

## **Description, appropriation, transformation: Fascist rhetoric and colonial nature**

Loredana Polezzi\*

*Department of Italian, University of Warwick, UK*

During the period of Fascism, a variety of discourses and representations were attached to colonial landscapes and to their uses. African nature was the subject of diverse rhetorical strategies, which ranged from the persistence of visions of wilderness as the locus of adventure to the domesticating manipulations of an incipient tourist industry aiming to familiarise the Italian public with relatively tame forms of the exotic. Contrasting images of bareness and productivity, primitivism and modernisation, resistance to change and dramatic transformation found their way into accounts of colonial territories ranging from scientific and pseudo-scientific reports to children's literature, from guidebooks to travel accounts, all of which were sustained not just by written texts but also by iconographic representations. This article will look at the specific example of accounts of Italian Somalia in order to explore Fascist discourses regarding colonial nature and its appropriation. Documents examined will include early guidebooks to the colonies, a small selection of travel accounts aimed at the general public, as well as the works of a number of geographers and geologists who were among the most active polygraphs of the period, and whose writings addressed a wide range of Italian readers.

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### **Representing 'Africa'**

During the years of Fascism, a variety of discourses and representations were attached to colonial African landscapes<sup>1</sup> and to their uses. While not entirely new or unique to the regime, images circulating during this period produced a distinctive mixture that both fixed and, at least to an extent, renewed the dominant representations of the continent. This double-pronged process of public representation and popularisation was particularly evident in the case of those territories that were under Italian control. African nature was the subject of diverse rhetorical strategies, which ranged from the persistence of visions of wilderness as the locus of adventure to the domesticating manipulations of an incipient tourist industry aiming to familiarise the Italian public with relatively tame forms of the exotic. Contrasting images of bareness and productivity, primitivism and modernisation, resistance to change and dramatic transformation found their way into accounts of colonial territories ranging from scientific and pseudo-scientific reports to children's literature, from guidebooks to travel accounts. All of these documents sustained their narratives not just through the use of the written word but also thanks to a range of iconographic representations, which included drawings, photographs and, in some cases, a more or less direct link to filmed images.

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\*Email: [L.Polezzi@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:L.Polezzi@warwick.ac.uk)

At the core of Fascist approaches to African landscape was an ambiguous reading of colonial nature as an extreme environment in which equally extreme heroic gestures could be performed, but also as an alien territory to be tamed, appropriated and radically transformed. At times, as in the case of Somalia in the 1920s and '30s, the two attitudes tended to coexist, though they seldom coincided. In the pages that follow I will look at accounts of Italian Somalia in order to explore continuities and discontinuities in Fascist discourses about colonial nature and its appropriation. The analysis will be based on documents such as early guidebooks to the colonies, travel accounts aimed at the general public, as well as the specialist and non-specialist works of geographers, geologists and other scientists, who were among the most active polygraphs of the period and whose writings addressed a wide selection of Italian readers.

In all of these cases a dialogue was also being created between the colonial and the national environment. African landscapes represented a counterpoint to Italian ones. They were promoted as an extension of the national territory and yet remained a place of ultimate difference. As a result, they were seen both as locations to which Italy could export its knowledge and technology (whether in the name of 'civilisation' or economic exploitation), and as a place of experimentation, where new scientific, economic and social models could be tested.

As recent studies of colonial and post-colonial environments have started to show, in fact, the Western imperial ethos was channelled not only through discourses of race and their inscription over native bodies, but also through the representation and appropriation of other forms of life (Bell, Butlin and Hefferman 1995; Beinart and Hughes 2009; Driver 2001; MacKenzie 1988; McClintock 1995; Mudimbe 1988, 1994; Stoler 2002). The notion of 'nature' was a flexible tool in the age of colonialism and empire, often stretching to assimilate (whether explicitly or implicitly) animal and human forms of 'native' life,<sup>2</sup> while at the same time also subsuming landscape and territory within its remit through acts such as the re-naming and classification of plants or the mapping of mineral resources (Beinart and Hughes 2009; Cittadino 2002).

As is almost invariably the case when dealing with Italian Fascism, questions of continuity and discontinuity are at the core of the regime's engagement with the colonial enterprise. Those issues concern both the thread of national history and the transnational nature of Western colonialism. In the first case, the key question concerns the position of Fascism and its interpretation either as a parenthetical interruption or as an integral element in the development of the modern nation; in this respect, the colonial enterprise constitutes one of the critical areas from which evidence can be drawn to support one or the other of two opposing narratives. In a broader perspective, the history of Italian colonialism provides an original viewpoint not just on the development of Western colonialism but also on its demise – or on the more or less hidden survival of its power dynamics in postcolonial times. Italy's attempts to establish a presence on the African continent date from the years immediately following unification. The history of Italy's presence on African soil is divided into a number of phases: the initial one saw the establishment of the *possedimenti* (possessions)<sup>3</sup> of Assab (1882) and Massawa (1885),<sup>4</sup> followed by the creation of the first Italian colony, Eritrea (1890). Early expansion came to a halt after Italian troops were defeated by the Ethiopian army in the battle of Adwa (1896). Liberal Italy did not, nevertheless, abandon its colonial ambitions and the following decades saw first an expansion of the Italian presence in Somalia (starting from the 1890s) and then, with the Libyan war in 1911, the establishment of an Italian presence on the southern shores of the Mediterranean. Fascism sought to reinforce and enlarge that presence, launching further campaigns in Libya (from 1922) and Somalia (from 1925), and eventually embarking on a war of aggression against Ethiopia (1935–1936) (Del Boca 1992, 1996; Goglia and Grassi 1993; Labanca 2002; Miège 1976).<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the Fascist propaganda machine was

transformed into what Angelo Del Boca (1996) has described as the ‘fabbrica del consenso’ (the factory of consensus), in an attempt to increase the popularity of Italy’s African ambitions. Italy’s colonial history came to an abrupt end with the collapse of the regime at the end of the Second World War. In 1947, with the Treaty of Paris, Italy lost all its colonial possessions. This meant, among other things, that Italy did not have to deal with a protracted period of decolonisation – a fact which, together with the strong association between Fascism and colonialism, favoured a widespread loss of memory with regard to the country’s ‘colonial adventure’. Yet that colonial past was less distant and less easy to erase than a tale focusing on discontinuities might imply. An Italian presence was in fact maintained in Somalia until 1960, through a trusteeship assigned to Italy by the United Nations. Close links also remained with other former colonies, such as Libya (especially, though not exclusively, before the advent of Gheddafi’s regime) (Cresti 1996; Del Boca 1986–1988). Over the past few decades, colonial memory has also returned to Italy in the form of interrogations raised by a new generation of scholars as well as by postcolonial intellectuals interested not only in the country’s past but also in its increasingly multicultural present (Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012). Read according to this second narrative, colonialism can be said to be a constitutive (though often unacknowledged) feature of Italian history, from the country’s unification to the present day, with the *ventennio* (the 20 years occupied by Fascism) representing one of its consecutive phases.

Together with a series of territorial possessions, the Fascist regime inherited a colonial history made of narratives, images and memories that had established a presence in the national imagination. At the same time, those narratives interacted with a broader, transnational context, which saw Western Europe engaged in what became known as the ‘scramble for Africa’.<sup>6</sup> Italy’s intervention in the political and military history of that appropriation may have been both late and limited, but it had already been preceded and continued to be accompanied by other forms of participation, such as the numerous expeditions which took Italian explorers to Africa in the nineteenth century (Comberiati 2013). These journeys were supported by public and private associations, such as the Società Geografica Italiana, based in Rome, or the Società di esplorazione commerciale africana, which gathered leading industrialists in Northern Italy (Atkinson 2005; Carazzi 1972). While some of their goals were clearly national, these initiatives were also integral to a wider circulation of and growing interest for information about all things African. Explorers delivered a variety of products, which were destined for composite audiences both within the national boundaries and beyond them. They wrote reports aimed at a specialist readership, made up of experts whose disciplines were emerging or being reshaped in those same decades (and largely in a colonial perspective): from geography to ethnography, zoology or the botanical sciences. They also published semi-specialist accounts in journals such as the *Bollettino della Società Geografica Italiana*, whose public included large sections of the political and economic elite. The links between these and equivalent publications in other European countries meant that information published by these journals often enjoyed a wide international circulation, either via translation or simply because the various national institutions stocked each other’s periodicals. Travellers could also reach a broader national public via publications of a more accessible nature, such as the serialized narratives that appeared in the popular press. These were then often reprinted in book format by well-known publishers like Treves and Hoepli in Milan, or Perino in Rome. Once Italy became directly involved in the colonial enterprise, explorers were joined by other kinds of travellers: members of the military forces, colonial officials and politicians, scientists directly engaged in acquiring colonial knowledge or mapping as well as exploiting colonial resources. As voices multiplied, so did

technologies, allowing, in particular, for easier and cheaper reproduction of visual images: drawings and photographs accompanied written words with increasing frequency, granting them a sense of enhanced authenticity and authority (Polezzi 2012).

By the time Fascism arrived on the scene, a repertoire of African images had therefore been created and had started to circulate among different strata of the Italian public. As it became increasingly engaged in new and renewed colonial initiatives, Fascism actively appropriated some of those representations, for instance by encouraging or directly supporting new editions of works by nineteenth-century Italian travellers to Africa, such as Gustavo Bianchi, or by early supporters of the colonial enterprise, like Alfredo Oriani. These operations sought to reframe both works and authors as precursors (whether intentional or otherwise) of the regime's ideological as well as practical commitment to an Italian presence in Africa. Oriani's *Fino a Dogali* (originally published in 1889) was particularly popular with the regime since it presented Italy's early colonial effort as 'la prima conseguenza del suo risorgimento' (the first consequence of its return to national independence) (Oriani 1943, 298) and as the continuation of a struggle between civilisation and primitive forces, between history and prehistory, which dated back to ancient Rome and its empire.<sup>7</sup> Bianchi's travels, on the other hand, and especially his death during his final expedition, were used to underline both the long-term engagement of Italians with the African territory and the ongoing nature of that enterprise (including the more or less explicit need to avenge 'barbaric' treatment and 'cruel' deaths) (Bianchi 1930).

At the same time, contemporary authors both consolidated and expanded the 'African library' (Mudimbe 1988, 1994) available to the Italian public (Burdett 2007). The exploration and adventure model did not disappear, but it was gradually joined or replaced by other forms of travel, such as tourism and leisure (McLaren 2006). The two modes were often superimposed, as in the case of texts centring on hunting expeditions or those devoted to excursions into particularly inhospitable locations, such as deserts. Growing attention was also being devoted in the 1920s and 1930s to 'scientific' accounts of the colonies, aimed at cataloguing resources and producing systematising (though not always necessarily systematic) knowledge of peoples and places (Atkinson 2003, 2005). Here an added focus was provided by the notion of transformation and by the related attention to the role of modern technology in imposing the seal of Italian civilisation (as well as possession) on the African territory. Both elements had been present in earlier modes of representation produced not only by Italian travellers but also by those from other countries (McClintock 1995), but the prominence of mechanical tools and scientific discourse noticeably increases in the years of the regime, making the colony one of the key locations for Fascism's fascination with notions and forms of modernity (Ben-Ghiat 2001; Fuller 2007). Yet even science-oriented writing could not entirely escape the lure of primitivism and of aestheticising exoticism. In fact the most noticeable feature of 'African' writing of this period is perhaps its slipperiness and hybridity: tales of adventure and discovery find their way into works supposedly devoted to scientific description; poetic and even mystical elements emerge among tales of conquest or tourist appropriation; and so on.

Landscape played a key role in this complex and evolving set of representations. The binary opposition between nature and civilisation that lay at the heart of colonialism found in landscape perhaps its most crucial dimension – especially if we consider that even human elements of the colonial world could, when needed, be subsumed into 'landscape' under the broader label of the natural environment. In this sense, it was precisely over and against landscape that the transformative ethos of colonialism had to be played out, as the ability to change the colonial environment became an emblem of the exercise of power and control at all levels: political, ideological, even racial. If in fact, as noted by Simon Schama (1991, 11), centuries ago it became



commonplace in Western cultures to claim ‘that landscape and people are morphologically akin, constructed, as it were, from common clay, and that they constitute in some primal cultural sense the nature of each other’, then transforming the landscape could be seen as the ultimate form of appropriation of a place. This was if anything all the more true in the case of Italy, a country whose national landscape is and has been for a substantial length of time perceived as profoundly modified by human presence: as, effectively, human-made (Armiero and Hall 2010). The pliability or resistance of the African landscape to intervention and transformation thus became, perhaps unsurprisingly, a crucial recurring theme in the textual tradition (however varied and hybrid) of Italian colonialism and especially of its Fascist phase, when the rhetoric of *Italianità* (Italianness) was at its strongest.

All of these themes recur in the representations of Somalia that will be the object of analysis in the following sections. Yet they appear in a variety of modulations and combinations, producing distinct patterns of similarity and difference, continuity and discontinuity.

### From unexplored wildernesses to model villages

A range of Italian interests had started to converge on Somalia in the second half of the nineteenth century (Hess 1966; Labanca 2002; Naletto 2011). The area was the goal of expeditions, such as those led by Luigi Robecchi-Bricchetti and Vittorio Bòttego, whose aims were linked both to the international prestige associated with geographical discoveries and to the growing political and economic significance attributed to the region. Images of wild nature and even wilder populations dominated the tales that reached Italy in the last decades of the century, though these were regularly accompanied by a systematic effort to ‘fill the blanks’ still left on the African map.

Explorers tried to offer an all-encompassing account of the places they visited and their narratives often reveal a composite patchwork of adventure stories, geographical and ethnographic observations, remarks on commercial prospects and natural resources, and so on. Bòttego’s *Il Giuba esplorato* (1895)<sup>8</sup> and the volume *L’Omo; viaggio d’esplorazione nell’Africa Orientale* (1899), published by Lamberto Vannutelli and Carlo Citerni after Bòttego’s death, testify to that comprehensive effort, as does the copious production of Robecchi-Bricchetti. The latter includes detailed factual accounts like *La prima traversata della penisola dei Somali* (1893), which reproduces the text of a lecture held on 22 February 1892 in front of the Società Geografica Italiana, as well as more popular and popularising travel narratives such as *Nell’Harrar* (1896), *Somalia e Benadir: Viaggio di esplorazione nell’Africa Orientale* (1899) and the openly exoticising *Nel paese degli aromi: Diario di una esplorazione nell’Africa Orientale da Obbia ad Alula* (1903).<sup>9</sup> These and similar volumes were heavily illustrated with photographs or drawings. Detailed maps of the areas covered and the itineraries followed by the expeditions took pride of place in almost all of them, with images of African fauna and hunting trophies, of local populations, or of artefacts and objects appearing as further common themes. Landscape is also present, usually through a small set of recurring images: panoramic views of coastal towns and harbours, representations of the expedition moving across particularly inhospitable terrain, and depictions of moments of rest, often by a well or some other source of water. A strong contrast is set up between the coastal regions and the interior of the country, clearly stressing the difficulties faced by the explorers and therefore sustaining a narrative of heroism and adventure. At the same time, however, those images are meant to underscore the sense of a profound difference and distance between Somalia and Italy, or, more specifically, between the Italian and the East-African landscape.

Somalia officially became an Italian colony at the beginning of the twentieth century, yet for a while the image of the country remained strongly linked to the repertoire produced by travellers in the previous decades. Gradually, however, a change took place in the range and scope of the accounts published in Italy. Increasingly, the ethos of exploration and its all-encompassing gaze were replaced by a more limited and often specialised set of perspectives, while explorers and adventurers were substituted by a range of professionals whose specialism played a role in the colonial enterprise. Members of the military forces, administrators, as well as geographers and other scientists became the most frequent authors of colonial travel accounts. Expeditions were replaced by 'excursions'. First attempts at describing unknown areas left their place to personal impressions of locations that were still represented as alien, but now appeared relatively more controllable (if not entirely under control). And traces of 'Italian civilisation' as well as its 'modernising' effects on the African landscape entered the fixed set of standard topoi most frequently encountered in colonial narratives.

A clearly restricted perspective on Somalia was provided by Vittorio Tedesco Zammarano, a member of the colonial military forces whose passion for hunting is the undisputed protagonist of his work. His written and filmic production stretched from 1920 to 1958 and encompassed travel accounts (*Impressioni di caccia in Somalia Italiana*, 1920; *Hic Sunt Leones: Un anno di esplorazione e di caccia in Somalia*, 1924; *Il sentiero delle belve: Impressioni di caccia in Africa Orientale*, 1929), as well as books for children (*Cuoresaldo a caccia grossa*, 1934), or an official volume on *Fauna e caccia* (1930) published in the series 'Le colonie italiane' by the Ministero delle colonie – Ufficio studi e propaganda (the research and propaganda office of the ministry of colonies). In all of these works, control over the environment and violent power exercised over nature through the use of modern tools such as weapons and mechanical means of transport become key themes. The impact of technology was further reinforced by a profuse use of photography and, in some cases, by the production of films that accompanied Tedesco Zammarano's books (*Hic sunt Leones*, 1923; *Il sentiero delle belve*, 1932). The overall effect was that of creating a highly exoticised image of Somalia's landscapes, which acted as an almost theatrical background to a form of restricted, belated heroism whose ultimate goal was the display of control and whose cypher was to be found in the exaggerated gesture accompanying that display. Even the search for authenticity inscribed in the iconographic apparatus that accompanies the narration effectively reifies that gesture, underlining its intrinsic lack of realism and its highly performative nature – and perhaps in this sense also aligning that performance with many other forms of Fascist posturing.

More common were accounts of Somalia that combined a degree of specialisation with individual observation and reflection, aiming to appeal to a wider audience. Giuseppe Stefanini's *In Somalia: Note e impressioni di viaggio* (1922) is a case in point. Stefanini was a professional geographer and the volume, which narrates a journey undertaken in 1913, mixes exoticising narrative episodes ('Madame Butterfly color cioccolata'; 'Uno sbarco ... burrascoso'; 'Una colazione poco succolenta'), with annotations of a more specialist nature ('Osservazioni topografiche preliminari'; 'Raccolte antropologiche'; 'La duna mobile e la duna fissa'; 'I lavori dell'Istituto Geografico Militare in Somalia'), as well as remarks which point to a new attitude towards and expectations about African travel ('Gita sul Giuba in motoscafo'; 'Gita a Biejra'; 'Escursione a Bender Suguma'; 'Il battello fluviale').<sup>10</sup> Besides his travelogue, Stefanini had already published and would continue to publish technical reports and other texts aimed at a more restricted audience, focusing in these cases on the geographic and hydrogeological characteristics of Somalia and its potential as a colony (see, for instance, *Le risorse idriche della Somalia italiana e l'avvenire della colonia*, 1919, and *I possedimenti italiani in Africa: Libia, Eritrea, Somalia*, 1923).

Stefanini was not the only geographer operating in the area and many of his colleagues were equally or even more adept at polygraphy. The most extreme case in this respect is probably that of Giotto Dainelli, a committed Fascist whose works on Italian colonies in Africa range from specialist accounts written in both Italian and English, to textbooks for Italian schools, travelogues, pamphlets, celebratory volumes about Italian explorers, and much more. Despite the range of genres they adopted and the varied audiences they targeted, colonial geographers shared a common goal in the attempt to identify and promote the potential for exploitation, development and transformation of the colonial environment. Dainelli provides eloquent examples of this trend: one of his English-language publications, for instance, is significantly and explicitly entitled 'The Agricultural Possibilities of Italian Somalia' (1931). The voices of geographers and geologists such as Stefanini, Dainelli and others, through their multiple echoes both within and at times outside the nation, helped to establish a discourse of appropriation and transformation which, in turn, supported the idea of Italian colonialism as largely aimed at the acquisition of agricultural land. That idea was connected to the enduring hope of exploiting colonial resources to enrich the homeland, but it was also crucial in continuing to promote (at least in theory) a 'special' model of demographic colonialism based on the relocation to the colonies of substantial numbers of Italian workers. In practice, however, that was not how colonial agriculture developed – when and where it did develop (Cresti 1996; Larebo 1994). Tales about the flourishing of agricultural production in the East African colonies may have been vital to sustain some of the fundamental myths of Fascism's imperial effort, but the reality of those enterprises (which occasionally emerged in internal reports and private diaries) revealed the inadequacy of actual results with regard to the images of fertility and almost unlimited potential produced for the purpose of propaganda (Del Boca 1996; Labanca 2001).

Early agricultural experiments had started shortly after the establishment of the first Italian colony in Eritrea. However, initial attempts promoted by the Tuscan aristocrat Leopoldo Franchetti to create a form of land ownership based on small property and family units had already failed by the end of the nineteenth century (Labanca 2002, 314). Somalia, on the other hand, saw a different kind of experimentation, with the creation of a small number of settlements based on the model of intensive farming.<sup>11</sup> The later date at which the colony was established, and the fact that agricultural land was mostly to be found in areas of the interior over which Italy only gradually established control, meant that the development of those agricultural experiments largely coincided with the years of Fascism. The Azienda Sperimentale created in Janale (Genale in colonial times) in 1912 by the agronomist Romolo Onor had initially devoted itself mostly to research and, indeed, experimentation. In the early 1920s, after the arrival in Somalia of Cesare Maria De Vecchi, appointed as governor by Mussolini, Janale became the centre of extensive land concessions, aimed at developing intensive agriculture based mostly on the cultivation of cotton and bananas. In those same years, another initiative was also under way in the area: the creation of the Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi and the Società Agricola Italo-Somala (SAIS).

### **Transforming Somalia: the Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi and its representations**

The Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi, sometimes also referred to as 'Villabruzzo' (Hess 1966, 163), was founded near Jowhar on the Webi Shabelle (respectively known as Giohar and the Uebi Scebeli river in colonial literature) by Luigi Amedeo di Savoia-Aosta, Duke of the Abruzzi, a member of the Italian royal family who had achieved international fame as an explorer and mountaineer (at one point he had held the record for the highest altitude and the northernmost

latitude reached by man). The Duke had also travelled extensively in Africa and counted the exploration and ascent of the Ruwenzori among his achievements. In founding the village he could rely on substantial initial capital (24 million lire) provided by Italian investors, which allowed him to buy most of the land (rather than confiscating it) and to embark on large-scale processes of reclamation. Concentrating on the production of cotton, sugar and bananas, the village aimed to introduce to the colony new agricultural techniques and industrial technologies, including tractors, an elaborate irrigation system and a sugar refinery. Its structure was based on settlement patterns aimed at 'rationalising' the exploitation of the land, and its management combined the presence of a relatively small number of Italian workers with local manpower, whose families were 'organised in ethnic clans' and who 'owned their own garden plots, and were paid for their labour' (Negash 2008, 310–311). This combination has led historians to talk of the Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi as an Italian approximation of plantation colonialism (Labanca 2002, 317–319).

The village achieved an iconic status, not least because of the figure of its founder. While Fascism was instrumental in instigating and supporting the developments at Janale, it had a more indirect and ambiguous relationship with the Jowhar initiative and its creator, who, as noted by Richard Bosworth (2006, 375), was not so much aligned with Fascist colonial policies as with the broader, longer-term commitment of Italian elites to the ethos of European imperialism. Nevertheless, Fascism appropriated the experience of SAIS, making it part of its narrative of colonial development and transformation. Three examples of that appropriation and of its enduring nature will help us to understand both the role of Villabruzzo in Italian representations of Somalia and its anomalies.

The first is the presence granted to the Villaggio in colonial guidebooks. During the period of Fascism, guides to the colonies were produced to encourage the development of tourism but also, more broadly, to popularise the image of overseas territories and support the popularity of the colonial enterprise. As such, guidebooks were integral to colonial propaganda and, unsurprisingly, they enlisted colonial officials, scientists and other 'experts' as contributors. Dainelli, Stefanini and Tedesco Zammarano, for instance, were all among the contributors to the volume *Possedimenti e colonie: Isole Egee, Tripolitania, Cirenaica, Eritrea, Somalia* produced by the Touring Club Italiano in 1929, while the Duke of the Abruzzi was listed, together with Fascist grandees such as Dino Grandi or Pietro Badoglio, among those who checked the volume's proofs before publication. The guidebook, which included '34 carte geografiche, 16 piante di città e centri archeologici e 41 piante di edifici, schemi e stemmi' (34 maps, 16 plans of towns and archaeological sites and 41 drawings of buildings, diagrams and emblems) had a first run of 400,000 copies. These were distributed free of charge to members of the club, turning the book into the most detailed large-distribution document on colonial territories produced in Italy until then.

The volume's section on Somalia includes two large-scale maps devoted, respectively, to Genale and the Azienda Agricola Sperimentale, and to the Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi. Both images adopt familiar symbology, depicting the areas occupied by agricultural concessions in green and giving pride of place to Italian or Italianised toponyms. The map devoted to Villabruzzo is, however, particularly impressive for the prominence given within it to the transport connections that linked the village to Muqdisho (Mogadiscio in the guide): since 1927, in fact, SAIS had been connected by train to the coast. The (almost) straight black line of the railway dominates the map, justifying its magnitude (it covers two full pages) and its coverage. The only other (almost) regular geometrical shape is provided by the green area representing the village, neatly divided into a grid of square plots, reminiscent of a modern city or, perhaps more



pertinently, a Roman encampment. The textual description of the village covers approximately four pages (the Azienda Agricola Sperimentale had deserved less than one) and provides a detailed account of the history of the settlement and of its activities.<sup>12</sup> Its focus is firmly on the radical transformation of the local landscape, with special emphasis devoted to the technological advances introduced by SAIS:

LA BONIFICA AGRARIA – La squallida boscaglia del medio Scidle, infuocata e riarisa per dieci mesi all'anno, è stata in pochi anni trasformata in un vasto piano coltivato e verdeggiante, attraversato da canali, da strade, da linee deauville [sic] e telefoniche, suddiviso in Aziende, in poderi, in piccoli riquadri pianeggianti, con belle costruz. civili e rurali e con popolosi centri abitati. (791)

[AGRICULTURAL LAND RECLAMATION – The squalid scrub of central Scidle, scorching hot and parched for ten months out of twelve, has been transformed in the short space of a few years into a vast agricultural plain, tinged with green, crossed by canals, roads, deauville [sic] and telephone lines, subdivided into Agricultural Businesses, smallholdings, small regular plots of land, with attractive civil as well as rural buildings and well-populated settlements.]

The railway line and the industrial plant of the Società Saccarifera Somala (SSS) also receive attention, as does a detailed account of the village's production, listed by type of produce and annual yield (with a stress on yearly increases). The language used is strongly familiarising (see for instance the use of the word *poderi*, evoking the typical central Italian smallholding system, in the passage quoted above) and also reminiscent of the imagery associated with similar rural enterprises carried out in Italy by the regime (starting from the key notion of *bonifica*, or land reclamation, but also including, for instance, a detailed account of the creation of a dam on the local river, 790–791). At the same time, attention is also intentionally and repeatedly devoted to the integration of the use of local techniques and traditional tools in the operation of the village, with mentions of a 'piccola accetta somala' (a small Somali hatchet) mostly used to clear the land, of 'ruspe primitive (simili alla *cassabia* egiziana) in legno e ferro' (primitive diggers [similar to the Egyptian *cassabia*] made of wood or iron), or of 'un attrezzo indigeno, la *cabāba*, che serve a spianare la terra o a costruire piccoli canali o argini' (a local tool, the *cabāba*, used to level soil or to build small canals or embankments) (791). Local terminology is also used to refer to climate and seasonal variations (793). And while the initial schematic description of the village concentrates on modern facilities (a hotel, a post office and telegraph station, a hospital, a chemist, a cinema, a mechanical workshop, and even an airstrip, as well as a church), the following pages specifically note that the Duca degli Abruzzi had also ordered the construction of a mosque and a bazaar (792). SAIS is also explicitly mentioned as being responsible for the system followed to organise manpower in the Villaggio, which was based on small concessions given to local families, who were allowed to cultivate half of the land for their own use, while the remaining half was given over to industrial production owned by the Società (792). It is almost as if a double discourse were set up within these pages: on the one hand, a narrative of dramatic intervention and modernisation is established through the repeated reference to modern technology, specialist terminology and detailed numerical data; on the other, the reader has to be regularly reminded of the alien nature of the environment in which the village operates, as if to reinforce both the scale of the effort required and, therefore, the might of the colonial achievement. Yet there is also a sense that some of the systems set in place at Villabruzzo are, to say the least, 'different' with regard to the 'normal' organisation of the colonies – at which point the figure of the Duca and his personal initiative are evoked, to both endorse and justify what might be classed as anomalies.

The Duke of the Abruzzi and his village also made an appearance in popular literature of a different kind: books for children. In 1935 the Turin-based publisher UTET produced a volume

devoted to *I grandi viaggiatori: Avventure di terra e di mare*, which was included in the fourth series of a very popular *collana per ragazzi*, 'La scala d'oro'. The book – narrated by Gustavo Brigante Colonna, illustrated by Golia, and targeted at nine-year-old children – was extremely successful and saw a number of reprints in the following years.

First published in the same year as the launch of the campaign against Ethiopia, *I grandi viaggiatori* has a strongly (though not exclusively) colonial flavour. The volume is made up of 11 brief stories, starting from the travels of Marco Polo, and including both Italian and foreign explorers, from 'Cristoforo Colombo' to 'Fernando Cortez' and 'Giacomo Cook'. The second half of the book is entirely devoted to African travels and includes chapters on the search for the source of the river Nile (with Giovanni Miani and 'Giovanni Speke' as protagonists), on 'Davide Livingstone' (presented as 'Il santo africano' [The African saint]) and on Romolo Gessi ('Il Garibaldi del Sudan' [The Garibaldi of Sudan]). The last two stories in the collection are devoted (in large part) to Somalia. The first tells the tale of Vittorio Bòttego and is a classic African adventure, accompanied by images of intricate forests, primitive populations, and brave white men leading the way while brandishing their weapons. Landscapes are either bare or exuberantly wild, and only occasionally exotically luxuriant. And the hero eventually sacrifices his life, killed in a 'carneficina' (bloodbath) ordered by 'un capo abissino rappresentante di Menelik' (an Abyssinian chief who was a representative of Menelik) (103). Though a handful of his men survive, '[le] ceneri di Vittorio Bòttego non si ritroveranno mai più' (Vittorio Bòttego's ashes will never be found) (103).

This final image contrasts dramatically with the closing page of the last story (and therefore of the whole volume). This last tale, entitled 'La sentinella avanzata' (The vanguard sentry) (104–113), is devoted to the Duke of the Abruzzi, who had died in 1933, only two years before the publication of the book. After following his adventures from an early circumnavigation of the globe to his mountaineering feats, from his polar expeditions to his war exploits, the final page closes with the portrait of the Duke as colonial entrepreneur:

Dopo la guerra, l'ammiraglio si fa agricoltore. Va a colonizzare la Somàlia: fonda sull'Uebi Scebeli, cioè sul "Fiume delle Pantere", un villaggio e un'azienda modello. Dirige personalmente i lavori di bonifica, trasforma la landa incólta e pur ricca d'ogni germe vitale, in una plaga feconda e redditizia. Vive la stessa vita dei suoi coloni, è benevolo e paterno coi negri che lo adorano e ai quali dona il più sicuro e duraturo dei beni: il lavoro. Ma è stanco, troppo stanco. E come si sente morire, chiede di essere sepolto lì, nel suo lontano villaggio tropicale. Lì dorme, sentinella avanzata, nella più lontana terra d'Italia. (113)

[After the war, the admiral turns into the farmer. He goes to Somalia, to colonise the land: on the Uebi Scebeli, the 'River of Panthers', he creates a model village and industrial farm. He personally directs the reclamation work, transforms that fallow wilderness, which is nevertheless rich with all germs of life, into a fecund and profitable region. He leads the same life as his colonists, he is benevolent and fatherly with the blacks, who adore him and to whom he makes a gift of the most reliable and lasting resource: work. But he is tired, too tired. And as he feels death coming upon him, he asks to be buried there, in his faraway tropical village. There he sleeps, our vanguard sentry, in the furthest corner of Italy.]

A number of themes run through this description. The first is of course the myth of 'good colonialism', or of 'Italiani brava gente', represented here by the familiar Fascist theme of war followed by the 'civilising effort', of the soldier turning to agriculture.<sup>13</sup> It is also striking how a completely different image of Somalia emerges from this depiction in comparison with that presented in the tale devoted to Bòttego. On the very last page of a volume that has gradually moved from tales of exploration to colonial narratives, the emphasis has also moved from land discovery to landscape transformation. The exotic 'River of Panthers' and its 'fallow wilderness'

endowed with ‘all germs of life’ are transformed into a model village and an equally model business, into ‘a fecund and profitable region’. The same message is reinforced by the illustration that occupies the top half of the page, depicting local women as they pick cotton in a green field, with a towering colonial building in the background, surmounted by the Italian flag. A further move takes place in the very final sentence. Here, paradoxically, the most distant of Italian territories becomes the place from which the spirit of the Duca can keep watch – presumably on Italy’s further colonial conquests as well as on its enemies. Through that same gesture, an aristocrat who had never fully aligned himself with Fascism and who had effectively left Italy before the advent of the regime becomes the symbol of imperial ethos.

The transformation of distant Somalia into ‘terra d’Italia’, and of the Duke into a hero of Fascist colonialism, was to find its most blatant and extreme conclusion decades later, in a volume also published by UTET and written by a by now old, retired and definitely nostalgic Giotto Dainelli. The book, *Il Duca degli Abruzzi: Le imprese dell’ultimo grande esploratore italiano*, appeared in 1967 and was Dainelli’s last publication, a year before his death. Like his two-volume *Gli esploratori italiani in Africa* (1960), Dainelli’s biography of the Duke was a form of appropriation as well as of personal and collective justification on the part of a man who had remained faithful to Fascism until the very end and who was equally unashamed of Italy’s colonial past.<sup>14</sup> In his last few years, writing biographies of Italian travellers became almost a form of vicarious self-representation, or at least a means through which Dainelli could create a genealogy for himself, inscribing his personal story within a national tradition. At the same time, his concentration on popular genres acted as a substitute and a form of partial compensation for his loss of academic status.

In the volume on Luigi Amedeo di Savoia-Aosta, the identification of the author with his subject is such that the text, though written in the third person, reads almost as an exercise in ventriloquism. The tenth and final chapter is devoted to ‘L’esplorazione dell’Uebi Scebeli’ (The exploration of the Uebi Scebeli). Here Dainelli attributes feelings, thoughts and motivations to the Duke, explaining his decision to leave Italy for Somalia as a result of deep-felt disillusionment with the way in which he had been treated during the First World War, when he had held a high position of command in the Italian navy. This is why, according to Dainelli, Luigi Amedeo developed ‘il desiderio di evadere dal proprio Paese, di andare lontano, lontano sì ma dove la propria bandiera garrisce ancora liberamente . . . sarebbe andato in Somalia, non come in una terra d’esilio, ma in una terra di lavoro, dove far fiorire la moderna civiltà degli uomini’ (the desire to escape from his own country, to go far away, yet to a place where one’s flag is still free to fly in the wind . . . he would go to Somalia, not as one goes into a land of exile, but rather into a land of work, where it is possible to make man’s modern civilization flourish) (296). In this initial elucubration on the Duke’s decision processes, as well as in the following pages which discuss the establishment of SAIS and of the Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi, we find all the recurring themes we have already encountered: the national spirit of the enterprise, its ‘civilising’ ethos and modernising effects, as well as the emphasis on the transformation of landscape through human intervention. Unsurprisingly, Dainelli also adds paternalistic and exotic elements to the mix, as when he remarks on the fact that ‘per i nativi, tutto ciò deve essere stato oggetto di grande meraviglia’ (all this must have seemed like a true wonder to the natives) (299); or on how ‘la Somalia, nel suo complesso, sia una delle regioni africane che più a lungo abbia resistito alla penetrazione delle conoscenze da parte delle genti civili’ (Somalia, as a whole, is among the areas of Africa which resisted for the longest time the penetration of civilized people’s knowledge) (302). There is also, however, a more unusual or unexpected note in Dainelli’s portrait of the Duca

degli Abruzzi's devotion to Somalia: the theme of escape, exile and disillusionment. The colony here becomes a refuge against a motherland that is not paying enough attention to Luigi Amedeo di Savoia, in spite of his fame and popularity. He escapes (almost exiles himself) to Somalia so he can live his last days as an explorer and a colonist, and die there, surrounded by people who, in this narrative, love and respect him.

The paradoxical transformation of Somalia into a substitute of Italian soil and the nostalgic nature of that substitution, operated by Dainelli through his re-narration of the last years of the Duca degli Abruzzi, become transparent in the final pages of the volume, a 'Conclusion' which is as much or more about the biographer as it is about his subject. Here Dainelli evokes the Duke's death at the Villaggio, where, 'circondato da quella che era stata la sua ultima impresa, ... concludeva, in silenzio e in solitudine, la sua vita di gloria' (surrounded by what had been his last enterprise, ... he ended, in silence and solitude, his glorious life) (329). In the final two pages of the book, illustrated with photographs of the house in which the Duke died<sup>15</sup> and of the large granite monolith that marks his tomb, Dainelli narrates his own pilgrimage to the Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi, during the years of the Italian trusteeship over Somalia. There he is met with a nostalgic vision of the perfectly domesticated colonial landscape: 'un grande prato rettangolare, nel mezzo delle colture, e limitato da un'alta serie di alberi disposti regolarmente tutto attorno' (a large rectangular lawn, set among the cultivated land, and bordered on all sides by tall trees planted in a regular shape) (329). At the centre of that space lies the Duke's simple tomb. That image takes Dainelli back in time, and inspires him to perform a gesture that is a commemoration of his own past self as much as of the personal and national hero he has allegedly come to worship:

Solo, il piccolo geografo vagabondo, dinanzi a tanta grandezza, sull'attenti, allora, ed in silenzio assoluto, e gli occhi fissi a quel pilastro di roccia nuda ma così espressivo, ed il braccio destro teso nel saluto romano, l'unico degno di Lui. (331)

[Alone, then, the small wandering geographer, faced by such greatness, standing to attention, and in perfect silence, his eyes staring at that pillar of rock, bare and yet capable of saying so much, with his right arm lifted in the Roman salute, the only one worthy of Him.]

This, however, is not the end of the book: there is one more layer of *mise en abîme* through which readers must find their way. Further years have gone by, marked, according to Dainelli, by the dramatic decadence of the Italian state and of its people (and, of course, by the final loss of Italian control over Somalia). We are now in 1967, and the old geographer is still at his desk, though there is no longer any call for his work. His mind wanders back to youth, to better days, and to the Duke. The pictures created by his imagination seem to come alive in front of his eyes, and his reaction is as immediate as it is inevitable:

... scattò diritto, il vecchio geografo, dietro al suo tavolo di lavoro, ormai senza più lavoro; e fissò dinanzi a sé gli occhi, ormai senza più luce; ed in silenzio levò il braccio destro, alto nel saluto romano: l'unico saluto degno come omaggio alla gloria. (331)

[... he stood up straight, the old geographer, behind his work desk, though there was no work left; and his eyes stared straight ahead, though they had lost their light; and, in silence, he raised his right arm, high in the Roman salute: the only salute which is a worthy homage to glory.]

With his gesture, Dainelli both underlines and sutures the discontinuities between Fascism and the post war period, denouncing the hypocrisy of Italy's colonial amnesia with a salute which is as irreverent as it remains ostensibly invisible, enclosed as it is within the four walls of the old geographer's deserted study (and yet the book was published, by a major Italian publisher, in 1967).



It is also significant that, subsumed in that gesture and in the memories which prompted it, a tamed and transformed version of Somalia – ‘la più esotica e lontana delle colonie italiane’ (the most exotic and distant of Italy’s colonies) (Labanca 2002, 320) – should become a belated symbol of Dainelli’s true lost homeland: that Fascist Italy which he was still mourning more than two decades after the regime’s collapse. The power of colonial landscape and its ability to evoke often discordant images and feelings – from modernity to primitivism, from exotic escapism to heroism, from classic adventure to innovative models of transformation – are on display here, as are the resilience and staying power of those images within the folds of the Italian imagination. In Fascism’s ambiguous ideological and symbolic construction, Italy’s African colonies were both the same and different, both part of the homeland and its discursive other. In the years that followed the collapse of the regime and the ‘loss’ of all overseas possessions, that ambiguity was allowed to persist largely undisturbed. As the memory of the traumas and disillusionments which had accompanied the history of Italian colonialism faded, it became possible to construct the colonial world as a ‘paradiso perduto’ (Del Boca 1996, 432): a lost Eden which acted as the repository of nostalgic memories, however partisan, tendentious or unreliable these might be.

Precisely because of its distance, in terms of both geography and imagination, Somalia was a convenient repository for such nostalgic gestures. It was the nation’s refusal to face the question of colonial memory that allowed Dainelli (and others with him) to cast a green corner of Somalia as ‘forever homeland’. And it is that refusal which still needs to be faced today as we approach the question of colonial landscape from the perspective of a postcolonial Italy. One of the striking characteristics of the material I have been discussing here is the absence of any Somali voices or visual representations from the accounts of the colony they presented to the Italian public. That glaring absence should represent a new point of departure, a suggestion for a more adequate, though not necessarily realistic, representation of the colonial environment and of the forces that shaped it.

## Notes

1. I am using the label ‘African landscape’ consciously here to indicate a construct belonging to the Western imagination and often encountered in literature regarding the continent, rather than as the contained and containable description of real places (which were and are, clearly, not reducible to a single ‘type’).
2. See for instance the notion of ‘spatialising’ bodies discussed in Atkinson (2007).
3. This and all following translations are mine. Since the article makes a number of points about use of language, including specific word choices and stylistic devices, the original Italian quotations will be given together with the translation.
4. Throughout this article I will adopt current spelling of place names and other relevant terminology, except where direct reference is made to the documents I am examining (including quotations and their translation) and to the orthography of the period.
5. As noted by Labanca (2002, 140–141), the so-called *riconquista* (re-conquest) of Libya, while enacted under Mussolini, had already been planned within the framework of Liberal Italy. See also Ahmida (1994); Del Boca (1992).
6. A similar point is made by Fuller (2007, 4–6) in her study of Italian colonial architecture, where she stresses both the ‘strong particularities’ of Italian colonialism and the commonalities it shared with other Western colonisers (6).
7. Besides being republished as a separate volume in the *Opera Omnia* of Oriani (under the auspices of Mussolini himself, who appeared as editor of the whole series), *Fino a Dogali* often provided key pages for miscellaneous works, such as *L’ora d’Africa* (1935), or *Gli eroi, gli eventi, le idee: Pagine scelte* (1929), which, according to Federzoni’s preface, included only pages personally selected by Mussolini.
8. A new edition of the volume, edited by Nicola Labanca, appeared in 1997.

9. Robecchi-Bricchetti's production also included a Libyan travelogue, *All'Oasi di Giove Ammone* (1890), and the volume *Dal Benadir: Lettere illustrate alla Società Antischiaivista d'Italia* (1904).
10. The titles can be translated as: 'A chocolate-coloured Madame Butterfly'; 'A ... stormy landing'; 'A not-so-succulent breakfast'; 'Initial topographical observations'; 'Anthropological collections'; 'Mobile and static dunes'; 'The activities of the Istituto Geografico Militare in Somalia'; 'An outing on the Giuba by motorboat'; 'An outing to Biejra'; 'An excursion to Bender Suguma'; 'The river boat'.
11. Agricultural settlements also became a feature of Italian colonisation in Libya, where their aims and characteristics were, however, substantially different from the ones I am discussing here. For an analysis of Libyan settlement and its characteristics see Fuller (2007), especially 171–196.
12. It should be noted that similar publications that appeared in subsequent years also devoted specific attention to the village. The 1938 volume *Africa Orientale Italiana* published in Milan by the Consociazione Turistica Italiana, for instance, included a separate section on 'Il Villaggio Duca degli Abruzzi' (599–605), with subsections devoted to travel by railway and by road, as well as to the village itself.
13. An eloquent depiction of this rhetorical image is provided by a postcard designed by G. Ferrari for the purpose of colonial propaganda. The drawing shows a soldier in black shirt and colonial hat, who has rested his gun against a tree and is now using a tractor to plough the land. The unmistakable profile of an *amba* – the typical flat-topped mountain often associated with representations of Ethiopia – in the background confirms the colonial location, as does the quotation from Mussolini reproduced at the bottom of the card: 'Voi dovete armonizzare il combattente col lavoratore, il soldato con il colonizzatore. I legionari romani, dopo aver conquistato le colonie, deponavano la daga, aprivano le strade, dissodavano il terreno' (You must combine the fighter with the worker, the soldier, the coloniser. The legionaries of Rome, after conquering a colony, put down their sword, opened up new roads, ploughed the land). The image can be seen in Brilli and Chieli (2001, 76).
14. Dainelli was the last *podestà* (Fascist governor) of Florence and then joined the Republic of Salò. After retiring in 1953 he continued to publish profusely. His school textbooks also remained in print, with various revisions. Vol. II of *Paesi e genti* (1953) significantly included chapters on 'Territori geograficamente italiani politicamente spettanti ad altri stati' (Areas belonging to Italy in geographical terms but assigned to other states for political purposes) and 'I vecchi possedimenti italiani d'oltre mare' (Old Italian possessions overseas). The first covers areas from Nice and Monaco to Istria, or the 'Isole Maltesi', the second is devoted to Libya, Eritrea and Somalia.
15. The image is remarkably similar to the drawing on the final page of *I grandi viaggiatori* and probably represents the same building.

### Notes on contributor

**Loredana Polezzi** is Associate Professor (Reader) in Italian Studies at the University of Warwick, UK, Academic Director of the Warwick Centre in Venice, and Monash-Warwick Associate Professor in the School of Languages, Literatures, Cultures and Linguistics, Monash University (Australia). Her main research interests are in translation studies, comparative literature and the history of travel writing. She is the author of *Translating Travel: Contemporary Italian Travel Writing in English Translation* (Aldershot–Brookfield: Ashgate, 2001) and co-editor of *Borderlines: Migrazioni e identità nel Novecento* (Isernia: Cosmo Iannone Editore, 2003) and *In Corpore: Bodies in Post-Unification Italy* (Madison, WI: Fairleigh Dickinson, 2007). She has guest-edited special issues of *The Translator* (2006), *Studies in Travel Writing* (2012, with Sharon Ouditt) and *Textus* (2012, with Elio Di Piazza).

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