

MEDITERRANEAN THOUGHT: QUEERNESS AND MIGRATION IN CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN LITERATURE

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Abstract

Today, mainstream narratives about migration centre around an imagery of attack, portraying Europe as a Fortress under siege and migration as an invasion. Significantly, in Italy, these narratives intersect with homonationalism. While the term was coined for the U.S. context (Puar 2007), in Italy homonationalism places openness and acceptance at the heart of Europe (in countries like France, Germany, and the Netherlands), and simultaneously promotes the need to protect the country and its LGBTQIA+ citizens from migrants (Colpani and Habed 2014). At the same time, Italian homonationalism intersects with antimeridionalist discourses, which deem Southern Italians as a hindering factor in the socio-cultural advancement of the country towards Northern Europe (De Vivo and Dufour 2012; Colpani and Habed 2014; Acquistapace et al. 2016). Consequently, this rhetoric endorses a push and a migratory movement towards Northern European countries, and a simultaneous rejection of both its Southern regions and the Mediterranean context (Colpani 2015). However, the Italian literary scene features a new trend: novels depicting LGBTQIA+ characters refusing these pre-set mainstream narratives. The article analyses *Spatriati* (2021) by Mario Desiati, *Polveri sottili* (2023) by Gianluca Nativo, *Baba* (2023) by Mohamed Maalel, and *Tangerinn* (2024) by Emanuela Anechoum, as case studies, in order to investigate how they chart different cartographies of migration, how they challenge a homonationalist rhetoric, and how they even trouble a linguistic standard. While Nativo tackles movements between Campania and the United Kingdom, Desiati instead focuses on a journey from Apulia to Berlin. However, both *Spatriati* and *Polveri sottili* simultaneously reproduce and challenge the homonationalist view of the Mediterranean, ultimately rejecting Northern Europe and promoting a view from the South. Significantly, the novels by Maalel and Anechoum reverse the perspective provided by Desiati and Nativo, opening Italy's Southern shores towards other Mediterranean regions and towards Tunisia and Morocco in particular. Ultimately, the article argues that the novels foster an in-betweenness mirrored by the space of the Mediterranean sea, which paves the way for a Southern thought (Cassano 2012), or rather, for a Mediterranean thought of complexity, fluidity, and liminality.

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Introduction

In September 2023, the EuroMed 9 Summit took place in Malta. EuroMed 9, also known as EU Med or MED9, is an alliance consisting of the leaders of EU countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea (Cyprus, Croatia, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia, and Spain). As reported by Italian newspapers, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's speech at the Summit on migration in the Mediterranean distinguished itself due to its harshness, as she strongly remarked that "you cannot show solidarity with other people's borders,"¹ reinforcing the function of Italy's confines as barriers, and her role as the defender of the country's perimeter. In this way, her speech rejected the notion of border porosity for Mediterranean countries, and instead fostered a specific narrative for her role and for that of the other EuroMed 9 leaders: they each have one land and one border to defend. By highlighting the need to shield the country's borders, Meloni's speech exemplifies the single narrative of invasion that has taken hold of right-wing and far-right discourses and policies in Italy in the last 20 years.² However, this narrative completely erases the fact that both historically and socio-culturally, Italy is a country marked by migration and by continuously crossed confines, both inbound and outbound. Furthermore, the location of Meloni's speech, the EuroMed 9 Summit in Malta, highlights the contradictions of this narrative, as the Mediterranean itself has fostered and continues to foster a border porosity for these nations.

The influence that the Mediterranean has on Italy and its identity has been at the core of many transnational analyses (Chambers 2008; Gualtieri 2018), which focus on the "liminal and pluralized conditions predicated

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- 1 "Meloni sui migranti critica Berlino: 'Non si può fare solidarietà con i confini degli altri'", RaiNews, 30 September 2023, <https://www.rainews.it/articoli/2023/09/vertice-med9-migranti-meloni-a-malta-senza-risposte-strutturali-tutti-quantiveranno-travolti--516242f5-15f6-43e2-ab34-4f1f84bbe5ea.html>. "Però non si può fare la solidarietà con i confini degli altri." All translations from Italian to English are made by the author of this paper.
 - 2 "Migranti, Salvini dal palco di Pontida: 'Contro l'invasione useremo qualunque mezzo permesso dalla democrazia'", IlFattoQuotidiano, 17 September 2023, <https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2023/09/17/migranti-salvini-dal-palco-di-pontida-contro-linvasione-useremo-qualunque-mezzo-permesso-dalla-democrazia/7294999/>.

on cultural exchange as well as physical movement between or beyond the sovereignties of individual nation-states.”³ Moreover, in recent years the transnational element has played a central role in the country’s literary production.⁴ The number of contemporary novels that feature narratives of migrations, second-generation Italians, and transnational journeys across the Mediterranean have meaningfully increased, including *Io, venditore di elefanti* (1990) by Pap Khouma, *Immigrato* (1990) by Salah Methnani and Mario Fortunato, *Madre piccola* (2007) by Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, *La mia casa è dove sono* (2010) by Igiaba Scego, among others. These novels counter the mainstream narrative promoted by far right and right-wing politicians, providing a more nuanced perspective. Moreover, in recent times, this literary proliferation has resulted in the publication of novels that intersect with other themes, such as LGBTQIA+ narratives.

If migration novels about heterosexual and cisgender characters develop alongside the mainstream narrative of invasion, novels about LGBTQIA+ migration engage with a specific version of the same discourse: policies and guidelines are developed following the notion that the State needs to scrupulously and securely manage and regulate it to protect the country from ‘lying’ asylum seekers i.e. those who falsely testify to being discriminated against in their own countries on the basis of their non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations.⁵ Additionally, both inbound and outbound LGBTQIA+ movements are associated to another flattening narrative, that of homonationalism. The term derives from Lisa Duggan’s ‘homonormativity,’ which indicates the respectability practices adopted by the LGBTQIA+ community to be accepted by the wider cisheteronormative society, resulting in the exclusion of those who are not regarded as acceptable, usually those who are not white, upper-class, virile, male, and cisgender.⁶ Homonationalism operates following a similar discriminating racialising mechanism and hierarchical division.⁷ The term, coined by Jasbir Puar for the U.S. context,

3 Jennifer Burns, “Mapping Transnational Subjecthood: Space, Affects and Relationality in Recent Transnational Italian Fictions,” *California Italian Studies*, no. 8 (2) (2018): 2.

4 Emma Bond, “Towards a Trans-national Turn in Italian Studies?,” *Italian Studies*, 69 (3) (2014), 415-424. <https://doi.org/10.1179/0075163414Z.00000000080>.

5 Massimo Prearo, “Stato, politica e morale dell’asilo LGBTI,” in *Migranti LGBT: Pratiche, politiche e contesti di accoglienza*, ed. by Noemi Martorano and Massimo Prearo (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2020): 46-47.

6 Lisa Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality? Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics and the Attack on Democracy* (Boston MA: Beacon Press, Boston MA, 2003): 45.

7 Lorenzo Bernini, *Le teorie queer: Un’introduzione* (Milan: Mimesis Edizioni, 2017): 112.

delineates the inclusion of the LGBTQIA+ community into the country's national identity and the simultaneous exclusion of Black migrants and migrants of colour: the U.S. government aims at protecting its LGBTQIA+ citizens from the discrimination that could arise by allowing migrants of colour into the country.⁸ Consequently, unjust exclusionary politics are justified by the country's self-appointed progressiveness.

In Italy, homonationalism was adopted by both political parties and LGBTQIA+ activist groups and adapted to the country's socio-cultural anxieties.⁹ Alongside focusing on incoming migratory fluxes, Italian homonationalism reflects the desire to conform to a perceived Northern European standard, to a push towards the North of Europe (namely, towards France, Germany, and the Netherlands).¹⁰ While this view accurately accounts for Italy's lack of civil rights in comparison to other European countries,¹¹ it also reproduces a damaging narrative: progressiveness is not only achieved by limiting arrivals from the Global South, which assumingly embody outdated views and behaviours, but also by rejecting Italy's South. In this, Italian homonationalism is moulded by antimeridionalism, a widespread rhetoric consisting of various negative stereotypes associated to the South of Italy, due to its presupposed moral and economic backwardness.¹² This view fully developed around the time of the Italian Unification in the mid-nineteenth century and continues to influence Italian culture, politics, and economy. In a homonationalist perspective, Southern Italians limit the progression of Italy because of their mind-set:¹³ if Central-North-

8 Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

9 Barbara De Vivo and Suzanne Dufour. "Omonazionalismo: Civiltà prodotto tipico Italiano?" in *Femministe a parole: Grovigli da districare*, ed. by Sabrina Marchetti, Jamila M.H. Mascot, Vincenza Perilli (Roma: Ediesse, 2012): 204.

10 Gianmaria Colpani and Adriano José Habel. "In Europe it's Different: Homonationalism and Peripheral Desires for Europe," in *LGBT Activism and the Making of Europe: A Rainbow Europe?*, ed. by Philip M. Ayoub and David Paternotte (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014): 76.

11 While in Italy, Civil Unions were approved in 2016, marriage equality and the possibility to adopt the children of one's own partner, the so-called 'stepchild adoption,' are not legal.

12 Alessia Acquistapace et al., "Tempo di essere incivili: Una riflessione terrona sull'omonazionalismo in Italia al tempo dell'austerità," in *Il genere tra neoliberalismo e neofondamentalismo*, ed. by Federico Zappino (Verona: Ombrecorte, 2016): 61.

13 Gianmaria Colpani, "Omonazionalismo nel Belpaese?" in *Il colore della nazione*, ed. by Gaia Giuliani (Milan: Le Monnier, 2016): 197.

ern Europe homosexuals are seen as ‘modern,’¹⁴ Southern Italians are characterised by the so-called ‘Mediterranean homosexuality.’¹⁵ The term was coined to Giovanni Dall’Orto to refer to a supposed backward form of sexuality revolving around the active/passive dichotomy, connecting Southern Italy to “a paradigm of homosexual behavior found in the Latin countries of Europe and the Americas, in the Islamic countries of the Mediterranean, as well as in the Balkans.”¹⁶ To summarise, Italian homonationalism predicated a single, linear, movement from the South to the North and a double rejection of subjectivities from the Global South and from Southern Italy to supposedly protect the advancement of the wider LGBTQIA+ community and its inclusion in the State.

However, the single, linear movement from the South to the North can be challenged by a perspective that looks at Italy’s Southern periphery (Polizzi 2022). In the words by Franco Cassano, “as long as we continue to believe that the inevitable running toward the West is the only possible motion [...], and that the Mediterranean is a sea of the past, we will be focusing our eyes in the wrong direction.”¹⁷ Additionally, according to Colpani and Habed, Italian homonationalism can be troubled by an ambiguous and oscillating move that starts from the South and is “located ‘in and out’ of the European map of liberal sexual politics, [which] can unmask not only the disciplinary mechanisms of European gay modernity but also its biopolitical operations.”¹⁸ It is a “paradoxical position” that rejects fixity.¹⁹

Because of the relevance that narration has both in the invasion and homonationalist rhetoric, and their influence in shaping Italy’s migration policies and the country’s imaginary, tackling the cultural representation of movements of the LGBTQIA+ community seems paramount. Literature can chart new journeys and map new narratives, questioning a single perspective and accounting for the complexity of reality. Hence, this article traces different journeys from Southern Italy to Northern Europe and from the Global South to Southern Italy in four contemporary Italian transnational novels that feature LGBTQIA+ characters. The four case studies

14 Colpani and Habed, “In Europe it’s Different,” 82.

15 Giovanni Dall’Orto, *Tutta Un’altra Storia: L’omosessualità Dall’antichità Al Secondo Dopoguerra* (Milano: Il Saggiatore): 2015.

16 Giovanni Dall’Orto, “Mediterranean Homosexuality.” *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality*, ed. by Wayne R. Dynes (New York: Garland, 1990): 796.

17 Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, trans. by Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme (Bronx: Fordham University Press, 2012): 38.

18 Colpani and Habed, “In Europe it’s Different,” 88-89.

19 Colpani and Habed, “In Europe it’s Different,” 89.

are the novels *Spatriati* (2021) by Mario Desiati, *Polveri sottili* (2023) by Gianluca Nativo, *Baba* (2023) by Mohamed Maalel, and *Tangerinn* (2024) by Emanuela Anechoum, which constitute a queer²⁰ migratory trend in Italian fiction.²¹ *Spatriati* focuses on Francesco Veleno, a young man from Martina Franca, Apulia, who moves to Berlin for a few years following his best friend, Claudia. Similarly, *Polveri sottili* follows the relationship of Eugenio and Michelangelo, who are from Naples, and move together to the suburbs of London. *Baba* expands the narrative borders beyond Europe, as its protagonist Ahmed grows up in Andria, Apulia, but traces his family's footsteps back to Tunis. Similarly, *Tangerinn* follows the journey of its protagonist, Mina, from Reggio Calabria to London and then to Tangier.

First, the article will analyse all four novels, investigating the representation of migration in conjunction with queerness. The transnational element of each novel will be highlighted, as well as their relation to Italian homonationalism. In the second and third section, the article will contend that the selected novels promote an ambiguous and paradoxical status, which is reflected in the characters' movements and in their language. Finally, the article will explore the "in and out" position and its relationship to the Mediterranean, arguing for an epistemological alternative that challenges a linear narrative of migration.

Queer Displacing

Italian homonationalism encourages a move towards Northern European countries that is both mental and physical, a full integration to a non-Mediterranean standard. In a way, this view replicates on a larger scale the so-called 'metronormative' rhetoric, which refers to the need for the LGBTQIA+ community to move from the countryside to the city in order to experience freedom and openness (Halberstam 2005; Herring 2010; Weston 1995). While various contemporary Italian novels contest this in-

20 The term 'queer' is understood in this article in an expansive way, i.e. it refers to non-normative gender identities and sexual orientations, and also to "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically". Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993): 8.

21 Mario Desiati, *Spatriati* (Torino: Einaudi, 2021).
Gianluca Nativo, *Polveri sottili* (Milano: Mondadori, 2023).
Mohamed Maalel, *Baba* (Milano: Accento, 2023).
Emanuela Anechoum, *Tangerinn* (Roma: Edizioni e/o, 2024).

ternal trajectory (Parrinello 2021), this article shifts the perspective onto the broader field, looking at transnational movements.

For instance, in *Spatriati*, Francesco feels trapped by his small-town environment; while his best friend Claudia frequently travels abroad and moves to Berlin, he is initially stuck in Martina Franca's environment, which is described as ruinous. Moreover, while his first kiss with a man takes place in Apulia, it is infused with homophobia and fear. He is only able to fully and openly explore his sexuality once he moves to Berlin to follow Claudia. Once there, Francesco is brought by her to the KitKat Club with her friend and lover Andria, a Georgian man. The Club is a synecdotal space representing Berlin's openness, a place where "a humanity in disguise" can let loose.²² The place paves the way for Francesco's relationship with Andria and changes him to the point that he thinks: "I was in disbelief, shaken, I wanted to cry and scream, inside I felt the dams burst and the walls crumble. For a lifetime I had silently taken in the same questions: 'Do you have a girlfriend?', 'Do you have a job?', 'Do you have a home?', 'Do you have a future?', 'Do you have a plan?', 'Who are you?', 'How do you fit in?'"²³ And again, "What would that world I had left behind say?"²⁴ Berlin dissolves the rigid social norms that trapped him in Martina Franca.

However, it is evident that these norms are almost self-imposed by Francesco. While they might have been sustained by some inhabitants of Martina Franca, Desiati accounts more than once for the fact that attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community in Apulia are changing, that an 'Apulian Spring' is taking place in the main narrative's marginalia and that it is Francesco who is choosing to disengage from it. His attitude is derivative of those pre-set narrative of Northern openness, which move him to dissociate from Martina Franca and adhere to the idea of strictness to the South and sexual freedom to the North. Significantly, *Spatriati* begins untangling this dichotomy, as Francesco becomes disillusioned with Berlin's environment due the limitations that EU migrant policies enact:

We were Europeans free to move within an enclosure, but outside that enclosure was the world to which Andria belonged. Our free Europe, without

22 Desiati, *Spatriati*, 198. "Un'umanità camuffata."

23 Desiati, *Spatriati*, 199. "Ero incredulo, scosso, volevo piangere e gridare, dentro di me sentivo saltare le dighe e crollare i muri. Per una vita avevo accolto in silenzio le stesse domande: 'Hai una fidanzata?', 'Hai un lavoro?', 'Hai una casa?', 'Hai un futuro?', 'Hai un piano?', 'Chi sei?', 'Come ti metti?'"

24 Desiati, *Spatriati*, 200. "Cosa avrebbe detto quel mondo che mi ero lasciato alle spalle?"

walls, was not the same as Andria's. Georgia is not an EU state and Andria was forced to leave Germany due to the expiry of his visa.²⁵

Francesco criticises the apparent freedom and queer paradise afforded by Berlin, as well as the norms and regulations that limit those who can benefit from it.

Due to his disappointment, Francesco moves back to Martina Franca at the end of the novel. His homecoming is not unscathed, as he has been permanently changed by his time in Berlin, "back but forever displaced, *spatriato*."²⁶ Therefore, he does reject the North, and he also exists in the in-betweenness. Furthermore, Francesco's return embodies a different perspective that looks towards South. Not only he changes his physical location, but he is also explicitly compared to other Mediterranean migrants: when his father sees newsreel footage of the Vlora ship arriving in Bari, he comments: "Look at them, you are like them."²⁷ Despite the pettiness of his remark, Francesco's father spotlights the similarities between his son and migrants on a ship that Desiati indexes as instrumental in allowing Apulians and Albanians to rekindle their relationship,²⁸ following an event that he sees as the most significant event for the South in the last thirty years.²⁹ Thus, *Spatriati* paves the way for a critical approach towards the homonationalist view of the North and the limits it imposes to non-privileged individuals, but also towards the invasion narrative, presenting various local and foreign subjectivities as moving throughout the space and creating alliances in the space of Southern Italy.

Polveri sottili by Nativo similarly tackles questions of movement and queerness, as Eugenio moves to the UK to work at a hospital, and he is soon followed by his boyfriend, Michelangelo. While Michelangelo opposes the move itself, Eugenio expresses multiple times his feeling of entrapment in Naples. Meaningfully, he does not want to move simply for professional

25 Desiati, *Spatriati*, 212. "Eravamo europei liberi di muoverci dentro un recinto, ma fuori da quel recinto c'era il mondo cui apparteneva Andria. La nostra Europa libera, priva di muri, non era la stessa di Andria. La Georgia non è uno stato comunitario ed Andria era costretto a lasciare la Germania per scadenza del suo soggiorno."

26 Desiati, *Spatriati*, 254. "Tornato ma per sempre."

27 Desiati, *Spatriati*, 185. "Guardali, sei come loro." The Vlora cargo ship is a ship that brought several thousand Albanians to the Bari harbour in 1991, opening to region to the Mediterranean.

28 Desiati, *Spatriati*, 274.

29 Valentina Cremonesi and Stefano Cristante. *La Parte Cattiva dell'Italia : Sud, Media e Immaginario Collettivo* (Milano: Mimesis, 2015): 83.

reasons, but also to live freely as a gay man. Before Michelangelo, he never dated Neapolitan men, and instead preferred dating tourists, with whom he could practice his English skills, as “in Naples he was convinced that the gay scene was not suitable for him.”³⁰ Eugenio’s move initially point towards a homonationalist motive, and he also breakups with Michelangelo due to the latter’s inability to adapt to the new context.

However, the end of the novel changes the character’s trajectory, since he decides to rekindle his relationship with Michelangelo and to not sell the family’s home in Naples despite his mother’s wishes. When she suggests selling the house, Eugenio immediately thinks of Michelangelo and the time they spent there, “he recalled the isolated flat between the buildings, the promise he had laid on Michelangelo within those walls. A refuge.”³¹ While he does not resign from his job in London, he resolves not to sever his Italian roots. In this way, Eugenio challenges the need for LGBTQIA+ people to move to Northern Europe and instead promotes an in-betweenness between the UK and Italy, embodied by his relationship with Michelangelo.

While both *Spatriati* and *Polveri sottili* draw a similar path towards the North and a return, or a partial return, to the South of Italy, *Baba* by Maalel expands and complicates the map drawn by Desiati and Nativo. The main character, Ahmed, nicknamed Ahmouda, grows up in Andria, a small town in Apulia. While his mother is from the region, his father, Taoufik, is of Tunisian origin. As a child, Ahmed acts in way that does not conform to normative views of gender roles; he uses his mother’s make up, plays with dolls with his cousin, and even cross-dresses for fun with her. While his non-normative gender performance is criticised by a particularly extremist imam, who moves him to destroy his cousin’s dolls, Taoufik challenges this, saying:

“But he read the Koran, he relied on the words of God.”

“They were made-up words, not God’s words. Ahmouda, you made a mistake breaking all your cousin’s dolls.”

“God says...”

“God says to love family, to love even those who are not Muslim. We must follow God, not a man who says he knows God.”³²

30 Nativo, *Polveri sottili*, 99. “A Napoli si era convinto che la scena gay non fosse adatta a lui.”

31 Nativo, *Polveri sottili*, 197. “Ripensò all’appartamento isolato tra i palazzi, alla promessa che aveva riposto con Michelangelo tra quelle mura. Un rifugio.”

32 Maalel, *Baba*, 119. “Ma lui leggeva il Corano, si affidava alle parole di Dio”. “Erano parole inventate, no parole di Dio. Ahmouda, tu ha sbagliato a rompere

Through his words, *Baba* sets the stage for Ahmed's queerness and for a more nuanced representation of migrants. Indeed, while Ahmed initially has to overcome his internalised homophobia, he does not need to move abroad to do so. He meets his first boyfriend in Apulia and, after he decides to spend some time as an Erasmus student in Tunis, he has a flirt with a local man, Talal. Although the latter is forced to hide his identity, their kiss troubles a monolithic narrative of queer migration. Similarly, when Ahmed moves to Palermo for work to become a journalist, he is not limited by the environment, rather, to him the place embodies openness. He argues that the city is: "a small city that fascinated me because of the multitude of cultures that meet there, respecting one another."³³ Moreover, it is in Palermo that Ahmed meets the person who becomes his long-term partner. Whilst moving between different spaces and identities, "Tunisian, Italian, unsteady,"³⁴ Ahmed remains firmly rooted in the South.

Tangerinn follows a similar transnational journey, as the story unfolds tracing two narratives, Mina's, from a Calabrian city (assumably, Reggio Calabria) to London, and her father's, Omar, from Tangier to Reggio Calabria. In London, Mina lives with Liz, an English upper-class woman who treats her as a charity case. While it is not motivated by a need for sexual freedom, Mina's stay in London is infused with queer tones as Liz and her occasionally have sex together. However, the move to London becomes a form of oppression for Mina, as she says: "I had a subaltern relationship with the city like an unrequited love."³⁵

Similarly, her father's movement from Tangier to Reggio Calabria, while not explicitly queer, follows a well-known paradigm of queerness in the South of the Mediterranean. In Tangier, he is shocked by the city's debauchery and *Tangerinn* fictionalises the colonial mentality of many white Northern Europeans who moved towards South looking for sex with other men. As written by Joseph Allen Boone, "whether feared or desired, the mere possibility of sexual contact with or between men in the Middle East has covertly underwritten much of the appeal and practice of the phenom-

tutte bambole di tua cugina".

"Dio dice..."

"Dio dice di amari familia, di amari anchi chi non è muslim. Dobbiamo seguire Dio, no un uomo chi dice di conoscere Dio."

33 Maalel, *Baba*, 219. "Una cittadina che mi affascinava per la moltitudine di culture che vi si incontrano, rispettandosi a vicenda."

34 Maalel, *Baba*, 182. "Tunisino, italiano, incerto."

35 Anechoum, *Tangerinn*, 44. "Con la città intrattenevo un rapporto subalterno come un amore non corrisposto."

enon we now call Orientalism.”³⁶ However, this orientalist perspective is challenged by Rashid, a young high-class homosexual from Tangier. Before being forced into an arranged marriage, he decides to embark on a Grand Tour and to take Omar with him, not asking for any sexual favours in return. Hence, Rashid reverses traditional Grand Tour journeys, as well as the trajectories made by white Europeans towards Morocco. Additionally, Rashid’s generosity allows Omar to enter Europe and then to move to Reggio Calabria and open a café.

Furthermore, the homonationalist trajectory from the South to the North is not only troubled by Mina’s dissatisfaction with London and with Rashid’s generosity, but also by the fact that her sister Aisha, who never moved away from Reggio Calabria, comes out as a lesbian. She firmly stands in her environment, refusing to move because of her sexuality and keeps wearing her hijab proudly. The complexity that she embodies questions the simplicity of both the invasion and homonationalist narratives.

A linear trajectory is also complicated by Omar’s sudden death, which moves Mina to return to Reggio Calabria. In the course of the novel, Mina decides to spend more time in Reggio Calabria to help her sister Aisha run the family’s café, *Tangerinn*. At the beginning, Mina desperately tries to reproduce the paradigm she experienced in her move towards the North, and she even tries to convince Mahdi, a young man who works at the *Tangerinn*, to move to Germany because she believes there is no future in Calabria. However, she gradually changes and her time in Reggio Calabria renders Mina unfit for London. After she decides to move back again to the UK, she realises it is an unfortunate choice: “[London] was as beautiful as I remembered it [...] But my outlines and I had become sharp in the wrong corners.”³⁷ She then goes to Tangier to visit Rashid, but similarly feels displaced. At the end, she moves back to Reggio Calabria, after realising that her sense of belonging is tied to those who love her. She does not find belonging in specific cities but in people, rebuffing the association between a good life and a specific location.

If Italian homonationalism predicates that both moving to Northern Europe is the only way to live openly and freely for the members of the LGBTQIA+ community and if it simultaneously appoints the Italian state as their protector from the supposedly backward mentality found in the Global South and in Southern Italy, *Polveri sottili*, *Spatriati*, *Baba*, and

36 Joseph Allen Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015): xxi.

37 Anechoum, *Tangerinn*, 227. “[Londra] era bella come la ricordavo [...] Ma io e i miei contorni eravamo diventati appuntiti negli angoli sbagliati.”

Tangerinn constitute a trend that changes the picture. They localise queerness in Southern Italy and display transnational alliances. At the same time, the novels do not promote an uncritical vision of the South, as they still trace the homophobia and misogyny present in Southern Italy, Morocco, and Tunisia. For instance, homophobic and discriminatory views are exemplified by the character of Talal in *Baba*, by Martina Franca's reception of Francesco's return in *Spatriati*, by the environment of Reggio Calabria in *Tangerinn*, or even by Eugenio's own internalised antimeridionalism in *Polveri sottili*. Desiati, Nativo, Anechoum, and Maalel refuse an exoticisation of the South, in favour of a nuanced standpoint. Finally, the novels uphold a productive in-betweenness, as the characters embrace liminality and oscillate between different places. They find a home in a "temporary, interstitial residence,"³⁸ adopting the 'in and out' position theorised by Colpani and Habel.

Language Decentring

Language skills are a crucial factor in displaying one's own cultural capital, in showing one's own adaptability and ability to move in the world. If homonationalist subjects are those that adhere to the norms delineated by Duggan, language proficiency is a category that could be added from a transnational perspective. For instance, in *Spatriati*, the inability to fluently speak German, or even a common language, becomes a connecting factor for Francesco and Andria. Mutually excluded from the soundscape surrounding them, they forge their own vocabulary, as it emerges in Andria's goodbye letter. In it, he writes that "he had always liked the linguistic chaos, the world in which I had invented a language, our language, the one only he and I understood."³⁹ In this way, Francesco and Andria step away from a complete assimilation to the Northern European territory and instead form their own dissenting path, one rooted in their migration background and in a non-structured and chaotic new language.

Polveri sottili does not feature a similar linguistic mélange, but it still presents language as a defining category. On the one hand, the novel opens with the Eugenio's appreciation of the discreetness of the English language

38 Dylan Winchock and Jessica Elbert Decker, eds. *Borderlands and Liminal Subjects: Transgressing the Limits in Philosophy and Literature* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017): 77-79.

39 Desiati, *Spatriati*, 213. "Gli era sempre piaciuto il caos linguistico, il mondo in cui avevo inventato una lingua, la nostra lingua, quella che capivamo solo io e lui."

compared to Italian, “the way the English language restored discrete meanings to words was one of the many reasons why he left. As he wrote in giant letters: MICHELANGELO CICCARELLI, with a broad, solemn manoeuvre, he added: *my significant other*.”⁴⁰ His ability to value the (gender) neutrality of English and his proficiency are the direct result of the expensive private classes he took in Naples. While he has minor issues right after his move to London, he is soon able to fully integrate into English society and become one of its productive members. On the other hand, Michelangelo, who comes from a lower class compared to Eugenio, is frequently defined by his poor English. Once in London, where he seemingly moved to attend English classes and not just to live with Eugenio, he fails in communicating with the outside world, being unwilling to socialise with Eugenio’s colleagues or being too shy to call a letting agency. He troubles Eugenio’s homonationalist and homonormative move. Eugenio’s decision to keep the flat in Naples ultimately troubles not only his move but also the importance of English and Michelangelo’s need to learn it.

Baba, instead of a conflict in relation to a hegemonic language, presents a linguistic Babel, which is embodied by the protagonist’s father’s broken Italian and his mother’s Apulian dialect. The very beginning of the novel displays a dialogue between them:

“Paola, Paola! Where did you put my cigarettes?”

“On the bedside table, I haven’t touched them.”

“No they’re not here”

“Don’t bother me, I’m cleaning. Check under the bed, move.”⁴¹

In *Baba*, Maalel troubles linguistic purity and instead intermixes his parents’ idioms, meaningfully including a Southern dialect.⁴² However, this linguistic blending is initially destabilising for Ahmed, who does not feel at home in either language, and resorts to creating an imaginary language.

40 Nativo, *Polveri sottili*, 11. “Il modo in cui l’inglese restituiva alle parole significati discreti era uno dei tanti motivi che l’avevano spinto a partire. Mentre scriveva a lettere giganti: MICHELANGELO CICCARELLI, con una manovra ampia, solenne, aggiunse: *my significant other*.”

41 Maalel, *Baba*, 12. ““Paola, Paola! Dove ha mes sigar?”

“Sul comodino, non le ho toccate.”

“No c’è.”

“Non rompere, sto pulendo. Vedi sotto al letto, muvt.”

42 Palomba, Giusi. “Zerocalcare, l’accollo Linguistico e Il Conflitto Tra Centro E Periferia.” Valigia Blu, 26 November 2021, www.valigiablu.it/zerocalcare-strappare-lungo-bordi-romanesco/.

Baba features a list of words imagined by Ahmed and their translations, such as “Miskrbada = something melted, like ice cream left in the sun.”⁴³ Significantly, Ahmed does not turn to languages like Italian or English to feel safe, but he creates one from scratch that unconsciously derives from his parents’ languages, Tunisian and Apulian.

In *Tangerinn*, Mina also moved to London to improve her English, and her same-sex attraction is narrated in the context of the English language classes taught by Liz. However, Liz’s English is subject to her performative activism:

That afternoon Liz sat down without taking off her hat [...] and announced that a word had to be taken out of our vocabulary. I say our because she was the one who helped me learn English, and as my tutor she took the liberty of adding and sometimes even removing words that she felt should take priority over others in my education.⁴⁴

Language learning becomes for Liz another way to show off her politics (and not necessarily her activism), unaware of her hegemonic attitude towards Mina, of her silencing the latter’s cognitive abilities. When Mina returns to Reggio Calabria, she distances herself from the linguistic hegemony embodied by Liz and is instead exposed to a linguistic mélange. Both her father and her sister created a welcoming environment for migrants arriving on the Southern Italian shores. He spoke French, Arabic, and German, while she is fluent in English. In this way, Omar and Aisha created “a community around that small hub of travelling souls, of misunderstood cultures, of mother and stepmother languages.”⁴⁵ The café becomes the location of transnational encounters and translingual affective connections not based on hierarchical power relations.

The characters in *Spatriati*, *Baba*, *Tangerinn* and to a lesser extent, *Polveri sottili*, trouble the hegemony of English, or of a single language, and instead build different linguistic contexts for themselves. In particular, the characters of *Spatriati*, *Baba*, *Tangerinn* embrace translingual practices, which are “always in movement, connected to the landscape, and at the

43 Maalel, *Baba*, 32. “Miskrbada = qualcosa di sciolto, come il gelato lasciato al sole.”

44 Anechoum, *Tangerinn*, 16. “Quel pomeriggio Liz si era seduta senza togliersi il cappello [...] e aveva annunciato che dal nostro vocabolario andava tolta una parola. Dico nostro perché fu lei ad aiutarmi a imparare l’inglese, e in quanto mia tutor si prendeva la libertà di aggiungere e a volte anche togliere le parole che per lei dovevano avere, nella mia educazione, priorità sulle altre.”

45 Anechoum, *Tangerinn*, 65. “Una comunità attorno a quel piccolo centro nevralgico di anime di passaggio, di culture incomprese, di lingue madri e matrigne.”

same time [are] bound by the inequalities inscribed in the relationships between languages and between human destinies speaking through languages.”⁴⁶ According to Tiziana De Rogatis, translanguaging creates homing, which is “familiarity through unprecedented paths. The drawing of these maps [...] can lead to new visions and creative metamorphoses.”⁴⁷ Hence, language meaningfully contributes to the alternative movements traced by the protagonists of these novels, since “being in between languages constitutes a vantage point in deconstructing identity.”⁴⁸

Mediterranean Homing

In the final pages of *Tangerinn*, Mina’s father dies, and his funeral is performed at sea. As his loved ones are gathered on a small boat, his ashes are dispersed in the Mediterranean:

We had rented a boat, in which seven of us got on: me, Aisha, Berta, our grandmother, Magda, the imam and the fisherman who had rented it to us. Aisha wore a black djellaba with a beautiful lace hijab: I was surprised how the Arab and the Southern Italian overlapped in her.⁴⁹

In the space of the sea, the plural and palimpsestic identity of Aisha, a queer, Muslim, Italo-Moroccan woman is enacted, as she challenges “metaphysically fixed, steady identities” and embraces an in-between identity and lives across borders.⁵⁰ Furthermore, because of the long history of overlapping and intermixing movements and cultures that crossed and continuously cross the Mediterranean, the sea is a central part of Aisha’s in-betweenness, acting as both catalyst and metaphor. In *Tangerinn*, the Mediterranean and its

46 Tiziana De Rogatis, *Homing/Ritrovarsi. Traumi e Translinguismi Delle Migrazioni in Morante, Hoffman, Kristof, Scego e Lahiri* (Siena: Edizioni Università per Stranieri di Siena, 2023): 6.

47 De Rogatis, *Homing/Ritrovarsi*, 3.

48 Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994): 12.

49 Anechoum, *Tangerinn*, 195. “Avevamo affittato una barca, dove salimmo in sette: io, Aisha, Berta, la nonna, Magda, l’imam e il pescatore che ce l’aveva affittata. Aisha portava una djellaba nera con uno splendido hijab di pizzo: mi sorprese come coincidessero in lei l’araba e l’italiana del sud.”

50 Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 5.

“liquid materiality” foreground the permeability of borders,⁵¹ being a crucial “Third Space,” neither fully Italian nor fully foreign.⁵²

As the Mediterranean in the novel allows the creation of meaning through liminality, through intersections, and in a place geographically and culturally located in the South, *Tangerinn* can be connected to Cassano’s Southern epistemology (2012). Challenging the binary constituted by an advanced and modern North and a backward and underdeveloped South, both in a local and global context, Cassano argues for a Southern thought, which can reclaim a Southern epistemological independence.⁵³ In particular, *Tangerinn* echoes Cassano’s thought, as he highlights the importance of the Mediterranean, looking up to its contradictory characteristics and diving in its complexity, as it “is an irreducible pluriverse that does not allow itself to be reduced to a single verse.”⁵⁴ This epistemological shift is embedded in the material formulation of the sea, in its complexity, as, “this sea, which is at once external and internal, inhabited and waded into, this sea-as-border interrupts the rule of identity, forces one to accommodate division.”⁵⁵ A Mediterranean thought thus thrives in the oxymoron.⁵⁶ In this way, the Mediterranean exemplifies an epistemological humility, that is “an acknowledgement of the impossibility of full and definitive knowledge and a corollary surrender of the teleological assumption that we might possibly, at some future point, achieve full mastery over ourselves and the world around us.”⁵⁷ In the Italian context, the Mediterranean is central in formulating an alternative against fundamentalisms and monolithic discourses, like the invasion narrative, the notion of the fixity of borders, and the push towards the North promoted by far right and right-wing parties in Italy, but also by some members of LGBTQIA+ activists groups.⁵⁸

Cassano’s thinking is not only echoed in *Tangerinn*, but he is also briefly featured in *Spatriati*, both as a character in the narrative and in the novel’s footnotes, where Desiati highlights the importance of his writings for his work. In particular, he spotlights the relevance of Cassano’s *Southern*

51 Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean crossings: the politics of an interrupted modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008): 5.

52 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 1994): 53.

53 Cassano, *Southern Thought*, xxxviii.

54 Cassano, *Southern Thought*, xlvi.

55 Cassano, *Southern Thought*, 18.

56 Cassano, *Southern Thought*, 33.

57 Samantha Frost, “The Implications of the New Materialisms for Feminist Epistemology,” in *Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science: Power in Knowledge*, ed. H. E. Grasswick (Berlin: Springer, 2011): 79.

58 Cassano, *Southern Thought*, xlvi.

Thought for a wider generation of scholars and readers, since it “has marked the identity of many Apulian scholars or simple readers on the value of time, slowness and the countryside.”⁵⁹ Cassano’s thinking is implicitly reflected also in the novels by Nativo and Maalel because of their decision to prominently emplace a Southern perspective, one that opens Italy’s Southern borders to the Global South and does not privilege Northern Europe.

Hence, a Southern, Mediterranean, thought can trouble European and Italian homonationalism because of its insistence on complexity, ambiguity, and oxymoronic strata, and because of its openness to the South. If Colpani and Habel argue for a more general “shift of the critical focus from the centers to the peripheries of the continent [which] works rather *diffractionally* and delivers us a different image of Europe” (86), the Mediterranean, as a fluid and ever-changing landscape, provides a further challenge to the monolithic image of Europe. As evidenced in the novels by Desiati, Nativo, Anechoum, and Maalel, the Mediterranean is the productive metaphor for stratified discourses, languages, and identities, which simultaneously contrast and corroborate each other, rather than a single, linear perspective.

Conclusion

Despite being often presented as a linear narrative of invasion, migration in Italy presents various ambiguities, contradictions, and antithetical elements. Simultaneously, this narrative reiterates several discursive tropes and obscures other core elements. For instance, migration discourses for the most part only refer to incoming fluxes into the country, while Italy’s own outbound migration and the one taking place inside Italy’s borders are rarely mentioned.⁶⁰ Similarly, incoming migrants are simultaneously “being perceived from the outset both as a potential solution to growing shortages in the labor market and a threat to the security, prosperity, and cultural traditions of Italians themselves.”⁶¹ Furthermore, newspaper articles, politicians’ speeches, and other media usually discuss arrivals via boat, although many studies argue that the majority of people

59 Desiati, *Spatriati*, 271. “Ha segnato l’identità di molti studiosi o semplici lettori pugliesi sul valore del tempo, della lentezza, della provincia.”

60 John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2007): 10.

61 Áine O’ Healy, *Migrant Anxieties: Italian Cinema in a Transnational Frame* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2019): 1.

enter the country legally via other routes.⁶² These multiple elements challenge a single discourse around migration and demand for more nuance in its discussion.

Stemming from this complex background, the article analysed a queer trend within contemporary Italian literature, which on the surface follows well-established narratives of internal migration and movement from the Global South to the Global North, queer metronormative narratives, as well as internal narratives from the South to the North, but displays a more nuanced picture upon closer inspection. The novels *Spatriati* by Mario Desiati, *Polveri sottili* by Gianluca Nativo, *Baba* by Mohamed Maalel, and *Tangerinn* by Emanuela Anechoum dive into complexity and in-betweenness, formulating narratives that develop on the shores of the Mediterranean and that are mirrored in their multiplicity by the sea. Ultimately, the article argued that they exemplify a Southern, or rather, Mediterranean thought, which troubles far right, right-wing, and homonationalist narratives about migration and about Italian assimilation. Moreover, while the novels by Desiati, Nativo, Anechoum, and Maalel were investigated as case studies in this instance, other novels could have been instead included, such as *Ragazze perbene* (2023) by Olga Campofreda, *Autoritratto newyorkese* (2023) by Maurizio Fiorino, or *Hijra* (2024) by Saif ur Rehman Raja.

A queer perspective, such as the one represented in *Spatriati*, *Polveri sottili*, *Baba*, and *Tangerinn* embraces complexity and liminal identities. Moreover, as argued by March, liminality “might shift us [...] towards a politics of relationality that is rooted in our being in the world and speaks to shared histories of loss and shared responsibilities towards one another.”⁶³ The novels explored in this article foster a new epistemology and hint at a future of multifaceted, oxymoronic, but shared co-existence.

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62 Iain Chambers, “Maritime Criticism and Theoretical Shipwrecks,” in *PMLA*, no. 125 (3) (2010): 679.

63 Loren March, “Queer and trans geographies of liminality: A literature review,” in *Progress in Human Geography*, 45(3) (2021): 465.

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