

Queer Italian studies

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Queer Italian Studies: Critical Reflections from the Field

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Abstract

This article investigates the multifaceted theoretical orientations and political concerns of, and the urgent need for, queer Italian studies. Critically reflecting on the current social, cultural, political, and economic position of LGBTQIA+ identifying individuals and other queer peoples in Italy, the article maps out diverse but convergent ways of understanding the importance of this area of investigation, the institutional and public need for interdisciplinary approaches to embodied and theoretical Italian queerness, and the potential impact of this research and pedagogy. Drawing connections across both time and space, queer Italian studies is approached as an embodied field, a field exploring sexual minority positions, and as a field based in radical oppositional theorisation. After an exploration into the traces that link queer Italian studies to historical research and feminist history and an elaboration of what a queer Italian pedagogy looks like, this article urges us to look across marginalised publics, so that by using these variegated geopolitical and theoretical positions, languages, and praxis those both inside and outside academia can collectively inform the discipline of queer Italian studies.

Keywords: feminism; precarity; universities; race; migration; LGBTQIA

Queer Italian Studies: Critical Reflections from the Field

Introduction

We are three researchers, based in the UK and North America, who ran a research project on ‘Queer Italia’ from 2016 to 2018.¹ In addition to building a transnational and multidisciplinary network of scholars, activists, and artists, we have created spaces to discuss and develop written projects on several different aspects of queer lives, times, art, activism, and politics.² During the last few years of exchanges and collaboration, it became clear that the Italian socio-cultural and political context remains incredibly hostile to those who transgress the pervasive norms of binary heterosexuality, gender identity, whiteness, and able-bodiedness. Recently — and increasingly — government ministers have openly attacked LGBTI people and families, Roma communities, Black and other racialised Italians, asylum seekers, and migrants.³ While there have been legal and cultural changes that protect and extend the rights of some LGBTI people (e.g., the ratification of long-term relationships through civil partnerships in 2016), scholars have pointed to a persistent demonization of non-normative sexualities.⁴ While pioneering research on queer Italian cultures, politics, and

¹ The research project, also known by the acronym QuIR, was sponsored by an AHRC Research Network Grant from 2016–2018. QuIR was proceeded by other collaborative workshops, meetings, and panels co-organised by SA Smythe, Julia Heim, and Charlotte Ross. For details, see our website: <www.queeritalia.com> (accessed 9 July 2019).

² A special issue of the journal *gender/sexuality/italy* on ‘Queer Italian Cultures’ will be published in August 2019, and a co-edited volume on queer Italian media and cinema co-edited by Julia Heim and Sole Anatrone is also forthcoming.

³ See, for example: Maria Novella De Luca, ‘Fontana: “Famiglie gay? Mi attaccano perché sono cattolico.” Ma Salvini lo stoppa: “Sue idee non in contratto”’, Cronaca, *La Repubblica.it*, 2 June 2018 <http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/06/02/news/fontana_famiglie_gay_non_esistono-197976404/> (Accessed 11 May 2019); ‘Il censimento dei Rom è illegale?’, *L’Internazionale.it*, 19 June 2018 <<https://www.internazionale.it/bloc-notes/2018/06/19/censimento-rom>> (accessed 11 May 2019).

⁴ One example is the case of the television programme *Le Iene*, that in February 2017 investigated UNAR’s (Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazioni Razziali) support of ANDDOS (Associazione Nazionale Contro le Discriminazioni Da Orientamento Sessuale) and

identities has been undertaken and published for several years now,⁵ queer perspectives are often still elided in scholarly and cultural debate. They have even been critiqued by feminists who claim to represent progressive thinking but who instead reveal an entrenched gender essentialism and cultural normativity, as will be discussed below. In addition, the vast potential for queer approaches to impact traditional research and pedagogy is far from being realised. More urgently, the importance of addressing the ways queer and other non-normative subjects are fatally discriminated against, especially Black Italians and other racialised individuals, has been tragically confirmed again and again in the last few decades with the expansion of a cis-heteropatriarchal carceral state known as Fortress Europe.⁶ This article brings together some of the recent events and trends in Italian politics, activism, and scholarship (with attention to our own research), we see this article as a step towards bridging the gaps between them and each other so as to create a more dynamic body of scholarship in queer Italian studies with the hopes that its breadth might influence both the politics and culture surrounding queerness in Italy, and the universalised Anglo-centrism of queer studies in the Western world.

indirectly of saunas and sex clubs. These spaces, which enabled the expression of queer sexuality and queer sex, were thoroughly demonized. Lorenzo Bernini analysed this situation in his paper 'Gay Orgies under the Big Top: Re-Sexualising the Queer Italian Debate', presented at the QuIR workshop on 'LGBTQIA+ Identities and Italian Media', New York, September 2017.

⁵ See, for example: *Queer Italia: Same-Sex Desire in Italian Literature and Film*, ed. by Gary Cestaro (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Miguel Andrés Malagrecá, *Queer Italy* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007); *Queer in Italia. Differenze in movimento*, ed. by Marco Pustianaz (Pisa: ETS, 2011); and *Il re nudo. Per un archivio del drag king in Italia*, ed. by Michela Baldo, Rachele Borghi, and Olivia Fiorilli (Pisa: ETS, 2014).

⁶ See SA Smythe, 'The Black Mediterranean and the Politics of Imagination', *Middle East Report: Suffering and the Limits of Relief*, 286 (Spring 2018), 3–9; Giulia Moro and Jacopo Orlo, 'La condizione transgender nelle carceri', *Ristretti Orizzonti*, 27 March 2018, <<http://www.ristretti.org/Le-Notizie-di-Ristretti/la-condizione-transgender-nelle-carceri>> (accessed 9 July 2019); and 'Trans si suicida nel bagno del carcere maschile di Udine', Cronaca, *UdineToday*, 2 August 2018, <<http://www.udinetoday.it/cronaca/suicidio-detenuta-trans-lgbt-carcere-maschile-via-spalato-udine.html>> (accessed 9 July 2019).

Between the three of us, our approach to ‘queer’ as a concept has been variegated, messy, fraught, and ultimately generative across languages, situated knowledges, theoretical and disciplinary engagements, and (geo)political generations. There is power in these differences, and we have taken to mobilising them throughout our collaborative work (as in this piece) and in our individual practices and interventions. We recognize the dangers in eroding the importance of sex, sexuality, and fleshliness that were integral to the development of the concept and allowing ‘queer’ to be an unmoored or floating signifier. Queer sexualities and embodiments must continue to hold their integral place within queer Italian studies. Critics have argued that ‘[t]o despecify the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or transgressive content of queerness’ risks ‘turning it into a generic badge of subversiveness, a more trendy, nonnormative version of “liberal” or “oppositional,”’ which ‘radically narrow[s] the scope and transformative power of queer critique’.⁷ However, while we would agree that it is politically and ethically vital to continue to fight for queer (LGBTI) people and queer (LGBTI) experiences, there are other groups and individuals whose categories can be read as ‘queer’ in relation to the state and cis-heteropatriarchal norms, and who also require urgent political support and critical attention. These include individuals who have historically been rendered less visible than white cisgender gay men, or monogamous white cis lesbians, both in terms of activism and research, such as people with disabilities, or racialised and migratized individuals like the Roma and Sinti people, Black Italians, other non-white Italians, Muslims, refugees, and asylums seekers. To include these and the many other identitarian categories of oppressed people within a framework of queer concern is to acknowledge first and foremost that some of the people in the latter categories also identify as queer. Secondly, it is to acknowledge that cis-heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism, colonialism, and neoliberal securitisation are interlocking systems built around subjugation,

⁷ *Gay Shame*, ed. by David M. Halperin and Valerie Traub (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), p. 17.

oppression, and submission. This includes the classification and ordering of bodies that produce, regulate, and intensify binary categories such as male/female, able-bodied/disabled, black/white, citizen/migrant, self/other, and so on.⁸ The radical specificity of the term ‘queer’ — ‘radical’ here meaning both ‘rooted’ and politically invested in dismantling systemic oppression — is both salient and useful for an intersectional and just world.

In that same vein, we also call for transnational perspectives that will bring critical discourses on queer issues in Italy into dialogue with other ongoing debates. By this we mean perspectives that engage critically with the concepts of nation, imperialism, and neoliberal globalisation, and that seek to offer meaningful, historicized points of view with regards to knowledge production. Otherwise, we risk failing to see and scrutinise essential dimensions of intercultural exchange, translation, and intertextuality that have been operating for many centuries. In relation to the present day, we risk artificially delineating what constitutes Italian culture and then sealing it off from the global cultures of which it is a part — which it is constantly informed by and informing — thereby undermining important transnational discourses that inform, shape, and provoke developments within and beyond the Italian nation state.

This article provides a series of critical reflections on what queer Italian studies might look like as a field of serious enquiry, without seeking to be exhaustive or prescriptive. It is divided into three sections that reflect our different voices and areas of specialist interest, and are intended to further debate and situate our respective research rather than to offer any kind of definitive statement, or to reify a field or discipline as such. The first section, authored by Charlotte Ross, provides an overview of existing scholarship that engages with queer Italian studies, with a focus on historical research and feminist epistemology, and suggests ways in which these areas of debate might be usefully developed. The second section, written by Julia

⁸ Paul Silverstein, ‘Colonization and the Production of Ethnicity’, *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 35–75.

Heim, creates a framework for thinking about theoretical and embodied approaches to queer Italian studies in relation to the university. SA Smythe's contribution, which concludes the article, speaks to the need to put queer Italian studies in conversation with Black studies, trans studies, and other fields of enquiry that seek the dismantling of racial capitalism, normative hierarchies, and the abolition of a colonial and carceral world order. Together, the three parts of this article call for continued investment and scholarship in the field of queer Italian studies, and bring to light how, by acknowledging and working with the traces that both historically and disciplinarily link queer Italian studies to other areas of knowledge, we may create and deepen fields and methods of understanding that more fully embrace the potentiality within queer Italian studies.

Queer Italian Studies and Feminist Embodiment (Charlotte Ross)

Historical and Literary Analyses

This section engages with existing scholarship and provides a brief overview and some suggestions for how critical approaches might develop productively in the future. Several studies have been published that engage with queerness in previous historical periods or in literary analyses. These include the 2004 collection *Queer Italia*, edited by Gary Cestaro, which focuses on literature and film from the Renaissance onwards; Derek Duncan's 2006 analysis of male homosexuality in twentieth century and contemporary literature; Chiara Beccalossi's 2012 comparative study of Italian and British sexological discourses in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century; Nerina Milletti and Luisa Passerini's edited collection of historical analyses of desire between women in the first half of the twentieth

century; and analyses of approaches to love, marriage and gender performance during the Renaissance such as in Laura Giannetti's work.⁹

These important contributions have begun to map queer experiences and identities, both in relation to lived experience and cultural representation. However, much more remains to be done, and there are several valid intellectual reasons to support this claim. First, many texts have not yet been explored, and there are large gaps in research. This is the case in relation to both historical documents (e.g. police records or records relating to prostitution and *manicomi*) and cultural texts such as plays, poems, or novels. Beyond the simplistic assertion that the gaps need to be filled, it is vital to point out that our understanding of the past and of the legacies of historical texts is problematically incomplete without further studies of these documents, which have often been side-lined by constructed narratives that privilege normative discourses and agendas. Queer historical documents (or historical documents which include queer traces) may not always constitute brilliant works of fiction or provide inspiring stories of heroic queer pasts, but they need to be brought to light and considered on their own terms as relevant pieces of the ever-expanding jigsaw of knowledge about the construction and policing of identities and modes of embodiment. Second, approaching a text, even a canonical text, or historical context, from a queer perspective often throws into relief moments of queerness that have gone unnoticed by generations of critics who were either intent on reading these out, or simply not open to such a reading. Drawing on insights by Eve Sedgwick, Tommaso Giartosio calls for continued queer scholarship on Italian literature, as a way of beginning to appreciate the queer intensities that may lie

⁹ Derek Duncan, *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality: A Case of Possible Difference* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006); Chiara Beccalossi, *Female Sexual Inversion: Same-Sex Desires in Italian and British Sexology, c. 1870–1920* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); *Fuori della norma. Storie lesbiche nell'Italia della prima metà del Novecento*, ed. by Nerina Milletti and Luisa Passerini (Milan: Rosenberg and Sellier, 2007); Laura Giannetti, *Lelia's Kiss: Imagining Gender, Sex and Marriage in Italian Renaissance Comedy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

unexplored in classic canonical texts, which now demand critical rereading.¹⁰ This call is arguably valid for research on cultural texts more broadly, and for historical research.

Third, many analyses to date, although rigorous and important, focus on one specific issue or demographic (e.g. homosexual men or lesbians). This is perhaps inevitable when beginning to map new terrain, due to the sheer volume of issues to discuss, and is something I have chosen to do in my own work.¹¹ However, while a more limited focus — in my case, on women who desire women — might allow researchers to chart developments of certain discourses and modes of representation, it shuts down other avenues, such as comparisons with modalities of queerness or other forms of discrimination. More work needs to be done that builds on existing studies with a relatively specific focus, which takes a transversal approach to queer experiences and therefore goes beyond an attention to homosexual/homoerotic identities and desires. Research with a wider focus can trace continuities and discontinuities across a range of textual genres, socio-cultural contexts, historical periods, and demographics. This will go some way to ensuring that sexual identities, modes of embodiment, and perspectives on the world that have hitherto received less attention (e.g. bisexuals and disabled people) are given due consideration. Moreover, as the field of queer Italian studies develops, it is crucial to engage with questions of homonormativity in relation to imposed or chosen identity categories such as ‘gay’, and to do so from a perspective that avoids reifying such categories.¹² Arguably, this task is facilitated

¹⁰ Tommaso Giartosio, “‘Oh, vi prego, fatemi andare avanti’”. Perché l’Italia ha ancora bisogno di analisi queer’, in *Inquietudini queer. Desiderio, performance, scrittura* ed. by Saveria Chemotti and Davide Susanetti (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2009), pp. 91–130 (p. 105).

¹¹ Charlotte Ross, *Eccentricity and Sameness: Discourses on Lesbianism and Desire between Women in Italy, 1860s–1930s* (Oxford and New York: Peter Lang 2015).

¹² Journalist and historian, Lisa Duggan describes ‘homonormativity’ as ‘a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption’. See Lisa Duggan, *The Incredible Shrinking Public: Sexual Politics and the Decline of Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), p. 179.

by analyses that move across groups and contexts that are sometimes lived as, represented as, and seen to be discrete.

Lastly, more comparative work is urgently needed to set the Italian context in relation to and in dialogue with other cultures, languages, and horizons and to consider different genres (e.g. literature, sexology, film, and the visual arts) together in critical studies. This is necessary to shed light on developments in contemporary literature and historiography in today's globalised world, but also to acknowledge and attempt to understand more historical connections that have lain unplumbed for many decades if not longer. For example, with the exception of Beccalossi's research there is very little work on nineteenth-century sexology that brings Italian debates into dialogue with those ongoing in other contexts, despite the fact that discourses on sexuality that were being forged at that time were deeply transcultural and were often legitimised and disseminated through practices of translation, citation, and review. Secondly, these discourses were forged across different genres, including sexology, literature, erotica, visual texts, and so on. More work is needed to trace how these ideas moved and evolved across languages, cultures, and genres; how the presence or character of discourses on sexuality blurred boundaries between genres (e.g. 'literature' and 'erotica'); and how these discourses were resignified and redeployed in both problematic and progressively satirical ways. A transnational perspective would also encourage more analyses of how racial and ethnic categories have been imposed in relation to nationalistic approaches to identity, including aspects like gender and sexuality. This important issue is severely under-researched, and critical studies can play a crucial role in both understanding complex dynamics in the past, and in tracing the legacies of racialised discourses on sexuality in contemporary society and culture.

Feminism and Embodiment

Scholarly work on literary texts and historical periods considered in the previous subsection certainly includes feminist perspectives, including my own. However, I now focus on the relationship between ‘feminism’ and ‘queer’ in Italian culture, which might be characterised as both mutually enriching and a source of ongoing tension. On the one hand, there are several exciting new activist collectives such as the Laboratorio Smaschieramenti, the Favolosa Coalizione, the SomMovimento nazioAnale and the Consultoria Transfemminista Queer that engage with queer and transfeminist perspectives and take aim at gender norms, sexual binaries, and racism.¹³ On the other hand, there are several quite prominent and established feminists associated with sexual difference, such as Luisa Muraro, who, I argue, take quite clear anti-queer positions and reinforce binary understandings of sex and gender.¹⁴

Beginning with the most dynamic developments in feminist thought and practices, transfeminist activists are currently involved in a range of initiatives, from more traditional protests, to the dissemination of queer ideas through translation. Some are trained researchers, overtly blurring the often-artificial distinction between ‘academics’ and ‘activists’ (which we sought to do throughout the ‘Queer Italia’ research project), and facilitating further opportunities for an exchange of ideas. Unfortunately, not all these experiences have been entirely productive, as seen for example at the first conference organised by the recently founded Centro Interuniversitario di Ricerca Queer (CIRQUE) held in L’Aquila in Spring 2017. During this event, several delegates decided collectively to

¹³ See the following websites for the abovementioned groups: <https://smaschieramenti.noblogs.org/>; <https://www.facebook.com/groups/maistarezitte/>; <https://sommovimentonazioanale.noblogs.org/> (accessed 9 July 2019); and <https://consultoriaqueerbologna.noblogs.org/> (accessed 9 July 2019). These groups are discussed by Michela Baldo in her article ‘Translating Spanish transfeminist activism into Italian: Performativity, DIY, and affective contaminations’ in ‘Queer Italian Cultures’ a special issue of *gender/sexuality/italy* co-edited by Julia Heim, Charlotte Ross, and SA Smythe, 2019.

¹⁴ Luisa Muraro, ‘La differenza sessuale c’è. È dentro di noi’, *La ventisettesima ora*, 28 March 2015; Luisa Muraro, *L’anima del corpo. Contro l’utero in affitto* (Verona: La Scuola, 2016).

‘strike’ and boycott the remaining sessions of the conference in order to discuss their experiences. They co-wrote a statement, which can be read on the website of the *SomMovimento nazioAnale*.¹⁵ The key points include: the feeling that vulnerable queer individuals and groups are being exploited by more privileged researchers for academic research as they are required to open themselves to scrutiny but are not fully listened to or compensated; a conviction that the concept of ‘queer’ should remain linked to LGBTI lives and experiences for political reasons, rather than ‘freed’ and applied to potentially any context; and criticisms of problematic approaches to the spectrum of trans individuals and of ‘trans-race’ claims and cultural appropriation that reportedly occurred during the conference. Their collective statement reveals strong tensions between some activists and researchers that urgently need to be addressed and overcome if an ethical, productive, and non-hierarchical queer feminist dialogue is to be established in future. It shows a form of feminist engagement that considers all forms of violence and discrimination within a queer optic rather than limiting itself to a focus on an essentialist understanding of the category of ‘woman’. Such statements raise many crucial issues and remind scholars of the vital importance of critical self-scrutiny.

In contrast, some established feminists, who are more visible in the mainstream media, privilege different topics as causes for concern. Their critiques of queer approaches to gender and sexuality, have been published in monographs as well as in national daily papers. For example, the journalist Marina Terragni has argued that the term ‘queer’ is an attack on women’s bodies and leads inexorably to ‘una misoginia furiosa, la faccia orribile e metaforica

¹⁵ See ‘SCIOPERO! Comunicata delle transfemministe in sciopero dalla conferenza CIRQUE (L’Aquila, 31 marzo–2 aprile 2017)’ *somMovimentonazioAnale blog*, 26 May 2017 <<https://sommovimentonazioanale.noblogs.org/post/2017/05/26/sciopero-comunicata-delle-transfemministe-in-sciopero-dalla-conferenza-cirque-laquila-31-marzo-2-aprile-2017/>>.

e invidiosa di un trans-patriarcato in punto di morte'.¹⁶ Taking a less aggressive but still, I would argue, antiqueer approach, the well-known philosopher Luisa Muraro has maintained in *Il Corriere della sera* that sexual difference is not determined by the relations between men and women but is within us. She says: 'Mi è *interna*, inserisce alla mia esistenza e io così la concepisco, così la vivo, come qualcosa da cui non posso prescindere, anche volendo' (emphasis in original). Moreover, while both criticising and in part agreeing with Judith Butler's approach to sexual difference, she argues that this perspective is being side-lined and replaced by 'un travestitismo generalizzato senza ricerca soggettiva di sé, disegnato dalle mode e funzionale ai rapporti di potere. Insomma: l'insignificanza della differenza e l'indifferenza verso i soggetti in carne e ossa'.¹⁷ This can be read as a biting critique of queer approaches to gender, sexuality, and embodiment, which dismisses such positions as superficial, faddish, in thrall to problematic relations, and uninterested in embodied experience. Muraro's position seems to reject any alternatives to sexual difference as a way of understanding the self, and fails to acknowledge the work of queer theorists such as Sara Ahmed who have already highlighted the risk of marginalising the material body, and offered compelling queer ways of rethinking such an approach.¹⁸

In a related vein, there is currently a heated debate between some feminists and lesbians, taking place largely in newspapers and online rather than in academic publications, around the fraught ethical conundrum of surrogacy. In 2016, a group of self-identified lesbians in Italy authored an open letter, which was reported on by *La Repubblica* and other news outlets, condemning all forms of surrogacy, criticising gay men as exploiting women's bodies and establishing a trade in children, and reiterating biologically essentialist views of

¹⁶ Marina Terragni, 'La Queer-Politics, Nuova Faccia Del Patriarcato', 28 October 2016, <<http://marinaterragni.it/la-queer-politics-nuova-faccia-del-patriarcato/>>

¹⁷ See Muraro, 'La differenza sessuale c'è', p. 14.

¹⁸ Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

motherhood in which a mother can only ever be the woman who gives birth.¹⁹ Scholars such as Carlotta Cossutta and Alberica Bazzoni have offered insightful and persuasive critiques of these positions, and have begun to analyse the complex dynamics at work when more traditional approaches to feminism resist queer and **post-structuralist** developments in critical and political discourse.²⁰ Cossutta expresses concern at how Muraro's views on this issue insist on 'the fundamental maternal relationship in which a woman discovers herself as a woman' at the expense of other experiences, and argues that the link between women and reproduction that is continually asserted by sexual difference feminism 'perpetuates and reinforces biopolitical power'.²¹ Corinna Guerzoni and Tatiana Motterle have further pointed out how traditional Catholic publications like *Avvenire* have become important vehicles for Muraro's views on the issue.²² Indeed, a striking 'coalition' of sorts has developed in recent times, in which traditionalist and far-right groups, as well as conservative Catholic politicians, are aligned with self-proclaimed lesbian feminists. Antiqueer positions and the celebration of motherhood as the apex of women's experience also resonate with the ongoing 'Anti-gender' campaigns, which have been incisively critiqued by Sara Garbagnoli and Massimo Prearo.²³ The campaigns are led by the Vatican (specifically the Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede and the Pontificio Consiglio per la Famiglia) and groups that seek to

¹⁹ Alberto Custodero, 'Appello di 50 lesbiche contro l'utero in affitto: "No a mercificazione di donne e bambini"', *La Repubblica*, 26 September 2016; and Daniela Danna, 'Le madri lesbiche tirano la volata alla GPA' *Il manifesto*, 10 May 2018.

²⁰ Carlotta Cossutta, 'Maternal Relations, Feminism and Surrogate Motherhood in the Italian Context', *Modern Italy*, 23.2 (2018), 215–226; Alberica Bazzoni, 'Queer and Feminism in Italy: An Open Debate', forthcoming in *gender/sexuality/italy* special issue co-edited by Julia Heim, Charlotte Ross, and SA Smythe, 2019.

²¹ Cossutta, 'Maternal Relations', p. 217; p. 222. In this section, she analyses *L'anima del corpo* in particular.

²² Corinna Guerzoni and Tatiana Motterle, 'Sul corpo delle surrogate. Analisi del discorso pubblico italiano sulla gestazione per altri', *gender/sexuality/italy*, 5 (2018), 159–80 (p. 166).

²³ Sara Garbagnoli and Massimo Prearo, *La crociata "anti-gender": dal Vaticano alle Manif pour tous* (Turin: Kaplan, 2018).

demonize queer approaches to gender and sexuality as an ideology that corrupts children, such as the Sentinelle in Piedi.

It is crucial and urgent for scholars and activists to work together to untangle the problematic misinterpretations of gender theory that have led to social panic and the closing down of many important initiatives that sought to educate the general population to take an inclusive, non-discriminatory perspective on individual expressions of identity. These include: a proposed law in 2014, that would have protected homosexual and **transsexual** individuals from hate speech, which was never discussed in the Italian Senate,²⁴ and an information campaign about education and diversity sponsored by UNAR (the National Office against Racial Discrimination), the Ministry of Education (MIUR), and the Department for Equal Opportunities that should have been distributed to Italian teachers.²⁵ Furthermore, it seems important to engage specifically with queer approaches to the material body and embodiment, to dispel the myth that queer theory somehow erases materiality, and to focus on embodied queer experiences of vulnerability.²⁶ In my view, a feminist politics that does not engage with queer lives and issues is inadequate, normative, and risks reinforcing binary norms including those of sex, gender identity, and race.

Queer Italian Studies Within and Without the University (Julia Heim)

Disciplinary Worth

²⁴ Lorenzo Bernini, 'La "teoria del gender," i "negazionisti" e la "fine della differenza sessuale,"' *About Gender: International Journal of Gender Studies*, 5.10 (2016), 367–81 (p. 368).

²⁵ Giulia Selmi, 'Chi ha paura della libertà? La così detta ideologia del gender sui banchi di scuola', *About Gender, International Journal of Gender Studies*, 4.7 (2015), 263–68 (p. 264).

²⁶ Ahmed's work is a good example of this. See, for instance, **Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).**

This section takes up the importance of critical self-scrutiny in relation to both essentialist tendencies and to a disregard for the power structures that determine the regulation, valuation, and production of certain forms of knowledge. In mapping out methods for multicultural education, J.A. Banks delineates ‘knowledge construction’ as one of the five key categorical areas under investigation.²⁷ To consider knowledge construction is to investigate the *how* and the *why* behind the frameworks of our disciplines. Looking into how knowledge is constructed begs us to acknowledge the implicit power dynamics that determine what is ‘worthy’ of study in a specific scholarly field. Saying ‘this has value’ and thus deserves academic attention and cultural acknowledgement is the fundamental first step in getting larger academic and social communities to recognise queer Italian studies. To name it is to interpellate it, to forge its place within the larger structures of our institutions. But we must not forget that in giving queer Italian studies a name, in fighting for its validation, we are also defining its limitations, which seems to contradict the queerness inherent within it. To do queer Italian studies justice, we must pay attention to the ways that we — consciously or not — conform to larger institutional expectations to stake a claim for ourselves. We must pay attention to the ways that we may be essentializing both queerness and Italianness, and restricting or presupposing what does or does not get considered a field or object worthy of ‘study’. Queerness is disruptive, but not necessarily destructive. Rather, it calls for a reshaping, a rethinking of the structures that have formed our foundations. In her speech entitled ‘Institutional as Usual’, Sara Ahmed notes that ‘[o]nce a building has been built, once it has taken form, more or less, some more than others will fit the requirements.’²⁸ The dynamic interplay between power, threat, and precarity helps determine what study and what

²⁷ J.A. Banks, *Introduction to Multicultural Education* (New York: Pearson, 2014).

²⁸ Sara Ahmed, ‘Institutional as Usual,’ *Feminist Killjoy* (blog), 24 October 2017, <<https://feministkilljoys.com/2017/10/24/institutional-as-usual/>>.

scholars fit these pre-existing forms. I am concerned with how we who are invested in queer Italian studies ‘fit’ as misfits, and why that might be the case.

In the United States, the university’s recent and superficial obsession with the notion of ‘interdisciplinarity’ does not address the ways that the term ultimately reifies the boundaries of acceptability within each discipline. Instead of calling for a consideration of queer Italian studies by playing to these trendy academic tropes, I would like to conceptualize ‘knowledge construction’ using Fred Moten’s notion of practice. Moten quotes Randy Martin who argues that

to speak of practices rather than objects of knowledge as what disciplines serve privileges the capacity for production over the already given product-object as a founding epistemological premise. The focus on practices allows production to be named historically so as to situate it with respect to existing political mobilizations.²⁹

In this way, queer Italian studies does not merely mix Italian studies with queer theories; it does not suture these pre-existing forms. Rather, it is a practice that produces knowledge of queer theories, bodies, and practices that centres around ‘Italy’ — as a historical, cultural, social, political, economic, linguistic area of investigation — and in doing so works in the particularity of the local (namely, Italy/Italianness in all its diaspora and variance), while calling into question the Anglo-centric, Westernised way that we too often think about queerness.

A Mediatic Lens for a Queer Future

²⁹ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), p. 35.

As a scholar, my practice queerly investigates Italian media. In the last 5–10 years in U.S. academia, Italianists have carved out more space — including more tenure-track jobs — for Italian cinema and media scholars, and annual meetings of associations for Italian studies, cultural studies, media studies, and cinema are rife with papers about ‘quality’ Italian television, as shows like *The Young Pope*, *Gomorra*, *Suburra*, and Elena Ferrante’s trilogy are being globally distributed and academically legitimized. There is queerness that is not being discussed here. There is queerness not only in characters like Spadino Anacleti (the gay Roma character in *Suburra*), but also in the fact that many of these shows are co-produced across nations, challenging notions of national television no matter how we might celebrate them as Italian.³⁰ This queerness, once again, is disruptive, it challenges the very same institutional structures that determine the legitimacy of our disciplines. Analysing Italian media queerly serves an important purpose, not least because it creates a framework of understanding that allows us to think of Italian media differently; it creates new relationships and connections, and these queer modes of thinking may bring us to new insight that the knowledge-formation structures of traditional Italian media scholarship do not consider — or worse, reject.

When silent Italian cinema began, art critics did not know what to make of it. They frequently invalidated it as a new technological art form, using it as a scapegoat to mask their larger fears about technological advancement and modernity.³¹ Queer theories, in creating different approaches to media analysis, need not create the same fear, or perhaps we must understand this fear for what it is: namely, fear about the tenuousness or vulnerability of our current methods of analysis. Once again, we are talking about power and its relationship to threat and precarity. Deemed as a threat to the established power structures, these methods

³⁰ For example, *The Young Pope* was co-produced by Italian, French, and Spanish production companies, while the new Ferrante series was born out of an HBO-RAI agreement.

³¹ ‘Introduzione della censura’, *Il cinema muto*,
<http://www.ilcinemamuto.it/betatest/introduzione-della-censura/>.

are in turn threatened and invalidated. What they do not see, however, is that we are not replacing these modes, we are making space for ourselves to dismantle them, to look differently, and to feel and create community through alternative lenses and ways of seeing. Queer theories and queer study embrace change, as they point to the fissures in established categorical understandings, which is precisely what Charlotte Ross notes above when she asks that we *queerly* reconsider the historical and literary documents of the past. And if we, as scholars and pedagogues, truly care about practices of knowledge-making, we should embrace the potentiality of these new pathways.

The very same discourses that are exploring queerness and media are very much relevant to conversations about our positionality within the university, as queer scholars of Italian outside Italy, as scholars of ‘queer Italia’, and as Italian scholars who are queer. To make claims that we cannot speak across politically imposed national borders is to misrepresent cultural exchange and influence. Too often I have heard arguments that work on ‘queer Italy’ should be done by Italians; that we, as non-nationals are imposing our Anglophone priorities or using our hegemonic power to tell queers, Italians, and scholars what to consider and how to consider it. These arguments are rooted within the hegemonic categories we are actively trying to blur and question. Furthermore, they ignore the liminality of our positions, and reject community. Audre Lorde warned us against hiding ‘behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us’ as, in doing so, ‘we rob ourselves of ourselves and each other’.³² What are the consequences of our various precarious positionalities, and more importantly, what are the aims we work toward because of them, and how can we speak to moments of connection between and across them? In ‘11 Theses / Anthropocene Dream’, Jedediah Purdy challenges those of us who choose to fight for our positions and our legitimacy separately, by stating: ‘Solidarity is different than hope. We

³² Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkley: Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 43–44.

have in common what we decide to have in common'.³³ In looking across disciplines and across identities, through the politics of using a multiplicity of languages, grammars, and embodiments, this is precisely the potential that SA Smythe speaks to below. Let us make the spaces for our queer theorizations, our queer approaches, our queer pedagogies, and our queer bodies and reshape the forms of our institutions where currently we must fight to fit, let us make our own, new formalities. In acknowledging our own multiplicities, and the historical and interdisciplinary connections that already exist, but often remain uninvestigated or unspoken, we make routes for those we teach to follow, we make paths for future queerings and queerlings, and acknowledge the potential for a post-queer. We are challenging the naturalness of institutional history by knocking down its doors from our unstable, insurrectionary positions on the inside.

Our Bodies, Our Labour

To determine who is disposable in our institutions is to determine legitimacy, and thus worth. It is disposability not only of scholars' use-value within the institution, but their bodies and their bodies of work and study. Thus to question the validity of queer Italian studies is to question the value of the queers that investigate it and vice versa. As Ahmed argues 'words can evoke histories, bodies too...'.³⁴ The legacy of the forms of normalization established and perpetuated by the heteropatriarchy has determined a hierarchy of value. It is a hierarchy that ultimately commodifies our history, our work, and our bodies, as we cannot separate the body that produces and performs the labour, from the intellectual and physical labour itself. The precarity that is queer physicality is directly related to the precarity of that which the queer precariat produces. Fred Moten asks: 'Where can the work of (re)creative thinking be

³³ Lushlife, Jedediah Purdy, and Sun Airway, *My Idols are Dead and My Enemies are in Power*, Lushlife Media, January 2017, streaming, <<http://idolsandenemies.com/>> (accessed 8 July 2019).

³⁴ Ahmed, 'Institutional as Usual'.

done in the midst of [...] the vocational enclosure of the university, in the ideological enclosure that one might call [...] the intellectual's public?'.³⁵ He goes on to argue that 'sometimes it seems like we are trapped in the correspondence of this assumed legitimacy of exclusion and precarity.'³⁶ These exclusions are corporeal in as much as they are ideological. The tensions that arose at CIRQUE, which were discussed earlier, point to the ways that the individuals within those groups that already work in queer studies in Italy and queer Italian studies, are mirroring the 'othering' that happens in the struggle for institutional legitimacy. So as not to reproduce the institutional habits that marginalize bodies as much as they marginalise the intellectual and cultural works those bodies create, we must be inclusionary when negotiating and sharing our relationship to precarity and those of others.

This struggle against exclusion is an activist's struggle, and our main battlegrounds are our bodies. As Samuel Delaney remarked when discussing his work 'Ash Wednesday', 'all true radicalism has to begin in the body'.³⁷ It is again the dynamics between power, threat, and precarity that dictate the position of our radical bodies in the university because they shape hiring practices, disciplinary frameworks, and student-teacher dynamics. My queer activism within these structures begins when I enter the classroom, as my queer body enters the space wherein I practice knowledge production with my students. My queer activism is the interaction between me and those I am teaching, but it also involves content, namely the introduction of queer histories and queer language into the curricula of my Italian studies courses, and the ways that I ask my students to engage with me, each other, and this content.³⁸

³⁵ Fred Moten, *Black and Blur*, 155.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Samuel Delaney, 'Radicalism Begins in the Body', *The Boston Review*, 10 May 2017.

³⁸ In integrating course material that touches on minority lives and/or counter histories pedagogues must always, however, be mindful that there is risk of tokenisation if one gay author, for example, is written into the syllabus and no context or discussion frames the text, or the author.

For the queer and *queerist** precariat in other disciplines in Italy and Italian queers and queerists outside of those geopolitical lines, I believe their academic activism to be in direct conversation with mine.³⁹ We are all asking our students to question the socially imposed assumptions at the foundations of their learning toolkits. We ask them to face the precarity of their assumptions and their precarious positions in relation to them. We are the radical corporeality of the queer spaces we carve and scratch out for ourselves in our institutions. As a collective and as individuals we threaten as we are threatened but we must look at the power of this radicality. Precarity as a word has an embodied sense that though tenuous connotes a sense of danger. There is potential in this danger, potential for new somatic ways of practicing knowledge, together.

Queer Italian Studies, Black Studies, and Intersectional Critique (SA Smythe)

Black Studies in Italy as a Site of Queer Concern

This section further explores the **intersecting** categories of queerness and race, and the queerness of race/racialization, particularly with regards to the issues of migration, rights-based discourses, and resistance to systemic oppression in contemporary Italy. My primary scholarship is on the Italian and Italoophone writings by contemporary authors of African descent, and the historical struggle to resist genocidal regimes of gender and race. This work is part of the growing discourse around the ‘Black Mediterranean’. In my view, the term and its attendant regionalism also foments cultural syncretism, intimacy, and expansiveness,

³⁹ The term *queerist** and its English language counterpart ‘queerist(s)’ is a portmanteau of ‘queer’ and ‘Italianist’. The term was coined circa 2012 by SA Smythe and Julia Heim in their roles as co-founders and organising members of the Queer Studies Caucus of the American Association for Italian Studies. It has since been mobilised on a transnational scale by and for queer scholars in Italy and its diasporas as well as scholars of queer studies and queer Italian studies alike.

while still leaving room for geospecificity for those who seek that within a transnational frame. The site carries with it queer, feminist, and diasporic valences, the likes of which have been articulated by scholars from Édouard Glissant to Sara Ahmed and beyond.⁴⁰ The Black Mediterranean that I am invested in understanding owes a great deal to the Black Radical Tradition, namely to Cedric Robinson who, in *Black Marxism*, began to articulate a conceptualization of the Black Mediterranean as ‘a precondition to the Black Atlantic and the making of Europe itself’.⁴¹ Rather than existing solely as a metaphor, a fixed geography, or a paradigmatic and hypervisible site of loss often referred to as a ‘wet cemetery’, the Black Mediterranean is more than the Mediterranean region or its seas. It is a plangent site of Black knowledge production, Black resistance, and Black joy. The ability to hold both sets of epistemic truths — incalculable loss and dispossession along with resistance, creativity, and worth — would be what queer Chicana poet and theorist Gloria Anzaldúa referred to as ‘sustained contradiction’, that is, a space for fraught creativity and tension that leads to new consciousness.

When we account for the intersecting oppressive forces of a colonial order that historically has codified who can be said to belong or to be afforded the right to life, we know that those we identify as ‘marginal subjects’ (e.g. migrants/asylum-seekers, queer and trans people, black people, other people of colour, and the overlapping constituencies therein) are at best peripheral if not well beyond the periphery of that belonging. Alessandro Dal Lago writes that

Equating the migrants with the enemy might seem misleading in so far as it is associated with a political definition of foreigners. It goes without saying that no war

⁴⁰ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997); Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*.

⁴¹ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, 2nd edn. (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), p. xix.

has ever been declared against migrants; and they don't display, obviously, their relative status as enemies. But migrants are in fact treated as enemies because they have the temerity to invade our national space.⁴²

The Black Mediterranean and Black Italian cultural producers not only belong in conversation with any form of queer studies in Italy, but the very matter of Black survival and Black culture should be considerable points of queer concern. The implication of how bodies get stratified, produced, and managed is clearly designated in cultural, ethnoracial, sexualised, and gendered terms. That process is consistently rendered conditional in relation to citizenship for racialised others and those who does not contribute to the white reproductive desires of the nation-state. I turn to the literature and poetry, which are often sites of Black and queer refusal, to explore responses of resistance to those state paradigms that are often upheld by quotidian violence. This includes gendered violence such as Italian colonialism, Italy's state-supported racialised and gendered violence via detention centres and prisons, and the nation's complicity both contemporary and historic with developing, financing, and meting out 'crises' of migration and death across the Mediterranean Sea and throughout Africa to countless named and unnamed individuals. Black lesbian feminist Audre Lorde has told us that 'poetry is not a luxury. It is the way we give name to the nameless'.⁴³

The queer Italian studies that I mobilise helps to sustain a configuration that expands the artistic and thus political capacity for naming and articulating Blackness outside of binary norms, which certain articulations of queer and trans theory also takes as their aim. It also sincerely seeks to make room for and amplify the voices of the historically dispossessed.

⁴² Alessandro Dal Lago, *Non-Persons: The Exclusion of Migrants in a Global Society*, trans. by Marie Orton (Milan: IPOC di Pietro Condemi, 2009).

⁴³ Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: Crossing Press, 2007), pp. 36–39

When reading sites like the Black Mediterranean, or even Fortress Europe more broadly, it is important to lend historical consciousness to the mainstream iterations of the ‘crisis of migration’ and to contemporary politics of belonging. Doing so offers a possibility for ‘home’ that is psycho-geographically expansive, transnational, and queer, in a way that a Sara Ahmed describes:

The point of the intersection between queer and diaspora might precisely be to show how the ‘where’ of queer is shaped by other worldly horizons – by histories of capital, empire and nation – which give queer bodies different points of access to such worlds, and which make different objects reachable, whether at home or away.⁴⁴

In this article, both Charlotte Ross and Julia Heim have previously cited Ahmed’s seminal works that think through the concept of ‘queer’ in disruptive relation to how we think about bodies, materiality, and institutions. I would acknowledge that same disruptive and embodied capacity in relation to coloniality. The collective spectre of the marginalised — bodies marked by Blackness, queerness, disability, and so on — continues to resurface out of epistemological and ontological oppression, ever vigilant in its struggle for survival and autonomy, and either resisting normative paradigms or being subsumed within it, like the more homonormative paradigm that Charlotte Ross describes above. Alternate economies of being together in true solidarity, as real accomplices, are what I witness being effected in the capacious category of the queer Italian studies that we have continued mobilising. This, along with the Black Italian literary and artistic production, takes up the matter of Black and migrant life and ancestry, to which we might always return, are always already returning, to teach us about the condition of belonging while traversing seas (psychosocial, geographical,

⁴⁴ Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, p. 176.

embodied, historical, and otherwise) that should be claimed for the emergence of a more just and radical world.

We should embrace the paradigm shifts that queerness might provide to Italian studies and that Blackness — as the ‘always already’ — might provide to queer Italian studies. The dynamic relation between the historical aspect of colonisation, and occupation, on the one hand, and the mixing of cultural and aesthetic elements such as the literary, the sonic, and representations of cultural memory and resistance, on the other, marks queer Italian studies as a contested and relational zone within the ‘cognitive ecologies’ that its purveyors continue to produce.⁴⁵ While many of the texts I study are not produced by LGBTI authors, my comparative analysis relies on a queer of colour methodology described in part by Roderick Ferguson in *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* as

[an] interrogat[ion] of social formations as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices. Queer of colour analysis is a heterogeneous enterprise made up of women of colour feminism, materialist analysis, poststructuralist theory, and queer critique.⁴⁶

Taking up Ferguson’s useful analytic, I include Black cultural studies, modern anthropology of the Mediterranean and its contemporary critiques, Italian queer theory and transfeminism, and narrative theories of Black and feminist epistemology and poetics. My adapted ‘heterogeneous enterprise’ establishes a theoretical framework that moves towards a queer Black critical praxis, and views reading as both pleasurable and a means of survival. In so

⁴⁵ Toni Morrison writes: ‘Since language is community, if the cognitive ecology of a language is altered, so is the community’. Toni Morrison, ‘Home’, in *The House that Race Built*, ed. by Wahneema Lubiano (New York: Vintage, 1998) pp. 3–12 (p. 8).

⁴⁶ Roderick Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 149.

doing, I further link the contemporary struggles around citizenship and the practices and politics of solidarity and belonging that I have identified as integral components of the Black Mediterranean. While my sources and objects of inquiry are primarily literary, my work is situated within and informed by the interdisciplinary fields of gender studies, Mediterranean studies, queer Italian studies, and Black studies, especially what is increasingly referred to as Black European studies. The latter is a relatively new field of research in terms of its institutional recognition, one that is still strongly marginalized within European academia, but gaining rapid purchase in North America, particularly from white and US/Americanist scholars who study race in Europe in comparison to the United States. The centuries-long history of Black people in Europe is still largely under-theorised, and in Italy (like many European nation states), the presence of Black people/people of African descent has been rendered utterly contemporary. However, since the 1980s, scholars have started to engage systematically with the history and presence of Black people in Europe, while Black social justice movements have also been growing throughout the continent.⁴⁷ Black European studies focuses on the recent and historic presences of Black people and sometimes other racialized peoples (e.g. Romani) either permanently or temporarily in Europe. All the areas with which my work is in conversation or to which it contributes necessitate shuttling across a grid of intelligibility that contains multiple axes along the lines of race, culture, and language.⁴⁸ Julia Heim spoke above about the superficial wielding of the label

⁴⁷ See, for example: May Ayim and the movement of Afro-German women facilitated by Audre Lorde in *Showing Our Colors: Afro-German Women Speak Out*, ed. by May Ayim, Katharina Oguntoye, and Dagmar Schultz, trans. by Anne V. Adams (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1991); Philomena Essed, *Understanding Everyday Racism: An Interdisciplinary Theory* (London: SAGE Publications, 1991); Fatima El-Tayeb, *Schwarze Deutsche. Der Diskurs um «Rasse» und nationale Identität 1890–1933* (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2001); Stuart Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', in *Identity, Community, Culture Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2003) pp. 222–37; and Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities', in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 441–49.

‘interdisciplinary’ in an academic context. I consider it more in the vein of interstitial translation, as a method and a strategy of in-betweenness without which a politics and affirmational project of sustained and invested critique would be impossible.

Works like Igiaba Scego’s short story ‘Salsicce’ or her novel *Adua* and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah’s novels *Madre piccola* and *Il comandante del fiume* might offer instances of translation and the transhistoric or translingual complexities of resistance.⁴⁹ These works do not aspire to translation in a manner that seeks full recognition or achieves total legibility from those hegemonic forces that deem them ‘Other’. These writers I study are primarily women who translate, organize, and collaborate with employ multiple narrative forms, multiple voices, and multiple grammars—in the linguistic, ontological, and epistemological sense—and thus actively try to break through the cage of minoritarian categorisation.⁵⁰ They refuse to let their readers forget the hauntingly political position of the historico-cultural and accusatory questions that anxiously race through the arteries of a certain Southern European polity: ‘Who or what is Italian’? The stakes of this question are meant to be high, and have often been used as a racial and aesthetic marker rather than a sociopolitical litmus test, as though those categories are ever mutually exclusive and do not together yield an inextricably linked desire for purity of genre and ethno-racial forms, often white supremacist in nature, ideology, and enforcement. These writers make it possible to take this question seriously by being attentive to Black imaginative works and creative practices. In fact, this is an attempt to re-read Blackness and re-imagine literature in always already geopolitically and transhistorically expansive relation.

⁴⁹ Igiaba Scego, ‘Salsicce’, *Pecore nere. Racconti*, eds. Emanuele Coen and Flavia Capitani (Bari: Laterza, 2005); Igiaba Scego, *Adua* (Florence: Giunti, 2015); Ubah Cristina Ali Farah’s *Madre piccola* (Milan: Frassinelli, 2007); and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, *Il comandante del fiume* (Rome: 66th and 2nd, 2014).

⁵⁰ Hortense Spillers, ‘Whatcha Gonna Do?’, *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, 35.1/2 (2007), 229–309 (p. 301).

Conditional Citizenship

Reading citizenship as precarious and ultimately conditional is a product of engagement with queer theory and Black studies alike. Blackness is usually at stake in a way that is individually and collectively a matter of history, affect, and sociopolitics. This is pertinent to a nation like Italy, which has preferred not to refer explicitly to *razza* or ‘race’ in recent years because of its strong association with twentieth century fascist ideology. During the latter half of the Fascist period (1938–43), *leggi razziali* were enacted throughout Italy that enforced racial hierarchies that stripped Italian Jews of citizenship, property, and position of state or civil service. These laws and the campaign promoting them, including the 1938 manifesto, *La difesa della razza*, relied on pseudo-scientific and historical documents to insist upon a distinction between Aryan, non-European, and African people, with the Italians falling into the most superior category of Aryan. This was not a unilateral view at the time.

Mediterraneanists such as Italian anthropologist Giuseppe Sergi and French historian Fernand Braudel argued in favour of a ‘Mediterranean race’ to which Italians proudly belonged, along with the Berber people in Algeria and others more readily categorised in the contemporary moment as African or Arab.⁵¹ However, Aryanism was the predominant doctrine of the Fascist government about the ‘Italian race’. This still resonates strongly for some Italians who balk at the self-referencing of Black people as *nera/o/** and instead are using the term *di colore* with increasing popularity.⁵² The latter is to the chagrin of many Black and/or leftist

⁵¹ See Giuseppe Sergi, *The Mediterranean Race* (New York: W. Scott, 1901) and Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean & the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II (Volume II)* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1996). See also Paul Silverstein’s *Algeria in France: Transpolitics, Race, and Nation* (fn. 8).

⁵² The * (asterisk) is used to represent a gender-neutral referent in Italian, which is a grammatically gendered language. When spoken, the *u* (e.g. *neru*) has become adopted as a legible/comprehensible ending for nouns and adjectives. It is a feature of several (primarily Southern) Italian dialects and is a recent effort to articulate the neuter form or a non-binary/non-gendered subject while also remaining within the broad parameters of the ‘grammatical’ Italian language and maintaining an oppositional/minoritarian relationship to it in terms of racialisation, ethnicisation, national borders/boundaries, and gender.

individuals who view the term as a form of apolitical erasure divorced from the North American term ‘people of colour’, which was politicised and mobilised by Black women.⁵³ The *Accademia della Crusca*, Italy’s linguistic academy responsible for tracing, historicizing, and codifying the use of the Italian language on multiple registers, notes:

Sull’uso di negro, nero e di colore per descrivere e caratterizzare una persona, o un gruppo di persone, in base al colore della sua (o della loro) pelle si è discusso non poco, negli ultimi decenni. E tuttora si continua a discutere, a voler scorrere, in Internet, i forum dedicati al tema. Non è un caso. Perché non vi è dubbio che l’argomento e le connesse scelte linguistiche presentino alcune incertezze e insidie sia sul piano squisitamente lessicale, sia su quello dell’accettabilità o dell’interdizione sociale.

However, on the idea of explicitly naming ‘race’, Anna Curcio and Miguel Mellino, in the introduction to the special issue of *Darkmatter* called ‘Challenging Italian Racism’, speak to the disavowal and foreclosure of open discussions about race in the public arena in Italy, even within the antiracist movement, especially when it comes to building antiracist practices towards Southerners. They argue that it goes hand in hand with the increase of racial conflict and racist episodes in the country, advocating for more usage of explicit language around/of race to challenge contemporary Italian racism and articulate a nuanced understanding of racialisation that is accountable to contemporary Italian history:

What we want to stress here is that given the particular historical configurations of the modern nation building process, ...the more evident the racial material constitution of Italian society becomes the more violent will be its discursive *foreclosure*, both within

⁵³ Lisa Wade, ‘Loretta Ross on the Phrase “Women of Color”’, *Sociological Images* (2011), <<https://thesocietypages.org/socimages/2011/03/26/loreta-ross-on-the-phrase-women-of-color/>>.

and outside the institutional domain. On the Italian scene, then, race could emerge as a *fundamental signifier*, that is as an ‘operator’ of social meaning, practice and subjectivity, only through: (a) the ‘implosive violence’ generated by episodes of ‘ethnic punitive anxiety’...driven by what can be defined (following the Lacanian concept of *foreclusion*) as ‘racial collective deliriums and hallucinations’; or, alternatively, (b) by the political pressure or *enunciations* of *outsider* subjects. We think this is a key feature of contemporary Italian racism.⁵⁴

This recent discussion over which term to use and how to discuss race is happening in conjunction with the rise of various social, activist, and creative collectives of self-identified *nere/i/* italiane/i/** as well as writers who explicitly centre their work around Black Italian identity, which they often acknowledge as feminist and/or queer. Simultaneously circulating are vitriolic claims that ‘there are no Black Italians’, which continue to ring out at sports matches and in piazzas throughout the Republic while the Minister of Families Fontana and many like him have insisted that ‘famiglie arcobaleno non esistono’.⁵⁵

An intersectional approach to Black studies and queer Italian studies means acknowledging and mobilising a shared concern over the farcical and recurrent practice of enumeration, of counting people as things without being accountable to them that seems to conform to the logics of accumulation that structure racial capitalism, in which the quantified abstraction of black and/or migrant deaths by organisations such as the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), ISTAT (Italian National Institute of Statistics), or various

⁵⁴ Anna Curcio and Miguel Mellino, ‘Editorial: Race at Work — The Rise and Challenge of Italian Racism’, in *In the Ruins of Imperial Culture*, ed. by Anna Curcio and Miguel Mellino, Special Issue of *Darkmatter* 6 (2010).

⁵⁵ ‘Fontana: “Famiglie arcobaleno non esistono.” Stop di Salvini poi la replica: “Polemiche strumentali”’, *ANSA.it*, 3 June 2018, <http://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/politica/2018/06/02/fontana-famiglie-arcobaleno-non-esistono.-salvini-idee-non-prioritarie-e-non-nel-contratto_fb07152b-8745-4d75-9df3-16a5c239a14e.html>.

social and mass media campaigns reveals the calculated value of black life through the state's own language — or grammars to use Hortense Spillers — of deficit, dearth, and debt. An underlying question embedded in these enumerative practices of codifying citizenship can be further clarified by queer/Black Italian studies. Ultimately, in the struggle for citizenship of so-called 'second-generation' or other Italians, specifically for those who are non-white, some questions remain: What are the seductions for state-oriented activism for which traumatised citizenship is more than a merely identitarian pitfall, but is rather a key beyond emergency — that is, for radical emergence? What would a politics of citizenship and representation — a queer, radicalised form of *italianità* — look like that would refuse all 'murderous inclusion'? The term is a phrase coined by trans theorist of colour Jin Haritaworn to describe the depoliticization of inclusion of LGBTQIA+ people, for example, under the liberal rubric of 'gay rights' such as same-sex marriage. In Haritaworn's study, the favouring of same-sex marriage over other iterations of rights upheld or bestowed upon by the state would result in the 'politics of queer subordination', resulting ultimately in the affirmation of policies that are ultimately neither queer, liberal, nor beneficial for the most minoritized or radical within a particular oppressed group.⁵⁶ We've seen time and time and time again the state's disavowal of refugees and asylum seekers, even *italiani senza cittadinanza* from wilful assimilation and traumatised recognition. Do we want the state to love us or do we want to be free? Is what we are fighting for conditional citizenship or are we making demands and laying the grounds for our own emancipation?

The political paradigm shift that I'm advocating is rooted, anarchic, and collective. It fundamentally challenges state recognition, consumerist individualism, and cis-heteronationalist frameworks. Approaches to Italian citizenship can be queered with an attention to those rendered the most precarious and marginalised, which fosters full use of

⁵⁶ Jin Haritaworn, Adi Kuntsman, and Silvia Posocco, 'Murderous Inclusions', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 15.4 (2013), 445–52.

coalitional imaginative practices, including an abolitionist vision that sees a world without border regimes and gives way to full bodily autonomy and freedom of expression.

Coda

The questions raised and problematised throughout this article necessarily pull in different directions and demand many diverse reactions. Above all, however, they aim to instigate a collective response. We see this article as the continuation of discussions begun in our workshops, at conferences, **and in our individual scholarship** that we want to continue with ever more interlocutors. Far from being the final word, we invite others to reflect and share their perspectives, insights and concerns. In our view, it is fundamental that academic work on queerness in Italy and in the Italian diaspora focuses on the issues we have raised here, without rendering an exhaustive survey. Moreover, it was important for us to share our views and situate ourselves in relation to our respective research and political investments. Collective critical appraisal of research published to date, ongoing projects and plans will enable scholars to work together effectively, and to forge a productive, self-reflexive awareness of what is at stake in our research, and how we might seek both to establish ethical engagements with those whose lives it touches, and to work towards achieving some palpable impact.

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