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Author: Lisa Dolasinski

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Author Bio: Lisa Dolasinski is a Visiting Assistant Professor of Italian at Dickinson College. She holds a PhD in Italian Studies and a minor in Gender Studies from Indiana University. Lisa works primarily on contemporary Italian cinema and culture, and is particularly interested in the topics of migration, aging, and masculinity. Her refereed journal articles interrogate the fluid sexual and racial identities of migrant protagonists onscreen. In addition to preparing her first monograph for publication, tentatively titled *Screening “Sterile Masculinity”: On Male Migrants, Italian Men, and the Future of Italy*, she is currently working on a project that investigates representations of aging in Italian films.

Abstract: This article intervenes in current discussions on perceptions of aging, masculinity, and (in)fecundity, and their combined effect on perceptions of Italy. The first half of this piece centers on Berlusconi and the broader phenomenon of *Berlusconismo*. Drawing on queer theorist Lee Edelman’s notion of “reproductive futurism,” and works by Italian philosophers and scholars (Ida Dominijanni and Lorenzo Bernini) who bring together theories of psychoanalysis and biopolitics in their analyses of Berlusconi/*Berlusconismo*, I argue that the seasoned politician performs a version of virile masculinity in old age that is degraded, yet also undying, and that the neoliberal populism he promotes has created a climate that authorizes and advances racist/racializing reproductive politics. The second half of this article introduces a concept I name “sterile masculinity.” Moving from a short study of Berlusconi in the media to an analysis of male migrant characters in contemporary Italian films, I maintain that present-day, often intersecting, understandings of masculinity, race, and national belonging generated during globalization and migration—as seen through the continued practice of racializing and sexually and socially marginalizing non-national, “non-white” bodies—are informed both by the legacy of fascism in Italy and the biopolitics of *Berlusconismo*. What follows, however, is a close reading of a male migrant character who rehearses a notion of masculinity that resolves racially-motivated tensions, looks forward to a global Italy, and rehabilitates negative connotations of “sterility”: Bepi of *Io sono Li* (A. Segre, 2011).

Keywords: migration, “sterile masculinity,” Italian cinema, *Berlusconismo*, aging.

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Media-ting “Sterile Masculinity”: On Male Aging, Migration, and Biopolitics in a (post)Berlusconi Italy¹

LISA DOLASINSKI

Introduction

In Italy, men in the media perpetuate a causal relation between securing acceptance in dominant society and engaging in exaggerated, often compensatory, displays of virile masculinity.² Recall, for example, the cover story featured in the October 2016 issue of *Chi* (see Figure 1).³ Splashed across the front page of this widely read Italian gossip magazine the script reads: “They are my future” (Sono loro il mio futuro).⁴ The quoted is none other than Italy’s love-to-hate *maschio* par excellence, Silvio Berlusconi, who, in anticipation of his eightieth birthday (28 September 2016), responded to questions posed by Italian television host and *Chi* editor, Alfonso Signorini. During the interview, the former Prime Minister of Italy (Berlusconi was elected into office on four separate occasions) sidestepped questions about politics to chat about family. The then soon-to-be octogenarian described his recently expanded, already sprawling, brood as “his future.”

The complementary magazine cover makes use of rhetorical devices that repeat, and thus reinforce, the logic of survival through legacy. Berlusconi, sporting his trademark smile and tan, poses behind a half-dozen of his grandchildren. He extends his right arm toward the youngest of the pack (the children are ordered according to height and age), directing the viewer to admire, along with him, the heirs to his multi-billion dollar empire. The word “future” (futuro) appears just below the shamelessly staged, family-friendly photo of Berlusconi playing granddad. It is capitalized and emboldened in red ink, a stylistic choice that draws the term out in contrast to neighboring text such that it advances the conventional tendency to identify virility (biological reproduction) as indisputable evidence of masculinity and vitality.

This human-interest piece, though a cogent example of Berlusconi’s fondness for shameless self-promotion, nevertheless brings into focus the revelations of an aging, infirm man preoccupied

¹ Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers and editorial staff at *g/s/i* for their generous readings and valuable feedback.

² I combine the terms “virile” and “masculinity” intentionally. Following R. W. Connell’s landmark text, I acknowledge that masculinity is a continuously evolving social construct, and that there in fact exist “multiple masculinities.” I also recognize that the term “virility” has been re-defined numerous times (as prowess, potency, self-control, discipline, intellect, maturity) throughout the course of Western history. My interest in examining the archetype of “virile masculinity” lies in dismantling a pair of conventions that resurface, especially in times of crisis, with the passing of time: (a) Displays of virility serve to verify a man’s masculinity and normativity and (b) There is a reciprocal relation between male sexual potency and national vitality. As I will argue in greater detail, these beliefs are not just flawed; rather, they are inherently racist and racializing. In brief, ethno-racially “pure” Italian men—even male seniors like Berlusconi, who partake in unregulated practices of virility—reproduce Italy. Conversely, non-Italian men are stigmatized as sexual and social deviants of a purportedly inferior biology that threatens to debase the national body of Italy. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); R.W. Connell and Jeff Hern, ed., *Handbook of Studies on Men & Masculinities* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2005); R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” *Gender and Society* 19, no. 6 (2005): 829-859; Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, and Georges Vigarello, ed., *A History of Virility*, trans. Keith Cohen (New York City: Columbia University Press, 2017 [2016]).

³ This issue was published on 5 October 2016. *Chi* is a weekly magazine (established in 1995) based in Segrate, Milan. Berlusconi’s oldest daughter, Marina, heads the company. Alfonso Signorini, “Berlusconi festeggia 80 anni, in copertina con i nipoti: ‘Mi sento un patriarca,’” *La Repubblica*, 27 September 2016. Web. Accessed 27 September 2016. http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/09/27/foto/berlusconi_festeggia_80_anni_in_copertina_con_i_nipoti-148642270/1/#1.

⁴ All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated. Ibid.

about securing his future. It incorporates a candid remark articulated by the formerly indefatigable *Cavaliere* (the Knight) on the profound effect of physical decline on understandings of old age and vitality:⁵

In all my life I have never thought about my age. To the contrary, I have always lived as if I were forty years old because this is how I felt: full of curiosity, of desire to accomplish [things]. Then, suddenly, came the illness. And along with the operation that I underwent came a profound awareness that I am an eighty-year-old man.⁶

This realization, resulting from a critical cardiac episode in October 2016, and surgery to repair a faulty aortic valve in June of that same year, led Berlusconi to evaluate the frailty of his health. Family—more precisely, Berlusconi’s plentiful progeny—took on increasing significance. They became, in no uncertain terms, the shrewd businessman’s most sound investment to date: futurity.



Fig. 1: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, “Silvio Berlusconi festeggia con i nipoti i suoi 80 anni,” *Chi* magazine cover, 5 October 2016. Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders and obtain permission to reproduce this material.⁷

Building on the *Chi* cover and Berlusconi feature, this article intervenes in current

⁵ During the 1970s, Berlusconi was granted an order of merit for his successful entrepreneurial endeavors. This distinction earned him the title (and nickname), the “Knight of Labor” (*Cavaliere del lavoro*).

⁶ “Nella mia vita non ho mai pensato all’età. Al contrario, ho sempre vissuto come se avessi quarant’anni perché così mi sentivo: pieno di curiosità, di voglia di fare. Poi, improvvisa, è arrivata la malattia. E con l’operazione che ho subito è arrivata forte la consapevolezza che sono un uomo di ottant’anni.” Signorini, “Berlusconi festeggia 80 anni.”

⁷ All images are reproduced for the sole purpose of scholarly discussion.

discussions on perceptions of aging, masculinity, and (in)fecundity, and their combined effect on perceptions of Italy. As a number of Italian scholars working on issues of masculinity have argued (Bellassai, Malatesta, Benadusi, Dell’Agnese, and Ruspini), I acknowledge that conceptions of manhood are reshaped continuously according to context (history, region, and class), as well as by the lived-experiences of actual men residing within and beyond the confines of Italy.⁸ At the same time, I maintain, as do Elena dell’Agnese and Elisabetta Ruspini, that an archetype of masculinity based on “virility” (virilità), “passion” (focosità), “insatiability” (insaziabilità), and “sexual potency” (potenza sessuale) has circulated for generations, and that this *maschio* model—touted by Berlusconi—persists in mainstream narratives on manhood and national belonging in Italy today.⁹

Together with examining representations of aging masculinities in Italian media, attention is directed toward the racist/racializing reproductive politics that have flourished in the climate of the neoliberal populism of *Berlusconismo*. Present-day Italy finds itself in a perfect demographic storm. The nation’s designation as a “dying country” stems from an alarmingly low birthrate, the mass exodus of young people, and a fast-aging population. Concurrently, global instability has precipitated an unprecedented arrival of migrants onto Italian soil. This combination of trends has re-invigorated the Italian government’s investment in heightening national security and managing the lives of its citizens—what Michel Foucault named biopolitics.¹⁰ Right-wing politicians, among them Berlusconi and Matteo Salvini, decry the “invasion” of displaced refugees with xenophobic rhetoric.¹¹ Their anti-immigration policies and “Italy first” agenda not only intimate a rise of populism under

⁸ Among others, see: Sandro Bellassai, *L’invenzione della virilità: politica e immaginario maschile nell’Italia contemporanea* (Roma: Carocci, 2011); Sandro Bellassai, *La mascolinità contemporanea* (Roma: Carocci, 2004); Sandro Bellassai, “La Mascolinità Post-Tradizionale,” in *Donne e uomini che cambiano. Relazioni di genere, identità sessuali e mutamento sociale*, ed. Elisabetta Ruspini, 123-146 (Milano: Guerini, 2005); Sandro Bellassai and Maria Malatesta, eds., *Genere e mascolinità: uno sguardo storico* (Roma: Bulzoni, 2000); Lorenzo Benadusi, “Storia del corpo maschile,” in *Uomini e corpi: una riflessione sui rivestimenti della mascolinità*, ed. Elisabetta Ruspini, 31-61 (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2009); Elisabetta Ruspini, “Educare alle nuove mascolinità (gestire la parabola della virilità),” in *Mascolinità all’italiana. Costruzioni, narrazioni, mutamenti*, eds. Elena dell’Agnese and Elisabetta Ruspini, 285-314. (Torino: UTET Libreria, 2007); Elisabetta Ruspini, “Italian Forms of Masculinity: Between Familism and Social Change,” *Culture, Society, and Masculinity* 1, no. 2 (2009): 121-136. Web. Accessed 10 January 2017. <http://www.mensstudies.info/OJS/index.php/CSM/article/viewFile/53/9>.

⁹ Dell’Agnese and Ruspini, *Mascolinità all’italiana*, xvii.

¹⁰ Foucault’s concept of biopolitics derives from his earlier work on biopower. The continental philosopher first defines biopower in the *History of Sexuality* (Vol.1), describing it as “an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations” (140). In a series of lectures Foucault delivered at the Collège de France between January and April 1978, he returns to and elaborates on this concept, defining it as follows: “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the 18th century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is what I have called biopower” (1). Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York City: Random House, 1990 [1978]); Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Web. Accessed 20 May 2018. <file:///Users/user/Desktop/Foucault-Security-Territory-Population.pdf>.

¹¹ Matteo Salvini, leader of the far-right League party (Lega, formerly Lega Nord), was appointed Interior Minister and Deputy Prime Minister of Italy on 1 June 2018. Since securing this appointment, Salvini has upheld his pledge to enforce stricter anti-immigration policies in Italy. Along with announcing plans to deport as many as 500,000 undocumented immigrants, in mid and late June 2018 he barred rescue ships carrying hundreds of migrants from docking in Italy. Carmelo Lopapa, “Migranti, Salvini a Malta: ‘Accolga la nave Aquarius, porti italiani chiusi.’ La replica: ‘Non è nostra competenza,’” *La Repubblica*, 10 June 2018. Web. Accessed 27 June 2018. http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/06/10/news/porti_salvini-198644488/; Alessandra Ziniti, “Salvini: ‘Sequestriamo la Lifeline e arrestiamo l’equipaggio ma i migranti non in Italia,’” *La Repubblica*, 21 June 2018. Web. Accessed 27 June 2018. http://www.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/06/21/news/migranti_lifeline_soccorre_400_naufraghi_al_largo_della_libia-199597183/.

globalization, but they also expose Italian fascism's legacy of racism, namely the persistent presence of discriminatory practices directed toward "non-white," non-national bodies.¹² Though less explicitly, government sanctioned biopolitical interventions—like the 2016 #FertilityDay campaign—are also inculcated in an idealized colonial memory. Promotional materials portray the act of reproducing the national Italian body according to institutionalized regimes of race, gender, and sexuality. Making use of "non-white" bodies, they create a "color line" (*linea di colore*) that conveys visually the incompatibility of ethno-racially impure subjects with Italy.¹³

The first half of this article centers on Berlusconi and the broader phenomenon of *Berlusconismo*. Drawing on queer theorist Lee Edelman's Lacanian-based polemic, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*, and recent works by Italian philosophers and scholars (Ida Dominijanni and Lorenzo Bernini) who bring together theories of psychoanalysis (namely Lacan) and biopolitics (Foucault) in their analyses of Berlusconi/*Berlusconismo*, I argue that the *Cavaliere* embodies a version of virile masculinity in old age that is degraded and spectacularized (a spectacle), yet also undying.¹⁴ In the current era of neoliberalism and "Viagra Culture," Berlusconi's body holds significant political and social capital.¹⁵ Contrasted with the imposed biopolitics of Italian fascism, average male citizens willingly invest in Berlusconi/*Berlusconismo* because doing so allows them to carry on their own fantasies of attaining superior wealth and sexual capabilities. The implicit consensus this kind of capitalist populism propagates in turn makes Berlusconi a synecdoche of Italy. For this reason, unveiling an authentic portrait of the silvering politician—one mired in impotence and death—inherently exposes the Italian nation's unnerving proximity to apocalypse.

The second half of this article introduces a concept I name "sterile masculinity." This notion of masculinity re-interprets the term "sterile" with flexibility: "sterile masculinity" is neither an exact antonym of "virile masculinity," nor does it always and invariably correspond with sexuality.¹⁶ Moving from a short study of Berlusconi in the media to an analysis of male migrant characters in contemporary Italian features, I assert that current, often intersecting, perceptions of masculinity, race, and national belonging generated during this ongoing period of globalization and migration, are informed both by the legacy of fascism in Italy and the biopolitics of *Berlusconismo*. More precisely, I understand the usually failed cinematic representations of migrant men as a continuation of the historical, largely political, practice of racializing and sexually and socially marginalizing non-national, "non-white" bodies.¹⁷ Contributing to the limited but growing collection of work studying migrant

¹² In this article, "non-white" is defined in opposition to "white." Following Richard Dyer's seminal text, *White*, I refer to "white"/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 migrants and "non-white" Italians) and evocative of the constructed homogeneity of *italianità* ("Italianness") under colonialism see: Gaia Giuliani, ed., *Il colore della nazione* (Milano: Le Monnier, 2015); Gaia Giuliani, ed., "La sottile linea bianca. Intersezioni di razza, genere e classe nell'Italia postcoloniale," *Studi Culturali*, no. 2 (2013): 253-344; Cristina Lombardi-Diop, "Postracial/Postcolonial Italy," in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, eds. Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, 175-190 (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Gaia Giuliani and Cristina Lombardi-Diop, *Bianco e Nero: Storia dell'identità razziale degli italiani* (Milan: Mondadori Education S.p.A., 2013).

¹³ I borrow this expression from Giuliani, *Il colore della nazione*.

¹⁴ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004); Ida Dominijanni, *Il trucco. Sessualità e biopolitica nella fine di Berlusconi* (Roma: Ediesse, 2014); Lorenzo Bernini, "Not in my name: il corpo osceno del tiranno e la catastrofe della virilità," in *Filosofia di Berlusconi: L'essere e il nulla nell'Italia del Cavaliere*, ed. Carlo Chiurco (Verona: Ombre corte, 2011).

¹⁵ Marco Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo*, (Parma: Guadana, 2009).

¹⁶ As I note in the introduction of this article (n. 1), the term "virility" also defies straightforward definition.

¹⁷ Scholarship examining masculinity, race, and Italian identity in the visual culture of fascist Italy was particularly helpful for guiding my thinking. See Giuliani, *Il colore della nazione*; Lombardi-Diop, "Postracial/Postcolonial Italy," 175-190; Karen Pinkus, "Selling the Black Body: Advertising and the African Campaigns," in *Bodily Regimes: Italian Advertising under*

film characters’ relation to Italy along gendered and/or reproductive lines, but expanding, specifically, on an article authored by Derek Duncan, I maintain that contemporary Italian films of migration nearly always render “sterile” (through failed interracial romance, expatriation, narrative expulsion, and/or death) onscreen migrant men in order to neutralize, symbolically, the threat of miscegenation and race difference.¹⁸ What follows, however, is a close reading of a male migrant character who embodies a notion of masculinity that resolves racially-motivated tensions, looks forward to a global Italy, and rehabilitates negative connotations of “sterility”: Bepi, of Andrea Segre’s debut feature, *Io sono Li / Shun Li and the Poet* (2011). Thus, though I will expound on this concept in greater detail, in essence, “sterile masculinity”: (a) is not defined by manliness/heteronormativity, (b) challenges the patriarchy/misogyny, and (c) shores up notions of belonging beyond those of nation and citizenship.

Berlusconi, Biopolitics, and (Aging) Masculinity

Returning, now, to the *Chi* exclusive, the manufactured image of Berlusconi—a salacious politician-turned-family man—exposes anxieties of the average Italian male and the socio-political future of Italy.¹⁹ On one hand, Berlusconi’s preoccupation with safeguarding his future via family legacy can be interpreted as symptomatic of blindly endorsing what Edelman terms the logic of “reproductive futurism.”²⁰ This heterosexist and future-oriented framework of belonging—for Edelman, a conservative, thus necessarily exclusionary, “Ponzi scheme”—envisages fecundity as a civic duty, necessary for the reproduction of the national body.²¹ In brief, analyzing the penchant for pro-family policy in the West with theory (Edelman engages principally with Lacanian psychoanalysis), the queer theorist surmises that the Child will remain “the fantasmatic beneficiary of every political intervention” insofar as Occidental citizens and politicians—like Berlusconi—consider children “the pledge of a covenant that shields us against the persistent threat of apocalypse now—or later.”²² This means that attaining acceptance (proving one’s “normativity”) is a biopolitical act that hinges upon verifying one’s fertility—criteria that prohibit all “queer” parties, including aging, post-

Fascism, 22-81 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Derek Duncan, “Italy’s Postcolonial Cinema and its Histories of Representation,” *Italian Studies* 63, no. 2 (2008): 196. Shelleen Greene, “Mixed Race Relationships in the Italian Colonial and Postcolonial Italian Imaginary,” in *Equivocal Subjects: Between Italy and Africa- Constructions of Racial and National Identity in Italian Cinema*, 50-115 (New York City: Continuum, 2012) (especially p. 111-13).

¹⁸ Duncan primarily examines a trio of texts featuring male migrants of an Eastern European origin: the Manetti brothers’ *Zora la vampira* (2000), Ennio De Domenicis’ *L’italiano* (2002), and Francesco Munzi’s *Saimir* (2004). Duncan, “Loving Geographies,” 167-82. Derek Duncan, “Loving Geographies: Queering Straight Migration to Italy,” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 6, no. 3 (2008): 167-82. For more on this topic, see: Áine O’Healy, “Screening Intimacy and Racial Difference in Postcolonial Italy,” in *Postcolonial Italy* (cit.), 205-220.

¹⁹ Berlusconi has been named “a synecdoche of Italian masculinity” (O’Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities*, 5) and “the sexual autobiography of the Italian male population” (l’autobiografia sessuale della nazione maschile) (Bellassai, “Il nocciolo politico.” English translation in O’Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities*, 5). Indeed, since his political strategy has been to create a “campaign of relatability,” Berlusconi has become a model to which everyday Italian men aspire, especially during times of instability (Bernini, “Not in my name,” 16; Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo*, 99-100). Catherine O’Rawe, *Stars and Masculinities in Contemporary Italian Cinema* (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Sandro Bellassai, “Il nocciolo politico del desiderio maschile,” *Il Manifesto*, 8 February 2011. Accessed 28 September 2016. <http://www.libreriadelledonne.it/oldsite/news/articoli/Manif080211.htm>.

²⁰ Edelman, *No Future*.

²¹ Edelman purposefully situates *No Future* in the context of the ascendance of the same-sex marriage movement. He equates “homonormativity” to a “Ponzi scheme” because, from his perspective, those gays and lesbians that opt into the institution of marriage are not only required to concede to the norms demanded by heterosexuality, but they are also complicit in further marginalizing non-conforming members of the queer community. *Ibid.*, 4, 17, 75-6.

²² *Ibid.*, 3, 18.

reproductive persons and racialized non-citizens, from gaining entry. Mature “white” men with financial means are, however, afforded two solutions to this predicament: they can insert themselves into ready-made families or invest in those biomedical enhancements that guarantee to correct diminished masculine vitality. In *No Future*, Edelman puts forth literary examples of miserly bachelors who “renounce their infertile solitude” (rinuncerà alla sua infeconda solitudine), that is, postpone death and demise by embracing “surrogate paternity.”²³ Meanwhile, with the arrival of Viagra in 1998, sexual decline was no longer perceived as a natural consequence of aging, thus senior men could—at least superficially—reclaim membership in dominant society.²⁴

Yet Berlusconi, and the broader social phenomenon of *Berlusconismo*, reveals himself to be a flimsy agent of virile masculinity and “reproductive futurism.”²⁵ Recent texts analyzing the Italian senior’s public image and politics point out that the “Berlusconi agenda” peddles a double—essentially paradoxical—message, in which traditional family values are continuously confirmed and denied.²⁶ From a practical perspective, Berlusconi’s involvement in numerous sex scandals contradicts the pro-family platform he promotes in political circles. Consider, for instance, the ongoing repercussions of Rubygate. On 24 June 2013, Berlusconi was convicted of exchanging money for sex with Moroccan-born Karima El Mahroug, at the time an underage nightclub dancer, and abuse of office for attempting to cover-up said affair.²⁷ Police interviews with El Mahroug, better known by her stage name Ruby Rubacuori (Ruby the Heart Stealer), introduced the general public to a neologism for X-rated soirees, that being *bunga bunga* parties. Berlusconi eluded legal sanctions; the court’s original ruling, a seven-year prison sentence and lifetime ban from public office, was overturned in a successful appeal. However, the negative press surrounding Rubygate, coupled with the financial crisis that befell Italy during the fourth Berlusconi administration, derailed

²³ These include Scrooge (*A Christmas Carol*, C. Dickens, 1843) and Silas Marner in George Eliot’s eponymously titled novel (1861). Edelman, *No Future*, 41–59. Quote from Lorenzo Bernini, *Apocalissi queer: elementi di teoria antisociale* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2013), 92. English translation from Lorenzo Bernini, *Queer Apocalypses: Elements of Antisocial Theory*, trans. Julia Heim (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 69.

²⁴ Multiple scholars argue that restoration of (aging) male sexuality through Viagra is premised on a limited understanding of “sex” and “masculinity”—as if production of an erection via biomedical intervention were somatic evidence of manhood reclaimed (Potts 2000, Mamo and Fishman 2001, Marshall 2006). Access to Viagra has also been identified as a matter of race and class hierarchies. As Calasanti and King maintain, erectile dysfunction adverts target a specific aggregate of consumers: older, wealthy, primarily “white,” men. Toni Calasanti and Neal King, “Firming the Floppy Penis: Age, Class, and Gender Relations in the Lives of Old Men,” in *The Kaleidoscope of Gender: Prisms, Patterns and Possibilities*, eds. Joan Spade and Catherine Valentine (London: Sage, 2011), 258.

²⁵ Scholars of Italian culture contend that for reasons of its mutability and elusive nature, it is more productive to study the essence and effect of *Berlusconismo* than define it in strict terms (Chiurco, *Filosofia di Berlusconi*; 9).

²⁶ Dominijanni, *Il trucco*; Chiurco, *La filosofia berlusconiana* (see especially Bernini’s chapter).

²⁷ I highlight Rubygate for two key reasons. Firstly, it perverts the logic of “reproductive futurism.” This case brought unprecedented media attention to Berlusconi’s practice of exchanging pay for sex with underage girls [“[l’]italianissima storia del Padrone che compra corpi di ragazze, spesso minorenni, per il suo piacere di consumo”] (Chiurco, *Filosofia di Berlusconi*, 11). Different from the relationships between sympathetic children and male seniors in the novels studied by Edelman (Tiny Tim-Scrooge and Eppie-Silas Marner), El Mahroug, at the time a minor fleeing a troubled childhood, was exploited (her body sexualized to satisfy the prurient fantasies of an aging male consumer) rather than protected. Secondly, popular Italian television programs’ coverage of the Berlusconi-El Mahroug affair sheds light on “the persistence of a (post)colonial archive [...] in contemporary Italy” (Giuliani, “Gender, Race, and the Colonial Archive,” 550). In *Porta a porta* and *Kalispéra*, for example, racializing and gendered discourses portray the Moroccan-born immigrant as a willing participant who profited from a benevolent “white” man (Ibid., 558–61). Gaia Giuliani, “Gender, Race, and the Colonial Archive. Sexualized Exoticism and Gendered Racism in Contemporary Italy,” *Italian Studies* 71, no. 4 (2016): 550–567.

the aging playboy’s already flagging political career.²⁸ On 12 November 2011, Berlusconi tendered his official resignation as Prime Minister of Italy, and following a 2013 tax-fraud conviction, he was issued a five year ban from public office.²⁹ From a theoretical perspective, Berlusconi’s penchant for pleasure sans reproduction reveals the octogenarian to be “marble Viagra” (*un Viagra di marmo*), “the ghost of impotence that hides behind its sexual compulsion”—attributes that ultimately place him on a trajectory that increasingly nears mortality.³⁰ In other words, akin to Edelman’s figure of the “*sinthomosexual*,” Berlusconi produces a moribund portrait of Italy and aging masculinities in which there is no “redemptive baby.”³¹ Essentially, “fucking really is just fucking,” and the collective social future of Italy has been compromised by the “sterile, narcissistic enjoyments” of a masturbatory citizen.³²

Such claims are substantiated further in print media. The collection of photographs with commentary on Berlusconi put forth in *Il corpo del capo* archive the politician’s deliberate, multi-decade construction of his evolving public image.³³ In a photograph dated around 1980, a period that anticipated Berlusconi’s Mussolini-like marriage of media, virile masculinity, and politics, the entrepreneur displays “a very Italian form of male chauvinism” (*una forma di maschilismo molto italiano*).³⁴ He upstages the presence of the secondary female subject, his first wife, Carla Elvira Dall’Oglio, and gazes directly into the camera lens as if communicating: “Here is my woman” (*Ecco*

²⁸ For a concise overview of Berlusconi’s political career, see: Nicoletta Marini-Maio, *A Very Seductive Body Politic. Silvio Berlusconi in Cinema* (Milano: Mimesis International, 2015), 17, 46-8, 89 and the appendix, “Silvio Berlusconi’s Political Trajectory: A Brief Summary,” 105-6.

Dominijanni, *Il trucco*, 28-30; 81-85. Chiurco, *La filosofia di Berlusconi*, 11-14; Elisa Cuter, “Non è la Rai, or: On the Becoming-Girl of Late Capitalism,” *g/s/i*, 4 (2017): 94.

²⁹ On 12 May 2018, an Italian court ruled to lift this ban, which would have been in place until November 2019. “Berlusconi si può candidare, sì dei giudici alla riabilitazione,” *La Repubblica*, 12 May 2018. Web. Accessed 12 May 2018. http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/05/12/news/berlusconi_riabilitato_severino-196152437/.

³⁰ The first quote is a comment on Berlusconi by psychoanalyst Massimo Recalcati in “Il sesso che verrà (3 January 2014),” *Otto e mezzo*, YouTube Video, 9 January 2014, posted by DesdeUdine. Web. Accessed 25 May 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gvJQgmXddl>. In the second quote, Cuter paraphrases from Dominijanni (“un’illusione di potenza, sessuale e politica, a coperta di un inconfessabile fantasma d’impotenza, politica e sessuale,” [Dominijanni, *Il trucco*, 28]). Cuter, “Non è la Rai,” 94.

³¹ Edelman defines the *sinthomosexual* as the physical manifestation of the death drive. He crafts this neologism by grafting Lacan’s term, *sinthome* (“symptom”), onto sexuality. Edelman, *No Future*, 39-40. In the quote that follows, I draw especially on the content and wording of a passage in *No Future*. The original text reads: “If, however, there is *no baby* and, in consequence, *no future*, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself” (13).

³² Ibid.

³³ The photos and commentary range from the late 1970’s, when Berlusconi was a relatively unknown real-estate developer, to 2011, a tumultuous period for the *Cavaliere* and Italy. Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo*.

³⁴ Marco Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo* (Parma: Guadana, 2009), 41. To view a copy of this photo, see page 40 in Belpoliti. Berlusconi shares many qualities with Mussolini. There are, however, key distinctions between the media-driven biopolitics of Italian fascism and *Berlusconismo*. Mussolini imposed gendered expectations of civic responsibility. He exercised authoritative control over the burgeoning media industries, fashioning himself into an icon of virility, and linking his body to the national Italian body, by plastering his portrait on posters, book covers, medals, and postage stamps. *Il Duce* did not commercialize his private life for political gain; the rare photos of his family that circulated do not emote a sense of intimacy. *Berlusconismo*, by contrast, identifies and exaggerates gendered qualities and perspectives that are already in place. It also thrives on the (false) sense of intimacy conveyed by the archive of carefully curated family photos circulated by Berlusconi. Bernini, “Not in my name,” 39-42; Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo*, 23-7; Lorenzo Benadusi, “Storia del corpo maschile,” in *Uomini e corpi: una riflessione sui rivestimenti della Mascolinità*, ed. Elisabetta Ruspini (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2009), 48-9; Stephen Gundle, “From Mussolini to Berlusconi: Masculinity and Political Leadership in Post-War Italy,” in *The Palgrave Handbook of Masculinity and Political Culture in Europe*, eds. Christopher Fletcher, Sean Brady, Rachel Moss and Lucy Riall (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018): 435-455.

la mia donna).³⁵ Flash-forward two decades into the future, and a Berlusconi eager to reinvigorate a political career stymied by personal and professional blunders, mobilized, again, albeit differently, the medium of photography to manage his public persona. In the months preceding the 2011 general election, his party, *Forza Italia* (Go Italy, founded in 1993), distributed *Una storia italiana* (An Italian Story) to an estimated 150 million Italian households.³⁶ This one hundred and twenty-five page biography of Berlusconi, interlaced with private photos that depict the *Cavaliere* as a relatable “self-made man” and model father proved to be an effective application of biopolitical capital.³⁷ On account of the Italian public’s connection with a manufactured impression of intimacy with Berlusconi, *Forza Italia*, and the broader right-wing coalition *La Casa delle Libertà* (House of Freedoms), won the majority of votes, thereby securing Berlusconi’s second appointment as Prime Minister of Italy (2001-2006). The final photo included in *Il corpo del capo* reveals an atypical, “unsettling” (inquietante), and “definitive” (definitiva) rendering of Berlusconi.³⁸ Borrowing from Belpoliti, this image, a 2008 portrait captured by Alex Majoli, replaces Berlusconi’s routinely staged performances of vitality with a “moment of truth” (momento di verità), that being the politician’s “enigmatic intimacy with death” (l’insondabile intimità con la morte).³⁹ Stripped of his conventional props (a reassured smile, attractive women, and an adoring family) and positioned in front of a floor-length white curtain, the *Cavaliere* inhabits “a funereal-like mise-en-scène” (una messa in scena quasi lugubre)—one that mirrors the aforementioned personal and political turmoil of Berlusconi, as well as the financial collapse of Italy.⁴⁰

At first glance, the more recent photograph printed on the cover of *Chi* appears to counter Majoli’s portrait of a somber Berlusconi. This image is upbeat and future-oriented. In announcing Berlusconi’s birthday plans, it seems to promote the paradigm of inclusion-via-fecundity maligned in *No Future*, since, as Edelman would aver, “observances like the birthday party [...] celebrate [...] the ideology of reproductive necessity.”⁴¹ Yet, upon further reflection, the performative and discursive practices enacted by the silvering politician reveal themselves to be narcissistic (a key quality of the *sinthomosexual*) rather than altruistic. They also combine “the worst defects of traditional machismo” (i peggiori difetti del maschilismo tradizionale) with “the more superficial and grotesque aspects of the contemporary redefinition of masculinity” (gli aspetti più superficiali e grotteschi della ridefinizione contemporaneo della mascolinità).⁴² In the *Chi* exclusive, Berlusconi uses phallocentric rhetoric to “sell” a fallacious spectacle of (masculine) vitality. He opts to exclude his granddaughters (Lucrezia, Sofia, and Flora) from the cover image, symbolically excising them from the Berlusconi bloodline, and making visible through their “absence” the traditional gender hierarchy in which females are subordinated to their male counterparts. Furthermore, Berlusconi’s declaration, “[f]ive children and ten grandchildren make a patriarchy. And this is what I feel” ([c]inque figli e dieci nipoti fanno un patriarca. E io questo mi sento), is “I”-oriented and egocentric.⁴³ Instead of celebrating the collective family unit, this comment serves to bolster the image of an insecure, aging man in “crisis”—one preoccupied with maintaining power, and the appearance of virile masculinity, on the unstable terrain of contemporary Italy.

³⁵ Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo*, 40.

³⁶ Emanuela Poli, *Forza Italia: Strutture, leadership e radicamento territoriale* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2001), 160.

³⁷ Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo*, 100. See also Ibid., 98-108; Poli, *Forza Italia*, 159-160; Dominijanni, *Il trucco*, 66-67.

³⁸ Belpoliti, *Il corpo del capo*, 139. See a copy of this photo on page 141.

³⁹ Ibid., 139; 142.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 139.

⁴¹ Edelman, *No Future*, 121.

⁴² Bernini, “Not in my name,” 43.

⁴³ Signorini, “Berlusconi festeggia 80 anni.”

Scholarship on Italian men’s “crises” as symptomatic of their perceived sense of precariousness in an Italy (re)shaped by social, economic, and political changes has abounded in recent years.⁴⁴ There has also been a proliferation of critical commentary that examines, more precisely, the adverse effects of Berlusconi’s co-mingling of sex, politics, and media on perceptions of (Italian) masculinity and the welfare of Italy.⁴⁵ Dominijanni and Bernini draw on theories of psychoanalysis and biopolitics in their respective analyses of *Berlusconismo*. Applying Lacan’s notion of the “evaporation of the father” to the neoliberal values advanced by Berlusconi, Dominijanni names *Berlusconismo* “an unprecedented form of biopolitical and post-patriarchal governmentality” ([un]inedita forma di governalità biopolitica post-patriarcale) founded on the exchange of sex, money, and power.⁴⁶ She surmises, additionally, that Berlusconi’s unregulated *jouissance*, his generally unpunished sexual transgressions in the political sphere, has enabled the proliferation of “a populism largely based on the fantasy of a male sexual power unencumbered by age” (un populismo largamente basato sulla fantasia di una potenza sessuale maschile inattaccabile dall’età).⁴⁷ Similarly, Bernini identifies *Berlusconismo* as “a result of neoliberalist contemporary *jouissance*,” and the “catastrophe of virility” (catastrofe della virilità).⁴⁸

Re-producing Italy. On Race, Biology, and the National Body

Berlusconi’s affiliation with morbidity and toxic masculinity has not, however, culminated in his permanent ejection from the Italian political scene. The *Cavaliere*’s body is “an omnipotent body that survives everything: sickness [...], old age, perhaps even death” (un corpo onnipotente che vince tutto: la malattia [...], la vecchiaia, fors’anche la morte).⁴⁹ *Berlusconismo*, too, is “apparently undying” (apparentemente non mortale), “always ready to renew itself” (sempre pronta a rinascere).⁵⁰ These

⁴⁴ Among others, Sandro Bellassai, Marco Deriu, and Elisabetta Ruspini aver that a combination of the following changes has dispelled the myth of an ideal and/or monolithic model of masculinity—especially one bound in performances of virility: (a) a rise in women’s education attainment, (b) a greater presence of women in the workforce, (c) Italy’s flagging economy, (d) unemployment and the pervasive spread of “*lavoro precario*” (involuntary part-time work), (e) the lack of childcare and social welfare programs in Italy, and (f) a greater visibility of minority masculinities (homosexuals, trans subjects, migrants living abroad). See Marco Deriu, “Il desiderio dei padri tra tentazioni di fuga e ricerca di nuova autorevolezza,” in *Donne e uomini che cambiano. Relazioni di genere, identità sessuali e mutamento sociale*, ed. Elisabetta Ruspini (Milano: Guerini, 2005), 147-166; Sandro Bellassai, “La Mascolinità Post-Tradizionale,” in *Donne e Uomini che Cambiano* (cit.), 123-46; Elisabetta Ruspini, “Educare alle nuove mascolinità (gestire la parabola della virilità),” in *Mascolinità all’italiana* (cit.), 285-314; Elisabetta Ruspini, “Italian Forms of Masculinity: Between Familism and Social Change,” *Culture, Society, and Masculinity* 1, no. 2 (2009): 121-136. Web. Accessed 10 January 2017. <http://www.mensstudies.info/OJS/index.php/CSM/article/viewFile/53/9>.

⁴⁵ Dominijanni, *Il trucco*; Bernini, “Not in my name”; Bellassai, “Il nocciolo politico.” Marini-Maio furthers discussions on the intersections of politics, sexuality, and *Berlusconismo* in her work on representations of Berlusconi in Italian and international cinema. Marini-Maio, *A Very Seductive Body Politic*; Nicoletta Marini-Maio, “Before and After Silvio: A Corpus for Us All,” in *Italian Political Cinema: Public Life, Imaginary, and Identity in Contemporary Italian Film*, eds. Giancarlo Lombardi and Christian Uva, 45-55 (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2016).

⁴⁶ In Lacanian psychoanalysis, “the evaporation of the father” signifies a crisis of the symbolic order incarnated by Oedipal law. Put simply, the absence of patriarchal forms of masculinity makes for a disordered society. Governmentality is a Foucauldian concept. The term refers, specifically, to the mechanisms (often institutions) through which the State controls its populace. Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 144. Dominijanni, *Il trucco*, 27.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 28.

⁴⁸ Bernini, *Queer Apocalypses*, 88, n. 38. As Bernini sees it, this crisis is caused both by Berlusconi’s grotesque vaunting of his sexual scandals, and by the *Cavaliere*’s association with a feminized, thus degraded, version of masculinity. Bernini, “Not in my name,” 45.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁰ Chiurco, *La filosofia di Berlusconi*, 11; 9.

figurative statements are reified in a real-world context. Quoting from a recent opinion piece, Berlusconi, though at the time barred from public office, reappeared, “as if from the dead,” on the political scene in November 2017.⁵¹ He cobbled together a center-right coalition (*Forza Italia, Lega, Fratelli d'Italia*) whose anti-immigration, “Italy first” platform evoked the xenophobic, nationalistic rhetoric of Italian fascism. In the months preceding the 2018 election, the Berlusconi-led coalition tapped into media to stoke many citizens’ already existing anxieties about safeguarding Italy’s economy and ethno-racial purity from noxious migrants and refugees. On the 14 January 2018 transmission of “Domenica Live”—a television program broadcast on network linked to the Berlusconi family—the octogenarian addressed anti-immigration policy as integral to national security, alleging that a rise in criminality is correlated with the increased presence of *clandestini* (undocumented immigrants).⁵² The media mogul made use of similar talking points on the 25 February 2018 installment of “La Quinta Colonna”—a political talk show that airs on the same channel as “Domenica Live.”⁵³ He named immigration “a danger” (un pericolo), a “social bomb ready to explode” (bomba sociale pronta a esplodere), that could only be diffused through biopolitical intervention—i.e. the detection and deportation of more than 600,000 migrant “prostitutes,” “criminals,” and “drug dealers.”⁵⁴

The political futures of Berlusconi and Italy remain unknown.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, the anti-immigration sentiment that pervaded recent elections reveals itself to be the cause and effect of the neoliberal biopolitics engendered by *Berlusconismo*. Consider, for example, the rhetoric of the 2016 #FertilityDay Campaign. This state-sponsored initiative promoted parenthood and family planning in an Italy afflicted by a flagging birthrate, mass youth emigration, and a fast-aging population. It was spearheaded by Italian Minister of Health Beatrice Lorenzin, who, referencing the nation’s trend toward depopulation, had recently designated Italy a “dying country.”⁵⁶ The #FertilityDay promotional materials sparked a firestorm on social media.⁵⁷ Shortly after their release, a group of Italian psychologists penned an open letter to Lorenzin in which they criticized the use of misogynist language and imagery in a campaign supposedly designed to address issues of public health.⁵⁸ They also denounced the government’s intent to intervene in citizens’ private lives (to

⁵¹ Chris Bamberg, “Berlusconi’s Back: Things Are Not Looking Good in Italy,” *Counterfire*, 21 February 2018. Web. Accessed 25 May 2018. <http://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/19472-berlusconi-s-back-things-are-not-looking-good-in-italy>.

⁵² In Berlusconi’s words, “Ogni venti secondi si verifica un reato, ogni quattro minuti un furto in un negozio e ogni due giorni si verificano tre rapine in banca. Questo perchè alla criminalità italiana si è aggiunta la criminalità di 466mila immigrati in Italia che per mangiare devono delinquere” (Every twenty seconds a crime occurs, every four minutes a theft in a shop, and every two days there are three bank robberies. This is because Italian crime has added the crime of 466 thousand immigrants in Italy who have to commit crimes to eat). “Puntata del 14 gennaio,” *Domenica Live*, Mediaset on Demand. Web. Accessed 25 May 2018.

http://www.video.mediaset.it/video/domenica_live/full/puntata-del-14-gennaio_796262.html.

⁵³ “Puntata del 25 febbraio,” *Quinta Colonna*, Mediaset on Demand. Web. Accessed 25 May 2018.

http://www.video.mediaset.it/video/quinta_colonna/full/puntata-del-25-febbraio_811815.html.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ No political group won an outright majority in the 2018 general election, resulting in a hung parliament.

⁵⁶ Michele Bocchi, “Beatrice Lorenzin: ‘Rischiamo il crac demografico, serve agire ora o sarà troppo tardi,’” *La Repubblica*, May 15, 2016. http://www.repubblica.it/politica/2016/05/15/news/beatrice_lorenzini_rischiamo_il_crac_demografico_serve_agire_ora_o_sara_troppo_tardi_-139852112/. Web. Accessed 22 May 2016.

⁵⁷ Due to the overwhelmingly negative response of Italian citizens, Lorenzin and then Prime Minister of Italy Matteo Renzi apologized for what they claim was a poorly executed informative initiative on reproductive health. Promotional materials of the 2016 #FertilityDay Campaign have been removed from the official website (www.fertilityday2016.it). However, many virtual posters remain widely available online.

⁵⁸ Annalisa Coppolaro Nowell, “Italy’s Fertility Day Posters Aren’t Just Sexist—They’re Echoes of a Fascist Past,” *The Guardian*, September 5, 2016. Web. Accessed 22 May 2016. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/05/italys-fertility-day->

impose procreation as a civic duty, that is, a *bene comune*) as antidemocratic and neo-fascist.⁵⁹ The authors’ widely supported position, that individuals’ reproductive decisions are not a matter of public interest, railed against the logic of “reproductive futurism” and (seemingly rejected) biopolitics. Missing from the psychologists’ critique, however, is a critical evaluation of the roles race and ethnicity play in advancing the nationalist fantasy of a homogenous Italian identity.

The #FertilityDay promotional materials feature, almost exclusively, “white” bodies. On the only occasion “non-white” persons are present, their bodies are “*risky bodies*.”⁶⁰ They advance the unfounded assumption that race is a product of biology—what Alys Eve Weinbaum refers to elsewhere as “the race/reproduction bind”—fueling the fantasy of a unified ethno-racial Italian identity by purporting the sexual and civic inferiority of minorities.⁶¹ More precisely, the campaign poster that advertises “correct lifestyles to prevent sterility and infertility” (*stili di vita corretti per la prevenzione della sterilità e dell’infertilità*) visually stigmatizes “blackness” and “black masculinity” (see Figure 2). On the top half of the flyer, two youthful white men flank a pair of attractive women. This assemblage of “good companions” is fair-skinned and dawns pearlescent smiles. Each member, exuding self-confidence and ease, looks directly into the camera. By contrast, the lower image captures at least one dark-skinned man in a throng of “bad companions” (*cattivi compagni*). Drug paraphernalia steals the attention of the addicts; their eyes are obscured, in part by the grainy filter through which they are captured, in part by the group’s generally disengaged demeanor. Noteworthy too, is the arrangement and appearance of text. Whereas the visages of the wholesome quartet are unobstructed by superimposed script, the bodies of the “bad companions” are covered in prose that labels them as such. The term “companions” (*compagni*) is offset in scare quotes, implying that these mates are neither suitable romantic partners, nor are they *desirable* candidates for Italy’s project of national renewal.

[posters-sexist-echoes-of-fascist-past](https://abbattoimuri.wordpress.com/2016/08/31/fertilityday-lettera-aperta-alla-ministra-lorenzini/). The open letter published on August 31, 2016 can be accessed here: <https://abbattoimuri.wordpress.com/2016/08/31/fertilityday-lettera-aperta-alla-ministra-lorenzini/>.

⁵⁹ In the psychologists’ words: “Non è chiaro perché lo Stato debba nuovamente entrare a piedi uniti su una questione così privata e con questi termini che ricordano, in modo fin troppo esplicito, il triste periodo storico del fascismo italiano, durante il quale, tra i molti e diversi modi in cui la democrazia veniva calpestata, si scelse di avviare campagne di invito alla procreazione, sottese unicamente dall’ideologia fascista ‘il numero è potenza’” (It is unclear why the State should intervene so directly and intrusively on such a private issue and with terms that recall, in an excessively explicit way, the sad historical period of Italian fascism, during which, among the many different ways in which democracy was infringed upon, it was decided to start procreation campaigns, subtended by the fascist ideology ‘in numbers there is strength’). To frame fertility as a “common good” (*bene comune*) recalls inevitably the Ascension Day Speech delivered by *il Duce* on 26 May 1927. This speech, remembered today as the official launch of a “demographic campaign” in Italy, focused on the problematic decline of national fecundity. Appealing directly to Italian citizens, Mussolini laid out a plan to increase the national population, from 40 million to 60 million in just twenty-five years. *Il Duce* also banned birth control and abortion during his reign, and, just one year prior to orating his Ascension Day Speech, he enacted the “bachelor tax.” This tax created a contractual agreement between (male) citizens and the fascist Italian nation, with unwed men between twenty-five and sixty-five years of age financially penalized for absconding from the roles of father and husband.⁵⁹ On procreation policies under Mussolini see Carl Ipsen, *Dictating Demography: The Problem of Population in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 66; David Horn, *Social Bodies: Science, Reproduction, and Italian Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 79-88; Martina Salvante, “‘Less than a Boot-Rag’: Procreation, Paternity, and the Masculine Ideal in Fascist Italy,” in *Masculinities and the Nation in the Modern World: Between Hegemony and Marginalization*, eds. Pablo Dominguez Andersen and Simon Wendt (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 103.

⁶⁰ Giuliani, *Il colore della nazione*, 7. Italics in original text.

⁶¹ Alys Eve Weinbaum, *Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation in Transatlantic Modern Thought* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 5.



Fig. 2: Ministero della Salute, #FertilityDay Promotional Poster. Accessed 31 August 2016. www.fertilityday2016.it. Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders and obtain permission to reproduce this material.

This poster is an illustrative example of the neoliberal biopolitics that thrive under *Berlusconismo*. Comparisons between the xenophobic imagery and eugenicist impulse that saturated the visual culture of fascist Italy are valid, especially if one considers those pseudoscientific and commercial materials studied by Karen Pinkus that correlate inferior genetics with the “African race.” And, while it can be argued that the negative iconography of “blackness” and race difference reached its apex under fascism, following Caterina Romeo, Italy has only recently begun to acknowledge that “racism is a pervasive element in Italian society and a constitutive factor in the process of national formation.”⁶² Processes of discrimination are embedded in everyday Italian culture. Violence against immigrants from Italy’s former colonies is on the rise, as is the frequency of racist discourse directed toward non-national bodies.⁶³ This #FertilityDay flyer, in particular,

⁶² Considering, specifically, “black masculinity,” because the Italian bourgeoisie associated “blackness” with cultural taboos (incest, polygamy, excessive sexuality, masturbation), the black male body was routinely “castrated and impotent” in popular advertisements. Pinkus points out that prior to and during fascism “black bodies” were routinely associated with the ape because this was considered to be the only animal capable of deliberate masturbation, a crass behavior according to codes of proper European comportment. Pinkus, “Selling the Black Body,” 41, 43, 74. For the quote, Romeo refers to Afro-Italian postcolonial writers (e.g. Pap Khouma, Salah Methnani, Mohamed Bouchane), but her observation lends itself to recent Italian films of migration. Caterina Romeo, “Racial Evaporations: Representing Blackness in African Italian Postcolonial Literature,” in *Postcolonial Italy* (cit.), 230.

⁶³ “Aggressione a Osakue, il Pd: ‘Chi nega il razzismo è complice’. Salvini: ‘Emergenza? Sciocchezze’. 5Stelle divisi,” *La Repubblica*, 30 July 2018. Web. Accessed 30 July 2018. https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2018/07/30/news/razzismo_pd_salvini-202979025. Lorenzo Tondo, “Attacks on Immigrants Highlight the Rise of Fascist Groups in Italy,” *The Guardian*, 6 February 2018. Web. Accessed 30 July 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/feb/06/attacks-on-immigrants-highlight-rise-of-fascist-groups-in-italy>; Ruth Ben-Ghiat, “How Italy’s Fascist Past Echoes in Migrant Crisis,” *CNN*, 22 April 2015. Web. Accessed 7 September 2017. <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/22/opinions/ben-ghiat-migrants/>; “Il problema del razzismo in Italia va affrontato a monte,” *Huffington Post*, 1 April 2014. Web. Accessed 7 September 2017. <http://www.huffingtonpost.it/human-rights->

illustrates what the contributors to *Il colore della nazione* (2015) identify as the tendency to visually portray migrants’ “race difference” in a way that precludes their undesirable bodies (biology) from being absorbed into the national body of Italy.⁶⁴ In fact, not only are “non-white” men denuded of qualities of hegemonic masculinity (virility, civic engagement, the role of father-provider), but “non-white” women are absent from this poster and the #FertilityDay campaign more generally. Could these discriminatory decisions be related to the findings of recent fieldwork on biopolitics and perspectives on fertility in Italy—that Italian citizens largely consider migrants to be “reckless parent[s]” engaged in “immoral reproductive practices”?⁶⁵ Might portraying dark-skinned men as non-reproductive be a rhetorical strategy for diffusing male migrants’ supposed predilection toward sexual violence?

Italian cinema, a medium that Derek Duncan names the “cultural crucible of Italian national identity” also intervenes in gendered and racialized discourses on reproduction and (in)fecundity in Italy.⁶⁶ Films of migration like *Terraferma* (Crialese, 2011) *La sconosciuta / The Unknown Woman* (Tornatore, 2006), and *Alza la testa / Raise Your Head* (Angelini, 2009) inflame anxieties about the “unwholesome” reproductive inclinations of foreign females. The first two put forth sympathetic, yet unsavory, migrant mothers who give birth on Italian soil in the absence of a co-parent; the third presents an Albanian woman who abandons the son born out of a failed relationship with an Italian man. Concerning children, biracial minors are not commonly shown in contemporary features.⁶⁷ And only those children born to Italian fathers and migrant mothers actually appear in the film narrative (e.g. *Alza la testa*, A. Angelini, 2009; *La nostra vita / Our Life*, D. Luchetti, 2010); the biracial kids of migrant men and Italian women are hinted at (through pregnancy) but never actually made visible onscreen (e.g. *Cose dell’altro mondo / Things from Another World*, F. Patierno, 2011; *Billo il grand Dakhaar / Billo the Great Dakhaar*, L. Muscardin, 2007). Regarding representations of male migrants, with the exception of a few films that envisage access to social inclusion as expedited through sexual relationships with Italian women, more often than not, these men are both denied membership in

[watch/il-problema-del-razzismo-in-italia-va-affrontato-a-monte_b_4694380.html?utm_hp_ref=italy](http://www.espressonline.it/2015/05/14/watch/il-problema-del-razzismo-in-italia-va-affrontato-a-monte_b_4694380.html?utm_hp_ref=italy). While racially motivated violence appears to be increasing, it would of course be inaccurate to say that Italian society at-large has reacted with uniform hostility to migrants and refugees. Debates around multiculturalism have also elicited positive reactions. Countless initiatives have been undertaken to facilitate integration, including the Archive of Migrant Memories (Archivio Memorie Migranti) and filmmaker Andrea Segre’s ZaLab. The ZaLab video cooperative, founded in 2006 with the cooperation of other activists, hosts digital projects, which provide a platform for previously silenced marginalized subjects to share their narratives with a broad public (<http://www.zalab.org/chi-siamo/>). Furthermore, despite concerns about the growth of Islam in Italy, the Catholic Church, through its organization *Caritas*, works to create solidarity with the migrant population. Migrant writers, (e.g. Igiaba Scego, Gëzim Hajadri, Amara Lakhous), too, have gained increased visibility in Italy.

⁶⁴ Consider the quote that follows: “Sui corpi di migranti e rifugiati si produce la linea di colore che definisce l’assorbibilità o l’inassorbibilità fenotipica di specifiche figure della razza nel colore della nazione: essi non possono essere l’oggetto di desiderio perché significanti di significati razziali che rimandano alla ‘distanza’ (la nerezza) o alla prossimità ‘pericolosa’ (la relazione con ‘il fratello nordafricano’)” (On the bodies of migrants and refugees the color line that defines the or phenotypic congruency or incongruency of specific figures of the race in the color of the nation is produced: the bodies of these subjects cannot be the object of desire because they signify racial meanings that refer to “distance” (darkness) or “dangerous” proximity (the relationship with “North African brother”). Giuliani, *Il colore della nazione*, 7.

⁶⁵ Elizabeth Krause, “‘Empty Cradles’ and the Quiet Revolution: Demographic Discourse and Cultural Struggles of Gender, Race, and Class in Italy.” *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 4 (2001): 595. Milena Marchesi’s study supports Krause’s findings. In her analysis of national and international discourses on reproduction in Italy, she found that Italians tend to defame migrants as a “population of reproductive excess.” Milena Marchesi, “Reproducing Italians: Contested Biopolitics in the Age of ‘Replacement Anxiety’.” *Anthropology & Medicine* 19, no. 2 (2012): 179.

⁶⁶ Duncan, “Italy’s Postcolonial Cinema,” 196.

⁶⁷ O’Healy, “Screening Intimacy,” 211.

dominant Italian culture and denuded of virile qualities.⁶⁸ To be sure, broadening the geographic scope of the features examined by Duncan, I discovered his assertion, that the recurring trope of untenable interracial romance conveys symbolically the incompatibility of migrant men, stands in more than a half dozen post-2000 Italian films (see Figure 3). What is more, those “sterile” male migrant characters who fail to satisfy their female partners, and by extension Italy, are not only removed from the Italian landscape via narrative expulsion, but often times, these men meet a violent end.

Film title	Fate of male migrant character
<i>Alì ha gli occhi azzurri</i> (C. Giovannesi, 2012)	disappears from film narrative
<i>Cose dell'altro mondo</i> (F. Patierno, 2011)	disappears from film narrative
<i>Good Morning, Aman</i> (C. Noce, 2009)	voluntary departure
<i>La giusta distanza</i> (C. Mazzacurati, 2007)	suicide
<i>Riparo</i> (M. Puccioni, 2007)	flees after being romantically rejected
<i>Cover Boy: L'ultima rivoluzione</i> (C. Amoroso, 2006)	voluntary departure
<i>Lettere dal Sahara</i> (V. De Seta, 2006)	voluntary departure
<i>Saimir</i> (F. Munzi, 2004)	symbolic death
<i>L'italiano</i> (E. De Dominicis, 2002)	murder
<i>Zora la vampira</i> (Manetti brothers, 2000)	self-immolation

Fig. 3: Untenable Romances Between Migrant Men and Italian Women⁶⁹

Notwithstanding directors' impulse to expatriate and/or wholly eradicate male migrants from Italy, on a few occasions, migrant men who “queer the reproductive trajectory of heteronormativity” through their affiliation with homoeroticism and/or “sterile masculinity” reject those exclusionary conventions of belonging that characterize the anti-immigration sentiment of the 2018 general election, and cultivate (at least temporally) counterhegemonic, multicultural communities.⁷⁰ Parallels between *Cover Boy: L'ultima Rivoluzione* / *Cover Boy: The Last Revolution* (Amoroso, 2006) and *Good Morning, Aman* (Noce, 2009) are noteworthy. Both films see the serendipitous encounter of a middle-aged Italian man and a twenty-something year old male migrant in the Roman periphery. They expose how the male characters' extended interactions not only give way to a shared sense of precariousness, but also manifests into a kind of kinship that transcends boundaries of age, race, and personal history.⁷¹ Additionally, in *Cover Boy* and *Good Morning, Aman*, there exist a handful of key

⁶⁸ Ibid., 214-215. O'Healy writes about *Billo il grand dakhaar* (Muscardin, 2007); *Passo a due* (A. Barzini, 2006) and *Pane e tulipani* (Soldini, 2000) also adhere to this model.

⁶⁹ Table generated by author.

⁷⁰ Quote from Duncan, “Loving Geographies,” 178.

⁷¹ In a co-authored piece, O'Healy analyzes migrant-citizen relations in *Cover Boy* through the lens of “shared precariousness.” Áine O'Healy and Alice Bardan, “Transnational Mobility and Precarious Labor in Post-Cold War Europe: The Spectral Disruptions of Carmine Amoroso's *Cover Boy*,” in *The Cinemas of Italian Migration: European and Transatlantic Narratives*, eds. Sabine Schrader and Daniel Winkler, 69-90. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

scenes that allude to, but never actualize, the potential for homosociality to evolve into homoeroticism. Worth mentioning, too, is that in each feature the male migrant lead refuses to surrender to the biopolitics of neoliberal capitalism. After being subjected to life-altering episodes of discrimination and corporeal exploitation, these men decide to leave Italy, and their acts of departure are correlated with the recuperation of male dignity.⁷² Andrea Segre’s *Io sono Li*—analyzed in greater detail in the sections that follow—and *La prima neve / First Snowfall* (2013) bear witness to the formation of interracial families on Italian territory. Both films retire the tired trope of doomed romance between a male migrant and Italian woman for the regenerative theme of “surrogate” paternity. Moreover, owing to their subdued style and emphasis on nature, they invite the spectator to imagine a post-Berlusconi Italy in which meaningful contact, rather than salacious human capital, is the accepted form of currency.

Io sono Li

Masculinities, Migration, Italy

Io sono Li incorporates themes of migration and exploitation into the conventional narrative of family reunification.⁷³ Much of the film recounts the travails of Shun Li (Tao Zhao), a Chinese migrant and single mother, who endeavors to facilitate her pre-pubescent son’s arrival in Italy. The recently arrived migrant has little funds, and her access to resources and employment is limited. For this reason, Shun Li resigns herself to the unscrupulous labor practices of the Chinese mafia in order to finance her son’s safe passage to Italy. Under the directive of her mafia handlers, Shun Li eventually settles as lead *barista* at the *Osteria Paradiso* in Chioggia, a small fishing town nestled in the Veneto region of Italy.⁷⁴ It is at this local watering hole where the Chinese woman meets Bepi (Rade Šerbedžija), an elderly poet-fisherman of (Yugo)slavic origin who has resided in this maritime city for more than thirty years, and *the* film character that sets into motion the potential for family reorientation in an increasingly global Italy.

In light of the strict criteria regulated by the biopolitics of *Berlusconismo*, Bepi should presumably have “no future” in Italy, and he should be precluded from participating in projects of national renewal. After all, this character is an outsider of advanced age, who, along with opting out of capitalist populism, rehearses a kind of gender performativity that does not conform to the model of virile masculinity (ostensibly) promoted in his Northern Italian host community. Remarkably, though, by embracing “sterile masculinity,” and in fulfilling the role of surrogate father to Shun Li (and, by extension, her son), Bepi manages to find purpose and utility past the age of biological

⁷² Similar themes of the toxicity of neoliberal capitalism and homoerotic tension between a male migrant character and an Italian citizen are present in Giovannesi’s *Ali ha gli occhi azzurri*. Lisa Dolasinski, “Precarious Masculinity: Intersections of Race, Gender, and Desire in Claudio Giovannesi’s *Ali ha gli occhi azzurri*,” *g/s/i* 3 (2016): 120-135. Web. Accessed 20 May 2018. <http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/13-precarius-masculinity-intersections-of-race-genderand-desire-in-claudio-giovannesi-ali-ha-gli-occhi-azzurri/>.

⁷³ Scholarship on the film focuses primarily on two themes: (a) the inclusion/exclusion of Shun Li in her host country (“Chineseness”) (Bertozzi 2014, Chung and Luciano 2015) and (b) parallels between the equally impenetrable Chioggian and Chinese communities (Kubati 2013, Bertoni 2013, Deleyto 2016, Paronitti 2016, Snaidero 2016). Nearly all of these pieces prioritize the narrative of the female migrant character. They identify Shun Li as the true protagonist of the film, accentuating the linguistic, gender, class, and cultural qualities that make her an “outsider” among her Italian customers and her Chinese employers.

⁷⁴ In choosing Chioggia as the film’s setting, Segre alludes to a shift in perception (from Marco Polo’s celebrated travels to China to the current-day sentiment of xenophobia in Italy) that links the Venetian Republic and the Chinese Nation.

reproduction. Additionally, through Bepi—and contrasted with the hyperbolized antics of *Berlusconismo*—Segre's understated docu-fiction, ultimately proposes a post-Berlusconi portrait of Italy—one in which practitioners of “sterile masculinity” (a) debunk the conventional belief that virility is a benchmark quality of manliness and normativity, (b) challenge patriarchal, often misogynistic, practices of heterosexual romance, and (c) open up claims to belonging that are not contingent upon citizenship, imagined racial homogeneity, or genealogical intimacy.

Bepi is first filmed in the *Osteria Paradiso*, a micro-male universe within the broader Chioggian community. Save for the presence of Shun Li, who contrasts with the masculinist dynamic of the bar milieu, women rarely frequent this space. This micro-male universe, is not, however, involved in the promotion of a monolithic vision of masculinity. Bar regulars differ in age, occupation, and cultural inclination, thereby projecting polyphonic notions of masculinity. Together with Bepi, repeat customers include: retirees, an attorney (Roberto Citran) whose disparaging remarks about the Chinese migrant community settled in Chioggian territory parrot the xenophobic rhetoric of Lega politicians, and Devis (Giuseppe Battiston), a young man who parrots the compensatory, those public displays of virile masculinity repeatedly rehearsed by Berlusconi.

Described by Ron Kubati as “the town bully” (*il bullo del luogo*), Devis is a figure of stocky build, tasteless tattoos, and abhorrent arrogance.⁷⁵ The twenty-something-year-old, who seeks to establish himself as alpha male, struts into the *osteria* with an air of self-importance. He brags about his earnings (“In one night I earn enough to buy you and your family”/ *io in una notte guadagno così tanto che compro te e la tua famiglia*), and, in recounting his exploits with a high-class escort (“you pay for quality”/ *la qualità costa*), alludes to his prodigious sexual prowess.⁷⁶ The broad-shouldered bully also uses his size to physically dominate weaker rivals. When Devis is first introduced, he intimidates the petite, soft-spoken Shun Li by raising his voice and flailing his arms across the service counter in a threatening gesture. In another scene, Devis attacks Bepi at the bar entrance. He throws the sexagenarian to the ground, repeatedly punching him until Bepi lay incapacitated.

Devis' bullish demeanor and brute strength are performative markers of what film scholar Christine Holmlund describes elsewhere as “masculine masquerade.”⁷⁷ They serve to produce a coherent virile subjectivity, while concomitantly reinforcing the male performer's claims to power. Yet, as a term like “masquerade” implies, these macho behaviors should be thought of as a kind of flimsy spectacle, which, like the media-fueled circus of *Berlusconismo*, calls attention to the constructed nature of gender performativity, as well as the illusory essence of power in continuously shifting social realities. Indeed, not only do other patrons criticize Devis' excessive *machismo*, but the young man's wife, who, violating patriarchal conventions of the demure woman, chastises her husband's hyper-masculine posturing in this male-dominated space. Children in tow, the unimpressed woman storms into the masculinist bar milieu (what she terms the “bar of the wretched”/ *bar dei disgraziati*) and scolds Devis for his less-than-adequate parenting skills (“I was up all night because your son had a fever. Where were you? Fooling around with your little boat all night is working?”/ *Io tutta la notte in piedi con tuo figlio con la febbre alta! E tu, dov'eri? Fare il cretino tutta la notte col barchino è lavorare?*). Therefore, along with enduring the debasement of his

⁷⁵ Ron Kubati, “Comunità chiuse: *Io sono Li*, *La Giusta distanza* e *Cose dell'altro mondo*,” *NeMLA Italian Studies*, no. 35 (2013): 224.

⁷⁶ In doing so, Devis brings together the laic trinity of *Berlusconismo* pinpointed by Dominijanni: wealth, sexuality, and (an inflated sense of) power. See Dominijanni, *Il trucco*, 27.

⁷⁷ Christine Holmlund, “Masculinity as Multiple Masquerade: The ‘Mature’ Stallone and the Stallone Clone,” in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, eds. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London: Routledge, 1993), 213–239.

masculine image such an episode of public castigation (by a woman), would engender, in underserving his children—icons of innocence that Edelman names “[t]he pleasurable fantasy of survival”—Devis compromises the collective future of his family and the broader Chioggian community.⁷⁸

Bepi starkly differs from Devis, as well as Italy’s self-proclaimed, patriarch par excellence (Berlusconi). This soft-spoken character represents a recurring portrait of masculinity circulating in contemporary Italian films of migration (*Terraferma* and *La prima neve*): senescent, “surrogate” paternity (see Figure 4). In the first place, Bepi bears an uncanny physical resemblance to Ernesto Pucillo (Mimmo Cuticchio), the rugged, wrinkled, and bearded Italian man featured in a film released in the same year as *Io sono Lì*: Emanuele Crialese’s *Terraferma*. Next, the male migrant mirrors the subdued, yet commanding, onscreen presence embodied by his Italian double. Bepi, like Ernesto, is repeatedly filmed against scenic backgrounds, in episodes with limited speech. In this way—and, in a nod to Pasolini’s anthropological approach to filmmaking—Bepi and Ernesto’s bodies are vehicles of communication and comprehension, as well as extensions of the men’s natural, undeveloped mise-en-scènes.⁷⁹ Lastly, these male seniors perform the same physically taxing labor. Undeterred by other characters’ concerns about their rapidly declining health, Bepi and Ernesto resolve to continue fishing well into their twilight years.



Fig. 4: Andrea Segre, film still from *Io sono Lì* (2011).

Bringing another aging Italian man linked to industriousness and the natural world—Pietro Fongher (Peter Mitterrutzner) of Segre’s second feature (*La prima neve*)—into the fold, further qualities of this particular resonance of masculinity materialize. All three men are (presumably) widowed, and they are similarly affected by the absence of their biological children. Bepi endures a strained relationship with his adult son; the pair shares two minutes of screen time, most of which attests to their dissimilar views concerning Bepi’s living arrangements. Ernesto witnesses the death of his eldest son in a harrowing episode at sea, and he disapproves of the modern lifestyle adopted

⁷⁸ Edelman, *No Future*, 45.

⁷⁹ Within the field of Pasolini Studies, there is a substantial body of work examining the auteur’s pursuit of authentic “faces” and “places” for his film projects, as well as his development of a particular aesthetic that accentuates the relationship between subjects’ bodies and their respective environments. Among others, see: Michele Mancini and Giuseppe Perrella, eds., *Pasolini’s Bodies and Places* (Zürich: Patrick Frey, 2017); Giuliana Bruno, “The Body of Pasolini’s Semiotics,” in *Pier Paolo Pasolini: Contemporary Perspectives*, eds. Patrick Rumble and Bart Testa, 88-105 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016 [1994]); Pino Bertelli, *Pier Paolo Pasolini. Il cinema in corpo: atti impuri di un eretico* (Rome: Croce Libreria, 2001); Maurizio Viano, *A Certain Realism: Making Use of Pasolini’s Film Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

by his younger, capitalist-oriented son.⁸⁰ Pietro also survives a male child, his adult son the casualty of a tragic hunting accident. The men's feelings of loss are (temporarily) fulfilled by their paternal interactions with migrant characters. Pietro counsels a recently arrived African man whose inability to cope with the sudden passing of his wife impedes the migrant's ability to parent their infant child. Likewise, despite the disapproval of their respective communities, Bepi and Ernesto provide aid to single migrant mothers.

Focusing exclusively on the aging male lead in *Io sono Li*, Bepi's acceptance of Shun Li, and the cultural difference she stands for, can be credited to his own ambiguous identity. No doubt assisted by his multi-decade residence in Chioggia, the male migrant has mastered the local dialect and customs. Bepi has also established a network of friends—a gang of aging fishermen that consider him to be Chioggian, and whom he endearingly refers to as “my people” (*la mia gente*). Despite these cultural competencies, Bepi never fully accesses the supposedly superior representational economy of “whiteness” enjoyed by his Italian neighbors. The seasoned fisherman self-identifies as a foreigner (“anche io sono straniero”): he repeatedly references his native Pola (formerly Yugoslavia, today Slovenia); he remains connected to his Slavic roots through drink (his beloved grappa “*jugoslava*”) and diet; and he passes long stretches of time at his fishing hut (*casone*), a modest structure distanced from the watchful eyes of the Chioggian community.⁸¹

Il casone: A Place of Subdued Virility

Together with the *Osteria Paradiso*, Bepi's *casone* constitutes a significant space within the film narrative. This property, which Bepi identifies as “his only home” (*l'unica casa che ho*), functions as an extension of its aged proprietor. Mirroring Bepi's deteriorating health, the hut, which is exposed to the elements of a harsh Chioggian climate, is in constant need of repair. The *casone* also reveals itself to be an intimate site of subdued virility. Different from the *Osteria Paradiso*, a public venue affiliated with “masculine masquerade,” Bepi's fishing hut appears as a solitary space of introspection and industriousness. Situated at the threshold of town and the Adriatic Sea, the *casone* is simultaneously isolated from the oppressive dynamics of Chioggia's masculinist culture and open to the seemingly boundless (thanks to cinematographer Luca Bigazzi's sweeping panoramic shots) horizon of a conventionally feminized landscape. In fact, beyond its occupation of a peripheral location, this structure is immersed in nature, and a female body of water (*la laguna*) at that.

Such a privileged location stages a significant episode in the film narrative. Bepi, having bonded with Shun Li over a mutual fascination of the Venetian lagoon, invites the Chinese migrant to spend an afternoon at his humble sea dwelling. Shortly after arriving, Bepi offers Shun Li—who, it should be noted, is the only guest ever invited to the *casone*—a glass of his “Yugoslavian grappa.” This goodwill gesture demonstrates Bepi's desire to make Shun Li feel welcome in an unfamiliar, and generally insular culture. It also discloses the male migrant's genuine comfort with the soft-spoken Chinese woman. To be sure, in sharing this drink, Bepi necessarily discloses a typically subdued part of his multifaceted identity: his ethno-racially impure heritage (biology). Accordingly, the spectator comes to understand that this man of Slavic origins, not unlike his female companion,

⁸⁰ For an interpretation of this character's allegiance to neoliberal capitalism (his “corporeal” investment in Linosa's tourist industry) as complicit in perpetuating those neocolonial hierarchies of race, gender, and social class in present-day Italy, see: Lisa Dolasinski, “Crossing Borders: Migration, Tourism, and Liminality in Criaiese's Terraferma,” *L'avventura* 2, no. 2 (2016): 421-424.

⁸¹ Pola, a territory located on the southern tip of the Istrian peninsula, shares a long history with Italy. In fact, until the postwar Istrian exodus (December 1946-September 1947), the peninsula's population was largely comprised of ethnic Italians. See Raoul Pupo, *Il lungo esodo. Istria: le persecuzioni, le foibe, l'esilio* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2005).

is a dislocated subject, caught between the expectations of Chioggian culture and an idealized memory of his birth city. In this way, along with prompting a renegotiation of gender dynamics, the *casone*'s threshold positionality resists against cultural rigidity. This structure, like those marginal sites featured in a handful of recent Italian films of migration, stages a meaningful episode of cross-cultural exchange between two displaced subjects within the confines of Italy.⁸²

Shun Li and Bepi, who have already bonded over similar maritime heritages, mutual fascination with language and poetry, and a common interest in different cultures, connect on a more intimate level, by sharing their feelings of parental inadequacy. Deeply affected by the absence of her adolescent son, Shun Li confides in Bepi that the child's fate (his arrival in Italy) lay in the hands of the Chinese mafia (“And one day the news. And the boss will make my son come [to Italy]”/ E un giorno la notizia. E il capo fa venire mio figlio). Bepi, whose tenuous relationship with his adult son is also a source of melancholy, comforts the grief-stricken mother. He wraps his arms around her, gently caresses her face, and plants a reassuring kiss on her forehead while François Couturier's understated soundtrack—here a tender piano leitmotif—fills the duo's silence (see Figure 5).



Fig. 5: Andrea Segre, film still from *Io sono Li* (2011).

A number of spectators and Italian Studies scholars interpret this episode, and the film in its entirety, as fraught with romantic tension. For instance, taking to Segre's official website, a blogger describes *Io sono Li* as “a film saturated in romantic melancholy.”⁸³ Likewise, in their respective articles, Ron Kubati and Roberto Bertoni contend that the co-protagonists' strong affective bond arises from mutual feelings of attraction.⁸⁴ However, not only do Bepi's actions signal this character's movement toward surrogate paternity, but conventional signifiers of an erotic exchange are missing from the scene. Instead of a love song, the viewer is treated to the diegetic sound of waves crashing against the *casone* and a piano arrangement. Bigazzi's camera slowly zooms in on the couple, yet a true close-up (the hallmark shot of heterosexual love scenes) is never achieved. Lastly, when Shun Li finally makes eye contact with Bepi, rather than express desire for sexual intimacy, the

⁸² I refer, specifically, to the Ostian beachscape in *Cover Boy: L'ultima rivoluzione*, the Pucillo family's garage in *Terraferma*, the Apennine valley in *La prima neve*, the remote lake in *Riparo*, and the rooftop in *Good Morning, Aman*.

⁸³ Accaeffe, “Blog post,” 6 October 2011. Web. Accessed 12 January 2016. <http://andrasegre.blogspot.com/2011/09/liberi-commenti-per-io-sono-li.html>.

⁸⁴ Kubati, “Comunità chiuse,” 225; Roberto Bertoni, “Connectedness, Identity and Alienation in Some Italian Novels and Films Depicting Contact Between People from Italy and People from Countries Other than Italy in the 21st Century,” in *Proceedings of LibrAsia: IAFOR Conference on Literature and Librarianship, Osaka* (April 2013): 6. Web. Accessed 19 November 2016. http://iafor.org/librasia_proceedings.html.

single mother divulges her difficult circumstances. For these reasons, Bepi's identity, as well as his gender performativity, undermine the vision of virile masculinity naturalized in the (purportedly) patriarchal context of the greater Chioggian community.

Making a Case for "Sterile Masculinity"

By way of conclusion, this article considers two interrelated events: the long-anticipated reunion of Shun Li and her son in Italy and the ceremonial service that commemorates the life of the recently deceased Bepi. When interpreted collectively, these episodes shed light on a positive, productive version of "sterile masculinity" for present-day Italy—one that (a) remedies those destructive behaviors of xenophobic nationalism disseminated by purveyors of neoliberal populism and (b) counterbalances the country's tendency toward depopulation, by ushering in alternative, non-genealogical ways of belonging.

The penultimate episode of *Io sono Li* sees the arrival of a racialized child in Italy—an event that alters western conventions of family relations, reproduction, and citizenship. Recalling the tender moment shared between Shun Li and Bepi at his *casone*, the Chinese mother wraps her son in a warm embrace. She gently strokes his face and rubs his back, enveloping the boy in a calming maternal presence. The camera cuts to a bathroom milieu. Kneeling beside the porcelain bathtub occupied by her son, Shun Li reassures the child that he will learn to speak Italian. In doing so, the Chinese migrant discloses her intention to settle in Italy. This sentiment is shared by her son, a minor whose "non-white," non-national status breaks from the fetishistic fixation on sameness ("the future is mere repetition [of] the past") that Edelman names a central tenet of "reproductive futurism."⁸⁵ Indeed, this child, the racialized son of a single mother and Chinese migrant, is an example of a marginalized subject who José Muñoz would term an unlikely "sovereign prince of futurity."⁸⁶ He defies the ethno-racial purity of the "white" figure at the heart of pro-family rhetoric in Italy—including those materials circulated during the 2016 #FertilityDay campaign—thereby exemplifying a divergent "image of the future" that both resists the notion of national homogeneity and does away with long-standing racialized hierarchies of migrant and minority cultures.⁸⁷

The image of Shun Li's son immersed in a tub of water ultimately serves as a kind of profane baptism into a multicultural Italy. During this scene, the Chinese mother assures her son that he will acquire the language of his host country through hard work and guided study. This setting also recalls visually the maritime locale affiliated with Bepi, thereby linking this child to the hydrophilic Slavic fisherman. Thus, borrowing from Daniela Berghahn, who writes about alternative family formations in contemporary European cinema, "by framing what may be deemed marginally or socially contested as familial and, therefore, familiar," this symbolic union of a Slavic father with a Chinese mother and her son "promote[s] social diversity and inclusivity," and, in turn, advocates for qualities beyond those of natality and ancestry (*jus sanguinis*) to determine membership.⁸⁸

Following this scene of family reunification, *Io sono Li* moves to an episode that delivers on Elizabeth Freeman's tongue-in-cheek challenge for the actualization of a non-genealogical model of kinship—one that is neither structured by (aristocratic) family lineage nor based on presumed racial

⁸⁵ Edelman, *No Future*, 30.

⁸⁶ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 95.

⁸⁷ Edelman, *No Future*, 3.

⁸⁸ Daniela Berghahn, *Far-Flung Families in Film: The Diasporic Family in Contemporary European Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 5.

affiliation.⁸⁹ Shun Li, who has returned to Chioggia in search of Bepi, learns that he has succumbed to his weakened state and died. She also discovers that Bepi has named her, rather than his biological son, proprietor of his *casone*. This decision transgresses those patriarchal conventions of inheritance that strictly conform to the logic of “(bio)reproductive futurism.” It also emends historically negative conceptions of “sterile” men as impotent, unproductive impediments to the project of national renewal. To explain, Shun Li is more than a memory or muse for Bepi; she is his living legacy. Prior to the fisherman’s imminent death, Bepi encourages Shun Li’s acquisition of agency. He convinces the Chinese woman to read aloud a poem in Italian, literally and figuratively making audible the voice of the previously silenced Shun Li. In this way, and, paraphrasing from Michele Gottardi, the affective bond that connects a Chinese woman to a Slavic man ultimately looks forward to a future of integration and multiculturalism in Italy.⁹⁰

The film’s finale also lays bare the rejuvenating essence of benevolent paternalism in old age. Bypassing the “predictable, inevitable, irrevocable time line” that queer theorist Carla Freccero contends is intimately linked to “concepts like growing, then growing up, then aging, getting old, and dying,” Bepi transcends the limits of a corporeal existence.⁹¹ Via a voice-over narration, the poet-fisherman speaks from beyond the grave, instructing Shun Li to burn his *casone* in “a purifying ritual.”⁹² The migrant mother, for whom *yang* (fire) signifies vitality, respects Bepi’s wishes and sets the structure ablaze.⁹³ Juxtaposed with the still waters of the lagoon, the dancing flames of the burning hut create a sense of movement, making Bepi present even post-mortem (see Figure 6).



Fig. 6: Andrea Segre, film still from *Io sono Li* (2011).

Captured via slow zoom-in, the film’s typically muted grey-blue hues are replaced with bright red and orange tones of the burning *casone*. All the while, a minor jazz progression swells into a full crescendo. The reverberations of a wailing saxophone, dissimilar to Couturier’s generally subdued soundtrack, add a depth of emotions to this dramatic finale. Two opposing elements—the *yin*

⁸⁹ Elizabeth Freeman, “Introduction,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (2007): 164. Here Freeman challenges Homi Bhabha’s failure to address the integral roles gender and sexuality play in state-formation and nationness [Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge 2004), 139].

⁹⁰ Michele Gottardi, “Io sono Li,” review of *Io sono Li*, by Andrea Segre, *Segnocinema* (December 2011): 45.

⁹¹ Carla Freccero et al., “Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2-3 (2007): 193.

⁹² Paola Brunetta, “La poesia della realtà. Anche quella che si vorrebbe diversa,” review of *Io sono Li*, by Andrea Segre, *Cineforum* 508 (2011): 40.

⁹³ Different from cultures that associate fire with danger and destruction, in China, *yang* (fire) represents vitality. Giovanni Maciocia, *The Foundations of Chinese Medicine: A Comprehensive Text* (Toronto: Elsevier, 2015), 178.

(water) and the *yang* (fire)—create a visually striking portrait. Taking in this final, poetic image, the spectator might begin to consider that in a post-Berlusconi Italy—where practices of “sterile masculinity” and an investment in the collective future of an ethno-racially diverse community replace those narcissistic attributes of neoliberal capitalism and toxic virility (i.e. from the ashes of Bepi’s *casone*)—a new, meaningful, and productive kind of social dynamic can emerge.

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