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#### **Abstract:**

This article examines the precarious masculinity performed by Nader Sarhan, the male migrant protagonist featured in Claudio Giovannesi's *Alì ha gli occhi azzurri* (2012). The theoretical framework draws on scholarship from postcolonial studies, film theory, queer theory, and gender studies. In particular, following recent work on representations of non-national male migrant film protagonists as "queer" and thus inassimilable to the national Italian body, the author contends that Nader's *desire* for "white," hegemonic masculinity (sexual and civic) ultimately results in his own undoing.

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# Precarious Masculinity: Intersections of Race, Gender, and Desire in Claudio Giovannesi's *Ali ha gli occhi azzurri*<sup>1</sup>

LISA DOLASINSKI

## Introduction

Claudio Giovannesi's *Ali ha gli occhi azzurri* (2012)<sup>2</sup> chronicles a week in the life of Nader Sarhan, an Italian teenager of Egyptian origin, who struggles to negotiate between his family's Egyptian-Muslim values and his desire for full, heteronormative assimilation in Italy. A coming-of-age tale, this film portrays the precarious position of a young male subject in the making, one caught between two disparate worlds—Italy and Egypt. This film also conveys the generational conflict frequently experienced by immigrants and their second-generation children, as well as the broader conflict related to teens' struggles to actualize their sexual identity. Finally, while the film's title is an explicit homage to Pier Paolo Pasolini's "Profezia,"<sup>3</sup> a poem that narrates the anti-Western rebellion of the Arab-Muslim world, Giovannesi's film ultimately negates Pasolini's dream of a utopic revolution led by young, socially diverse, and marginalized (male) bodies.

This article incorporates several critical methodologies and disciplinary perspectives, drawing on the intersecting fields of postcolonial studies, film theory, queer theory, and gender studies. Following Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, for example, I use the term "colonial" in a broad sense.<sup>4</sup> There are two reasons for this choice: (1) relative to other European countries, Italy was a weak colonizing power and (2), while Italian and Egyptian political history<sup>5</sup> is not directly referenced in Giovannesi's film, the logic of racial difference and the constructed superiority of "whiteness"<sup>6</sup>—conditions that are as symptomatic of colonialism's continued legacy—nonetheless surface throughout *Ali*, inviting readings of this film as a postcolonial text.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to Colleen Ryan, Dana Renga, Brenda Weber, and the anonymous reviewers at *GSI* for valuable feedback.

<sup>2</sup> *Ali ha gli occhi azzurri*, directed by Claudio Giovannesi (2012; Acaba Produzioni in collaboration with RAI Cinema, 2013), DVD. Henceforth I will refer to the film as *Ali*.

<sup>3</sup> Pier Paolo Pasolini, "Profezia," *Ali Dagli Occhi Azzurri*, (Milano: Garzanti, 1965), 488-493.

<sup>4</sup> The "postcolonial paradigm" conceptualized by Lombardi-Diop and Romeo is not limited to a study of the relationship between former colonizers and colonized, as it also "include[s] the processes of racialization, gendering, and cultural transformations engendered within contemporary Italy by the legacy of colonialism, emigration, and global migrations" *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, eds. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 2.

<sup>5</sup> The most significant events of this colonizer/colonized relation are Italy's expansion of the National Fascist Party in Alexandria and Cairo (1930's) and Mussolini's ultimately failed invasion of Egypt (1940).

<sup>6</sup> Following Richard Dyer's seminal text, *White*, I refer to "whiteness" as a representational economy and a racialized position of privilege. There is now a substantial and growing body of scholarship on "whiteness." For a discussion of the unacknowledged race privilege currently enjoyed by Italians (relative to immigrants and nonwhite Italians) and evocative of the constructed homogeneity of *italianità* under colonialism see: Cristina Lombardi-Diop, "Postracial/Postcolonial Italy," in *Postcolonial Italy* (cit.), 175-190.

<sup>7</sup> Other Anglophone scholars working on postcolonial discourses in Italian films of migration show that representations of male migrant protagonists evoke the same racializing tropes deployed during colonialism. See: Derek Duncan, "Italy's Postcolonial Cinema and its Histories of Representation," *Italian Studies* 63, no. 2 (2008): 195-211; Derek Duncan, "Double Time: Facing the Future in Migration's Past," *California Italian Studies* 2, no. 1 (2011); Derek Duncan, "Shooting the Colonial Past in Contemporary Italian Cinema: Effects of Deferral in *Good Morning, Aman*," in *Postcolonial Italy* (cit.), 115-124; Áine O'Healy, "Screening Intimacy and Racial Difference in Postcolonial Italy," in *Postcolonial Italy* (cit.), 205-220; Áine O'Healy, "Postcolonial Theory and Italy's 'Multicultural' Cinema," in *The Italian Cinema Book*, ed. Peter Bondanella (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014), 295-302.

Pertinent to the complex and interconnected relationships among articulations of race, gender expectations, sexuality, and desire that emerge in *Alì* are Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures*<sup>8</sup> and Derek Duncan's "Loving Geographies: queering straight migration to Italy."<sup>9</sup> Through the prism of queer feminist theory, Gopinath defines "queer diasporas" as idyllic communities that "productively exploi[t] the relation between nation and diaspora" and conceptual spaces that necessitate an examination of the heterosexist norms conventionally applied to the subjects that reside in them.<sup>10</sup> Like Gopinath, I envisage sexual exchanges between diasporic subjects and 'colonial' subjects as potentially fraught with the racist, sexist, and heteronormative logic of colonialism and nationalism. However, while Gopinath studies a combination of discursive and mediated constructions of South Asian diasporic cultures, this essay concerns the precarious subjectivity of an Egyptian-Muslim teen in Italy. I also diverge from Gopinath's theoretical framework in some key ways. First, whereas Gopinath treats the rupture from the Western heteronormative romantic paradigm as a project of recovery that sutures the traditionally silenced "queer" from the notion of "diaspora," my analysis of *Alì* does not allow for such a reparative reading. Next, Nader is not positioned within the standard telos of a queer political subject; his sexuality, like his identity, is fluid and cannot be precisely defined. Lastly, I do not rigorously engage with one of the primary focuses of Gopinath's work, locating and "making possible" queer female diasporic subjects because, even in their absence, these subjects do not contribute to the disruption of hegemonic formations in *Giovannesi's* film.

Duncan examines the destabilizing potential of non-normative sexuality performed by male migrants in recent Italian films through the lens of Queer Theory. He understands "queer" as the "intersecting nexus of sexual and racial difference" in a postcolonial context.<sup>11</sup> Following Duncan, in this article, I too "dislodge queer from a too-rigid association with same-sex desire."<sup>12</sup> By this I mean that Nader's queerness results from a combination of his non-normative sexuality (which, by the way, is never outright gay) as well as his cultural and racial differences. Employing Gopinath's queer reading practices and Duncan's analysis of the "queering," denaturalization, and ultimate eradication of the non-national male migrant body,<sup>13</sup> I show that, in *Alì*, the sexualized, gendered, and racialized<sup>14</sup> modalities of diasporic subjects both reinforce (through imitation) and threaten (given their inherently "queer: potential) the heteronormative Italian family unit. Concomitantly, I propose that the formation of racialized masculinities necessitates a limited representational economy for diasporic women, as these women are frequently rendered invisible.

This essay is organized in four distinct, yet complementary parts: "Home," "Homelessness," "Making the Racialized Male Subject," and "Impossible Desires." Together, these sections reveal that *Giovannesi's* film both precludes the possibility of a "queer diaspora" and forecloses the

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<sup>8</sup> Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> Derek Duncan, "Loving Geographies: queering straight migration to Italy," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 6, no. 3 (2008): 167-182.

<sup>10</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> Duncan, "Loving Geographies," 170.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibi.*, 171.

<sup>13</sup> With the exception of Albanian migrant Beni (*Passo a due*, Andrea Barzini, 2005), whose relationship with his Italian dance partner expedites his successful integration, all of the male migrant protagonists analyzed by Duncan are undone (eradicated or repatriated) by their interracial relationships.

<sup>14</sup> In this paper, I define racialized masculinity in terms of opposition— opposition to "white" and "femininity"—and as a definitively marginal status, always positioned as (racial) other.

intelligibility<sup>15</sup> of queer protagonists who challenge dominant, Western iterations of heterosexual desire. Specifically, I underscore that Nader's occupation of liminal, diasporic spaces mirrors his sexual marginality; I analyze the precarious nature of his racialized identity; and I explore how Nader's desire for "white," hegemonic masculinity (sexual and civic) results in his own undoing. In the end, Nader's queer racialized body—which has been marginalized twice over—not only serves as an archive that shores up unresolved memories of colonialism, but through Nader's "presence-in-absence," it also exposes the ongoing tensions, contradictions, and complexities among race, sexuality, gender, desire, and belonging in Italy.

## Home

Similar to the films that Gopinath studies, images of "home" provide the locus around which *Alì* interlaces themes of "diasporic displacement, queer desire, and the pleasures and dangers of dominant culture for racialized male subjects."<sup>16</sup> The Sarhan home is a diasporic space, a site that Avtar Brah describes as "the point at which boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, of belonging and otherness, of 'us' and 'them,' are contested."<sup>17</sup> Home, in *Alì*, is where tensions between Western acculturation and diasporic identification arise. For example, in one scene, the hand-held pan creates a feeling of intimacy, pausing only to focus on an Egyptian tapestry (rather than a rendition of the Madonna or a cross) hung above a couch in the living room. At the same time, symbols of "white" masculinity that evoke Italy's colonization of Africa are readily visible. To illustrate, despite being positioned underneath a cultural object (the tapestry) that recalls "home" (the Egyptian-Muslim nation) the Sarhan men are simultaneously engrossed in an Italian soccer game—a cultural practice imbued in a proper display of Italian masculinity.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, although this shot captures the process of interaction between dissimilar cultures, it also alludes to the tension experienced by racialized male subjects who desire to articulate intelligible expressions of masculinity in their host country.<sup>19</sup>

The complex negotiation of racialized masculinity is further emphasized considering that the hand-held camera films from Nader's perspective. David Bordwell explains that this type of camerawork was used in Dogma films to foster an aesthetic of "spontaneous realism" that freed the

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<sup>15</sup> I understand "intelligibility" in a Butlerian sense, i.e. as "coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 17) and as cultural recognition (*Bodies that Matter: On the discursive limits of "sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>16</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), 209.

<sup>18</sup> Articulating a strict definition of hegemonic Italian masculinity is a task that I will not attempt here. The idea of a dominant, monolithic *maschio italiano* is a misconception, since, as the field of Masculinity Studies has shown, distinct cultural, regional, and class differences inform diverse notions of masculinity. Furthermore, soccer is Egypt's most popular sport, and it is considered highly masculine. Thus, for the Sarhan men, there is an underlying familiarity with this cultural practice.

<sup>19</sup> The Sarhan clan's impulse to carve out a space that legitimizes one's subjectivity in a foreign culture, recalls, but also complicates José Muñoz's disidentificatory strategies of queers of color. On one hand, the Sarhan home is a marginal site where "a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture" continually manifests itself (*Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 31). All the same, the male inhabitants' enthusiasm for Italian soccer implies that the Sarhan men neither strictly oppose, nor fully assimilate, with dominant [Italian] notions of masculinity.

camera and broke from the fluidity of rehearsed studio performances.<sup>20</sup> Likewise, commenting broadly on the use of hand-held camera in contemporary Italian cinema, Catherine O’Rawe notes that this film technique creates an experience of “emotional realism and authenticity” for the spectator precisely because s/he never obtains an omniscient perspective, compositions are unbalanced, and the actor’s body is never centered in the frame.<sup>21</sup> Filming from Nader’s perspective privileges an otherwise marginalized body; immersed in Nader’s world, the spectator experiences his comings and goings first-hand, participating, therefore, in the creation of an affective bond between audience and character.

However, further unpacking the camerawork here reveals the precariousness of Nader’s masculinity. Reflecting on the teen’s investment in performing hegemonic masculinity—not only in this scene, but throughout the film—relays how “authentic” gender performances rely on the close alignment of an actor’s movements and the audience’s expectations. In one of her seminal works on the performative nature of gender, Judith Butler posits, “[gender] ‘identity’ is a normative ideal” constituted by “*regulatory practices* of gender formation.”<sup>22</sup> Employing Butler’s notion of gender, which is strongly tied to “style” (i.e. clothing, presentation, composure), the stakes of performing legible masculinity in a patriarchal context like Italy are better understood. For example, while the camerawork in this scene suggests that Nader’s movements are natural, there is also great emphasis on the teen’s physicality. It is with purposefulness that Nader navigates the Sarhan home and interacts with the other inhabitants. In order to establish his masculinity and assert dominance over others, Nader samples the dish his mother is preparing without invitation, interrupts his father’s TV viewing, and stops his sister, Laura, from greeting a guest at the door. Engaging once more with Butler’s conceptualization of gender, or the “repeated *stylization* of the body,” which “congeal[s] over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being,”<sup>23</sup> we see that the repetition of Nader’s performative acts are necessary for any subject who wishes to construct an intelligible (male) gender identity.

Nader’s movements within the Sarhan home are also emblematic of his diasporic status. Constantly in motion, he is unable to secure a stable home base or create a definitive masculine identity. More than any other character, in fact, Nader is at the threshold of the migrant home and Italian society more broadly. Physically negotiating Italian and Egyptian-Muslim cultures, Nader distances Laura from the entryway of the Sarhan residence and calls out to an Italian friend from the balcony—both structures exist at the boundary between a diasporic space and the Western world. Thus, although the spectator is primed to sympathize with the film’s protagonist via the use of hand-held camera, Nader is still coded as an “outsider” embodying a transient existence.

## Homelessness

Nader’s transgressions (skipping services at the mosque and breaking curfew) eventually lead to his expulsion from the Sarhan residence, generating conditions of financial and sexual precariousness for the rebellious teen. In Western culture, property management is historically tied to masculinity;

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<sup>20</sup> David Bordwell, “Unfreeing the Camera,” *FILM Magazine* 57 (May 2007), accessed March 3, 2015, <http://www.dfi.dk/service/english/news-and-publications/film-magazine/artikler-fra-tidsskriftet-film/archive/unfreeing-the-camera.aspx>.

<sup>21</sup> Here O’Rawe examines Elio Germano’s performance as Claudio in *La nostra vita. Stars and Masculinities in Contemporary Italian Cinema* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 84.

<sup>22</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 16. Emphasis (*italics*) is in the original.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibi.*, 33.

the *pater familias*—a role typically occupied by the eldest male family member—was morally responsible for carefully managing patrimony.<sup>24</sup> Conversely, colonized male subjects, including Nader and the South Asian men Gopinath studies, are often denied claims to housing and (heteronormative) masculinity.<sup>25</sup>

Once homeless, multiple allusions to Nader’s racial and sexual marginality amass. First, it is another member of the Egyptian-Muslim community, Mahmoud, who practices non-normative sexuality, that comes to Nader’s aid. Initially, the two stay in a room at the back of a warehouse shared by several displaced migrants.<sup>26</sup> This scene is saturated with erotic undertones. The camera pans over bodies heaped together on dirty mattresses. Due to the constrictive nature of this space, it is difficult to distinguish where a body ends and a blanket begins. In addition to the visual composition of the scene, diegetic sounds are limited—while the men chat, the heavy breathing of other occupants and sounds of highway traffic can be heard—providing further cues that diasporic subjects do not have access to the privacy that property ownership would engender. A florescent lamp illuminates the makeshift bedroom, brightening certain portions of the frame, while casting the rest in shadows. This use of low-key lighting visually creates a noir-like feel, heightening the spectator’s interest in looking and enhancing erotic tension.

After a brief stay in the warehouse, Nader and Mahmoud take refuge in an abandoned shelter on a beach off the coast of Ostia, another peripheral setting reflective of the occupants’ racial, cultural, and sexual marginality. As Fiona Handyside reports, beach settings are often “queer sites”—i.e. the location where the boundary between homosocial and homoerotic desire dissolves.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, since “queer sites” exist within a “queer temporality” that does not respect linear progression, they routinely transform into “site[s] of haunting,” where past memories are folded into the present<sup>28</sup>—an idea I will use to interpret a final scene in *Alì*. Applying Handyside’s observations to Italian cinema (she discusses Michele Placido’s *Romanzo criminale*) O’Rawe describes the beachscape as a homosocial space, central to the fraternal milieu.<sup>29</sup> In *Alì* this is certainly the case, since throughout the film the beach is a site dedicated exclusively to male bonding: Nader frequents this locale with Stefano; he takes refuge here with Mahmoud; and female characters never inhabit this space.

Giovannesi’s choice of an Ostian setting is especially provocative within the Italian film canon because it inevitably evokes Pasolini. Many spectators will identify this location as the exact site of Pasolini’s murder, supposedly prompted by homoerotic advances made to a minor. Within the narrative of *Alì*, associating beach imagery with Pasolini’s lived-experience is problematic because it kneads violence into queer desire. At the same time, for Pasolini scholars, the Ostian setting calls to mind Pasolini’s literary and cinematic use of Rome’s beaches as privileged sites of exchange that mobilize (homo)eroticism to blur the boundaries between hegemonic and subproletariat cultures. Following Pasolini’s death, some Italian film directors have recuperated

<sup>24</sup> Richard Saller, “Pater Familias, Mater Familias, and The Gendered Semantics of the Roman Household,” *Classical Philology* 94, no. 2 (1999): 182.

<sup>25</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 69, 73.

<sup>26</sup> Nader and Mahmoud’s inhabitation of the warehouse recalls Duncan’s observation that migrant film protagonists routinely occupy “desolate dystopia[s]” (“Loving Geographies,” 174) and “anonymous and peripheral” spaces (“Italy’s Postcolonial Cinema,” 207).

<sup>27</sup> Handyside studies the use of beaches as “queer sites” in Francois Ozon’s films. Fiona Handyside, “The Possibilities of a Beach: Queerness and François Ozon’s Beaches,” *Screen* 53, no.1 (2012): 54.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibi.*, 65.

<sup>29</sup> O’Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities*, 101.

Pasolini as an intellectual and national icon (rather than sensationalize his homosexuality) by recognizing the auteur director's cinematography as integral to, and a continuation of, his broader political and cultural *impegno*. Through meaningful, stylistic tributes, these directors reference Ostia in ways that shore up the theoretical insights on cinema Pasolini lays out in *Empirismo eretico*.<sup>30</sup>

In the beach locale it initially appears that homosocial bonding will move towards homoerotic desire. Eager to resist the cold breeze of the Roman winter, Nader and Mahmoud huddle together under a shared blanket (see Figure 1). Mahmoud gazes upon Nader's body. He inches closer to his sleeping companion, until the climactic moment when he caresses Nader's face. It is here, in an anonymous space, distanced from the reaches of dominant culture, that Mahmoud expresses his sexual attraction to Nader. However, as Duncan points out elsewhere, during their off-season, Italian beaches are sites of dystopia, rather than pleasure, for migrant subjects.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, conventions of heterosexual romance are so far-reaching in *Ali* that homoerotic intimacy is inconceivable, even in spaces unfrequented by dominant culture, even between displaced diasporic subjects. The promise of a romantic interlude is ultimately denied in this scene when Nader aggressively distances himself from Mahmoud and demands, "che cazzo stai facendo?!"<sup>32</sup> At sunrise Nader flees without pause, and Mahmoud is absent from future scenes. Nader's flight from homoeroticism, and the erasure of the only overtly queer character in *Ali*, effectively undercuts Giovannesi's homage to Pasolini, since Western iterations of heterosexual desire are reinforced.



Figure 1 - Nader and Mahmoud at the beach<sup>33</sup>

Nonetheless, Nader's rejection of Mahmoud's advances does not signify that the teen has unequivocally secured the position of heteronormative male subject. At this time, Nader has only managed to assert dominance over another racialized male body—and an admittedly queer one at that. Additionally, regardless of any discomfort he feels, Nader chooses to pass the entire night with Mahmoud. Thus, the inclusion of a double marginal figure (Mahmoud is queer and his body is marked as racialized) seems to serve a cautionary, rather than a revolutionary, tale. To clarify, once Nader is cast from the home space, he too must confront his racial, masculine, and sexual marginality.

<sup>30</sup> See: *Caro Diario*, Nanni Moretti, 1993; *Romanzo criminale*, Michele Placido, 2005; *Cover Boy: L'ultima rivoluzione*, Carmine Amoroso, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Duncan describes the desolate beachscapes in *Saimir* and *Ehjs and Merijn* as sites of "violence and criminality" for migrant protagonists ("Loving Geographies," 174).

<sup>32</sup> Nader's aggressive outburst also foreshadows the violence that will unfold here between him and Stefano.

<sup>33</sup> All images are reproduced for the sole purpose of scholarly discussion.

### Making the racialized male subject

Giovannesi's film also expands on the Oedipal crisis of the young male who struggles to identify with his father, by incorporating the element of race. Several scenes problematize what Gopinath refers to as "dominant conceptualizations of diasporic notions of patrilineal genealogical inheritance,"<sup>34</sup> allowing for alternate interpretations of Nader's desire for "white" masculinity. First, in alignment with Fanon's reworking of the notion of oedipality in relation to the influence of (post)colonial regimes of power on racialized masculinities, Nader does not identify with the type of masculinity performed by his "brown" father.<sup>35</sup> Conversely, like other male migrant film protagonists, Nader deploys strategies of "imitation, impersonation, and masquerade";<sup>36</sup> the teen linguistically and physically transforms himself to mimic the "white" male subject, wearing blue contact lenses and donning a Yankees hat (see Figure 2).<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, outside of diasporic spaces, Nader speaks exclusively in Italian, publicly avowing, "Io sono italiano, non sono arabo."<sup>38</sup> In addition to appropriating the colonizer's language, Nader consciously chooses to surround himself with 'colonial' subjects—his best friend Stefano and his girlfriend Brigitte are Italian.<sup>39</sup> Finally, Nader participates in acts of "hyper-masculinity": he robs stores, shoots a gun, and knifes another male who challenges his best friend, Stefano's, sexual prowess. These acts illustrate Nader's conscious performance of "white" masculinity, and they confirm his refusal to be subjugated.

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<sup>34</sup> Gopinath, *Impossible Desires*, 64.

<sup>35</sup> Frantz Fanon, "The Black Man and Recognition," in *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 185-190.

<sup>36</sup> Duncan observes that migrant characters of Italian films concerning migration from Albania repeatedly practice these tactics in an attempt to belong to the national Italian body. Duncan, "Italy's Postcolonial Cinema," 203.

<sup>37</sup> Nader's preference for Western fashion reveals that the process of race formation is invariably a process of class formation, i.e., the teen adorns accessories associated with "whiteness" in order to (temporarily) access the economic and race privilege enjoyed by "white" Italians. Nader's blue contacts and Yankees cap are also fetishized objects of consumption that place the capitalist-oriented teen in a neocolonial context. As O'Healy suggests elsewhere, the ongoing globalizing process has been met with the emergence of new forms of empire—what she terms "a neoliberal/neocolonial regime of global capitalism" ("Screening Intimacy," 205). Thus, even in cases where immigrant characters (like Nader) attempt to overcome the legacy of colonialism through assimilation, Italian films often employ visual and narrative stratagems that reinforce paradigms of subordination/domination tied to racial and class difference.

<sup>38</sup> There is one noteworthy instance in which Nader breaks the Sarhan's practice of speaking exclusively in Egyptian-Arabic within the immigrant home. During an argument with his parents, the teen defends his relationship with Brigitte in the Italian language. Context here is significant; since Brigitte is an Italian citizen, Nader's linguistic rebellion is also an act of cultural rebellion.

<sup>39</sup> Notwithstanding his acquisition of the Italian language and his desire for an Italian way of life, as I will show, Nader never attains a sense of belonging in Italy, nor does he enjoy the (class, race, cultural) privilege it would engender. For more on the inaccessibility of italianità for foreigners and non-white Italians see Lombardi-Diop and Romeo's chapters in *Postcolonial Italy* (cit.).





Figure 2 - Nader Sarhan

Nader may identify more closely with the “white” male subject than his own father; however, his relationship with Stefano is not without complications. The teen’s admiration for his Italian mate hedges the precarious confine between homosocial and homoerotic desire.<sup>40</sup> Throughout *Ali* the two are framed in suggestive scenarios: they lie next to one another on the beach, straddle the same motorcycle, and playfully joke with each other. Additionally, every time that Nader and Stefano share a scene, acts of heterosexual intimacy are left unfulfilled. Two specific examples come to mind: first, although Nader and Stefano approach a female prostitute to negotiate services, neither of them enjoys her companionship. The teens forfeit sexual interactions with the woman in order to rob her, and the violence they perform against the prostitute registers as the pinnacle of pleasure for both young men. Second, Nader’s attempt to consummate his relationship with Brigitte is disrupted by the intrusive noise of Stefano and other “white” men shooting guns off the roof above their bedroom. The gun, an obvious phallic symbol, creates a sexually-charged, visual metaphor. Heterosexual interactions are subdued, while the group of men euphorically shoots off several rounds of ammunition, reaching maximum satisfaction. Once again, violence and eroticism are mixed in a way that privileges queer desire over heterosexual desire—a trope that calls to mind that violence is one of the scarce avenues for depicting onscreen male-male intimacy.

An additional scene that conveys Nader’s problematic desire for “white” masculinity incorporates narrative, spatial, and filming stratagems that generate unease. Nader and Stefano are framed within the confines of a cramped bathroom, physically restricting them within a tight interior space. Writing on post-war Italian film melodramas, Louis Bayman observes that this kind of spatial configuration is used to create tension because it places protagonists’ emotional expressivity in conflict with their body immobility.<sup>41</sup> The camerawork and editing here are also significant. Nader and Stefano are framed in close-ups during a series of shot/reverse-shot combinations—film techniques traditionally used in melodramatic (heterosexual) love scenes. The potential for a homoerotic interlude increases when another “white” male enters the bathroom. Along with Stefano, this shirtless man admires his muscles, partaking in a kind of homosocial, performative behavior that Chris Holmlund describes elsewhere as the “masquerade of masculinity.”<sup>42</sup> Homosociality slips into homoeroticism when the men invite Nader to gaze upon their sculpted abdominals and ask, “Ti piace?” This scene is also acoustically and visually saturated with queer

<sup>40</sup> *Cover Boy: L’ultima rivoluzione*, Carmine Amoroso (2008) and *Good Morning, Aman*, Claudio Noce (2009) also put forth the trope of implied, but ultimately unfulfilled, homosexual relationships between migrant men and Italian men. However, in these films, it is the Italian protagonist whose sexual practices are suggested as non-normative.

<sup>41</sup> See: Louis Bayman, “Melodrama as seriousness,” in *Popular Italian Cinema*, eds. Louis Bayman and Sergio Rigoletto (Basingstoke, Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 82-98.

<sup>42</sup> Chris Holmlund, “Masculinity as Multiple Masquerade: The “Mature” Stallone and the Stallone Clone,” in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. (London: Routledge, 1993), 213-239.

potential: The thumping bass of non-diegetic *discoteca* music—what Holmlund characterizes as the “male sonic atmosphere”<sup>43</sup>— transforms this intimate space into a one for public performance, and the lighting design emphasizes the male physique.<sup>44</sup>

It is helpful here to consider Steve Neale’s comments on abject spaces in cinema<sup>45</sup> and Frederic Jameson’s attribution of sexuality to cinematic spaces.<sup>46</sup> First, the “white” men’s invitation to Nader “to look” supports Neale’s observation that male occupants of abject spaces (like the bathroom) threaten to destabilize heteronormative patriarchal values, by marking the male body as an erotic object.<sup>47</sup> This threat is imminent in restrictive homosocial spaces, since male characters are vulnerable to an erotic gaze by another male character.<sup>48</sup> Relatedly, Jameson assigns sexuality to cinematic spaces rather than attaching it to the protagonists that move through them.<sup>49</sup> Jameson’s approach, which elevates space above character, generates a productive way to think about Nader’s fluid sexuality. By this I mean that Nader’s sexuality continually adapts according to the different locations he inhabits.

In addition to choices regarding film narrative and setting, an advertisement of *Alì* alludes to the complex nature of Nader and Stefano’s friendship—a friendship that is not strictly bound in platonic, fraternal bonding. A film poster (see Figure 3) depicts Nader and Stefano seated next to one another on a cement ledge with a solid white column (another phallic symbol) positioned behind them. Nader, aloof, stares down at his cellphone, while Stefano gazes upon him. On the cement column behind Stefano, the grafitto *Ti amo* is written twice. In the Italian language, platonic love is expressed with the expression *ti voglio bene*, and the expression *ti amo* is used instead to communicate romantic affection, relaying the teens’ unspoken queer desire. The doubling of this expression suggests these feelings of desire are reciprocal—at least at a subconscious level.

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<sup>43</sup> *Ibi.*, 221.

<sup>44</sup> It is worth noting that “queer spaces tend to be performance spaces” (like the bathroom turned ‘nightclub’), and in these kinds of spaces, the occupants express their sexuality in a way they cannot in spaces of dominant culture. See Jamie Stewart, *Performing Queer Female Identity on Screen: an analysis of five recent films* (London: McFarland, 2008), 1.

<sup>45</sup> Steve Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle,” in *Screening the Male* (cit.), 9-20.

<sup>46</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Spatial Systems in *North by Northwest*,” in *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Hitchcock)*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 1992), 47-72.

<sup>47</sup> Neale, “Masculinity as Spectacle,” 14.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibi.*

<sup>49</sup> Jameson, “Spatial Systems,” 47-72.



Figure 3 - Film poster

Queer desire is reinforced at a graphic level. Under the graffiti, two free-hand hearts are sketched. How can we interpret these moments of homoeroticism left unconsummated? How do they impact the way we situate Nader within the macro-narrative of the film, which treats both “queer” and “racialized” subjects as lesser than their “white” counterparts?

*Ali* is not a film about queer, interracial desire. Nevertheless, it is only through the slippage of homosociality into homoerotic desire that silenced historical memories of the racialized Other have the potential to be recuperated. Repeatedly cast to the periphery of society, throughout the film, Nader’s “brown” body stands as an emblem of the historical struggle of marginalized subjects (including colonized, racialized, and queer figures). The teen’s rejection of his marginalized status could shore up the exploitative intimacies of power that have been concealed within racialized, sexualized, and colonized histories. Nonetheless, endeavor as he may, Nader will never have access to the social and economic benefits of a “white” male: he will remain a low-level gangster that has to report to his (“white”) boss, and he will fail to assume a dominant position in his relationship with Brigitte.

Anglophone scholars of Italian cinema of migration (e.g., Duncan, O’Healy) understand the trope of doomed interracial intimacy through the prism of postcolonialism. To this end, they propose that these kinds of failed onscreen relationships are emblematic and/or symptomatic of (male) migrants’ inability to assimilate to the national Italian body.<sup>50</sup> Nader and Brigitte’s untenable relationship lends itself to this interpretation, especially since carrying on with an Italian girl underscores Nader’s incommensurability within the representational economy of “white” heteronormative masculinity. Narrative, visual, and symbolic stratagems intersect to chronicle the “dystopian romance” between the male migrant and his Italian love interest. To illustrate, during the inevitable break-up scene, Nader is positioned in the street. From the street, he looks up at Brigitte, who gazes down at him from the balcony of her family home. This spatial configuration symbolizes the social and racial hierarchy inherited from colonialism that has traditionally separated male

<sup>50</sup> See: Duncan, “Loving Geographies”; Duncan, “Italy’s Postcolonial Cinema”; O’Healy, “Screening Intimacy and Racial Difference,” (especially 213-18).

“brown” bodies from “white” female bodies. Furthermore, when interpreted in the vein of postcolonialism, the absence of language is significant. Nader’s silence—his absent “voice”—reifies his subaltern, subordinate position in society.<sup>51</sup>

Prior to their break-up, Nader experiences multiple conditions (racial, classed, gendered, and sexual) of postcoloniality that foreshadow the couple’s impending separation, as well as allude to the inassimilable condition of the male migrant more generally. In a patriarchal context, hegemonic masculinity is based on normative practices of gender and sexuality. When Nader seeks financial and emotional support from his Italian girlfriend, his masquerade of “white” masculinity deteriorates. Concomitantly, Nader fails to attain the heteronormative entitlement this status engenders. The occasion that Brigitte provides Nader with jewelry to pawn, and allows him to shower in her bathroom, marks a reversal in the traditional gender roles, and the related power dynamic, that previously governed their relationship. Just a few days earlier Nader surprised Brigitte with an engagement ring, a material symbol of his ability to take on the traditional male role as initiator in the West.<sup>52</sup>

This insistence on gender role reversal, and the dominant/subordinate paradigm of postcoloniality it evokes, is further evidenced when Nader emerges from the bathroom without his blue contact lenses and clothed in Brigitte’s bathrobe. In donning this feminine article of clothing, Nader invites the “threat of feminization”; he is emasculated if not feminized.<sup>53</sup> Further, Nader’s “brown” skin contrasts visibly with Brigitte’s white robe. Notably, this visual juxtaposition, which underscores the insurmountable chasm that separates Nader from Brigitte, is performed at the peak of Nader’s emotional vulnerability. This is, in fact, the only scene in which Nader cries. Moreover, in this condition of precarious corporeality, Nader is physically and symbolically stripped of embellishments (blue contacts and a Yankees cap) associated with the class and race privilege of “whiteness”.

### Impossible Desires

Homosexual acts are never realized in *Ali*, yet, I would argue that tension surrounding queer desire is *the* driving force that renders female diasporic figures, such as Nader’s mother and sister, Laura, invisible. In particular, Laura’s transformation from invisible to visible threatens the possibility for queer male desire, underscoring Gopinath’s observation that homoeroticism depends on the invisibility of female diasporic subjects.

In *Ali*, female diasporic characters are allotted considerably less screen time than their male counterparts, and, when they are featured, it is often in situations that draw attention to their subordinate status. For example, during a heated exchange between Nader and his mother, Mrs. Sarhan is positioned with her back to the camera, where she can be heard but not fully seen. Unsurprisingly, Mrs. Sarhan is filmed here performing feminized, domestic work (meal preparation),

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<sup>51</sup> I refer to Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” a probing interrogation of the historical and ideological factors that systematically silence the voices of peripheral subjects.

<sup>52</sup> We can reasonably speculate that Nader purchases this expensive gift with funds obtained through criminal activity—a plot detail consistent with the actions of another male migrant protagonist (Saimir in Francesco Munzi’s eponymously titled film from 2004). Indeed, since both film protagonists increasingly rely on criminality in order to perform patriarchal customs of masculinity, Duncan’s description of Saimir as “undone by his adherence to the conventions of heterosexual romance” could similarly describe Nader. “Italy’s Postcolonial Cinema,” 209.

<sup>53</sup> For more on anxiety about male feminization as symptomatic of a (perceived) loss of hegemonic masculinity (in contemporary Italian cinema) see: O’Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities*.

and her pleas to Nader to respect Muslim culture are ignored—cues that underscore female diasporic figure’s inability to convey conventional signifiers of subjectivity. Like her mother, Laura fades into the background when male figures are present. The only spaces she inhabits outside of the home are the mosque, where her body remains covered, and school, where she is positioned behind her male peers. However, as Nader spends more time away from home, Laura steadily gains agency and visibility. Nader’s absence is replaced by Stefano’s presence, and it leads to Laura’s realization of her erotic desire for a “white” male. Although Stefano initially calls on the Sarhan home in search of Nader, his visits eventually lead to a budding romance with Laura. It is no coincidence that the scene that captures the would-be lovers’ flirtation is the only one that features Laura in a one-shot—ultimately making the diasporic female subject (who, on all other occasions, is framed in choral shots) visible.

Inevitably, Laura’s celebratory agency—evidenced by her newly acquired visibility—is so threatening that it is promptly eclipsed by the film’s renewed focus on the precarious homosocial bond between Nader and Stefano. The moment Nader learns of his sister’s agency (through Stefano’s confession of his romantic interest in Laura) he erupts in a fit of unbridled rage. Nader’s objection to the relationship between Stefano and Laura eventually escalates into actual violence. When he spies the forbidden couple kissing in a sedan, Nader smashes the car window and threatens Stefano with a loaded gun. For more than a minute—a lengthy duration for any onscreen chase scene—Nader pursues Stefano until they reach the beach, the same location where *Alif* began and a space the pair visits throughout the film (see Figure 4 and Figure 5).



Figure 4 - Opening Scene: Nader and Stefano at the beach



Figure 5: Nader and Stefano return to the beach

The one-time friends' return to the Ostian shore, and Nader's failed attempt at murder is significant, particularly when analyzed in the interpretive key of Handyside's comments on "queer sites" as "sites of haunting." On one hand, Nader seems determined to eliminate his best friend; he pulls the trigger of his pistol and shoots a round of ammunition. Yet Nader's grip is unsteady, his eyes are closed, and the bullet intended for Stefano misses its target. Stefano ultimately leaves the beach startled but uninjured. Nader's inability to maim Stefano is influenced by the pair's return to the beach. This location triggers Nader's recollection of memories—perhaps of his jovial excursions with Stefano, or of his traumatic encounter with Mahmoud—that now haunt him in the present. Contrasted with O'Rawe's exploration of the concept of "queer temporality," as a means of recuperating masculinity through nostalgia,<sup>54</sup> the schism that presently divides Nader and Stefano is too great to overcome.

Nader's objection to a heterosexual relationship between Stefano and Laura can be interpreted in multiple ways. First, similar to the tragic consequences of the "affectively overdetermined sibling love"<sup>55</sup> described by O'Rawe elsewhere, Nader and Stefano's brotherhood proves to be potent and destructive. Stefano's desire for Laura creates a sort of erotic triangle that strains the teens' fraternal bond until it manifests into physical violence. Nader's desire to kill Stefano can also be read as a protest against the relation of (post)colonial narratives to sexual and racial subjectification. In essence, Nader's attempt to eliminate Stefano is also his attempt to write a queer history of colonization that does not allow the "white" male subject to eroticize a "brown" female body. Lastly, interpreting Nader's objection through Gopinath's queer feminist lens, one can propose that Laura's visibility threatens the possibility of a future queer interaction between him and Stefano. When Nader realizes that queer sexuality cannot be articulated, a violent reaction against submerged histories of colonization erupt into the present.

<sup>54</sup> O'Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities*, 101-102.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibi*, 133. O'Rawe studies homosocial bonds in cinematic representations of the *anni di piombo*—a period of precariousness and social unrest in Italy.



## Conclusion

The final episode of *Alì* brings into focus unsettled tensions among race, gender, sexuality, desire, and belonging for diasporic (male) subjects in Italy. Returning once more to the immigrant home, the camera films the Sarhan family seated around the dinner table, with one member noticeably absent. In the background, the TV broadcasts the warm Egyptian sun, contrasted with the cold, Ostian winter, a juxtaposition that alludes to diasporic subjects' conventional longing for "home." This suggests that the legitimization of a "queer diaspora," where scattered colonies no longer perceive their nation of origin as "home," is impossible. Nader's absence, represented by his empty chair, ultimately steals the camera's focus, as it is the final frame of the film. This image suggests that Nader cannot return "home" again. The teen has been definitively displaced: his identity is no longer secure because he is neither "Italian" nor "Egyptian," neither "gay" nor "straight." At the same time, much like Gopinath's female same-sex-desiring diasporic subject, Nader's absence does not signify his erasure. Nader is physically missing from the Sarhan home, yet his absence haunts the scene, thereby providing him with a source of intelligibility previously denied to racialized subjects.<sup>56</sup>

Rather than neatly wrap up *Alì* with a scene of family reunification, Giovannesi closes the film with this ambiguous, if not tragic, ending. The unresolved conclusion purposefully articulates the complexities of identity formation for racialized, diasporic male subjects who come-of-age in a society that privileges "white" bodies. Indeed, commenting on the film, Giovannesi insists that there are no easy solutions to the problem of immigration and cohabitation in present-day Italy. According to the director, "L'integrazione è un processo dinamico. [...] Nader ha preso coscienza di una contraddizione. Vive una situazione conflittuale, uno scontro culturale ed è questa la sua ricchezza."<sup>57</sup> Therefore, perhaps it is best to interpret the conclusion of *Alì* through the perspective of Stuart Hall, who upholds that cinema teaches us that identity production is a continuous process, "always constituted within, not outside, representation" and never fully completed.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> For a related, yet distinct, example of a male migrant protagonist who—despite being "excised from the national [Italian] body"—manages to "reproduce[] himself and become invisible" see: Duncan, "Loving Geographies," 178.

<sup>57</sup> Carlotta De Leo, "Nader e i suoi fratelli. E L'Italia del futuro," *Corriere Della Sera*, November 16, 2012, [http://cinematv.corriere.it/cinema/speciali/2012/roma/notizie/concorso-ali-occhi-azzurri-de-leo\\_4d14276c-2b4c-11e2-9d1b-8a6df7db52f7.shtml](http://cinematv.corriere.it/cinema/speciali/2012/roma/notizie/concorso-ali-occhi-azzurri-de-leo_4d14276c-2b4c-11e2-9d1b-8a6df7db52f7.shtml), accessed April 15, 2015.

<sup>58</sup> Stuart Hall. *Cultural Identity and Diaspora: Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990), 68.

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