Cristiano Berti

Boggiano Heirs

Quodlibet

Cristiano Berti

Boggiano Heirs

followed by a conversation
with Seph Rodney

Quodlibet

Project supported by
the Directorate-General for Contemporary Creativity by the Italian Ministry of Culture under the Italian Council program (2021)

Promoted by Altroquale ets
In collaboration with Accademia di Belle Arti di Macerata

Translated by Margot Gover

© 2023 Quodlibet srl
Macerata, via Giuseppe e Bartolomeo Mozzi, 23
www.quodlibet.it

ISBN 978-88-229-2118-5

CONTENTS

Boggiano Heirs

1 11
2 23
3 35
4 41
5 47
6 53
7 61
8 71
9 83
10 93
11 109
12 117

Notes

Introductory Note (129); Chapter Notes: 1 (133); 2 (140); 3 (150); 4 (156); 5 (165); 6 (173); 7 (182); 8 (186); 9 (194); 10 (199); 11 (210); 12 (217)

Beyond the Names, the Stories 223
Conversation with Seph Rodney

Acknowledgements 237

Index of names 239

BEYOND THE NAMES, THE STORIES

CONVERSATION WITH SEPH RODNEY

SEPH RODNEY I think you know that I'm Jamaican, but what you may not know is that I'm not sure where my family name originates. I have a clue though. Once, when I returned to Jamaica years ago to see my mother, we were driving through Spanish Town and I noticed a large statue in the recessed alcove of a small plaza. The statue was engraved at the bottom with the name of a British "Admiral Rodney". I thereafter began to assume that members of my family may once have been owned by the admiral's family. Perhaps it's not so terrible. I certainly don't know for sure. Perhaps there was legitimate intermarriage somewhere in our history. I've never seriously investigated my heritage.

But what my last name suggests is that in some way, I am a child of empire, of colonization. I've not thought of myself in these terms before.

CRISTIANO BERTI Surnames are like ants of history, laborious porters who carry history on their shoulders, and if we look at them closely, they reveal many things. During the research carried out for this book, I consulted the Napoleonic civil records of the city of Savona. There I found an infinity of Venturino, that is of foundlings who were given this auspicious surname: "ventura" is like saying "fortuna", that is fortune (a close relative of this surname is Buonaventura). The meaning was: since you don't have parents to protect you, Fortune will. Or something like that. I won't make other examples of surnames that were given to abandoned babies; there are an infinity of them. Illegitimate birth, out of wedlock, has always been widespread. But it was also a mark of shame, the stigma of the "bastard".

In my country there are also those who bear an important surname, which belonged to dukes and barons, or to royalty.

And who can say if they are not the descendants of the servants of those great lords? So, it's just a question of depth of field, to use a photographer's term. In the Caribbean, some high-sounding surnames, *los ilustres apellidos* as María del Carmen Barcia calls them, are more easily interpretable because they have a fresh imprint.

Now, this proximity over time can also have unpleasant consequences, I don't deny it, and give rise to legitimate claims. But while in order to know something about a feudal serf we have to rummage through the shards at the bottom of a well, the history of modern slavery offers us the extraordinary opportunity to discover how some skilled and courageous people, sometimes also lucky or shrewd, were able to change their life for the better.

RODNEY I very much like the phrase "depth of field". Indeed, for those of us who have these prestigious names it's difficult to ascertain whether we are descendants of the domestic-worker class or the family who had wealth and power. In some ways in contemporary United States society it doesn't matter. I mean it does and it does not. We here are often creatures of self-invention. I think of that sub-plot in the television show *Mad Men*, about the Madison Avenue advertising agencies that influenced an entire generation of people who were transformed into consumers from whatever they were before (citizens? workers?). In a scene where one of the principal protagonists, Don Draper, is shown as a younger man fighting in the Korean War, we see his commanding officer killed by enemy fire and Draper seizing this opportunity to take his military identification, his "dog tags", in essence his identity, to procure the necessary social capital to start a new life for himself back in the USA. He is both lucky and shrewd. Because I live and was raised in a context of this kind of mercenary, relentless self-invention this attitude has rubbed off on me. I hardly care whether my

ancestors were enslaved. The story that will be told of me is largely the story that I insist be told, the story I will have invented for myself.

That said, the "depth of field" issue is a different thing for the viewer as opposed to the maker of this image. The maker of the image – let's say that person is the colonizer – decides to make people in his image. It's the Abrahamic god move: to do something and then say it's the only way it could be done. But for the person viewing what has occurred, there are likely many other choices that could have been made. What names might have otherwise been given to the servant class of the house of the paterfamilias? Naming is crucial. Naming gives us handholds, so we can grasp someone and get their attention, so we can put them in historical records accurately, so we can identify them to others, to ourselves.

BERTI In the Spanish colonies it was compulsory to baptize every slave. On that occasion, the African woman or man acquired a new name, a Christian one, chosen by the master. Very often they were names linked to the Virgin Mary or to the saints, but since the masters had to distinguish between their slaves, they were often given names of another nature, not inspired by devotional figures, or even bizarre ones. The Christian name had a permanent quality: the authority of the Church could not be questioned by commercial practices. The surname, on the other hand, was like a trademark of ownership, generally changing when the owner changed. However, since the times of slavery, there were forms of resistance to this unscrupulous use of the surname, reappropriations of which I have also found interesting examples. As for first names, for some decades the recurrence of Christian names becomes a family tradition. From the first decades of the twentieth century, the use of secular names begins. To me, this process does not seem to have anything to do with the memory of the op-

pression experienced, it is a fact which occurred everywhere in countries of Christian faith. During my research I did not come across the re-appropriation of African first names, but others have found late nineteenth-century documents that attest to this very interesting restoration of identity.

RODNEY I rejected my father's name. He originally named me after himself "Joseph". I hated that name. It was, in the US American context, always shortened to "Joe". I'm not a Joe. I'm also not at all like my father, so naming myself (in my 30s) seems like the ultimate act of self-recognition. I dropped my middle name and made myself into "Seph". Was such an option available to people in your story? I imagine it wasn't. I imagine that even titular proximity to wealth was something greatly desired by a people who would have been hopeful, aspirational. Thinking about the depth of field (and I know this intimately having once been a photographer) I think about what is in focus and what is not and therefore what is legible and what is not in your book.

BERTI I believe that within each family there is someone, somewhere in the near or distant past, who had a certain name on their identity documents, but was known otherwise. On my maternal side there are several examples. Furthermore, it is difficult to find a more subtle and tenacious form of rebellion against parental authority than this. The ambiguity of the name is also a typical example of the distortion that historical documents can offer us. The administrative documents of the past are usually scarce, restricted to those produced by religious authorities, and can provide us a first name which is different from the one that was commonly used to recognize a person, not only within the family, but by the entire community of which she or he was a part of. Sometimes traces remain of choices, all of which have to be interpreted. This also

happens to the pseudo-protagonist of the book, who dropped his first baptismal name, similar to that of his father, to use the one he received from his godmother. On this choice of Antonio Boggiano, and on the name he gave to his firstborn, one could speculate on the relationship he had with his father.

In countries of Hispanic culture, the absence of the second surname was always in itself a sign of illegitimate birth. In Cuba, for a few decades after the abolition of slavery, at the same time it became a sign of an uncomfortable proximity to that world. In rare cases, it happened that the acronym of the word "sin otro apellido" became the surname Soa. I found traces of the effort made by some black Boggianos to escape this symbolic trap, but I was left with the feeling that I could have continued this exploration. The fact is, that nothing can ever fully restore the complexity of these paths of life. The tools of historical research are not very sharp, when it comes to the poorest classes, and risk mixing everything in scant generalizations.

RODNEY I have found the re-appropriation of African first names to be a fairly widespread practice in the United States, in my generation and subsequent generations. I have definitely heard of or have spoken to people given names that are supposed to hearken back to the African continent, though the bearer of the name was not born there or born to parents who were born there. I've heard names like "Sadika" and "Ncoolie" and I used to think rather derisively about this practice, since it seemed to issue from a kind of mythology about the continent. Now, I suppose I better understand the impulse. I think that people who want to assert ownership of themselves frequently express that desire by changing their names. This act has more to do with being self-directed, fully embracing one's agency than I think it has to do with rebellion – at least this is true for me.

There is another aspect of this discussion of names. The notion of "erasure" or "being under erasure" used to get talked

about a lot in academia in the US. There is a way in which the forced or encouraged adoption of a Christian name by an enslaved person, moves toward erasing their heritage. It uproots them and places them in a new plot of soil to grow, and yes, they might still develop and bloom, but some think about what it might have been like to grow in the field in which one was originally planted. There is a way in which maybe the story of the Boggianos is a story of resisting erasure, even in cases when some of them go back to the Boggiano name, perhaps because the name has a history that feels substantial and meaningful. I wonder whether members of the poorest classes desire a surname with some historical weight to offset that feeling or apprehension that they are so light, so unsubstantial that they might just drift away on the wind one day.

I think it is important to hold onto the surname just as a way of tracing one's lineage. I was told once that the fact that my family survived up until this point of me writing this is itself a great achievement because there have been many family lines that have died out. I don't know whether this is true, but it certainly sounds true. I may not be interested in the particular people in my family tree, but I would like to find out how the name migrated and traveled, where it originated and how I came to share it.

BERTI In recent decades, the process of appropriation of names that do not belong to the Christian tradition was also widespread among the Boggiano families, especially among those who remained in Trinidad. The outcome of this process could also be seen as a form of re-appropriation, but I must confess that I have not studied the subject sufficiently to be able to say more. The re-appropriation of the name I referred to earlier was, however, another type of action. That is, the restoration of the name that that particular person had in Africa, before being deported to America.

This talk about names reminded me of a song by Nina Simone, *Four Women*. The association of thoughts is probably due to the name-labels that close the verses, but that's not what I want to talk about. In fact, I find this song to be a good example of what art can do as a means of knowledge. I mean, if someone asked us about the condition of the black woman in the past, we would have much more in mind after listening carefully to *Four Women*, than reading an historical essay on the subject. I will try to give a quick definition, at the risk of seeming coarse: art is giving meaning to things, to existence, through what is of no use. I add that, based on my experience, the less a thing is useful, the greater the effort to give it shape, the more it becomes potentially charged with meaning. The tools and paths chosen can then vary, depending on sensitivities and temperaments, but this is a secondary aspect.

For some years now I have envisioned the Caribbean as a sort of open-air laboratory, a place that predicts the future. This thought of mine is not particularly original, there are brilliant intellectuals who have theorized about it. The Caribbean is also a place where history quickens its pulse, a place of sudden disappearances and uncertainties. This is why in the last ten years I have worked mainly on Caribbean themes, first in Martinique with *Ma belle ka di*, and then in Cuba.

What do you think of the Caribbean? You have lived in New York for a long time, and therefore you can look at it from both the inside and outside at the same time. Something which I cannot do, and this makes me curious to know your opinion.

RODNEY The Caribbean is a place that is only somewhat known to me. I spent the first few years of my life in Jamaica until age six and then emigrated to New York City, specifically the North Bronx. I've only been to Jamaica, Martinique, and the Bahamas. My sense of the Caribbean is hazy and I have a slippery grip on it. But so do others.

The Caribbean has long seemed to be a place for projection for many different kinds of people. Some valorize and mythologize the Caribbean, thinking that it's a place of "roots" or indigenous power, where the people because they are sometimes closer to the land have a more authentic or less conflicted relationship to their place of birth. I recall many years ago hearing someone who was European American insist that people in Jamaica somehow had a better quality of life, knew how to "live better", which I thought was mostly fantasy. I countered that I knew that lots of people on the island live in real, crushing poverty and that though the island is beautiful in places, it is still economically precarious and I think when I said this, the person I was speaking to dismissed my concerns.

People associate Jamaica and other islands in the Caricom community with grassroots activism, and social justice struggle, in the way that they associate Bob Marley with the same. But like any other culture with layers and tiers of activity and being, Jamaica is more than liberation theology, more than dancehall music, more than Marcus Garvey and Sam Sharpe, more than Treasure Beach and Ocho Rios. Among the things the Caribbean is, it is also a place where the old world of Taíno and Arawak natives met the new world of transported African enslaved people and British, Spanish, and French conquistadors. Out of these encounters came a group of nations that are hybrid, inflected by colonization but generally proud of their various heritages. The region is a space where the rest of the world can see in real time how the struggle to disentangle ourselves from the nets of empire plays out culturally and politically and nationally.

Much of the world thinks of the Caribbean as a space of leisure, but I think of it as a place of work. I also think of it as a place where I cannot practically live. It may be that I am deeply ignorant of the resources available in Jamaica, but I think I couldn't make the life I've made for myself here in the US, on

that island. There frankly isn't enough cultural infrastructure, enough interest in visual arts to support the kind of criticism and writing that I do. The Caribbean is a place that I might once have known but the longer I'm away the more it seems like it's not the place for me. But it may be a place for those who don't want to live within the confines of empire, who want something more ad hoc, maybe more pliable.

BERTI I think I understand what you mean. Even if we have experienced a place, this can only be subjective, therefore partial, and we will build our imaginary vision mainly or only on that part. The more this experience of ours takes place within the channels organized for foreign travelers in search of entertainment, the more easily a stereotyped vision will emerge, which for the tropical islands will be that of a place of natural beauty and smiles. But the risk goes beyond tourism, as you effectively summarized.

However, I find that the Caribbean has particularly intriguing characteristics of duality. For example, from the point of view of physical geography, each island in the Lesser Antilles could be split in two: the side facing the ocean is far from the postcard image of the side facing the Caribbean Sea. On the ocean side, the sweetnesses of the Tropics wear different clothes, the sea is a real enemy, the mountains are harsh, at first glance, people are more reserved and suspicious, as is somehow normal. I was able to get an idea of this by living for a month on the Atlantic side of Martinique, at the time of *Ma belle ka di*. Obviously, I also drew a partial and questionable view from the experience, though far from the more consolidated stereotypes.

The Caribbean is a place of mixtures, of crossbreeds that make it difficult to divide people according to their physical appearance. My country is also like this in many respects: a bridge thrown between Europe and Africa, over which popula-

tions from all over the world have traveled for millennia, sowing their genetic makeup. The Italian peninsula has therefore always been a land of crossroads, which is why anyone who makes racist claims in this country would be more than ever a real idiot. But obviously, even if the impossibility of affirming one's purity or "precedence" were a good guarantee against certain distortions of thought, Italy like the Caribbean is not exempt from latent forms of racism.

I think it is precisely this widespread ambiguity of the Caribbean that fascinates me. It's the impossibility of establishing exactly what relationship exists between Antoinette and Daniel Cosway in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, certainly, but the question goes beyond the theme of ancestry. Ambiguity is for me a value. A door that allows you to explore reality while experiencing the vertigo of those who move forward without a foothold.

Starting from this research assumption, the idea of creating an artist's book in the form of a historical essay has something absurd about it. Historical research aims to interpret the past based on the evidence that has been preserved, and naturally tends to reduce ambiguity to produce a plausible explanation. But this book, as you know, is part of a larger work, which elsewhere offers space suited for erratic paths. This is the case with *Pero está por ahí, ¿no?* which in its exploration-*dérive* collects fragments of experiences capable of resonating with the history of Boggiano's coffee plantation, that disappeared over a century ago.

RODNEY The question that lies at the heart of this book and of the whole art project is what to do with the heritage that one has been given, whether we are discussing the Boggiano clan, you the writer and inheritor of a certain history or historical mystery and an Italian culture that frames this mystery, and me, someone who has inherited an ambiguous and conflicted Caribbean legacy. I mostly turned away from that original in-

heritance because I grew up in the United States and it seemed to me more crucial to try understand, learn from, and ultimately critique the culture of my adopted country.

You turned toward the mystery of the Boggianos to see what they could tell you about the wider developments within the Caribbean. I think it's valuable that you have uncovered a hushed history of entrepreneurship, travel, exploitation, enslavement, aspiration, intermixing of cultures and ethnicities, and laborious self-possession. You've turned toward the question of what to do and answered as a researcher who means to put the history in a form that is legible and logical to other audiences. And you've turned toward the question as an artist, teasing out the profound and curious threads of the Boggiano story to examine them as meaningful creative activities. You have said: "art is giving meaning to things, to existence, through what is of no use". I would put it slightly differently: Art gives meaning to us through the creation of non-utilitarian objects that are in turn profoundly invested with meaning in the acts of research, design, and construction.

In the Shakespeare play *Romeo and Juliet*, the daughter of the Capulet family famously asserts an influential conception of romantic love that she thinks can overwhelm family histories and duties. She believes fervently that Romeo is far more than his name. She says: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose / By any other name would smell as sweet; / So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd, / Retain that dear perfection which he owes". But it turns out that there is much more in a name than some of us ever imagined.