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Abstract: This article develops a queer methodology to rethink Southern Italy by examining the intertwined histories of Italian emigration and colonialism, focusing on their gendered and sexualized dimensions. Challenging nationalist narratives, it foregrounds marginalized identities and destabilizes binaries such as Italian/foreigner and insider/outsider. By connecting internal and external colonial memories through a transnational lens, the approach engages with contemporary Italy's migrant realities and social transformations. It offers a critical framework that fosters solidarity and deepens understandings of Southern Italy's past, present, and ongoing cultural complexity.

Keywords: Southern Question, Queer theory, Southern Italy, Italian emigration, Italian colonialism

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A Queer Perspective on the Italian South? Some Methodological Notes; or, How to Read as a Southern Queer

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Historically the point of departure for millions of emigrants, Italy has become, at least since the mid-1970s, a destination country for a growing number of people arriving or travelling through the peninsula. Patterns of migration to Italy originate from a wide variety of locations; they have significantly changed the social make-up of the country and made it the site of a very diverse multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society.¹ This process has been accompanied by the re-awakening of deep-seated social anxieties that testify to the fact that the more current construction of Italianness has historically been marked by the dovetailing of national identity, Catholicism and whiteness and by representations of gender and sexuality that were also implicated in various ways in the nation-building project. At the same time, the resurfacing in the national consciousness of questions regarding identity brought about by the visibility of migration to Italy has also spurred a critical return to those cultural and historical conjunctions where the conception of a homogenous Italy has been theorized and enforced but also questioned, interrogated and taken to task. The Southern Question certainly represents one of the most significant and consequential of these sites of interrogation, and, from its first formulation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it has not ceased to shape in various ways the perception that many have of the South. Today, the large and very often highly spectacularized visibility of the contemporary Mediterranean routes of migration to Italy and to Europe represents one of the main ways in which the Italian South and the phenomenon of migration become present in the national imagination. In general, the South is represented in the news with “sensationalistic forays modulated on a kind of localist exoticism, depicting the *Meridione* as a land of oddities and anomalies.”² The depiction of migration to the south (and to Italy more broadly) in these same sources often frames it as a recent, threatening and destabilizing phenomenon. In contrast to the often-sensationalized reports on the *emergenza sbarchi*, much less visibility is given in Italian mainstream media to inquiries and analysis on the changing culture of Italy and of the Italian South, also as a result of migration to Italy.³ This gap in mainstream discourse is, I believe, one of the key reasons to examine how migration is portrayed in contemporary literary and cinematic works. Migration and mobility more broadly have become central themes in contemporary Italian literature and cinema, which increasingly include works by authors and filmmakers with migratory backgrounds. By focusing on such works, we can explore alternative avenues to gain a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. These portrayals not only challenge the often one-dimensional media narratives but also help illuminate the broader societal and cultural transformations occurring within Italy—and southern Italy—as a result of the enduring presence and influence of migratory movements.

Based on this premise, in what follows I argue that a more thorough understanding of these dynamics requires an intersectional and transnational perspective, one that takes into account how gender, sexuality, ethnic belonging and processes of racialization are implicated in the South’s marginalization, its long history of emigration, and Italy’s colonial past. By tracing some of these entangled histories, this article suggests that they continue to shape experiences and discourses around identity, migration, and queerness in contemporary Italy, and in the South, now itself a site

¹ On contemporary Italian multiculturalism and its difficulties see for example the following sociological and historical studies, see Colucci, *Storia dell’immigrazione straniera*; Macioti and Pugliese, *L’esperienza migratoria*; Dal Lago, *Non-persone*.

² Cremonesini and Cristante, *Parte cattiva dell’Italia*, 25.

³ The expression *emergenza sbarchi* (“landfall emergency”) appears frequently in Italian media and political commentary to depict irregular sea-borne migration to Italy as a crisis situation. Particularly salient during the Mediterranean migration surge of the 2010s, the term portrays these arrivals as urgent and disruptive. It is most often applied to landings in Southern Italy and on islands such as Lampedusa and Sicily, and its usage is highly politicized, influencing both public perception and governmental policy approaches.

of arrival. Rather than offering an exhaustive analysis, my aim is to foreground some key moments and tensions that emerge when these histories are brought into relation, and to suggest how they may help us reframe discussions around *Southern queerness* while also deepening the ways we read both texts and the worlds they inhabit. I argue that such a reframing calls for a coalitional approach—one that resists the logic of competitive memory and instead opens up space for shared forms of resistance, situated knowledge, and solidarity across difference.

It is my hope that this partial, situated account resonates with one of queer theory's earliest—and still strikingly relevant—formulations. That relevance feels all the more urgent today, as new queer subjectivities emerge beyond the historically central—but also limited and limiting—gay and lesbian framework. One enduring challenge to the coalitional approach I propose here is the very dilemma Teresa de Lauretis so clearly articulated in the early 1990s—arguably in the first use of the phrase *queer theory*:

The fact of the matter is, most of us, lesbians and gay men, do not know much about one another's sexual history, experience, fantasies, desire, or modes of theorizing. And we do not know enough about ourselves, as well, when it comes to differences between and within lesbians, and between and within gay men, in relation to race and its attendant differences of class and ethnic culture, generational, geographical and socio-political location. We do not know enough to theorize those differences.⁴

With this work, and in conversation with others engaged in similar efforts, I aim to help address this ongoing lack of knowledge and critical interrelation.

Toward a Queer Perspective on the Italian South

Queer theorist Paul B. Preciado has given a synthetic but very effective description of the *invention of the South* which takes into consideration the various and intersecting factors which contributed to it:

The South does not exist. The South is a political fiction constructed by colonial prejudice. [...] The direct consequence of the invention of the South was the construction of a modern Western fiction of the North. The North doesn't exist either. [...] The South is not a place, but rather the effect of the relationships between power, knowledge and space. Colonial modernity is inventing a geography and a chronology: the South is primitive and past. The North is progress and future. The South is the result of a racial and sexual system of social classification, a binary epistemology that opposes high and low, mind and body, head and feet, rationality and emotion, theory and practice. The South is a sexualized, racialized myth. In Western epistemology, the South is an animal, feminine, infantile, a fag. The South is potentially sick, weak, stupid, incapable, lazy, poor. The South is always represented as lacking sovereignty, lacking knowledge and wealth, and consequently, by nature indebted to the North. At the same time, the South is the place where capitalist extraction is taking place: the place where the North captures energy, meaning, enjoyment and added value.⁵

If, as Preciado writes, “the South is a sexualized, racialized myth,” these contemporary texts which focus on migration and mobility, exploring, confronting or recasting in new terms the *invention of the South*, also constitute visual and literary elaborations of very specific and situated experiences relating to race, gender and sexuality, and to the negotiations of these axes of subjectivity across languages and cultures. The aim of their critical analysis should then also be to highlight the importance of the interaction between multiple cultures, histories and elements of subjectivity

⁴ De Lauretis, “Queer Theory,” viii.

⁵ Preciado, “The South Does Not Exist,” 231.

(gender, ethnicity, sexuality) as co-constituting in the process of the creation of national and regional identity and to illustrate the concomitant emergence of new conceptions of Italian cinema and Italian literature.⁶

The many discursive frameworks that the Southern Question first brought to bear on the Italian South are today being re-examined anew in a variety of ways. A particularly significant contribution in this regard—and one that shares certain methodological parallels with my own project—is Carmine Conelli’s recent book *Il rovescio della nazione*. While focusing primarily on the role of Southern elites in the unification process and in the racialization of Southerners—especially the Southern lower classes, whose perceived unruliness and racial inferiority served to legitimize elite dominance—Conelli effectively recontextualizes the Southern Question within a broader and more complex transnational framework, that of the “global archive of coloniality,” thereby opening space for new forms of coalitional politics.⁷ *Meridionalismo*, in its various and often conflicting strands, but considered a discourse that, in its mainstream current, looked at the South with an implicitly and unacknowledged colonial lens, formed the basis of many later discussions on the South; as the afore-mentioned research on the representation of the South in the mainstream media in the last three decades demonstrates, such a lens still informs the knowledge of the region in substantial ways. The majority of the existing literature on the invention of the Italian South rarely includes an analysis of the intersectional dimension of such a process. But the main foci of race, gender and sexuality should be considered as concomitant factors that all contributed to the process of the invention of the South. This type of discussion constitutes a necessary contextual framework for the analysis of contemporary cultural production on\from the South. As Stuart Hall has argued in the clearest and most effective way, the realm of cultural representations does not represent, reflecting or distorting them, meanings and identities which are already there in the real world. On the contrary, it constitutes a domain “where we discover and play with the identifications of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time.”⁸ Stories, figures, images do not remain confined to the space of the page or of the screen, rather, literary and cinematic representations can provide shifting points of identification for viewers and readers which allow them to think and imagine themselves otherwise. What is at stake in representation is the possibility of articulating new knowledges, new identities and new meanings.

The contemporary return to the South certainly implies a reconsideration of those moments of cultural interaction in which the Italian South became one of the points on a map that spans multiple localities. It is in fact in those moments of contact that very often take place beyond the national borders, or as a result of processes of mobility, when cultural transfer becomes more evident. For this reason, in order to weigh in on the significance of contemporary representations of the South and of migration to the South, the experiences of Italian colonialism and Italian emigration represent two important contexts to scrutinize. The depiction of the contemporary relationship between Southerners and migrants is certainly informed by discourses and representations that emerged at those historical conjunctions. A transnational look at the South is thus required in order to look at its contemporary representations in a meaningful way, as they scrutinize not only the position of Southerners in relation to Italy but also a different and less linear set of relationships: first and foremost, the position of Southerners vis-à-vis the migrants of today

⁶ This has been the main aim of my recent monograph, *Reimagining the Italian South*. In the book, I present a tentative corpus of this recent cultural production, while also offering in-depth analyses of novels and short stories by writers Giulio Angioni, Evelina Santangelo, and Christiana De Caldas Brito, as well as films by directors Emanuele Crialese, Emma Dante, and Jonas Carpignano. The number of literary and cinematic texts centered around various experiences of mobility from, to, or through the South has grown exceptionally fast in recent years and is gaining greater cultural recognition and prominence in the national imagination. A comparable perspective, with a focus on more recent texts, is offered by Parrinello, “Mediterranean Thought.”

⁷ See Conelli, *Il rovescio della nazione*.

⁸ Hall, “Black Popular Culture,” 113.

coming from other more distant Souths.

Fictions of the Italian South: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Identity

The transnational recovery of the different histories of mobility that have had Italy as one of the points of a map that spreads to various parts of the globe and the consideration of their moments of connections and their integral role in the formation of national identity and culture should be done paying particular attention to aspects related to gender and sexuality, as both lived experiences and as discourses whose deployment and construction serves a political-ideological function, which in turn affect and are affected by individual experiences. Research on gender history and on the history of sexuality in Italy has contributed considerably towards gaining a more nuanced understanding of processes of “Othering” of the South in nineteenth-century Europe and Italy. The Eurocentric discourse on the degeneration of Southern Europe and Italy in the mid-eighteenth century deployed by foreign commentators included narratives on the sexual debauchery of the local population and especially on the indolent and effeminate character of Southern men. These stereotypes later became current in the political works of many *Risorgimento* patriots, being an integral part of their anti-aristocratic polemical positions.⁹ The so-called scientific theories of race elaborated by the positivist school of anthropology also made claim to the domains of gender and sexuality in order to classify individuals, cultures and nations on an evolutionary ladder and to associate criminality with racial inferiority, cultural backwardness and Blackness. Lombroso and his school had a linear, evolutionary view of sexuality: non-normative sexualities, homosexuality and gender fluidity were all seen as sexual vices that, together with many other identities labeled as perversions, were associated with a corrupted past, while the superiority of the present was demonstrated by the restrained and civilized behavior of the monogamous couple.¹⁰ Gender hierarchies and fixed roles were seen as proof of evolution, while undifferentiation of gender roles and women taking on traditionally more masculine functions or behaviors were seen as characteristic of lower races.¹¹ Sexual and gender behavior deemed perverse or abnormal were then also associated with those regions and parts of the world that were seen as inferior and backward. In the works of criminal anthropologists like Niceforo, Sergi and Ferrero shortly after the time of unification, perversion, effeminacy and sexual immorality were increasingly associated with Southern Italy and local gender and sexual identities and behaviors, like the *femminiella* in Naples or the idea, apparently quite common in some regions and social milieux of the South, that homosexuality was a normal part of male adolescents’ sexual maturation into proper adult heterosexuality, were seen as proof of degeneracy and of a North-South difference.¹² Ironically, later historians of sexuality in the 1960s and 1970s also relied on a teleological view and linear model of sexuality, usually positing a progression from sexual repression in the past to modern sexual liberation in the present. This is evident, for example, in Giovanni Dall’Orto’s discussion of what he calls “Mediterranean homosexuality”: Dall’Orto, a prominent gay activist, constructs the Mediterranean homosexual as a residual “constitutive opposite” of the so-called modern, Northern gay man, who is to be the political subject of gay liberation.¹³ In setting up this binary

⁹ Patriarca, *Italian Vices*, 20–50.

¹⁰ Babini, Beccalossi, and Riall, *Italian Sexualities Uncovered*, 2.

¹¹ Gibson and Hahn Rafter, “Editors’ Introduction,” 18.

¹² *Femminiella* refers to a historically specific Neapolitan social figure that developed in working-class settings, describing people assigned male at birth who are socially recognised through the expression of femininity. Rather than corresponding to contemporary identity-based categories, *femminielle* have been embedded in everyday social relations and ritual practices and have often been understood through symbolic or spiritual meanings. Scholars emphasize that this figure occupies an ambiguous position in relation to gender and sexuality that does not map neatly onto current trans frameworks. See Mauriello, “Corpi dissonanti”; Vesce, *Altri transiti*; see Beccalossi, “The ‘Italian Vice,’” 190–91.

¹³ Dall’Orto, “Mediterranean Homosexuality,” 796–798.

opposition, Dall’Orto reiterates the teleological, linear model of earlier commentators on Southern sexuality, de facto excluding more local and less visible forms of expression of gender and sexuality from a political horizon. Because of his teleological framework Dall’Orto fails to see what queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has considered to be one of the main axioms whose studies include a consideration of sexuality in contemporary culture should take as a starting point.¹⁴ Sedgwick cautions scholars of sexuality against the idea that different models of homosexuality (and implicitly of heterosexuality) simply supersede and substitute each other, instead arguing for a perspective which is able to “show how issues of modern homo/heterosexual definition are structured, not by the supersession of one model and the consequent withering away of another” but by the tensions between “the unrationalized coexistence of different models.”¹⁵

Unfortunately, we do not know as much about the existence of non-heterosexual communities in major cities in the South or in the North of Italy at the turn of the century as we do about European capitals like London, Paris and Berlin, even if recent historical work has started to unearth extremely interesting evidence.¹⁶ On the contrary, male homosexual tourism in Southern Italy in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries is by now well documented. Northern European homosexual tourists were drawn to Italy and especially to islands like Capri and seaside towns in the South like Taormina by a fascination with the “myth of a homoerotic Mediterranean,” which conflated notions about homosexuality in antiquity and during the Renaissance with an original appropriation of present views on the hypersexualization of Southerners.¹⁷ Without minimizing the exploitative dimension of many interactions between Southern Italian boys and Northern European travelers and the orientalist and patronizing aspects of much of the tourists’ production on the South, recent scholarship has tried to go beyond the victim/perpetrator, colonizer/colonized binaries in order to gain a more nuanced understanding of these encounters. Looking for an Arcadia untainted by the restrictive mores of their countries, Northern European homosexual artists travelling to the South often recast the discourses on Southerners’ unruly sexuality in a positive light, turning stereotypes about Italians’ sexual debauchery and effeminacy into “positive tropes of sexual freedom.”¹⁸ Although being very often quite oblivious of the power differentials between themselves and the local population, they opened up a space for experimenting with their own fantasies and desires and to indirectly criticize the laws prohibiting homosexuality in their countries.¹⁹ Both Italian and Northern European sources on southern Italy’s sexual attitudes suggest that there existed at the turn of the century certain social factors that favored the acceptance of same-sex practices at various levels of society and that these were shaped by but also ignited processes of physical and cultural mobility and contact.²⁰

Gendered and Sexualized Journeys: Emigration and Colonialism Reconsidered

The interconnected histories of colonialism and emigration, along with the various dimensions and interrelated aspects of Italian differential mobilities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, can be examined together as a means to critically interrogate the concept of Italian national identity.²¹ In this context, traditional historical accounts of emigration can be fruitfully complicated by a focused examination of gender dynamics. Before the development, in the last thirty years, of

¹⁴ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 1–65 passim.

¹⁵ Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 47.

¹⁶ See Schettini, *Il gioco delle parti*.

¹⁷ Aldrich, *Seduction of the Mediterranean*, x.

¹⁸ Beccalossi, 187.

¹⁹ Beccalossi, 202; Aldrich, 69–175.

²⁰ Beccalossi, 203.

²¹ See Burns and Polezzi, *Borderlines*; Ben-Ghiat and Hom, *Italian Mobilities*.

a growing literature on Italian women migrants, the image of women involved in migratory processes constructed by historians of migration was characterized not so much by a physical immobility, but rather by a cultural one.²² They were in fact seen either as the immobile women at home patiently waiting for their husbands to come back, or, when migrants themselves, as the ones who would simply transmit the unchanged values of their culture of origin, custodians of a static tradition for the second generations. Their role analyzed only as subordinate to and supportive of the male emigrants, they were seen as dependent and unproductive in a vision that completely ignored their reproductive work in the house and their productive work and engagements outside of the house, both in their home country and in the host countries. This situation can be seen as a consequence of a longstanding reluctance of history of migration, in line with the methodological nationalism that has characterized the humanities and the social sciences, to engage with departure contexts as well as with arrival contexts and to link the analysis of the two, and, more in general, of a widespread lack of interest on the part of scholars in various fields in the history of women from the lower classes.²³

Gender historiography on migration has been from its inception quite keen on developing a transnational framework and a comparative outlook that would consider together departure and arrival contexts. Through this approach, scholars have been able to document the experiences of lower class women by reconstructing their roles as active and mobile participants in cultural and social change both in the home country and in the host country, tracing the trajectories of their activism in various political movements in Europe, Australia, and North and South America, documenting the great variety of jobs they did and the complex negotiations between their smaller circles of belonging and the host societies.²⁴ They have contributed enormously to increasing our knowledge about the peasants' society to which the majority of Italian women involved in migratory processes belonged. They have also helped reconsider the conventional image of the white widows (the women who stayed at home while their husbands or relatives left), usually depicted as simple housewives passively waiting for their husbands, by illustrating instead the various ways in which they replaced the men who had left in many of their functions; they had to manage the remittances with great care, often integrating them with other jobs. Indeed, their activities and central roles in their communities were often perceived as threatening and caused social anxieties at many levels of Italian society.²⁵

Scholars have described how significant the political activity of Southern lower class women was in the last decade of the nineteenth century, all throughout the movements of the *fasci siciliani* (Sicilian Workers League) and of the various peasants' revolts, which were spearheaded by peasant women and seriously threatened the power of the social elites of liberal Italy.²⁶ They reconstruct a new genealogy of modern working class movements, which can be seen as having been launched by peasant women's participation in Southern Italy at the end of the nineteenth century. The period of the *fasci siciliani* and of the peasants' revolts is in fact the same period as mass emigration: peasant women through their mobility helped in spreading practices of resistance and "traditions of civil disobedience and community-wide revolts [...] independent of formal organizations" all throughout Italy and the diaspora.²⁷ The representation at the end of the nineteenth century of Southern lower-class women as victims to be rescued, as meek, submissive and docile, was embedded with the politics of representation of Southern Italy of the period, part and parcel of more general strategies utilized by Northern and Southern upper classes as a way to

²² Tirabassi, "Migrazioni in Italia," 19-40.

²³ Tirabassi, 20-21.

²⁴ Pioneering work has been done by Donna Gabaccia: see Gabaccia, *Sicily to Elizabeth Street*; Gabaccia and Iacovetta, *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives*.

²⁵ See Reedder, *Widows in White*; Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution*, 40-43.

²⁶ See Calapso, *Donne Ribelli*.

²⁷ Guglielmo, 12.

legitimize their policies and secure their social and economic position.²⁸

Emigration, and the lack of internal cohesion that characterized the newborn state were a driving force behind Italy's colonial expansion, both in the liberal and fascist phases of its history. Colonial conquest was seen as a cure for internal problems and as a means to create a national consciousness. This cohesive mechanism was considered a solution to Italy's poor material conditions and to the massive emigration that had already begun soon after unification. With colonialism, the interpretation of emigration changed, and the phenomenon could now be understood within a nationalist framework. Italian emigration began to be presented as a form of settler colonialism: initially seen as an embarrassing issue that demonstrated Italy's inability to provide for the lower strata of its population, it was reframed as a kind of civilizing mission that demonstrated the vigor and resourcefulness of the national character. An idealized link between emigration and colonialism was established: both were seen as ways to conquer new land for the rural Italian masses, and it was believed that exporting a white labor force would have a civilizing effect on the destination countries. It is not surprising, then, that the idea of demographic colonialism, promoted by many liberal governments, was viewed favorably—especially in the South, which had borne the greatest burden of unification and soon became a primary source of both Italian emigration and colonial manpower. Southerners comprised the vast majority of those who left Italy for Africa, even though this accounted for only 15 percent of total emigration during the seventy years of Italian colonialism (while North and South America received about 50 percent of Italian emigrants). Southerners made up the majority of the Italian population in all African territories occupied by Italy, particularly in Libya and the Mediterranean colonies.²⁹

As many scholars have underlined, gender is a central feature of colonialist representations, and fantasies about gender and sexuality are extremely instrumental in creating a colonialist representation of self and other that serves to consolidate unequal power relations.³⁰ Italian colonialism had a very gendered and racialized character, differently articulated in its various pre-colonial, properly colonial and post-colonial phases. As for other experiences of colonialism, the presence of Italians in the colonies was mostly composed of men and the colonial endeavor in Africa served as a way to confront and mend the supposed male identity crisis that resulted from the fast changes that Western society was starting to undergo at the end of the nineteenth century and from the new visibility that women started to secure for themselves in various realms of social life. As already mentioned, in Italy, this virilist rhetoric of regeneration had characterized the process of nation building and state formation from its very beginning. The homosocial experiences of war, camaraderie, military discipline and violence were seen as an opportunity for male regeneration. Africa, as a stage on which it was possible to demonstrate virility, heroism, the strength of the national character and the racial superiority of Italians, was very present in the collective imagination of Italians.³¹ The fascist version of this so-called African myth adapted and elaborated on previous codifications, sometimes in confrontational ways, in an effort to underscore the momentous nature of the fascist *uomo nuovo* (new man) and to comply with the explicitly imperialist policies of the regime.³²

Interracial relationships between Italian colonizers and local women took the shape of prostitution, very rarely marriage and more often of *madamismo* or *madamato*, a sort of institutionalized concubinage or temporary conjugal contract, especially present in colonial Eritrea.³³ Building on local social institutions that contemplated the existence of temporary marriages that included compensation for the women and that bound the men to a set of

²⁸ Guglielmo, 40; Gibson, "The Female Offender."

²⁹ Labanca, *Oltremare*, 390–94.

³⁰ See McClintock, *Imperial Leather*. On the Italian case, see Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop, *Bianco e Nero*; Giuliani, *Race, Gender and Nation*.

³¹ See Del Boca, *L'Africa nella coscienza*; Triulzi, "L'Africa come icona"; Triulzi, "La costruzione dell'immagine."

³² Polezzi, "White, Male and Italian?," 50–51; Stefani, *Colonia per maschi*, 42–45.

³³ Barrera, "Madamato," 69–72.

responsibilities, Italians appropriated this local tradition in a version that did not offer local women, who fulfilled the role of providing the man with all the comforts of a home, with very many rights and guarantees.³⁴ Nonetheless, in the period before the promulgation of the racial laws, *madamato* had been recognized and accepted by the white colonial society and often constituted for local women a means of social and economic mobility. In 1936 and 1937, the fascist laws that imposed strict racial segregation in the colonies and punished interracial relationships tried to eradicate the phenomenon of *madamato*, which was not in line with its imperialist ideology. Concurrently, the regime increased the subsidization of institutionalized prostitution and even imported white prostitutes from Italy in order to minimize the risks of miscegenation and racial mixing.³⁵ The racial laws did not succeed in completely eradicating the phenomenon of *madamato*, but exposed the women who entered into these types of relationships with Italian men to even more violence, since they did not even have the minimal legal protection that they had in the past.³⁶ Today, the colonial-era fixation on regulating intimate and reproductive relationships between white Italian citizens and colonized women—an obsession rooted in the desire to preserve racial purity and uphold the hierarchical structures of empire—continues to shape contemporary legal frameworks. This preoccupation led to explicit legislation aimed at preventing *meticciato*, or racial mixing, during Italy's colonial period.³⁷ Although the formal colonial context has long since ended, the underlying logics of exclusion and racial boundary enforcement persist, as evidenced by the enduring influence of these historical anxieties in present-day Italian citizenship laws.³⁸

Even if the majority of the people in the colonies were men, white Italian women were not absent and they made up one third of the entire colonial population in Mediterranean colonial Africa. The peculiar demographic nature of Italian colonialism and the fascist policies on the emigration of entire families favored the presence of Italian women, especially in the 1930s.³⁹ Their experiences varied widely according to their class belongings and role in colonial society. Although the presence of white women in the colonies has been somehow erased from the virile and misogynist representation of the colonial endeavor that its male participants tended to produce and consume, and due to the scarcity of first-hand accounts by women, recent studies have started to call into question the image of the Italian colonies as an exclusively male domain by retrieving the experiences of Italian women in the colonies, although they have mostly been able to focus on accounts by and on women of the upper classes.⁴⁰

The marginalization and splitting off of these different but connected experiences of mobility in the accounts of the nation has favored the belief in singular identities and solidified the binary opposition Italian/foreigner, contributing to the creation of a hostile climate towards the arrival of migrants in Italy today. On the contrary, attention to the interrelatedness of these experiences can help diffuse simplistic binary models of identity and devise more complex ones, thus having a positive impact towards fostering transcultural awareness and transnational forms of belonging.

Conclusions

In conclusion, I want to emphasize that as we revisit the Southern Question anew—both in our politics as queers and Southern queers, and in our ways of looking at texts and contexts—we

³⁴ Sòrgoni, *Parole e corpi*, 127-138; Iyob, "Madamismo and Beyond," 236-238. See also Pesarini, "Blood is Thicker than Water."

³⁵ Iyob, 238-239.

³⁶ Stefani, 142-143.

³⁷ See Pesarini and Tintori, "Mixed Identities in Italy."

³⁸ See Hawthorne, *Razza e cittadinanza*.

³⁹ Labanca, 398-400.

⁴⁰ See Lombardi-Diop, "Pioneering Female Modernity," 145-154; Di Pasquale, "Civilizzare le civilizzatrici."

should always make the effort to keep in mind these complex histories in which Italy and Southern Italy have been points on a map that spans multiple continents, and in which collective and individual trajectories have been shaped and determined by needs, desires, and aspirations, as well as by geopolitical and cultural factors.⁴¹ It can certainly be important work to reconstruct and popularize a somewhat hidden genealogy of transfeminist and queer Southern Italian figures and experiences to denounce the many ills afflicting Southern Italian society—such as inadequate access to healthcare, overtourism, and both literal and metaphorical desertification—and to engage, alongside artists and activists from other Souths, in critical reflection on the revolutionary potential of notions of *Southernness*.⁴² Nevertheless, it is crucial that we make a very focused, deliberate and informed effort to foreground the history and legacy of Italian emigration and colonialism, as well as their material and discursive connections to contemporary migration to Italy—connections that may not always be immediately apparent, yet have the potential to bring about deep and far-reaching cultural and social transformation. The particular aspects of the history and legacy of emigration, colonialism, and contemporary migration to Italy and Southern Italy which I have touched upon in this paper, are only some of the features related to gender and sexuality that we should take into consideration when we try to theorize our experiences—and, crucially, our differences—as queers and Southern queers. Many other could and should emerge from a continuous effort to build alliances among differentially marginalized queers and Southern queers, and to learn more about each other's lives and experiences—an effort that must be rooted in a wide array of practices of solidarity and coalition.⁴³

This is especially important today, when, as Carla Panico has shown in a detailed and methodologically rigorous article, the memory of the marginalization of Southern Italy and the memory of Italian colonialism in Africa increasingly risk becoming competitive memories. Panico's article explores how Italy's history of internal colonialism in the South and its external colonialism in Africa are remembered—or more often, forgotten—in national discourse. Drawing on Michael Rothberg's concept of multidirectional memory, Panico cautions against framing these histories in opposition to each other. Instead, they should be understood in a more nuanced and interconnected way that recognizes both shared and distinct forms of oppression.⁴⁴

The form of historical reappraisal I advocate in this article—intended to provide a critical and interdisciplinary framework for the analysis of both literary and cinematic texts—is consistent with the increasing integration of transnational and global perspectives within contemporary scholarship on gender and sexuality, particularly in relation to their complex and historically situated intersections with ethnicity. A transnational outlook on gender and sexuality requires a shift in interpretation that goes beyond the colonizer/colonized binary and away from an exclusive focus on “the nation, the local or the disembodied and de-contextualized subject of rights,” a “reconfiguration of the intimate and proximate” and an effort to intercept translocal processes of resignification, negotiation and creation of new meanings.⁴⁵ While many interventions remain somehow Northern-centered, accounts by scholars with an interest in the Global South are growing and have started to pose a set of new questions on the localization and globalization of sexuality, on the extent to which a colonialist outlook has constituted sexuality as an object of

⁴¹ In a seminal article, Emma Bond contrasts the often-abstract ways in which the global has typically been conceptualized in Italian cultural studies by introducing the notion of a hyphenated trans-nationalism. This concept represents a “sustained critical engagement with the real-life processes of trans-nationalism and globalization itself.” According to Bond, Italy can be understood as a trans-, in-between space capable of queering conventional notions of national time and space. This interpretation is grounded in several factors: Italy's history of colonialism and both internal and external emigration, which disrupt the linear temporality and bounded spatiality of the nation; its peripheral, southern position and status within Europe; and its image as a country marked by a never-fully-achieved modernity. See: Emma Bond, “Towards a Trans-national Turn,” 415.

⁴² See Amenta and Fauzia, *Femminismo terrone*; Tateo, “Editoriale.”

⁴³ See Acquistapace et al., “Tempo di essere incivili.”

⁴⁴ See Panico, “Colonialismo italiano.”

⁴⁵ Povinelli and Chauncey, “Thinking Sexuality Transnationally,” 440.

interest for various disciplines in the North and the South and on the relationship between modernity, sexuality and processes of nation-building in the South.⁴⁶ Their insights challenge the West's "selective memory of sexual pasts" and its pretension to be the beacon of tolerance, freedom and sexual rights, conveniently based on the forgetting of its past of colonialism and exploitation and present conditions of misogyny, racism, and homo- and transphobia.⁴⁷

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⁴⁶ Wieringa and Sivori, *Sexual History of the Global South*, 4.

⁴⁷ Wieringa and Sivori, 11.

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