‘A Roman Holiday?’

African Americans and Italians in World War II

> Here were White Italians greeting Negro Americans as liberators, showering us with love, while in our own country we remained second-class in all respects.
>
> I soon became aware [that] the Italian people had suffered a great deal and… that our troops had a great empathy for them. The Italian people recognized this and there immediately developed a wonderful rapport which apparently did not exist in the same intensity between the Italians and the white troops.
>
> I am sure the fondest memories the men of the 92nd Division have of the whole war are of Italy and its people.[1]

Three months after becoming the first African American to be awarded America’s most prestigious military decoration, the Medal of Honour, Vernon J. Baker returned to Italy where he had served in World War II to receive another accolade. In April 1997 he was granted honorary Italian citizenship in a public ceremony held in the small town of Montignoso. Scenes of Baker’s return to Italy appear in *Inside Buffalo,* an Italian documentary celebrating the achievements of the 92nd ‘Buffalo’ Division, one of the few Black combat units in the war. In a moving scene Baker is reunited with Emilio Bertelloni, one of the many local partisans that had fought alongside the Allies.[2] What begins as a formal handshake swiftly becomes an emotional embrace that resembles the reuniting of long-lost brothers. This scene reflects the way many Black veterans recall the ‘wonderful rapport’ they developed with Italians during the war, but also how their shared experiences

[1] Ivan J. Houston, *Black Warriors: The Buffalo Soldiers of World War II* (Bloomington: iUniverse Inc., 2011[sic]2009): 56; Wade McCree in Mary Penick Motley, *The Invisible Soldier: the experience of the black soldier in World War II* (Wayne State University Press: Detroit, 1987): 299; Eugene Lester in Motley, 310.
[2] *Inside Buffalo*, dir. By Fred Kuwornu (FKK Filmz, 2010): the documentary was inspired by the fact Kuwornu worked as an assistant on Spike Lee’s movie *Miracle at St. Anna’s* (2008) about the German massacre of Italians in the village of St. Anna di Stazzema.

lived on firmly in their memories and those of the Italians they encountered and fought beside.[3] Indeed, the recollections of the Italian campaign quoted above reflect the way many African American GI's were 'exhilarated by the freedom, respect and fair treatment' they received in Europe.[4] Encounters with seemingly more racial liberal Europeans often crystallized the contradictions of serving in a segregated army to fight Fascism, while paradoxically being denied full citizenship at home. As the last quote also seems to suggest, these experiences occupy a prominent place in the memories of veterans. In the long-term, relations with European civilians formed an essential part of GI's military experiences that many historians believe helped to foster 'a new militancy and sense of self-worth.'[5] These 'new' attitudes among black veterans influenced significant life choices and aspirations in the post-war era, as for instance, expressed in the increased rate of migration from rural to urban areas, and often out of the South.[6] There were also more directly political effects with many veterans, including prominent Civil Rights activists such as Hosea Williams and Medger Evers, becoming 'the foot soldiers in [the] transformational movement' of the post-war decades.[7]

Although Thomas Guglielmo's identification of 'a martial freedom movement' demonstrates the various ways African Americans challenged discrimination in the military,

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[3] Motley, 299.

[4] Marjorie McKenzie, 'Pursuit of Democracy,' *Pittsburgh Courier*, Feb. 10, 1945, 7, in Thomas A. Guglielmo, 'A Martial Freedom Movement: Black G.I.s' Political Struggles during World War II,' *Journal of American History*, 104:4, March 2018, 879-903, 885.

[5] Simon Topping, '"The Dusky Doughboys:" Interaction between African American Soldiers and the Population of Northern Ireland during the Second World War,' *Journal of American Studies*, 47:4 (2013): 1131-1154: 1153.

[6] On the effects on the personal aspirations of black veterans, see John Modell, Marc Goulden, and Sigurder Magnusson, 'World War II in the Lives of Black Americans,' *Journal of American History,* 76:3, Dec. 1989, 838-48: 838; Neil A. Wynn also argues that the mass movement of African Americans from more rural to urban settings was particularly significant in breaking down traditional race relations in the South, Neil A. Wynn, *The Afro-American in the Second World War* (New York & London: Holmes & Meier, 1993c1973), 133.

[7] Maria Höhn and Martin Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom: the Civil Rights Struggle, African American GIs, and Germany* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), 36-7.

this discussion of black agency is rarely evident when considering relations with European civilians. Instead, the emphasis tends to be on the manner in which African American GIs 'were generally well received,' welcomed as liberators, or even simply treated as unusual 'novelties.'[8] While the second quotation above suggests European civilians often regarded African American GIs more highly than their white counterparts, rarely have explanations for these attitudes gone beyond the absence and/or rejection of American racial prejudice in Europe. The consequence is that European behaviours and attitudes are foregrounded at the expense of the actions and decisions made by black GIs.[9] This article attempts to explain the positive reception of black troops in Europe by focusing on the relatively underexplored case of the Italian campaign in World War II. It suggests that African American GIs actively nurtured positive relationships with Italian civilians in a number of ways that are hidden in official military documentation, but are detectable through testimonies, photographs, newspaper reports, veteran's surveys, and in Italian sources. By being more generous with their resources, befriending families, making efforts to learn the language, and often defying prevalent military attitudes and practices towards civilians, African American GIs not only experienced liberal European attitudes, but actively fostered those attitudes by exploiting social opportunities in such a way that they became seen as 'goodwill ambassadors' by the black press and by Italians.[10] Unlike Britain, where a shared language made cultural relations less problematic, in Italy there is evidence to suggest that African American troops - particularly from poorer backgrounds – overcame the language barrier formed ties with Italians worst affected by the War through empathy and a sense of

[8] Wynn, *The Afro-American in the Second World War,* 32.
[9] In Britain see Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience during World War II* (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), 51-2; Höhn and Klimke discuss a survey of German civilians showing 70% found black GIs friendlier than whites, in *A Breath of Freedom*, 48.
[10] 'Race Soldiers being called "Goodwill Ambassadors,'" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 23, 1944, 18.

shared experience.[11] Cultivating these relationships was particularly significant given the context of racial discrimination in the American military, and its effects on the morale of African American troops. This situation was compounded by the fact black GIs had to navigate the threats presented by Fascist and Nazi anti-black propaganda, combined with Italian racial attitudes that ranged from fascination to fear, especially when it came to relations with Italian women.

Interestingly, many veterans' recollections of the Italian campaign downplay or exclude experiences of hostility or racial prejudice by Italians, highlighting the way memories intertwine the recollection of historical events with nostalgia and the contemporary context in which events are recalled. However, oral accounts and memories of veterans not only provide insights into the connections forged between black GIs and Italian civilians during the War, but are also indicative of the significance of these social relations in the long-term. If 'memories are not static' but rather represent '"advancing stories" through which individuals and communities forge their sense of identity,' then these recalled experiences constitute significant aspects of veterans' self-identification and collective memories in the post-war years.[12] Encounters with Europeans also became inherently political in the way they could be used to validate and celebrate the African American contribution to the war, while denouncing the hypocrisy of American claims to be fighting for freedom. Furthermore, these memories have also been 'performed' in various

[11] The literature on experiences of American and African American GIs ins Britain is far more well established than in Italy, see for instance, Graham Smith, *When Jim Crow Met John Bull: Black American Soldiers in World War II Britain* (London: IB Tauris, 1987); David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: the American Occupation of Britain* (Harper Collins, 1995); Wendy Webster, *Mixing It: Diversity in World War II Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2018); Lucy Bland, *Britain's 'Brown Babies:' The Stories of Children Born to Black GIs and White Women in the Second World War* (Manchester University Press, 2019).

[12] Anne Fuchs and Edric Caldicott, *Cultural Memory: Essays in European Literature and History* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2003: 11-32) quoted in Andrew Frayn and Terry Phillips, 'Introduction: War and Memory,' *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 11/3, August 2018, 181-191: 182.

ways in the decades since the end of the War. Several of the veterans quoted here returned to Italy in both personal and more official capacities, demonstrating that through reunions with fellow veterans and Italians, they have been active agents in shaping collective memories of the war often on the basis of the connection between the two groups.

The Italian Campaign and Social Encounters in Europe

Commander of the Tuskegee Airmen General Benjamin O. Davis recalled how nine black pilots returning from three days of leave in Rome were 'surprised to find relatively large numbers of blacks integrated into the civilian population.'[13] These experiences echo the positive reception of African Americans in other parts of Europe during the War. The *Chicago Defender* celebrated the fact Parisians treated black GIs with respect and tolerance rarely experienced in the US. In Britain African Americans 'often found that they were treated better by the locals than by their fellow Americans.' Many black GIs stationed in Germany from 1945 onwards also experienced what Höhn and Klimke describe as 'a racial utopia.' It was reports of experiences such as these that led up to 85% of newly enlisted African American troops to request posts in Europe in 1946.[14] These commonalities indicate that it is possible to make broad generalizations about the relations between black Americans and European civilians. However, while sharing many of the characteristics of experiences in Britain, France and Germany, the Italian campaign was also unique in its

[13] Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. *American: an autobiography* (New York: Plume, 1992), 129.

[14] For France, see Mary Louise Roberts, *What Soldiers Do: Sex and the American GI in World War II France* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 238; for Britain see Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War*, 32; Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom*, 39 and 52.

concentration of black combat troops that experienced combat during the war. As was common in the American military, African Americans were confined to service and support roles in segregated units from the invasion of Sicily in the summer of 1943. However, Italy was also the base for the Tuskegee Airmen, who were stationed at the Ramitelli airfield on the Adriatic coast. These have been the focus of numerous historical accounts as well as popular films such as George Lucas' *Red Tails* (2012), all of which tend to focus on the struggles, heroism, and accomplishments of the black pilots, rather than their contact with Italians.[15] Similarly, considerable attention has been paid to the 92nd 'Buffalo' Division, a unit consisting of black combat troops stationed along the Gothic Line in Tuscany and Liguria. The Division was often accused of 'cowardly performance' or 'melting away' during the conflict.[16] These views emerged after the misrepresentation of a report by Truman Gibson, the Secretary of War's civilian aide who visited Italy in 1945 and reported on the Division's condition and performance.[17] Importantly, GIs provided many accounts of their struggles and achievements to challenge these views by writing letters directly to newspapers, while also encouraging black leaders and politicians to address issues of discrimination in the military.[18] Over the years, numerous studies as well as memoirs and testimonies by veterans have challenged these negative views by highlighting the

[15] See for instance Brynn Baker, *Tuskegee Airmen: freedom flyers of WWII* (North Mankato, Minnesota: Capstone Press, 2016); Charles E. Francis and Adolph Caso, *The Tuskegee Airmen: the men who changed a nation* (Boston: Branden Books, 2008); J. Todd Moye, *Freedom Flyers: the Tuskegee Airmen of World War II* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Christine Zuchora-Walske, *The Tuskegee Airmen* (Minneapolis: Essential Library, 2018); Stanley Sandley, *Segregated Skies: all-Black Combat Squadrons of WWII* (Washington DC: Smithsonian, 1992).
[16] Hondon. B Hargrove, *Buffalo Soldiers in Italy: Black Americans in World War II* (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1985): 5.
[17] Ibid., vii;
[18] See for instance Philip McGuire, *Taps for a Jim Crow Army: letters from Black Soldiers in World War II* (Santa Barbara, California: ABC-Clio, 1983) and Maggi M. Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army: Black Men and Women Remember World War II* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

achievements of the 92nd despite being underequipped, demoralized, and poorly led.[19] In most cases relations with civilians in Italy are marginalized as secondary to the assessment of GIs military experiences. For instance, Mary Penick Motley's oral history analysis of the 92nd Division referred to the fact that 'excellent' relations with Italians 'appear[ed] frequently in the interviews.' However, this statement only qualified as a footnote.[20] The attention given to the experiences of black GIs in Italy through these studies and various oral history projects therefore offers an important opportunity to re-examine their encounters with civilians more closely, particularly because these are often described in positive terms.

A *Newsweek* article commenting on the reunion of the 92nd Division in Italy stated the 'blacks remember that unlike the American army, the Italians were color blind.'[21] This was a sentiment mirrored in the recollections of many veterans represented in various oral history collections as well as their memoirs. Former U.S. Senator and 92nd Division veteran Edward W. Brooke described Italians as 'colorblind with regard to race.'[22] Rufus Johnson, another veteran of 371st Infantry regiment in the 92nd Division stated that they 'were heroes to the Italians.[23] The fact we were black persons made no difference. Similarly, other veterans recall being welcomed as part of a liberating army, something which had a big

[19] see Hargrove, *Buffalo Soldiers in Italy*, but also Daniel K. Gibran, *The 92nd Infantry Division and the Italian Campaign in World War II* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2001); Carolyn Ross Johnston, *Fighting with the Buffalo Soldiers in World War II* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012); Christopher Paul Moore, *Fighting for America: Black Soldiers – The Unsung Heroes of World War II* (New York: One World Ballantine Books, 2005); and veterans' biographies such as Houston, *Black Warriors* (2011[sic]2009).
[20] Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 318.
[21] Ibid., 259.
[22] Edward W. Brooke, *Bridging the Divide: My Life* (New Brunswick; Rutgers University Press, 2007): 33.
[23] Rufus Winfield Johnson, Army Service Experiences Questionnaire: 6, WWII Veterans Survey Collection, Stanton's Order of Battle, Infantry Division, 92nd Infantry Division, Box 317, Army Heritage Education Institute, Carlisle, PA, USA.

effect in lifting their spirits and improving morale, particularly after the difficulties experienced in terms of military training. Benjamin Stewart who served in the 92nd Division remembered that that Italians were happy with the contribution of black soldiers in the war, allowing for a sense that they 'left as heroes,' a picture vividly painted in the account of another 'Buffalo' veteran, Ivan J. Houston:

> At a hamlet just north of the Arno [river], the citizens greeted us with more cries of *"Viva Americani!" "Buon giorno!"* and phrases that were beyond our limited vocabulary. Others just waved happily. Some of the women could be seen crying. The excited civilians clung to our vehicles and showered the soldiers with grapes, flowers, and fruit. Some ran along, pouring wine for all who would accept it, while others of both sexes and all ages paid their tribute with hearty kisses. They had every guy in the column feeling like a conquering hero. Even today I smile and feel good when I recall those scenes.[24]

Being welcomed as liberators was not necessarily unique to the Italian campaign. However, the fact that the 92nd Division and the Tuskeege Airmen were in combat positions was far from common and attracted significant attention both in the US and in Italy. The contribution of black combat troops was also recognized in higher circles of Italian life. Pope Pius XII praised the conduct of African American troops and described them as 'kind, good-humoured and winning.' In October 1945, the 92nd was awarded the Italian Military Cross by the Lt. General of the Realm, Prince Umberto, who would become the last the King of Italy. In June 1945, soldiers of the 92nd Division took part in a ceremony returning the ashes of Christopher Columbus back to the city of Genoa, an event *Il Corriere* newspaper described the event as 'symbolic of the Italo-American brotherhood' ('simbolo di fraternitá italo-

[24] Interview with Benjamin V. Stewart, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC; Houston, *Black Warriors*, 56.

americana').[25] This recognition at both grassroots and more official Italian levels not only challenged ideas about the supposed failure of black combat troops which dominated American perceptions for many years after the war, but also points to the specifics of the Italian campaign. Events such as these filled veterans who took part with 'honor,' especially as they had 'fought for such a long time under a great cloud of alleged incompetence.'[26] In his visit to Europe to examine the role of black troops during the war, the head of the NAACP Walter White stated that the 'morale of Negro soldiers' in Italy was 'higher than in any other theatre of operation.'[27] White's remark justifies a closer examination of social encounters in the Italian campaign, but also in terms of the way it informs the broader historical significance of the African American presence in Europe in World War II.

'Winning Hearts and Minds of Italians with Kindness:' Memories of Race Relations in Italy

There are a number of ways in which this higher level of morale could be explained. One of the common points of discussion in veterans' testimonies is visiting sites of historical and cultural interest. As in other parts of Europe, American military officials were keen to promote tourism via pamphlets such as the *Soldier's Guides to Italy* and the *Pocket Guide to Italian Cities*. While visiting sites of cultural interest would have the function of

[25] 'Pope Sends Special Message to the American Negro,' *The Daily Bulletin*, 14 May, 1945, 4.; Ivan J. Houston also narrates being blessed by the Pope on 25 April 1945, in *Black Warriors*, 181; Italian Military Cross in '92nd Division Colors are Decorated,' *The Buffalo 92nd Division*, Vol. 6 No. 23, 29 October 1945, front page, in A. William Perry Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC, https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.51117/pageturner?ID=pm0001001 [accessed 27 November 2019]; 'Le ceneri di Colombo consegnate a Genova,' *Il Corriere*, mercoledí 6-7 June, 1945.

[26] Houston, *Black Warriors,* 193-4.

[27] Walter White, *A Rising Wind* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1945), 86-7.

alleviating stress and keeping soldiers busy, particularly after the German surrender in 1945, officials believed that through tourism soldiers could act as unofficial ambassadors, fostering good will, and ultimately support the American ambition of reforming Italy along liberal lines.[28] Black servicemen, like their white counterparts, took advantage of rest and recuperation time to visit sites such as Naples, Rome, Florence, Pisa and Venice. Photographs by Ellis L. Ross (see figures 1 and 2), who served as a quartermaster and took hundreds of photographs of his time in Europe, give a visual reference to the recollections of veterans such as Richard Elton Nazareth,

> I didn't come home with a joyous feeling 'cos I enjoyed myself in Italy. I really had a Roman holiday after the war was over, especially when I was up in Rome. I had a chance to visit many many things there of importance, like the historical areas and so forth. Beautiful place, beautiful city.[29]

[28] Andrew Buchanan, '"I Felt Like a Tourist instead of a Soldier:" The Occupying Gaze – War and Tourism in Italy, 1943-1945,' *American Quarterly*, 68:3, Sep. 2016: 593-615, 595-6.
[29] Interview with Richard Elton Nazareth, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Figure 1 - Ellis Ross 'imitating gesture of Cicero as he stands immediately below a statue in front of the Palazzo Giustizia on the banks of the Tiber River, Rome.' 1944 Ellis Ross Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Figure 2 – Ross 'in St. Peter's Square, Vatican City, Rome.' July 1944. Ellis Ross Collection.

Memories often highlight the pleasure derived from travelling around the country to visit the main tourist sites. As veteran of the 92nd Division Isham Benton recalled: 'I liked what I saw in Italy. Physically, geographically it's a beautiful country.' They were also keen to share these experiences with relatives at home. Another veteran of the 92nd Division Lt. Earl Cunnigham also took photographs of his time in Italy and sent postcards to his wife. One of Genoa contained the note 'How do you like the scenery? One of the many beautiful scenes. This city is really grand.'[30]

For Andrew Buchanan, the 'liberal ideological framework' that characterized the approach to Italy meant that for many American servicemen wartime tourism engendered 'a profound sense of the superiority of the occupiers over the occupied.'[31] Even the army information handbooks tended to be 'less than flattering' about Italians, and reinforced negative stereotypes about Italians as 'lazy, untrustworthy, superstitious, [and] excitable.' These ideas had been fuelled by the unique dynamics characterizing the Allied campaign in Italy. It constituted both an enemy still in the process of being fought, and gained the unique position of 'co-belligerent' following the armistice on 8 September 1943.[32] This situation blurred the boundaries between the sense that the country was being liberated as much as it was being invaded. The confusion was exacerbated by the lack of preparation for the occupation of Italy, which provides a stark contrast to the arrival of the American military in Britain, for instance. Both Britain and the US 'embarked on public relations

[30] Interview Isham Benton, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC; Postcard of Genoa's Piazza Della Vittoria, Earl Garfield Cunningham World War II scrapbook, photographs, and ephemera, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.
[31] Andrew Buchanan, 'Good Morning, Pupil!' American Representations of Italiannness and the Occupation of Italy, 1943-1945, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 43:2, 217-40: 217; Buchanan, '"I Felt Like a Tourist instead of a Soldier,"' 600-5.
[32] Isobel Williams, *Allies and Italians under occupation: Sicily and Southern Italy, 1943-45* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 31 and 53.

exercises to make known differences' between the two cultures, particularly 'in racial attitudes.' By contrast, as David Ellwood suggests the application of Allied control in liberated Italy was characterized by a distinctive lack of preparation, so that Southern Italy '"turned into a laboratory where [Allied Military Government] tested out"' its theories of military governance.[33] Overall, these contextual complexities worked to generate ambiguous and 'detached' attitudes towards Italians.[34] An American GI who had remained in Italy after the war recalled that Allied commanders instructed troops not to trust Italians because after all, they had accepted Mussolini and his regime, and had only switched their allegiance to the Allies because they had no other choice.[35]

Initially, the difficulty of discerning friends from foes contributed to African American GIs' similar sense of distrust for Italians, which ultimately created a confusing context for social encounters. Giorgio Pardini, a resident of Lido di Camaiore in Tuscany and ten years old at the time, recalled the way black GIs were surprised to see Italians smiling at them upon their arrival in the area.[36] Veteran of the 92nd Division Spencer C. Moore described Italians as 'wishy washy' upon first meeting them.[37] The response of Italians to African American troops was also subject to the influence of anti-black propaganda, such as the idea promoted by German forces that blacks ate babies. Ennio Mancini, only a young boy at the

[33] Wynn, *The Afro-American and the Second World War*, 33; David, Ellwood, 'The American challenge in uniform: the arrival of America's armies in World War II and European women,' *European Journal of American Studies*, 7:2, 2012, 1-13: 2: Ellwood's conclusion is based on a report included in Merle Fainsod, 'The development of American Military Government Policy during World War II' in C.J. Friedrich et al., eds., *American Experiences in Military Government in World War II* (New York: Rinehart, 1948), 31.
[34] Ellwood, 'The American challenge in uniform,' 4.
[35] Maria Porzio, *Arrivano Gli Alleati: amori e violenze nell'Italia liberate* (Bari: Laterza, 2001), 53; William Tarlton veteran of the 92nd Division also recalled being told not to fraternize with Italians, in Interview with William Tarlton, World War II: The African American Experience, RH MS 1439, Kansas University Digital Collections, https://digital.lib.ku.edu/ku-wwii/25, [accessed 29/4/2021].
[36] Giorgio Pardini, telephone interview with the author, 23 July 2019.
[37] Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army,* 169.

time, recalls being afraid the first time he saw black soldiers because he had been told such stories.[38] Felix James recalls that if black troops entered a town where whites had been there before them, the locals would be more hostile. Edgar S. Piggott, veteran of the 370th Infantry, described this as the 'character assassination' conducted by white GIs.[39] Common anti-black propaganda across Europe during the war was the creation of the myth that black soldiers had tails. Many veterans recount stories of Italian children circling around them to see if rumours were true.[40] As in other parts of Europe, African Americans were received with a mix of fascination and fear, but these tactics were used by Nazi and Fascist forces as ways of undermining Italian collaboration with the allies by exploiting the latter. They also sought to dissuade African American participation in the war in various ways, such as dropping leaflets with images of black men being lynched in the United States.[41]

Despite these obstacles, the sense of cultural superiority and mistrust of Italians is far less evident in the recollections of African American veterans. This fact is corroborated by the way veterans frequently and warmly tell of their experiences establishing relationships with Italian families,

> Italians welcomed us, generally speaking. After all, we were allowed to stand up and fight like men. I was befriended by an Italian family who invited me in on many occasions. I remember the spaghetti was white with no salt, no sauce.

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[38] *Inside Buffalo*, dir. By Fred Kuwornu (FKK Filmz, 2010)

[39] Interview with Felix James, 1 February 2001, Amistad Research Centre, New Orleans, LA; Edgar S. Piggott, Army Service Experiences Questionnaire: 6, WWII Veterans Survey Collection, Stanton's Order of Battle, Infantry Division, 92nd Infantry Division, Box 317, Army Heritage Education Institute, Carlisle, PA, USA.

[40] Haskell Cohen, 'Men of 92nd Win Hearts of Italians with Kindness,' *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 30 December 1944: 9; for stories about black GIs' 'tails' see Cyril Osborne Byron (81682), Ted Lumpkin (78719) and Walter Schuler (82483) in the Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC, and testimonies in *Inside Buffalo.*

[41] Rufus Winfield Johnson, Army Service Experiences Questionnaire: 7, Army Heritage Education Institute, Carlisle, PA, USA.

> I was treated real nice with the Italian people, with the older people… I used to go to their homes and eat, and I was treated real nice.[42]

Spencer Moore also recalled spending a lot of time with an Italian family, drinking grappa and wine with them, and being present at the joyous return of the family's son from the war, almost as if he were a member of the family.[43] Tullio Bertini vividly describes the way soldiers from the 92nd Division 'were always welcome in our house.' [44] Only a twelve-year old boy at the time, he also outlines the way his family hosted a group of five soldiers for a Christmas Eve party in 1944: '[t]he soldiers were moved by the festive atmosphere and by the appearance of the dining room, commenting that being there with us was the next best thing to being home for Christmas.'[45] While it would be easy to interpret these encounters in Italian homes simply as forms of escape or relaxation from the trials of war, these recollections point toward a deeper sense of intimacy and reciprocity that allowed Italian

[42] Interviews with Joseph Purvis and Charles Mundy, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC.
[43] Interview with Spencer C. Moore, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC.
[44] Moore, *Fighting for America*, 266.
[45] Tullio Bertini, *Trapped in Tuscany, Liberated by the Buffalo Soldiers: the true World War II story of Tullio Bruno Bertini* (Dante University Press: Boston, 1998): 243.

homes to function - in Bertini's words - 'as a home away from their home.'[46] A photograph by Ellis Ross illustrates one of these encounters in an Italian home (Figure 3).

Figure 3 - Ross third from left 'drinking wine at Antonio's and Albina's', unknown location and date. Ellis Ross Collection.

Gathered around the dining table with an extended family, Ross and his hosts pose with smiling faces to celebrate a toast. Ross' collection also includes a portrait of an Italian family with a note on the rear which is suggestive of the genuine affection and mutual respect between the two groups, but also how dearly these encounters were remembered: '[t]o our dear and good friend Ellis that he will not forget them that remember always.'[47] While far fewer in number, there is also evidence that black women established similar friendships with Italians. Red Cross worker Wilhelmina Barrow maintained contact with a lady called

[46] Moore, *Fighting for America*, 66.
[47] Ellis L. Ross Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Maria in Naples, who in a letter tells Barrow that she 'will never forget the time when you were here.'[48] In another group of photographs, Ellis and some his fellow GIs are pictured on a beach and pose for photographs with some of the locals (see figures 4 and 5).

Figure 4 - Ross (left) ''with friend Lyons eating grapes on the San Venanzo Beach,' August 1944. Ellis Ross Collection.

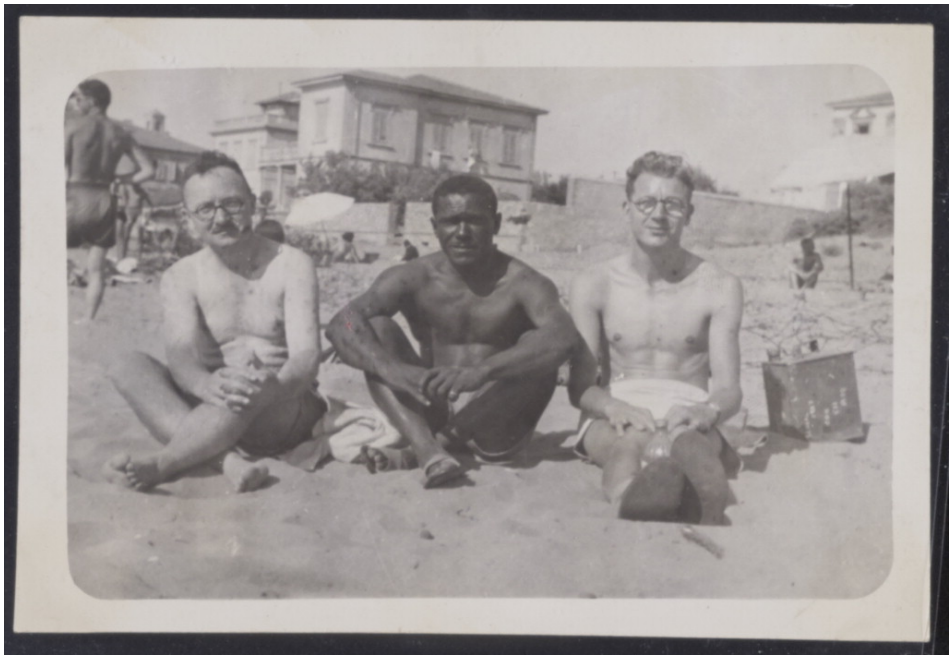

Figure 5 - Ross 'with two friends sitting on a beach.' No date. Ellis Ross Collection.

[48] Letter to Wilhelmina Barrow, Lionel Barrow Papers, 1940-2008, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC.

Importantly, these personal photographs give a far more personal insight into the experiences of black GIs. As Hohn and Klimke illustrate, in most photographs of black men in uniform in newspapers, the GIs' image was often controlled to emphasise their role as helpers rather than heroes.[49] However, Ross' photographs capture the GI's gaze, and point towards the significance of these encounters on a personal level. Considered alongside the testimonies of veterans with similar experiences, they also suggest that many African Americans were able to either overcome or ignore the sceptical and cautious approaches towards Italians.

Maggi Morehouse argues that after the initial sense of mistrust was overcome by increased contact and collaboration, 'both groups rejected the notions of "otherness" and the hierarchy of racial categories,' but rarely have explanations been offered for the specific ways in which African Americans seemed better able to forge positive relations with civilians.[50] In Italy the shedding of 'otherness' seems to have been facilitated by the empathy black GIs felt for Italian civilians worst affected by the War. The conflict had exacerbated deteriorating conditions of many Italians during the latter years of Fascism. Indeed, many civilians were threatened by food shortages, a lack clothing and proper sanitation which precipitated a desperate situation. This was particularly the case in cities such as Naples, which according to British officer Normal Lewis had 'collapse[d] into conditions which must resemble life in the Dark Ages.'[51] The sense of lawlessness and social upheaval in the city is reflected in the prevalence of the black market, which accounted for

[49] Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom,* 29.
[50] Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army,* 170.
[51] Norman Lewis, *Naples '44: a world war II diary of Occupied* Italy (Carroll & Graf: New York, 1978[sic]2005): 43.

65% of the per capita income of Neapolitans. These conditions, combined with the fact that over 14,000 Italian women had been arrested for prostitution between 1943 and 1944 fuelled Allied perceptions of Italians as immoral and untrustworthy.[52] This context tended to reinforce the long-standing racializiation of Italians by American military officials as 'distinctly inferior,' and that the Neapolitans represented the worst of these imagined qualities.[53]

By contrast however, the material struggles of Italian civilians clearly affected many black GIs. Luther E. Hall of the 92nd Division recalls the hardships of Italian peasants along the Gothic Line who had been stripped of all their livestock and means of subsistence,

> I just want to mention how poor the place was over there. The Germans lived there and went through there, and I call them scavengers. Everything that wasn't nailed down, they took it… Those people [Italians] had nothing. A store on the corner, you could walk in the store and not a thing on the shelf. Nothing. Maybe a little potatoes, or something like that somebody could buy, and the farmers was out there, they didn't have any tractors, and they would be farming land and the battle going on. They had no horses, and the women would be pulling the ploughs, and they'd be walking barefooted over the dirt. And I stopped one day and I said 'Man I can't believe this!'[54]

One of Ellis Ross's most striking images shows a lone, dishevelled and barefoot child dressed in rags along a rail track looking at the camera (Figure 6). This photograph suggests Ross was compelled by the conditions of Italians to make his own visual record.

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[52] Antonio Papa, 'Napoli Americana: Commentari,' *Belfagor*, 37, Jan. 1981: 249-64, 254, and 246-7.

[53] Buchanan, 'Good Morning, Pupil!,' 220; Papa, 'Napoli Americana: Commentari,' 253.

[54] Interview with Luther E. Hall, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Figure 6: 'Child standing by train tracks', no date, Ellis L. Ross Collection, Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center.

Other soldiers witnessed similar scenes throughout the country. Upon his arrival in Taranto in the south of Italy, Felix James describes being shocked by the long queues of Italians waiting outside the American mess hall set up in a bombed-out school, desperate for any leftovers they could get.[55] Witnessing the struggles of civilians suffering the worst consequences of the war seems to have provoked significant feelings of empathy in black veterans. As veteran Robert Millender explained the 'relationship between the Negro soldier and the Italians was excellent' because 'we understood their plight.'[56]

[55] Interview with Felix James.
[56] Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 318.

Contrary to the ambiguous attitudes of American and Allied military officials towards 'untrustworthy' or 'immoral' Italians, it seems likely that many veterans drew similarities between the condition of ordinary Italians and the African American experience at home. As Wade McCree argued, '[b]oth groups knew what it meant to suffer,' while veteran of the Italian campaign Louis Shropshire explained that 'one of the reasons that the black troops got along so well with the civilian population is compassion and probably the fact that we had been quite deprived and so we were able to understand it.'[57] Within the military black GIs had not only experienced discrimination, but also saw the way Italians were often portrayed in less than favourable ways by Americans. This sense of shared experience, based on the material struggle and notions of racial inferiority would have been particularly familiar for black troops that came from poorer parts of the American South. Charles Brown of the 370th Infantry Regiment recalled that 'people in the countryside and in the mountains were terrific to us… This was particularly true of the peasants.'[58] There were some stark class differences between the African American troops, as the college educated Edward Brooke recalled, 'I was often shocked by the lack of education in black soldiers from the South. Many came from extreme poverty.' According to a white commanding officer of the 92nd Division, 60% of the men were 'functionally illiterate', meaning periods of training needed to be constantly extended. This statistic was both a testament to the long-term effects of racial discrimination in the US, and ironically, a means to discredit the use of black troops in combat.[59]

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[57] Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 299; Suzanne Branciforte, 'Memories of War in the Mezzogiorno 1943-44: the Unbearable Weight of Memory,' 331-50: 347; in *Italy and America: 1943-44: Italian, American and Italian American experiences of the liberation of the Italian Mezzogiorno* [papers given at an international conference held in Connecticut, USA in April 1995] (Napoli: Città del Sole, 1997).
[58] Charles Brown, in Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 271.
[59] Brooke, *Bridging the Divide,* 21; Carolyn Ross Johnston, *My Father's War: Fighting with the Buffalo Soldiers in World War II* (University of Alabama Press: Tuscaloosa, 2012), 109.

In this dramatic context of material need, African American GIs responded to the condition of Italian civilians with acts of greater generosity than their white counterparts. The actions represent the ways in which they actively fostered and maintained positive relations. Veteran of the 92nd Division Elvyn V. Davidson corroborates this interpretation suggesting that the greater generosity on the part of black GIs was instrumental in building positive relationships with Italians,

> [a] lot of people were just destitute, didn't have anything and we'd share what we had. And they said that the black soldiers were kinder than the white, because they said we were willing to share what we had with them. The white soldiers wouldn't do nothing…. so we got along with them very ` well, very well.[60]

Bill Perry, a veteran of the 370th Infantry Regiment, recalled that the Buffalo soldiers would give 'a little more than leftovers,' and Spencer Moore instructed men in his unit to give whatever they didn't eat 'to the people.'[61] The result of this is that Italians seemed to have prioritized befriending black soldiers as they were seen as more generous than their white counterparts. Recalling the American presence in Barga, Tuscany, Bruno Sereni wrote that 'white Americans, reserved and distrustful, make us mourn the company of the blacks and their generosity.'[62] As Gabriella Gribaudi also shows, in works of Neapolitan literature such as Curzio Malaparte's novel *La Pelle* (*The Skin*, 1949), black GI's were often represented as the most valued in the eyes of Neapolitans for obtaining goods and food in particular.[63] Greater generosity not only suggests that black GIs identified and empathized with struggles

[60] Interview with Elvyn V. Davidson Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, Washington DC.
[61] Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army*, 171.
[62] Bruno Sereni, *La Guerra e Barga* (Barga, LU): Edizione Il Giornale di Barga, 1968, 92 in Solace Wales, *Braided in Fire: Black GIs and Tuscan Villagers on the Gothic Line* (Knox Press, 2020), 426.
[63] Gabriella Gribaudi, 'Napoli 1943-45: La Costruzione di un'Epopea,' in *Italy and America: 1943-44:* 297-329, 316-7.

of Italians, but also indicates that they placed a great significance on their relationships with them. Furthermore, GIs often went against the instructions of their commanders who advised against providing food for Italians for fear their facilities and resources would be overrun.[64] These GIs were therefore not only asserting themselves in terms of their actions, but also using their unexpected position of privilege in relation to civilians to foster good relations. The responses that this generosity provoked were powerful expressions of acceptance. Louis Shropshire remembered, a great 'camaraderie' developed between the two groups, and 'for perhaps the first and only time in his life, he was accepted and treated as an equal.'[65]

The actions of these GIs became positive stories on the black contribution to the war effort at home. The black press was keen to relate these positive relationships and acts of good will to African American readers in the United States. *Pittsburgh Courier* correspondent Haskell Cohen reported that 'Men of the 92nd [were] Win[ning] Hearts of Italians with Kindness,' and celebrated the regular distribution of food to locals in Pisa. He also recounted the story of the 92nd's 'adoption' of a young Italian orphan named Fernando, and reflected on the ways in which these good relations were symbolically important for future race relations at home,

> The other day Fernando turned up without shoes, shoeless children are common sights here, but Fernando wasn't shoeless for long. In a few minutes the child's Godfathers had scraped together enough money and in no time Fernando was sporting a new pair of brogans… The boys are quite proud of these friendships and want to hold on to them. They give them hope for the future. One college graduate told us, "Now people can see that we can get along with others of a different race on an equal plane. Perhaps when we get

[64] Felix James interview.
[65] Branciforte, 'Memories of War in the Mezzogiorno,' 340/2.

back home the white folks will have learned from what they observed here and just give us a chance to get by on our own merits."

Figure 7 - Members of the 92nd pose with a young Italian boy, date and location unknown. 792nd Ordnance, Light Maintenance Company, 1944-1945 folder, Box 7, US Army 92nd Infantry Division Collection, Manuscripts Division, Library of Congress.

(Figure 7 shows an image of members of the 92nd with a young boy named Fernando, although it is unknown whether Cohen was describing the same person). Felix James describes a similar story of 'adopting' a young teenage Italian boy by the name of Mario, who was orphaned and homeless. After providing Mario the opportunity of getting washed and fed, James describes the bond between the two developed, in particular the way Mario taught James some essential Italian.[66] These stories not only provided reassurances to readers at home about the positive contribution of black GIs in the war, but evidence that African Americans were deserving of full citizenship at home through their actions towards

[66] Interview with Felix James; see also Albert Burke for a similar 'adoption' story in Morehouse, *Fighting in the Jim Crow Army*, 171.

Europeans. The idea of GIs benevolently taking care of Italian children was particularly effective in creating their image as 'goodwill ambassadors,' and that they were 'a credit to their race' for being 'kind, sympathetic and generous' to the Italian people.[67] The image of a black GI's friendship with an Italian boy also featured prominently in Roberto Rossellini's *Paisá* (1946), one of the most iconic neo-realist movies on the war in Italy, one of several Italian films featuring black GIs.[68] A 92nd Division lieutenant highlighted that actions such as these represented conscious choices significant for their future as American citizens: '[w]e know that in the treatment of these people will be decided the fate accorded our men.' [69]

The ability of African Americans and Italians to overcome the language barrier played a significant role in establishing these relations, an aspect of the Italian campaign that sets it apart from the British context, but can also explain similar experiences with civilians in other parts of Europe such as Germany and France. Cohen remarked that members of the 92nd Division were 'industrious in studying the language' and that quite a few had become 'fluent conversationalists in Italian.'[70] While all troops were given phrase books to help their communication with civilians, many black GIs seemed to learn enough to aid their relationships with locals, which sometimes involved much more complex regional dialects. Wade McCree recalled that 'some of our quasi-literate and illiterate troops showed an amazing capacity for learning to converse in Italian… These men really related to, and in many ways identified with, the Italians; it was a two-way street.'[71] This comment is

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[67] 'Race Soldiers being called "Goodwill Ambassadors,'" *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 23, 1944, 18.
[68] Shelleen Greene, "Buffalo Soldiers on Film: Il soldato afroamericano nel cinema neorealista e postbellico italiano" in *L'Africa in Italia: per una controstoria postcoloniale del cinema italiano,* edited by Leonardo De Franceschi (Rome: Aracne, 2013): 93-108, 93: Greene points out that in Italian cinema of the immediate post-war years there are more representations of black American GIs than in the entire history of American cinema.
[69] Haskell Cohen, 'Men of the 92nd Win Hearts of Italians with Kindness,' *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 30, 1944, 9.
[70] Ibid., 9.
[71] Motley, *The Invisible Soldier*, 299.

indicative of the ways in which black GIs from poorer and less educated backgrounds nurtured encounters with Italians. The ability and willingness to learn Italian points toward a significant level of cultural exchange, and highlights the importance African Americans placed on relations with Italians.

It is important to consider that these relationships developed within extraordinary circumstances. The paradoxical experiences of African American GIs fighting American racism as well as Fascism converged with the plight of Italian civilians suffering the direct effects of War. In many situations, relationships from the Italian perspective were predominantly motivated by necessity and often desperation. The widespread hunger of the civilian population, the vast numbers of Allied soldiers on Italian soil, and the role of the black market meant that the materials needs of Italians were central in understanding relationships with Allied troops. Indeed, this dramatic context could easily blur the lines between genuine friendships and romances on the one hand, and transactional exchanges including sex on the other.[72] For some Italians, necessity would have outweighed ideological motivations based on race or nationalism. In these circumstances, the anti-black propaganda promoted by Fascist leaders and Axis soldiers was less influential on the attitudes of ordinary Italians. As Laura Capobianco suggests, as well as being driven by survival and suffering from war fatigue, lower class Italians were less invested in the ideological foundations of Fascism than they were enamoured with mythical images of America as the land of plenty to which many of their relatives had emigrated in previous decades.[73]

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[72] Nelson Moe, 'Naples '44/'Tammuriata Nera'/Ladri di Biciclette,' in *Italy and America: 1943-44:* 433-55: 438.
[73] Laura Capobianco, 'La Guerra a Napoli: il vissuto e il rimosso,' *Italia Contemporanea*, settembre 1986, no. 164: 67-82, 67-8.

Meeting Jim Crow in Italy

The fact that African American GIs experienced significant levels of discrimination in the military both at home abroad has been well documented in various studies of the black experience of World War II. However, it is important to consider the fact that the relationships between African Americans and Italians developed within a complicated context where local racial prejudice was by no means absent. black GIs also had to navigate and risk the consequences of numerous forms of Italian anti-black sentiment, which contrasts with the emphatic descriptions of Italian 'colour blindness.' Italian radio had condemned the arrival of black troops in Britain in 1942, stating that '[t]o send Negroes to invade Europe is an insult to us.'[74] The magazine *Il Pettirosso* (a subsidiary of the socialist newspaper *Avanti*!), showed 'an American Negro soldier wearing shiny combat boots surrounded by barefoot Italians,' highlighting their frustration at the idea that Americans treated and considered blacks better than Italians (something challenged by *Stars and Stripes*).[75] Critical in the Italian case, however, was the presence of a more virulent Fascist form of anti-black propaganda which complicates the idea of Italian racial liberalism.

While Italians may not have had the social or psychological infrastructure of Jim Crow, the Fascist regime's closer alignment to Nazi ideology saw the development of a 'politica della razza' (racial policy) following Mussolini's imperial ambitions in Ethiopia in

[74] Simon Topping, 'Laying Down the law to the Irish and the coons: Stormont's response to American racial segregation in Northern Ireland during the Second World War,' *Historical Research*, 86:234 (November 2013): 741-759, 752.
[75] 'Army Newspaper Resents Cartoon in Italian Daily,' *Cleveland Gazzette*, 17 February 1945: 2.

1935. These were part of initiatives that sought 'to protect a supposedly pure Italian race from various forms of "contagion" from other races.'[76] An example was the 1937 edict that made it illegal for Italian citizens to marry people from the colonies, and presented interracial unions between Italians and Africans as threats to European civilization.[77] While predominantly affecting Italian men, the latter demonstrates the increasingly racialized thinking in state policy before and during World War II, particularly in relation to sex and marriage. This was by no means a distant memory by the time African Americans arrived on the peninsula. Ideas about the purity of the Italian race and the threat of the black soldier persisted after the war, as the journalist Paolo Monelli exemplified in the national broadsheet *La Stampa* in 1947: '[w]e cannot understand why the Americans, so careful in their own country not to mix with negroes… have imposed their negro soldiers in total equality with others on an ancient and civilized country such as ours.'[78]

Perhaps the most striking aspect of this anti-black propaganda was the idea that black Americans were 'ferocious savages and no respecters of women, or gentlemanly code of war.' Much of this was exploiting the increasingly widespread reports of mass rapes and atrocities carried out by the Moroccan Goumiers attached to the French forces in Southern Italy.[79] However, visual representations of the threat black men posed to Italian women

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[76] Alexander de Grand, *Italian Fascism: Its Origins and Development* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000[sic]1982): 115.

[77] Silvana Patriarca, '"Brown Babies" in Postwar Europe: The Italian Case,' Max Weber Programme, European University Institute, March 2016: 3. https://cadmus.eui.eu/bitstream/handle/1814/41165/MWP_LS_2016_03.pdf?sequence=1 [accessed 17/7/2019]; Vincenza Perilli, '1949: E' Nato Nu Criaturo Niro, Niro,' in *Storia Mondiale Dell'Italia*, by Andrea Giardina ed., (Bari and Rome; Laterza, 2017): 715-8, 717.

[78] Patriarca, '"Brown Babies" in Postwar Europe,' 558.

[79] Williams, *Allies and Italians under Occupation*, chapter 4, 45-57; Art Carter, 'Nazi's Step Up Word War: Use Race Hate Weapons,' *The Pittsburgh Courier*, 2 December 1944: 1; in Italy the atrocities committed by the French Moroccan troops – namely the 'goumiers' – are referred to as 'marocchinate' (the 'Maroccan deeds'); see Andrea Cionci, 'La verita' nascosta delle "marocchinate," saccheggi e stupri delle truppe francesi in mezza

often blurred the distinctions between non-white 'threats.' This was especially the case in the poster by Fascist illustrator Gino Boccasile, who in 1944 appealed to Italians to protect their women with the image of a black soldier sexually assaulting a white woman with the text 'Defend Her! She could be your mother, your wife, your sister, your daughter' ('Difendila! Potrebbe essere tua madre, tua moglie, tua sorella, tua figlia').[80] Another Italian poster identified black Americans as a direct danger to Italian women. The poster claimed to quote a black GI named Sam Boyking who had been allegedly interrogated by the Germans:

> I wanted to come to Europe because my instructors told me that here you can take anything that is valuable and alcohol and that in the occupied territories you can have fun with any white girl you like… 'No Italian women for these brutes!'[81]

The fact that African Americans were fraternizing openly with Italians was also made evident by the disapproval of Italian American GIs. While in Naples Walter White came across placards that sought to deter Italian women from associating with African Americans to 'preserve' the Italian race: '[w]hen will your honor, your pride in being white and Italian incite you to justly scorn the Negro? You humiliate us: All Americans speak thus: Look, the Italian people are fond of Negroes.'[82] This form of propaganda hyped the fear that black men were sexually deviant and a threat to local women, and marked the racist methods that sought to undermine Italian civilian collaboration with the Allies.

Italia,' *La Stampa*, 16 March 2017 https://www.lastampa.it/cultura/2017/03/16/news/la-verita-nascosta-delle-marocchinate-saccheggi-e-stupri-delle-truppe-francesi-in-mezza-italia-1.34636405 [accessed 14/7/2019].

[80] See Paolo Berizzi, 'Il manifesto anti-immigrati come ai tempi del fascismo "Intervenga la magistratura",' *La Repubblica*, 2 September 2017, https://ricerca.repubblica.it/repubblica/archivio/repubblica/2017/09/02/il-manifesto-anti-immigrati-come-ai-tempi-del-magistratura15.html?ref=search [accessed 17/7/2019.

[81] Poster from David Bidussa ed., *La Menzogna Della Razza: documenti e immagini del razzismo e dell'antisemitismo fascista* (Bologna: Grafis, 1994) in Porzio, *Arrivano Gli Alleati,* np: translated by the author.

[82] White, *A Rising Wind*, 98-99; Ernest Johnson, 'Reveal Details of Walter White's Report to Stimson on How Negro Soldiers are being Treated Abroad,' *Plaindealer*, 12 May 1944: 1 and 3.

Sexual relations between soldiers and European women has been an important lens through which American attitudes and behaviours towards Europeans have been examined. As Mary Louise Roberts has demonstrated in the example of northern France, 'sexual relations came to possess larger political meanings' that reinforced both American notions of superiority and the weakened position of Europeans. Similarly, in Italy sexual relations were particularly significant. Rates of venereal disease among American troops in Southern Italy were estimated to be five times higher than the acceptable standards set by the War Department, most likely a result of the fact around 80% of American soldiers had sex while being in Italy, as a survey suggested.[83] The sight of women in the company of Allied troops was humiliating, especially for men who had been part of the Italian's military defeat and those who interpreted the Allied liberation as a symbol of national weakness.[84] For others, it represented the moral degradation that followed the 'liberation,' which was in cases interpreted as more of an occupation. The large numbers of women involved in prostitution, combined with the spread in venereal diseases, tended to reinforce negative view of Italians, especially women as unclean, untrustworthy, and immoral.[85] Italian women also faced the double burden of being ostracized at home. As Chiara Fantozzi suggests, women and their bodies became the symbol of Italy's social and moral degradation via the concept of 'l'onore violato' (violated honour).[86] By selling themselves or often just associating with black GIS, regardless of their material necessities or constraints they were also seen to be dishonouring their country.

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[83] Roberts, *What Soldiers Do*, 7 and 164; Williams, *Allies and Italians under Occupation*, 196.
[84] Porzio, *Arrivano Gli Alleati*, 89.
85 Papa, 'Napoli Americana,' 252 and 256-7.
[86] Chiara Fantozzi, 'L'onore violato: stupri, prostituzione e occupazione alleata (Livorno, 1944-47),' *Passato e Presente*, a. XXXIV, 99, 2016: 87-111, 90.

It was often through the vilification of Italian women that racial prejudice became manifest, something also clearly evident in other parts of Europe. The 'sexual racism' of the US military in dealing with cases of rape is evident in the fact fourteen of the twenty-three men executed after a court martial in Italy were black, and ten of these were charged with rape, dispute black forces representing a far smaller proportion of the US forces.[87] However, similar disapproval of fraternization between black men and Italian women was also shared by Italians and Italian authorities across the country, and from the invasion of Sicily in 1943. Sicilians recalled feeling threatened by the presence of thousands of male troops, but in particular those that were non-white.[88] Further north, women who frequented the Tombolo - a densely wooded area near Pisa that became infamous for prostitution, the black market, and for its large African American presence - were increasingly stigmatized because black men were regarded as more sexually voracious and prone to violence.[89] In Viareggio, Italians joined white Americans in their condemnation of African American troops at a prominent 'pleasure spot', which followed a local newspaper's attempts to 'discourage Italian young women from associating with them.'[90] Similarly, one of the numerous Italian letters intercepted by the postal authorities highlighted how blackness underscored the transgression and degradation of Italian women: 'they are prostituting themselves for the Allies… think that I've even seen some with blacks… how vile.'[91]

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[87] J. Robert Lilly and J Michael Thompson, 'Death Penalty Cases in WWII Military Courts: Lessons Learned from North Africa and Italy,' A paper presented at the 41st Annual Meeting of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences March 10-13, 2004. Las Vegas, NV. https://dspace.nku.edu/bitstream/handle/11216/2456/Death_Penalty_Cases_in_WWII_Military_Courts__Less(1).pdf?sequence=1 [accessed 24/7/2019].

[88] Tommaso Baris, 'La memoria della Seconda guerra mondiale nel Mezzogiorno d'Italia: la liberazione avvolgente,' *Treccani.it* (2015) http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/la-memoria-della-seconda-guerra-mondiale-nel-mezzogiorno-d-italia_%28L%27Italia-e-le-sue-Regioni%29/ [accessed 10/7/2020].

[89] Fantozzi, 'L'onore violato,' 91.

[90] Johnson, 'Soldiers Rioting in Europe,' 11b; Guglielmo, 'A Martial Freedom Movement,' 886.

[91] Porzio, *Arrivano Gli Alleati*,' 112 (translations by the author).

Negative attitudes towards the African American presence in Italy would also be expressed in reactions to 'brown babies', the children born of relations between black GIs and Italian women. While the official number of children born of relations between black men and Italian women was 598 in the mid-1950s, Silvana Patriarca indicates that while subject to conjecture, the real numbers were likely to be far higher, possibly in the several thousand.[92] As in the rest of Europe, these babies were often regarded as a problem to the extent that some prominent members of the Catholic Church believed separation from the general population, if not relocation to countries like Brazil, to be viable solutions.[93] While there are some examples of Italian women who defied these norms and were proud to raise mixed race children, it was more common for these women to become symbols of Italy's humiliation.[94] Writing in 1947, a newspaper article complained that 'to rid ourselves of the Fascists and the Germans, we needed him, Johnny… [who] will reward the women waiting for him on the roadside with a little latte coloured child.'[95] The satirical magazine *Don Chisciotte* ('Don Quixote') published two cartoons in September and October of 1944 that played on the idea that Italian women were fraternizing with black soldiers, and that a mixed race baby was a sign of a married woman's infidelity.[96] These satirical representations reflected the popular fears and anxieties over interracial relations. One of the more established symbols of wartime reaction to interracial relations is the song 'Tammuriata Nera.' Originally written in 1944 and now part of the Neapolitan musical tradition, it gave voice to the hysteria following the birth of a mixed-race child, particularly with the line 'E'

[92] Silvana Patriarca, 'Fear of Small Numbers: "Brown Babies" in Postwar Italy,' *Contemporanea: rivista di storia dell'800 e dell'900*, 4, Oct-Dec 2015: 537-567, see *fn* 539
[93] Ibid., 559.
[94] See for instance Silvana Galli, *Little Blond* (Cinquemarzo, 2012), who writes about raising her son Giorgio after a relationship with an African American GI in Tuscany.
[95] Franco Ferrarotti, "Le segnorine contro la military police. L'ultima da Tombolo la raccontiamo noi," *L'Unita'* (edizione piemontese) 12 June 1947: 4 quoted in Fantozzi, 'L'onore violato,' 102.
[96] Porzio, *Arrivano Gli Alleati*, np (images in the centre of the book).

Nato Nu Criaturo Niro, Niro' (a baby is born, and it's black, black).[97] For James Senese, the Neapolitan musician whose father was an African American GI, the focus on the ostracism of a white woman for giving birth to a mixed-race child demonstrates that popular responses to the 'brown babies' were far from colour-blind.[98] The Jim Crowism of the American military thus co-existed with various forms of anti-black propaganda and Italian anxieties about black men. This complicated context meant that interracial encounters and relationships came with considerable risks for both groups, but the fact that so many veterans recall them in positive ways indicates that they play a significant place in their experiences of the War.

Post-War Encounters and Memory

Like Vernon Baker, many other black veterans of the Italian campaign returned as tourists or in more official commemorative events in the decades later. Some of these visits involved re-establishing contact with Italians they had met during the war. Veteran of the 92nd Division and author of *Buffalo Soldiers in Italy*, Hondon B. Hargrove wrote about his return to Italy with his wife to search for a partisan commander named Giovanni Moriconi (also known as 'Il Corsaro'), who he had fought alongside. Hargrove recounts the way the two men had vowed 'never to forget' their 'love and respect for one another.'[99] Joseph

[97] Moe, 'Naples '44/'Tammuriata Nera'/Ladri di Biciclette,' 442.
[98] Livio Qualgliata, 'James Senese: "O' Sanghe di un nero a meta'," *La Repubblica*, May 1, 2016 (updated May 1, 2020) https://www.repubblica.it/spettacoli/musica/2016/05/01/news/james_senese-138129761/ [accessed 3/7/2020]; the experiences of other 'brown babies' in Italy was given voice in Antonio Campobasso's autobiographical narrative *Nero di Puglia* (1980), see Perilli, 717.
[99] Hondon B. Hargrove, 'Il Corsaro: A Story of War and Friendship,' *Michigan History*, 64:1 (January/February, 1980), 14-19: 16.

Hairston, a veteran of the 92nd Division returned to Tuscany in 2009 accompanied by the widow of John Fox, who was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor alongside Baker in 1997 for his act of self-sacrifice in December 1944. On 5 September 2009, they took part in a number of public events and commemorations, including the renaming of a street in Sommocolonia in honour of the 92nd Division. Having first returned to Italy with his wife in 1978, Ivan J. Houston was back in the town of Barga in 2012 where he was welcomed by local dignitaries and Italian veterans' organisations to present the publication of his memoir.[100] James Pratt, whose father served in the all-black 366th Infantry Regiment which became attached to the 92nd Division, also visited Barga on three occasions as part of his research on the 366th, and was welcomed by the mayor on each occasion.[101] These public events in Italy signal the ways in which African American veterans, particularly combat troops, are remembered and honoured among Italian communities with which they came into contact. Visits have also had intergenerational elements that have seen the participation of the sons and daughters of black veterans. There have also been return visits of a more personal nature. Fifty-five years after his tour of duty, Felix James returned to Italy with his wife to visit the places he had passed through as a GI. While at a highway rest stop he struck up a conversation with an elderly Italian man who correctly identified him as a veteran. The Italian was moved to tears as he remembered the help provided by African American soldiers, and tells James 'you will always have a place in my heart.'[102] For James, this chance encounter more than half a century after the war demonstrated how Italians

[100] 'Joseph Hairston, veternao della 92 Divisione Buffalo in Barga,' *Barganews.com*, 4 Sep 2009, https://www.barganews.com/2009/09/04/joseph-hairston-veterano-dalla-92%c2%b0-divisione-buffalo-in-barga/ [accessed 10/7/2020]; Flavio Guidi, 'L'accoglienza di Barga e Sommocolonia al veteran della Buffalo, Ivan Houston,' *Barganews.com*, 14 Sep 2012, https://www.barganews.com/2012/09/14/laccoglienza-di-barga-e-sommocolonia-al-veterano-della-buffalo-ivan-houston/ [accessed 10/7/2020].
[101] 'Sommocolonia: James Pratt Visit,' *BargaNews.com*, 2/4/2017 https://www.barganews.com/2017/02/04/sommocolonia-james-pratt-visit/ [accessed 26/7/2021]
[102] Interview with Felix James.

remained appreciative of the African American contribution. Giorgio Pardini highlighted how this sentiment was reciprocated in his experience. He explained that every time he visited the US, he would make a point of buying the same chocolate that black GIs would often give out when he was a child.[103] Many other veterans returned to Italy as tourists in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. These trips to Italy on both personal and official visits provide an insight into the public and private significance of the memories of the encounters between black GIs and Italians.

A significant proportion of the interviews examined in this article, such as those in the Veterans' History Project at the American Folklife Centre housed in the Library of Congress, were conducted around memorial celebrations and commemorative events, as for example, the dedication of the World War Two Memorial in Washington D.C. on May 29, 2004. At events such as these, where large groups of veterans converged in collective acts of remembrance, memories of their experiences were not only drawn upon, but were used, reinforced and transmitted in various ways. For Robert F. Jefferson, 'the dramaturgical aspects of "memory-telling" among these veterans provided direction to their respective communities to be more politically active.' Remembrance underscored the importance of military experiences in World War II to black consciousness in the post-war era.[104] However, these acts of remembrance also highlight the ways in which veterans use their memories in acts of self-definition as 'advancing stories.' They not only inform about past events, but they represent how the person remembering defines themselves in relation to the memory

[103] Interview with the author.
[104] Robert F. Jefferson, 'Interfaced Memory: Black World War II Ex-GIs' and Veterans' Reunions of the Late Twentieth Century,' in Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes (eds), *Oral History and Public Memories* (Temple University Press, 2008): 187-206, 189.

being recalled.[105] Offering some impromptu closing remarks at an event discussing the black experience of the War in 2001, Vernon Baker outline the way his own experienced fuelled both a sense of colour-blindness and patriotism: 'I don't see white, I don't see black, I don't see red, yellow or green, I see America, and that's what we are. America, Gold bless you, I love you.'[106] By returning to Italy and taking part in individual as well as more official ceremonies, these black veterans were further enacting and honouring the memories of their encounters. The trips to Italy and Europe by veterans represent a promising avenue for future research into the legacies of their military experiences.

The idea of Italian colour-blindness prevalent in the memories of veterans also highlights some of the paradoxical dynamics of oral history and memory. On the one hand, it shows the way veterans distinguished the behaviour of white Americans from that of Europeans less invested in the codes and practices of American racism. At the same time, referring to Italians as 'colour-blind' involuntarily underplays the ways racial tolerance co-existed and contrasted with various forms of anxieties and fears about black men. Thus, memories of encounters with racially liberal Italians are often coloured with nostalgia. In addition, many respondents may also have exhibited what Suzanne Branciforte refers to as the 'unbearable weight of memory,' those social and psychological elements which may

[105] The Italian oral history expert Alessandro Portelli argues that oral testimonies are characterized by the dynamics that interweave communication about 'what people did, but [also] what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, and what they now think they did', Alessandro Portelli, 'What Makes Oral History Different,' in R. Perks & A. Thompson (*eds*), *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), 67.
[106] Vernon J. Baker speaking at the Double Victory Panel Discussion, 2 February 2001, Amistad Research Center, New Orleans, LA; Roger Horowitz suggested that frequently studies of veterans' testimonies have failed to fully interrogate the role and significance of patriotism in their accounts, Roger Horowitz, 'Oral History and the Story of America and World War II,' *Journal of American History*, 82: 2, Sep. 1995, 617-624: 622; see also Edward M. Coffman, 'Talking About War: Reflections on Doing Oral History and Military History,' *Journal of American History*, 87:2, Sep. 2000, 582-592.

have led them to omit or forget certain experiences, while privileging others.[107] However, nostalgia can also be a considered a way in which veterans remembered encounters with Italians to highlight American hypocrisy, particularly when it was clear that for most African Americans their status at home was more of a concern than the threats posed by the Axis powers.[108] Recalling his return trip to Italy in 2000, James continued to make the comparison between Italian and American attitudes to race, by imagining both wartime and contemporary Italy as a place free of racial prejudice,

> You could go out there… right now on that street… and you walk and face a white woman and a man, and they turn their heads, or they drop their eyes. You just watch. You go to Italy, and you're black and they're white? They look at you just like you're looking at me, and if you smile, they'll smile back and nod their head… I don't want to get racist, I'm just telling you what happened in Italy.[109]

Thus, the nostalgic recollections of colour-blind Italians, while containing misleading elements on the context of wartime Italy, are significant in terms of the way veterans have deployed them in order to critique historical as well as contemporary racial prejudice in the US.

The Allied presence in Italy has often been interpreted as a pessimistic narrative. Studies based on official and military documentation from Italian and American sources emphasise the fact that the campaign gradually became defined as an occupation as much

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[107] Suzanne Branciforte, 'Memories of War in the Mezzogiorno 1943-44: The Unbearable Weight of Memory,' in *Italy and America: 1943-44: Italian, American and Italian American experiences of the liberation of the Italian Mezzogiorno* ; [papers given at an international conference held in Connecticut, USA in April 1995] (Napoli: Città del Sole, 1997): 331-50.
[108] Höhn and Klimke, *A Breath of Freedom,* 26.
[109] Interview with Felix James.

as it was a liberation. Williams described the presence over 1.2 million Allied troops as 'one of widespread general nuisance' that had a 'deleterious' impact on Italian civilians. Focusing on the perspectives of Italian women in particular, Ellwood interprets occupation as a pained experience that provoked forms of 'generalised resentment.'[110] The stories discussed in this paper, therefore, centre on experiences that run counter to this dominant narrative, and speak to the ways in which two groups were able to establish more positive relations amid a complex and often chaotic wartime context. It would be unwise to surmise that only black GIs were welcomed by Italians and other Europeans, or that all black GIs formed these kinds of relationships. The voices and recollections examined in this paper represent a small proportion of the troops stationed in Italy. Nonetheless, from the examined materials of veterans and newspapers, as well as Italian sources, the relationships African American GIs formed with Italians seemed to have been particularly significant as part of their military service, and these encounters had long lasting legacies. The manner in which these encounters figure in the memories of veterans suggest they had an enduring influence on their self-definitions as Americans worthy of their full citizenship. Some returned many decades later in personal and more official visits to reaffirm their experiences. Importantly however, the memories of veterans shed light on the nuanced ways in which encounters with civilians speak to the agency of black GIs. Relations with Italians provided escape from the demoralizing consequences of serving in a Jim Crow army which 'exacted … an immense and incalculable physical, emotional, and psychological price.'[111] In Italian civilians, often those whose lives had been devastated by the conflict, they found counterparts with whom they could empathise and form connections. They were

[110] Williams, *Allies and Italians under Occupation*, 36 and 227; Ellwood, 'The American challenge in uniform,' 3.
[111] Guglielmo, 'A Martial Freedom Movement,' 879-80.

not just welcomed as liberators as part of the Allied forces or because of an absence of racial prejudice, but actively nurtured relations with Italians, expressing and asserting their wartime liberties.