma: Modern and Contemporary Poetry and Poetics* 41 (2014): 229–45.

<sup>25</sup> Cumming, *My Dear BB...*, viii.

<sup>26</sup> Merrill, *A Different Person*, 110–11. Two of Merrill's poems were published in *Botteghe Oscure* in 1952.

<sup>27</sup> See these poems in Harry Thomas, ed., *Montale in English* (New York: Handsel Books, 2002), 98–99, 112–13, 159–60. A short biographical note in *Montale in English* identifies Johnson as "the son of a prominent lawyer in Boston." See page 98.

<sup>28</sup> Merrill, *A Different Person*, 110.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 147–48.

<sup>30</sup> Ben Johnson, ed., *Stories of Modern Italy: From Verga, Svevo, and Pirandello to the Present* (New York: Random House Modern Library, 1960).

<sup>31</sup> It is also significant that Johnson worked in this period with experimental poet Alfredo Giuliani, a leader of the *Novissimi*, translating his "Il cuore zoppo" as "The Lame Heart." Alfredo Giuliani, "The Lame Heart," trans. Ben Johnson, *Poetry* 94, no. 5, 1959: 314–17.

extensively Johnson's collaborative ties to Italian letters and his substantial but heretofore underrecognized contributions to introducing Calvino, along with a constellation of innovative Italian writers, to a postwar American readership.

Johnson's Random House collection coincides with Calvino's own travels and writing of "American Diary, 1959-1960," later published in *Hermit in Paris*.<sup>32</sup> Inasmuch as Johnson and Calvino were apparently moving in the same literary circles in Rome, their respective transatlantic crossings between Europe and the United States in this era showcase the differences in their lived experiences. When Calvino sailed from Europe to the United States in 1959, the ship was but a site of ennui: "For me boredom has now taken on the image of this transatlantic liner. [...] I will arrive weighed down by an already heavy dose of American boredom, American old age, American lack of vital resources."<sup>33</sup> In early 1953, a year before Calvino's English-language debut, Johnson wrote to *Jet* magazine to spread the word of his racist treatment while sailing back to Europe aboard the new luxury liner the *S.S. United States*.<sup>34</sup> *Jet*'s headline, "Linguist Blasts Bias on a New U.S. Liner," succinctly hails Johnson's career in Italian letters even as it indicts Jim Crow's mobile presence. *Jet* shares with its readers in this blurb Johnson's outrage at finding the ship, a microcosm of US race relations, "segregate[d] from A to Z" in its dining and accommodations.

Traveling through the US South is transformative for Calvino, particularly his brief meeting with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1960 in Alabama.<sup>35</sup> In Montgomery, Calvino bears witness to African American churchgoers and passersby being surrounded by policemen armed with truncheons and menaced by a seething white mob that includes families. "This is a day that I will never forget as long as I live," he writes. "I have seen what racism is, mass racism, accepted as one of society's fundamental rules." Calvino does not invoke nor offer a comparison in this passage to his own experiences as a young person living under fascism, which might suggest an equivalence; rather, he particularizes the profound impact that this scene of US racism and antiblackness on full display had on him. Though he does not go on to offer extensive commentary about US racism, Calvino references his visits with Black activists whose homes were bombed by the Ku Klux Klan and documents that a Black woman was beaten with a baseball bat, while her klansman assailant walked free in spite of eyewitnesses and photographic evidence.<sup>36</sup> Such details make clear Calvino's commitment to better understanding the movement and its activists on the ground. Calvino asks organizers to introduce him to King and is brought to a church meeting attended by thousands planning their next actions. The organizers do not break from their work to trade pleasantries with him, and Calvino contrasts their authenticity with the bigotry of a white society woman who picks him up for a local tour shortly thereafter and apologizes for the "'troubles' caused by that agitator Luther King."<sup>37</sup>

In 1957, just a few years earlier, King traveled to Rome following his time in Ghana, and in

---

<sup>32</sup> Italo Calvino, "American Diary, 1959-1960," in *Hermit in Paris* (New York: Mariner, 2014), 16–120. Translated by Jonathan Cape.

<sup>33</sup> Calvino, "American Diary, 1959-1960," 16.

<sup>34</sup> "Linguist Blasts Bias on New U.S. Liner," *Jet*, January 1953, 14. It must be noted that this is a blurb based on a report from Johnson sent to the magazine, but he is not the actual author of the published blurb, nor is one credited.

<sup>35</sup> Calvino, *Hermit*, 111. For an extended discussion of this pivotal point in Calvino's travels in the US South, see Maria Popova, "Italo Calvino on Racial Justice: The Beloved Italian Writer's Stirring Account of the Early Civil Rights Movement and His Encounter with Martin Luther King, Jr.,"

*The Marginalian*, <https://www.themarginalian.org/2017/02/13/italo-calvino-racism/>.

<sup>36</sup> Calvino, *Hermit*, 114.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.



1964, he was the guest of Pope Paul VI. King relayed a message home, published in the *New York Times* to a vast readership: “The Pope made it palpably clear that he is a friend of the Negro people, and asked me to tell the American Negroes that he is committed to the cause of civil rights in the United States.”<sup>38</sup> These traces signal the work that remains to be done in considering the African American cultural and intellectual presence in Italy alongside the insights of Italian writers, Calvino among them, who spent time in the United States during the civil rights movement and reckoned with American race relations with critical distance.<sup>39</sup>

Five years after translating Calvino’s English-language debut in *Paris Review*, Johnson published at least one further translation of a story by Calvino, “Di padre in figlio,” entitled “Like Father Like Son.” The story appeared in *The Transatlantic Review*’s Winter 1959/1960 issue. Though little-known today, “Like Father Like Son” is a significant publication in that it appeared in *The Transatlantic Review*’s second issue and coincided both with Calvino’s travels in the United States and Johnson’s edited collection of Italian short stories for Random House.<sup>40</sup> The front matter presents *The Transatlantic Review* as being based in “Rome-New York,” with Creagh as the Rome-based European editor. Such concentric circles of collaboration solicit further research and contemplation.

By way of Johnson’s postwar translation work, we might orient readings of Calvino toward Rome—not as an anchor but as being in a dynamic rapport with literary and intellectual Turin and Calvino’s Einaudi cohort. A retrospective biographical note from 1970 sums up this period: “The literary capital of Italy in the 1950s was Rome, and Calvino, though remaining explicitly ‘Turinese,’ now spent much of his time in Rome, enjoying that fun-loving city and a great many friends and associates, among whom the serene figure of Carlo Levi dominated.”<sup>41</sup> Affirming the importance of writing short stories, Calvino averred in an interview with scholar Ugo Rubeo, “I am a writer of short stories first and foremost more than a novelist.”<sup>42</sup> Through early Calvino we encounter Johnson, and in Johnson we glimpse early Calvino. Johnson’s career in Rome and his heretofore unacknowledged role in circulating Calvino’s early short stories in English, along with that of a great number of other Italian modern and contemporary writers—his long-term work with

---

<sup>38</sup> “ROME, September 18—Pope Paul VI received the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. this evening,” *The New York Times*, Sept. 18, 1964. See also “King Arrives in Rome: March 14, 1957,” King Papers, Stanford University, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/king-arrives-rome>.

<sup>39</sup> See Charles Leavitt, “Impegno nero: Italian intellectuals and the African-American Struggle,” *California Italian Studies* 4, no. 2 (2013), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6qn2w1cm>. In his comprehensive essay, Leavitt evidences the “impegno nero,” or sustained intellectual investment in the US Black freedom struggle that antifascist Italian thinkers, Calvino among them, had in the postwar period and notably documents the great number of African American writers who were translated into Italian, including Richard Wright and Langston Hughes. For more on Hughes’ time in Italy and his work’s Italian translations, see Cristina Lombardi-Diop, “Translating Blackness: Langston Hughes in Italy,” *Langston Hughes in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 213–22. For a recent discussion of Calvino’s relationship to racism and colonialism, see Elio Baldi, “Italo Calvino’s Colour Blindness and the Question of Race Among Einaudi Intellectuals,” *Modern Languages Open*, no. 1, <https://doi.org/10.3828/mlo.v0i0.273>. Baldi critiques what he terms Calvino and his circle’s “colour blind[ness]” and speculates, “Perhaps unconsciously, Calvino strays and stays within the safe boundaries of an abstract, universal rhetoric that does not really reckon with the deepest roots and repercussions of inequality in the form of racism or colonialism.” In contrast, these notes from the field privilege Calvino’s networks of affiliation—with a focus on his translations into English by Ben Johnson—to affirm interracial solidarities and impactful transcultural flows.

<sup>40</sup> Italo Calvino, “Like Father Like Son,” *The Transatlantic Review*, no. 2 (Winter 1959/1960): 43–46. The journal was founded in 1959 by editor and art collector Joseph F. McCrindle and ran until 1977. Calvino composed this story in 1946.

<sup>41</sup> Calvino, *Hermit*, 164.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 236. Calvino shared this remark in a 1984 interview.

the writings of Svevo, chief among them—invite new research and readings to expand the field and to trace more complex transcultural genealogies.