

Sherlock Holmes in Abyssinia: subverting colonial power in Carlo Lucarelli's *Albergo Italia* and *Il tempo delle iene*

Enrico Zammarchi

Gonzaga University

ABSTRACT

Carlo Lucarelli is a bestselling author of Italian crime and mystery novels (also known as *gialli*) who often engages with the topics of Italian colonialism and Fascism. As such, Lucarelli has contributed to a growing subgenre within Italian literature, known as *giallo coloniale*. This article looks at two of Lucarelli's most recent novels – *Albergo Italia* (2014) and *Il tempo delle iene* (2015) – to discuss how its characters aim at subverting the power relations that would traditionally occur between European colonizers and colonized subjects. The article argues that Lucarelli's strategic alternation of the Italian and Tigrinya languages and the identification of an indigenous police officer with the more famous literary character of Sherlock Holmes lead readers to question the effectiveness of Italy's power over its East African colonies.

Keywords

Carlo Lucarelli, Italian colonialism, Eritrea, *giallo* literature, Sherlock Holmes

In the second half of the 20th century, Italian mystery novels – known as *gialli*¹ – were gradually reevaluated due to their ability to combine entertainment with elements of social critique. While some *gialli* denounce the disfunctions of the Italian political and social systems and their troubling relation with Italy's historic memory (Milanesi 2009; Pezzotti 2014), others problematize the increasing industrialization of Italian cities and the potentialities of its urban sprawls to foster crime (Pezzotti 2012; Covi 2020). As showed by Giuliana Pieri, in the postmodern world, “crime fiction has been transformed by Italian writers into a new powerful vehicle to express Italy's discontents,” hence proving the “need to re-engage with the time-honored tradition of *impegno*, the social and political commitment that we strongly associate with Italian post-war literature and culture” (Pieri 2011, 4). Another trend that has experienced increasing popularity within the *giallo* literary genre is the one that combines elements of mystery and historical fiction. Of particular relevance within this subgenre are *giallo* novels set during Italy's colonial period, which recuperate tropes that are typical of colonial literature – such as exotic environments – and turn linguistic and racial differences typical of the colony into elements of mystery. In their discussion on the state of Italian contemporary literature, Bologna-based writers collective Wu Ming theorized the existence of a new Italian epic.

According to Wu Ming, some novels written by authors such as Pino Cacucci, Valerio Evangelisti, Roberto Saviano, and Wu Ming themselves, provide the readers with epic narratives, since they are centered on

historical or mythical events, heroic or adventurous facts: wars, anabasis, initiation journeys, fights for survival, always within vaster conflicts that decide the fates of [social] classes, peoples, nations, or even the whole of humankind, all the while historical crises and catastrophes happen, and social formations collapse.² (Wu Ming 2009, 14)

Among the texts that Wu Ming references is Carlo Lucarelli's novel *L'ottava vibrazione* (The Eighth Vibration, 2008). Set in Massawa, Eritrea, the novel focuses on the days that precede the Battle of Adwa on 1 March 1896, where the Italian Army, in an attempt to expand their domination over East Africa, was defeated by the Ethiopian troops led by their commander and *negus*, Menelik. While Lucarelli's novel was met with good commercial success upon its publication, several scholars pointed out how it offers problematic representations of Southern Italian men, as well as Eritrean women (Stefani 2010; Sabelli 2013). Following *L'ottava vibrazione*, Lucarelli published two more novels that are set in a similar colonial setting but revolve around different characters: *Albergo Italia* (Hotel Italy, 2014) and *Il tempo delle iene* (The Time of Hyenas, 2015). In what follows, I aim to offer a novel interpretation of these two texts by showing how they subvert the power relations that would traditionally occur between Italian colonizers and colonized indigenous subjects, represented by the characters of Piero Colaprico and Ogbagabriel Ogbà respectively. In particular, I argue that Lucarelli makes strategic use of linguistic elements, interrupting the narration in Italian and alternating it with terms and sayings in Tigrinya, to encourage a questioning of the effectiveness of Italy's power over its colonies. To frame my analysis, I begin by offering a brief review of the history of Italy's colonial *gialli* and the academic debates that emerged after the publication of Lucarelli's *L'ottava vibrazione*, which ultimately point towards a reading of the novel as Lucarelli's first attempt to problematize Italy's colonial expedition.

The Italian Colonial *Giallo* and the Case of Carlo Lucarelli's *L'ottava vibrazione*

In her discussion of the reception of Italy's colonial experience in public discourse, postcolonial studies scholar Sandra Ponzanesi writes that, even more than fifty years after its end, "the Italian presence in Africa is often denied or marginalized, recognized as historically too short and spatially limited when compared with the one of other empires. [...] As a result, such experience leads to the creation of a 'postcolonial unconscious'" (Ponzanesi 2004, 26). Her concept of a postcolonial unconscious – which she defines as the "the discarding, discrediting, and generally repressing of the history of colonial expansion" (Ponzanesi 2012, 52) – allows us to codify contemporary resistances to the long-lasting effects of the Italian colonial experience. As Alessandro Triulzi and Ruth have noted, "[t]he increasing flux of immigrants

coming from the former colonies has re-opened Europe's memory to the idea of 'colonial divisions'" (Iyob and Triulzi 2007, 24), providing multiple frameworks through which today's so-called 'migrant crises' can be read as a direct continuation and consequence of Europe's colonial experience. It follows that a revision of Italian colonialism and its problematic legacies may finally allow Italy to recognize its colonial past as an unresolved "cultural trauma" that Italians have not wanted to admit (Jedlowski 2011, 37).

Even if Italy has been one of the few ex-colonial powers to accept the need for colonial reparations,³ the implementation of such measures has generally failed "to engender any social memory of the colonial past [...] and instead led to systemic violations of human rights in the treatment of migrants" (De Cesari 2012, 322; see also Bufalini 2017). Moreover, unlike other European nations, Italy's demography has been only minimally impacted by the postcolonial migration of Africans from the country's former colonies (see Marchetti 2014; Morone 2015; Deplano 2017; Colucci 2018, 32). Not having a tangible and widespread presence of postcolonial subjects on the Italian territory also meant that Italy's colonial experience was rarely a central subject of its post-World War II literary production. Indeed, the few examples that scholars cite – Ennio Flaiano's *Tempo di uccidere* (Time to Kill, 1947), Mario Tobino's *Il deserto della Libia* (Libya's Desert, 1952), and Giuseppe Berto's *Guerra in camicia nera* (War in a Black Shirt, 1962) – reveal contrasting interpretations of Italian colonialism, with some texts showing elements of nostalgia or even apologetic narratives (see Tommasello 2004, 200). Following decades of silence, the question of Italy's colonial experience started to re-emerge in the early 1990s, with the literary trend of the so-called *letteratura italiana della migrazione* (Italian migration literature; see Comberiatì 2010). However, it was not until the early 2000s, thanks to a new wave of African-Italian writers such as Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, Gabriella Ghermandi, and Igiaba Scego (see Alessi 2019), that Italy's colonial experience was finally critically assessed. Consequently, *giallo* novels also started to focus on Italy's colonial period, with authors such as Andrea Camilleri (*La presa di Macallè*, 2003; *Il nipote del Negus*, 2010), Giorgio Ballario (*Morire è un attimo*, 2008; *Una donna di troppo*, 2009; *Le rose di Axum*, 2012), Luciano Marrocu (*Debrà Libanòs*, 2002), and many more who contributed to the creation of a literary subgenre known as "giallo coloniale" (D'Arcangeli and Lori 2016).

While *giallo* novels that are set in Italy during the Fascist regime often emphasize the role of police detectives as authorities that have complicated relationships with the hegemonic apparatus of the regime, the *giallo coloniale* subgenre adds a further layer of complexity given by geographical, linguistic, and racial elements (Sangiorgi 2004; Somigli 2007).⁴ *Giallo* novels that are set in Fascist Italy usually portray a reality that is environmentally, linguistically, and racially homogeneous, where threats come from perpetrators who look like and speak the same language as the authorities. On the contrary, *giallo coloniale* novels recuperate narrative strategies that are typical of colonial literature, such as the use of environmental factors to

further exoticize the territories that are subject to colonial rules, or the depiction of indigenous peoples in animalistic terms.⁵ In other words, tropical vegetation and torrid climates that are inhabited by beasts are opposed to Europe's more temperate weather, where calm and rationality are the norm. Furthermore, the relationships of power that occur in the colonies between military authorities and civilians are often intertwined with discourses of difference – either linguistic or racial – which are practically absent in mainland Italy during the Fascist regime.⁶

In the 1990s, Carlo Lucarelli published five novels that are set between 1925 and 1948,⁷ hence covering most of Benito Mussolini's Fascist dictatorship as well as some of the unresolved tensions of the afterwar period. With *L'ottava vibrazione* (2008), however, Lucarelli moved the plot to pre-Fascist colonial Eritrea, constructing a perfect example of *giallo coloniale*. Interviewed about the upcoming release of the book, Lucarelli motivated this change of setting by claiming that Italy's former colonies could be considered an Italian version of the American Far West: a space that allows him to narrate adventurous metaphors (Baricco 2008), which would otherwise be impossible to concoct in mainland Italy. *L'ottava vibrazione* is a complex text, full of characters and with multiple and coexisting narrative levels: it is difficult to identify a central line in the plot, as well as who the main characters are. As pointed out by Wu Ming, Lucarelli's narrative style contributes to the creation of a sense of estrangement among the readers, who struggle to make sense of what is happening in the novel and how it relates to real events (Wu Ming 2009, 77). Much has been written on the narrative content of Lucarelli's book as well as the author's writing style: some have drawn parallels between *L'ottava vibrazione* and Torquato Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* (Porcelli 2010), while others have focused on the tragicomic aspects of Lucarelli's narrative style (Jurišić 2012), or how the topic of nostalgia is discussed in the novel (Santangelo 2018, 86). Certainly, Lucarelli's novel has also received several critical comments.

Many scholars have criticized the stereotyped and 'racialized' manner in which Lucarelli portrays both indigenous Eritreans and Italian soldiers from southern Italy.⁸ For example, Paolo Jedlowski writes that Lucarelli's representation of Italy's colonial past ends up being ambivalent: on the one hand, it "reflects a degree of attention [...] but on the other, it adopts certain commonplaces. So it reactivates the memory of colonialism, but does not adopt a position" (Jedlowski 2011, 38). Similarly, Giulietta Stefani writes that Lucarelli's novel lacks "an additional layer that could have been given by a further problematization of the colonial experience lived by Italian characters, as well as a less stereotypical characterization of indigenous characters, and a better articulation of the relationships between the two groups, colonizers and colonized" (Stefani 2010, 51). On the contrary, Franco Manai believes that

in his realistic description of the disorganized and corrupted condition of the Italian troops that were about to fight in the Battle of Adwa, [Lucarelli] had no intention of contributing to the removal [of the

colonial experience] from the collective memory of the Italians. [...] On the contrary, the style and content of *L'ottava vibrazione* reveal the author's clear will of emphasizing the crimes, misdeeds, and responsibilities of Italy's colonial operation in Africa. (2012, 325)

An additional critical element in Lucarelli's text emerges when we consider the kind of treatment that female characters receive throughout the book. For example, Sonia Sabelli argues that Lucarelli's novel contributes to the representation of indigenous characters as animalesque and of inferior status. As Sabelli argues, in Lucarelli's novel "the affirmation of whiteness as a synonym of Italianness is complementary to the devaluation of blackness, which is considered as the quintessential form of alterity" (Sabelli 2013, 37). Moreover, such alterity is strongly characterized by questions of sexual nature: black women are described as sexual objects for white European men, while black men are portrayed as ruthless murderers, who aim at capturing and castrating the Italian enemy. As a result, black masculinity represents a constant threat for the virility of white Italians, who need to protect themselves from the risk of castration, not just a physical but a symbolic disablement: in fact, it undermines Italy's colonial power (Sabelli 2013, 38).

Two examples of such distorted representations of gender roles emerge in the cases of the black female characters Aicha and Sabà. As Giulietta Stefani writes, the former is a prostitute of unknown origins who does not speak Italian; therefore, she is solely described through the words of her lover-client – Italian colonial functionary Vittorio Cappa – aside from the narrator's own descriptions (Stefani 2010, 53). Aicha is primarily described through her body, which is seen through animalistic and hyper-sexualized lenses; her skin color sometimes merges with the obscurity of dark spaces, perpetuating orientalist stereotypes that frame her as a mysterious and sexually tempting character. In this view, Aicha's body becomes the target of European adventurous endeavors, which aim at 'conquering' her just as much as they would like to 'penetrate' into the exotic territories of the African colonies. The other black female character in Lucarelli's novel – Sabà, the Eritrean concubine of Italian Captain Branciamore – is also presented through similar terminologies: her body is celebrated because of its high physical compatibility with the one of her lover-client. Because of that, Stefani concludes that "it does not seem possible to depict female African characters if not in relation to their corporeality and sensuality, and sometimes their animality" (Stefani 2010, 53).

Narrative strategies that rely on the 'animalization' and hyper-sexualization of the black bodies of colonized subjects are not new to scholars of postcolonial studies (see Fanon 1967; Césaire 1972) and, unfortunately, Lucarelli does not seem to fully resolve them in subsequent novels, set in Italy's colonial era (D'Arcangeli and Lori 2016, 78). Indeed, not only does *L'ottava vibrazione* lack the subversion of colonial stereotypes that would be expected from this kind of contemporary literature: it is in fact replete with them. As emphasized by Sabelli, this shows how "a postcolonial perspective is not a matter of chronology, but one of critical consciousness"

(Sabelli 2013, 35). In concluding the first part of my personal analysis of Carlo Lucarelli's *giallo coloniale* novels, I find myself agreeing with Giulietta Stefani's opinion: ultimately, I am not concerned with an evaluation of the author's creative skills, nor am I interested in discussing whether or not Lucarelli had considered the repercussions of his narrative choices (Stefani 2010, 54). What I am more interested in understanding, instead, is the kind of reception that Italian readers – who, perhaps, have not extensively studied Italy's colonial history – may have when they are faced with this text. What kind of message is understood by readers who do not read this book alongside a series of critical voices? And what is left out?

I believe that these questions remain pending in relation to *L'ottava vibrazione*. However, subsequent novels that continue Lucarelli's exploration of *giallo coloniale* – that is, *Albergo Italia* and *Il tempo delle iene* – do include elements that address some of the critiques discussed so far in relation to *L'ottava vibrazione*. In the next section, I will focus on the relationship that Lucarelli develops between the two protagonists of the novel: Piero Colaprico – the Italian commander of the Royal *Carabinieri* Company in the Eritrean colony – and Ogbagabriel Ogbà, an indigenous *carabiniere* with the role of *brigadiere*. Moreover, I will discuss Lucarelli's strategic linguistic mix of Italian and Tigrinya. I will argue that these novels aim at subverting traditional narratives on the inferiority of indigenous characters and, more broadly, that they question the value of Italy's colonial occupation in East Africa.

Sherlock Holmes in Abyssinia: power relations in *Albergo Italia* and *Il tempo delle iene*

Following the publication of *L'ottava vibrazione*, in 2008, Carlo Lucarelli met Yodit, an Eritrean-American woman who, a few years later, became his wife. It is this personal event that – as Lucarelli himself revealed during a book presentation in Parma in 2015 – convinced him to further explore the theme of Italy's colonial expansion in Eritrea, leading to the publication of two new novels (Arganini and Orlo 2015). Set between 1896 and 1899, the series of homicides at the center of *Albergo Italia* and *Il tempo delle iene* take place right after the Battle of Adwa on 1 March 1896, which was at the center of *L'ottava vibrazione*. Moreover, one of the two protagonists – *Carabinieri* Captain Piero Colaprico – is not entirely new to Lucarelli's readers, having appeared as a secondary character in *L'ottava vibrazione*. Such a strategy allows Lucarelli to establish a narrative continuum among the three novels, which share temporal and geographical settings while having a radically different approach to the characterization of its protagonists.

As mentioned by Luciana D'Arcangeli and Laura Lori, Lucarelli's decision to set these novels in a period that precedes the emergence of Italian Fascism represents a brave move: not many Italian readers know that Italy's first attempt to colonize sectors of Africa took place in the late 19th century, and not during Mussolini's regime (D'Arcangeli and Lori 2016, 83).

While *Albergo Italia* and *Il tempo delle iene* are set after the Battle of Adwa, such a defeat is still extremely significant among the characters of the novels. For example, Captain Colaprico remembers having taken part in the battle; however, he does not dare to express a moral judgement on this event, nor does he express opinions on the presence of Italian troops in Eritrea (Lucarelli 2015, 70). Captain Colaprico, as characterized by Lucarelli, is an upright *carabiniere* who prides himself with his oath of loyalty to both King Umberto I and the Italian law system. On the one hand, Colaprico often shows indulgence to the indigenous population, acknowledging their customs and traditions and showing some familiarity with East African culture. In doing this, I argue, Colaprico indirectly recognizes Eritreans' status as victims of Italian colonialism, even if he does not explicitly show compassion. On the other hand, Colaprico's attitude becomes radically different when he deals with the Italian residents of the colony. He is well aware of the widespread corruption in the colony and his judgement is not influenced by the social status and political power of those whom he suspects of a crime. Indeed, Colaprico aims at having potential criminals judged by due legal process, even if he anticipates that Italian courts of law will most likely ignore crimes that have been committed in foreign and colonized territories and against individuals who are considered racially inferior by the Italian State.

Next to Captain Colaprico in both novels, readers quickly get to learn about the *buluk-bashi* of the *zaptiè* – that is, the *brigadiere* of indigenous *carabinieri* – Ogbagabriel Ogbà. He is a former farmer turned *carabiniere* because of economic needs, after Eritrea was swarmed by locusts that caused a deep agricultural crisis. Ogbà does not seem to have the same innate passion for justice as Colaprico; however, his character is very likeable because he demonstrates an attention for details that would otherwise be ignored by Colaprico and other Italian officers. Ogbà's investigative methodology often relies on cultural factors: thanks to his familiarity with Eritrean society, class system, and physical environment, Ogbà can read other characters and potential suspects in ways that are different from Colaprico's. Moreover, as I will discuss more in detail later in the essay, Ogbà's linguistic skills and his frequent code-switching between Tigrinya and Italian grant him with a privileged position during the course of the investigations led by Colaprico. Ogbà's name is inspired by Lucarelli's wife's grandfather, who during the Italian occupation of Eritrea worked as an indigenous *carabiniere*. According to Lucarelli, "this character is fundamental because he provides readers with the point of view of the indigenous population" (Arganini and Orlo 2015). Aside from Ogbà's privileged understanding of Eritrea's reality under colonial times, I argue that Ogbà is much more than a simple partner to Captain Colaprico – or, as D'Arcangeli and Lori define him, a "sidekick" (D'Arcangeli and Lori 2016, 76). Rather, through Ogbà's character, Lucarelli attempts to subvert traditional power relations that occur in colonial contexts and, more importantly, he succeeds in demystifying Italy's colonial experience.

Both *Albergo Italia* and *Il tempo delle iene*'s narrations are centered around Captain Colaprico, whose character occupies most of the two novels. The positive nature of Colaprico's character as well as his nationality allow Italian readers to identify with him. However, Ogbà's key role in Lucarelli's novels already emerges in *Albergo Italia*'s initial pages. After Ogbà repeatedly contradicts an Italian *carabiniere*, hence causing his irritation, Colaprico breaks the tension saying to the officer: "Please, marshal, when *buluk-bashi* Ogbà speaks, I always listen to him. Do you know what I call him? Abyssinia's Sherlock Holmes" (Lucarelli 2014, 10).⁹ Colaprico's consideration of Ogbà does not simply originate from his good character, nor does it come from Colaprico's open-minded attitude towards the indigenous populations and their customs and traditions. Rather, what Lucarelli suggests, from the very first pages of the novel, is a subversion of power relations. Even if Ogbà ignores Arthur Conan Doyle's body of work, Colaprico identifies Ogbà with the metaphorical role of Sherlock Holmes; being much more than Holmes's sidekick, Doctor Watson, Ogbà's relevance counters pre-established military and social hierarchies in the Eritrean colony. As a result, Ogbà stands as a rhetorical challenge to the supposedly superior intellect of the Italian colonizers, indirectly showing the limitations of Italy's colonial experience.

Several other passages in the novel show, sometimes with sarcastic tones, the central role that Ogbà gets to play, while gradually assigning to the Italian troops the role of subaltern companions at best. For example, it is Ogbà who initiates the criminal investigation in *Albergo Italia*, strategically moving a stool that is on the crime scene and showing the Italian *carabinieri* that what they had initially interpreted as a suicide is instead a homicide. Similarly, in *Il tempo delle iene*, Ogbà is the one who pushes the Italian *carabinieri* to reconsider their conclusions on the case, demonstrating how a dead woman that is found in a hut has not been killed by hyenas, but rather by humans. Hesitating on how to intervene in the conversation that the Italian *carabinieri* are having, Ogbà states:

No,— Ogbà says, and he thinks about it, *mbí*. Too much in a hurry, and too confident, usually he would have started with *if I may, captain*, or *with all due respect*, [...] Too much in a hurry, however. Captain Colaprico may be *hawunà*, down to earth, and he may be used to his objections, but he is still a superior to him, and he is a *t'liàn*, a *cullu ba'ilei*, a know-it-all, like all Italians. (Lucarelli 2015, 28)

While Ogbà is aware of military hierarchies and the need to maintain a distanced and formal language, his superior intuitive skills are what leads to a change of the initial judgement on the crime that was committed. Therefore, Ogbà's point of view prevails over said hierarchies.

As these excerpts suggest, Ogbà is the real protagonist of the novels, since his knowledge of the language, culture, and geography of the Eritrean colony leads the Italian officers to the resolution of criminal cases. Naturally, this does not mean that Captain Colaprico and the other Italian *carabinieri* who are involved in the investigations are entirely hanging off Ogbà's words; indeed, Captain Colaprico and other Italians characters occupy most of the

pages in the novels. However, while this may be true quantitatively, Ogbà's intuitions are what ultimately causes the novels to progress. When asked about the nature of the Colaprico-Ogbagabriel investigative team, Lucarelli stated:

Initially, there was only Colaprico; then, as ioften happens, there needs to be a narrative motivation, an alter ego that makes the plot move. Ogbà grew gradually, page after page, thanks to my wife's stories about her grandfather; I talked to her relatives and, by the end, it is difficult to understand who the real protagonist is: Ogbà or Colaprico. (Vincenzi 2015)

Further proof of Ogbà's centrality in Lucarelli's novels comes from the author's strategic alternation of the Italian and Tigrinya languages, as well as the sporadic use of English, French, and a series of Italian regional dialects. The use of regional dialects was already a characteristic of *L'ottava vibrazione*, which some scholars found to be slightly pedantic (Stefani 2010, 50) as well as "indicative of the lack of linguistic and cultural homogeneity in a nation [such as Italy] that has just started its process of linguistic and cultural unification" (Sabelli 2013, 36). In the acknowledgments section that concludes *Il tempo delle iene*, Lucarelli emphasizes the issues that he had in the transliteration between Tigrinya and Italian and, maybe sarcastically, also mentions equal difficulties in switching between the Romagnolo dialect used by some of the characters in the novel and 'standard' Italian (Lucarelli 2015, 197). Many of the indigenous characters that populate these novels make use of Tigrinya in two strategic ways: it serves the purpose of communicating exclusively among indigenous characters – hence limiting comprehension and leaving Italian colonizers out of the conversation – or it can be a way for indigenous people to express themselves in more specific and precise ways while simultaneously refusing the language imposed by the colonizers. In the latter sense, Ogbà often becomes a linguistic mediator: taking advantage of Colaprico's own elementary knowledge of Tigrinya, Ogbà switches back and forth between the two languages, verifying his understanding of what is said in Italian while also enriching his own knowledge of Italian language and culture. Indeed, just like Ogbà familiarizes himself with new terms in Italian by repeating and attempting to use them in everyday conversations, the readers also start to familiarize themselves with basic words in Tigrinya because of their frequent repetition during the novel.

After some time, readers become familiar with words such as *berghèz* (obvious), *ferengi* (foreigner), *t'liàn* (Italian), *hawunà* (down to earth), *cullu ba'llèi* (know-it-all), as well as the aforementioned *buluk-basci* and *zaptiè* that identify Ogbà's military hierarchy. The frequent alternation of Italian and Tigrinya provides the readers with an idea of how, under Italy's colonial domination, Eritrea was forced to accept the use of Italian. Moreover, it also reveals how knowledge of Tigrinya may still be a fundamental tool that allows for the creation of privileged positions of power. For example, Ogbà is certainly useful to Captain Colaprico as a translator during the investigations, but his role as mediator goes beyond the question of

language. Ogbà's knowledge of the Tigrinya language and his awareness of cultural mechanisms within the Eritrean colony make him a more reliable figure for those indigenous subjects who do not trust Italian colonial authorities and, instead, prefer to address Ogbà using their native language. At the same time, Ogbà also makes a strategic use of the Italian language with his Italian interlocutors, either leaving them astonished because of his high level of proficiency or pretending not to speak it at all when it is more convenient. While this lack of knowledge of the Italian language favors the perpetuation of racial stereotypes that several *carabinieri* have of Ogbà and the indigenous population, it also allows Ogbà not to waste time dealing with *t'liàn cullu ba'llèi* (know-it-all Italians). As a result, Ogbà's multilingual skills further cement his role as the protagonist of the novels, while simultaneously exposing the refusal of the locals to succumb to the use of the Italian language despite Italy's colonial domination.

Lastly, Lucarelli's decision to use several languages within the two novels allows him to draw further connections between Ogbà and his more famous counterpart, Sherlock Holmes. In *Albergo Italia*, Ogbà once states: "What seems impossible, when there is no other explanation, must be true" (Lucarelli 2014, 66), which Colaprico immediately recognizes as almost identical to one of Sherlock Holmes's mottos. In this passage, Ogbà expresses himself directly in Italian, while Colaprico is familiar with that phrase because he has read Conan Doyle's novels in the original English version. The same sentence is reprised in *Albergo Italia*'s final lines, and the comparison between Ogbà and Sherlock Holmes continues in the following novel. In the initial pages of *Il tempo delle iene*, while reflecting on the crime that just happened, before he falls asleep, Ogbà thinks in a mix of Tigrinya and Italian: "*kem fulut neghèr zeybahriawí yelèn*. There's nothing more unnatural than what is obvious" (Lucarelli 2015, 17). The sentence – which first appeared in Conan Doyle's 1891 short story "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," published in *The Strand Magazine* – is repeated by Ogbà at the end of the novel, leaving Captain Colaprico once again amazed by such similarities (Lucarelli 2015, 196).

Even if *Il tempo delle iene*'s final pages reaffirm Ogbà's ignorance of Conan Doyle's character – to the point that Ogbà genuinely asks Captain Colaprico: "who the hell is this Sherlock Holmes you talk about?" (Lucarelli 2015, 196) – the overall idea that emerges from Lucarelli's narration is that investigative genius (and the more general intellectual skills that come with it) should neither be limited to the famous detectives of well-established literary traditions, nor to Italian colonial authorities only. In other words, by drawing a comparison between Ogbà's and Sherlock Holmes's intelligence, Lucarelli gives value to a victim of Italy's colonial experience. He does not merely put Ogbà on the same level as Captain Colaprico; rather, he emphasizes Ogbà's relevance for the solution of multiple criminal cases and highlights his intellectual independence and worth. By doing this, Lucarelli revises traditional power relations occurring in colonial contexts, thus demystifying Italy's colonial experience.

Conclusion: 'Giallo coloniale' as a Subversive Narrative Strategy

Carlo Lucarelli's *Albergo Italia* and *Il tempo delle iene* share similar geographical and temporal features to his 2008 novel *L'ottava vibrazione*, while also providing readers with a radically different characterization of the main protagonists. In *Albergo Italia* and *Il tempo delle iene*, the events that revolve around colonial authorities such as Captain Piero Colaprico and other Italian officers occupy most of the book. And yet, the intuitions of indigenous police officer Ogbagabriel Ogbà are what lead to the start and solution of multiple criminal investigations. Ogbà's attention to detail, as well as his knowledge of the Italian language and awareness of cultural norms within Eritrean society ultimately grant him a position of power that is uncommon among other indigenous characters in *giallo coloniale* novels. While Ogbà's status in the Eritrean colony is still subjected to the norms of official military and racial hierarchies, the respect that he earns from Captain Colaprico disrupts traditional narratives of the inferiority of indigenous characters and, more broadly, pushes readers to question the value of Italy's colonial occupation in East Africa. Far from simply perpetuating exotic tropes that are typical of colonial literature, Lucarelli's own version of the 'giallo coloniale' destabilizes the stereotypical power relations between European colonizers and colonized subjects.

Notes

¹ The word *giallo* is Italian for 'yellow'. The term comes from a series of popular mystery and crime novels with distinctive yellow covers that were published in the 1930s by Mondadori in Milan (see Pieri 2011).

² All translations from Italian are mine.

³ As stated by Chiara De Cesari: "Before the Italy–Libya Treaty, no formal apology or compensation had been offered by the government of a former colonial power" (De Cesari 2012, 319).

⁴ As Minne G. De Boer notes, what complicates the relationship between police detectives in Fascist times and the hegemonic apparatus of the regime is the representations of the latter by authors who, like Lucarelli, were born after the end of the regime (De Boer 2010, 263). De Boer asks: should authors represent the regime as it was at the time, or as modern mass media represents it today? American novelist Thomas Mullen attempted to tackle similar questions —albeit with different examples— in his discussion of what he calls *totalitarian noir* (see Mullen 2021).

⁵ Naturally, I do not mean to dismiss how similar techniques of animalization were also used under the Fascist regime. For example, Mia Fuller has analyzed Fascism's strategic use of archaeology and architecture to establish and reinforce the social and racial hierarchies that separated the Italian 'civilizers' from the African 'barbarians' (Fuller 2007).

⁶ Indeed, even when racial and linguistic differences are present in Italy, they are routinely suppressed and hegemonically homogenized by the regime. An example of that can be seen in novels such as Wu Ming 2 and Antar Mohamed's *Timira: Romanzo meticcio*. In the book, Isabella and Giorgio are the dark-skinned daughter and son of Fascist soldier Giuseppe Marincola and Somali woman Ashkiro Hassan, with whom Marincola establishes a relationship based on the practice of *madamato*. After he is dismissed from the army, Marincola manages to bring Isabella and Giorgio to Italy, where a discussion of his children's racial difference is perpetually avoided, hence contributing to their gradual racial homogenization. The literature on *madamato* is quite vast; for some examples see Campassi 1987; Lyob, 2005; Poidimani 2006; Stefani 2007.

⁷ Those are *Indagine non autorizzata* (Unauthorized Investigation, 1993), *L'isola dell'angelo caduto* (The Island of the Fallen Angel, 1999), as well as the first three books of the police commissioner De Luca series: *Carta bianca* (Carte Blanche, 1990), *L'estate torbida* (Turbid Summer, 1991), and *Via delle Oche* (Goose Street, 1996). Since 2017, Lucarelli has published three new novels that continue this series.

⁸ On the use of the term 'razzializzante' (deriving from 'racializing' and 'racialized') in the Italian context, Teresa De Lauretis writes that these are "important neologisms because they communicate the idea

that race is neither a genetic fact nor a natural property of the body, but rather a cultural construction imposed by the West” (De Lauretis 1999, 113; see also Mellino 2012).

⁹ The same comparison is repeated in Lucarelli’s *Il tempo delle iene*, where Colaprico grants a few days of leave to Ogbà because “[Colaprico] knew his *buluk-basci* [Ogbà] enough to know that he had something in mind. And since Ogbà was his Abyssinian Sherlock Holmes, he granted the leave immediately” (Lucarelli 2015, 137).

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Enrico Zammarchi is Assistant Professor of Italian in the Modern Languages and Literature Department at Gonzaga University. He holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Studies from The Ohio State University, where he wrote a dissertation on the development of hip-hop culture in Italy. His work analyzes the connections between music and politics, with a particular interest in 1990s popular and protest music, social movements, and radicalism in Italy. His other research interests include the field of postcolonial studies, mystery and noir novels, as well as regionalism in Italy. Email: zammarchi@gonzaga.edu