

# **Queering Southern Italy: Towards a Conceptualisation of 'Meridian Sexualities'**

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## **Abstract**

This article critically interrogates the expectations connected to the presence or absence of queerness in Southern Italy from a theoretical perspective, advancing the concept of 'Meridian Sexualities' (Ammaturo 2019) as a tool that can be deployed from within the Italian South to think about its own queer histories and experiences, beyond the existing 'cultural hegemony' of the Italian North (Cospito 2016, 61-62) that has historically invisibilised, exoticised, or essentialised them. This concept explicitly borrows from the work of Southern Italian sociologist Franco Cassano on 'il Pensiero Meridiano' ('Meridian Thought') and suggests that the emergence of 'Meridian Sexualities' can be achieved through 'de-Northing' knowledge production about the queer Italian South; subverting existing stereotypes on queerness in Southern Italy; and lastly through re-shaping of queer Italian pasts that have been forgotten or are missing from the archives, through the production of cultural artefacts. This article contributes to the sociology of gender and sexuality, particularly in relation to the existing hegemonic/subaltern relations within the Global North, showing the key role that these relations play in the definition of Northern and Southern European sexual and gender modernities.

## **Keywords**

Southern Italy, Gender, Sexuality, Meridian Thought, Queer

## **Introduction: Is Southern Italy Queer?**

Around 2007 I visited a friend in the town of Gallipoli, in Salento, South-Eastern Italy, with some of my friends. As queer woman born and raised in the same Southern region of Puglia, before moving to

Northern Italy to study at university, I knew that Gallipoli was emerging as one of the most exciting tourist destinations for LGB(T)<sup>1</sup> people in the country and in Europe (Gazzetta del Mezzogiorno 2022). This was attested by the existence of lavish summer parties, such as *La Mala Educación* and *GayDay*, held in beautiful outdoor locations, which drew huge, mostly cis male-dominated crowds. On warm summer nights, before heading to these parties, tourists and locals alike would pre-drink at *Caffé Bellini*, a 'gay-friendly' bar, located on the main avenue of the town, where passers-by would engage in the *struscio*, the Italian tradition of the night-time stroll. During a dinner with my friend's family, one cousin asked her: "Gli hai già fatto vedere il bar dei *ricchioni*<sup>2</sup>?" ("Have you shown them the *faggots*' bar yet?"). My friend was mortified and did not know how to reply to such crude question, particularly considering that a few of us identified as queer at the table.

This episode stuck with me, as I realised that, whilst I had grown up in that area, I was still considerably surprised to see queerness emerging in such 'peripheral' location in Southern Italy and being configured as a spectacle for others to gaze upon. The question asked at the dinner table signalled simultaneously the *out-of-placeness* of queer desire in the local geography of Gallipoli, as well as the naturalness of the existence of that specific bar, as if it was just another local sight to show to visitors, together with the beautiful beaches, the old town, and the harbour. I (like many others) had not contemplated that there could be something *queer* about Puglia or the Italian South, internalising a specific heteronormative view of Southern Italy. The awareness of my process of internalisation of this heteronormative way to look at Southern Italy has given me the impetus for this theoretical interrogation of the Queer Italian South.

With its queer bars, LGBT associations, and historical connections with the birth of the Italian LGBT movement, particularly through the emergence during the 1970s of the 'FUORI' (Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano<sup>3</sup>) (Pini 2011; Prearo 2015), and the 'MIT' (Movimento Identità Trans<sup>4</sup>) (Cannamela 2022), Central and Northern Italy represent in the collective imaginary the sites of Italian sexual and gender modernity, whereas the South is often absent from this queer genealogy of Italy or, when present, it is mostly narrated through episodes of homophobic violence, such as in relation to the infamous killing of two young gay men (Giorgio Agatino Giammola and Antonio Galatola) in Giarre, Sicily, in 1980 (Lepore 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the use of the 'LGBT' acronym, this refers mostly to cisgender gay/bisexual men and, to a lesser extent, to lesbian/bisexual women.

<sup>2</sup> 'Ricchioni' is a derogatory Italian term to describe particularly gay men.

<sup>3</sup> Italian Homosexual Revolutionary Unitary Front.

<sup>4</sup> Trans Identity Movement. For a history of the changes of the organisation's name over time, visit the official website at <https://mit-italia.it/chi-siamo/>, last accessed 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2024.

This article critically interrogates the expectations connected to the presence or absence of queerness in Southern Italy from a theoretical perspective, advancing the concept of 'Meridian Sexualities' (Ammaturo 2019) as a tool that can be deployed from within the Italian South to think about its own queer histories and experiences, beyond the existing 'cultural hegemony' of the Italian North (Cospito 2016, 61-62) that has historically invisibilised, exoticised, or essentialised them. This concept expands my previous research (Ammaturo 2019) on the queer Italian South and explicitly borrows from the work of Southern Italian sociologist Franco Cassano on 'il Pensiero Meridiano' ('Meridian Thought'), who suggested that the Italian South should conceive itself not just an object of thought by others, but as a thinking agent, tracing a connection between the subalternity of the Italian South, and that of the colon(ised) South(s) of the world, whilst avoiding an improper conceptual assimilation between the two (Cassano 2021, IX). Whilst the concept of 'Meridian Sexualities' affirms the specificity of Queer Southern Italian epistemologies, sometimes at odd with the hegemonic understandings of gender and sexuality formulated from the vantage point of the Italian (and European) North, it still works within a tradition of hybridity and *border-thinking* (Mignolo 1998 and 2002), much in line as well with Cassano's (2021) idea of the Mediterranean as a crucible of solidarity and agency.

The first section of this article discusses the background and theoretical foundations of the concept of 'Meridian Sexualities', contextualising the history of subordination of the Italian South to the cultural, political, economic, and social hegemony of the Italian North beyond essentialist temptations. Contextually, this section explores the work of Franco Cassano (2021) on 'Il Pensiero Meridiano' and justifies its relevance and applicability to the research at hand. The second section critically analyses some of the tropes and stereotypes relating to sexuality and gender associated with Southern Italy and then moves to consider contemporary forms of exoticisation of Southern Italian queerness and gender identity in the regions of Puglia and Campania. The third section builds on these critiques to articulate the concept of 'Meridian Sexualities', premised upon three major strategies: 1) the necessity to 'de-North' knowledge production about the queer Italian South; 2) the subversion of existing stereotypes on queerness in Southern Italy; 3) and the creative re-shaping of queer Italian pasts that have been forgotten or are missing from the archives, through the production of cultural artefacts.

This article introduces an innovative approach to the conceptualisation of queerness in an area of Italy traditionally considered to be inherently misogynistic (Verde 2022) and homophobic (Barbagli and Colombo 2008, 189; Colpani and Giuliani 2015, 199), hence not fully 'modern' yet, compared to the North of the country (Varriale 2021). In deconstructing the idea of a homogeneous Western sexual and gender 'modernity', by showing how the Italian South is congenial not only to the articulation of Italian Modernity, but also European modernity (Savransky and Lundy 2022; Seth 2022), this article contributes to the process of opening up a new research interdisciplinary agenda, across sociology,

geography, history, critical and decolonial studies, as well as Italian studies, on the entanglements between different conceptions of ‘the South’ in relation to gender and sexuality across latitudes and longitudes, and the challenges these conceptions pose to the existence of a ‘hegemonic’ (and modern) North, wherever it may be located, within and beyond the Global North.

### **Beyond the ‘Southern Question’: Italian Modernity and the Creation of the Italian South**

Southern Italy has traditionally been considered as ‘backwards’ compared to Northern Italy. Its economic, political, and social development is considered by many as a burden on the development of Italy as a whole (Barbagallo 2013; Conelli 2022; Fauzia and Amenta 2024), a perception openly articulated by the racist and anti-meridional party ‘Northern League’<sup>5</sup> in the early 1990s. Since the unification process of Italy in 1861, authors have grappled with the so-called ‘Questione Meridionale’ (‘Southern Question’) (Conelli 2022; Moe 2002; Pescosolido 2017), exploring the historical, political, and economic reasons behind this alleged backwardness, as well as, in some cases, possible ‘solutions’ to bridge the gap between the North and the South. Among them, Sardinian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci (1926) has highlighted the colonial-like relationship existing between the Northern Italian liberal élites (and Southern Italian élites), and the proletarian masses in Southern Italy (Conelli 2022, 36). Over time, however, the interest in the fraught relationship between these two ‘Italies’ has led to the emergence of ‘Meridionalismo’ (‘Meridionalism’) (Lupo 1998), as an institutionalised field of study that has often been criticised as essentialising and patronising Southern Italy (Cassano 2021; Conelli 2013).

Simultaneously, authors inspired by Gramsci’s proposition have discussed the existence of a form of ‘internal colonialism’ at the detriment of the South within the country (Bonu 2021; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2016) and highlighted how the Italian South has been congenial not only to the creation of a unified Italy, but also, to the very articulation of a modern idea of Europe (Dainotto 2011; Moe 2022). Conelli (2022), for instance, has explored the ‘colonial construction of the idea of Southern Italy’, a construct that still affects the ways in which the South is viewed by others and, crucially, continues to view itself; and that is firmly rooted in the social, political, and economic history of the Italian peninsula since at least the Sixteenth Century.

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<sup>5</sup> Since 2017, the party has changed its name, under the guide of Secretary Matteo Salvini, from ‘Northern League’ to ‘League’ to disguise its historical anti-South character and broaden the appeal for voters in the Southern regions of Italy (Mammone 2023, 236), ramping up their anti-immigrant and Islamophobic rhetoric.

Conelli's work, however, does not romanticise an identitarian version of Southern Italian history that mythologises the Spanish rule of the Borbone in these territories – namely 'Neoborbonismo' (Conelli 2013; Mammone 2024). At the same time, discussions on colonial-like relations between the North and the South of Italy, should not be read as intending to overshadow the bloody history of Italy as a coloniser outside of Europe (Del Boca 2003; Giuliani 2015; Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012; Panico 2024) which, to some extent, still remains underplayed and minimised by the persistence of the 'Italians good people' trope (Del Boca 2005).

Still in the spirit of Antonio Gramsci, whilst also moving beyond the essentialising features of 'Meridionalist' discourse, Southern Italian sociologist Franco Cassano (2021 [1996]) has introduced the concept of 'Pensiero Meridiano' ('Meridian Thought') as an influential alternative to 'Meridionalismo', and has suggested that the Italian South needs to conceptualise itself as an agent of thought, rather than as an object of investigation by others. Cassano establishes a clear connection with Said's work on 'Orientalism' (2016) and a common genealogy with postcolonial and decolonial thinkers, such as Dipesh Chakrabarty or Walter Dignolo, while maintaining that there cannot be an easy equivalence drawn between the experiences of the Italian South, and other postcolonial and decolonial South(s) (Cassano 2021, IX):

Meridian Thought explicitly asserts the connection between a South, the Italian South, and the South(s) of the world. [This is not] to build equivocal identifications and assimilations, but especially to fight against the tendency that thinks that the emancipation of the Italian South can be seen as a separate question, confined in the horizon of the nation state, or the [European] continent, oblivious to the external connections, especially with the Southern shore of the Mediterranean<sup>6</sup>.

For Cassano, 'Meridian thought' should not be conceived as offering suggestions or solutions on how Southern Italy can 'catch up' with Northern Italian modernity. On the contrary, he interrogates the very idea that a fast-paced, *turbocapitalist* (his word), North-driven, idea of Italian modernity, is desirable in the first place (Cassano 2021, 5). This interrogation of modernity also addresses the very process whereby vastly different civilisations across time and space have all been asked to measure and 'catch up' with homogenising ideas of Western 'modernity' Cassano (2021, XI). As a result, we should stop considering modernity (or the drive for Southern Italy to catch up with Northern Italian modernity) as

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<sup>6</sup> Freely translated from Italian. See the original: 'Nel pensiero meridiano si rivendica esplicitamente la connessione tra un sud, quello italiano, e i Sud del mondo. Non per costruire equivoche identificazioni ed assimilazioni, ma soprattutto per contrastare la tendenza a pensare che l'emancipazione del sud italiano possa essere letta come una questione separata, chiusa nell'orizzonte dello stato nazionale o in quello continentale, insensibile alle connessioni con l'esterno e in primo luogo con la sponda sud del Mediterraneo' (Cassano 2021, IX).

the solution to all ills and, instead, reverse the logical construction of this argument: '(...) not to think the South in light of modernity, but to think modernity in light of the South' (Cassano 2021, 5).

Cassano's theory of 'Meridian Thought' is built on the equilibrium between a scission and mediation: on the one hand, the Italian South needs to break away from hegemonic representations of itself that have been externally imposed by others; on the other hand, it is important to acknowledge – to mediate – the nuances of the various representations of the Italian South, in order to avoid lapsing in identitarian fundamentalism (Cassano 2021, VII-VIII). This tension between these two poles represents a continuous process that possesses that same maritime undulation of the Mediterranean, a sea that he conceives as a place of syncretic encounters between the different peoples living on its Northern and Southern shores (Cassano 2021, 23).

Cassano's 'Meridian Thought' offers an invaluable and critical way to cast a queer gaze onto Southern Italy, as recent scholarship has suggested (Ammaturo 2019; Fauzia and Amenta 2024). Historically, in fact, narratives relating to gender and sexuality in Southern Italy have tended to adopt the categorical distinctions between a 'civilised' Northern Italy (and, by extension, Europe), and an 'uncivilised', backwards Southern Italy (Ammaturo 2019, 85; Benadusi 2007, 8; Polizzi 2022, 50), flattening the complexity, ambiguity, and ambivalence of a Southern Italian history of homosexuality and gender dissidence or diversity.

Cassano's invitation to espouse 'Meridian Thought' is deployed to navigate the drive to emancipation (scission) of the Italian South from the framing, tropes, and stereotypes that limit its ability to imagine itself in relation to gender and sexuality, with the concurrent need to avoid easy essentialisations of this very Southern Italian identity by way of 'reacting' to these tropes or images (mediation). The article highlights the importance of the sexual and gender agency of Southern subjectivities, here conceptualised as 'Meridian Sexualities' (Ammaturo 2019), as a tool to affirm the political value of interrogating the civilising and modernising gaze that has dominated the North Italian and North Europeans depictions of Southern Italy as a place of sexual and gender licentiousness, perversity, and (criminal) deviance (Polizzi 2022, 50-51).

### **Modern or Archaic? Interrogating Tropes on Gender and Sexuality in Southern Italy**

Can Southern Italy simultaneously be *queer* and not *queer enough*? As Burgio (2008, 46) has discussed, two paradigms for the narration of homosexuality in Italy are available: that of 'modern homosexuality' exemplified by the work of Barbagli and Colombo (2008) and that predominantly maps onto Anglo-

American globalised conceptions of identity-based homosexuality (Nardi 1998); and a 'residual model' based on the dyad of active/passive (male) sexual roles, exemplified by the concept of 'Mediterranean Homosexuality'<sup>7</sup> discussed by Dall'Orto (1990). The existence of this dual and parallel track in the narration of homosexuality in the Italian South represents an important challenge. In relation to the former characterisation of sexual and gender 'modernity', Southern Italy does not seem to fare well as Barbagli and Colombo suggest (2008, 188-191). In connection to the second proposition, Southern Italy would appear to be *too queer* compared to the Northern Italy as, during the Nineteenth century, homosexual contact was *de facto* decriminalised in the South of Italy, where it was seen as more commonplace, than in the North of Italy, when men used to be prosecuted for it (Benadusi (2021, 99-100). The existence of this duality in relation to the narratives are further complicated by the Northern European gaze that particularly identified Southern Italy with (homo) sexual freedom and (homo)sexual experimentation (Aldrich 1993; Polizzi 2022), particularly through the touristic practice of the so-called 'Grand Tour' of Italy between the Seventeenth and the Nineteenth century (Beccalossi 2015; Corbisiero 2016, 58).

The existence of this duality (modern-archaic) in the conceptualisation of homosexuality across Italy represents a clear limitation of the possibility of imagining interstitial practices that cross over the boundaries of these historical and epistemological categories. Two considerations need to be presented. Firstly, as Polizzi (2022, 50-51) has argued, building on Sedgwick (2024), it would be wrong to deny coevalness and coexistence to different, sometimes dissonant, models of homosexuality. Considering the model of 'Mediterranean Homosexuality' as an historical (archaic) precursor to 'modern' homosexualities would be reductive, as it precludes the possibility that different (homo)sexual and (homo)social behaviours also existed that exceeded the interpretative framework of Dall'Orto's essentialising model. Secondly, building on Cassano's (2021, 5) suggestion for which we should '(...) not to think the South in light of modernity, but to think modernity in light of the South', we need to question the very paradigm of Western sexual 'modernity', particularly in relation to its 'civilising' effects (Colpani and Habed 2014; Hoad 2018; Rahman 2020) and the productive effects they have in the articulation of both national and transnational power relations.

To interrogate our understanding of the dichotomy between 'modern' and 'archaic' narratives about (Southern) Italy, it is crucial to critically appraise and deconstruct the frames and tropes through which it has been conceptualised in relation to gender and sexuality. Two major strands capture a significant part of the narratives relating to homosexuality and gender diversity in Southern Italy in this regard:

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of 'Mediterranean Homosexuality' is described by Dall'Orto (1990, 796) as follows: 'its most salient characteristic is the sharp dichotomy between the one who is considered the "homosexual" in the strict sense, that is the one who plays the insertee role, as against that who plays the insertor role ["the active"]'.

Southern Italy as a place of exoticised desire for tourists, and as a place of almost 'mythical' gender diversity.

*Southern Italy as Exotic: the emergence of a 'Grand Tour 2.0'?*

Southern Italy has often been conceptualised, particularly through a Northern European gaze, as a place of sexual licentiousness and experimentation. The phenomenon of the 'Grand Tour' represented the main vehicle responsible for this characterisation. Since at least the Seventeenth century, middle-class and rich Northern Europeans travelled across the Mediterranean, and particularly across Italy, to escape the repressive environments in their own countries, where homosexuality was often criminalised<sup>8</sup> (i.e. England) (Aldrich 2002; Beccalossi 2015; Corbisiero 2016).

The idea of the 'homoerotic Mediterranean' has represented a constant in the imaginary of Western sexual history, fuelled by orientalising theories such as that of 'The Sotadic Zone' by English writer Richard F. Burton. Burton had identified areas of Southern France, the Iberian Peninsula, as well as Italy and the Southern shores of the Mediterranean, as places for this allegedly 'unbridled' expression of homoeroticism and homosexual behaviour (Beccalossi 2015, 189). Southern Italy occupied a particularly important place, with the bucolic depictions of Sicilian boys in the pictures of Von Gloeden (Aldrich 2002; Beccalossi 2015), or descriptions of travellers who created vivid portrayals of these romantic and sexual interactions between local young men and foreigner visitors which, as Aldrich (2002, 183-184) reminds us, were neither fully disinterested, nor fully exploitative.

Although the narrative of Southern Italy as a place of sexual freedom and exploration, compared to both the Italian and the European North, a place where a specific kind of 'Mediterranean Homosexuality' (Dall'Orto 1990) was found, would appear to cast a positive light on this area of the country, there are also unintended consequences, such as the sketching of a mode of (homo)sexual expression primordial and archaic, far removed from the dictates of 'modern' Anglo-American understandings of homosexuality (Nardi 1998, 576). As a result, these forms of (homo)sexual affection and expression appear to be static, crystallised in a time and space that are seen to be pre-modern and, therefore, hierarchically inferior, as Hoad has observed (2000, 138-140).

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<sup>8</sup> Italy decriminalised homosexuality in 1889 with the approval of the 'Codice Zanardelli'. Rather than a crime, homosexuality was recast as a question of sin and morality (Corbisiero 2016, 54).



Whilst the 'Grand Tour' across Italy is now a phenomenon of the past, some of its symbolic vestiges reverberate in contemporary aesthetic conceptions of queerness in Southern Italy. As Southern Italy increasingly become the chosen destination of LGBTQIA+ beach tourism across Europe, there are several transfigurations of these processes of exoticisation. Two examples, that are non-exhaustive but still relevant, illustrate the modalities through which a sort of 'Grand Tour 2.0' of Southern Italy can be conceptualised in the present era. The first of these two examples concerns the existence of a travel blog called 'The Big Gay Puglia Guide' (<https://www.gaypugliapodcast.com/>). This blog, which was started in 2018, gives comprehensive advice, in Italian and English, to predominantly LGBTQIA+ travellers to this Southern Italian region, including places to eat and sleep, entertainment, as well as cruising spots and nudist beaches. The blog is filled with beautifully taken pictures that depict both the gastronomic specialities, as well as mostly muscular men posing with the backdrop of some of Puglia's most recognisable architectural and natural landmarks, such as the cone-shaped stone houses of Alberobello named *Trulli* (Fig. 1<sup>9</sup>), or the rugged landscape of the beach of Torre dell'Orso (Fig. 2).

[Insert Fig. 1 here]

[Insert Fig. 2 here]

These pictures, whilst depicting a different staged aesthetic of (queer<sup>10</sup>) masculinity – one that is more toned and less ephobic – reformulate and reinterpret some of the themes of the photography of von Gloeden, who used to depict young Sicilian men with the backdrop of ancient ruins (see reproduction in Aldrich 2002, 109), or with beautiful beaches in the background (see reproduction in Aldrich 2002, 111-113). The result is that, while the pictures tell an *Instagrammable* story about queerness in Southern Italy, the composition of the pictures, their narrative, can be interpreted as reproducing the dreamy, exotic(ised) depictions typical of the Grand Tour.

The second example that relates to the conceptualisation of the Italian South as a sort of 'playground' for sexual experimentation is represented by the two British reality TV Programmes respectively named *I Kissed a Boy* (2023) and *I Kissed a Girl* (2024). In both shows a group of either queer cisgender men or women, who normally reside in the UK, is invited to a villa (a *masseria* – a fortified farmhouse traditional to Puglia) to kiss one person that they have been paired with, spend some time exploring possible connections, and eventually find a partner. This script is not dissimilar to other dating reality

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<sup>9</sup> For Fig.1 and Fig. 2 consent to publish has been sought from owner of the pictures: Puglia Podcast website and Puglia travel guide by the Puglia Guys (<https://www.gaypugliapodcast.com/>).

<sup>10</sup> The blog contains a disclaimer that indicates that the models' sexuality should not be presumed because of their presence on the blog: 'The appearance of any model on the pages of this website does not constitute an implication relating to their sexual orientation'. From <https://www.gaypugliapodcast.com/>, last accessed 25<sup>th</sup> November 2024.

shows, such as the famous international franchise *Love Island* which, however, has a focus on heterosexual relationships. Compared to the previously mentioned example of 'The Big Gay Guide to Puglia', in this case the spotlight is not on Italian men (or women), but on the location itself, a dreamy villa with multiple swimming pools, lavish patio, well-manicured lawns, at the height of a hot Italian summer.

In the show, the only presence of an Italian 'character' is that of either a male or female 'assistant' to the presenter of the show (Dani Minogue), who occasionally delivers messages to the group, and who is longingly eyed up by the participants. Any other reference to Italy is missing. Furthermore, the participants never leave the *masseria*, and there is no reference to the possible existence of queerness beyond the walls of the location itself. The participants are effectively insulated from their surroundings, while simultaneously immersed in this idyllic Mediterranean location. This process of isolation, almost 'extraction' from the hustle and bustle of Northern European 'modernity', one that is quite common in contemporary dating shows, such as *Love Island* (Staples 2022), shows how a complex (touristic) location is reduced to an 'icon', a place where the natural and/or architectural elements are emphasised, and the anthropic element (the history, the traditions, the social and cultural life) are erased or hidden from view (Greco 2015, 157). Southern Italy, like other exoticised/orientalised locations, as Cassano (2021, 6) has aptly commented, is placed outside of the developed world, becoming a 'vacuum' to welcome tourists.

Both the examples of 'The Big Gay Puglia Podcast' and the British reality TV programmes *I Kissed a Boy* / *I Kissed a Girl* transfigure the classic theme of the Grand Tour as a quest for sexual excitement and adventure in locations away from the lives and routines of contemporary audiences, continuing to place Southern Italy, with or without its anthropic element, at the centre of this eroticised gaze. Both playful representations contribute to consolidate the image of Puglia as one of the most 'gay friendly' touristic destinations across Europe precisely because of its status as a site of queer 'escapism' that sets itself apart and in contrast with the reality of Northern European queer cosmopolitan urban modernities.

If the phenomenon of the so-called ‘Grand Tour’ interrogates categories of Southern Italian (homo) sexualities, the experiences and histories of *femminiellà*<sup>11</sup> in Naples, from the region of Campania, show how Southern Italy is narrated through the prism of gender difference and plurality. *Femminiellà* are considered as a group of individuals who are biologically assigned as male, who perform and embody femininity, particularly in working-class neighbourhoods of Naples (Fig. 3), such as ‘Quartieri Spagnoli’, characterised by the existence of the *vicoli*, narrow streets at the centre of social (and sometimes sexual<sup>12</sup>) encounters and interactions (Clemente 2020; Mauriello 2018; Vesce 2017; Zito e Valerio 2010). *Femminiellà* have also been associated with the sacred and the magical because of their roles in rituals such as ‘*a figliata*’<sup>13</sup> ‘*o spusarizio*’<sup>14</sup>, or *la juta dei femminielli*<sup>15</sup> (Clemente 2020, 306; Di Nuzzo 2009, 144-145).

[Insert Fig. 3 here]

Many consider *femminiellà* to straddle the lines of gender identity and sexuality, occupying a *liminal* position that escapes categorisations, particularly in relation to contemporary ‘trans’ identities (Mauriello 2018, 8; Vesce 2021, 57). The growing significance of the category of ‘trans’ to indicate experiences of gender diversity in contemporary societies increasingly interrogates the role of *femminiellà* in the sexual and gender history of (Southern) Italy. *Femminiellà* are often described as embodying an understanding of sexuality and gender which is still strongly imbued with patriarchal ideas about the sexual and affective relations between men and women, as well as an often-negative perception of homosexuality, and particularly effeminacy (Mauriello 2018, 10). As a result, some people within the queer community (and trans communities more specifically) may distance themselves from the experiences and/or identities of *femminiellà* which may be perceived to be ‘outdated’ (Vesce 2018, 11 and 2019, 333).

There is, therefore, a tension between the existence and celebration of *femminiellà* as an autochthonous subject that embodies gender diversity and plurality within the Italian South (and Naples more specifically), and the emergence of contemporary identity-based categories of ‘transness’ which contain an element of temporality that may sometimes work to supersede or overcome ‘outdated’ forms of gender difference. On the one hand, the emergence of ‘transsexuality’ (and later

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<sup>11</sup> The use of the ‘schwa’ sign (‘ə’) in Italian is used to overcome the gender binary. In the case of the dialectal noun *femminiellà* the use of the ‘ə’ simultaneously signals the potential liminality of these identities, as well as reproducing the typical Neapolitan pronunciation (see Nossem 2019, 21).

<sup>12</sup> In some, but not all cases, *femminielli* are said to be working as sex workers (Clemente 2020, 306).

<sup>13</sup> ‘*A figliata*’ is a ritualistic simulation of childbirth by a group of *femminiellà*, one of whom plays the role of the birthing woman.

<sup>14</sup> ‘*O spusarizio*’ is a ritualistic performance of a wedding between two *femminiellà*.

<sup>15</sup> *La juta dei femminielli* is the annual pilgrimage of the *femminiellà* to the Sanctuary of the Madonna of Montevergine on the Day of the Candelora (Candlemas).

of 'trans') as a category for social, political and legal intelligibility has represented a milestone in Italian activism; on the other hand, this phenomenon may have partially overshadowed and cast as 'outmoded' experiences of gender diversity that have contributed to shape *Neapolitanness* ('Napoletanità') for centuries.

This ambivalence between the legacy of the *femminiella* and the demands of modern trans intelligibility is captured by Vesce (2019, 344) in an interview with a young trans activist named Valentina:

(...) I am in between two worlds, or we could even say three: the hetero-patriarchal culture, the *femminielli* culture, and trans culture. So: where do we place ourselves as trans (people) from Campania? Most of all, those who define themselves as trans feminist and they try to have a dialogue with *femminielli* who, instead, reiterate a hetero-patriarchal model (...) because they are a third gender at the service of the patriarchy. Then, what does it mean to be *femminielli* today? It's a little bit like...the *femminelle* of the third millennium.<sup>16</sup>

Valentina's words show the disjunction, and concomitant tension, between a 'modern' conception of transness shaped by trans feminist arguments against patriarchal structures and rules, and the world of *femminiella* which has, instead, found a space of expression within those same patriarchal rules and structures.

One of the consequences of this tension between allegedly 'traditional' and contemporary values relating to gender, gender identity, and gender roles, has been that *femminiella* are increasingly 'disappearing' from the social and cultural landscapes of Southern Italy, as noted by Porpora Marcasciano (2014, 114), a key figure of trans Italian activism:

Paradoxically, the introduction of the term 'transsexual', has led to the long and inevitable demise of *femminielli* and of their wonderful world. Because of the pressure of globalisation and of its promises, this centuries-old tradition has disintegrated.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Freely translated from Italian. See the original: '(...) sono in mezzo a due mondi, anzi, potremmo dire anche tre, perché c'è la cultura etero-patriarcale, la cultura dei *femminielli* e la cultura trans. E allora: dove ci poniamo noi trans campane? Soprattutto, chi fa attivismo trans, chi si definisce una trans femminista e poi va a cercare di dialogare con i *femminielli* che invece reiterano un modello etero-patriarcale, perché di fatto, nella cultura napoletana, il *femminiello* è nel sistema etero-patriarcale, anche se è un terzo genere, ma non è un terzo genere che combatte contro il patriarcato, è un terzo genere a servizio del patriarcato. E allora cosa significa essere *femminielli* oggi? È un po' come...le *femminelle* del terzo millennio.' (Vesce 2019, 344).

<sup>17</sup> Freely translated from Italian. See the original: 'Paradossalmente, da quando è stato introdotto il termine "transessuale", è cominciata la lenta e inesorabile fine dei *femminielli* e del loro splendido mondo; sotto la spinta della globalizzazione e dei suoi abbagli si è sgretolata una tradizione antica di secoli.' (Marcasciano 2014, 116).

This phenomenon of ‘disappearance’ has led to what Vesce (2019 and 2021) has described as a process of ‘patrimonialisation’. To preserve the cultural significance, relevance, and experiences of Neapolitan *femminiella*, a process of ‘naturalisation’ and ‘ethnicization’ has taken place (Vesce 2019, 337), with the (mostly unintended) result of depicting *femminiella* in stereotypical and, sometimes orientalist, terms as a timeless feature of *Neapolitaness* as open and welcoming. For Vesce (2021, 72) this process of ‘patrimonialisation’ contributes to reinforce a narrative that differentiates between a progressive and developed Northern Italy, and a welcoming but backwards Southern Italy:

These processes of inferioritisation and racialisation<sup>18</sup>, extended to the populations of Southern Italy, have transformed the femminiello/femminella from degenerate subject to figure of a mythical past, a past that has been luckily overcome thanks to the civilising mission of a gay modernity that has excluded for a long time the regions and territories of the South (Vesce 2021, 70).<sup>19</sup>

Vesce’s concept of ‘patrimonialisation’ shows how the effort to protect the essence of the experiences of *femminiella* in Naples as an ‘authentic’ cultural feature of the city, one that nowadays may be mostly confined to the domain of the past, leads to the conceptualisation of the Italian South as a ‘monocultural icon’, as Greco (2015, 164) has suggested, that is to say a territory that becomes fully saturated with the narrative of a relatively static ‘traditional past’ and, as a result, becomes geographically or symbolically distant from the loci of (Northern) Italian modernity.

This process described by Vesce echoes the perplexities of the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino, one of the most well-known experts on the study of traditions and religion in Southern Italy<sup>20</sup>, who cautioned against the adoption of a naturalistic approach to the social and cultural phenomena of the subaltern popular world (2021, 18-19), of which the *femminiella* certainly are part. De Martino (2021, 20-24) saw in this effort to ‘scientifically’ know the cultural practices of subaltern peoples an effort to re-entrench their alleged civilisational inferiority vis-à-vis Northern European societies, following an openly colon(ial/ising) logic.

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<sup>18</sup> The author is talking here about George Mosse’s (2020) discussion on the sexual connotations of the racialisation of Black people and Jews in Europe.

<sup>19</sup> Freely translated from Italian. See the original: ‘Questi processi di inferiorizzazione e razzializzazione, estesi alle popolazioni del meridione d’Italia, hanno trasformato il femminiello/femminella da soggetto degenerato a figura di passato mitico, fortunatamente superato grazie all’azione civilizzatrice di una modernità gaia che a lungo ha escluso proprio le regioni e i territori del Sud.’ (Vesce 2021, 70)

<sup>20</sup> Ernesto De Martino (1908-1965) is mostly known for his study of the magical in the context of the Italian South, with its book ‘Il Mondo Magico’ (1948) and ‘Sud e Magia’ (2015 [1959]), as well as for his extensive work on the phenomenon of ‘Tarantate’ in Salento (Puglia), women who were allegedly bitten by a spider and developed madness-like symptoms that could only be cured through obsessive music and rituals, with the book ‘La Terra del Rimorso’ (2009 [1961]).

In light of this analysis, the conceptualisation of *femminiellà* as an archaic expression of a Southern Italian past that is out of sync with contemporary trans ‘modernities’ does not just represent a naïve periodisation of transness across a linear timeline of Italian queer history, but also contains an important civilisational element, one that echoes the preoccupation expressed by Love (2009, 9) who has argued that queer subjects may be inclined to ‘leave behind’ those who do not perform their queerness appropriately, in this case *femminiellà*, to try and pursue a ‘possible brighter queer future’. Whilst, therefore, the world of *femminiellà* needs to be protected, celebrated, and memorialised (if it is, indeed, about to disappear), it is important to refrain from characterising it following a naturalistic impulse, as suggested by De Martino, as this approach would inevitably sketch it as a folkloristic and anachronistic phenomenon that needs to make way to more ‘modern’ forms of gender difference and plurality.

### **Can the queer Italian South think about itself? Theorising ‘Meridian Sexualities’**

The examples of the ‘Grand Tour 2.0’ and the existence of a ‘naturalistic’ (De Martino 2021) approach to the narration and preservation of the narratives of *femminiellà* analysed in the previous section raise the question of whether and how can the queer Italian South think about itself. Together they show the limitations of approaching the study of queerness in the context of the Italian South from an essentialist, orientalist, almost ‘timeless’ perspective, as well as exposing their dialectical relation to the category of Italian (queer) modernities. Hence, if the Italian South is not just the playground for queer tourists, nor it is the locus of mythologised forms of gender diversity, how do we think about it in a way that is simultaneously queer and emancipatory? Cassano’s theory of ‘Meridian Thought’ offers the perfect opportunity to change the outlook on the queer Italian South in a way that both acknowledges its characteristics, in terms of how sexuality and gender play out in the context of specific social, cultural, and geographic landscapes, whilst also avoiding essentialisation of these very phenomena, applying his principles of scission and mediation (Cassano 2021, VII-VIII).

In my previous work (Ammaturo 2019, 95) I had already briefly introduced the concept of ‘Meridian Sexualities’, to suggest that Southern Italy (and the Mediterranean more broadly) can think about itself, rather than being thought by others, and presents ‘(...) [its] own ways of negotiating between *tradition* and *modernity*, *indolence* and *social change*’ [original emphasis]. The concept of ‘Meridian Sexualities’ emerged in connection to the analysis I undertook of the microcosm of LGBTQIA+ activism in the sub-region of Puglia called Salento, where activists oscillated between a desire to emulate dynamics of

North-driven activism and their intention to reconcile queerness with local Salentinian identities. Beyond this specific empirical horizon, the concept recognises the existence of entangled genealogies of subordination that invest Southern Italy vis-à-vis both the Italian and European North that are organised along the axes North/South, modern/archaic, and heterosexual/queer, and suggests the formulation of an agentic way of thinking the queer Italian South. As such, it offers great potential for sociologists of gender and sexuality to be deployed as an interpretative framework for analyses of queerness across the Mediterranean and in conversations with Decolonial Theories of gender and sexuality.

Whilst still relatively at the margins in the context of academia, discussions on the entanglements between gender and sexuality and Southern Italy are multiplying, with several authors now exploring avenues of both theoretical and empirical investigation (Burgio 2008; Ferme 2016; Ferrante 2019; Parrinello 2021; Polizzi 2020 and 2022). A recent case in point, which centres Feminism as its main object of theorisation, is the recent book by Claudia Fauzia and Valentina Amenta (2024) which puts forward the idea of a 'Terrone<sup>21</sup> Feminism' ('Femminismo Terrone'), that is to say an agentic form of Southern Italian Feminism, that rejects stereotyping, essentialisation, and subordination of Southern Italian experiences, recuperating subaltern buried histories of Southern Italian feminist resistance.

The concept of 'Meridian Sexualities', however, does not just contain a diagnostic dimension, aimed at denouncing the existence of a naturalistic and essentialising (sometimes even orientalising) outlooks on gender and sexuality in the context of Southern Italy. It also proposes a prognostic agenda, suggesting what strategies can be deployed for the queer Italian South to become an agent of thought, rather than solely occupy the position of object of investigation and interpretation by others. In light of the two examples discussed in the previous sections, and considering more broadly the discussions in this burgeoning field of study, the theory of 'Meridian Sexualities' is premised upon three major strategies: 'de-Northing' knowledge about gender and sexuality in Southern Italy, combatting stereotypes that essentialise, naturalise, and orientalise Southern Italians in relation to queerness, embark on a process of fabulation/reformulation of lost queer histories of the Italian South.

Firstly, the configuration of queer Southern Italy as an agent of thought can be carried out through the process of 'de-Northing' our knowledge on constellations of gender and sexuality in the specific material and symbolic space of the Italian South. This requires, on the one hand, to centre Southern Italy as an agent in the production of knowledge about itself, through the multiplication of initiatives,

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<sup>21</sup> 'Terrone' is a derogatory deriving from the word 'terra' (land) used by Northern Italians to historically discriminate against Southern Italians, considered to be backwards through their association with peasantry. For an analysis of the term, please see Alga (2018).

conferences, workshops, and/or projects of research, among many options. On the other hand, it also crucially means to re-orient our gaze beyond the horizon of the Northern European and Northern Italian hegemony in the field of gender and sexuality. It means to ask, echoing Cassano, not to think Southern Italy in light of queer Northern European modernity, but to think Northern European modernity in light of Southern Italy. To this regard, we should be interrogating what authors have described as 'North Gaze' (Fauzia and Amenta 2024, 84-85) or 'Northsplaning' (Conelli 2022, 188), as processes whereby the 'North' imposes its interpretative frameworks and explanations upon the South; and scrutinising whether extant categories to describe gender and sexuality are even applicable or translatable to the context of Southern Italy, unless we take into account the hegemonic North-South power relations that have contributed to structure them over time and across space.

Secondly, a theory of 'Meridian Sexualities' requires a critical interrogation of stereotypes and tropes that continue to circulate in relation to queerness in Southern Italy. The examples discussed in this article relating to the 'Grand Tour 2.0' in Puglia, and the process of 'patrimonialisation' of *femminiella* in Naples (Vesce 2019 and 2021), show that it is impossible to disentangle the histories of Southern Italy as queer from the interactions with the North as sometimes patronising, exoticising, or essentialising, and that their contemporary reverberations still cast a long shadow onto contemporary queer Southern Italian subjectivities and individual and collective imaginaries. One of the operations needed to overcome these stereotypes and tropes requires complicating and nuancing our perception of what is to be a queer person in a peripheral/rural environment, such as Southern Italy (Ammaturo 2019), beyond 'metronormative' conceptions (Halberstam 2005), that posit that cities are the privileged sites where queer life can flourish, whereas rural and peripheral locales are seen as inherently hostile. By taking inspiration from Cassano's ideas of scission and mediation, we need to detangle a Southern-centred view on the specificity of queer experiences in these locales whilst, simultaneously, refusing essentialisation. This means to move from folklorised depictions of (queer) Southernness as anthropologically different and, by extension, inferior to Northern modernities. The only way to make Southern Italy truly hospitable to queerness is to work through the stereotypes and nurture and visibilise spaces of resistance and queer joy that already exist, creating interstices of hope for those who inhabit these spaces.

Thirdly, thinking Southern Italy as queer through the concept of 'Meridian Sexualities' also requires a creative effort in filling the gaps of a queer past that has not been documented and/or has been sidelined in the official queer histor(ies) of Italy, taking inspiration (with the due differences, and avoiding undue categorical juxtaposition) from the process of 'critical fabulation' deployed by Saidiya Hartman (2019) in relation to documenting the forgotten lives of Black women in the U.S. during the early Twentieth Century. In Hartman's work, this means looking at the archives, which mostly



described these women in negative terms, as criminal, or mentally ill, and craft a prose that blends an academic sensibility with creative writing, in order to '(...) recover the insurgent ground of these lives; to exhume open rebellion from the case file (...)’ (Hartman 2019, XVI).

In the context of Southern Italy, and particularly Puglia, one example of how to re-read archives and/or historical accounts has been that of Angelo Morino, with the novel ‘Rosso Taranta’. In the book, Morino starts from Ernesto De Martino’s famous 1961 ethnographic work ‘La Terra del Rimorso’ (‘The Land of Remorse’<sup>22</sup>) in which the scholar explored the phenomenon of ‘Tarantate’, women (and some men) who, in Salento, reported being bitten by spiders or tarantulas and developed madness-like symptoms that could only be cured through obsessive dancing. Morino’s (2006, 124-125) re-reads De Martino looking at the possibility of queerness existing in the interstices of this centuries-old phenomenon, tracing the steps of these men and women who refused to comply, or were unhappy, with the heteronormative dictates of society. ‘Critical fabulation’, therefore, represents an exciting opportunity within the horizon of ‘Meridian Sexualities’ to re-cast a new gaze on the queer Italian South, one that unveils the unsaid, the unspoken patterns of queerness that lay dormant under the official documents.

### **Conclusion - ‘Meridian Sexualities’ as a Bridging Concept between Western Hegemony and the Decolonisation of Gender and Sexuality**

The concept of ‘Meridian Sexualities’, much in the spirit of Cassano’s own work, is a liminal concept, a concept that seeks to bridge, on the one hand, the grand explanatory theories of queerness proper of Western modernity, with the ongoing efforts, predominantly within the Global South, to ‘decolonise’ our knowledge on autochthonous expressions of gender and sexuality, particularly in formerly colonised territories and countries. This liminality enables the concept of ‘Meridian Sexualities’ to apply to all those situations in which a tension exists between identifying and articulating a sense of alterity with respect to hegemonic discourses whilst, simultaneously, avoiding caricaturising or folklorising specific expressions of queerness that escape the intelligibility of the Western canon of LGBTQIA+ modernity. The elaboration of this concept of ‘Meridian Sexualities’ contributes to nuance our sociological understandings of European ‘progress’ and ‘modernity’ both within the specific context of Italy (Varriale 2021) and across the European continent and beyond (Savransky and Lundy

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<sup>22</sup> In De Martino’s conceptualisation ‘rimorso’ can simultaneously mean ‘remorse’ but also ‘re-bite’, as ‘morso’ is the Italian word for ‘bite’. De Martino is referring here to the bite (‘morso’) of the spider/tarantula that made women (and men) allegedly fall ill.

2022; Seth 2022). As such, therefore, this concept offers an opportunity for empowerment, and agency from the part of those who have become used to think about themselves through the eyes of others.

[Fig.4 here]

Furthermore, it would be impossible to disentangle the geographical dimension from a conceptualisation of 'Meridian Sexualities'. The question of the queer Italian South, in fact, is also a question of class, as economic subordination limits the opportunities for queer people to imagine themselves and their futures in such areas of Italy. It is not uncommon, in fact, for LGBTQIA+ activism (Fig. 4), as well in academic analyses (Ammaturo 2019; Fauzia and Amenta 2024) to connect the question of economic deprivation and economic opportunities to the question of queer liberation in this area of Italy. Queer liberation without material liberation becomes a vacuous exercise that does not shake the foundations of a fundamentally socially, politically, and economically unequal Italian society. To this regard, the concept of 'Meridian Sexualities' highlights the importance of mobilising different forms of empowerment and agency of the Italian South that enables to imagine and nurture its imagination of its queer past(s) and future(s), in a networked connection with all the 'Souths' of the world.

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Fig. 1 – A model posing on an Apulian Trullo – Picture courtesy of <https://www.gaypugliapodcast.com/>



Fig. 2 – A model posing next to the cliffs of Torre dell'Orso, Puglia - Picture courtesy of <https://www.gaypugliapodcast.com/>



Fig. 3 – a representation of a *femminiella* in Naples, 2024 – photo by the author



Fig.4 – a banner for the 2017 Salento Pride (Puglia) reciting 'From our roots for our revolution. Free bodies and territories' – Photo by the author.

