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Title: Spiritual Hotbeds: (Counter)Narratives of HIV/AIDS in Sicily

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 11 (2025)

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Publication date: 12/22/2025

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, “Themed Section”

Permalink: <https://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/5-campagna-leonardo-spiritual-hotbeds>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15781/HB38-N926>

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Abstract: If we conceive of the Southern Question as an interpretative key to analyze contemporary history and politics, we realize that Italian LGBTQ+ historiography has hardly addressed the South. Through archival research and textual analysis, this paper proposes Sicily as a case study in the investigation of narratives on HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s, with particular focus on the representation of body, sexuality, space, and serostatus. The first part examines media coverage of the AIDS crisis in Sicily, a portrayal based on the dominant themes of death, healthcare inefficiency, the clash between institutional politics and civil society, and the peculiar case of illness and heterosexual romance in the story of Claudio Belcuore and Maria Carò. The second part concentrates on the counternarratives constructed by Sicilian activists and associations, such as the Associazione Siciliana Assistenza Malati di AIDS (ASIAMA) and its magazine *Il Melograno*, and Nino Gennaro's *Libretto gioiattiva: Risorsa spirituale*, a collection of poems about AIDS as an occasion to practice care, reciprocity, and affection. Through this heterogeneous set of materials, it is possible to reconstruct a period of intense and intersectional political activity, and to observe the transformation of the pandemic from a health emergency with heavy moral implications into an occasion for emotional exchange.

Keywords: HIV/AIDS, Sicily, Southern Question, body, affection

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Spiritual Hotbeds: (Counter)Narratives of HIV/AIDS in Sicily

LEONARDO CAMPAGNA*

Introduction

In the *Treccani Encyclopedia's* entry for the “Southern Question,” historian Guido Pescosolido defines the issue as the economic depression that occurred in the South of Italy in the context of the 1861 Unification. The event marked a differentiation in industrial development between North and South, having a series of consequences such as migration of the Southern population to the North and abroad, the exploitation of Southern labor as a reserve army in Northern factories, and, in general, the consolidation of the structural dependence of Southern regions on the North.¹ Thanks to Antonio Gramsci's analysis in the *Quaderni del carcere/Prison Notebooks*, contemporary Italian historiography, especially the Marxist strand, has long analyzed the Southern Question as an essentially economic issue, studying the breadth and depth of the North-South divide, hypothesizing the causes, and proposing different solutions and research paths.²

The Southern Question, especially with the end of Fascism, was of utmost urgency for the Italian State, which employed more or less effective measures, such as the Cassa per il Mezzogiorno (Fund for the South), to bridge the economic gap.³ However, since the fund's closure in 1984, and due to the profound shift in political sensibility on the issue exemplified by the rise of northern independentist movements, characterized by strong anti-southern sentiment, from the 1990s onward the Southern Question has been spectralized.⁴ The application of queer and postcolonial theories to the Southern Question has led to its resurgence, fostering new reflections and research paths on the cultural and political repercussions of the economic divide, and positioning the South as a place from which it is possible to rethink the production and circulation of knowledge.⁵

With its substantial neglect of the South, Italian LGBTQ+ historiography demonstrates what seems to be an epistemic condition of national culture, one that arose from the Southern Question: the common belief that the North is the only territory capable of generating politics, dissent and change, while the South is doomed to inertia, poverty, exploitation, and, ultimately, unending suffering.⁶ In the texts comprising Italian LGBTQ+ historiography, we can read exhaustive reconstructions of the political battles of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans* and queer

* I would like to thank Ilaria Di Marco of the Circolo di Cultura Omosessuale Mario Mieli, Sara De Giovanni and Antonia Pennella of the Cassero LGBTQI+ Center, and Sonia Soresi of the Biblioteca Centrale della Regione Siciliana “Alberto Bombace” for their assistance and precious advice during the archival research conducted for this article. My deepest gratitude also goes to the anonymous readers and the *g/s/i* editorial team for their invaluable work and feedback. Lastly, thank you to Lorena and Alessandro for their patience and support.

¹ See Pescosolido, “Questione Meridionale.”

² Numerous passages in Gramsci's *Quaderni del carcere* are dedicated to the Southern Question and the Italian Risorgimento, such as the comparison between the North-South divide with the city-countryside relationship illustrated in 1:34–40; or the analysis of Francesco Crispi's policies toward the Fasci Siciliani movement in 19:2017–22. For an examination of Gramsci's impact on the historiographical debate on the Southern Question, see Lupo, *La questione*; Capuzzo and Mezzadra, “The Italian Reading of Gramsci.”

³ See Lepore, “Cassa per il Mezzogiorno”; Crainz, *Storia della Repubblica*, 4.

⁴ Colarizi, *Storia politica della Repubblica*, 168–69. Concerning the spectralization of the Southern Question, I am using the metaphor of spectrality as devised by Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx*. Spectrality indicates the haunting recurrence of what has been conveniently removed in political and intellectual debate, such as Marx and Marxism after the fall of the Soviet Union. By asserting the spectralization of the Southern Question, my purpose is to highlight its ontologically unresolvable nature, being contextual to the birth of the Italian State, even though it has been removed from public debate and considered resolved or, at least, no longer politically relevant. Just like the ghost in the castle, those who live inside are well aware of its haunting presence. Those who live outside the castle doubt its existence.

⁵ See at least Orizzonti Meridiani, *Briganti o emigranti*; Ammaturo “The More South You Go”; Conelli, *Il rovescio della nazione*; Fauzia and Amenta, *Femminismo Terrone*.

⁶ See Moe, *Un paradiso abitato da diavoli*; Forgacs, *Italy's Margins*.

communities, associations, collectives, and individuals formed in the metropolitan cities of the Center-North, with particular focus on Turin, Milan, Bologna, and Rome, while an entire portion of the country is neglected.⁷ In the overlooked South, Sicily is an exemplary case, as its use in national narratives assumes the role of the Derridean ~~trace~~, that is, the trace in the text whose erasure (hence the strikethrough) structures the text itself in its discursive economy—the margin necessary for the formation of the center.⁸ Indeed, Sicily's presence/absence within Italian LGBTQ+ historiography occurs within a double movement of eroticization and victimization. On the one hand, the island is represented as a lustful paradise through the erotic photography of Wilhelm Von Gloeden, a story that has long been celebrated especially in the gay press and put in continuity with modern gay tourism without paying due attention to the colonial undertone of the matter.⁹ On the other hand, through the founding story of Arcigay in Palermo following the Giarre murder of October 1980—the discovery of the bodies of young lovers Giorgio Giammona and Antonino Galatola killed in mysterious circumstances—the island is portrayed as the scene of brutal crimes of a homolebophobic nature.¹⁰ The lack of interest that Italian LGBTQ+ historiography has shown toward Sicily outside the Eros and Thanatos paradigm can be interpreted as the sign of an underlying Southern Question.¹¹

Parallel to geographical exclusion, another type of marginalization must be investigated, which concerns the space dedicated to HIV/AIDS in Italian historiography. Ann Cvetkovic states that queer archives and the history they keep are pervaded by trauma, HIV/AIDS being both the most violent and, paradoxically, the most forgotten.¹² The AIDS crisis is a historical event that profoundly changed LGBTQ+ activism in terms of both its goals and how activists organized themselves. More broadly, it changed the ways people of all gender identities and sexual orientations engage in sexual activities, putting a tragic end to the joys of the sexual revolution of the 1970s, and reconceptualized the body in its political and philosophical dimensions, thus making it an essential object of inquiry in body history, in the history of medicine, and in cultural history.¹³ As pointed out by Enrico Landoni, the debate surrounding HIV/AIDS in Italy was quite intense, not only in the medical and political fields, but also in bioethics, anthropology and sociology.¹⁴ However, contemporary mainstream Italian historiography seems uninterested in investigating the impact of HIV/AIDS on the country's politics and society: the pandemic is reduced to a few lines or a footnote, making the issue of marginalization quite literal and unavoidable.¹⁵ Although

⁷ See Rossi Barilli, *Il movimento gay in Italia*; Scalise, *Cose dell'altro mondo*; Cristallo, *Uscir fuori*; Locati Luciani, *Crisco Disco*; De Leo, *Queer*.

⁸ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 65; Spivak, "Translator's Preface," xviii.

⁹ See Bolognari, *I ragazzi di Von Gloeden*. Regarding the promotion of Taormina as a gay tourist destination, see Corsi, "Taormina," 34; Dall'Orto, "Taormina da riscoprire," 60–61.

¹⁰ See Barilli, *Il movimento gay in Italia*, 134; Pezzano, *Troppo amore ti ucciderà*, 140; Lepore, *Il delitto di Giarre*.

¹¹ As detailed in the methodology, this paper is based on archival research conducted in various institutions, which led to the discovery of a diverse set of sources, most of which are crime news articles. Of the cultural and political events reported in the mainstream and movement press, at national, regional and local level, very little has been historicized, such as the timely intervention of Sicilian gay groups following the Giarre crime, and the history of separatist lesbian feminism in Catania: see Prearo, *La fabbrica dell'orgoglio*, 105; Biagini, *L'emersione imprevista*, 157.

¹² See Cvetkovic, *An Archive of Feelings*, 8.

¹³ See Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*; Haver, *The Body of this Death*; Baldwin, *Disease and Democracy*; Starr, *Blood*; George, *Nine Pints*; Nicolson, "Death and Birth."

¹⁴ See Landoni, "Lo stato di fronte all'emergenza HIV/AIDS." For more insight about the debate, see Cattorini, *AIDS e situazione carceraria*; Mannetti, *L'Aids nell'immaginario collettivo*; Gabardi, *Stop AIDS*.

¹⁵ Paul Ginsborg mentions AIDS in connection with the care and assistance work carried out by the diocese of Milan, led by Archbishop Carlo Maria Martini (see *L'Italia del tempo presente*, 248); Adolfo Scotto Di Luzio writes about drug addiction and heroin use without focusing on the intravenous transmission of the virus (see *Nel groviglio degli anni Ottanta*, 67–76); Simona Colarizi and Marco Gervasoni cite AIDS among the issues, along with homosexuality, the abortion pill and the use of condoms, against which the Vatican railed in the 1990s to maintain its hegemony over the faithful (see *La tela di Penelope*, 70); Guido Crainz writes about it, recalling the substantial growth in deaths caused by heroin in the years between 1980 and 1993 (see *Il Paese reale*, 80); Marco Impagliazzo refers to it in illustrating the work

HIV/AIDS in the Italian common sense appears as a long removed trauma, in recent years, a group of scholars has paid increasing and diversified attention to HIV/AIDS in Italy, placing it within the history of drugs and drug addiction, the history of labor—and, more specifically, sex work—and LGBTQ+ history.¹⁶ Within these more specific and detailed historical reconstructions, AIDS emerges as a much broader issue than just a health emergency. From trauma, it sparks as an opportunity to rethink politics and alliances, making care a powerful tool for activism and mutual support.

The aim of this paper is to merge multiple types of historical marginalization deriving from social exclusion: the marginalization of the South in Italian LGBTQ+ historiography, and the marginalization of the AIDS crisis in Italian mainstream historiography. Through a textual analysis applied to archival sources, the political and cultural dimensions of the fight against the virus in Sicily in the 1980s and 1990s will be explored, with particular attention to the relationship between body and space and how such relationship is affected by sexuality, serostatus, and type of transmission of the virus.

As stated by Biswas and Papadogiannis, HIV/AIDS history, and more specifically the history of HIV/AIDS collective action, requires new and more nuanced types of periodization that take national and local specificities into account.¹⁷ The periodization of this research will not be anchored to milestones in the history of HIV/AIDS in Italy, such as the discovery of the first cases, the foundation of HIV/AIDS associations, or political and media cases of historical relevance, but rather by following the paths traced by archival sources, so that the archive can be “read” and not conceived as a “repository of facts.”¹⁸ By doing so, the archive itself will become an object of investigation, and the milestones of HIV/AIDS history in Italy will be placed, where necessary, within the story it narrates.

The first archival source dates back to 1986 and concerns the AIDS-related death of a 37-year-old man; the last is from 1998 and recounts a powerful act of body politics against an eviction. Over the course of twelve years, two contrasting narrative paths will emerge. The press will, in fact, construct a dominant representation of the virus in Sicily focused on issues such as healthcare inefficiency, the distance between institutions and civil society, and AIDS-related deaths, often at the cost of the subjectivity of people living with HIV/AIDS, reduced to their mere physical and infectious dimensions. The work of the Associazione Siciliana Assistenza Malati di AIDS (ASIAMA—Sicilian Association for the Assistance of AIDS Patients), founded in Palermo in 1989, with its magazine *Il Melograno* (The Pomegranate), and the poetic AIDS narratives of activist and playwright Nino Gennaro in *Libretto gioiattiva* (Activejoy Booklet), together constitute a counternarrative of AIDS.¹⁹ Their representations focus on care and proximity, emphasizing feelings such as hope and joy over the sorrow and grief conventionally associated with the virus.

Methodology and Research Questions

This essay is part of a wider study on media representations of LGBTQ+ Sicily from the 1970s to the present.²⁰ The types of sources collected are heterogeneous: newspaper and magazine articles,

of John Paul II and the controversial reputation he built on his own policies in this regard (see “Geopolitica del papato,” 391). Although the number of texts mentioned in this footnote is small, it is illustrative of the posture that contemporary mainstream Italian historiography has adopted toward the pandemic.

¹⁶ See DeGrazia, “Drug criminalization”; Roghi, *Eroina*; Sbaifi, “Damaged Bodies”; Love, “Life in Translation.”

¹⁷ See Biswas and Papadogiannis, “Transnational histories.”

¹⁸ Spivak, “The Rani of Sirmur.”

¹⁹ The English translations, including associations’ names and any Italian text quoted, is my own.

²⁰ Archival research was carried out in the following places: in Rome, at the Marco Sanna Documentation Center of the Circolo di Cultura Omosessuale Mario Mieli (Mario Mieli Association of Homosexual Culture) and the Archivia-

conference proceedings, informative pamphlets and leaflets, and books ranging from poetry to autobiography. Of the sources found, newspaper and magazine articles constitute the larger sample, counting 418 units that, following theories on the queer archive as an archive of feelings and emotions, were thematically coded according to the emotions upon which they were based.²¹ An initial reading of the sources served to group them into thematically coherent categories—crime news, political and cultural reporting, and coverage related to HIV/AIDS. A second, closer reading sought to identify the key features of each group, with particular attention to the emotions that animate them: the emotions that guided the authors in producing the articles; the emotions that contemporary readers likely experienced upon publication; and, following the methodological trajectory outlined by Dario Pasquini in his work on the emotional approach to sources, the emotions I myself experienced as a researcher while reading and analyzing them.²² The most recurring emotion in the research is sorrow, as crime news articles constitute 49% of the journalistic sources (208 articles).²³ Articles regarding HIV/AIDS constitute 15.5% of the total (65 articles coming from 14 different national, regional, and local newspapers). Below is a list of newspapers that have written the most about AIDS in Sicily.

<i>Giornale di Sicilia</i>	10 articles
<i>La Repubblica</i>	9 articles
<i>L'Ora</i>	9 articles
<i>L'Unità</i>	8 articles
<i>Corriere della Sera</i>	6 articles
<i>Il Messaggero</i>	5 articles

It is interesting to note that the most covered story was Claudio Belcuore's, a man who became famous for having decided to contract the virus voluntarily through unprotected sexual intercourse with his partner, Maria Caroè, and for their particularly incisive political protests. The significant and thematically relevant presence of a heterosexual love story within research located between LGBTQ+ history and the sociological study of HIV/AIDS in Italy, although it may seem forced and out of place, is actually an opportunity to reflect on the representation of the infected body and how it changes according to variables such as sexual orientation, types of sexual-affective relationship implied, and modes of transmission of the virus. It is important to note that sources on Belcuore and Caroè were not found in the institutional archives such as the Palermo Library or the State Archive in Catania, but in the queer archives consulted for this research. The Marco Sanna and Flavia Madaschi archives, in fact, belong to associations founded in the early 1980s (Mario Mieli in Rome, Cassero in Bologna), coinciding with the diagnosis of the first AIDS cases.

Casa Internazionale delle Donne (Archivia–International Women's House); the Flavia Madaschi Documentation Center of Cassero LGBTQIA+ in Bologna; the Maurice GLBTQ+ in Turin; the State Archive in Catania; the Alberto Bombace Central Regional Library in Palermo.

²¹ See Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings*; True Latimer, "Conversation on Queer Affect"; Stone, "Queer Persistence."

²² See Pasquini, *Con rabbia felice*, 10.

²³ It was chosen to define the narratives emerging from crime news articles through the emotion of sorrow for the following reasons: this group collects and recounts episodes such as the Giarre murder, the suicide of Alfredo Ormando, and the cases of pedophilia that have often led to the stereotyping of Sicily as a land of perverse sexuality. I would like to point out that the articles on pedophilia cases were found within the queer archives consulted for this research, and therefore, while their presence is problematic and rather haunting in a study that analyzes representations of the Sicilian LGBTQ+ community, it is significant in the analysis of the queer archive's understanding of Sicily. Overall, in fact, the articles in this group make Sicily a traumatic and painful presence in the Italian queer archive, where sorrow lies not only in the single narrated event, but also in the emotional burden generated by the essentialization of Sicily as a dangerous and unhealthy place for queer people to live. Furthermore, the categorization of this group with the emotion of sorrow, together with another group of articles on gay tourism characterized by the emotion of desire, emphasizes the Eros and Thanatos trope diagnosed in Italian LGBTQ+ historiography. Lastly, a methodologically non-determining but guiding factor, sorrow is the emotion I personally felt in processing this group of articles.

Therefore, it can be assumed that such archives were committed since their foundation, given the social and political urgency of the time, to preserving press coverage on HIV/AIDS in Italy, even when it did not concern queer people. Below is a list of the main themes covered by the press and the number of articles dedicated to each one.

Claudio Belcuore and Maria Carò	21 articles
AIDS and political institutions	14 articles
AIDS and regional healthcare	10 articles
Deaths caused by AIDS	10 articles
Cultural initiatives	5 articles

Textual analysis was then employed to examine the articles, one by one and collectively, focusing on the narratives they outline and their ideological undertones. Textual analysis is usually defined as a “type of qualitative analysis that focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of a text.”²⁴ The object of a text, the choice of words, and the context in which the text is produced and published are never neutral data, but reflect the structuring and ideology of society.²⁵ In the context of this research, cultural studies’ understanding of text as “a means by which people make sense of themselves and the societies that they are part of” merges with the deconstructionist study of the text as a textile of traces hiding and revealing desire, violence, subjectivity and its strategic absence.²⁶ Previous research on the rhetoric of AIDS discourse in the media, along with queer theory, will guide this analysis, to highlight the processes of subjectivation and subalternization of people with HIV/AIDS and how such processes depend on body, serostatus, and sexuality.²⁷ The sources are not separated into primary and secondary ones, as is usually done in historical analysis, because the point of this essay is not to reconstruct events or to assign different degrees of truth to the sources and their authors, but to treat them as ethnographic data and highlight the discourses involved.²⁸ For this reason, the research questions for this article concern both historical and sociological issues: what were the dominant narratives concerning HIV/AIDS in Sicily? What were the main topics of interest for the press? How did Sicilian civil society respond to the HIV/AIDS crisis? What were the counternarratives advanced by activists and associations?

Infection

According to Cristiana Pulcinelli’s reconstruction of the pandemic, the first cases of HIV infection in Italy were diagnosed in the regions of the Center-North between 1982 and 1983, with the highest concentration in the province of Milan. Most of the newly diagnosed contracted the virus through intravenous heroin use.²⁹ Rachel E. Love adds that although official statistics had identified intravenous drug use as the main vector of the virus, the initial profiling of the virus as a gay plague by the Italian press, modelled on the American case, produced a high level of stigmatization based on sexual habits and the marginalization of intravenous drug users from HIV/AIDS discourse.³⁰

²⁴ Arya, “An Overview of Textual Analysis,” 173.

²⁵ See Hall, “Television Discourse”; McKee, “Textual Analysis”; Kovala, “Cultural Studies and Cultural Text Analysis.”

²⁶ Dhaenens and Van Bauwel, “Textual Analysis,” 272; see also Spivak, “The Politics of Translation.”

²⁷ See Watney, *Policing Desire*; Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*; Lupton, *Moral Threats and Dangerous Desires*; Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*.

²⁸ See Luzzatto, “Foreword.”

²⁹ Pulcinelli, *AIDS*, 56.

³⁰ Love, “Life in Translation,” 294.

The pandemic impacted primarily the regions of the Center-North and metropolitan cities, as demonstrated by the numerous infographics periodically published by newspapers.³¹

The first article on AIDS in Sicily to emerge from archival research concerns an AIDS-related death: “Young man, hit by aids...dead after a long hospitalization in the infectious diseases ward of the Garibaldi hospital in Catania. The young man, a drug addict, was incarcerated in the Noto prison before being hospitalized.”³² Ten articles were found on AIDS-related deaths, published mainly in national newspapers, which are extremely consistent in tone and length. One example is the news of the suicide of a 27-year-old man who “locked himself in the garage of his father’s villa, in the countryside of Alcamo, in the province of Trapani, and poisoned himself with the exhaust fumes of a Fiat 127” after finding out he was HIV positive.³³ In another case, Maurizio Sigali’s body was “left for two days abandoned in the morgue of the hospital without any interest from his family members. Only after the carabinieri intervened did a relative take care of funeral arrangements.”³⁴ With the sole exception of Sigali, whose name and situation of homelessness are mentioned presumably to emphasize the unfortunate circumstances of his existence and consequently his death, no details of the victims are provided. The communication style of these articles is short and dry and, given the subject matter, acquires a rather morbid undertone, especially when describing the situations of desperation and isolation experienced by the victims. While this paucity of information about patients and their lives before the virus was probably due to the need to protect their privacy, the lack of discretion in these articles concerning the most dreadful aspects of such deaths highlights the essentialization of patients as infected bodies and corpses and the prevalence of AIDS and its pain as the subject of journalistic discourse. This echoes what Susan Sontag defined as an “epic of suffering”—the emotionally charged narrative of what is considered, in the case of AIDS, a hard and dehumanizing death.³⁵

The wholesale treatment of bodies and corpses is also particularly evident in articles regarding cases of healthcare inefficiency. As Stefano Cristante argues, *la malasanità* (medical malpractice) is a recurring theme in media representations of the Italian South in TV news and newspapers and can be identified as one of the contemporary consequences of the Southern Question.³⁶ In the case of AIDS, this narrative merges with the equally conflicting narrative of the pandemic. Starting from the headlines, the war trope of AIDS is combined with the narrative of healthcare inefficiency, resulting in a tale of struggle and defeat: to name two examples, “War

³¹ On December 6, 1986, *La Repubblica* reported 175 cases in Lombardy, the highest rate, followed by Latium with 61 cases and Emilia Romagna with 44 cases (see Mastrogiamico, “Aids, la sfida del ministro”). Three years later, the same newspaper reported 872 cases in Lombardy, 368 cases in Latium, 311 cases in Emilia Romagna, 85 cases in Sicily (see D’Amico, “Il ministro detta le regole dell’amore”). The statistics of the *Osservatorio Epidemiologico Regionale* (Regional Epidemiological Observatory) report 5 cases in Sicily in 1985, 27 cases in 1986, 57 cases in 1987, 118 cases in 1988 (see De Martino, “Guerra all’AIDS”), while the statistics of the *Centro Operativo AIDS* (AIDS Operational Center) report 3 cases in Sicily in 1985, 21 cases in 1986, 41 cases in 1987, 60 cases in 1988 (see Moss, “AIDS in Italy,” 140). The discrepancy in epidemiological data between different sources demonstrates the limitations of statistics in describing the phenomenon. Furthermore, considering the possibility of an indeterminable number of people who, due to possible stigmatization, refused to get tested, it is safe to assume that statistical data on HIV/AIDS epidemiology refers to hospitalizations, people assisted by centers for drug addiction, and people who decided to get tested. Therefore, such data is not exhaustive.

³² “Un giovane, colpito da aids...deceduto dopo una lunga degenza al reparto di malattie infettive dell’ospedale Garibaldi di Catania. Il giovane, tossicodipendente, prima del ricovero in ospedale si trovava rinchiuso nel carcere di Noto.” *Il Melograno*, “Giovane detenuto muore per AIDS.”

³³ “Si è chiuso nel garage della villa del padre, nelle campagne di Alcamo, in provincia di Trapani, e si è lasciato avvelenare dei gas di scarico di una Fiat 127.” *Il Manifesto*, “Sieropositivo si uccide.” An article in *Giornale di Sicilia* of the same day states that the victim’s name was Maurizio, he was 28 years old instead of 27, had AIDS, committed suicide under the overpass of the Alcamo-Alcamo Marina provincial road, and that he attempted suicide two months before. See *Giornale di Sicilia*, “Alcamo, malato di Aids.”

³⁴ “Rimasto per due giorni abbandonato nell’obitorio del nosocomio senza che alcuno dei familiari se ne interessasse. Solo dopo l’intervento dei carabinieri un parente ha provveduto ai funerali.” *Corriere della Sera*, “Morto di Aids.”

³⁵ Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor and AIDS and its Metaphors*, 125.

³⁶ See Cristante, “Cosa dice il Tg1 del Sud?”

against AIDS,” and “Palermo, blunt weapons against Aids.”³⁷ Francesco Foresta, on February 9, 1989, writes:

The last two died yesterday. A 21-year-old who had stopped using a few years ago, and a nineteen-year-old girl who arrived a few days ago from the Caltanissetta hospital. And on Monday, a “junkie” from Palermo died as well. The umpteenth victims of AIDS, five since the beginning of the year, nine in the last forty days. One dies every week in Palermo. And these nine are all between the ages of 22 and 43. A homosexual man, eight “junkies” including two girls. They died at the “Guadagna,” the only hospital in the city that treats these patients. There are only ten beds in the facility on Via Villagrazia. They become twelve when there’s absolutely no choice but to say no to a terminally ill patient. The outgoing president of USL [Local Health Unit] 62, Giuseppe Cascio...reiterated that Guadagna’s capacity is “more than enough.” Yet, it was thanks to the recent deaths that, on the first floor of the AIDS wing, it was possible to admit nine young people who had been on a waiting list for weeks.³⁸

The scenario described is a serialization of AIDS infection and death: inside a trench-like ward, poorly prepared to deal with the emergency, bodies and corpses with no identity or history come and go. If the rather brutal tone of the article emphasizes the criticality of the situation, the use of the words *homosexual* and *junkie* clearly denotes the association of infection with risky behaviors and risky categories as a burden for the hospital and, metonymically, for an already compromised regional healthcare system.

In *Policing Desire*, Simon Watney defined the AIDS crisis as a crisis of representation, where the main interest of the media was to address the pandemic in a way that would reassure the heterosexual, monogamous family from ever having any contact with the virus and its carriers. This meant that no useful information about prevention would be disseminated, nor would AIDS patients and activists have any control of the narrative.³⁹ Since the first cases appeared, discourse on AIDS in Italy was heavily influenced by the most conservative fringes of institutional politics, as well as by the Catholic Church and its positions on sexuality and prevention.⁴⁰ Emblematic are the statements of Christian Democrat Carlo Donat-Cattin, Minister of Health between 1986 and 1989, who repeatedly declared that “Aids is for those who seek it” and applied prevention and information policies defined by Giulia Sbaffi as “familist.”⁴¹ His 1998 letter to Italian families, in fact, while urging empathy and solidarity toward people affected by HIV/AIDS, defines the family as “the most suitable place for an effective interpersonal balance in the fight against AIDS,” and encourages readers to seek “a normal existence in emotional and sexual relationships.”⁴²

Family, space, and safety are at the center of the no-entry directive on the city park of Messina, proposed by a councilor of the municipality, for anyone who was not accompanied by

³⁷ See De Martino, “Guerra all’AIDS”; Barba, “Armi spuntate contro l’Aids.”

³⁸ “Gli ultimi due sono morti ieri. Un ventunenne che aveva smesso di bucarsi da qualche anno e una ragazza diciannovenne giunta qualche giorno fa dall’ospedale di Caltanissetta. E lunedì era morto anche un ‘tossico’ palermitano. Le ennesime vittime dell’Aids, cinque dall’inizio dell’anno, nove negli ultimi quaranta giorni. Ne muore uno ogni settimana a Palermo. E questi nove sono tutti compresi tra i 22 ed i 43 anni. Un omosessuale, otto ‘tossici,’ fra questi due ragazze. Sono morti alla ‘Guadagna,’ l’unico ospedale in città che accoglie questi malati. Ci sono soltanto dieci posti letto nella struttura di via Villagrazia. Diventano dodici quando proprio non si può fare a meno di dire no ad un malato in fase terminale. Il presidente uscente della Usl 62, Giuseppe Cascio...ha ribadito che la ricettività della Guadagna ‘basta e avanza.’ Eppure è stato grazie ai morti di questi giorni che, al primo piano del padiglione Aids, è stato possibile accettare nove ragazzi in lista d’attesa da settimane.” Foresta, “Un morto a settimana.”

³⁹ Watney, *Policing Desire*, 82.

⁴⁰ Balestracci, Guidali and Landoni, “Introduction,” 16.

⁴¹ “L’Aids se lo prende chi se lo va a cercare.” Morelli, “Aids, ritorna la paura.” For a better contextualization of the concept of familist, instead, see Sbaffi, “Il virus dell’oppressione,” 198.

⁴² “[La famiglia è normalmente] la sede più idonea per un equilibrio interpersonale efficace nella lotta contro l’AIDS”; “[Per una persona sana, la prima regola alla quale è consigliabile attenersi è quella di] un’esistenza normale nei rapporti affettivi e sessuali.” Landoni, “Lo Stato di fronte all’emergenza HIV/AIDS,” 59–60.

children, in order not to transform the park into a theater of danger and indecency. Councilor Ziino declared:

“Why did we decide to close the park in Via Cannizzaro to adults? We want to avoid visits from junkies, who leave their syringes on the lawn, from couples in love who engage in displays of affection and kissing, from ill-intentioned people who might attempt some form of solicitation, and from tramps who make a mess and sleep on the benches.” Instead of setting up a surveillance service, managed by traffic wardens and policemen, we opted for a quick fix by prohibiting entry to “risk categories.”⁴³

As stated by Brian DeGrazia in his analysis of a similar case, the opening of Villa Glori Casa Famiglia for people with AIDS in the Parioli neighborhood in Rome, the fear of AIDS had a spatial quality: the perception of danger changed according to proximity or distance from the virus.⁴⁴

The centralization of the family as a safe haven from the virus, and the protection of minors as potential innocent victims of AIDS are also present in the case of a nativity scene made of condoms by the students of a high school in Avola, driven by the need to address the issue of HIV/AIDS in an active, creative and provocative way. The nativity scene was deemed obscene and blasphemous: it was confiscated by the principal, sparking anger among the students.⁴⁵

The mainstream media discourse on AIDS viewed teenagers in a rather polarized way. The moral panic about sex and drugs made them victims of controversial policies, such as the “mass screening to identify addicts and seropositives, a grid investigation on almost 15 thousand teenagers” proposed by Provincial councilor for the Ministry of Education of the city of Siracusa Mario Battaglia in November 1998.⁴⁶ At the same time, the nativity case, similar to the controversy generated by the publication of the Lupo Alberto pamphlet on AIDS prevention, is characterized by an infantilizing tone that did not consider teenagers as sexual subjects to be informed or with whom to interact on the topic of safe sex, but as children to be protected from their age-induced recklessness through the exclusion of HIV/AIDS from school education.⁴⁷ The Avola students’ initiative proved to be a well-aimed provocation to symbolically inject the virus into family rhetoric: to transform, through desecration, a social, political, and religious emblem into a tool for raising awareness about HIV/AIDS and the use of condoms.

However, this case, along with urban hygiene policies like Ziino’s, as well as the debate surrounding the presence of Villa Glori in Parioli, highlights the delineation and differentiation of space according to serostatus. Family-oriented spaces, such as public parks, schools, and residential neighborhoods, had to be enclosed and immunized from the potential presence of people with HIV/AIDS, who were dehumanized and confined in hospital wards that resembled battlefields.

Within the segregationist and familist discourse on HIV/AIDS, where there is a clear division between the healthy body and the infected body, the space of decency and the space of perversion, one media case stands out for its potential to simultaneously disrupt and reaffirm the discourses involved. Claudio Belcuore and Maria Caroè are the main protagonists of the press review about HIV/AIDS in Sicily. Counting 21 articles published between 1995 and 1998 (one third of the total published articles about the topic), it is a story of challenging institutions as much as it is of romanticizing the virus through the narrative of heterosexual, reproductive love.

⁴³ “Perché abbiamo deciso di chiudere la villa di via Cannizzaro agli adulti?” dichiara l’assessore Ziino. “Vogliamo evitare le visite dei drogati, che lasciano le loro siringhe sui prati, delle coppie di innamorati che si dedicano alle effusioni e ai baci, dei malintenzionati che potrebbero tentare qualche adescamento e dei barboni, che insozzano e si mettono a dormire sulle panchine.”...Invece di istituire un servizio di vigilanza, affidato ai vigili urbani o ai poliziotti, si è pensato di andare per le spicce vietando l’ingresso ai ‘soggetti a rischio.’” Rizzo, “Parco vietato agli ultradodicenni.”

⁴⁴ DeGrazia, “Drug criminalization,” 64.

⁴⁵ See Lazzara, “Il presepe con i profilattici? Vietato.”

⁴⁶ “Uno screening di massa per individuare tossicodipendenti e sieropositivi per Aids, un’indagine a tappeto su quasi 15 mila adolescenti siciliani.” Bolzoni, “Vediamo se sei tossicomane.”

⁴⁷ Balestracci, “AIDS, sessualità e corpi,” 205.

Dying of AIDS for love. This is the story of Claudio B., a 28-year-old man who contracted the disease from his young wife. He knew that she, Maria, 29, a former drug addict, was HIV positive but did not use any protection during sexual intercourse. A great demonstration of love that resulted in a miracle: the birth of Francesco, their child, who is two and a half years old and very healthy. Today, Claudio knows that his days are numbered, but he doesn't care. His is the dramatic life of a man with a difficult childhood, lived between the streets and prison, where he ended up several times for a series of petty thefts.⁴⁸

In the story of Belcuore and Caroè, there is a clear political dimension touching the issues of social hostility, the lack of protection and services for people affected by HIV/AIDS, and the excessive slowness of the regional bureaucracy in fulfilling the welfare policies established for them. Belcuore's tone was openly defiant, and some of his protests were quite scandalous and effective examples of body politics: in March 1995, he climbed the belltower of the Messina cathedral with a bedsheet, threatening to jump, to bring awareness about the life conditions of HIV/AIDS patients; in February 1998, the couple cut their wrists and displayed them from the balcony of the apartment from which they were being evicted.⁴⁹ However, every article concerning the two always contains a romantic undertone, such as the news of their wedding: "In the name of tradition. She wore a white dress and arrived on a dark Mercedes escorted by her father, Michele Caroè. Inside the church the scent of white gladioli and roses, arranged around the altar."⁵⁰ Their story is dominated by a deep sense of self-sacrifice on his part toward her. He decides that he will save her from drugs, even though she has no intention of quitting. The narrative acquires a chivalrous tone when Belcuore describes their first intercourse: "'Don't worry, I'm not afraid'; she looked at me and said 'Let's go buy condoms, at least you won't get it'; 'Don't worry,' I replied; she looked at me 'You can die from it'; I told her that we're all going to die one day, at least I choose how, for others it will be fate!'"⁵¹ Infection is therefore conceptualized as proof of love, and then, as the curse marking them as star-crossed lovers.

Compared to the articles previously analyzed, the story of Belcuore and Caroè raises questions concerning the processes of voicing and subjectivation of people affected by HIV/AIDS according to their sexual orientation and sexual-affective relationships, making serostatus a differentiated experience of subalternity. Considering the number of people who died from AIDS, and whose death was the only reason for their presence in the press, the story of the Belcuore family reverses this dynamic because they are afforded subjecthood in the narrative. However, inside a discursive regime where AIDS was mainly associated with homosexuality and narrated as punishment against deviant behaviors, a rhetorical question arises: how would the Belcuore story have been received if they had been a gay couple? According to scholars such as Judith Butler and Leo Bersani, AIDS provoked the association of gay desire with the Freudian death drive.⁵² If, during the 1970s, sex outside of heteromonogamous relationships was politically celebrated as a source of pleasure, joy, and self-determination, AIDS caused the necrotization of queer desire.

⁴⁸ "Morire di Aids per amore. È la storia di Claudio B., un ragazzo di 28 anni, che ha contratto la malattia dalla giovane moglie. Sapeva che lei, Maria, 29 anni, ex tossicodipendente era sieropositiva ma non ha usato alcuna protezione durante i rapporti sessuali. Una grande prova d'amore sfociata nel miracolo: la nascita di Francesco, il loro bambino che ha due anni e mezzo e che è sanissimo. Oggi Claudio sa bene di avere i giorni contati, ma non gli importa. La sua è la vita drammatica di un ragazzo con un'infanzia difficile, vissuta tra la strada e la galera, dove è finito più volte per una serie di furtarelli." Pagliaro, "Lei ha l'Aids."

⁴⁹ *Corriere della Sera*, "Morto di Aids abbandonato all'obitorio"; *L'Unità*, "Si tagliano le vene per evitare lo sfratto."

⁵⁰ "All'insegna della tradizione. Lei indossava l'abito bianco ed è arrivata a bordo di una Mercedes scura accompagnata dal padre, Michele Caroè. Dentro la chiesa il profumo dei gladioli bianchi e delle rose, sistemati intorno all'altare." Manfrà, "Nozze in chiesa."

⁵¹ "Non preoccuparti, io non ho paura; mi guardò e mi disse: 'Compriamo i preservativi, almeno non ti contagi'; replicai: 'Non preoccuparti'; mi guardò 'Vedi che si muore'; le risposi che tutti un giorno moriremo, io almeno scelgo il come, per gli altri sarà il destino!" Belcuore, *Io e l'AIDS*, 29.

⁵² See Butler, "Sexual Inversions," 346; Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?"

Furthermore, gay sex was often sensationalized, especially in crime news, even when it was in no way related to the events described, thus arousing a mixture of disgust and obsession.⁵³ In the case of Belcuore and Caroè, however, unprotected sex is ennobled: narrating infection as an act of love and not as a consequence of unprotected intercourse, especially when its goal is reproduction, appears as an entirely ideological narrative choice to celebrate the birth of Francesco, who is perfectly seronegative.

Affection

Archival research thus far has demonstrated that the master narratives of HIV/AIDS in Sicily adhere to a wider national framework where the virus is associated with feelings of despair, grief, and neglect, unless it serves to reaffirm the validity of heterosexual love.

However, other narratives, marginal in quantity, bloom in the archive in a rather disorderly way: such traces represent AIDS not just as a bodily infection, a disease, but especially as an affection: a chance to reconsider life, human relationships, politics, and the spaces where it all takes place. Their common thread is to conceive of care as collective responsibility and AIDS as an opportunity to practice it.

From a document found at the Marco Sanna Documentation Center in Rome, we learn about the founding of the Associazione Siciliana Assistenza Malati di AIDS (ASIAMA) (Sicilian association for the assistance of AIDS patients) in Palermo in 1989, a voluntary association for the assistance of people affected by HIV/AIDS. Its purpose, as declared from the presentation sheet and in line with other national AIDS prevention associations such as Lega italiana per la lotta contro l'AIDS (LILA) (Italian league against AIDS) and Arcigay, was to facilitate dialogue and mutual aid among the various actors involved in the fight against the virus, with the common goal of transforming HIV/AIDS into a possibility of exchange, closeness and care, rather than a condemnation to depression, isolation and death: "The intervention of the volunteer aims to create relationships with the people suffering from the illness, with their relatives, with their circle of friends, with the healthcare and social staff of the hospital structure."⁵⁴ The association and its volunteers were also protagonists of a presentation at the conference *AIDS: Dalla paura alla speranza* (AIDS: From Fear To Hope), which took place at the University of Palermo. An excerpt from the conference proceedings, published in 1992, reads:

At the origin of our experience, there is an episode related to a young homosexual, hospitalized at the Guadagna Hospital for Infectious Diseases. Due to an intercurrent pathology, he was completely unable to move his limbs, and the shortage of staff prevented the proper feeding of Francesco, this was his name. Having learned of the case, one of the founders of ASIAMA, who volunteered at the ward, tried to create a chain of solidarity to ensure assistance to feed Francesco... The idea of an association of volunteers was then born, which has always had only one goal: the human person. It is a form of volunteering that operates in integration with other actors in social and healthcare assistance, both in prevention and personal care. By care, we mean attention to the person in their entirety and not only in relation to the disease. Affection, love, listening, and empathic relationships are the tools of ASIAMA volunteers. In our work, we exclude healthcare for which there are structures and personnel from public institutions that are capable, given their

⁵³ This is the case of Vincenzo Scarantino, named the "mafia deep throat" (pun evidently intended), an informer previously involved with mafia discredited for his homosexuality, and of Luciano Petrini, the computer engineer who carried out the expert assessments on Giovanni Falcone's computer, found dead in May 1995, and whose sentimental and sexual past was oddly reported by the press. See Bellavia, "Se è gay non è credibile"; Stocco, "Assassinato esperto di computer."

⁵⁴ "L'intervento del volontario mira a creare rapporti con le persone malate, con i familiari, con la rete amicale, con lo staff sanitario e sociale della struttura ospedaliera." ASIAMA, *Information Sheet*. On the role of national associations on the fight against the virus, see Sbaffi, "Damaged Bodies," 48; Love, "Life in Translation."

role and resources, of providing adequate levels of medical-healthcare assistance. Volunteering favors the fundamental spheres of the person, that is, the need for friendship, affection, and love.⁵⁵

As the press demonstrated, in many cases, people affected by the virus died in extreme conditions of isolation and abandonment from their families and the institutions, left alone with nobody to soothe their pain or give them comfort. The work of ASIAMA stands out for the affective and relational aspect of its volunteering, to fill the lack of tact and contact in the care work for HIV-positive and AIDS patients. In addition, the concept of care pursued by the association was not limited to the space of the hospital and the case of its patients, nor did it treat the topic of AIDS exclusively, but it embraced the city of Palermo, its society, and its political issues. In fact, in 1995, the association launched *Il Melograno*, a self-funded magazine written and managed by volunteers. As the main media outlet of an AIDS care association, it would be logical to think that *Il Melograno* addressed similar topics; on the contrary, as written by the editorial staff, the aim of the magazine was to “‘form’ consciences on the issues that most affect our lives, our closest ones, the interpersonal relationships that characterize and influence daily life.”⁵⁶ Therefore, AIDS in the magazine can be considered as the starting point for rethinking human relationships, city politics, and proxemics in pandemic times. In the first number, next to an article about a Candle Light event organized by ASIAMA with Arcigay, Arcilesbica, and the group home “Padre Pino Puglisi” to commemorate AIDS victims, there is an article titled “Palermo doesn’t forget” about the Capaci bombing organized by Cosa Nostra where antimafia judge Giovanni Falcone, his wife Francesca Morvillo, and the police agents Rocco Dicillo, Antonio Montinaro, and Vito Schifani were murdered.⁵⁷ Mafia crimes, and Palermo’s initiatives to fight back, were the protagonists of another article, written by Maria Di Carlo, about Palermo Anno Uno, an organization composed of approximately thirty Palermo associations whose aim was to lift up the city from an artistic and civil point of view, such as the initiative of a cooperative of former inmates who cleared garbage from a little church in Ballarò: “Ex inmates, working (a real job, not a fake one!), discovering (literally!) a monument buried in garbage, meticulously discarding shards, while other passers-by, intrigued as I was, were peeking and making positive comments: ‘What’s that? Historical reparation?’”⁵⁸

Drawing from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s theory of intersectionality, Claudia Fauzia and Valentina Amenta affirm the political need to rethink the South as a stratification of conflicts that must be addressed altogether to foster the formation of an “alliance of the margins.”⁵⁹ The strong presence of the Catania lesbian feminist movement during the antimilitarist protests in Comiso in the early 1980s, the environmentalist critique of the Salento LGBTQ+ community against the

⁵⁵ “All’origine della nostra esperienza, si colloca un episodio legato ad un giovane omosessuale, ricoverato nell’Ospedale di malattie infettive della Guadagna. A causa di una patologia intercorrente, era del tutto impossibilitato al movimento degli arti e la carenza di personale impediva la corretta alimentazione di Francesco, questo era il suo nome. Venuta a conoscenza del caso, una delle fondatrici della ASIAMA, che a titolo volontario, frequentava il reparto, cercò di creare una catena di solidarietà, in grado di garantire l’assistenza per alimentare Francesco... Nasce allora l’idea di una associazione di volontari che da sempre ha un solo obiettivo: la persona umana. È un volontariato che si svolge in integrazione con altri soggetti dell’assistenza socio-sanitaria, sia sul versante della prevenzione che in quello della cura della persona. Per cura intendiamo l’attenzione alla persona nella sua integrità e non soltanto in relazione alla malattia. L’affetto, l’amore, l’ascolto, il rapporto empatico sono gli strumenti dei volontari della ASIAMA. Nel nostro operato escludiamo l’assistenza sanitaria per la quale vi sono strutture e personale della pubblica istituzione in grado, per il ruolo che rivestono e per i mezzi posseduti, di prestare adeguati livelli di ausilio medico-sanitario. Il volontariato privilegia le sfere fondamentali della persona cioè le richieste di amicizia di affettività, di amore.” Giambanco, “ASIAMA: Una esperienza di volontariato a Palermo,” 141–42.

⁵⁶ “Formare” le coscienze sulle problematiche che più di altre coinvolgono la nostra vita, gli affetti più stretti, le relazioni interpersonali che caratterizzano e influiscono la vita di ogni giorno.” *Il Melograno*, “Ma quanto è dura la salita?”

⁵⁷ See Porrovecchio, “Palermo non dimentica.”

⁵⁸ “Ex detenuti, al lavoro (un lavoro vero, non a finta), scoprivano (alla lettera!) un monumento sepolto d’immondizie, scartavano certosinamente dei cocci, mentre altri passanti, come me incuriositi, sbirciavano facendo apprezzamenti positivi: ‘Ma chi è? Un risanamento storico?’” Di Carlo, “Cittadini di una città migliore.”

⁵⁹ See Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing”; Fauzia and Amenta, *Femminismo Terrone*, 159–163.

ILVA steelworks, and the involvement of ASIAMA in antimafia initiatives are all clear examples of activism that is necessarily and organically intersectional, where geographical positioning becomes a perspective for the ignition of a process of care and mutual aid among different political voices.⁶⁰ In the case of ASIAMA, AIDS was transformed from a social and health plague into a driving force for the construction of political and emotional networks of solidarity. As written by Adele Bucalo, “Care is the ontological need to be there. Historical guarantee of the memory of man, ability to harmonize the rhythm of living in the world, projection screen of one’s need to recognize oneself in the other.”⁶¹

Lastly, in the quest to find the traces of a counternarrative of AIDS in Sicily that highlights a broader palette of emotions and experiences, the work of Nino Gennaro, a poet and playwright from Corleone, is essential. Always going back and forth between the personal and the collective, the sexual and the political, with a rapid pace and sparse words, Gennaro’s poetry and theater describe the disintegration of human relationships and the sense of emptiness and loneliness caused by the capitalist economic model.⁶² The *Teatro Madre* (Mother Theater) he founded had a swastika enclosed in a pink heart as its symbol, to underline the violence on which the heterosexual, monogamous, bourgeois family is based. However, Gennaro’s poetry was also deeply rooted in the Sicilian political and social context, often resulting in a sarcastic chronicle of events, such as the conviction for mafia association of Vito Ciancimino, Mayor of Palermo from 1970 to 1971, and the mysterious murder of socialist trade unionist Calogero Morreale in 1975.

The irruption of AIDS in his poetry dates back to 1992, where in his collection *Una calia al completo* (A Complete Calia) he portrays the apocalyptic scenario of Palermo being contaminated by waste, chemical products, and pollution, addressing the removal of the virus from public discourse:

Maurizio:
 what comes after the postmodern?
 me
 another planet
 me: seals die of AIDS
 a woman: please I don’t want to hear about it I’m like this I don’t want to know things they weigh
 on me
 me: seals die of AIDS
 the woman: I have bigger problems than this one they tell me I don’t have problems, that I create
 problems for myself
 me: silence doesn’t exist anymore.⁶³

Marco Palladini, dear friend of Gennaro, states that the virus provoked a radical shift in the poet’s sensibility. If Nino Gennaro before AIDS was “the aggressive, sarcastic, antibourgeois author, the

⁶⁰ See Biagini, *L’emersione imprevista*, 183–92; Ammaturo, “The More South You Go,” 94.

⁶¹ Bucalo, “La ‘Cura’ è l’artefice.”

⁶² This excerpt from his 1974 work *Una divina di Palermo* (A Divine Woman from Palermo) is quite evocative of the themes addressed: “Wake up I feel alone | Wake up everyone I | need company | Don’t be scared I feel alone so alone. | I’d like a house | a very big one | with people who get up during the day | who stay up at night | a very big one! | with 3–4 corridors wings of the house | 10–20 people | with the most | different schedules | all different | sirens sirens sirens sirens | one step! | I have no one | a hand | a dick | a stomach | a cold shiver | I’m not sad | stop saying that I’m sad.” “Svegliatevi mi sento solo | svegliatevi tutti ho | bisogno di compagnia | non vi spaventate mi sento solo solo. | Vorrei una casa | grandissima | con gente che si alza di giorno | che sta alzata la notte | grandissima! | con 3–4 corridoi ali di casa | 10–20 persone | con gli orari più | diversi | tutti diversi | sirene sirene sirene sirene | un passo! | Non ho nessuno | una mano | un cazzo | uno stomaco | un brivido di freddo | non sono triste | smettita di dire che sono triste.” Gennaro, “Una divina di Palermo,” 88.

⁶³ “Maurizio: | dopo il postmoderno che cosa viene? | io | un altro pianeta | io: le foche muoiono di AIDS | una tipa: per favore non lo voglio sentire io sono così le cose non le voglio sapere poi mi | cadono addosso | io: le foche muoiono di AIDS | la tipa: ho problemi + grossi di questo mi dicono che non ho problemi e mi creo problemi | io: il silenzio non esiste +.” Gennaro, *Una calia al completo*, 37. In Palermo dialect, *calia* are toasted seeds and dried fruit, usually eaten during folk festivals.

militant of an expressionist poetry...the angry gay, narcissist and healthily hedonist,” after the infection he became “a man who fought to make a present and cosmic sense to his own end.”⁶⁴

The poet reached the height of his creative expression with the collection of poems *Libretto gioiattiva*, a meditation on life, death and illness written before dying of AIDS-related complications in 1995. Written in capital letters with a thick marker stroke in small note pads and then given as a present to his closest friends, *Libretto gioiattiva* sees Gennaro transform into his own spiritual figure, “SUNSON | SON | OF | THE | SUN,” and make fun of religious figures such as Jesus, Buddha, and Mother Teresa, named “MULTINATIONAL OF LOVE” to underline a commodification of spirituality that failed to soothe the pain of people with HIV/AIDS.⁶⁵ Within the multiple narratives of HIV/AIDS analyzed thus far, Gennaro’s stands out in his interpretation of the virus as an affection, an emotional event that profoundly changes the relationship with oneself, with one’s body and its functions, the relationship with everyday life, the relationship with others, with politics, and with space. Conceiving of AIDS as a disease, a slow death, would imply the loss of time, of one’s own sense of self. Central to this poetics is the concept of deficiency as a lack, from which a reflection on the ontological, reciprocal, and pervasive need for care begins:

AIDS
IS
LACK
IS
DEFICIENCY

IF THEY DON’T HAVE
HOW CAN THEY GIVE?

...
THEY BELIEVE IN
DEATH AS
A PREDICTION

AND THEY’RE ALREADY DEAD
STATISTICALLY
CLINICALLY

LIFE IS UNPREDICTABLE
AND SO IS DEATH

...
IT’S NOT THE DISEASE THAT NEEDS A CURE
BUT THE CURE THAT NEEDS THE DISEASE

DISEASE IS
A GREAT
MEDICINE.⁶⁶

⁶⁴ Palladini, “È morto Nino Gennaro, poeta di vita,” 39.

⁶⁵ Gennaro, *Libretto gioiattiva*, 205, 214.

⁶⁶ “AIDS | È | MANCANZA | È | DEFICIENZA | SE NON HANNO | COME POSSONO DARE? | ...CREDONO ALLA | MORTE COME | PREVISIONE | E SONO GIÀ MORTI | STATISTICAMENTE | CLINICAMENTE | LA VITA È IMPREVEDIBILE | E COSÌ PURE LA MORTE | NON È LA MALATTIA CHE HA BISOGNO DI CURA | MA È LA CURA CHE HA BISOGNO DELLA MALATTIA | ...LA MALATTIA È | UNA GRANDE | MEDICINA.” Gennaro, *Libretto gioiattiva*, 207–8.

As previously seen, the concept of space in the dominant narratives of AIDS had a very strong symbolic function, linked to the body's permeability and therefore its vulnerability to the virus. Physical and metaphysical spaces were designed according to serological status, with the aim of compartmentalizing and separating the healthy from the infected. Home, the quintessential symbol of the nuclear family as much as of private property, was a veritable theater in Gennaro's aesthetics and poetics: it was in the homes of his friends and actors, in the presence of a small audience and in an atmosphere of closeness, that his theater pieces were staged. In the *Libretto gioiattiva* the body and home overlap until they become a single space, a space that expands as the virus spreads, covering the city, and the entire island:

*Let us hope
that we never
reduce ourselves forever
to a private life
We are of the world
Let's give ourselves to the world*⁶⁷

...

*the city is a
hotbed of infection
let's make
our homes and
our bodies
spiritual hotbeds*⁶⁸

Following José Estéban Muñoz's reflections in *Cruising Utopia*, Nino Gennaro's "gioiattiva" can be conceived as a utopia, for its use of AIDS as a bodily event through which it is possible to reimagine the future. In his text, Muñoz criticizes the anti-social path followed by queer theorists such as Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman who defined queerness as the pursuit of the Freudian death drive or as a form of self-shattering against the domestication of sexuality through the means of capitalist and assimilationist politics.⁶⁹ In its "romances of the negative," antisocial queer theory neglects the necessarily and irreducibly relational dimension of existence and politics.⁷⁰ Queerness, for Muñoz, is a not-yet, "primarily about futurity and hope."⁷¹ In Gennaro's words, "gioiattiva" is an "ANTITAVOR AND ANTIGRIEF CAMPAIGN," a sort of methodology to guide one's existence.⁷² Joy projects the self (infected, sick, depressed, dying) toward the future even when the future seems impossible. The hope for a future is what transforms AIDS from infection and death into an opportunity for closeness and care.

In a time where AIDS is a death sentence and therefore an absence of time, and in a narrative space that reduces people living with HIV/AIDS to walking corpses or vampires, Nino Gennaro gives himself the chance to cultivate hope for the future, and in doing so, relieves his present from depression and isolation. To be a home and to reimagine the concept of home from the place of the heterosexual nuclear family to a porous space without ownership or entry policy is

⁶⁷ "Auguriamoci | di non ridurci | mai per sempre | a una vita privata | siamo del mondo | diamoci al mondo." Gennaro, *Libretto gioiattiva*, 212.

⁶⁸ "la città è un | focolaio di infezione | facciamo delle | nostre case e dei | nostri corpi | focolai spirituali." Gennaro, *Libretto gioiattiva*, 217.

⁶⁹ See Edelman, *No Future*; Bersani, "Shame on You."

⁷⁰ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 1.

⁷¹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 12, 11.

⁷² Gennaro, *Libretto gioiattiva*, 221. Tavor is the commercial name for lorazepam, a benzodiazepine medication used for the treatment of anxiety and panic attacks.

not an abstract utopia, the foolish wish of a dying man, but something concrete and achievable, a precise political position that affects the entire city, and the entire island.

Conclusion

To rethink the South is primarily the act of acknowledging it as a place of politics and culture, as long as we rethink the categories through which politics and culture have been conceived and maintained. The aim this paper hopes to have achieved was to propose Sicily as a case study for the investigation of HIV/AIDS discourses and understand how territorial specificity influenced dominant media narratives, as well as political and artistic counternarratives.

The press review of the 1980s and 1990s, consisting of national, regional, and local newspapers and magazines, has outlined a narrative space where the infected body is represented in a quantitative way, consistently with national and epidemiological accounts of the virus. In light of the silencing of people with HIV/AIDS, the reduction of their bodies to mere biological entities, and their segregation in spaces of medical treatment as well as of containment, the story of Belcuore and Caroè resonates as atypical and exceptional. While their influence in making HIV/AIDS a central political issue through their protests is undeniable, the fact that a heterosexual couple who voluntarily shared the virus is the only audible voice in the press speaks volumes about the ideological orientation of the mainstream HIV/AIDS discourse.

Very different representations of the virus emerged outside the press. Through the work of ASIAMA and Nino Gennaro, we have learned that the main political line of HIV/AIDS activism in Sicily was care, adapted through different languages and practices. ASIAMA's volunteer work, in fact, addressed the dehumanization of people with HIV/AIDS by providing for their emotional well-being. Furthermore, the publication of *Il Melograno* revealed the intention to make AIDS a starting point for a broader political reflection, one aimed at building alliances by making care a transversal and intersectional practice. Lastly, Nino Gennaro's poetry is the clearest and most intense example of a counternarrative of AIDS that reimagines bodies and spaces during the pandemic crisis as places of affection, reciprocal care, and joy.

From this paper, a multitude of research paths branch out. Further historical and sociological research on HIV/AIDS in Italy should adopt a strong territorial perspective, reconstructing political events and media representations in specific regions and cities. This would enable comparative analyzes that highlight different narrative nuances, such as North and South, or city and province. At the same time, more research on Sicilian associationism and grassroots movements in the 1980s and 1990s would shed light on the ways in which alliances were built and the principles upon which such alliances were based. Lastly, oral history and ethnographic research would make an even more valuable contribution to the subjectivation of people living with HIV/AIDS in Sicily and in the South.

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