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Utrecht University - Granada University  
Faculty of Arts – Women's studies  
Master GEMMA  
“Erasmus Mundus Master’s Degree in Women's and Gender Studies”  
Year 2012/2013

## **Postcoloniality and the Italian South: Race, Gender, Sexuality, Literature**

Supervisor: Dr. Sandra Ponzanesi  
Support Supervisor: Prof. Adelina Sánchez Espinosa

Goffredo Polizzi  
Utrecht, August 2013



Universiteit Utrecht



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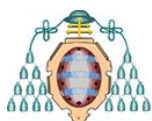
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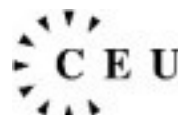
## Postcoloniality and the Italian South: Race, Gender, Sexuality, Literature

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ALMA MATER STUDIORUM  
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## Abstract

A recent stream of scholarship has described the Italian process of unification (1861-1865) as an instance of “internal colonialism”, in which the “Othering” of the South served in producing, by opposition, a “modern” Italian identity.

The main question that this thesis aims to answer is how literary representations of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationhood, sustained or ran counter the process of Othering of the Italian South in some of the crucial periods of contemporary Italian history. It takes as case studies three different novels. The second half of the nineteenth century is the period when the problematic unification of the country was carried out. Federico de Roberto is probably the Italian writer of the time that has been the most critical about the process of Italian unification. In his major novel women play a pivotal role; the analysis of De Roberto's female characters in *The Viceroys* (1894) is carried out in relation to the ways in which the nationalist discourse of the time mobilized notions about gender and sexuality.

The second chapter focuses on the fascist *Ventennio*. Elio Vittorini's *Conversations in Sicily* (1938) stands out in this moment as expressing a nuanced meditation on the status of difference in the fascist period; a meditation that is carried out from a “southern” point of view. Vittorini's meditative novel effectively deconstructs fascist gender stereotypes, a homogenous idea of Nation and makes visible the hybridity of the “southern Italian subject”.

The postmodern period (from the 70s to the present) and the recently rediscovered novel by Goliarda Sapienza, *The Art of Joy* (written between 1968 and 1977) form the focus of the third chapter. The symbolism of Sapienza's style is particularly fit for being read with a method of close reading that can account for the rich texture of the language used by the author and the recurrence of some specific tropes and themes linked to the history of marginalization of the South.

## Table of Contents

<b>Acknowledgments</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>8</b>
1 Postcolonial Southern Italy?	10
1.1 Internal and External Colonialism	11
2 Race, Ethnicity, Coloniality, Southern Italy	18
2.1 Racism Today	22
2.2 Postcolonial Studies Italian Style: Meridionalismo and Pensiero Meridiano	24
3 Feminism, Gender Studies and Postcoloniality in Italy	28
3.1 Why Have Italian Gender Studies been Colorblind?	
29	
3.2 (Post)Colonial Italian Gender Studies	31
3.4 Outsourcing Patriarchy to the South	32
3.5 Mediterranean Homosexuality	35
4 Conclusions: Literature	37
<b>Federico De Roberto and the Monstrous Birth of the Nation: <i>The Viceroy</i> (1894) as a Gothic Novel</b>	<b>41</b>
1 The Plot and stylistic features.	42
2 The theme of Race	44
3 <i>The Viceroy</i> as a Gothic Novel	48
4 Re-production and Degeneration	53

<b>Postcolonial Melancholia in Vittorini’s <i>Conversations in Sicily</i> (1937)</b>	<b>58</b>
1 Postcolonial Melancholia	59
2 The Orient in <i>Conversations in Sicily</i>	62
3 Deconstructing fascist militarized masculinity	69
<b>The Art of Change. Goliarda Sapienza's <i>The Art of Joy</i> (1968-1977) and the colonialist “discourse of unchangeability”</b>	<b>74</b>
1 Modesta’s Journey	75
2 Fruitful Contradictions and Eccentric Subjectivity in <i>The Art of Joy</i>	77
3 Contradiction in <i>The Art of Joy</i> as Postcolonial Hybridity?	81
4 Rewriting Race and Degeneration: Intertextual Relations between <i>The Art of Joy</i> and <i>The Viceroy</i> s	91
5 Conclusions	96
<b>Conclusions: Notes for a Future Project</b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>108</b>

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\* \* \*

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Introduction:  
Postcoloniality and the Italian South.  
Race, Gender, Sexuality, Literature

On the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Italian unification, in 2011, the *Risorgimento*, the process of unification of the country and of creation of a nation state in the period from 1861 to 1865, was celebrated as a glorious, patriotic, “moment of origin”. This celebration is certainly appropriate and even more so in the face of the divisionist rhetoric that right-wing and openly racist parties like the Italian “Northern League” effectively utilize in order to gain political consensus. Nonetheless these recent celebrations could have been more reflective of the problems and the inequalities that the *Risorgimento* created or somehow worsened: the uneven distribution of resources and power between the north and the south of Italy continues to this very day to be one of the major issues in the country. The history of *Risorgimento* in fact can be said to be a somehow colonial one: the annexation of the south was carried out in a violent way notwithstanding popular opposition in the south. Rather than being an occasion for reopening a debate on the injustices that lie at the heart of the national identity and of the national history, the public discourse in Italy, both the institutional one and the one deployed by different mainstream medias unfailingly tied to the biggest Italian parties, has preferred to put aside such questions in the name of “unity and cohesion”. This lost occasion is only the umpteenth instance of a more general obliviousness in the country's collective memory: a removal that can be said to constitute the specificity of the relation



of Italian culture at large with its colonial past (or colonial pasts).

In this work I will focus on southern Italy and on the possibility of addressing such a context via Postcolonial Theory. A postcolonial approach to Italy should try to recover the history and the memory of the Italian imperial endeavors in Africa, the voices of the massive emigration from Italy from the late nineteenth century up to the 1970s (both internal and external), and should be able to relate these different but interconnected histories to the present state of Italian multiculturalism engendered by a recent wave of immigration. It should try to see these different moments of Italian history as linked, try to theorize the link between them and take their legacy to bear onto the present. These hidden histories, and the repression of them, have tremendous repercussion on the present time, but these go unnoticed because of the scant awareness of the role that both the internal and the external colonialism, and the phenomenon of emigration, have had and continue to have in the construction of Italian identity.

I would also advocate, in the field of Italian Studies, for a queer and intersectional approach in conjunction with a postcolonial one. Let me then explain what I mean with these words in relation to the specificity of the Italian context.

A queer approach would mean a utilization of the category of gender and of the distinction of gender and sex in ways that don't naturalize or essentialize one or the other and an approach to sexuality not as simply equating sexual orientation but based on a wider notion of sexuality that would open it up to a consideration of how sexuality, and hence subjectivity, is also shaped by political and social processes (including racism and colonialism) in ways that are context-specific and not easily predictable, and in ways that leave their mark across different generations.

An intersectional approach (Collins 2000, Wekker 2006, Yuval-Davis 2009) would mean, in Italy, stopping subsuming all the differences under the rubric of class on one hand, or of a universalized notion of sexual difference on the other, but rather trying to see the mutual imbrications of race, class, gender, sexuality as well as the emergence of “other differences” that we might still be unaware of or that might still be under-theorized.

## **1 Postcolonial Southern Italy?**

In his recent article on the usefulness of Postcolonial Theory in general and in the French context in particular Jean-Francois Bayart provides a searing critique of the field. Bayart points out what he calls methodological errors in Postcolonial Studies (namely a certain “reification” of what it is to be defined as a proper “colonial situation”) and calls for a greater contextualization and historicization in order to avoid some of the possible shortcomings. Although Bayart doesn't dismiss Postcolonial Studies entirely he goes as far as affirming that “for all its usefulness, Postcolonial Studies is largely unnecessary. Most of the issues it has explored had been explored previously or were simultaneously being investigated by other theories, which often avoid the pitfalls into which postcolonial Studies fell” (Bayart 2011, p.65).

Somewhat provocatively Bayart raises an important question, one that we should ponder on: if it is to avoid becoming a new normative and exclusive label that falls in the trap it wants to criticize, Postcolonial Studies need to be made more “local” and parochial; they should also be able to account for the diversity of the contexts they are applied to, while at the same time avoiding fostering somehow essentialist, (or in the worst case scenario even nationalist) ideas about coherent, self-sufficient identities. A certain productive tension between universality and particularity needs to be left unresolved.

Keeping this in mind I would like to reflect on the conditions of applicability of Postcolonial Studies to the southern Italian context, starting with a summary of the contemporary history of the region.

## 1.1 Internal and External Colonialism

The Historian Piero Bevilacqua offers a concise and useful account of the history of Southern Italy from before the unification to the present day in his recently republished “History of Southern Italy” (Bevilacqua 1993); I'm going to follow it here at some length in order to give a brief historical overview<sup>1</sup>.

According to Bevilacqua, although southern Italy found itself in a politically subaltern position in regard to other European countries in the period before unification, its economic conditions were not bad. In 1815 the congress of Vienna restored Ferdinand I of Bourbon to the throne of Naples, with the intent of going back to the way things were before the Napoleonic storm. The Kingdom included the whole of southern Italy and the island of Sicily; its population was comprised for the 80% of small farmers and peasants. Agriculture was then the main activity carried out in southern society, but industries were not absent either, fostered by local and foreign investments in various sectors. Although vexed by some serious problems and certainly not at the same level of other European countries that had undergone a more ancient industrialization, the economy of the southern kingdom was, in the first half of the nineteenth century, not in an extremely poor condition and only slightly less prosperous than the economy in the northern part of Italy (Ibidem, p.56).

The situation changed after the expedition of the Thousand (1860-1861), led by Giuseppe Garibaldi with the support of the House of Savoy and their Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia. The Kingdom of Naples was unified to the rest of the country to form the Kingdom of Italy, after a plebiscite that took place on March 17<sup>th</sup> 1861. But the way in which the unification was carried out had serious repercussions on the situation of the southern regions. The unification had in fact consisted basically in a military and institutional operation, with scant popular participation. Moreover the biggest part of the

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<sup>1</sup> The literature on the history of the Italian South and its uneven relation to the North is vast and has undergone many changes throughout the decades; recent interesting historical contributions include the following: Antonino De Francesco, *La palla al piede*, Milano: Feltrinelli, 2012. Carlo Petraccone, *Le due civiltà. Settentrionali e Meridionali nella storia d'Italia dal 1860 al 1914*, Bari: Laterza, 2000. Ernesto Galli della Loggia ed., *Due Nazioni. Legittimazione e delegittimazione nella storia dell'Italia contemporanea*, Bologna: Il Mulino, 2003.

southern population, (especially in Sicily, where an independent revolution in 1848 had temporarily overthrown the Bourbons and had resisted repression for 16 months), had adhered to Garibaldi's endeavor with the hope of becoming either a democratic independent state or part of a democratic confederation of Italian states, and certainly not with the idea of being annexed to the Kingdom of Piedmont. Many people in the South had also hoped for a redistribution of land that would undo the feudal agricultural system and that could have fostered a more equal balance of social relations among classes, one that the new state did not promote. The majority of the population in the former Kingdom of Naples was then probably hostile to their new king, possibly perceived as a foreign power that had deposed the legitimate dynasty (Ibidem, p.63).

It is then not surprising that, right after unification, started the longest and most violent civil war of the history of the Italian state: the war against Southern Brigandage. From 1861 to 1866 a big part of southern Italy was traversed by armed groups of people, mostly farmers and former soldiers of the Bourbon army that plundered and raided the properties of the vast-land owners, in open defiance of the new state. These bands were usually protected by the local population that often saw them as their only real defense against the abuses of the police and of the upper classes. These groups were comprised by farmers vexed by the new taxes imposed by the government, disappointed from the missed chance of the re-distribution of land, and angry against the required military service imposed to the youngest men who were the most efficient workers in the fields. Many former soldiers that the dismantling of the Bourbon army had left with nothing also joined the armed bands. The Brigands were given the ambiguous endorsement of the dethroned king of Bourbon, who was hoping that a revolt could bring him back to power. The repression from the new state was extremely harsh. In 1863 a special legislation named "legge Pica" was passed that declared a state of siege in the southern regions; half of the Piedmontese army was sent to the south and their repression was ferocious. At the end of the conflict, in 1866, the brigands were decimated; approximately 4 thousands brigands had been killed while only around 300 Piedmontese soldiers had lost their life. The extremely violent repression of Brigandage marked negatively, since the very

beginning, the relationship between the southern population and the new state (Ibidem, p.64). The history of Brigandage is being told from a point of view that, even if it tries to counter the rhetoric of Risorgimento, still tends to project onto Brigand men and women romanticized gender stereotypes related to their being southerners (Bruno Guerri 2011). A very novel and fresh narrative perspective on the phenomenon of Brigandage, seen through the eyes of an original female character, is offered by the novel *La Briganta (The Woman Outlaw)* by the feminist writer Maria Rosa Cutrufelli, first published in 1990.

The new state also did not do its best to fight against southern criminal organizations in the south like the Sicilian Mafia and the Neapolitan Camorra. It did not address in fact the inequalities that marked the relations among classes in the south, inequalities on which these organizations thrived. Moreover, in some cases they even relied on them in order to get a better control of the local population (Ibidem, p.72).

As for the economy, the protectionist policy that had marked the rule of the Bourbons and that had allowed the southern economy to grow, was now substituted in the Unitarian state by a *laissez-faire* attitude that was favorable to southern agriculture (at least initially) but that did not benefit at all the industries in the region; in the long run this determined the persistent idea, among the ruling class of the new state, that the only vector of economic development in the south had to be agriculture: the total lack of any industrial strategy for the south in the thirty years that followed the unification seriously damaged the prospects of the region; the fact that there actually was in those regions an industrial tradition that could have been worth saving was completely forgotten (Ibidem, pp.82-84).

All of this led, in less than 40 years, to a situation of actual economical dualism and growing disparity among the south and the north. According to Bevilaqua, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the disparity among the North and the South had become something like an “auto-dynamic mechanism” that tended to widen the distance among the two parts of the country. While the north consolidated its industrial basis in the first

decade of the century, the south, that had been stripped of its industrial potentialities, stopped attracting any new activity; whoever was willing to invest capital in a new entrepreneurial endeavor was more likely to do so in the north than in the south, since in the north an industrial structure was already in place. Moreover the few remaining entrepreneurs in the south did not have a social weight that would influence their society at large while the majority of southern politicians, for electoral reasons, were the spokespersons for the interests only of the vast-land owners and of the farmers and fieldworkers (Ibidem, pp.97-98).

The First World War also widened the economical distance among the North and the South, as industries from the North benefited from the demands for machines, arms and goods for the army that the war induced. Such a trend did not reverse with fascism, on the contrary, during Mussolini's regime the south was pushed even more towards agriculture as its principal activity. After World War II, in that moment of re-boostered economical impulse known as the economical “boom” or the economic miracle, the south did not partake of the positive effects that were transforming the economy in the rest of the country. Notwithstanding the governmental program of the Southern Development Fund (*Cassa per il mezzogiorno*) launched in 1950 with the aim of somehow reducing the distance among the two parts of Italy, the divide remained of great concern. After a moment of stasis in the 70s the economical imbalance started growing even deeper in the 80s and it is still growing nowadays (Ibidem, pp. 107-109)

Massive emigration from southern regions was one of the outcomes of the economic insecurity in the south and of the “auto-dynamic mechanism” that Bevilacqua refers to. Emigration happened in two major waves, although it always was a continual flow. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century masses of southern workers left their towns to go to South and North America; according to the figures offered by Bevilacqua more than 5.400.000 people left from southern Italy between 1876 and 1914, inducing a deep process of social transformation. Going away represented a way for breaking loose with the power exerted by land owners on workers. The farmers who

stayed saw their salaries rise and had the opportunity to negotiate better conditions of work. Women started to be more relevant as workers, even in jobs that had previously been done only by men. Very often the farmers who had emigrated would come back, at least from time to time, having earned considerable amounts of money and having acquired precious experiences abroad. The money that the emigrants would send home had an incredible impact on the lives of the most poor and disenfranchised part of the population of the south and very often would help them step out of poverty, making it possible, for example to buy small properties or start a commercial venture. All of this was of course achieved most of the times at the cost of a very hard life and very hard work, and left the south deprived of its brightest and youngest energies. (Ibidem, p. 94)

The second wave of emigration happened in the decades of the 50s, 60s and 70s, when the technological changes that took place in agriculture left millions of people unemployed: when we look at the historical moment of the economic miracle it is important to underline how the boost to the economy that graced the northern part of Italy was accompanied by massive emigration in the South. Between 1946 and 1976 more than 4 million people left the South, and this time it was not only farmers and field workers but also a large part of the lower middle class. They went to North and South America, but also to other parts of Europe where cheap labor was required (France, Germany, Switzerland, Belgium), and many moved to the biggest cities in the north, going away without any kind of help or support from the state. At the same time a process of internal migration took place: people from the internal countryside and from the mountains moved to the biggest southern cities that were very much unprepared to receive them, thus determining a situation of unruly growth of the peripheries that still shapes the appearance of these cities. (Ibidem, p.156) Migration from the south never completely stopped and it is growing even faster than before in recent years under the form of a “brain drain” that leaves the southern regions impoverished of the youngest and most educated people.

Bevilacqua’s work is very interesting and very well documented, nonetheless its

exclusive focus on facts of a purely economic nature and his unquestioned and single model of economic development somehow undermine the potentialities of his book as a tool for reactivating wider processes of self-understanding in Italy and in the South in particular. Moreover references to the Italian external colonialism in Africa and to the links among the internal and external colonialism are missing. His very valuable study is somehow symptomatic of the limits of a traditional historical approach.

In her “Paradoxes of Postcolonial culture” (Ponzanesi 2004), one of the first works to use postcolonial lenses to look at the specificity at the Italian case, while also framing it in the international context of postcolonial studies dominated by Anglo-Indian voices, Sandra Ponzanesi offers an account of Italian external colonialism making very clear its links with Italy’s internal tensions. The first campaigns of Italian colonial conquest were launched soon after unification under the liberal governments of De Pretis and Crispi and targeted territories in the horn of Africa that had not been already colonized by other European powers. Italy established its rule on parts of today’s Eritrea (1882) and in Somalia (1889). From there, Italy tried to expand in parts of today’s Ethiopia waging war against the Ethiopian Emperor Menelik II. The Italian defeat in Adwa in 1896 had a strong symbolic resonance and remained an open wound in the nationalistic ego of the country, one that later Mussolini set to avenge. (Ibidem, pp.110-113). Soon before WWI, (in 1911), under the liberal government of Giovanni Giolitti, Italy waged war against the troubled Ottoman Empire in order to conquer the North African territories of today’s Lybia. The war was successful but its very high costs only served in worsening the already fragile Italian economy.

In 1935 Mussolini declared war against the *Negus* of Ethiopia Haile Selassie, the war was much longer than the regime was anticipating but eventually successful, also thanks to the use of extremely toxic chemical weapons that had been banned by the League of Nations. Finding itself isolated in Europe after this victory fascist Italy was pushed even further into the orbit of Nazi Germany. (Ibidem, pp.118-119)

The lack of internal cohesion that characterized Italian history was a driving force



behind the Italian colonial expansion, both in its liberal and fascist phases; colonial conquest was seen as a cure to the internal evils and as a way to create a national consciousness. This “cohesive device” (Ibidem, p.107), was considered to be a solution for Italy’s poor material conditions and to the massive emigration that, as we have seen, had already started soon after unification. Moreover Italian colonialism had a very gendered and racialized character, differently articulated in its various phases, whose shifts Ponzanesi clearly describes with references to different types of cultural productions.

The analysis of visual, literary and musical documents in Ponzanesi’s work helps illuminating the complex interrelations of constructions of gender and race that were convenient for the legitimization of the Italian colonial endeavor in Africa and that formed the basis of Italy’s gender politics in the colonies; Moreover they go beyond the limits of a traditional historiography to which Bevilacqua for example can be said to cling onto. Discussing the creation and the history of the North-South divide for example Bevilacqua comments that:

It would be certainly unfair, and historically incorrect to say [...] that the northern industrialization was obtained at the expenses of the south. In the same way it would be incorrect to say that a sort of colonial politics was implemented at that time against the regions of the south” (Bevilacqua 1993, p.100, my translation).

Bevilacqua backs up his claim with facts of economical nature and with figures about northern and southern industrialization, in a way that is fitting with his framework based more on the economical dimension and only marginally on other aspects. In this way he might fall in the trap of somehow reifying the colonial/postcolonial situation that Bayart warns against. In fact if we look more at the cultural dimension of the history of the relationship among the southern and the northern part of Italy a different picture starts to emerge, and the colonial nature of such a relationship can be seen with more evidence.

## **2 Race, Ethnicity, Coloniality and Southern Italy**

A handful of scholars in Italy and abroad have discussed the cultural dimension of the relationship North-South and their insights can offer a valid integration to Bevilacqua's account of the history of southern Italy. But among these scholars too there is not a complete consensus on the applicability of the language of postcolonial theory and of the categories of race and ethnicity to the southern Italian context. John Dickie carefully cautions us against a too coarse use of the category of race that he sees deployed in many studies on the so called “southern question”:

The horrendous forms of oppression that have been legitimated by racism make it both an important and a difficult object of historical study. The study of racism is accompanied by a loose but interrelated set of analytical habits. Too often, perhaps, the need to disprove and condemn racial theories has left little room for historicization and analysis. [...] Some commentators on the race debate in *fine secolo* Italy have resorted to the kind of nonexplanation that attributes racism to ignorance (yet people are prejudiced because of the way they organize what they *do* know rather than because of what they do not). There is also a tendency to ignore the variety and indeed vagueness of the use of the term “race,” and thereby to reduce racism to a single and unchanging thesis according to which race is the *causa causarum* in human affairs. There is also the temptation to see bigotry only in those instances in which racial language is used, or to see racial chauvinism as the secret essence of all forms of ethnic prejudice. (Dickie 1999, pp.4-5)

He finds a more fruitful line of thought in interpreting prejudice against the south in terms of an ethnocentrism that doesn't necessarily implies the utilization of the language of race, although it does so at times. Racism should then be understood as a “subset of ethnocentrism”, one that can produce many different concepts and discourses of race based on the political needs of the moment that the social actors might have. (Ivi)

At the same time it is very important to be aware of how racism has changed in the last 50 or 60 years as Vito Teti says in the new preface to his fundamental study of anti-southern racism. Neo-racism doesn't appeal to science or anthropology anymore but rather to culture and “cultural differences” seen as negative, unchanging and somehow essential of a certain group (Teti 2011, p.17). But this was of course not always the case

and Teti's anthology of anti-southern prejudice traces the history of the semi-scientific legitimation of racism against the southerners from the time of unification to the present day. Teti refers to the anti-southern prejudice as an “anthropological novel” that starts with the work of Alfredo Niceforo (1876-1960), a positivist anthropologist that dedicated his work to proving “scientifically” the racial, moral, social, psychological and physical inferiority of southern Italians when compared to northern Italians and northern Europeans. Niceforo worked and wrote at a time when, already since 20 years or so, the intellectuals that participated in the so called trend of *Meridionalismo*<sup>2</sup>, had described in detail the huge difference among the north and the south of Italy at the time, denouncing the extremely poor conditions of the south as the effect of the failure of Risorgimento: as the outcome of the problematic way in which the process of unification had been completed. Niceforo's theories then represented a nice “way out” that somehow acquitted the unification of its share of responsibility and blamed the very population who had paid the highest price for the political shortcomings of the Risorgimento. For this reason then his theories were politically very convenient to the elites of the new state.

For elaborating his theories Niceforo mainly referred to his teacher, the founder of the Italian school of criminology Cesare Lombroso, a very influential figure in the scientific culture of late nineteenth century. In his most popular book, *Criminal Man*, written in 1876 and soon translated into English and French, Lombroso linked criminal behavior to races and tried to devise ways to discover a natural proclivity to crime through the identification of physical characteristics that differentiated various races, (especially through the measurement of the skull). Lombroso had included southern Italians among the races who were more inclined to commit crimes citing southern brigandage as a proof to corroborate his theories. He had also dedicated an entire book to his experience in Calabria as a doctor in 1862, where, conducting research on the local population, (on their bodies as well as on their culture and habits), he had arrived to the same conclusions. (Gibson 2002, p.128))

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<sup>2</sup> As we will see, *Meridionalismo* can be defined as the tradition of thought that critically addressed, since the period of the unification, the nature and the causes of the disparities between the north and the south, and that looked for possible solutions of what was called “the southern question”.

Alfredo Niceforo picked up where his teacher had left and dedicated a trilogy to the inferiority of the southerners: the first book *Crime in Sardinia* was published in 1897; here Niceforo related the crime in the Island to the existence of a Mediterranean Race and used the analysis of local music, songs, traditions and folklore as a proof of the Sardinians' racial inferiority and tendency to crime. Niceforo took the idea of a Mediterranean Race from another scientist affiliated to the school of criminology, Giuseppe Sergi; from him he also adopted the idea of a difference among an Aryan, Celtic race of Germanic origins, in northern Italy and a Mediterranean, Italic southern race of African origins, in the south; a race that represented almost a case of "arrested development" of biology and culture, an inferior stage in the ladder of evolution. This insight was brought to the fore in his second book, *Contemporary Barbarian Italy*, published in 1898 where Niceforo wanted to prove the existence of two separate races in the Italian state. This division had serious political implications and according to Niceforo only the northerners deserved political freedom while the southerners had to be governed with despotism and imposing a strict rule on them. The latest of Niceforo's books dedicated to the South, *Northern Italians and Southern Italians* came out in 1901; it was largely based on his previous work but focused more on the concept of "degeneration" and "decadence". Niceforo had a teleological idea of civilization: he identified the most advanced civilization in the Anglo-Saxon countries, which were thus presented as the stage to be attained by everyone else. The concept of degeneration allowed Niceforo to explain how countries like Italy and Greece that had had a great importance in the history of the west were now in a "less developed" state. Interestingly enough Niceforo was Sicilian and according to Mary Gibson his work represents an instance of "southern complicity" in the creation of an anti-southern cultural climate after unification. (Ibidem, p.132).

Lombroso, Sergi, Niceforo and other positivist criminologist offered scientific legitimation to stereotypes about southern Italy that were periodically resorted to in order to justify the harshness of the treatment reserved to the south. These stereotypes depicted the South and its inhabitants as:

a place of illiteracy, superstition, and magic; of corruption, brigandage, and cannibalism; of pastoral beauty and tranquility admixed with dirt and disease; a cradle of Italian and European civilization that is vaguely, dangerously, alluringly African or Oriental. The South as the theater of sweet idleness (*dolce far niente*) and of the “crime of honour”; of tragic courage and farcical cowardice; of abjection and arrogance; of indolence and frenzy. Southerners as a friendly people in whom lie dormant the seeds of *mafiosità* and atavistic violence; a “woman people” who practice an “Arabic” oppression of women; a pathologically individualistic people who are nonetheless indistinguishable in their teeming masses or bound to the tribal logic of familism; a people both ungovernable and slavish. The South as a society verging on anomie that is resilient in its feudalism or clientelism; a society shot through with residues of a precapitalist past (Dickie 1999, p.14)

Nonetheless these representations were very likely already circulating long before their positivist codification, and it is important also to consider the international framing of the creation of stereotypes about the south. According to Nelson Moe stereotypes about the south date at least back to the second half of the eighteenth century when an increasing Eurocentrism used the south for marking the difference among the countries of Europe that were leading in the way to progress (France, England and Germany) and the countries who were lagging behind; countries that were dangerously close, in nature and in spirit, to Africa and to the Orient. (Moe 2002, p.2)

A very interesting source for tracing the origins of the stereotypes on southern Italy are the diaries and the narrations of Northern European travelers in the grand tour that unfailingly described southern Italy as a “paradise inhabited by devils”.

This situation was of course of very much consequence for the political events inside Italy and Aliza Wong, referring to Moe’s work, describe its effect has having a double-edgedness:

this neo-Orientalist discourse within Italy itself operates on two parameters. Northerners, in their attempt to have Italy included within the larger imperialist, industrial, progress-driven Europe, found Italy’s weakness in the distant south, a place less civilized and thus further from the European core, and displaced the failures of the country onto its most sensitive and volatile region. At the same time, some southerners began to articulate the northerners’ meridionalist discourse, criticizing their native society and culture, and lent credence to the political and cultural debates (Wong 2006, p.6)

## 2.1 Racism Today

But what would be the relevance and the timeliness for today's political and cultural landscape of going back to this history of racialization of the southerners that lies at the heart of Italian national formation?

Some recent interventions have reflected on this issue and have addressed the *foreclusion* of race in the Italian public sphere, trying to understand what kind of power mechanisms it has served and it still serves in the present day; these scholars and activists strongly argue for the (re)introduction of the concept of race, racism and especially the concept of *racialization* in the public debate in Italy as critical tools that can give us a better understanding of past and contemporary phenomena of exploitation and marginalization in Italy and in Europe.

In their introduction to the issue of the *Darkmatter* online journal dedicated to racism in Italy, Anna Curcio and Miguel Mellino argue that the problematic disavowal and foreclusion of Race in Italian public debate, (even in the anti-racist movement, when it comes to anti-southern racism), goes hand in hand with the increase of racial conflict and racist episodes in the country. Inspired by the field of *Critical Race Studies* that has its roots in the American civil rights movement, Curcio and Mellino see the introduction of the lexicon of race in the Italian public sphere as a way for challenging contemporary Italian racism and they give an account of contemporary Italian history that wants to trace the work of racialization<sup>3</sup>. They also want to develop a framework where the imbrication and the complex relation between different forms of racism in Italian History are taken into consideration:

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<sup>3</sup> Curcio and Mellino so define the term: "by racialization we mean the effect on the social fabric of a multiplicity of institutional and non institutional practices and discourses oriented towards a hierarchically connoted representation of physical and cultural, real and imaginary *differences* and hence to the disciplining of their material and inter-subjective relationships. Oversimplifying, we think that the concept of racialization, since it is highly saturated with the disturbing colonial and imperial legacy of race, is more suitable than others connoted with more neutral meanings (such as ethnicization or multiculturalism, for instance) to describe in an effective way the economic and cultural processes of essentialization, discrimination, inferiorization and segregation, that is of symbolic and material violence, to which certain groups in the Italian and European social space are nowadays submitted" (Curcio & Mellino 2010, p.4)

we want to argue that racism has *fractured* the Italian national space right from the birth of the modern nation in 1861 and, consequently, the terrain has been prepared for the contemporary racialization of international migration. In fact, it is not possible to understand the contemporary postcolonial migrant as the key representative of race without taking into account the cultural, political and economic construction – and hence their role within historical Italian capitalism – of its main ancestors: the southerner and the colonial other (during the first liberal and fascist moment), the Jew (in the later fascist period), the southern migrant (second Post-war Republic). (Curcio & Mellino 2010, p.6)

Curcio and Mellino then see the use of the prejudice against southerners as serving the needs of an incipient capitalism and of the formation, for the first time in the second half of the nineteenth century, of a labor market on a national scale. This is especially evident when looking at the history of migration from the south to the north.

Using a very similar framework Caterina Miele also links the history of the Italian South after Unification to Italian Emigration and to the History of Italian Colonization thus exploring the complex links among internal and external colonialism throughout different stages of Italian contemporary History; Miele sees an important continuity among southern emigration and Italian Colonization in Africa. The repressive practices that were first experimented in southern Italy during the repression of southern Brigandage were few decades later applied to the African population during the colonial endeavor. Miele's take on the phenomenon of Emigration is a very interesting one: she refers to the experience of emigration as being more ambivalent than what is usually described and states that, even when considering the phenomena of emigration it is important to see the links with the post-unitary racialization and the external colonialism. Italian migrants to North America for example were divided between southerners and northerners when they arrived in the United States on the basis of the distinction made by Niceforo, and better jobs were given to the northerners. On the other hand it is important to consider how Italian emigration was used as a form of settler colonialism, especially in south America and how during the time of colonialism in Africa emigration to South America, from being an embarrassing issue, came to be conceived of as a sort of “civilizing mission” and a sort of ideal link among emigration and colonialism was established: both were ways to conquer new land for the rural Italian masses, and the

exportation of white labor force, it was thought, would have had a civilizing effect. (Miele 2012)

## 2.2 Postcolonial Studies Italian Style: *Meridionalismo* and *Pensiero Meridiano*

As Bayart points out postcolonial Studies should take in great consideration the fields of thought that, in the various contexts in which it tries to adapt itself, have revolved around concerns and issues similar to its own. In the Italian and southern Italian context this would certainly mean addressing the now centuries long tradition of *Meridionalismo*.

Giuliano Minichiello has described the history of *Meridionalismo* in three phases: after a period of intense, complex and wide-ranging debate that goes from the years of the unification to the end of World War II, follows a phase of heavy political intervention from the state that tries to enact measures for solving the inequalities between the north and the south; even if some good results were attained, for a variety of reasons that I have to sidestep here, the situation has not registered a major improvement; moreover the debate around the “southern question” has lost its depth, becoming essentially a discussion in bureaucratic, technical and almost only economical terms. In the 1980s, also the economic measures enacted in the previous decades in order to foster economic development in the south have been dismantled; Minichiello's evaluations are not optimistic:

the southern question, after the abolition of meridionalistic policies, [...] risks being removed from the collective consciousness of the country. The problem is that the overlapping of meridionalistic policies, *Meridionalismo*, and extraordinary measures in favour of the south ends up overshadowing crucial aspects of the “southern question”, aspects that are not only or foremost of economic nature. (Minichiello 1997, p.66, my translation).



The cultural aspects of the “southern question” need to be kept alive as sites of debate in order for the question itself not to be completely disavowed in Italy's collective memory and consciousness, a danger even more threatening in the face of increasing diversity that constitutes the present of Italian multiculturalism. The reframing of the “southern question” in terms of a postcolonial issue could help us achieve such a goal.

The figure of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) is the one most knowingly associated with *Meridionalismo* and his work has proven extremely influential also for postcolonial thought. Gramsci's analysis of the Italian internal differences and of the “Southern Question” have spurred many critical tools (such as the notions of hegemony, subalternity and organic intellectual) that have been taken up by the Indian Subaltern Studies movement and by Edward Said in *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*, two of the founding texts of Postcolonial Studies<sup>4</sup>. Notwithstanding these southern roots of Postcolonial Studies only a handful of scholars have then followed in this path, trying to re-bringing, as it were, Gramsci home through Said's theories.

The Italian-American scholar Pasquale Verdicchio has written of a “Preclusion of Postcolonial Discourse in Southern Italy”, mostly due to a “characterization of postcoloniality almost purely in terms of problematic designations of white versus nonwhite, or First versus Third World.” (Verdicchio 1997, p.191). But the category of race, as Verdicchio demonstrates using the case of the Italian migrants in the United States, is much more ambiguous and dependent on a variety of contextual elements than the white/non-white binary would account for, and processes of racialization are not always dependent uniquely on apparently self-evident (but in reality purportedly singled out) physical differences. Verdicchio defines southern Italians as “unrecognized postcolonials” (Ivi), and delineates a very useful framework for the consideration of southern Italy through a postcolonial lens.

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<sup>4</sup> A recent evaluation of the importance of Gramsci's thought for the field of postcolonial studies can be found in the following collection: Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya eds., *The Postcolonial Gramsci*, New York: Routledge, 2012.

Making a similar argument, the Anthropologist Jane Schneider has considered the north-south dynamics in Italy as an instance of “Neo-orientalism”; Schneider describes the last twenty years in the life of Italy as a period of rekindled regionalistic conflict fostered by the different and conflicting interests of different actors on the national stage (political parties, industrial lobbies and criminal organizations of various kinds) and finds it imperative to rethink the “southern question”, via Said and his notion of Orientalism, as having a strong but somehow unacknowledged racial element. Commenting on what has become an internalized sense of inferiority on the part of southern Italians Schneider states that the task of the present is to understand “what alternative formulations might people create and live by if they were able to escape from the control of the “Question” and to imagine the political, economic and cultural differences within Italy in some other way.” (Schneider 1998, p.16).

As is the case with Verdicchio and Schneider, the majority of the scholars that have theorized the relevance for Postcolonial Studies and theory for the Italian and the southern Italian context are mostly working outside of Italy. We could wonder why this happens and a provisional answer would be that a certain resistance at addressing the north-south dynamics as a postcolonial issue comes from the fact that such a definition would amount to admitting that the relation between these two parts of the country was indeed an instance of colonialism: this idea is in fact still contested and far from being widely accepted as a springboard for further discussion. Moreover, the Italian academy has proven extremely resistant to the varied modes of analysis that fall under the general rubric of cultural studies. In my view the framing of the “southern question” as a postcolonial problem would be beneficial exactly because it would make clear that from the period of unification up until the present, (and even before), the history that we are dealing with is precisely a history of colonization whose effects are very tangible and constitute the everyday reality of millions of people<sup>5</sup>.

An attempt at combining the focus on southern Italy with a postcolonial line of

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<sup>5</sup> An articulate and very well-informed inquiry into the (mis)fortune of Postcolonial Studies in Italy is offered by Miguel Mellino; (Mellino “Italy and Postcolonial Studies: a difficult encounter”. 2006)

thought has been the one associated with the conceptualization of the Mediterranean as a postcolonial space; according to Iain Chambers, for example, southern Italy should be interpreted and should interpret itself as being part of the larger postcolonial network of the Mediterranean Sea. Southern Italy should be looking south instead of looking north, to Europe, in order to gain a better understanding of its identity. This theoretical move has to be understood on the backdrop of recent discourses on the “Europeanness” of Italy and of the becoming ever more im-porous of the southern borders of Europe. According to Chambers the Italian south can be a place from where a critique of western developmental teleologies can be sustained and an alternative to the hegemonic pressure of a certain version of modernity and of capitalist, globalizing transformations can be articulated; or, even more poignantly, from a “southern Italian” point of view it is possible to carry out a critique of western modernity from within to demonstrate its non-modernity to itself. Thus, the discourse of the Mediterranean as a site of open-ended hybridization exposes “the fundamentalism of Occidental humanism.” (Chambers 2008, p.31).

Chambers' theories can be seen as part of what Norma Bouchard calls a “Mediterranean Neo-Humanism” or as it is most often referred to in Italy as *Pensiero Meridiano*. The sociologist Franco Cassano can be considered one of its major proponents. According to Bouchard, Cassano and *Pensiero Meridiano* don't endorse a complete rejection of humanism, rather “from the framework of the Global South(s) of Postcolonial and Subaltern theory, Cassano questions the universalizing assumptions of Eurocentric Occidentalism while seeking to recover a subalternized archive of humanistic knowledge.” (Bouchard 2006, p.300). *Pensiero Meridiano* amounts then to a search for a different kind of humanism, one that is not coterminous with a Eurocentric point of view, and whose origins can be traced back to the Mediterranean. In my view *Pensiero Meridiano*, also through its engagement in Postcolonial Studies, can be said to infuse a “new life”, so to speak, into the somehow exhausted tradition of *Meridionalismo*.

### **3 Feminism, Gender Studies and Postcoloniality in Italy**

As many scholars have underlined gender is a central feature of colonialist representations and fantasies about gender and sexuality are extremely instrumental in creating colonialist representation of the other (Mc Clintock 1995, Stoler 1995). Nonetheless, in much of the literature that focuses on southern Italy, attention to gender is scant. On the other hand gender studies in Italy have rarely taken into consideration issues related to the mutual imbrication of race and gender, or of race, gender and colonialism in regard to the Italian context. In this section I'm going to discuss some of the existing studies that, taking an explicitly feminist approach, have tried to analyze the mutual construction of gender, sexuality and ethnicity in the Italian context; in the last part I'm going to discuss two original case studies in order to show what kind of phenomena such an approach could help us shed light onto.

In an article that takes to task the underling eurocentrism of much of the scholarship in the field of gender studies the African scholar Oyeronke Oyewumi calls for a greater contextualization and for a careful application of the tools of gender studies to local contexts. According to Oyewumi in many countries this need has translated itself in discussions that "have focused on the necessity of paying attention to imperialism, colonization, and other local and global forms of stratification, which lend weight to the assertion that gender cannot be abstracted from the social context and other systems of hierarchy." (Oyewumi 2004, p.2). In other words, the use of the category of gender should be a way to be aware and understand how stratification and power work in a specific place and time.

Taking my clue from Oyewumi's call for a "decolonization" of gender studies I want to analyse the present situation of gender studies in Italy. In particularly I will ask myself if gender studies in Italy have been concerned at all with questions regarding Italian colonialism and processes of racialization in the Italian context. The answer is, I can

already anticipate, yes, but not enough. In fact, we are talking of just a handful of scholars in the field of gender studies that have dedicated their research to issues related to racism and colonialism in Italian history and culture. In this paper I will first try to analyse the reasons why attention to issues of race and colonialism in Italian gender studies has been so scant; then I will describe the research carried on by those few “brave” ones that have actually used a more intersectional approach in their work and summarize the major lines of analysis that have emerged.

### 3.1 Why have Italian Gender Studies been Colorblind?

If Italian Gender studies have not taken into consideration issues regarding colonialism and racism this is also due to the aforementioned general disavowal of the colonial experience in Italian culture at large. Removal and disavowal can be said to be the specificity of the relation of Italy with its colonial past (or colonial pasts).

But to answer our initial question, we also need to analyse the specificities of Italian feminism and of the Italian feminist movement and its relation to other forms of difference throughout its history. Vincenza Perilli has dedicated an article to the (mis)fortunes of Intersectionality in Italy and in the second wave Italian feminist movement of the 1970s; according to Perilli, there was an initial phase in the early seventies in which, also in the wake of the relations that the rising Italian feminist movement had established with other movements abroad, the similarities between women and other oppressed categories (workers, migrants, gays and lesbians) were highly debated; but already in the early eighties, the centrality gained by the conception of gender as elaborated by the “philosophy of sexual difference”, inspired by the writings of Luce Irigaray, pushed considerations of the intersection of gender with “other differences” out of the feminist picture. (Perilli 2009, p.70). In a certain interpretation of this stream of feminism coming from France but absorbed very early by Italian feminists,

the difference of woman from men is seen as “the” fundamental difference, while all the other differences are seen as less important or secondary in terms of creating subjectivity and structuring social life. These other differences then, become less worthy of attention.

Perilli underlines how, in the first ten years of the feminist movement in Italy the analogy between the predicament of women and that of blacks had been very important for the coming into being of a feminist consciousness and for women to become aware of their exploitation: comparing the exploitation of blacks and the exploitation of women was a founding and fundamental gesture also for others feminist movements, for example in the U.S.A., in the U.K. and in France. Perilli also underscores how separatism, usually identified like the quintessential practice of the feminist movement, has its origin in the anti-racist struggle carried on by African-Americans. But if on one hand the analogy blacks/women has been very present and of constitutive importance, on the other it had serious shortcomings. A major one was that, when the feminist movement thought about “the blacks”, it often had in mind the anti-racist struggle carried on by African-Americans in the U.S. and tended to overlook racial stratification at home: for example the differences among southerners and northerners, or among migrants from North-Africa and Eastern Europe and the autochthones.

Another reason that can help us understand the current colorblindness of Italian gender studies can be traced back to the fact that the mutual dialogue and constitutive inter-relation between social movements and academia that has fostered a more intersectional approach in other countries, especially in the United States is absent in Italy where the academic institution has remained somehow feudal and conservative; in the U.S. and in other European countries the dialectic between movements and academia has probably been more productive. Moreover in a country of recent immigration like Italy there has not probably been a strong enough anti-racist movement, notwithstanding the long history of internal migration from the south to the north. It should also be said that Italy has been for decades the stronghold of a somehow orthodox Marxist leftist politics that has always subsumed all the various struggles carried on by different political subjects under the rubric of class struggle, Gramsci notwithstanding. Given this situation

it is not surprising that Italian gender studies has not been very keen on using a perspective where gender was made to interact with other categories such as race.

### 3.2 (Post)Colonial Italian Gender Studies?

Notwithstanding the predicament discussed above, in more recent years the field of gender studies in Italy has started to be more open to an intersectional approach and a handful of scholars have published works applying this framework.

The topics that have been the most studied by gender studies scholars in Italy are aptly summarized by Catia Papa in the voice “women colonizers” (Papa, 2012) in a recent and very interesting dictionary of the present “knots” in feminism (Marchetti, Mascat, Perilli 2012); according to Papa the issues that have been mostly taken into consideration are the analysis of the anti-colonial stance taken by the first liberal feminist movement in Italy at the end of the nineteenth century (Papa 2009); the relationship between men colonizers and indigenous women, studied through the analysis of racial and sexual politics implemented in the Italian colonies, and in particular through the history of *Madamismo*, the colonial institution that regulated the relationship between native women and Italian men (Barrera 1996, Sòrgoni 1998, Iyob 2005, Poidimani 2009, Ponzanesi 2004, 2012); the close ties between masculinity, fascism and the colonial endeavor (Stefani 2007, Benadusi 2005, Ponzanesi 2013).

As we can see, the intersection between the lenses of Gender and the lenses of race have already produced few but exciting results in the researches of these scholars. Nonetheless much still needs to be done in the pursuit of not only decolonize Italian gender studies but, more generally, of making Italy remember its past in order to understand and hopefully intervene into its contemporary problems. In the next two

sections I will discuss two case studies as an example of what kind of phenomena such an approach could shed light onto.

### 3.4 “Outsourcing Patriarchy” to the south

In a lecture delivered at Utrecht University in 2012 and titled “Outsourcing Patriarchy”, Inderpal Grewal analyzed the ways in which the notion of *honor killing* is being used in public discourse and in media in India, and how its utilization goes hand in hand with a mounting securitization based on social control and disciplinarianism that potentially bypasses democracy. According to Grewal, the concept of *honor killing* has been the object of a certain spectacularization in India; Grewal interrogates critically the ambiguous visibility of this notion in Indian public sphere pointing out that its origin might not lie in a genuine concern for women's rights and women's freedom but rather in a complex mechanism that aims at creating a favorable climate for the enactment of strict measures of political control. This goal is accomplished in two steps: exploiting these concerns for women on one hand, and targeting the Islamic minority as the patriarchal residual formation that, still affected by a traditional honor code, is portrayed as the main responsible for patriarchal attitudes towards women in the country. Grewal very poignantly demonstrates how the concept of *honour killing* came about and it is still being used as a racialized notion: among the many instances of murders of women by partners or relatives only certain types of murders are singled out and referred to as honor killings: the murders that happen in a Muslim context. *Honor killing* is considered to be typical of Mediterranean societies and somehow linked to Islam; but why are these murders singled out by the unfortunately huge bulk of murders against women and referred to with the specific term of honor killing? A term that seems to imply a somewhat “traditional” “cultural” element? Grewal notices how it's only recently that the concept has been used in Indian media but it has long been used in Europe and North America as a way of perpetuating stereotypes against Muslim minorities; Grewal makes



the point that the same use and function of the term has filtered down to Indian newspapers from North American and European media, through what she calls “transnational mediations”; through this racialized use of the concept of *honor killing* an islamophobic discourse is made possible that casts the Islamic minority as backward, traditional, premodern patriarchal thus displacing more general, “national anxieties” about modernity onto them; effectively this displacement aligns the Indian public sphere with a broader climate of transnational islamophobia. This “outsourcing of patriarchy”, (this displacement of patriarchy onto a single minority), is central in creating a national discourse of modernity that scapegoats the Islamic constituency of the country and creates a favorable climate for the enforcement of law and order measures for example in matters of immigration.

The “Outsourcing of patriarchy” is part of a general, transnational, readjustment of patriarchy itself. Analyzing the current use of the term patriarchy Grewal notices that it is used nowadays only in relation to non-western context, as if patriarchy had somehow ended in the west; against this problematic use of the term, Grewal states, it is important to point out how heteropatriarchy is transforming itself in the west, also using at its own advantage issues of women's and LGBT rights; thus certain requests by women and LGBT groups in the west have to be understood as being complicit with heteropatriarchy.

Many of Grewal’s insights regarding India can be also resonant for the Italian context; it is really important to notice how this “reshaping” of Patriarchy can be seen at work also in Italy<sup>6</sup>, and with the same goal of fostering a climate of favored securitarianism. This has been evident on the occasion of the so-called “*emergenza stupri*” in 2006, that, according to many, was a media-driven phenomenon; newspapers and televisions in Italy over-represented cases of rape enacted by migrants, in particular Romanians, coincidentally enough at the same time when the so called “*pacchetto sicurezza*”, a set of law and order laws, were being presented to the parliament. Included in the “*pacchetto*

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<sup>6</sup> An international framework that explains how stereotypes about Italian masculinity were dependent on the commodification of Italy in the 1950s and on its entering the sphere of influence of the United States after the war is elaborated by Jacqueline Reich in *Beyond the Latin Lover. Marcello Mastroianni, Masculinity and Italian Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004.

sicurezza” were some measures that aimed at making it difficult for Romanians to enter the Italian state. (Romania had recently entered the EU thus making it difficult for the Italian state to control the flow of immigration from that country).

Moreover in Italy as well the concept of “honor killing” can be said to have a history of racialization that still haunts the present and that now and again resurfaces on the pages of major daily newspapers; “*Delitto d'onore*” was considered an extenuating circumstance in the Italian law up until the 80s and its existence was justified with the idea of it being part of a “southern tradition”. Although the law has been abolished the idea that violence against women represents something like a “southern tradition” is still in place and has devastating effects as it can be seen by a scrutiny of recent events.<sup>7</sup>

What does this outsourcing to the south does in the Italian context? We could suggest that, similarly to the Indian case, it creates and fosters consensus around securiticism. On the other hand, casting violence against women as a somehow backward tradition that pertains only to the allegedly backward part of the country disavows the very issue and prevents from seriously considering its incidence in the whole of the country.

### 3.5 Mediterranean Homosexuality

In his theory of Mediterranean Homosexuality Giovanni Dall' Orto, historian, sociologist and a prominent activist of the biggest and more mainstream Italian gay association (Arcigay), opposes two different models or “paradigms” of homosexuality: the “Mediterranean homosexual” against the “modern gay” subject. The Mediterranean homosexual is represented and described almost as an underdeveloped, primitive stage of the “modern gay” that emerges in northern Europe (northern and central Italy included).

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<sup>7</sup> The case of president Amato referring to violence against women as a “sicilian-pakistani tradition” in a public speech in 2007: ( <http://www.repubblica.it/2007/07/sezioni/politica/amato-donne/amato-donne/amato-donne.html> ) or the case of the German judge that granted some allowances for “cultural reasons” to a sardinian man who had beaten up his wife: ( <http://www.repubblica.it/2007/10/sezioni/cronaca/sardo-violenza/sardo-violenza/sardo-violenza.html> )

The underdeveloped nature of the Mediterranean homosexual is linked to socio-economic factors: “The diffusion of the paradigm is not uniform, but for the most part coincides with areas in which industrialization is recent or has not yet begun. In countries such as Italy and Spain it is not found in industrial areas and is starting to recede in those that are industrializing.” (Dall' Orto 1990, p.796).

The Mediterranean conception of homosexuality according to Dall' Orto, comes down to the fact that in these societies only a man who has the “passive” role during sex is considered a homosexual, while the man who has an “active” role is not differentiated by heterosexual men. In this paradigm, says Dall' Orto the passive homosexual is somehow feminized, and although he might or might not be a transsexual, he still feels somehow feminine. On the contrary, we can assume that the “modern gay” is described by Dall' Orto as having no doubts in regard to his belonging to the male gender.

The existence of the Mediterranean paradigm is traced back by Dall' Orto to the fact that “Mediterranean societies” are, (or were until not long ago), so sexually segregated that in fact many heterosexual men would settle for another man (who is to play of course only the passive role), because of the impossibility of having sex with women. This “Mediterranean” paradigm of homosexuality is, according to Dall' Orto, detrimental or incompatible with a “modern liberationist gay politics” whose protagonist has to be the northern “modern gay”. However, Mediterranean homosexuality is, for Dall' Orto, slowly receding, not because of the efforts of the modern gay movement at trying to make the Mediterranean homosexuals understand that after all they are men too, but because modernity itself, slowly arriving even in the “Mediterranean countries” will somehow sweep away this conception of homosexuality:

This decline is not due to the struggles of the gay movement (which is always weak where homosexuals reject the figure of the "gay" as aberrant), nor does it result from the theories of physicians and psychiatrists (who have little resonance among the uneducated, who are the bulwark of this paradigm of sexual behavior). The reasons for the retreat must rather be sought in the fading of peasant patriarchal society, in the impossibility of continuing to seclude women, and in the spread of the "sexual revolution. (Dall' Orto 1990, p.769)

Dall' Orto then sees Mediterranean Homosexuality as an imposing of a heterosexual framing onto gay sexual and social practices, and as a reinforcing of gender binaries (male/female, active/passive); but what I see subterraneanly at work in Dall' Orto's theory is a will of distancing himself and distancing the “modern gay” from other, maybe less “decent”, sexual inverts and perverts of all kinds. Through this distancing, the modern (male) gay subject can build his hegemony on other sexual minorities (such as lesbians, transsexuals and queers of various kinds). It is interesting to see how this distancing takes shape through the invention of the “Mediterranean homosexual” in a way that reenacts and updates the similar mechanism of Othering against southerners that had taken place at the time of the Italian Unification in the middle of the nineteenth century.

In order to substantiate his theory Dall' Orto cites the fact that in 1860 when the penal code of Piedmont had to be extended to the newly formed nation state, thus to southern regions newly conquered, the article that punished male homosexual behaviors was erased in consideration of the “particular attitude of southerners toward homosexuality: homosexuality was part of their culture, their familiar structure; it was better to give up trying to eradicate it” (Ivi). Reading his sources in this way Dall' Orto doesn't pay any attention to what was happening in that period in Italy where a kind of colonial “structure of feeling” was in the process of being created: as we have seen these are the years of Lombroso's experiments and theories made literally on the bodies of southern men and women; these are also the years of that southern Brigandage against what was perceived by many as an invasion or as a forced unification, that was brutally and violently stopped by soldiers from the north.

Dall' Orto misses the bigger picture of a period in which a kind of homosexual, inverted attitude (based on the idea of sexual indetermination as a sign of an underdeveloped, backward nature in line with the theories of the positivist school of anthropology<sup>8</sup>), was ascribed to the South in order to justify a semi-colonial attitude

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<sup>8</sup> On Lombroso's attitude towards Homosexuality see D. Duncan *Reading and Writing Italian Homosexuality, a case of possible difference*, Burlington, Ashgate, 2006 and Nic Groombridge, “Perverse Criminologies: The Closet of Doctor Lombroso”, *Social & Legal Studies*, December 1, 1999 8: 531-548

towards it. This paradigm of Mediterranean homosexuality, rather than being taken as an evident truth, proved by archival sources, must be placed in a moment of constitution of a colonial “structure of feeling”. As a proof of the persistence of stereotypes we can see how Dall' Orto idea of a Mediterranean Homosexuality opposed to a Modern gay identity unfortunately still has some currency in studies about homosexuality in Italy and in Southern Italy.<sup>9</sup>

## **Conclusions: Literature**

In “Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (Spivak 1985), one of her seminal essays from the mid-80s, Gayatri Spivak challenges the eurocentrism of western feminism showing how the narrative of self-empowerment of the female (European) subject that it endorses, exemplified through a subtle reading of *Jane Eyre*, is complicit with the European colonialist project and produces a marginalization of native colonized women. Following on Said's footsteps Spivak opens her article reflecting on the role of literary representations in such a context, stating that:

It should not be possible to read nineteenth-century British literature without remembering that imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English. The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored. These two obvious "facts" continue to be disregarded in the reading of nineteenth-century British literature. This itself attests to the continuing success of the imperialist project, displaced and dispersed into more modern forms. If these "facts" were remembered, not only in the study of British literature but in the study of the literatures of the European colonizing cultures of the great age of imperialism, we would produce a narrative, in literary history, of the "worlding" of what is now called "the Third World. (Spivak 1985, p.235)

In a similar vein, and without downplaying the important contextual differences between Italian history and the history of other European countries, I want to argue that it should

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<sup>9</sup> It is somehow uncritically accepted for example by the very problematic sociological research of Barbagli and Colombo (Barbagli & Colombo, 2012) and in the ethnography of Giuseppe Burgio, conducted among homosexual teenagers in Palermo (Burgio, 2008).

not be possible to read Italian literature, at least since the late nineteenth century, without taking into consideration the role played in Italian culture and society and in Italians' psychic and identitarian constructions, by the powerful discourse of othering of the Italian South that I have described in this introduction. And by the gendered and racialized discourses that legitimized Italian colonialism abroad. Taking my cue from Spivak's quote I hope I can, with the analysis of literary texts presented in this work, contribute at least something to the production of a narrative that will unveil the “worlding” of the so called Third-World, and also the “worlding” of that liminal space that Southern Italy represents.

The following chapters will focus on different crucial historical periods of Italian history taking as case studies three different novels. The second half of the nineteenth century is the period when the problematic unification of the country was carried out on the backdrop of incredible civil turmoil and of widespread popular opposition in the south. Federico de Roberto is probably the Italian writer of the time that has been the most critical about the process of Italian unification. His entire oeuvre, and in particular his masterpiece *I Vicere' (The Viceroy's 1894)*, foregrounds questions of identity and difference at the moment when an “Italian nation” is in the process of being invented, and challenges the mainstream historical account of the Italian “Risorgimento”. In his major novel women play a pivotal role; the analysis of De Roberto's female characters in *The Viceroy's* will be carried out in relation to the ways in which the nationalist and racist discourse of the time mobilized notions about gender and sexuality (as described in Banti 2004, 2005) and with the aim of understanding how the writer's representations of gender and sexuality intertwine, support or deconstruct the “technology of gender” (de Lauretis 1987) of Risorgimento.

The second chapter will focus on the fascist period and on what has been considered by many the antifascist book almost by definition, Elio Vittorini's *Conversazione in Sicilia (Conversations in Sicily 1938)*. Vittorini's novel will be analyzed with the help of the psychoanalytic theory of postcolonial melancholia as described by

feminist theorist Ranjana Khanna (Khanna 2003). According to Khanna the postcolonial situation can be understood in terms of Freud's concept of melancholia and of a potential critical agency that emerges in such a state; this critical agency can lead to a positive “undoing” of self, nation and gender. Khanna's theory will be tested on Vittorini's novel. There are a number of great insights to be gained applying the notion of “postcolonial melancholia” to *Conversations in Sicily*: insights regarding the way in which the racial or ethnic other is somehow forgotten or subsumed in a problematically universal “class other” in the postwar period. This act of forgetting leaves some traces whose persistence can be seen at work in Vittorini's poetic and highly metaphorical style. It is through the work of undoing (the self, the ideal of the lost father, of the lost fatherland, of the lost “authenticity” of Sicily and also of gender) that the novel is able to find an ethical answer to the troubling times of fascism.

The postmodern period (from the 70s to the present) and the recently rediscovered novel by Goliarda Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia* (*The Art of Joy*, written from 1968 to 1977) will be the focus of the third chapter. *The Art of Joy* has possibly become in recent years the most debated contemporary novel among feminist literary critics in Italy. Modesta, Sapienza's Sicilian immoral and unethical heroin, is an extremely powerful character, whose journey and transformation will be read paying particular attention to how the text confronts histories of gendered and racialized marginalization. The symbolism of Sapienza's style is particularly fit for being read with a method of close reading that can account for the rich texture of the language used by the author and the recurrence of some specific themes

In the conclusions the future direction towards which the insights presented in this thesis could be taken will be briefly sketched through a delineation of a possible itinerary among texts and films by contemporary southern and migrant writers who comment on each other. The relation between the old internal and external colonialism and a new generation of italophone migrant writers will be taken into consideration through an understanding of what is the migrant writers' take on Italian internal differences, and the

southern Italian writers' take on contemporary migration, and to how they deal with stereotypical representations of gender and sexuality attached to southerners and to migrants.



## Chapter 1

### **Federico De Roberto and the Monstrous Birth of the Nation *The Viceroy*s as a Gothic Novel**

In this chapter I will analyze a canonical novel from the end of the nineteenth century, *I Viceré*<sup>10</sup> (*The Viceroy*s), published in 1894 by Federico De Roberto. I will try to place the novel in the climate of the scientific elaboration of racial prejudice against the southerners and of the political implications that such a phenomenon had at the time of the Italian unification. I will hence do a close reading of the novel paying particular attention to the theme of race in it; I will then discuss the representations of gender in relation to the centrality of the racial theme and to the discourses of nationality and patriotism at the time when De Roberto wrote his novel. In the last section I will elaborate on the small but very significant references to Italian external colonialism that can be found in the last chapter of the book and connect it to my reading of the novel.

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<sup>10</sup> References and quotes from the novel (hereafter abbreviated as *VR* in the quotes) are taken from the *Meridiani* edition by Mondadori, edited by Carlo Madrignani: Federico De Roberto, *Romanzi, novelle e saggi*, Milano: Mondadori, 1984. Translations are given in footnotes and, they are taken from the English translation by Archibald Colquhoun: Federico De Roberto, *The Viceroy*s, London: Collins Harvill, 1962, translated by Archibald Colquhoun, hereafter indicated as *The Viceroy*s.

## 1 The Plot and stylistic features.

*The Viceroy* is rather unanimously considered the masterpiece of the Sicilian writer Federico De Roberto. The novel, published in 1894, was started in the summer of 1891 and written in a little more than two years; quite a short time considering the more than 600 pages that it amounts to. The plot revolves around a noble Sicilian family, the Uzeda di Francalanza, of ancient Spanish origins, whose ancestors, coming from Spain in the middle ages had raised to the title of viceroys around the time of Charles the fifth. The family is still called the viceroys in Catania where the novel is set. The novel recounts the story of the family, composed by numerous characters, around the time of unification: precisely from 1855 to 1882. The text opens with the death of Donna Teresa Uzeda, the powerful matriarch who has led the family out of economical misfortunes in the previous decades, ruling it with an iron fist, forcefully imposing her will on all of her children. Teresa had 7 children with her now deceased husband: Giacomo, who was forced to marry Margherita, and has fathered a boy, Consalvo, and a girl, Teresina, Lucrezia, who has not married and lives in the palace with her brother, Ludovico, forced to become a priest, Angiolina forced to become a nun in a cloistered convent from where she cannot go out, Chiara forced to marry Federico, the extravagant Ferdinando and last the only beloved child Raimondo who has married Matilde and has had two little girls (Laura and Teresa). Not only the matriarch's children have interest in knowing what the testament left by Donna Teresa will deliberate, but also the 4 siblings of her deceased husband: the liberal Duke Gaspare, the benedictin priest Don Blasco, the extravagant Don Eugenio and the spinster Donna Ferdinanda. Soon enough we discover that Donna Teresa, contravening to the established tradition, has not left the whole patrimony to her eldest son, as was the custom among noble families, but has divided it between Giacomo, the eldest, and Raimondo, the only child for which she was deeply passionate. The text then will revolve around all the envies, the scheming, the complex machinations that this decision will generate; Giacomo will try to get back what he feels he has been robbed of by her mother's irrationality; and, with the exception of Raimondo, all of the other

characters, who did not have almost any share in the heritage, will do their own scheming for wrenching at least a part of the heritage from either Raimondo or Giacomo. If this is the main plot, many other plots and parallel and intertwining stories crisscross the novel: each character in fact is described painstakingly in its psychology and in its evolution, with a very consistent but subtle and diversified use of the free indirect speech (a technique brought to its most expressive by the founding father of *Verismo*, Giovanni Verga).

The political and historical background is of great importance: the novel follows the events starting from before the time of the unification (1855), during Garibaldi's expedition of the thousands (1861), and up until the parliamentary election of 1882, the first election where the right to vote was extended to lower class people in Italy. The family is traditionally very loyal to the Bourbonic Spanish dynasty whose rule is on the verge of being overthrown by the coming political events that, as we know, will conclude with the end of the Kingdom of the two Sicilies and the birth of the unified Kingdom of Italy. Only the Duke Gaspare has liberal political sympathies, although more for convenience and political opportunism than for a sincere republican and liberal conviction. On the other hand all the other members of the family have strong Bourbonic, monarchic faith, especially Don Blasco and Donna Ferdinanda, whose pride for being the descendant of the viceroys is limitless. But if at first it is only the Duke who has liberal, leftist ideas, during the course of the novel many characters will change their political color in order to take advantage of the changing situation and to maintain the prominence they had during the previous regime: this is the case of Don Blasco, fervent Bourbonic and zealous opponent of the new kingdom's law on the redistribution of the church's land and then among the first to profit from its implementation. This is also the case of Consalvo, the young Prince, heir to the family fortune and very determined to become a member of the parliament in Rome; This ambition is clearly seen by Consalvo as a way to continue the powerful legacy of the Viceroys and is motivated more by personal ambition and greed than by any other thing.

## 2 The theme of Race

However it is not easy to state clearly what are the main motivations of the characters in the novel; the text clearly makes a point of making all of the characters come across as somehow crazy, lunatic, mad and moody people, whose reactions and behaviors are far from transparent and always border on sickness and neurosis, so that the reader always questions the sanity of the characters. In general the theme of madness and insanity is presented as affecting every character; madness is connaturalized with the Uzeda family, sometimes more dormant (although manifesting itself in little manias or fixations), sometimes more explicit and evident, but always presented as an almost unavoidable fate that looms heavy on the horizon of every single character. Madness and lunacy are described as an inevitable destiny for the Uzeda family, something that is somehow scripted in their genes, in their “old and impoverished blood” (*VR*, p.879):

Consalvo non diceva nulla. Pensava impaurito a quel male terribile che un giorno avrebbe potuto rodere, distruggere il suo proprio corpo in quel momento pieno di vita. Era il sangue impoverito della vecchia razza [...] Sarebbe anch'egli morto prima del tempo, prima di conseguire il trionfo, ucciso da quei mali terribili che ammazzavano gli Uzeda giovani ancora? [...]. Che avrebbe dato egli stesso, perché nelle proprie vene scorresse il sangue vivido e sano di un popolano?... «Niente!...» Il sangue povero e corrotto della vecchia razza lo faceva quel che era: Consalvo Uzeda, principino di Mirabella oggi, domani principe di Francalanza. A quello storico nome, a quei titoli sonori egli sentiva di dovere il posto guadagnato nel mondo, la facilità con cui le vie maestre gli s'aprivano innanzi. «Tutto si paga!...» pensava; ma piuttosto che dare qualcosa per vivere la vita lunga e forte d'un oscuro plebeo, egli avrebbe dato tutto per un solo giorno di gloria suprema, a costo d'ogni male... «Anche a costo della ragione?» Solo quest'altro oscuro pericolo che pesava su tutta la gente della sua razza lo atterriva;<sup>11</sup> (*VR*, p.1039, emphasis mine)

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<sup>11</sup> Consalvo said nothing. He was thinking with terror of the fearful disease which could one day gnaw away and destroy his own body at that moment so full of life. The impoverished blood of the ancient race [...] Would he too die before his time, before achieving his triumph, killed by those terrible ills which struck down the Uzeda while they were still young? [...] What would he not give himself for the vivid healthy blood of a peasant to flow in his own veins?... ‘Nothing!’ It was the corrupt blood of his old race that made him what he was: Consalvo Uzeda, today Prince of Mirabella, tomorrow Prince of Francalanza. It was to that historic name, to those sonorous titles that he felt he owed his place in the world, the ease with which avenues opened before him. “All must be paid for!” thought he. But rather than give a thing for

It is evident in this quote the underling theory that informs the whole novel: the blood of the viceroys is corrupted, it was glorious once but it is now degenerated; it is their blood that makes the viceroys rapacious, avid and greedy, prone to lunacy, madness and irrational anger; it makes them also very ugly, with only a couple of exceptions (Raimondo and Teresina) that are presented as actually confirming the rule; the concept of the degeneration of the old, noble blood and of its corruption, along the centuries are probably most evident in the passages with which these two characters are introduced; here is how the narrator describes Raimondo, when he first enters the text, coming back from Florence after his mother's dead:

Tra i progenitori più lontani c'era quella mescolanza di forza e di grazia che formava la bellezza del contino [Raimondo]; a poco a poco, col passare dei secoli, i lineamenti cominciavano ad alterarsi, i volti s'allungavano, i nasi sporgevano, il colorito diveniva più oscuro; un'estrema pinguedine come quella di don Blasco, o un'estrema magrezza come quella di don Eugenio, deturpava i personaggi. Fra le donne l'alterazione era più manifesta: Chiara e Lucrezia, quantunque fresche e giovani entrambe, erano disavvenenti, quasi non parevano donne; la zia Ferdinanda, sotto panni mascholini, sarebbe parsa qualcosa di mezzo tra l'usuraio e il sagrestano; ed altrettante figure maschilmente dure spiccavano fra i ritratti femminili di più fresca data; [...] Tratto tratto, fra le generazioni più vicine, in mezzo alle figure imbastardite, se ne vedeva tuttavia qualcuna che rammentava le primitive; così, per una specie di reviviscenza delle vecchie cellule del nobile sangue, Raimondo rassomigliava al più puro tipo antico.<sup>12</sup> (*VR*, p.502)

And, in a very specular way, here is the description the text makes of Teresina when she comes back from Florence where she was sent to receive a proper, upper-class education when she was a young woman:

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the long strong life of an obscure plebeian he would have given all, at the cost of any ill, for a single day of supreme glory... "*Even at the cost of reason?*" The only danger really terrifying him was that other obscure one weighing on all of his race. (*The Viceroy*s, p.572, emphasis mine)

<sup>12</sup> More distant forebears had that mixture of strength and grace which gave the young count his charm. Gradually, as the centuries passed, features began to alter, faces lengthened, noses grew, skin darkened; extreme fatness like Don Blasco's, or extreme thinness like Don Eugenio's, disfigured the portraits. Changes were most obvious among the women. Chiara and Lucrezia, though both of them fresh and young, were so hideous they scarcely looked like women at all. Aunt Ferdinanda, in male attire, would have been taken for a moneylender or a sacristan. And there were other harsh, mannish faces to be seen among feminine portraits of recent date [...] Now and again among the degenerate faces in more recent generations could be seen one or two reminiscent of the earliest; thus as if by a kind of recrudescence of the old cells of noble blood, Raimondo was like the purest ancient type. (*The Viceroy*s, pp. 105-106)

La bellezza bianca e bionda, fine, delicata, quasi vaporosa della fanciulla non aveva riscontri nella famiglia dei Viceré. La vecchia razza spagnuola mescolatasi nel corso dei secoli con gli elementi isolani, mezzo greci, mezzo saracini, era venuta a poco a poco perdendo di purezza e di nobiltà corporea: chi avrebbe potuto distinguere, per esempio, don Blasco da un fratacchione uscito da lavoratori della gleba, o donna Ferdinanda da una vecchia tessitrice? Ma come, nella generazione precedente, s'era vista l'eccezione del conte Raimondo, così adesso anche Teresa pareva fosse venuta fuori da una vecchia cellula intatta del puro sangue castigliano<sup>13</sup>. (*VR*, p.906)

I hope it is evident from these quotes how the theme of blood and of race comes to acquire an extremely central role in the novel<sup>14</sup>. And the centrality of this theme has a special significance when considered on the backdrop of the historical period when the novel was written which is at the time when the positivist school of anthropology led by Lombroso and Niceforo was preoccupied in legitimating the theory of the inferiority of the south. As we have seen degeneration was a central concept in the positivists' theories (a concept to which Niceforo will dedicate an entire book in 1901), one that De Roberto's text heavily exploits to achieve its expressive aims.

To be sure De Roberto was rather conversant with the work and the theories of the Italian school of criminology; he will obtain the praise of Lombroso for a "scientific" work on the theme of love that he publishes in 1895 (see Cavalli Pasini 1996, p.42); he had also drafted the main character of a previous novel, *Illusione*, drawing on Lombroso's theories, and on the Darwinist idea of the "survival of the fittest" applied to the relationship of men and women: if seen through this prism love revealed itself as an endless but "natural" and "biological" fight between the sexes for supremacy (Ibidem, p.70).

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<sup>13</sup> The girl's white skin and fair hair, her delicate, exquisite, almost vaporous beauty were unparalleled in the family of the Viceroy, The old Spanish race, mixed in the course of the centuries with island stock part Greek, part Saracen, had gradually lost its purity and nobility of form. Who, for example, could have distinguished Don Blasco from any fat friar of peasant stock, or Donna Ferdinanda from any old spinning woman? But just as in the preceding generation there had been the exception of Count Raimondo, so now Teresa too seemed to have come from some old cell of pure Castilian blood left intact. (*The Viceroy*, p.460)

<sup>14</sup> This is also evident when we consider that De Roberto working title for the novel was "Vecchia Razza" "Old Race", as he says in one of the first descriptions he gives of the novel in a letter to his friend De Giorgi: "La storia d'una gran famiglia, la quale deve essere composta di quattordici o quindici tipi, tra maschi e femmine, uno più forte e stravagante dell'altro. Il primo titolo era Vecchia Razza: ciò ti dimostri l'intenzione ultima, che dovrebbe essere il decadimento fisico e morale di una stirpe esausta." (Also in the *Meridiani* edition, p.1727)

If this is the case, then, we have more than a little evidence to conclude, as Giovanni Maffei does, that the concept of madness and lunacy that De Roberto refers to is not just a generic one, but rather it is tied to the scientific elaboration that this notion was undergoing in the positivist school of Anthropology (Maffei 2012, p.1).

Of course almost all the critics that have worked on the novel have noticed the centrality of the theme of race, but its presence in the novel tends to be downplayed and accounted for more as an overarching theme used to give unity and cohesion to the narrative than as a concept used also for its ideological implications<sup>15</sup>. We can see in this critical attitude towards the theme of race more of an embarrassment of dealing with it, and a preoccupation to absolve de Roberto from any accusation of racism than an open engagement; in other words, consideration of the theme in the novel is too easily dismissed by the critics in line with the general attitude towards race that according to Anna Curcio has characterized Europe after the end of the second world war, when the international community was very keen (and rightly so) in rejecting any possible conceptualization of race; nonetheless, even if the concept of race as a biological feature is certainly to be abhorred and condemned, we should be more attentive, according to Curcio, in seeing how the concept of race has actually informed and justified forms of exploitation and marginalization (Curcio 2011, p.2).

The question should not be to decide if De Roberto was or was not racist; this would probably not lead us very far; rather we should engage with the theme of race in the novel relating it to more general representations of the south and their political implications. Moreover the removal of race from the critical attention given to the novel has probably prevented critics from seeing interesting features of it that could give us new and interesting insights on it.

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<sup>15</sup> See for example Spinazzola, undoubtedly one of the most sensitive interpreters of the novel: “Il motivo razzistico, l’insistenza sul dispiegarsi della legge dell’ereditarietà ha [...] soltanto una funzione subordinata, nei *Viceré*, e si presenta come un elemento di sostegno”. (Spinazzola 1961, pp. 126-127.)

### 3 *The Viceroy*s as a Gothic Novel

In line with this premises then, I want to relate De Roberto's novel to a literary tradition to which it is rarely compared to and to the literary representation of the south within this genre that De Roberto very likely had in mind when writing *The Viceroy*s. This interpretation of the novel will, I hope, contribute to the critical debate on the genre of *The Viceroy*s; on what kind of genre the novel can be ascribed to; a debate that I will briefly summarize.

*The Viceroy*s and De Roberto's work in general have been interpreted for many years as being part of the movement of *Verismo*. It is true that De Roberto, a generation younger of Verga and Capuana (the two most prominent figures of *Verismo*), and born in the same province, was a friend and an admirer of both of these writers (especially of Verga) and that the kind of poetics he himself expressed in prefaces and essays was similar to Verga's<sup>16</sup>. But it would be a mistake to consider an author for what he programmatically says: the text should speak for itself. According to Anna Cavalli Pasini, the consideration of De Roberto's work only in relation to the tenets of *Verismo* is a paradigm that critics should go beyond, and that has actually prevented them from seeing many interesting features of the novel (see her praise for Spinazzola who compares the novel to Pirandello's *Vecchi e giovani* and to Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il Gattopardo*, p.173). I agree with her and absolutely agree also with those critics who have seen in De Roberto an anticipation of quintessentially modernist themes and sensibilities, who have highlighted the novel expressionist and deformative tone, its plurilinguism so distant from Verga's (Tedesco 1989), the radically negative and skeptical, relativist ideology that links it more to Pirandello (De Grado 1984). But I also want to say that the automatic, taken for granted inclusion of De Roberto in the movement of *Verismo* has also prevented critics from seeing the influence on his texts of other older literary modes with which he was probably familiar too: in particular the themes and modes of the gothic novel.

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<sup>16</sup>Interestingly enough *The Viceroy*'s first pages were written using an ink pot that Verga had given to De Roberto as a present. (letter to De Giorgi, *Meridiani* edition, p. 1732)



Born in England in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the gothic novel is characterized by the setting in religious, dark, dim and picturesque places, like convents, ancient castles, labyrinths. Very often the plots mix romance and terror. Terror and horror are some of the effects that the gothic novel wants to induce in its readers. Fred Botting defines the gothic as the writing of excess and transgression and traces the major lines of evolution of the genre from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the contemporary 20<sup>th</sup> century gothic imaginary. In his description gothic texts encode the anxieties of progress and give voice to the perceived threats to the values that have defined modernity in the west. Moreover, gothic novels very often imply a return of the past into the present in ways that undermine the progressive understanding of time that lies at the basis of modernity (Botting 1996, pp 2 - 4). Analysing the gothic resurgence in the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Botting notices how at this stage of its history the gothic can be linked to the ambivalences of positivist science and theories like Darwin's and Lombroso's (Ibidem, p.137).

The gothic genre did not have particular luck in Italy, but certainly some of its features filtered into some of the works of Italian writers; an example of this could be *Fosca* by Iginio Ugo Tarchetti, published in 1869, after the death of the author, but traces of the gothic imagination can be found even in *Fermo e Lucia* and in *I promessi sposi*, by Manzoni. *Fosca* was very likely a novel that De Roberto had read: in 1888 he moved to Milan for some time and entered the circles of the Milanese Scapigliatura, with no doubt the Italian literary movement most conversant with the gothic genre and most receptive of its influence, and of which Tarchetti was an important figure.

When considering the possibility of linking De Roberto to the gothic novel and to the gothic imagination we should underline some very interesting commonalities: see for example how there are moments in the text where the effect that the text wants to create is one of fear and horror, using themes that are very common in gothic fiction and also analyzing the spatial dimension of the novel, the setting and the spaces.

The theme of the girl forced to become a nun is very recurrent in gothic fiction, and it is also present in De Roberto. Donna Teresa forced her first daughter Angiolina to

become a nun<sup>17</sup>; Angiolina's character is, up until the very end never present directly in the novel but only through the reports that people visiting the convent give of her; only in one passage in the conclusive chapters of the novel she is described through the eyes of Teresina, now an adult woman whose father wants to convince her to marry a cousin for convenience. Teresina has gone to visit the old nun, confused on what she has to do; the description of the old nun, finally appearing in the text after all the references made about her, is similar to that of a ghost; her sight makes the niece, and maybe the reader also, shiver with fear:

La Badessa, col viso color della cera tra i veli bianchi, era rimbambita del tutto, non sapeva far altro che ripetere alla nipotina, dietro le grate del parlatorio, quel che le avevano indettato: «Bisogna fare la volontà di tuo padre e tua madre... Così comanda Nostro Signore, così comanda la Vergine Immacolata, così comanda il patriarca San Giuseppe...» La sua voce aveva il tono che si prende nel recitare le litanie; e lì, tra le mura del monastero, Teresa rammentava la fanciullezza lontana, l'antica paura provata quando la posavano sulla ruota per farla entrare nell'impenetrabile badia;<sup>18</sup> (*VR*, p.982)

The visit to the old nun elicits in Teresina the terrifying memory of past visits to the convent, when she was a little girl. The passage wants to induce a sense of fear and mixes pathetic elements with a somehow anti-religious or anti-catholic feeling (evident in the description of Christ's statue) that it is not foreign either to the gothic genre:

Povera piccina! Tutte le volte che la mettevano nella ruota per farla passare dentro alla badia, oltre il muro impenetrabile che segregava le suore dal mondo, tendeva le braccia alla sua mamma ed alle zie con un senso di paura negli occhi spalancati; ma la principessa che aveva gli ordini del marito, pel quale la bambina era una specie di muta ambasciatrice incaricata di sedare il malcontento della Badessa e della sorella Crocifissa, persuadeva la figlia a star buona, a non temere, e la piccina diceva di sì, di sì, mandando baci alla sua mamma mentre la ruota girava, la chiudeva nello spessore del muro, la passava dall'altra parte, nello stanzone freddo e grigio con un grande Cristo nero e sanguinante che prendeva un'intera parete<sup>19</sup>. (*VR*, p.726)

<sup>17</sup> (*VR*, pp. 480-481)

<sup>18</sup> The Abbess, with a waxen face amid white veils, was well into her second childhood, and from behind the parlour gratings did nothing but repeat to her niece what had been impressed on her, saying, 'You must carry out your father and mother's wishes. Our Lord orders it, Our Immaculate Virgin orders it, our protector St Joseph orders it...' Her voice had taken on the lilt of the recitation of a Litany. And there among the convent walls, Teresa remembered her distant childhood, the old fear she had felt when they put her on the wheel to take her into the impenetrable convent. (*The Viceroy's*, p.522)

<sup>19</sup> Poor little girl! Every time they put her on the wheel which passed her into the convent through the impenetrable walls segregating the nuns from the world, she stretched out her arms to her mother and to her

Another aspect of the novel that can help us see its closeness to the gothic conventions is its setting. Even if the reader is told that the story takes place in Catania the city is largely absent from it and the extremely long and detailed descriptions of the environment are reserved for the Uzeda Palace; when nature or the countryside enter the narrative the descriptions are carried out emphasising the desolate, almost desertsic aspect of the landscape, that is very distant from the populated fields of Verga's *Vita dei campi*. Such a setting is more in line with the conventions of the gothic novel than with the verista tradition and we should not forget that southern Italy (as well as Spain) was a privileged location where gothic writers would set their novels at least since *The Castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole, considered one of the founding texts of the genre.

Such a representation of southern Italy is not alien from those mechanisms of othering and orientalism implemented by northern Europe in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and that targeted southern Europe and the Ottoman Empire at the moment when the Spanish kingdom was in crisis and France, Britain and Germany were competing for hegemony over Europe. According to Roberto Dainotto, for example, this is the moment when the notion of a modern, industrious, protestant northern Europe comes to define itself against a backward, catholic, indolent southern Europe (Dainotto 2007) and, it is in this international framework, as we have seen, that the anti-southern prejudice emerges in Italy (Moe 1997, Wong 2006).

Considering *The Viceroy* also as a gothic novel I don't want to deny the appropriateness of its inscription to a political genre as Pomilio does: *The Viceroy* is certainly a novel that expresses the disappointment of a liberal from the south for the outcome of the Italian unification and the “protest of a gentlemen from the south against the ruling class of the south” (Pomilio 1960, p.162), and the political element is certainly central in it;

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aunt with a look of terror in her wide-set eyes. But the princess had orders from her husband, who considered the child as a kind of mute ambassadress to soothe the Abbess's and Sister Maria's discontent, so she would persuade her daughter to be good and not to be frightened. The little girl would say 'Yes' again and again, sending her mother kisses as the wheel turned deep in the wall and passed her through on to the other side, into the big cold grey room with a great, black, bleeding, Crucifix taking up an entire wall. (*The Viceroy*, pp.301-302)

neither I want to contest the ascription of the novel to a Anti-Historical genre, a very original and antiteleological one, as does Spinazzola (so much so that it is probably wrong to speak of a genre). For Spinazzola the very symmetrical structure and the apparent cohesion of the text, where every episode is carefully linked to the others, actually hides a narrative that doesn't have a linear direction; events are not linked together to then proceed to a clear ending, rather they intertwine with each other in a non - linear way that undermines a linear understanding of time and of history:

Tutto collabora insomma a far apparire i personaggi derobertiani immersi in un flusso temporale senza confini né di anteriorità né di posteriorità: i sussulti continui che si producono nel suo dilagare sono mere increspature di superficie, come un accavallarsi di onde senza meta. La corrente in cui pure si incanalano non tanto procede dal passato verso il futuro quanto piuttosto costringe a vivere il presente. [...] La frenesia di movimento che pervade *I Viceré* si risolve tutta nell'agitazione convulsa di singoli atomi cozzanti fra loro in questo universo per così dire compattamente disgregato, dove il prima e il poi si confondono, dove il moto coincide con la stasi (Spinazzola 1990, pp. 137-138)

Spinazzola's interpretation of the novel goes, I think, at the very roots of the inspiration of *The Viceroy's*. The anti-teleological character of the novel deconstructs ideas of linearity, of progress and of hope of a better future. The anti-teleological, centripetal energy that runs through the text is I think also directed precisely to a certain idea of nation, and to codified representations of national-patriotism in the nineteenth century. In the remainder of this chapter I will briefly describe the literary construction of a national-patriotic imagery in the nineteenth century and then I will show with quotes from *the Viceroy's* how De Roberto undermines, subtly criticizes, or at least reveals the anxiety around such a notion of nation and patriotism, and he does so especially through the representation of mothers and motherhood.

## 4 Re-production and Degeneration

As Benedict Anderson has demonstrated narration has been a powerful way to imagine a national community and to make nations coming into being. The novel has been a literary genre that has lent itself to such a goal since its very beginning (Anderson 1996) The historian and cultural historian Alberto Mario Banti has noted how in many of the novels that are instrumental in constructing a national imagination, the vast majority of which have been written by male writers, women play a pivotal role. The trope of the young woman who “has to be defended, reached, chased, kidnapped, brought back home or married, overcoming the obstacles posed by the enemies of the nation” (Banti, p.122, my translation) is an almost omnipresent narrative device. Romantic and patriotic love come together in these representations and they are met either with an happy ending or with a tragical one, depending on the more uplifting or inciting effects that the writer wants to solicit in his readers. The masculinity engendered by these types of narratives is a military one, the male character is always the hero, a warrior, soldier-hero ready to defend his homeland and the honor of the women. On the other hand women characters are very often portrayed as chaste, pure, and virginal; their virginity is somehow equated with the unviolability of the nation and Banti aptly refers to this trope the high recurrence in these kind of works of scenes of sexual aggression and rape. (Ibidem, p.126). The nation imagined in this kind of works of the early nineteenth century is, according to Banti, a “nation in army” (Ibidem, p.125).

Banti traces the origin of this representation in eighteenth century's polemical writings against the upper class. This genre, practiced by Roussau and Goethe among others, is informed by a moralizing intent, one that denounces the vices of upper-class women while at the same time invoking for a moralization of politics and culture. A very recurrent theme is the denunciation of the upper-class practice of arranged marriages, seen as motivated by economical interests more than by sentimental passion. The loose and uninhibited upper-class women are opposed to virtuous and pure female characters, for which adultery would be the worst sin. According to Banti this moralizing process of

women's behaviours, that targeted arranged marriages as well as sexual promiscuity and the upper-class habit of handing over newborns to nurses during their first years of life, effectively restricted women's possibilities for freedom and re-gendered the social space in severe ways; women now had to “stay home caring for the children and waiting for their virile husbands, rather than in the *salon* receiving visits, or at the park showing their new dresses or – even worse- in the *boudoir* reading and writing” (Ibidem, p.138).

In this moralizing intent that targeted women Banti sees the emergence of what will become, in the late nineteenth century an imagination of the nation as a “community of lineage” where the moralizing of women is dictated by the need to be reassured of the paternity of the children. Such a community of lineage is based on an exclusively patrilineal axis of lineage, it constitutes a social space where “individual and families are immersed in a relational continuum that ties them together in the present, ties them to their ancestors in the past and to their offspring in the future” (Ibidem, p.144). In such a way the redefinition of the social space according to the separation of the sexes and to the valorization of men as soldiers and women as re-producers of labor force for the army is accomplished.

In this context than motherhood becomes central both as a material practice to be carried out in a specific way and as a representation, and as Banti says, nineteenth century's novels are full of good, patriotic mothers that either “incite their children to go fight against the enemies”, or that cry their departure or their eventual death for the war. (Ibidem, p.122)

We can take Banti's very convincing argument and his description of the discourse of national patriotism and of the gender representations it relied on as the representational context, the horizon of expectations that De Roberto's implied reader might have had. In particular it could prove very useful to relate Banti's description of the representations of motherhood and compare it to the way mothers are represented in De Roberto's novel.

In the *Viceroy* in fact there are no good mothers. All the mothers in the novel are bad ones. the whole story is actually set in motion by the extremely willful, irrational decisions of an unloving mother, Donna Teresa Uzeda, whose funeral opens the text and

whose shadow looms large on the development of the whole story; her actions are sometimes used to offer a traumatic explanation for the irrationality of all the other characters. Matilde, Raimondo's wife is also a very bad mother, and her character is conflicted between the love for her children and her extreme passion for her unfaithful husband. Matilde goes as far as wishing that one of her little girls was sick so that Raimondo would come back to her; immediately repenting for her thoughts. Such an internal conflict and the extreme passion that she has for Raimondo, even in the face of the mistreatments that she has to put up with, will eventually consume her and bring her to death, and to leave her children orphans.

But the epitome of the theme is probably reached with Chiara's character. Chiara who at the beginning of the novel has undergone already a couple of miscarriages is literally obsessed with the idea of having a child and she keeps trying and trying to get pregnant. She gets pregnant eventually half through the novel and the text shows her carefully preparing everything that the child could need; but Chiara will undergo the umpteenth miscarriage and not just a simple one: she will in fact give birth to a terrific monster that the novel describes in all of its gruesomeness, with abundance of horrific details that could be worth of a Cronenberg's "body horror" movie<sup>20</sup>. So attached to her offspring Chiara will decide to keep the body, storing it in a jar in her closet.

In the description of Chiara's childbirth the text probably reaches its most gruesome and the gothic inspiration can be seen in all its evidence. The technical construction of the episode of Chiara's childbirth is of particular significance here; it not only can confirm how the nation was imagined as a community of lineage anxiously disciplining reproductive practices but it can also show how De Roberto, having this representation in mind, constructs an horror story where the reproductive functioning of this mechanism is threatened by the monstrosity of the offspring.

As Margherita Ganeri has noticed (Ganeri 2005) in fact the ninth chapter of the

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<sup>20</sup>“A un tratto le levatrici impallidirono, vedendo disperse le speranze di ricchi regali: dall'alvo sanguinoso veniva fuori un pezzo di carne informe, una cosa innominabile, un pesce col becco, un uccello spiumato; quel mostro senza sesso aveva un occhio solo, tre specie di zampe, ed era ancor vivo”. (*VR*, p.691).

Suddenly the midwife went pale, seeing her hopes of rich tips vanish; from the bleeding womb came a piece of formless flesh, an unnameable thing, a beaked fish, a featherless bird; this sexless monster had one eye, three things like paws, and was still alive. (*The Viceroy's*, p.267)

first section of the book, where Chiara's childbirth is described, is also the one where the first parliamentary election of the newborn kingdom of Italy is described. The chapter is constructed juxtaposing big blocks of narrative following two strands: in one Chiara's preparation for the arrival of the child and her miscarriage is described, in the other the candidacy, the election and the first political speech of Duke Gaspare. Such a narrative construction interprets and plays upon the anxiety around reproduction that characterizes the imagination of the nation as a “community of lineage”; in linking the birth of the monster with the political ascension of Duke Gaspare to Rome a suggestive motif that hints at the fear that the monstrous child of the Viceroy, bringing with him the corrupted blood of his old race will move to the heart of the nation, and from there it will be able to corrupt and infiltrate the whole nation is set in place.

This motif underscores the narrative of Consalvo's political career and returns at the very end of the text, in the rightly famous passage of Consalvo's final speech with which he will secure a seat in the parliament in Rome. Consalvo's politically ambiguous but somehow galvanizing speech highlights the opportunism, the lack of morality and ethics and the shamelessness of the character and puts these qualities at the center of the newly Unitarian state, of its appeals to modernity and progress, and of its future vicissitudes, here included the colonial endeavor:

“un giorno non lontano, rivendicati I nostril naturali confine (*Applausi vivissimi*), riunita in un sol fascio la gente che parla la lingua di Dante (*Scoppio di appalusi*) stabilite le nostre coloniae in Africa e forse anche in Oceania (*Benissimo!*) noi ricostituiremo l'Impero romano! (*Ovazione*)” (*VR*, pp. 1088-1089, emphasis in the original)<sup>21</sup>

but the racial diagnosis of Consalvo's temperament is not lost. It is still the blood of the old race that is seen as the etiology for Consalvo's corrupted ambition, as becomes even more evident in the final dialogue with Donna Ferdinanda. In the last pages of the novel,

<sup>21</sup> So one not distant day, when we have our natural frontiers again (*lively applause*), and joined in one group the peoples who speak the tongue of Dante (*outburst of applause*), established our coloniae in Africa and maybe in Oceania too (*Good!*) we will rebuild the Roman Empire! (*Ovation*) (*The Viceroy*, p.615)



Consalvo goes to visit his old Great-aunt who has not yet forgiven her nephew for having changed his political affiliations and in a second speech that mirrors the previous one, he exposes his real motivations for pursuing a political career: all he cares about, in an almost irrational way, is power and maintaining the privileges that the Viceroy's have always had, which is also all that Donna Ferdinanda cares about. In this sense then, he concludes, the Viceroy's race "has not degenerated; it is the same as it ever was" (*The Viceroy's*, p.627)

We should not, I think try to strengthen too simply the role that the racial theme and the racial imagination plays in De Roberto's novel. Nonetheless a few conclusive remarks are in order. With no doubt the racial theme provided De Roberto with powerful expressive tools for criticizing the political project of Risorgimento and of unified Italy, at the same time they allowed him to substantiate his critique of the responsibilities of the opportunistic aristocratic social classes of Sicily and of Southern Italy. But this metaphorization of race, (talking of race to actually talk about class, using racial arguments to mount an anti-aristocratic polemic), remains very problematic because it leaves unquestioned its underlying racial assumptions. De Roberto's novel also encoded in literary form the scientific theories about the inferiority of southerners and supplied a literary blueprint for its future representation, one that, as we will see in the chapter dedicated to Goliarda Sapienza, later writers will have to confront.

## Chapter 2

### **Postcolonial Melancholia in Vittorini's *Conversations in Sicily***

In this chapter I will try and relate the theory of postcolonial melancholia as elaborated by feminist critic Ranjana Khanna to Elio Vittorini's masterpiece *Conversazione in Sicilia (Conversations in Sicily)*<sup>22</sup>. In my view *Conversazione in Sicilia* describes a situation that can be considered as an instance of postcolonial melancholia. Far from being a state of mild but unproductive suffering, melancholia becomes in Khanna's reinterpretation of the Freudian concept a very powerful and paradoxically even potentially empowering state, thanks to the critical agency that already Freud saw emerging in the melancholic mind. In my reading of Vittorini's novel the melancholic predicament has to be read as induced by different factors that are related to Italy's internal and external colonial endeavor and to the becoming even more racist of fascist politics after Mussolini's alliance with Hitler (stipulated in 1936). The critical agency generated by the journey back to his native Sicily of the protagonist Silvestro, leads, in the book, if not to the deconstruction at least to a critical interrogation of the interrelated categories of masculinity, race and nation. I will first briefly describe Khanna's theory of postcolonial melancholia and then attempt a reading of *Conversazione in Sicilia* along the lines of Khanna's re-reading of Freud, with the aim of showing how, under the pressure of postcolonial melancholia, the fascist model of masculinity is put into question together with the progressive linear conception of time and history and with a homogenous idea of nation.

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<sup>22</sup> Once again the edition I used for the original quotes is the Meridiani Mondadori edition: Elio Vittorini, *Le opere narrative*, edited by Maria Corti, Milano, Mondadori, 1974 (hereafter abbreviated with "CIS"). Translations are taken by the following British edition: Elio Vittorini, *Conversations in Sicily*, Translated by Alane Salierno Mason, London, Canongate, 2003. (hereafter referred to as "Conversations")

## 1 Postcolonial Melancholia

Ranjana Khanna's book *Dark Continents*, published in 2003, is an extremely well researched book about the relationship between psychoanalysis and colonialism. The book contains sharp and detailed analysis of the major authors that have tried to couple psychoanalysis with a postcolonial perspective. Khanna is greatly concerned with the origins of psychoanalysis and tries to unearth its implications in the creation of a nationalist and colonialist "structure of feeling" in Europe, through a consideration of its relationship with archaeology and anthropology. Of course psychoanalysis is the main method used by Khanna herself, who wants to understand the role played by Freud's feelings of marginalization in his homeland (due to a burgeoning anti-Semitism) in the development of his theory of the subject. But she is also greatly influenced by a Foucauldian discourse analysis. Psychoanalysis is understood as a discourse which, mutually imbricated with the discourses of anthropology and archeology, has an effective power of subjectivation on individuals thus participating in creating or reinforcing existing power relationships. That said, Khanna's aim is not to dismiss and condemn psychoanalysis, quite on the contrary, she wants to endorse the use of psychoanalysis and show its importance for a deep understanding of our colonial, postcolonial and neo-colonial time. Given the implication of psychoanalysis in the European nationalist and colonialist *episteme*, it is important to understand how come Freudian theory has been fruitfully used by theorists of decolonization and by postcolonial theorists in their struggle towards liberation. Khanna is very much concerned in reading psychoanalysis "against the grain", and she accomplishes this goal developing a theory of colonial melancholy. Khanna reads the colonial situation as possibly inducing that state of melancholia that Freud described in his paper on "*Mourning and Melancholia*" in 1917 and draws on the concept, already discussed by Freud in the paper, of critical agency in melancholia:

While melancholia is paralyzing in Freud's term, the inassimilable paradoxically becomes the site of what Freud calls "critical agency." This form of agency, he suggests, is rather like "conscience". [...] This critical identification with the lost object constitutes the burden of melancholia, and indeed the traumatic undoing of self and lost object as a result. (Khanna 2003, p.22)

It is in this "undoing of the self and of the lost object", (an object that may very well be an ideal or a country), that Khanna sees the positive, somehow empowering, potential of critical melancholia and of an understanding of the colonial and post-colonial situation as melancholic. This undoing must equate a deconstructive approach to both the self and the lost ideal; a deconstruction that must account for the ghosts, the spectral histories, (the hidden violence, maybe?) through which this contextualized selves, (the colonizer's as well as the colonized ('s) self, came about. Also it has to take into account the interdependence of the two.

In his paper on *Mourning and Melancholia* written in 1917, Freud distinguishes among two different reactions to loss: mourning represents the standard and not pathological reaction to the loss of a person but also to the loss of an abstraction, "such as one's country, liberty, an ideal, and so on" (Freud 1917, p.237), while melancholia has an unconscious character. While in mourning the reaction to loss is a conscious one, coming from the fact that the subject is aware of who or what he/she has lost, melancholia would be a pathological reaction to an unconscious loss:

The object has not perhaps actually died, but has been lost as an object of love (e.g. in the case of a betrothed girl who has been jilted). In yet other cases one feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of this kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows *whom* he has lost but not *what* he has lost in him. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious. (Freud 1917, p.238)

The symptoms of melancholia, as described by Freud are characterized by depression, self-loathing, by a sense of low self-worth, by indifference to the outside world. This

sense of self-loathing is addressed to the Ego and amounts to an extremely critical attitude towards it. In such a state, which Freud labels as pathological even when the self-criticism is right and to the point, there is nonetheless the appearance of what Freud himself calls a certain “critical agency” that is equated with awareness and consciousness:

let us dwell for a moment on the view which the melancholic's disorder affords of the constitution of the human ego. We see how in him one part of the ego sets itself over against the other, judges it critically, and, as it were, takes it as its object. Our suspicion that the **critical agency** which is here split off from the ego might also show its independence in other circumstances will be confirmed by every further observation. We shall really find grounds for distinguishing this agency from the rest of the ego. What we are here becoming acquainted with is the agency commonly called “conscience”; (Ibidem, p.240, emphasis mine)

It may very well be, says Freud, that when prey of melancholic feelings the subject allows himself to see all of its faults and defects with a clarity and a lack of sympathy that heightens the criticality of this self-scrutinizing process in a way that is not there in a “normal” state. This agency also permits to overcome the melancholic predicament, which nonetheless has to be first experienced. This beautifully nuanced conception of melancholia, where a pathological state is described at the same time as being a state of heightened sincerity, clarity and self-knowledge (thus making normality different from clarity and self-knowledge) is taken to bear by Khanna on the postcolonial situation. Her concept of melancholia is used to challenge the idea of homogenous and empty time of the nation and as a supplement to Bhabha’s idea of the temporality of the nation being that of the “deferred action” of the return of the repressed (Bhabha 1990). It is not only the repressed trauma of colonialism that comes back haunting our postcolonial present, according to Khanna, but also the melancholia for the lost object: the lost possibility of a past without colonialism, of a self, an identity and a group identity untarnished by colonialism’s epistemic violence. In this way then the return of the repressed of the trauma of colonial past is marked by a critical agency that represents an opportunity for change.

Khanna's theorization of melancholia is thus different from other contemporary uses of the concept in postcolonial theory. Paul Gilroy for example has also used the notion of melancholia but for indicating a somehow different aspect of postcolonial cultures: in his idea melancholia describes the relationship of national European cultures to their lost colonial power, and the stubborn clinging to a past of exploitation that is never fully acknowledged and that prevents these societies from imagining different cosmopolitan, fairly multicultural futures and from addressing inequalities in the present. (Gilroy 2005). Although I acknowledge the importance of Gilroy's use of the concept of melancholia I refer here to Khanna's reformulation of the Freudian notion, because in her theorization we can see in postcolonial melancholia also a possibility of agency: it is in fact the hypothesis of this chapter that the trauma of Italy's colonial external endeavor and of racism against the Jews during fascism, and thus the lost ideal of fascism as a progressive movement, ignites a process of melancholia that brings to the reviving of the affective memories of the internal colonialism in the south and that the critical agency generated in the process leads in the book to a deconstruction of racist and exclusionary conceptions of nation, of progressive linear time and of the fascist model of masculinity.

## 2 The Orient in *Conversations in Sicily*

*Conversazione in Sicilia* (*Conversations in Sicily*), published in Italy in 1938 and translated into English in 1941 with a foreword by Ernest Hemingway, follows the journey of a Sicilian migrant Silvestro, from the city in northern Italy where he has been living for fifteen years, back to his hometown, a little village on the mountains of Sicily. The book is divided into 5 parts: the first one describes the decision of Silvestro for going to Sicily and his journey on the train from Milan to Sicily during which he meets many different characters that allegorically refer to the political and social reality of the thirties. In the second part Silvestro, now in his mother's house, describes the encounter with the

mother after 15 years and their long conversations. In the third part Silvestro accompanies her mother, who works going to people's houses to give them injections, through her usual itinerary among some of the houses of the village. In the fourth part Silvestro parts with her mother and joins a group of men, in their shops and then in a bar where they stay drinking until late. In the last part Silvestro recounts, in a way that blurs dreams and reality, his encounter with a soldier, (or maybe with the soul of a dead soldier), then his conversation with her mother where he alludes to the fact that the dead soldier might be Liborio, Silvestro's brother; in the last part of the fifth section Silvestro goes for a walk in the village and finds himself under the statue of a naked woman that the regime has erected as a monument to dead soldiers, here Silvestro meets once again all the characters of the novel, all together, before deciding to leave again for the north. In the short Epilogue, Silvestro, who has gone to say goodbye to her mother before leaving, finds her kneeling while washing the feet of a very old, sad and mute man who turns out to be Silvestro's father. *Conversazione in Sicilia* is a decidedly anti-realist, experimental novel, where every character has an allegorical and symbolical function, and where the language and the words reach an almost poetic level of openness and of multilayered meaning. The anti-realist character is accentuated by the heavy presence of figures and tropes: repetitions, anaphora and ellipsis, cumulative descriptions, syntactical peculiarities, all contribute to the creation of a temporal and spacial atmosphere that although clearly identifiable is also imbued with an allusive, symbolic character.

The psychoanalytical criticism of the novel has zeroed in on the experimental character of Vittorini's book and has highlighted the "regressive" character of the novel using in particular Jungian psychoanalysis for illuminating its multiple meanings. Both Franca Bianconi Bernardi and later, Eduardo Sanguinetti, the two critics that have taken psychoanalytical insights to bear on the interpretation of the novel have reflected on the relationship between the personal regression of Silvestro's character, in space and in time, and the interrogation of the present and the future. According to Sanguinetti in the novel we can find "memory as an escape that transfigures itself in critical recovery, making evocation into a problem, inscribing the act of remembrance as a question" (Sanguinetti

1966, p.XIV). In a very similar vein Bianconi Bernardi had written of the novel as animated by an inspiration that tends to see today's history through the prism of the past but not in a linear, causal way: thus aiming at what she calls a "de-historification of the future" (Bianconi Bernardi 1966, p.236) (making an argument that is similar to the one made by Spinazzola on the anti-historical, anti-teleological character of De Roberto's *The Viceroys*). Bianconi Bernardi and Sanguineti's essays lucidly address what I also see as a central inspiration in the novel: its critique of teleological history through an evocative recuperation of the past not in terms of cause-effect but more in terms of affective persistence, but I would like, in the remainder of this chapter to supplement their readings in two ways. First identifying the past whose recuperation and affective, spectral persistence is traced in the novel as the past of Italy's internal colonial history in the south and showing how its recuperation is ignited by the experience of external colonialism and racism against the Jews which in turn is criticized through this recuperation; secondly I also want to engage with psychoanalysis in my reading of the novel using not Jungian but Freudian psychoanalysis and in particular Khanna's reformulation of melancholia in postcolonial terms.

Already the notorious incipit seems to perfectly illustrate the melancholic predicament as described by Freud and the pertinence of Khanna's insights:

Io ero, quell'inverno, in preda ad astratti furori. Non dirò quali, non di questo mi son messo a raccontare. Ma bisogna dica ch'erano astratti, non eroici, non vivi; furori, in qualche modo, per il genere umano perduto. Da molto tempo questo, ed ero col capo chino. Vedevo manifesti di giornali squillanti e chinavo il capo; [...] Pioveva intanto e passavano i giorni, i mesi, e io avevo le scarpe rotte, l'acqua che mi entrava nelle scarpe, e non vi era più altro che questo: pioggia, massacri sui manifesti dei giornali, e acqua nelle mie scarpe rotte, muti amici, la vita in me come un sordo sogno, e non speranza, quiete. Questo era il terribile: la quiete nella non speranza. Credere il genere umano perduto e non aver febbre di fare qualcosa in contrario, voglia di perdermi, ad esempio, con lui. Ero agitato da astratti furori, non nel sangue, ed ero quieto, non avevo voglia di nulla.<sup>23</sup> (CIS, p.571)

<sup>23</sup> That winter I was in the grip of abstract furies. I won't be more specific, that's not what I've set out to relate. But I have to say that they were abstract, not heroic, not living; in some way they were furies for all doomed humanity. This went on for a long time, and I went around with my head hung low. I saw posters for the newspapers blaring their advertisements and I hung my head; [...] Meanwhile it rained, and days and months passed; I had holes in my shoes and water seeped in, and there was no longer anything but this:



The abstract furies seems to refer to a loss that is hard to identify or to pin down, as well as the desolate attitude, the broken shoes as an objective correlative of the feeling of being stuck, and most of all the lack of hope and the “quiete nella non speranza”. The reference to the “manifesti di giornali squillanti” and to the “massacri sui manifesti dei giornali” can refer to different things, and certainly as Felice Rappazzo says, they are to be put in relation with the fascist support of the government in the Spanish civil war in 1935, an event that really made Vittorini, like many of his generation that had initially supported fascism, disappointed of it (Rappazzo 1996, p.29); without aiming at reifying the novel’s meaning or at flattening its suggestive, evocative, open-ended style I want to suggest that the “massacres on the newspapers” can also be put in relation at least with two other important historical circumstances that occurred at the moment when Vittorini was writing his novel: the second Italo–Ethiopian war that started in October 1935 and ended in May 1936 and that resulted in the military occupation of Ethiopia and its annexation into the newly created colony of Italian East Africa (*Africa Orientale Italiana*, or AOI) and the enactment of the racial laws against the Jews in the fall of 1938. In the midst of this melancholic state for “all doomed humanity”, which might very well be a state of humanity before violence, or a lost authenticity of a people before colonialism, the protagonist, Silvestro, hears like music, like a flute, or a fife, playing in his head, that urges him to go back to Sicily and go see her mother. I think the music of the flute can be equated with the kind of critical agency, or consciousness, that Freud saw emerging in states of melancholia. It is through his journey back to Sicily and through a recollection of his own individual and family memories (his childhood, the relationship between his father and his mother), and through a recollection of Sicily’s past that Silvestro is able to proceed to that “undoing of self and of the lost object”. Silvestro’s father is also a “lost object” (he has just left his mother and has moved to Venice with another woman) and the

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rain, massacres in the ad posters for the newspapers, water seeping through the holes in my shoes, mute friends, life in me like a deaf dream, and a hopeless calm.

That was the terrible thing: the calm in the midst of hopelessness. Believing humanity to be doomed and not burning with a fever to do anything about it; wanting to doom myself as an example of it instead. I was agitated by abstract furies, but they didn't stir my blood, and I was calm, I desired nothing. (*Conversations*, pp.5-6)

novel plays with profoundly suggestive analogies positioning the father, the fatherland (Italy at the moment of the invasion of Ethiopia and of the enactment of the racial laws), and the “lost humanity” in the same way. The relationship between the affective resonance of the external and internal colonialism in the book can appear more clearly in the following quote:

Salii nella luce le scale dell'atrio, per me era lo stesso continuare sotto la pioggia verso casa o salire quelle scale, e così salii nella luce, vidi due manifesti. Uno era di un giornale, squillante per nuovi massacri, l'altro era della Cit: Visitate la Sicilia, cinquanta per cento di riduzione da dicembre a giugno, 250 lire per Siracusa, andata e ritorno, terza classe. Mi trovai allora un momento come davanti a due strade, l'una rivolta a rincasare, nell'astrazione di quelle folle massaccrate, e sempre nella quiete, nella non speranza, l'altra rivolta alla Sicilia, alle montagne, nel lamento del mio piffero interno, e in qualcosa che poteva anche non essere una così scura quiete e una così sorda non speranza<sup>24</sup>. (*CIS* 575)

The Journey to Sicily is presented as a possible alternative to “l’astrazione di quelle folle massaccrate”: the regression to personal and collective past is seen as a possibility of hope in the face of contemporary massacres. Marina Paino has highlighted the importance of the oriental motifs not only in *Conversazione in Sicilia* but also in other works by Vittorini, in particular tracing the influence of *One Thousand and One Nights* in some of his major novels; according to her the oriental imagination in Vittorini's work has a lot to do with that “regressive vocation of the return to the origins” that she sees as a fundamental theme in Vittorini's fictional work and with the “lost ideal of a still young humanity, in a unresolved overlapping of regression and utopia” (Paino 2011, p.1). But if this is the case, this is not because of a conception of Sicily and of the south as a land of purity, untouched by violence and untouched by history. Although it may seem at first glance that the text endorses such an allochronic, orientalist idea of Sicily and of the south, (whose presentation is in fact significantly juxtaposed in the novel with the “discovery” of women’s bodies and of sexuality), at a closer look we can see how such an

<sup>24</sup> I went up the stairs of the entrance, in the light; it was all the same to me whether I continued in the rain towards home or went up those stairs, so I went up, in the light, and saw two posters. One was an ad for a newspaper, blaring new massacres, the other was for the tourism board: Visit Sicily, 15 per cent off from December to June, 250 lire for Siracusa Round-Trip, Third Class.

I found myself then facing two paths for a moment – one turning back home, into the abstraction of those massacred crowds, into the same calm, the same hopelessness; the other turning back to Sicily, to the mountains, into the lament of the fife that was playing inside me; into something which might not be as dark a calm and as deaf a hopelessness. (*Conversations*, p.10)

idea is in the novel presented as an infantile fantasy, fostered by books and novels, and one that cannot last:

- A Terranova? - io dissi.

Avevo letto le *Mille e una notte* e tanti libri là, di vecchie storie, di vecchi viaggi, a sette e otto e nove anni, e la Sicilia era anche questo là, *Mille e una notte* e vecchi paesi, alberi, case, gente di vecchissimi tempi attraverso i libri. Poi avevo dimenticato, nella mia vita d'uomo, ma lo avevo in me, e potevo ricordare, ritrovare. Beato chi ha da ritrovare!

E' una fortuna aver letto quando si era ragazzi. E doppia fortuna aver letto libri di vecchi tempi e vecchi paesi, libri di storia, libri di viaggi e le *Mille e una notte* in special modo. Uno può ricordare anche quello che ha letto come se lo avesse in qualche modo vissuto, e uno ha la storia degli uomini e tutto il mondo in sé, con la propria infanzia, Persia a sette anni, Australia a otto, Canada a nove, Messico a dieci, e gli ebrei della Bibbia con la torre di Babilonia e Davide nell'inverno dei sei anni, califfi e sultane in un febbraio o un settembre, d'estate le grandi guerre con Gustavo Adolfo eccetera per la Sicilia-Europa, in una Terranova, una Siracusa, mentre ogni notte il treno porta via soldati per una grande Guerra che è tutte le guerre.

Io ebbi questa fortuna di leggere molto nella mia infanzia, e a Terranova la Sicilia significa anche Bagdad e Palazzo delle Lagrime e giardino di palmizi per me. Vi lessi le *Mille e una notte* e altro, in una casa che era piena di sofà e ragazze d'un qualche amico di mio padre, e ne ricordo la nudità della donna, come di sultane e odalische, concreta, certa, cuore e ragione del mondo<sup>25</sup>. (*CIS*, pp.659-660)

On the contrary Sicily is described in the novel in its reality of poverty and suffering (very interesting in this sense are the dialogues with the oranges seller but also the description of the squalid houses where Silvestro goes with her mother to visit her

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<sup>25</sup> 'In Terranova?' I said.

At seven and eight and nine I had read *A Thousand and One Nights*, and many other books there, old stories of old journeys, and that was also Sicily for me, *A Thousand and One Nights* and the old countries, trees, houses, and people of far-away times I met through books. Then, in my manhood, I forgot but I still had it inside me, I could remember, I could rediscover it. Blessed is he who has things to rediscover!

We're lucky to read as children. And doubly lucky to read books about old times and old countries, books of history, books of journeys and, in a special way, *A thousand and One Nights*. You can even remember what you've read as if you somehow lived it yourself, and then you have the history of men and all the world inside you, together with your own childhood: Persia when you were seven years old, Australia at eight, Canada at nine, Mexico at ten, and the Hebrews of the Bible with the Tower of Babylon and David, that winter when you were six, caliphs and sultans one February or September, and during the summer the great war with Gustav Adolf et cetera for Sicily-Europe – all in a town like Terranova or Siracusa, while every night the train carries soldiers to a great war which is all wars.

I was lucky enough to read a lot when I was a child, and for me in Terranova, Sicily was also Baghdad and the Palace of Tears and the Garden of Palms. There I read *A thousand and One Nights* and other things, in a house which was full of couches and the daughters of some friend of my father's, and from the time I can remember the nakedness of woman, like that of the sultan's wives and the odalisques – a nakedness concrete and certain, the heart and reason of the world. (*Conversations*, pp.129-130)

patients), a reality of which the trauma of internal colonialism and the uneven process of unification is certainly one of the causes. The journey to Sicily can then be a productive one, one that is able to offer an alternative to the troubling times of fascism, only if it is a journey that implies a meditation on the real conditions of Sicily and of Sicilians, and a meditation on the nature of difference, and not as an escape to Sicily and to the South seen through the prism of an orientalist fantasy, a fantasy that is actually shown to be a potentially dangerous one:

Poi aspettando vidi venire su dalla valle un aquilone, e lo seguii con gli occhi passare sopra a me nell'alta luce, mi chiesi perché, dopotutto, il mondo non fosse sempre, come a sette anni, *Mille e una notte*. [...] fu molte volte che me lo chiesi mentre in quell'aria guardavo l'aquilone. Questo si chiama drago volante in Sicilia, ed è in qualche modo Cina o Persia per il cielo siciliano, [...], e io non potevo non chiedermi, guardandolo, perché davvero la fede dei sette anni non esistesse sempre, per l'uomo.

O forse sarebbe pericolosa? Uno, a sette anni, ha miracoli in tutte le cose, e dalla nudità loro, dalla donna, ha la certezza di esse [...]. Ma dopo che farebbe con la certezza? Dopo, uno conosce le offese recate al mondo, l'empietà, e la servitù, l'ingiustizia tra gli uomini, e la profanazione della vita terrena contro il genere umano e contro il mondo. Che farebbe allora se avesse pur sempre certezza? Che farebbe? uno si chiede. Che farei, che farei? mi chiesi<sup>26</sup>. (*CIS*, pp. 663-664)

### 3 Deconstructing fascist masculinity

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<sup>26</sup> Then, while I was waiting, I saw a kite come up over the valley, and I followed it with my eyes as it passed above me into the sunlight high overhead, and I asked myself why, after all, the world was not *A Thousand and One Nights*, the way it was when I was seven. [...] I asked myself this question many times over as I watched the kite in the air. We call them flying dragons in Sicily, as somehow they embody China or Persia in the Sicilian sky, [...] and watching it I couldn't help but ask myself why, really, the faith one has at seven doesn't last for ever.

Might it be dangerous perhaps? At seven, a boy senses miracles in all things, and in their nakedness, in the nakedness of Woman, he has certainty [...]. But later, what would he do with certainty? Later, one knows the wrongs done to the world, the ruthlessness, the servitude, the injustice among men, and the desecration of earthly life against humanity and against the world. What would one do then, if even still, one had certainty? What would one do? one asks oneself. What would I do, what would I do? I asked myself. (*Conversations*, pp.136-137)

What would one do if one assumed to know? What would one do if one would not question the things that appear more self-evident or even natural? The text asks. Among the things that *Conversations in Sicily* doesn't take for granted and tries to question is certainly gender. Masculinity in particular is seen in the novel through the lenses of the historical context of fascism and exposed in its political uses by the regime.

Lorenzo Benadusi, in his historical study on homosexuality in the fascist totalitarian experiment comments on the particular model of masculinity that fascism tried to implement. According to Benadusi, who follows in the footsteps of George Mosse's important work, masculinity becomes in fascist times extremely tied up with nationalism and takes upon itself the characters of a warrior-like identity. Fascism, according to Benadusi, embarked itself on a “virilizing” mission of the Italian population, one that made citizenship coextensive with health, vigour and strength: the virtues of a good soldier ready to die for his country. War and sport became ways to prove one's masculinity and gain social acceptance and the entitlement to belong to the healthy part of the country. Sexual prowess and a blatant misogyny were also considered qualities of the fascist “new man”. If some of these features were already part of the model of masculinity emerging in the beginning of the century, according to Benadusi, with fascism the “militarization of masculinity” reaches its peak together with the identification and criminalization of what was to be considered a menace to fascist masculinity: homosexuality, old age, physical weakness. (Benadusi 2005, pp.13-34)

We can see how the male characters presented in the book are very far from this model, even when they are animated by a strong political conviction they remain doubtful, pensive and defeated. In particular the dialogue between Silvestro and the ghost of his brother, Liborio, a casualty of the war, and then between Silvestro and his mother on the death of Liborio, can be seen as indictment of the form of militarized masculinity that according to Benadusi was very characteristic of fascism:

Nel silenzio che seguì io le domandai: - “Chi era?”.  
 Mia madre guardò le cose della nostra infanzia sparse per la cucina, e guardò lontano, poi più vicino, più vicino, rispose: - “Era Liborio”.  
 - “Ah, il terzo di noi?” - dissi io.  
 E lei: - “Non era ancora andato nel mondo e fu contento quando lo chiamarono. Mi ha mandato delle cartoline dai luoghi del mondo che ha visto. Tre l'anno scorso, due quest'anno. Belle città! Gli saranno piaciute”.  
 - “Erano le città della guerra?” - osservai.  
 - “Credo” - lei rispose.  
 [...]  
 Disse mia madre: - “Non pensar male di lui, ora”.  
 - “Male?”- io gridai. - “Che ti salta in mente? Sarà stato un eroe”.  
 Mia madre mi guardò come se io parlassi con amarezza. - “No!” - disse. - “Era un povero ragazzo. Voleva vedere il mondo. Amava il mondo”.  
 - “Perché mi guardi così?” - gridai. - “E' stato bravo. Ha conquistato. Ha vinto”.  
 Ancora più forte gridai: - “Ed è morto per noi. Per me, per te, tutti questi siciliani, per far continuare tutte queste cose, e questa Sicilia, questo mondo... Amava il mondo!”.  
 - No! - disse mia madre. - “No! E' stato ragazzo con te. Tu avevi undici anni e lui sette”.<sup>27</sup>  
 (CIS, pp.699-700)

But the female counter-part of the “new man”, ready to die for his country is of course the proud mother who will be invested of the glory deriving from the heroic death of her son, from his brave sacrifice to the Homeland. In the course of the same dialogue we can see how the deconstruction of fascist militarized masculinity goes hand in hand with that of the fascist myth of motherhood that had found in the historical figure of Cornelia its hyposthesis:

“Perché quella signora mi ha chiamato fortunata?”

<sup>27</sup> In the silence that followed I asked her: 'Who was it?'

My mother looked at the things of our childhood scattered around the kitchen, she looked far off, then nearer, nearer; she said: 'It was Liborio.'

'The third one of us,' I said.

And she: 'Ha hadn't yet been out of the world and he was happy when they called him up. He sent me postcards from places he saw. Three las year, two this year. Beautiful cities! He must have liked them.'

'The cities where the war is being fought?' I asked.

'I believe so,' she answered. [...]

My mother said: 'Don't think badly of him now.'

'Badly?' I cried. 'What are you thinking? He must have been a hero.'

My mother looked at me as if I were talking bitterly.

'No!' she said. 'He was a poor boy. He wanted to see the world. He loved the world.'

'Why are you looking at me that way?' I cried. 'He was brave. He conquered. He won.'

More loudly I cried: 'And he died for us. For me, for you, for all Sicilians, to allow all these things to continue, this Sicily, this world... He loved the world!'

'No!' my mother said. 'No! He was a boy, you were boys together. You were eleven when he was seven. (Conversations, pp.186-187)

Pronto, dissi: - “Ma è chiaro. Per la sua morte che ti onora”.  
 E lei: - “La sua morte mi onora?”.  
 E io: - “Morendo egli si è fatto onore...”.  
 Di nuovo lei mi guardò come se parlassi con amarezza. Anzi era un modo stabile nel suo sguardo che veniva su di me non appena io mi mostravo: un sospetto, un rimprovero. Con rimprovero disse: - “E questa è mia fortuna?”.  
 Dissi io, in ostinazione: - “L'onor suo torna su di te. Tu l'hai partorito”.  
 E lei, sempre con rimprovero: - “Ma l'ho perduto, ora. Dovrei chiamarmi disgraziata”.  
 E io: - “Nient'affatto. Perdendolo l'hai acquistato. Sei fortunata”. Interdetta, mia madre restò un momento a meditare. Sempre mi guardava con diffidenza, con rimprovero. E pareva che si sentisse in mia balia. Mi chiese: - “Sei sicuro che quella signora non ha voluto prendermi in giro?”.  
 - “Oh, no!” - le risposi io. - “Sapeva bene quello che diceva”.  
 [...]  
 Ma pur sempre mia madre mi guardava con diffidenza. Si sentiva in mia balia, era evidente. E ora scattò: - “Ma che dici?”.  
 - “Dico la verità” - dissi io. - “E' anche scritto sui libri. Non ti ricordi nulla dei libri di scuola?”.<sup>28</sup>  
 (CIS, pp.700-701)

In the remainder of the dialogue, the denunciation of the gender politics of fascism based on the idea of the warrior man who is ready to die for his homeland and of his proud mother is tied up with an indictment of History as an ideological construct that obscures and instrumentalizes personal stories and individual desires and that is caught up in the nationalist and fascist propagandistic endeavor:

<sup>28</sup> 'Why did that woman call me fortunate?'

Right away I said: 'But that's clear. Because his death honours you.'

And she: 'His death honours me?'

And I: “Dying, he brought honour to himself...’

Again she looked at me as if I were talking out of bitterness. In fact, there was a steadiness in the look she had cast over me as soon as I appeared: a suspicion, a reproach. Reproachfully she asked: 'And that's why I'm fortunate?'

I said stubbornly: 'The honour reflects back on you. You gave birth to him.'

And she, still reproachfully: 'But I've lost him now. I should call myself unfortunate.'

And I: 'Not at all. Losing him you've gained him. You are fortunate.'

Speechless, my mother thought for a moment. Still she looked at me with suspicion, with reproach. And she seemed to feel that she was at my mercy. She asked me: 'Are you sure that woman wasn't playing a joke on me?'

'Oh no!' I responded. “She knew what she was saying.”

[...]

But still my mother looked at me with suspicion. She felt that she was at my mercy, that was clear. And now she bursts out: 'But what are you saying?'

'I'm telling the truth,' I said. 'It's even written in books. Don't you remember anything from your schoolbooks?'

(*Conversations*, pp.188-189)

Trasali mia madre: - "Io?" - E rossa in faccia, fuoco e fiamme con la coperta sulle spalle, a precipizio esclamò: - "Vuoi dire che scriveranno anche di me sui libri?".  
 - "Pressappoco" - dissi io. - "Di te e di tuo figlio. Già appartenete ai libri".  
 Mia madre era stravolta. Non riusciva ancora a riprendersi, e non diffidava. - "Ai libri? Ai libri?" - gridò.  
 - "Alla storia" - dissi io. - "Non lo sapevi? Uscito dal mondo egli è entrato nella storia. E tu con lui".  
 - "Io con lui?" - gridò, stravolta, mia madre.  
 - "Tu con lui. Tu con lui" - gridai io.  
 - "Credi di appartenere ancora al mondo? - gridai. - A questa terra qui? Questa Sicilia?".  
 Più forte gridai: - "No, mia cara. Vedrai che ti chiameranno e ti daranno una medaglia".  
 - "Una medaglia?" - mia madre gridò.  
 - "Sì, sul petto" - gridai io.  
 E qui abbassai infine la voce, continuai con calma: - "Per ciò che ha fatto lui al mondo. A quelle città. Alla Sicilia".  
 Conclusi: - "Una medaglia per il merito di lui".  
 Ma mia madre, proprio qui, cominciò a crollare. - "Com'è possibile?"  
 - disse. - "Era solo un povero ragazzo".  
 E io cominciai a temere. Cominciai anche a ricordare.<sup>29</sup>  
 (CIS, pp.702-703)

Notwithstanding the innovative and challenging depictions of gender it is important to notice how the representation of homosexuality is a rather trivial one in *Conversations in Sicily*, and doesn't go too far from the use of homosexuality, represented as a sexual deviance in order to discredit fascism, that was typical of many leftist writers (Duncan 2006, p.12). Moreover, although the myth of the proud nationalist mother is challenged, we could agree with Ruth Ben-Ghiat who, in her important study on the

<sup>29</sup> My mother gave a start: 'I?' She was red in the face, afire and aflame with her shawl on her shoulders, as she exclaimed in a rush: 'Are you trying to say they'll also write about me in books?'

'More or less,' I said. 'About you and your son. You already belong to the books.'

My mother was deeply upset. She could no longer restrain herself, and she was no longer suspicious.

'Belong to the books? To the books?' she shouted.

'To history,' I said. 'Didn't you know? He's left the world and entered history. And you with him.'

'Me with him?' shouted my mother, deeply upset.

'You with him. You with him,' I shouted.

'Do you think you still belong to this world?' I shouted. 'To this land here? To this Sicily?'

Louder, I shouted: 'No, my dear. You'll see, they'll call you and give you a medal.'

'A medal?' my mother shouted.

'Yes. They'll pin it to your chest,' I shouted.

And here I finally lowered my voice and continued more calmly: 'For what he has done for the world. For this city. For Sicily.'

I concluded: 'A medal for his service.'

But my mother, right at this moment, began to fall apart. 'How can it be?' she said. 'He was only a poor boy.'

And I began to be afraid. I also began to remember. (*Conversations*, pp.190-191)



cultural politics of fascism notices how, although in *Conversazione in Sicilia* “the dictatorship's discourses are all being subverted. Alienation and sickness are signs of health, disobedience and skepticism indicate integrity”, and “language becomes an instrument of resistance against power”, Vittorini in his novel “also marks antifascist militancy as a male space” (Ben Ghiat 2001, p.192). As we will see in the next chapter, Goliarda Sapienza will achieve in her recently rediscovered novel *The Art of Joy*, not only a re-configuration of anti-fascism seen through the prism of an extremely original female character but will also perfect a powerful critique of the all too un-corporeal kind of materialism that, also according to Albert Asor Rosa, marks too many narrative works of postwar Italian male writers. (Asor Rosa 1989, p.72)

## Chapter 3

### **The Art of Change. Goliarda Sapienza's *The Art of Joy* and the colonialist “discourse of unchangeability”**

The recently rediscovered novel by Goliarda Sapienza *L'arte della gioia*<sup>30</sup> (*The Art of Joy*) has possibly become in recent years one of the most debated contemporary novels among feminist literary critics in Italy. Written in a period of almost ten years, from 1967 to 1977, the book was published only much later and with many difficulties; Sapienza, who died aged 72 in 1996, did not see its publication and eventual success.

The troubled journey to publication of *The Art of Joy* has had a transnational dimension: the survival of the novel and its eventual publication, decades after Sapienza had finished it, is due in large part to a network of passionate women readers that extended from Italy to France and Germany; women that were touched by the novel and fought for its publication. Manuela Vigorita and Loredana Rotundo, authors of a documentary on Sapienza's life, testify on how the novel, rejected by many Italian publishers was finally published by Angelo Pellegrino (Sapienza's companion for many years and the editor of the novel), who had to pay for it, in 1998; from that moment, through word of mouth, the novel was read by many women and finally was picked up by a French translator and published in French in 2005 where it became a huge success. From that moment on, attention to the novel and to Sapienza's work was continually on the rise. Einaudi republished it in 2008 and started publishing all other works by Sapienza. (Vigorita and Rotundo in Farnetti ed. 2011, pp.15-31)

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<sup>30</sup> The edition I'm using here is the Einaudi edition: Goliarda Sapienza, *L'arte della gioia*, Torino: Einaudi, 2008 (hereafter indicated as “ADG”). Translation are taken from the Penguin edition: Goliarda Sapienza, *The Art of Joy*, London: Penguin, 2013, translated by Anne Milano Appel. (hereafter indicated as “*The Art of Joy*”).

## 1 Modesta's Journey

*The Art of Joy* follows closely the story of her protagonist, Modesta, who is born the first of January 1900. The novel opens at the beginning of the century when Modesta is 4 or 5 years old and concludes in the 1950s with few flash forwards in the narrator's diegesis that reach to the 1970s and 1980s. In this way the novel chronicles the events of the first half of the century in Italy and in Europe, but they are always filtered through the perception and the point of view of the characters. Metaphors and similitudes take very often as their reference the landscape, nature or the body. The language used is Italian with a Sicilian flavour (especially evident in the syntax and in some lexical elements) and at times Sicilian itself.

The novel is divided in four parts and 95 short chapters. The first part goes from the beginning of the century to the end of the First World War, the second from the beginning of the 1920s to the beginning of the 1930s, the third is set during the 1930s and the fourth during the 1940s.

The first part describes Modesta's childhood, her extremely poor origins, her first sexual experiences, and her growing up: first in a convent where she is sent after the destruction of her house in a fire that also killed her mother and her sister (and that she might have accidentally caused), and then at the castle of the Brandiforti family, where she is sent after the death of Madre Leonora, the mother superior of whom Modesta had become the protegee. The first part concludes with the death of the old Princess of Brandiforti and with the birth of Modesta's son after her marriage with Ippolito, the hereditary Prince.

The second part of the novel sees Modesta moving to the city of Catania and revolves around her life in the 1920s, her political involvement with the socialist and communist circles in the city, her romantic and sexual relationships and the formation of her large

and unconventional family.

The third part of the book is set during fascism. It is centered around the love relationship between Modesta and Joyce, (a Turkish-italian woman comrade fleeing fascist persecution), Modesta's discovery of Psychoanalysis thanks to Joyce, and the life of the house during fascism.

The fourth part starts when the war is approaching and concludes at the beginning of the 1950s. Modesta is persecuted by fascism and is sent to jail where she meets and falls in love with Nina, an anarchic woman from Rome. With Nina Modesta is sent in exile to an unspecified island. After the end of the war Modesta and Nina go back to Catania. The final pages describe a big party that Modesta throws in her son's honor, and end with a love scene between Modesta and Marco, Nina's friend whom she has just met, and with a celebration of life, love and sex at fifties.

Stylistically, *The Art of Joy* is a very syncretic book; Sapienza's style is not extremely literary and her novel accommodates different kinds of materials giving to the narration a very original tone. Descriptions are not extremely detailed and they are always very "subjective", mainly filtered through the eyes of the main character. Dialogues have a very prominent position and sometimes they even extend to the point of becoming theatre pieces, where the name of the speaker is indicated at the beginning of the sentence in order to understand who's talking. One of the chapters of the book accommodates the play that the children put up at *Villa Suvarita*, Modesta's house in Catania, based on the adventures of *Giufà*, a character of Sicilian oral folklore. The narration is mostly carried out in the first person by Modesta, while all the other characters are given voice always in a dialogue, either with Modesta or with some other character, but only in the presence of Modesta. Occasionally the narratorial voice shifts from the first to third person; according to Laura Fortini, this is a way of distancing the narratorial voice from the narrated events and the fact that it mostly happens at the beginning of the novel shows how the character gains awareness and maturity with time. (Fortini in Farnetti ed. 2011, p.107)

## 2 Fruitful Contradictions and Eccentric Subjectivity in *The Art of Joy*

The existing critical literature on Sapienza is composed of prefaces and forwards to the newest editions of her books, by a biography written by Giovanna Providenti, and by two collections of essays: *Appassionata Sapienza*, edited by Monica Farnetti, collects essays presented during a one day conference on Sapienza held in Ferrara in 2009, and “*Quel sogno d’essere*” di Goliarda Sapienza, edited by Giovanna Providenti, collects more than twenty essays dedicated to *The Art of Joy* and to other works by Sapienza. What these two collections and almost all of the essays have in common is a feminist inspiration, an attentive focus to the depiction and eventual subversion of gender and to the representation of women and women’s experiences in Sapienza’s work. Adopting this point of view the different researchers have focused on many issues: the interpretation of the killings in the first and the second part of the novel (Fortini, Farnetti), the relation between *The Art of Joy*, Modesta’s character and the more autobiographical production by Sapienza (Castagne’, Cagnolati), the kind of autobiographism that Sapienza can be said to practice (Andrigo), the themes of sexuality (Ross), maternity (Trevisan), Sapienza’s relationship with feminism and the feminist movement, the differences and similarities with Irigaray and *écriture féminine* (Maenza, Trevisan) or with queer theorizations (Ross). This is of course in line with Sapienza’s own stated interest, since women were, as she wrote in a letter, “il mio pianeta, la mia ricerca, il mio unico ‘partito’ e forse, oltre all’amicizia, il mio unico scopo nella vita” (Pellegrino in Farnetti ed., 2009). In this sense, although extremely original and in some ways unique in the landscape of contemporary Italian literature, *The Art of Joy* has many ties with the literary tradition and Angelo Pellegrino, a privileged witness of the birth of the novel, (having been Sapienza’s partner during the ten years of the writing and after, and having been the first editor of the novel), informs us on what were Sapienza’s literary passions. Goliarda was

particularly fond of 18<sup>th</sup> century British Literature, of Sterne, Richardson and Defoe, and loved the humor, the liveliness, the unprejudiced nature of the literature of this century. On the contrary she did not love the great 19th century novel, and its female characters that all, from Anna Karenina to Madame Bovary, end their lives tragically; with an exception to be made for Nievo's *Pisana*, which Pellegrino includes among Modesta's ancestors. But Modesta, says also Pellegrino, “is an Italian, a Sicilian, she is our history” (Pellegrino in Farnetti ed., 2011, p.71, my translation). To be sure Sapienza invents her protagonist, her Sicilian woman, having in mind other women, not only as source of inspiration but also as potential readers of *The Art of Joy*; her implicit reader is first and foremost a woman. “Inventing Modesta, Goliarda expresses the necessity of creating a character that had not existed before. A character that was needed, especially by women, one to be added to the gallery of characters of literary history” (Ibidem, p.72). According to Pellegrino then, Sapienza very consciously confronted the history of representation and the literary tradition that preceded her: aware of the fact that a character like Modesta, was absent and highly needed. And this tradition that Sapienza wants to address and confront at the same time is, Pellegrino goes on, first and foremost a southern tradition to which Goliarda felt she belonged: “Goliarda felt she belonged to a Ghibelline Italy, one that will always love Pirandello or Verga more than D'annunzio”

An important theme that runs through the critical literature on Sapienza is the issue of contradiction and of the non-rational logic that Sapienza indulges in and makes use of in her novel. Undoubtedly contradiction was a very important concept for Sapienza, one that she probably drew from Pirandello and that she used to undermine the apparent self-sufficiency and enclosedness of the subject. Reflection on contradiction translates itself into a narrative mechanism that informs the whole novel as Alberica Bazzoni as noticed (Bazzoni in Providenti ed. 2012, p.42). According to Bazzoni, the full acceptance of contradiction as a structural element of subjectivity is characteristic of the postmodern condition and allows Sapienza and her main character to go back at looking at the outside world and at historical events but from an entirely fresh perspective infused with “impegno postmoderno”. As Bazzoni says, because of the relation between history

and narration implemented in *The Art of Joy*, the collective of writers Wu Ming has included Sapienza among the predecessors of a contemporary trend in Italian writing that they call “New Italian Epic” (Ibidem, p.34). As further evidence of the importance of contradiction for Sapienza we could quote the fact that, as Giovanna Providenti says, Goliarda wanted to collect her first autobiographical novels under the title “Le certezze del dubbio”, adding the subtitle “Autobiografia della contraddizione” (Providenti 2012, p.23).

In light of the concept of contradiction we can read Sapienza’s work as destabilizing binary oppositions and dichotomical thinking in many different ways and on different themes. Gender is probably one of the most prominent binaries that the novel engages with and troubles, through a representation of sexuality that, contradictorily, sometimes reaffirms gender binaries and sometimes undermines them as Charlotte Ross has noticed. In her reading of *The Art of Joy* and of other works by Sapienza, Ross describes Sapienza's books as texts that “seek not to install a sovereign subject, but to push to the margins of the rational subject” (Ross 2012, p.2). Ross refers the subjectivity that emerges from Sapienza's work to Teresa de Lauretis' formulation of an eccentric subject and to Judith Butler's concept of performativity. She identifies in the shifting narratorial voice (from first to third person narrative) one of the ways in which Sapienza evokes the multilayered nature of the self. (Ibidem, p.6) Moreover, Ross analyzes how in Sapienza's work we can find a deconstruction of gender and of normative gender roles, through the description of a multiplicity of subject-positions (going from a strong male identification, to an hybrid half male, half female self to a definitely female self inspired by De Beauvoir) that is highly contextual and very often even contradictory but that, for this very reason:

Challenges understandings of gender, sexuality and identity over and over again, and refuse to settle into any pattern, refusing to align with narratives of feminism, or even with themselves. While we might wish to problematize specific statements, overall, this eccentricity has value in its ability to provoke us into reflection, to interrogate discourses that risk becoming consolidated into unexamined, received norms, and as a largely unheard strand of feminist self-

fashioning and self-theorizing. (Ibidem, p.16)

This “unheard strand of feminist self-fashioning and self-theorizing” is accomplished in my view through what I would like to call a methodology of re-reading and re-signifying to which Modesta refers multiple times in the course of the novel. Words, says Modesta, lie; they have to be always tested and re-tested on experience in order to uncover the meaning they might have, and this meaning is never absolute or valid outside of specific circumstances:

Il male sta nelle parole che la tradizione ha voluto assolute, nei significati snaturati che le parole continuano a rivestire. Mentiva la parola amore, esattamente come la parola morte. Mentivano molte, mentivano quasi tutte. Ecco che cosa dovevo fare: studiare le parole esattamente come si studiano le piante, gli animali... E poi, ripulirle dalla muffa, liberarle dalle incrostazioni di secoli di tradizione, inventarne delle nuove [...] Imparai a leggere i libri in un altro modo. Man mano che incontravo una certa parola, un certo aggettivo, li tiravo fuori dal loro contesto e li analizzavo per vedere se si potevano usare nel “mio” contesto<sup>31</sup>. (*ADG*, pp-134-135)

The new meaning Modesta finds for the words inherited and made stale by “centuries of tradition” is tested on corporeal experience, on the experiences of the body that are always material and discursive at the same time. Ross well describes this mechanism when she says that Sapienza sense of self is “costruito in modo discorsivo e mediato [...]”. Per poter assumere consistenza le sue esperienze devono essere paradossalmente incanalate attraverso il testo”, but also admitting that “Sapienza insiste più volte sul carattere corporeo della nostra condizione ontologica e sulla carnalità del nostro essere soggetti sessuali, sessuati e genderizzati” (Ross in Providenti ed. 2012, p.224)

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<sup>31</sup> The harm lies in the words which tradition presents as absolute, in the distorted meanings those words continue to hold. The word 'love' is a lie, just like the word 'death'. Many words lied, almost all of them lied. That was what I had to do: study words exactly as one studies plants, animals... And then, wipe away the mould, free them from the deposits of centuries of tradition, invent new ones [...]. I learned to read books in a different way. As I came across a certain word, a certain adjective, I extracted them from their context and analysed them to see if they could be used in 'my' context. (*The Art of Joy*, pp.186-187)



### 3 Contradiction in *The Art of Joy* as Postcolonial Hybridity?

-Colonia, tu hai messo le mani sulla sua colonia!  
 -Cavolo, Mody, mi fai tornare il buonumore! Olimpia, vieni qua, colonia mia! Somalia, Abissinia, mia  
 adorata! Sei uno schianto, Mody! Ci voglio fare una canzone e cantarla per le strade...  
 (ADG, p.462)

I would like to add to Ross' insights, and in general to the feminist literature on *The Art of Joy*, another way in which Sapienza makes the subjectivity highlighted in the novel an eccentric one. In her seminal essay titled *Eccentric Subjects* (de Lauretis 1999) Teresa de Lauretis refers to the eccentricity of the subject also as eccentric in terms of nationality and in terms of race/ethnicity, explicitly comparing her own formulation to Bhabha's concept of hybridity and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Mestiza*. I would like to show how the contradictory questioning of gender and this exposition of the non-coherence of the self that Ross aptly describes goes hand in hand with the interrogation of a certain version of "siciliannes" and of southern Italian subjectivity and addresses its history of racialization to which we have been referring to in the introduction. In other words in *The Art of Joy* we might find not only the eccentricity of the subject along the lines of gender and sexuality but also the hybridity of the subject along the lines of race and ethnicity. Sapienza's take on the difference of the south is not a particularistic one as Laura Fortini has noticed commenting that: "*The Art of Joy* is not a Sicilian novel, and if it is, it is only because it makes of the island the whole of the world, without denying though the precise location of the story: that takes place almost entirely in Sicily" (Fortini in Farnetti ed. 2011, p.116). Modesta's story definitely has a universal appeal on many different kinds of readers (on whoever "is" a body, I would say, quoting Rossana Rossanda through the perceptive reading that Clotilde Barbarulli makes of *The University of Rebibbia* in Farnetti ed. 2011, p.133), but at the same time is firmly grounded in the south: Sicily and Southern Italy are not the simple backdrop of a story about an allegedly universal feminine experience. A certain tension between universality and particularity is left productively unresolved. Keeping in mind then how, as Pellegrino says, the Sicilian

literary tradition, and the representational history of Sicily, was also the horizon inside which Sapienza situated her writing, I will briefly describe what has probably been the most popular representation of Sicily from the 18<sup>th</sup> century onward, a representation that is part of what I would call, following Homi Bhabha, a “colonialist discourse of unchangeability”, an Orientalist gaze that still predominates on the representation of Sicily, and then I will read Sapienza's novel pointing out some elements that can illuminate the way in which she tried to confront these representations, draw from them, while also using the elements she draw from them for creating something new: something that was “missing before and that was highly needed”. (Pellegrino, op.cit.)

In the location of culture Homi Bhabha describes how the discourse of the colonialist relies on fixity and on the idea of unchangeability: fixity and unchangeability are the main characteristics of the colonial stereotype (that Bhabha describes in terms of fetishism). Bhabha identifies in Fixity one of the main strategies of colonial discourse; the purpose of fixity is to construct otherness “fixing” the other in his/her difference, a difference that must at the same time be represented as unchanging and somehow degenerate. The stereotype, according to Bhabha, does the work of this paradoxical fixity, and it is a powerful “form of knowledge and identification” (Bhabha 1994, p.18). The main feature of the stereotype is, in Bhabha's words, *ambivalence*: a constant and anxious shifting between “what is always 'in place', already known and something that must be anxiously repeated” (Ivi), such a shifting constitutes “one of the most significant discursive and psychical strategies of discriminatory power” (Ivi). Bhabha's attitude is not one of outright condemnation of the stereotype as simply “false”, but rather a critical interrogation that is able to chart its ambivalent mode of functioning and its being, every time anew, a new condensation, or codification, of precise and contextual relations of power:

My reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the *identification* of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse. To judge the stereotyped image on the basis of a

prior political normativity is to dismiss it, not to displace it, which is only possible by engaging with its *effectivity*; with the repertoire of positions of power and resistance, domination and dependence that constructs the colonial subject (both coloniser and colonised).” (Ibidem, p.19, emphasis in the original)

Even in his treatment of the stereotype Bhabha brings his psychoanalytically informed conception of the split, hybrid, subject to bear on his analysis. An unproblematic notion of the subject, in fact, hinders, according to Bhabha, the possibility of seeing the ambivalence at work in the functioning of the stereotype.

In the case of Sicily and of Southern Italy the island has been imagined as a place almost ontologically resistant to change, a place where in the words of Tomasi di Lampedusa “everything must change so that everything stay as it is”. Literature has been very instrumental in the construction of this representation and Lampedusa’s formula has probably been the most popular rendition and codification of it but by no means the only or the first one. There is a long tradition of literary figures that have uphold this representation of Sicily in particular and of Southern Italy in general, starting, as we have already mentioned, with foreign travellers during the Grand Tour years, and gaining a new impetus during and after Unification: as we have seen, many great Sicilian writers from De Roberto to Sciascia, passing through Verga can be said to have indulged in this discourse in a way or another.<sup>32</sup>

How can we fit *The Art of Joy* in this picture? Where does the novel stand in respect to the Orientalist discourse on Sicily? In this section I want to read Sapienza’s work contextualizing it within the history of the colonial discourse on the Italian south, resorting once again to the powerful interpretative key of contradiction that as we have seen is not so distant from the hybridity of the subject as discussed by Bhabha. In the

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<sup>32</sup> see for example: Frank Rosengarten, “Homo Siculus: Essentialism in the Writing of Giovanni Verga, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, and Leonardo Sciascia,” in *Italy’s “Southern Question”: Orientalism in One Country*, ed. Jane Schneider (Oxford: Berg, 1998). Mark Chu, “Sciascia and Sicily: Discourse and Actuality”, in *Italica*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (Spring, 1998), and Santiago Parga-Linares, “Representations of Sicily in the Contemporary Narrative of the Risorgimento”, in *Carte Italiane*, 2(8), (Department of Italian, UCLA, 2012)

remainder of this chapter I will try to understand Sapienza's attitude towards this issue in two ways: first highlighting the oscillation in her representation of Sicily and how there is an element of exoticism and orientalism that Sapienza reiterates but how there is also a powerful discourse of change; secondly through a comparison with Federico De Roberto's *The Viceroy*s on the specific theme of race, deformity and degeneration. De Roberto, as I will show in the last section can certainly be considered an important intertextual reference in *The Art of Joy*. As already mentioned, contradiction and ambivalence is present in the way Sapienza renews and challenges traditional representations of Sicily. Her representation of “the Island”, as she calls it many times, oscillate between a sometimes exotic and somehow essentialist representation and a powerful discourse of change; change is not only political, social, cultural and individual in *The Art of Joy*. It is the essence of Sapienza’s materialism and it is inscribed in the body: change is the law of matter, the condition of the body. See for example the following quote from the last page of the novel when Modesta and Marco have a discussion on death:

-M’ aveva presa una curiosità intensa per la mia morte. Sì, come se in questa parola leggessi un’altra avventura biologica, un’ennesima metamorfosi che ci attende Marco, me te, Nina. [...] Tu sei uomo Marco, e non sai nel tuo corpo, o sapevi e poi nella fretta di agire hai dimenticato, le metamorfosi della materia e tremi un po’ a questa parola. Ma se ti stringi a me, io, donna, ti aiuterò a ricordare e a non temere quel che deve mutare per continuare a essere vivo<sup>33</sup>. (*ADG*, p.509).

One almost has the impression here that Sapienza is referencing the famous formula of *Il Gattopardo*, offering a radically different picture of the dialectics among stasis and change. Change in Modesta’s interpretation is unstoppable, it is the law of matter itself.

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<sup>33</sup> 'I was gripped by an intense curiosity about my death. Yes, as if another biological adventure could be read in that word, yet another metamorphosis that awaits us, Marco: me, you, Nina.' [...] 'You're a man, Marco, and you don't know – or you knew and then, in your haste to act, forgot – the material transformations in your body, so the word makes you tremble a little. But if you hold me close, I, a woman, will help you remember, and not be afraid of that which must change in order to continue living.' (*The Art of Joy*, p.668)

In order to further illustrate this point I will refer to a specific passage of the novel, that although very significant for our discussion is not the only one that foregrounds the ambivalence on the theme of “southernness” present in the novel. It is with Carmine, the old steward, that Modesta establishes a dialogue and a conversation interspersed and integral to their lovemaking that shows the inherent hybridity of the southern Italian subject by oscillating between an appeal to a traditional identity and powerful figures of change. “Cuore” is one of those words that Modesta has discarded as a lie but, after having met Carmine again, and having made love with him Modesta tells him

-L' ho visto sai il cuore.

-e come era?

- come la ruota di legno che a pentecoste i carusi incendiano e trascinano giù per il Monte. Io, solo da una finestra l'ho vista, tanto tempo fa. Allora non potevo uscire fuori dalle mura. Da queste parti non la fanno la ruota, Carmine, com' è?

- Eh no! Questa terra vascia è! Che ne sanno qui dei campi di segale e di grano?”<sup>34</sup> (ADG, p.203)

This dialogue is followed by a very detailed description of this tradition of the Burning Wheel, made by Carmine. Modesta then regains the word “cuore”, finds a new meaning for it and this meaning is a meaning that is related to an old traditional practice. The meaning of the word “cuore” is equated to a traditional practice, associated with a traditional feast, which Carmine recounts in all its significance. We can doubtlessly say that the novel gives much importance to the theme of local traditions and habits. For example in the second part of the novel the theme of death and of the feast of the dead has a prominent position: during this day, it is said in Sicily, the dead ones return to the earth to be with their loved ones; the fascist regime tried to eradicate this feast promoting instead the epiphany. Not only death is present as synonym of freedom (freedom from

<sup>34</sup> 'I saw it, you know, my heart.'

'And what was it like?'

'Like the wooden wheel that the *carusi* set aflame at Pentecost and drag down from the Mountain. I only saw it from a window, a long time ago. At that time I wasn't allowed to go out the walls. Around here they don't do the wheel, Carmine. Why is that?'

'No, of course not! This land is flat! what do they know about rye and wheat fields here?' (*The Art of Joy*, p.275)

fear, freedom from oppression and social constraints), but this traditional idea of the return of the dead ones is one that it is also related to the multiplicity of the self on which Ross elaborates. Many dead characters in the novel, many of which were killed by Modesta herself, come back as presences in her mind, as interlocutors of internal dialogue as partners in conversations. Modesta is literally haunted by them, or even more poignantly, they have become part of her.

But this appeal and re-actualization of forgotten traditions is not to be interpreted only as a nostalgic appeal to a fixed, stable identity; in fact after few pages Modesta and Carmine engage in a dialogue where what is at stake is the political nature of the “discourse of unchangeability”; here Modesta reproaches Carmine for having forced his son to marry a woman for convenience, and announces her ideas about change:

- Non sono come te, Carmine! I tempi stanno cambiando, e spero che i tuoi figli i tuoi nipoti, e tutti gli altri giovani vi facciano saltare la testa e i poderi!
- Sentitela! E chi ti ha messo queste idee in testa, tuo cognato? O l'hai letto nei libri? E che interesse ci avresti tu, eh? Principessa Brandiforti?
- L'interesse di farmi una bella risata.
- Queste idee straniere sono Modesta. E mai niente di buono fuori dall'isola è venuto.<sup>35</sup> (*ADG*, p.207)

But Carmine is very soon destined to change his mind when Modesta proudly shows him how Carlo taught her how to swim. Even if Modesta is skeptical about certain features of the socialist ideas and organization that Carlo has introduced her into, she opposes these views to Carmine's ideas that nothing ever changes and that all that Sicilians can do is mind their own business and think about their own interest. (*ADG*, p.208) While Modesta recognizes a certain “wisdom” in these words, she thinks that they presuppose the idea that somebody else will always be in charge in Sicily and in Southern

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<sup>35</sup> 'I'm not like you, Carmine! Times are changing, and I hope that your sons, your grandchildren and all the other young people will overthrow you landowners and do away with your estates.'

'Listen to her! And who put these ideas in your head, your brother-in-law? Or did you read about them in books? And what would you gain from it, eh, Princess Brandiforti?'

'I would have a good laugh over it.'

'Those ideas are foreign, Modesta. And nothing good ever came to the island from the outside.'  
(*The Art of Joy*, p.280)

Italy and opposes to them the idea of self-determination, offering an analogy with how abortion has liberated women from their apparent unavoidable “nature”, from their “destiny”. In siding with Carlo against the “discourse of unchangeability” reiterated by Carmine Modesta takes a decisively gramscian stand while at the same time showing how she has incorporated these ideas through her corporeal experiences (her experience of abortion), putting the body back at the center of personal and collective processes of making sense of the world. In the end a convergence with Carmine is found exactly in refusing the idea of “destiny” (*ADG*, p.216). Moreover, while the equation of the word “cuore” with the traditional practice of the burning wheel, whose description might be said to indulge in a certain exoticism, can be seen as reinforcing ideas of fixity and archaism, and as an idealistic, nostalgic appeal to traditional identity, the symbolic meaning of the wheel leads us back to the theme of change. The wheel is constantly moving: it is, we might say an objective correlative for the theme of change. Rather, with this figuration of change as the traditional burning wheel the concept of change itself is subtracted from a possible interpretation that would make of it the goal of a progressive, futuristic and teleological narrative; the endorsement of a “progress narrative” of this sort would be in fact in complete disagreement with the anti-historical inspiration that runs through the novel and that Alberica Bazzoni as well described.

The epistemological and subjectivizing process described by Modesta is then, as Ross has noted, not so much of a (gramscian) utopia but more of a foucauldian eterotopia, that doesn't project itself into the future but shows difference in the present (and in the past). Sapienza's figurations are then “specchi che mettono a fianco temporalità e luoghi lontani, e versioni molteplici di noi; esse sconvolgono le concezioni normative del sé coerente e del tempo cronologico” (Ross in Providenti ed. 2012, p.226).

It is interesting also to notice how, in this passage the possibility of change for Sicily is described and illustrated in the novel through interesting analogies with the predicament of women or of low social classis; it is as if we could identify in Sapienza's book a kind of “intersectional inspiration”, as we can see also through a brief analysis of the second part of the novel and of the character of Carlo. The theme of the difference

north/south and of racism against the southerners runs through the more than 500 pages of *The Art of Joy* but it is in the second part that it is present with more force. It is especially through the character of Carlo Civardi and through the description of the relationship between Modesta and Carlo that the issue is brought to the fore. At this point in the novel Modesta is in Catania, the so longed for city, and she has achieved a considerable level of stability, securing, after having killed Nonna Gaia, the leadership of the house and, marrying Ippolito, the title of Princess Brandiforti. Nonetheless Modesta is very dissatisfied and, having to deal with the very narrow-minded milieu of the catanese upper class she comes to conceive of freedom and of “success” in another way, she also becomes even more aware than she was before of class oppression:

La città insegnava. Quel potere di cupole maestose, di palazzi e torri rapaci appena ingentiliti da trine di cancelli sdegnosi sbarrava il passo al formicolio miserabile che si dissanguava a servire e sorridere, ricordando a tutti, ricchi e poveri, di accumulare denaro per combattere la paura della morte, una parola che in realtà non è più paurosa della parola malattia, schiavitù, tortura. Non mi sarei più confrontata con la morte, con quel traguardo che non più temuto fa eterna ogni ora goduta pienamente. Ma bisognava essere liberi<sup>36</sup>. (*ADG*, p.131)

In this section of the book the awareness of class oppression goes hand in hand with the awareness of other structures of inequalities and of their interconnection: the section opens, for example, with a detailed description of the seemingly self-imposed code of moral behaviour that the women of the catanese upper class observe and that prescribes them, for example, not to go out in public alone, not to go to the movies unless a male relative has approved of its content and judged it appropriate for them.

Here I want to focus on the information the novel gives us about racism against the southerners and on how the theme of power imbalance between the north and the south of Italy is presented in the novel. When Modesta and Carlo meet, on the beach where

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<sup>36</sup> The city taught me. The power of those majestic domes, of the rapacious palazzos and towers barely refined by haughty, ornamental gates, kept out the wretched swarm that was bled dry serving and smiling, and reminded everyone, rich and poor alike, that amassing wealth was a way to contend with the fear of death, a word that in reality is no more frightful than the words 'illness', 'slavery', 'torture'. I would no longer worry about death, that final destination which, once is no longer feared, makes each hours enjoyed to the fullest seem eternal. But you had to be free. (*The Art of Joy*, p.181)



Modesta is trying to learn how to swim by herself, her first feeling is one of fear. She is afraid of Carlo's youth, and of her own youth. And she is impressed by the way Carlo talks; by his impeccable Italian “that rolled down in many soft rs without disturbing the silence” (Ibidem, p.137). The theme of fear is a recurrent one in this section of the book, and it is connected to the theme of freedom. If you don't know any better, it can be fearsome to be free, if you have never been free, maybe your first reaction to freedom, or to the possibility of it, can be fear. This is evident for example in the passage on Ippolito, the mentally challenged and bodily handicapped prince who was kept locked up in a room before the arrival of Modesta, and on his improvement after that Modesta stopped his seclusion and appointed somebody to take care of him: like Ippolito, the women of Catania that don't dare take the freedom they could reclaim, the lower class of Sicily that goes on serving the upper class without any conflict, Modesta herself, have all been secluded for too long:

Cercai di ridere dentro di me. Ma il sospetto che solo in quanto lo avevano tenuto rinchiuso s'era perduto alla vita, e il constatare i progressi che aveva fatto anche alla sua età solo perché qualcuno si occupava di lui, mi fecero salire tanti di quei singhiozzi alla gola che dovetti tornare subito nella mia stanza dove piansi per ore e ore. Piangevo per Ippolito?<sup>37</sup> (ADG, pag. 136)

Carlo's arrival is then presented as this possibility of freedom and the fact that Carlo teaches Modesta how to swim is equated with him introducing her to the socialist circle in Catania.

The information we have on Carlo's family are particularly interesting here; Carlo comes from a family whose history is crisscrossed by the problematic relations between southerners and northerners. Carlo refers to his ancestors as “colonizers on their own”. The family is from Milan and has peasants' roots. They are, Carlo says quoting somebody in his family “una razza forte. Razza selezionata dal gelo, dall'austerità dei costumi, da

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<sup>37</sup> I tried to laugh silently. But the thought that he had been lost to life only as long as they kept him locked up, and the recognition of the progress that he had made even at his age just because someone took pains with him, brought sobs to my throat; I had to return quickly to my room, where I wept for hours and hours. Was I crying for Ippolito? (*The Art of Joy*, pp.188-189)

nessuna contaminazione con elementi indigeni”, “Avevo una tale paura di quella razza forte!” Carlo concludes. In Carlo's memories his grandmother, Nonna Valentina, stands out as upholding more than any other family member the racial prestige of the family, against the southerners' degeneration. But degeneration coming from the south has infiltrated the family all the same, to the discontent of Nonna Valentina, because Carlo's father fell in love with a girl from Naples and married her. From the marriage Carlo was born. Nonna Valentina reiterated stereotypes against the southerners, against southern women in particular and she openly compares her daughter in law, Carlo's mother, to a prostitute. (*ADG*, p.150)

In this predicament Carlo survives reading his father's “forbidden books”. Books about politics. Carlo's father, Federico, participated in Garibaldi's expedition in Sicily but was very disappointed and felt his dream of a republican Italy betrayed when Garibaldi met the King in Teano. Federico then becomes part of the socialist league with Turati in 1889. But Turati also disappointed Federico in 1898 with his refusal to endorse an anti-statalist perspective, settling for a reformist one. With the digression about Pirelli, the link between socialist-communist struggle and womens' liberation is reiterated once more (*Ibidem*, p.154).

After his father disillusionments, Carlo says, he would have not thought of becoming active in politics if he would have not met Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci's presentation at this point in the novel is particularly interesting and we can put it in relation with the episodes of anti-southern racism that Carlo suffered all throughout his childhood.<sup>38</sup>

But socialism and communism are no easy recipes and, while Carlo goes away, Modesta grows dissatisfied by the socialist and communist circle. In the novel in fact the body is the only unit of measure against which everything must be tested and ideas do not have any other life if not “in the flesh”.

Fra i tuoi compagni ho trovato soltanto malcelata aspirazione alla santità e vocazione al martirio. O la ferocia del dogma per nascondere la paura della ricerca, della sperimentazione,

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<sup>38</sup> According to Stuart Hall Gramsci's work can be said to be very relevant to the study of Race and Ethnicity. see S. Hall “Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity”, *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, June 1986 10: 5-27

della scoperta, della fluidità della vita. Se lo vuoi sapere non ho trovato nulla che assomigliasse alla libertà del materialismo<sup>39</sup>. (*ADG*, p.168)

Colonialism has dispossessed men and women of their bodies through the family as social institution, and through normative ideas of gender (“Didn't your mothers teach you anything?” is a recurrent sentence in this part of the book) so putting the body back at the centre of one's own experience is very resonant with many insights of postcolonial authors. This narrative move opens up new spaces for mutual comprehension for differently positioned subjectivities while at the same time retrieving a different history of Italian history and Italian identity as “split” from the very beginning, across lines of race, class, gender.

#### 4 Rewriting Race and Degeneration: Intertextual Relations between *The Art of Joy* and *The Viceroy*s

*Ma quanto è dolce questa degenerazione!*  
(*ADG*, p.478)

A comparison among *The Art of Joy* and *The Viceroy*s can offer us interesting insights on the themes of race and degeneration; The nature of this intertextuality can in my view be said to be a veritable rewriting attempted by Sapienza of the famous Sicilian novel by De Roberto.

Many are the similarities and the intertextual echoes of *The Viceroy*s in *the Art of Joy*. In an interview with Teresa Maffei, Angelo Pellegrino notices how the space of the Brandiforti's castle is very reminiscent of the Uzeda's castle in *The Viceroy*s. In a still

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<sup>39</sup> All I found among your comrades was a barely concealed aspiration for sainthood and a vocation to martyrdom. Or else a ferocity of dogma hiding a fear of investigation, of experimentation, of discovery, of life's fluidity. If you want to know I didn't find anything resembling the freedom of materialism. (*The Art of Joy*, p.230)

unpublished article on the significance of the linguistic variety in *The Art of Joy*, Valentina Fulginiti also identifies in De Roberto's novel an important intertextual reference for Sapienza, while Alberica Bazzoni, taking her cue from Vittorio Spinazzola, sides *The Art of Joy* with *The Viceroy*s and with Pirandello's *I vecchi e i giovani*, for their common anti-teleological, anti-historical inspiration. In this section I will further this line of investigation by offering a close-reading of some of the passages where the allusions or references to De Roberto's novel can be seen with most evidence in order to reflect on the nature of this intertextuality.

In the first part of the novel an inspiration coming from De Roberto is probably most evident in the description of places, especially buildings: the convent where the very rich and privileged nuns live a very comfortable life is very reminiscent of the Abbazia di San Nicola where the clerics of Casa Uzeda live among fellow noblemen. Moreover, like in De Roberto, the convent will be turned into a hospital when an epidemic of Spanish flu will strike the island. But it is probably in the section set in Nonna Gaia's castle that the relationship with *The Viceroy*s becomes an open rewriting; we have the impression that Sapienza has resuscitated Teresa Uzeda in the character of Nonna Gaia. In De Roberto's novel Teresa's death opens the narration and sets in motion the whole story; the matriarch's shadow will loom large on the vicissitudes of every character and of the house. In Sapienza instead Nonna Gaia is, together with Beatrice, the only survivor of the family and her death, facilitated by Modesta will close the first part of the novel being a liberation from destiny. Even structurally the section set at the Brandiforti's house and the first chapters of *The Viceroy*s, when all the members of the family are introduced are very similar: while in the Uzeda's castle the gallery of the family portraits is hang on the wall, in Gaia's house they have been removed from view and placed in a hidden room because Gaia, we are said, hates seeing them. In De Roberto the description of the gallery leads to the introduction of all the members of the family, who are alive and will be the characters of the story. In Sapienza instead, Beatrice guides Modesta in a tour of the empty rooms of all her dead relatives: rooms that have been left intact "in case they return". Thus Beatrice shows Modesta the rooms of Gaia and Leonora's brothers and sister: Ildebrando,

Adelaide, Jacopo and Ignazio. The story and the presentations of these absent characters are very reminiscent of the stories of the characters of *the Viceroy*s and somehow rewrite, confront or supplement their stories. Adelaide, we are told, after having hastily discussed with her whole family when Madre Leonora went to the convent, has lived only for her birds, to the point that, as Beatrice says: “quando una madre di qualche bestiolina moriva, lasciando le uova, lei le covava. Mi hanno detto che più di una volta è riuscita a fare nascere un pulcino.” (ADG, p.62). Adelaide story seems to refer to Chiara’s attitude towards maternity, but her somehow giving birth to a bird is presented in a completely different tone than Chiara’s monstrous childbirth. In the same vein Jacopo and Ignazio’s character are presented as men committed to science and technical progress and as fervent atheists as opposed to the superstition and bigoted religious beliefs that mark many of the characters of *The Viceroy*s. It is almost as if Sapienza wants to overturn De Roberto’s description of Sicilian characters and his idea of degeneration: from Jacopo, Beatrice says, she has learned that “il brutto e il bello sono una cosa sola che non si può separare che... aspetta, come disse? Ah sì, che dal brutto nasce il bello, dal bello il brutto e così via” (ADG, p.63).

We could even go as far as suggesting that we can read the whole story of Modesta’s ascension to head of the House of the Brandiforti as a way of contrasting the decision of Nanna Gaia for extinguishing the family and thus the race: in this passage where Beatrice explains to Modesta Gaia’s plans the lexical similarities with *The Viceroy*s is striking:

Vedi, tutti I Brandiforti fino alla generazione del nonno sono stati bellissimi e sani. Poi qualcosa si *guastò nel sangue*. [...] Certo, c’era stato Ignazio bello e forte, ma *maman* dice che anche lui era *marcio nel cervello*. Forse per questo è morto. Così *maman* dice che la nostra casata deve estinguersi come un fiume che il monte non vuole nutrire più<sup>40</sup>. (ADG, p.70, emphasis mine)

<sup>40</sup> You see, all the Brandiforti up until Grandfather's generation were fine-looking and healthy. Then something in the blood deteriorated. [...] Of course, there was Ignazio, handsome and strong, but Maman says that he too was rotten – his brain that is. Maybe that's why he died. So Maman says that our lineage must dry up like a river that is no longer fed by the Mountain. (*The Art of Joy*, p.100)

The terrible determinism implicit in Gaia's racialized thinking is in this quote evident in all its horror: Gaia goes as far as thinking that Ignazio, who has died in the war, died because of a genetic inheritance, because he was "marcio nel cervello" in consequence of his family's "sangue guasto", and she is extremely firm in her decision that her family stops with her (she thinks Beatrice will never marry because of her leg). Modesta's story then, and the building of her extremely lively, alternative, nonconformist family made of children from various parents, from guests and from the servant is an imagination of an entirely different form of community and her killing of Nonna Gaia also signifies her rebellion against this kind of thinking. If De Roberto had taken up the representation of the racial degeneration of the south creating a disquieting picture of its reaching the heart of the nation and thus contaminating the newborn Unitarian state, Sapienza's way of confronting this history creates a hopeful heterotopia where the offspring of this family, "degenerated" in the best way, and somehow de-genderated and de-racialized, will become actors for change.

The terrible determinism of racialized thinking, so akin to the terrible determinism of the word "destiny" that is more than once powerfully criticized in the novel, is challenged in *The Art of Joy* at least in two ways that are, not surprisingly at odds with each other: with a positive re-evaluation of deformity, especially evident in Beatrice's character on one hand, and with the idea that progress and technical change are able to cure sicknesses and infirmity in the other.

Beatrice's deformity is then not only an overthrowing of a traditional idealized representation of women: Sapienza's less perfect but more corporeal and lively version of Dante's guide, but it also acquires a special relevance if seen on the backdrop of discourses on the degeneration of the south and on southerners' racial difference; Beatrice's lame leg is described in the novel as something precious, endearing, seductive and attractive

Quella piccola nota dissonante del piede sinistro dava alla sua vita sottile un

qualcosa di tenero, da stringere fra le mani come una cosa preziosa che da un momento all'altro si sarebbe potuta rompere<sup>41</sup>. (ADG, p.59)

Her graciously deformed body is indeed an inheritance from her family but this makes Beatrice even more beautiful and desirable as Modesta will say later in the novel:

Così vicina vidi qualche filo bianco che già si mostrava fra il biondo. Per discendenza maschile Beatrice aveva ereditato quel bianco precoce e quel piedino malato. Dal ceppo contadino di quell'uomo d'onore provenivano due segni raffinatissimi, squisitamente *fin de race*<sup>42</sup>. (ADG, p.173)

On the other hand, in the episode of Prando who risks being affected by Beatrice's same infirmity and who is instead promptly cured by Carlo we can find a different challenge to Nonna Gaia's thinking. Gaia is explicitly evoked in the opening passage of the section, when Beatrice calls for help: "Eriprando, Eriprando! Aveva ragione la nonna, la maledizione! Correte, sta sul tappeto e urla.[...] Il piedino teso come fu per me" (ADG, p.170). But the outcome of Prando's incident is presented as the effect of medical and technical change in a way that sustains somehow a "progress narrative". Such a progress narrative is nonetheless undermined by the resignifying of deformity as normal or even beautiful. Once again tensions and contradictions in *The Art of Joy* call not for a rational either/or logic but for a productively contradictory emotional, mental, corporeal response.

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<sup>41</sup> That small dissonant note of her left foot somehow lent her slim waist a certain tenderness, making you want to hold it in your hands like a precious thing that might break at any moment. (*The Art of Joy*, p.84)

<sup>42</sup> Up close like that, I saw a few grey strands already showing among the blond. Beatrice had inherited that premature grey hair and her bad foot from the paternal line of the family. From the peasant stock of that man of honour, Carmine, came two overly refined, exquisitely *fin de race* signs. (*The Art of Joy*, p.237)

## 5 Conclusions

I hope I have, with the discussion of the theme of race in the novel and with the comparison of *The Art of Joy* with *The Viceroy's* offered enough proof of how Sapienza's novel engages with what I would call, following Frantz Fanon the sociogeny of southern Italian subjectivity. A subjectivity shaped by norms of gender and class across history but certainly also, as I have tried to show, from a too often overlooked history of racialization. Offering an extremely interesting reading of Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* and exploring the way she, as a woman and as a feminist, relates to it Teresa de Lauretis comments that:

Fanon's unique apprehension of the body as the material ground of subject formation, which led him to add the notion of 'sociogeny' to Freud's ontogeny and phylogeny, extends the theoretical reach of psychoanalysis to a conceptual space located between them, a place beyond the individual's psychic history (ontogenetic development) but closer to home than species history (phylogenetic inheritance), and that is to say, the place of culture. Let it be noted that Freud's conception of phylogeny is also a cultural one: phylogenetic inheritance – as a 'recapitulation' of the previous stages of human life, or 'precipitates from the history of human civilization' that occur in each individual – is not directly a biological concept but *analogy* loosely drawn from Darwinian and Lamarckian biology, in that the previous stages are those of human *civilization*, not species development, and what is inherited by each individual are 'the psychological peculiarities of families, races and nations'. If, however, culture is understood not in the broadest sense of Freud's 'civilization', but as historically configured in a particular society, then Fanon's sociogeny identifies the place of culture in the individual psyche more precisely, by articulating subjectivity and subject formation to the effects of the ideological constructions of subject, difference, and otherness that are specific to a given social and cultural formation. (de Lauretis 2002, p.67)

In the case of Modesta and of Sapienza the context of the "ideological constructions of subject, difference and otherness that are specific to a given social and cultural formation" is that of southern Italy with its history of racialization of which the discourse of unchangeability of which I have talked is part. In the novel then we can find the articulation of specific but universally resonant conflicts; a description of the inner contrasts, ambiguities and tensions of southern Italian subjectivity. This subjectivity then can be said to be a hybrid one: one that constitutes and imagines itself within and against different but mutually constitutive power structures, within and against histories of



domination that have to be challenged, traditions of representation that have to be twisted.

## Conclusions: Notes for a Future Project.

### **Re-imagining the Italian South. Subjectivity and Migration in Contemporary Literature and Cinema**

I hope I have with the analysis of the different texts that I have examined, shown how the history of racialization of Southerners is long and articulated and how this process of othering can be said to lie at the heart of Italian identity since the very beginning of its somehow recent history. Moreover, the marginalization of southerners certainly plays a role in the psychic self-structuring of Italian subjectivity and it is still at the core of its processes of identity-formation. This centrality, although very often forgotten by cultural critics and literary historians, is with no doubt reflected in cultural representations in a way that still has to be fully accounted for. It is probably also for this general lack of awareness that the ambiguous differential inclusion/marginalization of Southerners into the Italian cultural and social space still serves the needs of deeply engrained and intertwined systems of oppression: capitalism, heterosexism and racism that feed upon and fortify each other. In the face of this history and in the face of the challenges posed not only to Italy but to Europe in general by globalizing transformations such as contemporary migration, new ways of looking at ourselves and at our cultures are highly needed. In my future research at Warwick University, which I will now describe more in detail, I will take the central questions regarding the colonial and postcolonial nature of Italian society and culture that I have explored in this thesis to bear more on the present configuration of Italian society.

This future project, starting from the premises explored in this thesis, aims at reframing and rethinking the concepts of subjectivity and national identity in contemporary Italy. It will do so by drawing from postcolonial and feminist approaches, with a special focus on the relation between past and present colonialism (both internal and external) in its intersection with the recent phenomenon of (im)migration to Italy and

the more long standing one of emigration from Italy. The scope is to highlight the importance of gender, race, sexuality and class as co-constitutive in the process of national subjectification and identity formation, and therefore creating new venues for alternative identities and more inclusive forms of citizenship. This will be achieved by examining a corpus of contemporary Italian novels by migrant writers and literary works and movies by southern authors as a privileged and still uncharted archive.

Such a research would illuminate the ways in which literary and cinematic representations of gender, sexuality, ethnicity and nationhood, sustain or run counter to the process of “othering” of the Italian South on one hand and to processes of racialization of migrants on the other. It also intends to describe the kinds of subjectivity that emerge from the works of migrant writers which have addressed the racialization of southerners and of southern authors and filmmakers that address the issue of contemporary migration.

As we have seen, In Italy, the “Risorgimento”, the process of unification and creation of a nation state in the period from 1861 to 1865, is still considered and celebrated as a patriotic “moment of origin”. However the uneven distribution of resources and power between the north and the south remains one of the major issues in the country today and it is largely rooted in that historical moment. Massive emigration on both intranational and international level was the outcome of an uneven process of unification. Emigration has disseminated Italian culture and language all over the world in turn affecting events and culture at home, in a circular, diasporic process (Verdicchio 1998, Gabaccia 2000). The importance of emigration and immigration, both international and intra-national has been shown to be of great consequence for the formation of Italian identity and culture (Burns and Polezzi, eds., 2003). Even if a recent stream of scholarship has described what happened in Italy as an instance of “internal colonialism”, in which the “Othering” of the South was exploited in order to produce, by opposition, a “modern” Italian identity (Verdicchio 1997, Schneider 1998, Teti 1993, Dickie 1999, Moe 1997), the appropriateness of the term “postcolonial” to refer to the context of the Italian South is still being questioned. This is even more surprising when considering that

engagement with the work of Antonio Gramsci on the “Southern question” and with his notion of subalternity has been of constitutive importance for the field of postcolonial studies. The debate on colonialism and postcolonialism that his work has stirred at international level has not been paralleled with an equal engagement in Italy. Nonetheless Gramsci's work and his idea that liberation wouldn't be achievable without anti-colonial struggle testify to the southern roots of postcolonial theory (Srivastava and Bhattacharya 2011) and initiate a genealogy of thought that tries to see the connections between internal and external colonialism.

These two phenomena are in fact deeply linked. Italy's unification was experienced by many in the south as an invasion on the part of the north, and the social unrest it created was one of the factors that persuaded the Italian liberal governments to launch the colonial enterprise. African conquest was depicted as a cure to the evils of the south and as a cure to emigration. Moreover southerners constituted a consistent portion of the people who enrolled for the African campaigns. The Italian colonial endeavour in Africa has also been removed from the national consciousness, as a deliberate attempt on the part of postwar governments to hide the violence perpetrated by Italians on colonized peoples (Del Boca 1976). Postcolonial criticism can therefore be instrumental in retrieving the memories of the colonial experience and reactivating reflection on them in contemporary cultural debates. This is a process of great importance in the context of contemporary migration to Italy.

There is in fact a special relevance and timeliness, for today's political and cultural landscape, in going back to this history of migration and of internal as well as external colonialism that lies at the heart of the Italian national formation. Since the 1980s Italy has become a country of immigration, after having been traditionally a country of emigration. Unlike other European countries Italy did not receive a consistent flow of migration from former colonized countries after decolonization. However in the late seventies, due to its position as a passageway to northern Europe, Italy started to receive migration flows from a lot of different countries and by the end of the nineties it

had one of the most diverse migrant populations in Europe. As Sandra Ponzanesi has noticed, the common experience of migration among southern Italians and migrants could constitute a possibility for the formation of a coalition in the struggle to redefine Italian Identity and to revise partial accounts of Italian history. Yet rather than with solidarity migrants are very often met with discrimination, exploitation, intolerance and violence. (Ponzanesi 2004, p.128)

The removal of the history of the Italian south and of external colonialism then goes hand in hand with the lack of awareness about issues related to migration and multiculturalism that troubles the Italian space today. And it is important to bear in mind, as Curcio and Mellino write, that it is not possible to understand the racialization of contemporary migration in the Italian space without “taking into account the cultural, political and economic construction – and hence their role within historical Italian capitalism – of its main ancestors: the southerner and the colonial other (during the first liberal and fascist moment), the Jew (in the later fascist period), the southern migrant (second Post-war Republic)”. (Curcio & Mellino 2010, p.2)

The use of postcolonial insights in the public debate in Italy then would provide us with critical tools that can give us a better understanding of past and contemporary phenomena of exploitation and marginalization in Italy and in Europe. This “postcolonial turn” in Italian Studies is already in full sway but, although it has achieved some major goals, there is a lot that still needs to be done. The retrieval of the contested history of the Italian South, its relation to the history of Italian colonization and the analysis of how these histories can reshape Italian culture and Italian national identity in the face of contemporary migration would be a way to “rethink theory and epistemology in accordance with perspectives of alterity and dissonance” (Ponzanesi 2013, p.59).

This research wants to put in a relationship of mutual contamination the fields of Italian cultural and literary studies and the fields of feminist and postcolonial studies. The project will be carried out with a postcolonial, feminist and intersectional approach. The

history and the memory of the Italian imperial endeavour in Africa and of the problematic unification of Italy will be retrieved with a postcolonial sensitivity; these two moments of Italian history will be considered as deeply linked and their past and present legacy will be investigated in novels and films.

Drawing on my previous research on southern Italy, feminist studies and postcolonial theory, in this work I will adopt an intersectional approach (Yuval Davis 2012). In an intersectional framework race is not a self-constitutive element but it is rather constructed at the intersection of different categories of analysis (primarily gender, class, sexuality, but also religion, nationality, and citizenship); in turn, racism intersects with all the other forms of discrimination, such as sexism, classism, islamophobia, economic exploitation). Gender and sexuality are in turn also shaped by other political and social processes (racism, colonialism, classism), in ways that are context-specific. In the (post)colonial context and in the contemporary discourse on migration, culture and cultural representations participate in creating a fantasy of the Other that is “horrible and titillating” (Said 1978, 1993) at the same time and that serves different political and individual needs. Notions of gender and sexuality are very instrumental in structuring these fantasies (Mc Clintock 1995, Stoler 1995, Khanna 2003), as it has been noticed in the Anglophone context. Studies of racism and colonialism in Italy have also started to focus on the body and sexuality (Ponzanesi 2012, Lombardi-Diop 2013), and this is a very promising line of thought. Moreover, an intersectional approach to the Italian context will lead us to stop assuming the homogenous nature of class, gender or race, and to pay more attention to the emergence of “other differences” that might still be under theorized.

In line with these theoretical premises, which I have explored in my previous research on racialized masculinities (Polizzi, forthcoming), I will analyze the field of Italian postcolonial studies (Ponzanesi 2004, Mellino 2005, Parati 1995, 1999, Gnisci 1998, 2003, 2006, Palumbo 2003, Ben-Ghiat and Fuller 2005, Andall and Duncan 2005) with specific attention to the ways in which different contributions have accounted for the

mutual construction of gender, race, class and sexuality. On the other hand I will read contemporary Italian feminist theory in order to map the emergence of an intersectional and postcolonial approach, attentive to local stratifications across lines of race, gender, sexuality and class, (Ponzanesi 2004, 2005, 2012, De Petris 2005, Ellena, 2010, Giuliani 2010, Marchetti 2011, Demaria 2003; Curti 2006; Romeo 2012, Bertilotti et al. 2005; Andall and Puwar 2007, Andall 1992, 2000; Marchetti 2010, 2011). A special focus will be dedicated to studies on migrant writing (Burns and Polezzi eds. 2003, Ponzanesi 2004, Ponzanesi and Merolla, Parati 2005, Orton and Parati 2007, Comberiat 2010b, Quaquarelli ed. 2010, Pezzarossa and Rossini eds. 2011), in order to gain a better understanding of how processes of migration past and present are shaping Italian national identity and are changing the way Italians interpret their own culture, (included the literary canon: Benvenuti 2008; Derobertis 2010; Venturini 2010). The texts will also be analyzed with the help of classical narratological literature (Bal 1986). The insights of classical feminist film theorists (Mulvey 1975, De Lauretis 1987) will be combined with attention to the literature that has analyzed the conventions of migrant cinema in the Italian and European context (O'Healy 2007, 2009, Grassilli 2008, Ponzanesi and Waller 2011).

Differences and the similarities in terms of subject-position vis-a-vis restrictive definitions of "Italiannes" can result in different forms of relation and encounter. Opposition, violence, discrimination on one hand or solidarity and mutual understanding on the other are all possibilities in the contemporary predicament of postcolonial Italy. There are substantial possibilities of mutual understanding; and although they shouldn't be overestimated or idealized, and awareness of violence and inequalities is crucial, there can certainly be mutual collaboration in a common challenge to non-inclusive conceptualizations of the Italian nation and of national culture. The phenomenology of the "strange encounter" (Ahmed 2000) between southerners and migrants in postcolonial Italy is already being charted by contemporary literature and cinema in many different representations. The ability of these representations to challenge existing inequalities and to innovate the cultural landscape, or their complicity with patterns of marginalization

will be explored with different methodological tools derived from the intersection of postcolonial and feminist studies.

The relationship between the old internal colonialism and a new generation of Italophone migrant writers will be taken into consideration through an understanding of what is the migrant writers' own take on Italian internal differences. This idea will guide the analysis of the novel *Divorzio all'islamica in Viale Marconi (Divorce Islamic Style 2006)* by the Algerian-Italian writer Amara Lakhous. The novel confronts the history (and the history of representation) of southerners (starting with the title, which references the movie by Pietro Germi, *Divorzio all'Italiana 1961*), while at the same time linking them to Orientalism and neo-Orientalism and to the stigmatization of migrants. The novel will be analyzed through a close reading, paying attention to the language and to the way “standard Italian” is revitalized by the insertion of linguistic elements coming from Arabic and from the Sicilian dialect. In his last novel, *Contesa per un maialino Italianissimo a San Salvario* (2013), Lakhous moves his setting from multicultural Rome to Turin, probably the northern city that has had the most consistent flow of migrants coming from southern Italy. The protagonist is a self-defined “second-generation *terrone*”, a journalist living in the multicultural neighbourhood of San Salvario. The chosen genre is once again that of an ironic and comical detective novel. The Brazilian-Italian writer Christiana De Caldas Brito has constructed powerful and symbolical representations of southern Italian women in her collection of short stories titled *Qui e La'* (2004). The character of Maroggia is of particular importance for analysing the way southern Italy is re-imagined by a writer that focuses on the migratory experience.

Novels and other forms of literary expression by southern writers constitute an archive of precious elaborations on the “subalternity”, marginalization and “differential inclusion” (Mezzadra 2008) into the national space experienced by southerners, and their analysis can shed a new light on their role at crucial moments in Italian history as well as on the contemporary relation with migrants. The journal of Vincenzo Rabito, an almost illiterate peasant who took part in WWI, WWII and in colonial campaigns in Africa, is an



extraordinary document in this sense. Moreover *Terramatta* (2007) (this is the title that was given to the text in 2007, almost twenty years after its completion by Rabito) has a literary dignity that exceeds the value of its testimony: Rabito's language is a completely invented one, made of a mixture of Italian and Sicilian, and able to give an extremely original perspective on the events of Italian history. The reflection and the elaboration on the symbolic and material meaning of “The Land” and of the “Homeland”, carried out in a place that has undergone forgotten forms of colonization and that finds itself nowadays at the center of globalizing transformations like international migration, resurfaces in the production of southern writers that have focused on issues of migration and on the relationships between southerners and migrants. Evelina Santangelo connects the experience of being a southerner and that of being a migrant in her first book, *Senzaterra* (2008); the novel centers on the character of Gaetano, whose father migrated to Germany and is urging him to join him there. Gaetano's story intertwines with the story of Ali, an undocumented migrant from North-Africa who arrived in Sicily by boat to work illegally in the fields, under the authority of a local mafia boss. Santangelo's novel represents a deconstruction of nationalistic conceptions of “homeland” and of a traditional notion of fatherhood and masculinity, and offers a very articulated answer to the question of “who can claim rights on whose land?” In her second novel, *Cose da pazzi* (2012), Santangelo focuses on the friendship among a Sicilian working class teen-ager and a second generation schoolmate (whose mother comes from Colombia). The book, set in Palermo, updates the model of the *bildungsroman* with a postcolonial sensitivity. The very detailed descriptions of the *Spina* neighbourhood of Palermo have a crucial function and are carried out in a way that is able to reveal the inscription of past and contemporary postcolonial events on the southern landscape. If *Cose da Pazzi* gives a rather hopeful depiction of the future of Italian multiculturalism, the novel by Veronica Tommasini *Sangue di cane* (2012) explores the psychic intricacies of the encounter with the other. The passionate love of a Sicilian girl, whose family history is marked by emigration, for a Polish homeless immigrant is written in a first person narrative where the girl continuously and emphatically addresses the Polish boy describing in detail the development of their relationship. The language and the metaphors are those of an

obsessive desire where all the strictures and structures of the encounter with alterity are mercilessly scrutinized. Tommasini describes patterns of projection and fantasies in the postcolonial encounter, zooming in on the role sexuality plays in the process and exposing the “fetishism of the stranger” that very often characterizes the relation to the other (Ahmed 2000). If considered together and compared to each other Santangelo's and Tomassini's novels can offer us almost a phenomenological description of the different “politics of encounter” with alterity and difference in a postcolonial south.

Contemporary cinematic representations have also foregrounded the relationship between southerners and migrants and between old and new forms of cultural and political violence. In recent productions by directors from the south and by migrant directors we see a profound engagement with themes related to the land, the homeland and to internal and external borders as well as to their role in the creation of a different Italian subjectivity. In the movie *Terraferma* (2011) by Emanuele Crialese the customs of a Sicilian island (reminiscent of Lampedusa) in which mass tourism and emigration have had a deep impact on local culture are disrupted by the arrival of North-African migrants. The Island becomes a border-space where an encounter will take place however painfully. In the movie by Vincenzo Marra, *Tornando a casa* (2001), the life of four fishermen, three from Naples, one from North-Africa, is presented with attention to their different positioning and to their different aspirations and conceptions of “home”. The possibility of solidarity and coalition and the difficulties of understanding the position of the other are explored in subtle and sympathetic ways. Similarly Mohesen Melliti's *Io e l'Altro* (2007) explores the relationship between a southern Italian and a migrant fisherman with references to their different but similar histories. Roberta Torre's *Sud Side Story* (2000) offers an original depiction of Italian multiculturalism using the modes of a “southern grotesque” style inaugurated by the short movies by Cipri and Maresco and contaminated by popular melodic music.

By charting the ways in which contemporary writers and directors (both southerners and migrants) are re-imagining the Italian south with a postcolonial

sensitivity, this research will show the emergence of a new subjectivity in the Italian south; a subjectivity which, confronted with the phenomenon of international migration, is urged to re-interpret its own experience of migration and colonization; thus developing new modes of thinking about itself, its past and its position in the national imaginary. It will also show the role and the importance that the phenomenon of internal and external colonization has in the subjectivation of migrants in the Italian space. Specifically in the imagination of those migrant writers in whose work references to the south and its history come to have a special relevance and to mirror their own experience of marginalization/inclusion.

By developing a postcolonial and feminist intersectional framework to look at the Italian south and at contemporary migration, this research will offer a novel account of the common struggle of southerners and migrants (and of the difficulties of this intersection) against monolithic notions of “Italiannes”. It will provide a nuanced understanding of the many challenges posed by this postcolonial encounter. These challenges are directed to the literary canon, to purist notions of Italian language, to Italian cinematic conventions. They also take to task a binaristic idea of “us Italians vs others foreigners”, different but intertwined phenomena of material exploitation and discrimination across lines of race, class, gender and sexuality and forms of cultural marginalization and assimilation.

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