

SERGIO ATZENI: THE RETELLING OF THE MEDITERRANEAN SARDINIAN SPACE

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Abstract

This article explores how Sergio Atzeni (1952-1995) deconstructs the crystallized image of Sardinia as an island outside time and space, untouched by the historical events occurring in the Italian Peninsula and the Mediterranean. Putting the author in dialogue with long-lasting representations of the island as found in travelogues and the Sardinian literary tradition, I investigate how the author in his latest works *Il quinto passo è l'addio* (1995) (The Fifth Step is a Farewell) and *Bellas Mariposas* (1995) (Beautiful Butterflies) creates a recounting of Sardinia. By challenging the fixity of a preconceived Orientalizing vision of the island, Atzeni engages in a totalizing representation of the insular space which expands the island storytelling into new settings, giving relevance to the previously neglected Sardinian urban space. My contribution, embracing Atzeni's postcolonial framework as investigated by Birgit Wagner, introduces a discourse of geographical repositioning and remapping of the island. While the traditional discourse on the island remarked Sardinian isolationism and peripheral localization, I claim that the Sardinian author reinstates Sardinian Mediterranean-ess and openness through the representation of the urban environment of Cagliari transformed by Atzeni into a quintessential Mediterranean harbor city. In the rewriting of the island Atzeni presents Sardinia as connected to the Mediterranean Sea, no longer conceived as a barrier but rather as a water highway which for millennia has favored the transit of people, the mixing of cultures and languages that forged the island's character. By repositioning the island at the center of the Mediterranean Sea, the island ceases to be a periphery and a marginal secluded insular territory. Thus, the island's cultural and linguistic diversity embodies in Atzeni the intrinsic nature of the Mediterranean space that opposes openness to the closeness of the Sardinian borderland narration. I state that the novelty of his works is the introduction of a contemporary and multicultural image of the island in the Sardinian literary canon, more representative of the complexity of Sardinian historical past and society. By representing a multifaceted multicultural and multilingual society, he conceives literature as a place where cultural and linguistic diversity meets anticipating contemporary Italian multiculturalism.

Keywords: insular space, multiculturalism, Mediterranean space, Sardinian literature, postcolonialism

Introduction

This article explores how Sergio Atzeni (1952-1995) deconstructs the crystallized image of Sardinia as an island outside time and space, untouched by the historical events occurring in the Italian peninsula and the Mediterranean. As outlined by Birgit Wagner (2011, 10) with the insertion of Sardinia into the Italian Kingdom in 1861, the relationship between the island and the Italian mainland became quasi-colonial, a case of internal colonialism, reminiscent of that of Ireland with The United Kingdom. The Austrian scholar identifies a post-colonial discourse in the work of Atzeni in his focus of retelling Sardinian story:

Atzeni's task "was to put Sardinian literary in a written form" guided by "the impellent need to close gaps, create unexpected connections, fill up empty spaces with his writing."¹

For Wagner, this process of 'talking back' counteracts the fixity of Sardinian image and official historiography with an autochthonous narration. This element along with the hybrid language Atzeni adopts in his later works recalls the creolized language in colonial Francophone literature (41) and inserts the Sardinian author in communication with postcolonialism and postcolonial writers.²

Focusing on Atzeni's latest works *Il quinto passo è l'addio* (1995) (The Fifth Step is a Farewell) and *Bellas Mariposas* (1995) (Beautiful Butterflies) and drawing on the work of Wagner, I remark how Atzeni challenges a preconceived Orientalizing³ vision of Sardinia fueled by the stereotyping foreign gaze of visitors to the island and their travelogues like D.H. Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), Elio Vittorini's

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- 1 Birgit Wagner, "Sergio Atzeni. Zur Poetik des Postkolonialen," *FORUM: Postkoloniale Arbeiten / Postcolonial* (2005): 3.
- 2 Wagner, Birgit, *Sardinien – Insel Im Dialog : Texte, Diskurse, Filme* (Tübingen: Francke, 2008).
- 3 In *Orientalism* (1978) Edward Said critiques the way in which the Western World has historically, culturally and politically perceived the East. For Said the origins of "orientalism" goes back to the centuries-long era in which European powers controlled the Middle and Near East. From its position of power Europe identified "the orient" simply as "other than" the occident. This representation of the Orient as the "other space" is still rooted in the Western world and prevents a comprehension of the East and its true representation. As I will point out in my discussion, Orientalism was extended also to the representation of Sardinia.

Sardegna come infanzia (1954) or Amelie Posse's *Sardinian Sideshow* (1932).

While the postcolonial nature of Atzeni has been investigated by scholars like Wagner, Sulis (2008), Onnis (2011), Pala (2017), the Mediterranean discourse that emerges in his works has not been explored. I claim that Atzeni counterpoints the representation of an island outside time and space by reestablishing Sardinia Mediterranean-ess and giving representation to the urban environment of Cagliari, a quintessential Mediterranean harbor city. He sees Sardinia as fully connected to the Mediterranean Sea, not as a place of separation, but a water highway which for millennia has favored the transit of people, the mixing of cultures and languages that forged the island's character. By repositioning the island at the center of the Mediterranean Sea, the Sardinian author deconstructs the preconceived notion of Sardinia as a geographical, cultural, and linguistic borderland. Thus, reconnecting the island with its sea, Atzeni breaks with the traditional representation of Sardinia as an isolated, backward and primitive territory. He introduces a contemporary and multicultural image of the island in the Sardinian literary canon⁴ which reflects the cultural and social changes brought by the migration wave of the nineties and a progressively globalized world. By representing a multifaceted multicultural and multilingual society, he conceives literature as a place where cultural and linguistic diversity meets anticipating contemporary Italian multiculturalism.

Atzeni was born in 1952 in Capoterra, in the province of Cagliari. He moved to Cagliari at a young age, where he spent his childhood and teenage years.⁵ He made his debut in the literary field with a fairy-tale collection *Fibabe sarde* (Sardinian fairy-tales) and with poems in the Sardinian language in 1984. From the start, he showed an interest in the rich Sardinian oral tradition and language. In 1986, Atzeni quit his white-collar job⁶ to travel throughout Europe while doing the most desperate jobs, including that of translator for a major Italian publishing house: this job will be central in the development of the hybrid language of his latest works. The nomadic European experience represents Atzeni's most prolific creative season in which he will publish *Il figlio di Bakunin* (1991) (Bakunin's son), *Il quinto passo è l'addio* (1995) (The Fifth Step is a Farewell), and his most well-

4 With Sardinian literary canon we consider the literary production about Sardinia written by Sardinian and non-Sardinian authors in various languages.

5 Atzeni also worked as a journalist and started a collaboration with the principal Sardinian newspapers. He was also politically involved; he joined the Italian Communist Party (PCI), and actively participated in the political life of his city.

6 In 1986, he quit his job at ENEL (the Italian national energy company)

known novel *Passavamo sulla terra leggeri* (1996) (Lightly we passed on earth) which, along with the short novel *Bellas Mariposas*, were published posthumously. Atzeni drowned on the island of Carloforte in Sardinia in 1995; he was only 43 years old.

Sardinia outside the circuit of civilization

Italy, ethnically and culturally, is extremely diverse. Its territory harbors the greatest number of regional and minority languages in Western Europe (Sierp 2008, 304). However, to strengthen the weak unitarian ties that led to the creation of the Italian nation in 1861 (Banti 2004), its rulers and intellectuals pushed for a generalized monolingualism and monoculturalism which they also transposed into the Italian literary canon which was built as a collection of monolingual Italian works. As Gianfranco Contini (1912-1990) remarked, this narration is deceptive since academically the Italian literary canon includes exclusively works written in Italian despite the fact the literary production in the peninsula is multilingual including languages like French or regional dialects like Neapolitan⁷ (Contini 1994, vi).⁸ Atzeni breaks with the unitarian monolingual narration of the Italian literary canon describing the multicultural and multilingual reality of the island which, as Contini explained, is a prerogative of the whole Italian cultural production. Atzeni accentuates the multilingualism of his writing especially in his later works where he uses a hybridized language whose highest results are appreciable in the short novel *Bellas Mariposas* (1996) published after his death. Atzeni narrating his island inserts himself in the history of Italian literature from the perspective of a Mediterranean periphery and the cultural and linguistic minority of Sardinia breaking with the monolingual and monocultural Italian literary tradition.

The portrayal of Sardinia is ambivalent. On one side, the island is internationally recognized as the playground for the rich and famous and a glamorous destination for beachgoers from all over the world longing for its Mediterranean turquoise waters. On the other hand, behind its tourist allure, its history, culture, and language remain unknown to most Italians

7 Marco Polo's *Il Milione* (13th century) was written in Franco-Italian, Basile's *Cunto de li Cunti* (1634) in Neapolitan to cite some examples.

8 La storia della letteratura italiana è scolasticamente concepita come la storia della letteratura in lingua italiana, mentre per buona parte della sua estensione essa è perlomeno bilingue, senza che al volgare del SI venga sempre assicurata la prevalenza neanche statistica.

and the rest of the world. Few visitors venture outside the coastal areas of the island to discover the rich and stratified millenarian historical and cultural heritage of the second-largest island in the Mediterranean. Despite its touristy popularity, Sardinia remains a mysterious territory that centuries of narration by Italian and foreign visitors described as uncontaminated and backward, an island outside space and time with very little culture and literacy (Fuller 2000, 60). Sardinia's representation is dual:

an island split into two distinct parts: the authentic Sardinian part with Nuoro and the Barbagia at its center, and the rest of the island, modernized and compliant with the standards of the world beyond the sea. (Urban, 190)

The first part is hidden, unreachable, and mysterious while the second one circulates in the media and its tourist promotion.

This crystallized image of the island originated in the Middle Ages. Dante himself denied the linguistic specificity and originality of the Sardinian language.⁹ The undermining of Sardinian culture and the linguistic particularity of the island is also observable in travel accounts by foreign officials and travelers visiting the region. Among the travel reports written by non-Sardinians and foreign visitors *Sea and Sardinia* by D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), written in 1921 after a visit to the island in which the English writer was accompanied by his German wife Frida, remains one of the most influential portrayals of the island and its people ever made. Despite the short trip to Sardinia, less than a week, and Lawrence's limited itinerary on the island in which he did not take any notes, the travelogue of the English author left a permanent mark on the representation of the island. Excerpts from this work are still used nowadays in introducing publications about Sardinia and for its tourist promotion. Lawrence famously wrote: "Let it be Sardinia. They say neither Romans, nor Phoenicians, Greeks nor Arabs ever subdued Sardinia. It lies outside; outside the circuit of civilization" (Biggers, 105). Lawrence inserts himself in that tradition of observers of the island that highlight its fixity and extraneity to civilization and cultural influences. This insular Italian periphery was typecasted into a stereotyped Orientalized image that has been exploited to sell a product to tourists, that of a wild region that could appeal to travelers in search of exoticism and adventure.

9 Dante, in his linguistics treaty *De vulgari eloquentia* (On Eloquence in Vernacular), written between 1303 and 1304, underplays the specificity of the Sardinian language and states that the island's language is a mere imitation of Latin: its grammar copies Latin grammar just like monkeys copy humans. "gramaticam, tanquam simie homines imitantes" *De Vulgari Eloquentia* Book I, chapter XI.

The insular space coincided with the idea of separateness; a geographical element became a qualifying psychological trait used to capture the essence of the Sardinian people. Following Giovanni Lilliu's theory of the Sardinian permanence of resistance, a common misconception took hold that Sardinians were resistant to what came from the sea, being those ideas or people, and as a defense mechanism, they retreated into isolationism.¹⁰ Therefore the image of the island solidified around this premise and the corollary of images of the island rooted in its traditional agropastoral world (Marci, 11).

Grazia Deledda (1871-1936) played a central role in the establishment of a Sardinian imaginary and became a reference for Sardinian writers who came after her. As observed by Gigliola Sulis, Atzeni too, on several occasions testified of his admiration for the matriarch of Sardinian literature. In an interview, he stated: "If only I were the little finger of Grazia Deledda, I could consider myself satisfied."¹¹ This statement shows Atzeni's admiration for Deledda's work. Valuing her work as a model to follow, he pays respect to her legacy and the mark she left in Sardinian literature.

Maria Bonaria Urban's *Sardinia in Screen* (2013), through a wealth of examples taken from literature and cinematographic works, focuses instead on the central role of Deledda's (1871-1936) literary production in the canonization of a Sardinian image (42) and for framing its insular and peripheral space. Deledda's narrative centers on her island, an endless source of inspiration for her writing. She describes the villages, the people, and the ancestral traditions of the local communities around Nùoro, her little town in the center of the island, which were her sole source of literary inspiration (Fuller, 65).¹² As thoroughly investigated by Margherita Caput-Hayer, Deledda's modernity has been overshadowed by critics who framed her work inside the limiting category of regionalism or as an epigone of "Verismo" and "Decadentismo" writers (6). According to the scholar

10 The illustrious Sardinian archeologist Giovanni Lilliu (1914-2012) formulated a theory based on the supposed cultural impenetrability of Sardinians from the most remote central and isolated areas of the island to external conquerors. He defined this cultural closeness as the 'costante resistenziale sarda' (The Sardinian permanence of resistance). Giovanni Lilliu edited by Antonello Mattone *La costante resistenziale sarda*.

11 Gigliola Sulis, "La scrittura la lingua, e il dubbio sulla verità. Intervista a Sergio Atzeni," in *La grotta della vipera*, 20, no. 66/67 (1994): 34-41.

12 In Deledda, Sardinian people came to be identified with the image of the title of Deledda's most famous work *Canne al vento* (Reeds in the Wind), 1913. Just like reeds, Sardinians are at the mercy of an unkind nature and land. One of the protagonists of the novel, the servant Efix who remains faithful to the Pintor sisters even after their family falls into misery, states "we are reeds, and fate is the wind." (156).

Deledda's works emphasize the author's ability to metabolize extremely diverse and complementary cultural discourses, ranging from Positivism to nihilism, from Cesare Lombroso to Friedrich Nietzsche. In this capacity, Deledda emerges as a European writer and intellectual of modernity, far beyond the critical labels that have stigmatized her narrative (Caput-Hayer, 6).

The superficial reception of her work extrapolated an idyllic and remote image of the island which became paradigmatic of the representation of the island cementing the idea of a territory outside time and space, immutable and anchored to its past.

A Mediterranean New Wave

During the sixties, Sardinian society entered a phase of forced industrialization imposed by the Italian central state that rapidly transformed its traditional agro-pastoral economy and modified Sardinian social habits. The increased prosperity enhanced by the creation of new employment in the industrial sector created an identitarian vacuum since Sardinian cultural and linguistic identity had to be renegotiated face to modernity and technological progress (Marci 2006). The newly achieved modernity and a new way of narrating Sardinia, which reflected on the rapid transformation of Sardinian society, emerged in the cultural resurgence of the island during the eighties. The artistic flourishing of those years contributed to bringing Sardinian literature and cinema to the attention of Italian mainstream cultural circuits.

Goffredo Fofi labeled the proliferation of works by Sardinian authors as New Sardinian Literature while Alfredo Franchini defined it as Mediterranean New Wave.¹³ The reference to the Mediterranean is particularly relevant because it allows the repositioning of the island in its natural Mediterranean context at the center of commercial, cultural, and linguistic exchanges. One of the features of the New Wave is the retention of the narrative focus on Sardinia. There is not a rejection of the previous literary and thematic tradition of the island's narration. However, there is a tendency to expand and vary the literary recounting of the island exploring settings and themes not previously developed. Broccia identifies an underlying urge that moves the creativity of Sardinian authors in those years, the rediscovery of the island by Sardinian themselves:

13 Goffredo, Fofi. "Sardegna, che Nouvelle Vague!" 13 November 2003. *Panorama*; Alfredo, Franchini "Chiamatela pure nouvelle vague Mediterranea" *Specchio* 14 May 2005.

One of the main reasons, that brought about this cultural change, is above all the people of the island's strong and steady desire to discover and study Sardinians' history, traditions, language and search for a definition of what Sardinia is and what it means to be Sardinian.¹⁴

This desire to reappropriate the island historically is particularly strong for Atzeni's whose production focuses on re-narrating the history of the island from an internal perspective. While maintaining his focus on Sardinia, Atzeni expands the narration of the island beyond the central mountainous area of the region that was considered the stronghold of Sardinian culture and identity. He is dissatisfied with the idea that only a specific geographic area of the island could be the expression of the Sardinian essence:

But I believe that also Cagliari needs to be narrated, and even Guspini, Arbus, Carbonia. If I live long enough, I will try to narrate all villages, one by one, and every person, one by one. (Atzeni *Si ... Otto!*, 66)

He wants to narrate the island in its complexity, believing that every single place from its capital city to its tiniest village had something to tell in the economy of Sardinian history.

Atzeni counterpoints the immobility and fixity of previous ideas of Sardinian identity with the openness of the Mediterranean space, repositioning the island at a crossroads of exchanges and cultural influences.

Atzeni's literary mission is the re-narration of the Sardinian insular space through a comprehensive account of the island, avoiding its folklorization. He reinvents the iconography of the island without disavowing its traditional ethnographic narration, and he goes beyond it. By exploring a more complex idea of Sardinianness he considers the intricacy of a multifaceted, stratified cultural exceptionalism. He confronts Sardinian identity with multiculturalism and global society and the effects they have on the traditional socio-cultural assets of Sardinia.

According to the writer Paola Soriga, Sergio Atzeni is the Sardinian writer who changed the way the island is narrated.¹⁵ He breaks the mold of a stereotyped literary description of an archaic immutable island marked by a strong and impermeable Sardinian identity. His literary investigation

14 Michele Broccia. "The Sardinian Literary Spring: An Overview. A New Perspective on Italian Literature." *Nordicum-Mediterraneum* 9, no. 1: C3, 2014.

15 Paola Soriga, "Lo scrittore che ha cambiato il modo di raccontare la Sardegna," *Internazionale*, September 20, 2015.

counteracts the narration of the insular space conveyed externally by foreign dominant powers with an internal, insular narration.

An urban, multilingual, and multicultural Sardinia

One of the innovations introduced by Atzeni in Sardinian literature is the space he gives to the urban setting in his works. With Atzeni, the city, particularly Cagliari, the island capital, bursts into a prominent role and enters Sardinian literature as a protagonist and not as a mere background. As observed by Gigliola Sulis, traditionally the Sardinian novel is set in the mountainous area of the island interior. Its coastal and mining areas along with the urban realities have a marginal role and Cagliari when present becomes a liminal space, an urban reality not representative of the real nature of the island, a space “other” than that of real Sardinia (2008, 449). In an interview with Gigliola Sulis, Atzeni discusses Cagliari as one of his sources of inspiration for becoming a writer and a missing subject in Sardinian literature. He states:

Narrating Cagliari has been one of the reasons that pushed me to write short stories. I had noticed that in newspapers, and on TV, descriptions of Cagliari or other peripheral areas were taken from non-Sardinian authors. As if there was no description of Cagliari or the Campidano region¹⁶ in our literature. There is much more about Barbagia, while we do not have much about the Southern part of the island.¹⁷

However, the idea of Cagliari as a space “other” emerges both in Sardinian authors, like Deledda, and foreign writers such as D.H. Lawrence. The exceptionality of Cagliari as a non-Sardinian space is appreciable in this passage taken from Deledda’s novel *Cosima* (1936) describing her first visit to the city:

Large birds she had never seen, with iridescent wings, rose up from the pool as though springing out of the water and made a kind of rainbow in the sky.

16 The biggest plain in Sardinia, in the south-western part of the island

17 “Raccontare Cagliari è stato uno dei motivi che mi ha spinto a cercare di scrivere racconti. Avevo notato che nei giornali, in televisione, quando si prendevano descrizioni di Cagliari, o di alcune zone della provincia, si finiva sempre per citare autori non sardi, come se non ci fosse una descrizione di Cagliari o del Campidano nella nostra letteratura. C’è molto di più sulla Barbagia, mentre sul Sud c’è pochissimo.” Gigliola Sulis, *La scrittura, la lingua e il dubbio sulla verità. Intervista a Sergio Atzeni*, in: *La grotta della vipera* 66-67, 1994, p. 38.

Perhaps it was a mirage... The train stopped in a station that seemed a civilized oasis with its garden of palms... The first person she saw was a young man dressed in a golden brown color, with a marvelous mustache of the same color and long oriental eyes.¹⁸

In Lawrence's words, Cagliari was:

lost between Europe and Africa and belonging to nowhere. Belonging to nowhere, never having belonged to anywhere. To Spain and the Arabs and the Phoenicians most. But as if it had never really had a fate. No fate. Left outside of time and history (Lawrence 2024, 84).

An ethereal place, not suitable for living, unreal:

And that is Cagliari. It has that curious look, as if it could be seen, but not entered. It is like some vision, some memory, something that has passed away. Impossible that one can actually walk in that city: set foot there and eat and laugh there. (97)

And "strange":

And suddenly there is Cagliari... It is strange and rather wonderful, not a bit like Italy... and makes me think of Jerusalem: ... rising rather bare and proud, remote as if back in history... One wonders how it ever got there. And it seems like Spain — or Malta: not Italy. (97)

Cagliari causes the visitor a feeling of estrangement, it resembles other Mediterranean cities that do not look like Italy or Sardinia. It is a strange and peculiar urban space: "strange, stony Cagliari" (101). Lawrence underlines the city's strangeness several times: "Cagliari is very steep. Half-way up there is a *strange* place called the bastions, ... curiously suspended over the town" (101). It is more Oriental and Arab than Italian: "... tufts of palm trees and Arab-looking houses. On the right, most curiously, a long strange spit of sand... It is a strange, strange landscape: as if here the world left off... this curious, craggy-studded town ... (102).

In the perception of both Sardinians and non-Sardinians Cagliari, the capital city of the island and its largest urban area resembles a foreign body that does not partake in Sardinian history and culture. A space "other," more a reflection of Sardinian conquerors rather than Sardinians them-

18 Grazia Deledda *Cosima* translated by Martha King, (New York, Italica Press, 1988), 136.

selves. The distinctiveness of Cagliari is remarked through the Orientalizing lens which ascribes to the Sardinian capital more Oriental and Arabic features than Italian ones. All in the geography of this place is different, “other,” impalpable, a mirage outside time and space.

Atzeni feels that the literary representation of the Sardinian urban environment is lacking, and it is mostly outer directed by non-Sardinian writers. Claiming back Cagliari as an integral part of the Sardinian social fabric, Atzeni abandons the Orientalizing trope in the portrayal of the city and its inhabitants.

In his third work, the autobiographical novel *Il quinto passo è l'addio* (The Fifth Step is a Farewell) published in 1995, Atzeni represents his city, and Sardinian urban environment in an unusual mimetic way. The time of narration in this work lasts twelve hours, the length it takes the ferry that departs Cagliari to reach Civitavecchia, near Rome. The passenger on the ferry is Ruggero Gunale, the protagonist and alter ego of the author.

The opening scene sets the city as one of the protagonists of the novel. Ruggero is on the ferry that is taking him to the Italian continent. The point of view moves from the top of the city to its port in a cinematographic bird-eye perspective:

... Ruggero Gunale looks with watery and petrified eyes at the city fading away: the golden cross on top of the cathedral and the buildings that crown it decreasing... along the hill surrounded by unpassable stony bastions... He looks at the modern neighborhoods descending from the hills into the oily and dark green sea, the beautiful buildings, and the porticos... He says goodbye to Pisan towers and belltowers... (13)¹⁹

In a few lines, Cagliari becomes tangible and realistic to the reader. It is a real place not altered by the Orientalizing gaze and forged by its historical past. The city is not transfigured into an exotic, dreamy, and unrealistic location. If we exclude the novel's opening with the description of the city, Atzeni has no interest in outlining its beauty or alterity. He is more involved in presenting a cross-section of society in an urban Sardinian context.

Gunale's ferry trip unlocks a series of memories and sketches of a myriad of sordid characters living in Cagliari and its surrounding areas which be-

19 My translation from the Italian original “Ruggero Gunale guarda con occhi umidi e impietriti la città che si allontana: la croce d'oro sulla cupola della cattedrale e attorno a corona digradando i palazzi circondati da bastioni pietrosi invalicabili... Guarda i quartieri moderni fuori le mura scendere dai colli al mare oleoso e verde cupo, i bei palazzi e i portici.... Saluta torri pisane e campanili...”

long to Gunale/Atzeni's formative years. The city is a mere backdrop around which a series of episodes flashback into Gunale's memory and resurface into a stream of consciousness. Through Gunale's reflections, dreams, and hallucinations, the author tells the protagonist's story and that of Cagliari between the end of the seventies and the beginning of the nineties.

The city, although denoted as Cagliari and identifiable as such, is an urban space that could resemble any other port city in the Mediterranean. Cities that have expanded outside their original historical center and sprawled into a new, anonymous urban conglomerate with no charm and clogged with cars:

Monica and Ruggero walk among the tall buildings and cars parked sideways on the sidewalks by people who are shopping in the parallel street. (The new city has devoured the almond trees, substituted by a parade of shining shop windows – looking at them with desire the crowd strolls – and from dark deserts where cars are left, where young people kiss each other, drug addicts exchange infected syringes and car radio thieves walk warily ready to grab a car radio and jump on the moped of the accomplice who is lookout around the corner. Dark deserts where Monica and Ruggero walk slowly. (20)²⁰

Atzeni strips Cagliari of any idyllic element, he sketches a reality common to many cities in Italy and the world at that time where hedonism and prosperity coexisted with social distress and petty criminality. Differently from the examples of the description of Cagliari I have included above, there is no sense of estrangement in this passage, it is all very tangible and recognizable. The reader is confronted with a scene that they have experienced first-hand while walking in a peripheral and run-down dark area of their city.

Atzeni, without disavowing Sardinian tradition and cultural identity, needs to detach from them and physically exile himself from his native land: “Flee. After thirty-four years you eradicate yourself from the land where you loved, suffered, and clowned around...” (15).²¹ The rift becomes physical when the ferry leaves Cagliari behind. This separation is

20 My translation from the Italian original: *Monica e Ruggero camminano fra gli alti palazzi e le auto parcheggiate di traverso sul marciapiede da gente ch'è nella via parallela per acquisti. (La città nuova ha divorato i mandorli, sostituiti da una mostra di vetrine scintillanti – guardandole con desiderio la folla passeggia – e da deserti bui dove lasciare l'automobile, dove i ragazzi si baciano, i tossici si scambiano siringhe infette, i ladri d'autoradio si scambiano siringhe infette... Deserti bui dove Monica e Ruggero camminano lenti).*

21 My translation from the Italian original: “*Fuggi. Dopo trentaquattro anni ti strappi alla terra dove hai amato, sofferto e fatto il buffone.*”

necessary to achieve freedom from the constrictions of the insular space and to experience new identities: “In return, I will be free. The mask of the foreigner, islander, beggar, they will sew on me, will hide me. It will conceal my name and I will be a man among men...” (15).²² The physical estrangement from the insular space retraces Atzeni’s life experience. Like the protagonist of his novel, Atzeni had abandoned the island and lived a nomadic life around Europe before settling in Turin. The separation from the island generates in the author a more thorough reworking of questions of identities and belonging.

For Atzeni’s poetics, it was fundamental the encounter with the works of postcolonial authors especially Patrick Chamoiseau (1953-) of whom he translated the novel *Texaco* in 1994.²³ The contact with the Martinican author contributed to the development of Atzeni’s thoughts on Sardinian identity and past. He related the post-colonial condition described by Chamoiseau to the Sardinian socio-historical context. He was aware that as it occurred during and after colonization processes, the voice of Sardinians had been silenced. For the Sardinian author, it was time to regain ownership of the Sardinian past through a retelling that originated inside the island.

Texaco (1992) by Chamoiseau contains a creolized language which inspired Atzeni to develop a similar linguistic register for his short novel *Bellas Mariposas* (1996). This work presents a society in which the local and the global or ‘glocal’ are interconnected in the background of a progressively more globalized world. In Atzeni’s posthumous novel, contemporary Sardinian society emerges as multicultural and multilingual.

The narration is centered around a stream-of-consciousness monologue uttered by Cate, a twelve-year-old teenager living in a degraded periphery of Cagliari. Throughout the story, we follow the young protagonist and her best friend Luna for an entire day: August third of an undefined year. Caterina will tell us, with a humoristic and at times poetic style, the stories of the neighbors in her degraded suburb of Cagliari, the capital city of Sardinia, and her adolescent dream of redemption from the misery and the decline of her family and surroundings. Her internal monologue unfolds freely, one thought after another without any control or articulation. The almost complete lack of punctuation, except for some question and exclamation marks, reinforces the connection with the spoken language and gives the reader the impression of dealing with a recorded speech transcript (Matt 2007, 200).

22 My translation from the Italian original: “In cambio sarò libero. La maschera che mi cuciranno addosso, lo straniero, l’isolano, il mendicante, mi nasconderà. oc-culterà il mio nome, sarò uomo fra uomini...”

23 <https://rivistatradurre.it/le-berger-de-la-diversite/>.

The protagonist, using a very peculiar language that mixes the regional Italian spoken in Sardinia that incorporates Sardinian elements, youth slang, and other foreign languages, recounts her wish for redemption, her dream of becoming a successful rock star, rising above the misery of her family and surroundings like a beautiful butterfly. Once again, Cagliari is crucial not only as an inspiration for the content of the work but also for the hybrid stylistic form which is taken directly from the idiolect used by its inhabitants. Talking about Cagliari and its language Atzeni declared:

Living in Cagliari is an exalting experience for those who like linguistic confusion, the illegitimate mixing of language, the delirious play on words: often – with more or less awareness – people speak a fake Italian, unintelligible to people that are not from there, heavily influenced by the Sardinian language.²⁴ (Atzeni 1991 qtd. in Marci 1999, 220)

The narration is imbued with cultural and linguistic contamination to mimic the way people speak in Cagliari. Cate's hybrid language is marked by opacity which reveals the liveliness of the spoken idiom of the young characters of the work and that of her neighbors. Her monologue acts as a mouthpiece that conveys the voices of her neighbors of Santa Lamenera, the fictitious degraded suburb of Cagliari.

The reader gets lost in Caterina's continuous change of codes. In this short work of only about 30 pages, 178 sentences contain Sardinian words or expressions encapsulated in Italian phrases. The frequency with which the linguistic mixture occurs results in an almost perfect blending of the two languages, producing a unique idiom used by the protagonist Cate. This technique aims at reproducing most authentically the conversations of Cate and her peers.

The language of the text expresses the social malaise that dominates the neighborhood. The simple intrusion of a verb in Sardinian inside an Italian sentence determines the local color in the narration. Through Cate's monologue, the reader experiences life in this urban periphery; the young protagonist, for example, brings up in the narration one of her neighbors who repeatedly calls her husband's name: "Federico! Federico! *Zerria* signora Sias" (66; Federico! Federico! Shouts Madame Sias). The verbo "zerria" reported by Cate, immediately positions signora Sias inside the specific socio-cultural

24 "Vivere a Cagliari è un'esperienza esaltante, per chi ama la confusione linguistica, la mescolanza spuria degli idiomi, i giochi di parole deliranti: spesso – in modo più o meno cosciente – si parla un italiano contraffatto, incomprensibile a chi non sia del luogo, tratto di peso dal sardo."

context in which the young protagonist lives. Using the verb “zerria,” Atzeni highlights the sudden and loud shout coming from her neighbor; the Italian verb “grida” would not have had the same effect on the reader. Naturally, a Sardinian speaker can better appreciate the power of the verb “zerria” inserted in this context. However, a non-Sardinian speaker can infer the meaning especially pronouncing the verb aloud; its onomatopoeic quality seems to reinforce and reproduce the shouting of the name “Federico.”

The author skillfully doses the use of code-switching; he contaminates the narrative with Sardinian through the insertion of Sardinian words into Italian sentences. In his posthumous novel, the author outlines the permeable and global dimension of a Sardinian society which for centuries has been described as enclosed and impenetrable. In Atzeni emerges a detachment from the stylized and stereotypical idea of Sardinia molded by forces external to the island and crystalized in its forms. Atzeni revindicates the necessity of narrating Sardinia in its multifaceted expressions and of re-narrating its history from the insider perspective and not that of the outsider or ruler. As one of the most influential authors of the New Sardinian Literature, his works continue to resonate and influence the production of contemporary Sardinian authors (Marras 2006, 122).

Giving voice to the Sardinian subaltern, Atzeni fills up the gap of a narration that was superimposed on the island. He reappropriates areas of Sardinian society, like the urban space overlooked or Orientalized in the traditional representation of the island. He embraces an all-encompassing depiction of the island that does not exclude but includes and expands into its Mediterranean space. Atzeni’s work challenges the idea that a supposed center still maintains its political, cultural, and linguistic supremacy over the peripheries.

Conclusion: a new Sardinian space

The importance of Atzeni’s literature lies in his ability to anticipate contemporary literary tendencies which include a reflection on identity in a postmodern, multilingual, and multicultural key. Atzeni introduces into the Italian literary panorama a post-colonial reading of Italian culture and society and a discourse on Italianness. This element is particularly relevant in the progressively more multicultural and multilingual contemporary Italian society that sees the affirmation of migrant literature or second and third-generation Italian writers who re-write and re-interpret the category of belonging reflecting on the concepts of citizenship and nationality. Sim-

ilarly, Atzeni questions traditional representations of Sardinia through a remapping of identity, a journey that leads to a re-establishment of a fragmented and dispossessed identity.

For Atzeni, Sardinian identity is no longer static but rather dynamic, open, and non-defensive, it includes and does not exclude. He reappropriates an urban dimension of Sardinia generally disregarded in Sardinian literature since the city did not embody the quintessential identity of the island. He introduces linguistic and cultural divergences that Cronin (2006, 15) deems fundamental at a time when literary works trespass the national boundaries determined by the binomial relation of one nation and one language that characterized the nation-state. The Sardinian author forges from a decentralized, insular position an identitarian model extendable to the whole of Italy; he does so by overcoming the tension between centripetal and centrifugal forces. He writes about a society rooted in cultural and linguistic exchanges open and porous which embodies the Mediterranean melting pot. Challenging preconceived ideas of islandness he is capable of repositioning Sardinia geographically as an island at the center of the Mediterranean, the crux of cultural and linguistic encounters.

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