

Emilia Rensi and the Italian Counter-Narrative on *Cristo-Colombo* ('Christ-Columbus') and Otherness

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Introduction

The British Black activist, theologian, and sociologist Anthony Reddie, in his book *Black Theology*, says: “educating a man is educating a person. Educating a woman is educating and transforming a country.”¹ This article addresses the key philosophical problems and main approaches to the human condition employed by the Italian philosopher and freethinker Emilia Rensi (1901-1990), in order to inaugurate a new conversation, and to offer a corrective to existing Western patriarchal, misogynistic theories and schools of thought. The work of Emilia Rensi is of crucial importance for two reasons. First, she presents a critical theory of the cultural, social, and sexual roles of women and of oppressed people. Second, she addresses the dichotomy of injustice and emancipation found within modern cultures. In her works, she considered the human condition and emotional healing in all cultures. She was exceptional—a thinker ahead of her time.

Rensi published her works in Italian and presented her ideas in a highly idiosyncratic and unconventional genre, style, and manner. She never pretended to belong to a school of thought or a political movement, but she was a tremendous educator, opening new paths to her readership. She also shone a light on neglected corners of human nature by devising new categories and definitions to interpret it, many of which are still misunderstood. One main reason why Emilia Rensi developed a deep sense of respect, compassion, and understanding for minorities and Otherness is because she personally experienced certain forms of cultural, social, and sexual oppression. Her writings comment on distinctions that are in some senses self-evident: between race and gender; between power and

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¹ Anthony G. Reddie, *Black Theology* (London: SCM press, 2012), pp. 12-13.

oppression; between religion and secularism. However, these distinctions are also linked to other controversial dichotomies, such as white and black, rich and poor, masculine and feminine, and superior and inferior. This article proposes a reinterpretation of oppression and liberation, following Rensi's position that such movements are strongly characterised by values of compassion, love and peace-making.²

Emilia Rensi's counter-narrative challenges her country's political and religious *status quo* by giving direction to a progressive shift in patriarchy, ethnic and sexual inequality, and cultural censorship. Her most controversial ideas related to the political philosophy of her father, Giuseppe Rensi: in particular, the issues of democracy and power; poverty and inequality; injustice; freedom of speech and inclusion; which were discouraged by the political authorities and are often considered as secondary and almost conspiratorial beliefs.³ The subversive way in which Rensi outspokenly defended such ideas explains her marginal status in cultural establishments. She faced many challenges in her life, and her literary writings on society, politics, and religion have largely been ignored and underestimated in academic circles.⁴

The general state of people, as she notes, is to be unaware of the intimidating powers of the "censor"⁵ or "superstate," the cultural and financial establishments which regulate wealth and morals. Rensi's critique of this global culture, and the ethical and social suppression of freedom of speech in an era dominated by hegemony and sovereignty, also reveals her empathy and connection with all people, regardless of their age, beliefs, socio-economic status, race or sexuality. Rensi went on to argue that education embodies self-contradictory ideas, such as instilling bias and racism while claiming to bring enlightenment and progress. Society creates divisions among cultures by establishing boundaries around thought that pertain to only a specific target group. Indeed, the presence of ethnocentric

² See, for example, Ervin Staub, 'Notes on Cultures of Violence, Cultures of Caring and Peace, and the Fulfillment of Basic Human Needs', *Political Philosophy*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2003), pp. 1-21.

³ Daniela Saresella, 'Christianity and Socialism in Italy in the Early Twentieth Century', *Church History*, vol. 84, no. 3 (2015), pp. 585-607.

⁴ Marzia A. Coltri, 'Atheism and Freethinking: Some Modern Italian Philosophical Contributions', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 30, no. 2 (2020), pp. 159-177.

⁵ The Roman censor in the Republic was a magistrate who had absolute leadership and responsibility for conducting a census, regulating public order, and overseeing certain aspects of state finances. See 'Censor: Ancient Roman Official', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/censor-ancient-Roman-official>. Accessed 03/01/2021.

prejudices is still widespread in contemporary cultures, and the purpose of this study goes beyond hegemonic paradigms while focussing on the approach of Emilia Rensi and its value. Through Rensi's critical perspective, we might learn that there is a need for deconstructive analysis and challenging knowledge on contemporary issues such as censorship, gender, ethnicity, and otherness. Over more than two thousand years, freethinkers, independent researchers, and critical authors concerned with racial injustice, sexism, and religious equality have been dismissed and silenced by mainstream politics.⁶

This echoes what Emilia Rensi wrote about otherness in her postcolonial narrative, *Cristo Colombo* ('Christ-Columbus'). It presents an appeal to read and teach literature, history, philosophy, and theology from an authentic Black perspective, and claims that liberation theory is a categorical imperative. This has recently become relevant again, and consideration of this past text is fruitful in examining current racism, censorship, and other related social justice issues. It is difficult to contest the assertion that social activism and independent critical thinking have been silenced and undermined by omission and falsehood.

Who is Emilia Rensi?

Emilia Rensi was born in Bellinzona, Switzerland in 1901 and died in Genoa in 1990. She was a leading critical thinker whose writings campaigned against social injustice and discrimination, and advocated freedom of thought and speech. She was influenced by her father, the antifascist philosopher Giuseppe Rensi (1871-1941), who was imprisoned for his ideals and his strong ethical stance against corruption in Italy throughout his lifetime. Emilia was the only child of her father and mother, Laretta Perucchi (1873-1966), a teacher and educator. The Rensi family was actively engaged in political and intellectual activities, and organised protests against the fascist regime.⁷

After graduating in classical studies, Emilia Rensi taught in several lyceums, but soon left the world of teaching due to her perception of academic stagnation, bias, intolerance, and chauvinism that sat ill with her character and integrity. She then spent most of her career actively

⁶ Carolin Kosuch, *Freethinkers in Europe: National and Transnational Secularities, 1789-1920s* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2020).

⁷ Marzia A. Coltri, 'On Authority and Freedom in the Thought of Giuseppe Rensi', *Literature & Aesthetics*, vol. 28 (2018), pp. 87-100.

campaigning and writing against the conservative culture of her time. From 1932 onward she contributed to the Italian and Swiss radical magazines and publishers on a series of social, cultural, and philosophical themes. She published for *Il Dovere* ('The Duty'), *La Volonta* ('The Will'), *L'Internazionale* ('The International'), and *La Ragione* ('The Reason'). She was a member of the Association of Giordano Bruno's Freedom of Thought. As a female freethinker, she abandoned Marxist and Stalinist ideals to follow her own liberal approach and anti-dogmatic, progressive thinking. In 1967, she established a strong relationship with two publishers: *La Fiaccola* ('The Torch') and *Nuova Ipazia* ('New Hypatia'), with whom she began writing on the themes of atheism, diversity, and cultural oppression, following in the footsteps of her father.

In her essays Renzi demonstrated an exceptional breadth of knowledge. Her books were written in an innovative philosophical style; they are short compendia of essays addressing a variety of themes. She published on a wide range of topics on social justice, religion, sexism, and racism. In her arguments, Renzi frames her view of the human condition in postcolonial terms, and stresses the vital role of critical knowledge, in relation to social reality as whole. She published for *La Fiaccola* periodically between 1964 and 1994. Her works include: *Chiose laiche* ('Secular Things', 1969); *Di contestazione in contestazione* ('From Dispute to Dispute', 1971); *Atei dell'alba* ('Atheist of the Dawn', 1973); *Dalla parte degli indifesi* ('On the side of the Innocents', 1975), which was reprinted by *Nuova Ipazia* in 1990; *L'azzardo della riflessione* ('The Challenge of Reflection', 1976); and *Umanita' e sofferenza in Jean Rostand: Colloquio* ('Humanity and Suffering in Jean Rostand: A Colloquium', 1981). Emilia Renzi argued for the good of the oppressed and unrepresented groups and promoted empathy in her writings focused on injustice, suffering, and the hardships of Black people.

Renzi also began a collaboration with *Sicilia Libertaria* ('Libertarian Sicily')⁸ in late 1984, by writing critiques and reviews on

⁸ *Sicilia Libertaria* ('Libertarian Sicily') was founded in January 1977 by Pippo Gurrieri, a former railway worker, militant anarchist and editor-in-chief of *Clandestino* ('Clandestine'). *Sicilia Libertaria* (or *Silib*), engages in activities focused on Sicilian issues. It is an 'unofficial' publication of the anarchist group of Ragusa and was issued until 1986 with irregular periodicity (three or four issues a year). It then became a monthly publication, and has published 409 issues to the present. This periodical is issued by the Cultural Association Sicilia Punto L, the group that also issues *La Fiaccola* ('The Torch') and *Sicilia Punto L* ('Sicily Point L'), based in via Garibaldi 2 A, Ragusa, Sicily. Today there is a young and

aspects of Italian culture and society. Her last piece was posthumously published in September 1990. Emilia Rensi was described by her friends Franco Leggio (1921-2006) and Giuseppe (Pippo) Gurrieri (1955-) as an unconventional and extraordinary intellect, as well as a genuine humanist; and a visionary thinker who anticipated the post-colonial critique of the Western hegemonic education system.⁹ She also wrote on political, religious, and ethical topics, and often used the pseudonym ‘Selene’. Emilia Rensi authored a psychobiography with a focus on sexual harassments conducted by a group of elite psychopaths. Her last shorter essay on non-religious beliefs was titled *Esiste Dio? No, Dio non esiste!* (‘Is there a God? No, there is no God!’), 1990).

After World War II, Rensi worked in the Library of the University of Genoa, where she had sixty years of intense literary activity. Due to her retiring lifestyle, she was, and remains, less visible than other established thinkers within the Italian and European cultural contexts. Extraordinarily little information exists regarding her personal life and personality; even though in the monograph *Arcana: Storia vera di un esempio di psicopatologia sessuale* (‘Arcana: The True Story of the Case of Sexual Psychopathology’, 1999).¹⁰ Rensi condemned her vicissitudes as a woman who struggled against sexual violence, esoteric rituals, and enigmatic initiations by the powerful and wealthy organisations.

The Redemption of the Human Condition

Rensi recounts her childhood memories in her biographical writing, *Il riscatto della persona umana*, describing her younger self as possessing “a

collegial editorial staff, but Pippo Gurrieri continues as the editor-in-chief. This journal features social libertarian writing which deals with a variety of anti-clerical and progressive themes. Its origins in the anarchist movement are reflected in it having been funded by freethinkers committed to freedom of expression with anti-capitalist, anti-militarist, anti-sexist, and anti-colonial values and beliefs. This movement is also committed to revolutionary social transformation in an age of populism and totalitarian ideals. Its approach is firmly rooted in local territory, with its specific culture (or cultures) and history, but also projects into the regional dimension, with political calls for national emancipation and the development of self-managed communities and self-governing countries in every corner of the globe. Sicilian libertarian values are based precisely on the concept of local and national independence from any totalitarian regime.

⁹ I recorded an interview with Pippo Gurrieri on 27 September 2020, based on the life and writings of Emilia Rensi.

¹⁰ Selene, *Arcana: Storia vera di un esempio di psicopatologia sessuale* (Ragusa: La Fiaccola, Anteo, 1999).

rebellious personality and a premature centred-person learning nature.”¹¹ When her mother sought to make her the perfect housewife instead of encouraging her to get a high level of education, Rensi quickly became an independent woman in her adulthood.¹² She became a critical and trenchant intellectual, remarkable not only for her innovative ideas and humanistic and liberal values, but also for her integrity and humility, which rendered her personality both reserved and trustworthy.

In Rensi’s pluralistic reflections, love, compassion, and integrity are the only expression of a meaningful life. Her ideal was to be nurtured in childhood and instructed via the ancient wisdom of philosophy based on an open dialogue that emphasises the importance of dialogue between parent and children, between listener and responder, and between superior and subordinate. She states:

As consequence, one cannot think about having passed on one’s own personality to one’s children: the person is nothing more than the meeting place of two generations... Injustice starts from birth. Nature works indifferently in creation: beautiful or ugly; strong or weak; smart or foolish. This biological superiority thereby matches the social inequality that creates injustice and produces a variety of problems that are much more difficult to deal with.¹³

Rensi sought social inclusion that includes individuals facing serious discrimination and oppression. Clearly, strong cultural, generational, racial, and sexual differences between people will produce different outcomes. The biography of Emilia Rensi reflects how the vulnerable are often manipulated by their external social environment in which powerful and sophisticated decision-making operates.

Since childhood, Rensi felt undermined by patriarchal education and received little recognition of her successes and merits. She had a very active, investigative, and analytical mind, but her abilities were not regarded and encouraged by the educational environment she operated within. She addressed ontological arguments concerned with existence of

¹¹ Emilia Rensi, *Il riscatto della persona umana* (Ragusa: Ipazia, 1976), p. 30.

¹² Rensi, *Il riscatto della persona umana*, p. 30.

¹³ Emilia Rensi, *Umanita’ and sofferenza in Jean Rostand: Colloquio*, p. 27, my translation. She says: “Ne consegue che non si può pensare di aver trasmesso ai figli se stessi, la propria personalità: l’individuo non è altro che l’incontro di due generazioni. Già dalla concezione comincia l’ingiustizia perché la natura opera indifferentemente nella creazione: belli, brutti, forti, fragili, intelligenti, ottusi; e il privilegio biologico ugualia in crudeltà il privilegio sociali creando problemi molto più difficili da risolvere di quelli preposti dal privilegio sociale.”

God and contingency, and argued that comparing death to heaven (where the soul is eternal) is not a valid analogy. Emilia Renzi went on to ask, Does the cause of the world exist? When is a life no longer a life? What problems might arise if the existence of an afterlife becomes possible and the soul lives a new life?¹⁴ She was sceptical and from an early age did not believe in God; she could not be satisfied with hopes but had the agonising need to know. In childhood, she felt that by learning and reflecting, perhaps she would get to understand ultimate reality.¹⁵

Renzi's goal was to explicitly reveal the interplay between paternalistic, traditional, and hegemonic power structures, and shared decision-making or the pluralistic approach. The former does not consult people about what they like and prefer, seeking to understand their problems, but rather uses oppressive norms to suppress them and disregard the human condition. Addressing the notion of the human condition and liberation or redemption in her writings, Renzi demonstrates that personal experiences and difficulties in childhood are the source of oppression and lack of self-esteem in the life of all oppressed children and adults.

At the same time, Renzi had to cope with her mother's authoritarian teachings and continual denigrations of her educational accomplishment. Her studies were not valued by her family; her mother told her that education did not matter.¹⁶ Renzi's writings expose the experiences of a girl, a young woman, or a particular group, that is relegated to an inferior role in society. Renzi's mother wanted her to love small things, and to become a modest woman with a career that was not too ambitious. At the time, a teaching profession was considered the right job for women.¹⁷

¹⁴ Renzi, *Il riscatto della persona umana*, pp. 59-61.

¹⁵ Renzi, *Il riscatto della persona umana*, p. 60. She notes: "Purtroppo Fiorenza era scettica e non crede fin da piccola in Dio; non poteva accontentarsi di speranze, aveva l'angoscioso bisogno di sapere. E nella sua Ingenuità giovanile pensava che studiando e meditando, forse un giorno sarebbe giunta alla suprema conoscenza."

¹⁶ Renzi, *Il riscatto della persona umana*, p. 45. She writes: "La povera Fiorenza ad ogni successo scolastico doveva sorbirsi le prediche materne. Non bastava che l'ambiente domestico fosse assolutamente indifferente ai suoi allori, e le facesse capire che non avesse importanza alcuna."

¹⁷ Renzi, *Il riscatto della persona umana*, p. 42. "Solo chi sarà contento di poco potrà essere felice," Lauretta Petrucci told Fiorenza that she appeared to be restless and demanding: "sarebbe bello aver un giardino..." ("it would be nice to have a garden"), p. 42. After completing the second year of gymnasium, Fiorenza and her family moved into a new house

When she was a child, she moved to several cities with her family until eventually settling in Genoa.¹⁸ “I am not wealthy,” she said, noting that “the elites have always taken from her parents,”¹⁹ and publishers never funded her and other dissident authors. But she thought herself fortunate even though she had a modest life, a flat and daily work, as many other people did not have meaningful work and lived in extremely poor circumstances.²⁰

The challenge of being a woman from both White ethnic background and other under-represented communities has been investigated by many scholars. Modern Western society is not a culturally sensitive system that is inclusive of vulnerable people; rather it impedes them and denies them access to basic human rights as free and independent thinkers and citizens. If we are unaware of the oppression felt under the patriarchy, we do not realise that Emilia Rensi’s progressive writings highlight abuse, injustice, and discrimination against the weak and oppressed. Thus, any study of the marginalised person and diversity in the context of Rensi’s counter-narrative would benefit broadly cultural, political, and postcolonial studies. As the daughter of Giuseppe Rensi, she failed to be heard. In her writings she gives herself two nicknames, both in childhood and adulthood, because her native voice was suppressed by the ferocious Italian dictatorship and/or vicious censorship amid the pervasive hierarchical power of the regime, where the law of ‘God’ did not protect freedom of expression but rather threatened the ideals of liberal women and exercised political surveillance. Indeed, her radical positions in raising awareness of sexual violence, alienation, not freedom of the press, social injustice, and control of speech “have always been censored by the political hegemony of a country in crisis.”²¹

On the Side of the Oppressed: The Significance of Being ‘Other’

Rensi begins her counter-narrative journey and her understanding of others’ lives by reflecting on humans’ unwillingness and incapacity to take control of their lives. If there is a lack of empathy and affection within the

by the sea with a spectacular landscape. (“La nuova residenza in una nuova città di mare offriva spettacoli di natura non mai visti...”), pp. 56-57. See also p. 64.

¹⁸ Rensi, *Il riscatto della persona umana*, p. 19.

¹⁹ Giovanni Simonelli, ‘Emilia Rensi: mistica e non credente’ (‘Emilia Rensi: Mystic and non-Believer’), *Sicilia Libertaria*, no. 54 (April 1998), pp. 5-6.

²⁰ Rensi, *Il riscatto della persona umana*, p. 23.

²¹ Simonelli, ‘Emilia Rensi: mistica e non credente’, pp. 5-6.

dynamics of social relations, the consequences are blindness and entrapment of our decisions, which will lead to greater fear, bias, and conflict between individuals. It is often difficult for us to distinguish the real self of another, or even our real self. This creates uncertainty, anxiety and narrow pathways that separate humans due to wrong decision-making. Insufficient co-existence and absence of empathy for others are, thus, the source of cultural and social alienation in modern automated and artificial societies, engrossed by productive growth and consumption, where human relationships are annihilated, and human beings are controlled and regulated by scientific laws.

In her book *Umanita' e sofferenza in Jean Rostand: Colloquio* ('Humanity and Suffering in Jean Rostand: A Colloquium', 1981), Renzi engages in conversation with the French activist, biologist and philosopher Jean Edmon Cyrus Rostand (1894-1977), on some of the main issues of human dignity. Retrieving Rostand's book, *Peut-on modifier l'homme?* ('The Artificial Man', 1958), she asks: "Who are we? What is the person and what does they mean in relation to the living beings and other human beings? What does human life mean?"²² If science focuses on how things happen, it does not pay attention to the causes of life and human relationships. We may know the origin of the cells, the creation of the bodies, but we know little about the origin of lifeways and different peoples. Organic union between cells, living beings, and other biological processes is more complex than the cause-and-effect principles of causality. Mutual relations take place in human consciousness, which embraces the other, and establishes criteria for social relations. Such relations are at the heart of human dignity, justice, equality, and wealth, and are the basis of morality. Renzi's writing calls for an understanding of the basic concepts of existence itself, which does not denigrate the nature of life, but profoundly views life as the necessity of the human being, that should be opened to the universe of human relations, ideas and competing opportunities.

Furthermore, in *Recensioni come testimonianza* ('Reviews as a Witness', 1991)²³ and *Dalla parte degli indifesi*, 1991 ('On the Side of the

²² Emilia Renzi, *Umanita' and sofferenza in Jean Rostand colloquio* (Ragusa: La Fiaccola, 1981), p. 21. See also Jean Rostand, *Peut-on modifier l'homme?* (Paris: Gallimard, 1958) at <http://www.xn--acadmie-franais-npbl1a.fr/les-immortels/jean-rostand?fauteuil=8&election=16-04-1959>. Accessed 24/12/2020.

²³ Emilia Renzi, *Recensioni come testimonianza* (Ragusa: Nuova Ipazia, 1991). These writings are part of the *Sicilia Libertaria* issued in September/October 1984 and in September 1990.

Defenceless', 1991)²⁴ Rensi notes that the excess of conventions and norms limits basic human rights, including freedom of speech and creativity, which should be valued and fulfilled by everyone irrespectively of their belief, age, ethnicity, nationality, and sexual orientation. "Without a freedom of expression there is no freedom of thought and thus, intellectual honesty,"²⁵ she observes. Her sensitivity to Black, minority, and gender problems demonstrates that politics and education have been unable to admit that their ethnocentric and patriarchal demonstrable falsehoods, cultural manipulation, and biased history have been the cause of colonialism, discrimination, to humans of all ages, which still occurs in contemporary societies. It is hard work to be a woman, a Black person, LGBTQI, or a member of another minority because there is still a high degree of cultural, political, and religious hostility and hatred; if we do not meet the criteria of the narcissistic elites we live as outsiders, with a life that is excluded from the good. This cultural differentiation between women and men, educated and uneducated, and native and foreigner is part of Western culture, and this determines social status, and therefore, causes instability and suffering. In a wide variety of psychotherapeutic and sociological research, several hypotheses have shown that there are significant cultural, sub-cultural and intergenerational differences in gender, ethnicity, and race, resulting in negative perceptions of sexual and racial beliefs and behaviour.²⁶

Emilia Rensi notes that social interactions frequently emerge from controlling and manipulative factors. This may be negative in certain ways. Most people try to make bonds and a sense in relationships, searching for an authentic person instead of being exploited by someone who plays a part. Rensi defines the process of human relations as a complex and exhausting activity between two individuals: the hunter and the prey. She says, "The art of the inquisitor is like that of a cat that plays with its prey."²⁷ The investigator is hunting for toxic arguments and intimidation, alternated with strategies of persuasion and courtesy, with the victim facing personal and emotional difficulties.²⁸ The abuser plays with people's feelings to maximize their sense of demoralisation, which is a tragedy.

²⁴ Emilia Rensi, *Dalla Parte degli indifesi*, 2nd ed. (Ragusa: Nuova Ipazia, 1991).

²⁵ Rensi, *Recensioni come testimonianza*, p. 25.

²⁶ John McLeod, *Counselling and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 6th ed. (London: McGraw-Hill, 2019), p. 376.

²⁷ Rensi, *Recensioni come testimonianza*, p. 14.

²⁸ Rensi, *Recensioni come testimonianza*, p. 14.

The common ground of this psychological manipulation exists in daily life, between women and men, between children and adults, between Black and White people, and as part of an alarming tendency to act unilaterally without regard to the legitimate interests of others. Thus, constitutional and patriarchal hegemonies which should support, listen, and offer guidance do not resolve problems. On the contrary, these human rights representatives tend to broaden and exacerbate difficulties; and the persistence of social classification and racial or cultural stereotypes is one source of the 'other' issues of today. The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Report points out that LGBTI (*sic* LGBTQI) is an acronym or an umbrella term and means a group of people with diverse sexual orientation.²⁹ These people, whose sexual and gender identity diverts from heteronormativity, face discrimination and violence. In contextualizing how LGBTI people are relegated to a status of inferiority and vulnerability, rooted in perpetuating cultural and religious ignorance, derision, and the stigma of homo/transphobia, it is important to consider some respondents who are victims of a discriminatory workplace culture and patriarchal mindset:

I wish straight IOM colleagues would realise how lucky they are talking openly about their husbands and wives, especially in countries where people are more conservative, or homosexuality is against the dominant religion or considered a crime in the country. I wish I could do the same as I love my partner very much and would like to talk about her all the time, but there have been many occasions where I have said I was single because it's easier than trying to explain I have a partner or lying that my partner is male, instead of female. It makes me sad and lonely sometimes.³⁰

Rensi's message is clear to everyone. Every oppressed being suffers and everyone seeks relief from social inequality. For example, the persecution of the *Diversi* (LGBTQI) is not recent, as she points out. This can be dated back to ancient and biblical sources, like Chapters 18 and 20 of *Leviticus*, which deals with a variety of prohibited sexual relationships: "When a man has sexual intercourse with another man, they have done an immoral act, and both are put to death" (*Leviticus* 20:22). The decision of this critical philosopher to use this biblical passage is an example of how her

²⁹ 'LGBTI Glossary Term 2017', *IOM*, at https://lgbti.iom.int/sites/default/files/LGBTI_Glossary_2017.pdf. Accessed 10/01/2021.

³⁰ 'IDAHOT 2017 - IOM staff quotes', *IOM-LGBTI*, at https://lgbti.iom.int/sites/default/files/IDAHOT2017_IOM_staff_member_quotes.pdf. Accessed 10/01/2021.

understanding of moral values is far from cultural conventions and religious standards. Cultural and sexual diversity and its expression in relationships, as she argues, have always existed in human societies, despite being identified as unnatural.

Rensi invites readers to learn about expressions of diversity by Greek and Roman poets, offering an uplifting perspective and an examination of diversity's value and power for all. She claims the Greeks and Romans did not persecute homosexuals and did not regard homosexuality as an abomination; "their poets praised it with some salacious epigrams."³¹ Further, laws against LGBTQI persons were very restricted until the World War I (1914-1918). Frederick II, known as Frederick the Great (1712-1786), was almost certainly homosexual,³² though in the early twentieth century, with the rise of the Nazi regime, homosexuality was illegal under Paragraph 175 of the Criminal Code. In 1936, the Gestapo set up an agency to fight homosexuality and abortion.³³ Rensi writes:

The most violent persecution (in 1935) hit not just the rape, but also the hopes, the dreams, the embraces, the affectionate words... The official punishment was six months' imprisonment. But after this sentence was completed, the Gestapo agents or SS officers were at the gate, and already arranged for the prisoner to be returned to the camp from where they come out only from the chimney. Not to mention the health treatments intended to cure the 'immoral' by means of hormone injections, which immediately sent them to the other world, one after the other.³⁴

When interactions between variables—biological, cultural, and social—do not occur and an individual lives in an environment that is too challenging, s/he may not be able to make the most of their skills. This is the drama that

³¹ Rensi, *Recensioni come testimonianza*, p. 22.

³² Matthew Smith Anderson, 'Frederick II, King of Prussia', *Encyclopedia Britannica*, at <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Frederick-II-king-of-Prussia>. Accessed 07/01/2021.

³³ 'Paragraph 175', *United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Washington, DC*, at <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/paragraph-175>. Accessed 07/01/2021.

³⁴ Rensi, *Recensioni come testimonianza*, pp. 24-25, my translation. She states: "La persecuzione più spietata (nel 1935) colpì non solo lo stupro, ma anche l'intenzione, i sogni, gli abbracci, le parole affettuose... La pena ufficiale era di sei mesi di carcere. Ma, una volta scontata tale condanna, all'uscita si trovavano i funzionari della Gestapo o gli ufficiali delle SS, che provvedevano a spedire il prigioniero in un campo, dal quale usciva solo per la cappa del camino. Per non parlare dei trattamenti sanitari intesi a guarire gli 'immorali', mediante iniezioni di ormoni, che li avviavano senza indugio all'altro mondo, uno dopo l'altro."

the philosopher, in her intellectual struggle, is seeking to solve in her search for justice. Emilia Rensi adds: “How many of us if they were born in a privileged class, where they could have had more care...? Where financial problems do not add to mental and emotional difficulties, and so they do not suffer from the degrading effects of hardship and poverty?”³⁵ From a gender studies and post-colonial point of view, social and sexual exclusion can be interpreted as a form of silence that suppresses the emotional responses of vulnerable people to oppressive social structures.³⁶ There is also a lack of recognition of human rights, which overcomes realistic problems related to discrimination, hatred and intolerance and thereby ignores equal opportunities such as employment, education, housing, and parenting.³⁷

Christ-Columbus and the Slave Trade: Implications for Love, Connection, and Otherness

Cristo-Colombo (‘Christ-Columbus’, 1964) was first published with another essay entitled *Colombiana*, which was previously released in the anarchist magazine *Volontà* (‘The Will’), where Rensi argues utterly against celebrating Columbus Day (the anniversary of the ‘discovery’ of America, 12 October 1492). This essay critically examines the history of Columbus in so far as it relates to the slave trade, colonialism, and exploitation. In effect, this book challenges the culmination of the cultural appropriation by Western artists, authors, and thinkers, whereby Columbus Day became a European emblem of victory, ignoring the mental, physical, and sexual abuse of the Indigenous populations. European accounts have always celebrated the anniversary, this celebration being an atrocious and divisive action by imperialist governments that revered the figure of the “Great Navigator” as a hero.

For Rensi, the commemoration of Columbus was simply imperialist, where “I Grandi Pennivendoli” (the writers’ experts in everything), in their colonial and patriarchal literature, language and

³⁵ Rensi, *Umanita’ and sofferenza in Jean Rostand: Colloquio*, p. 28. She says: “quanti sarebbe stato risparmiato uno stato di inadattamento se fossero nati in una classe privilegiata, dove avrebbero potuto godere cure maggiori... dove le difficoltà materiali non si sarebbero aggiunte alle difficoltà affettive e morali, e dove non avrebbero subito l’influenza deprimente delle privazioni e della miseria.”

³⁶ Dana Crowley Jack and Alisha Ali, *Silencing the Self Across Cultures: Depression and Gender in the Social World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

³⁷ Rensi, *Umanita’ and sofferenza in Jean Rostand: Colloquio*, p. 25.

rhetoric, celebrated and glorified the enterprise of “Cristo-Colombo.”³⁸ Their literature does not mention the human rights of tortured slaves, marginalised Indigenous peoples, and raped women, all of whom were invaded and conquered by Europeans. For example, the Italian comic book artist and writer Milo Manara (1945-) illustrated Columbus Day with scenes and dialogues about Indigenous people and exotic naked women. Rensi argues that women are often subjected to cultural abuse and treated as patriarchal commodities.³⁹

The past of the Black Africans and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, as she points out, is the history of social and racial struggle; to achieve self-consciousness, to integrate their “hybrid” self into a free and independent self. In this fusion, she does not want the past to be lost. Retrieving the theories of the Pan-African and Civil Rights leader W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) in his masterpiece *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903), which does not separate souls or races,⁴⁰ Rensi also seeks the meanings of people’s connections, unity, and peace between Black and White, women and men, since the blood of the abused and the poor has a message for the world. Thus, unity is at the core of the human experience and should go beyond the assumptions of ageism and ethnic division, belief and disbelief, or gender and sexual classification.

She wrote in reaction to the ideology of Whiteness, the European Christian culture and religion that damaged the landscape of the Black and Indigenous cultures. As the Black scholar James H. Cone points out in *God of the Oppressed* (1975), Whites were so frightened by “this radical and separatist rhetoric”⁴¹ and by the language, passion, and outrage of Black liberation movements. The reality that the moral standards of Blackness and Otherness have not yet been universally followed by leaders, ethicists, and philanthropists is inconceivable. The sensitivity of these studies is often not evident in education; however, the ethnocentric fallacies of colonialism, segregation and bigotry in multiple ways influence modern societies. The Whiteness “mind” has long been unwilling to admit such hermeneutical points of view, since they are convinced that their “invisible” Whiteness is natural and logical.

³⁸ Marzia A. Coltri, *Beyond Rastafar!: An Historical and Theological Introduction* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015), pp. 151-2.

³⁹ Emilia Rensi, *Cristo Colombo e...l'inizio della tratta degli schiavi* (‘Christ-Columbus: And...The Beginning of the Slave Trade’) (Ragusa: Nuova Ipaia, 1992), p. 6.

⁴⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994 [1903]), p. 3.

⁴¹ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), p. ix.

Rensi in her chapter ‘Mondi a Confronto’ (‘Worlds in Contrast’) uses a postcolonial perspective in her writing, putting emphasis on the militancy of Whiteness and patriarchal culture against a matrilineal society of many American and African Indigenous peoples. She says: “The Whites subsequently pursued a defiant hunt for greed without regard for the native environment.”⁴² Indigenous peoples had a range of cultures, nomadic and sedentary, in which men hunted and built external relationships, while women raised children and gathered food, but had powerful ritual lives and some say in tribal governance. White settlers, though, sparked war, caused genocide, drove Native Americans onto reservations and missions, then lured them to big cities with false promises of jobs, and made them “American citizens.”⁴³

Indigenous peoples also had integrated systems of beliefs, traditions, ceremonies, and symbols that reflected their spirituality and relationship with nature. These peoples cared for the earth because it was a sacred place, and felt connected to everything in the cosmos.⁴⁴ In contrast, the colonizers had lacked reverence, affection and kindness for their surroundings; they did not live in harmony with the universe, abusing their habitats and exploiting wildlife, trees, and other humans.⁴⁵ As Leonardo Boff observes, care allows spiritual and emotional development towards human beings and all other living creatures.⁴⁶ Rensi argues that Indigenous Americans had a positive attitude to life and were welcoming to others. These people were connected with the world around them, and paid attention to living a righteous life as the most important task of their philosophy. The feeling of being linked to their community and surroundings was a natural and necessary need for the “savages.”⁴⁷ Likewise, the well-being and happiness that the Greek philosopher Epicurus (c. 341-277 BCE) describes in his *Letter to Menoeceus*, is about simple desires in life.⁴⁸ The Epicurean way of living is similar to the

⁴² Rensi, *Recensioni come testimonianza*, p. 37.

⁴³ Rensi, *Recensioni come testimonianza*, p. 38.

⁴⁴ Rensi, *Recensioni come testimonianza*, p. 39.

⁴⁵ Rensi, *Recensioni come testimonianza*, pp. 39-40.

⁴⁶ Leonardo Boff, *Essential Care: An Ethics of Human Nature*, trans. Alexandre Guilhreme (London: SPCK, 2007), p. 143.

⁴⁷ Rensi, *Cristo Colombo*, p. 16: “La felice indole dei così detti «selvaggi» non tardò a manifestarsi. Essi recarono doni ai nuovi arrivati...”

⁴⁸ Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader: Selected Writings and Testimonia* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), p. 130. See also David Konstan, ‘Epicurus’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of*

wellbeing of Indigenous peoples, who have a genuine modesty of needs, “to live with simple things benefits health and wellbeing.”⁴⁹ Furthermore, from a Buddhist approach, understanding how “it is difficult to maintain a simple mind”⁵⁰ is the right response to divisive supremacist values which devalues other people’s views and life.

Conclusion

The works of Emilia Rensi aimed to transform the narratives and stories disseminated by Western patriarchal culture and institutions. She offered alternative truths about shared values and freedom from oppressive social contexts. Her counter-narrative brought new perspectives on the history of oppressed people focusing on gender, race, and sexual abuse. Writing on the “other sides,” Rensi shed particular light on the role of cultural studies, that omitted and distorted gender and race in the narrative of identity and power relations between the colonisers and the colonised. Across the arts, law, sciences, and social sciences, there is insufficient research on non-Western, Black, and Indigenous studies. Europe and the West have seldom debated liberal ideas and decolonising values regarding cultural conformism and patriarchal paradigms in the mainstream structural system. As a result, a myriad of global non-Western academic institutions, including Asia, China, and the Middle East, have not yet introduced a wide variety of subjects that are built upon alternative approaches.

What ought to be achieved with the freedom of expression and the thought of minorities and otherness? By explicitly questioning what an important yet divisive notion empowerment for oppressed people is, we might be asked how to expand our critical skills and empathy to the problem of injustice, so that we can consider all different views. This would enable us to engage in better cultural integration, moral generosity, and social dignity for others who have been alienated and excluded due to the privilege and egocentricity of a few.

Philosophy (2018), at <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/epicurus/>. Accessed 13/01/2021.

⁴⁹ Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader*, p. 130. For a detailed analysis of this, see Ad Bergsma et al., “Happiness in the Garden of Epicurus,” *Journal of Happiness Studies*, no. 9 (2008), pp. 397-423.

⁵⁰ Dharma Master Chen Yen, *Twenty Challenges to Enlightenment*, trans. Lin Sen-shou (Taipei: the Tzu Chi Cultural Publishing Co., 2010), pp. 102-107.