

## Queer Italian cultures

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**Charlotte Ross** is a Reader in Gender, Sexuality and Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. Her research focuses on issues of gender, sexuality, and embodiment in Italian culture and society. Her publications include the monographs *Eccentricity and Sameness: Discourses on Lesbianism and Desire between Women in Italy, 1860s–1930s* (Peter Lang, 2015), *Primo Levi’s Narratives of Embodiment: Containing the Human* (Routledge, 2011) and several chapters and articles on topics such as LGBT activism in Italy and lesbian representation in Italian fiction.

**SA Smythe** is an Assistant Professor of Black European cultural studies, contemporary Mediterranean studies and Black trans poetics in the department of African American Studies at UCLA. Their first monograph is provisionally titled *Where Blackness Meets the Sea: On Crisis, Culture, and the Black Mediterranean*. It is a transdisciplinary study focused on literature and other cultural responses to racism, misogyny, colonialism, and other relational aspects of inequality and oppression between Europe (in particular, Italy), East Africa, and the Mediterranean. Smythe is founder and organizing member of the Queer Studies Caucus of the American Association of Italian Studies as well as a published and performing poet and an activist who organizes within queer/trans Black and abolitionist poetry collectives across Europe and the US.

**Keywords:** queer, feminism, performativity, transnational, activism

**Abstract:** The editorial includes the Guest Editors’ introductions to their respective areas. Julia Heim, Charlotte Ross, and SA Smythe offer a brief critical contextualization of current and ongoing sociopolitical issues undergirding the question of LGBTQIA+ rights in Italy. They reflect on anti-queer/anti-LGBT discrimination within academia, on intersectional solidarity and activism, and on the developing field of “Queer Italian Studies.” The editorial also provides a summary of the articles contained in the volume.

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## Queer Italian Cultures

### Journal Editorial

JULIA HEIM, CHARLOTTE ROSS, & SA SMYTHE

Every nation state carries within it a set of myths, borne of internal and external perceptions that are both historic and contemporary. Italy's reputation for being "backward" relative to places in Northern and Western Europe and countries like the United States has persisted and even gained traction over the last few years. Specifically, this perception has been in relation to social mores and government policies around gender justice and LGBTQ+ rights as well as the way that Italy has been marked by entrenched racism, homophobia, and misogyny. Narratives of the heteronormative family and of white ethnonationalism prevail as hegemonic. Several examples from the Italian political and sociocultural spheres seem to support this reputation. Legislation in favor of same-sex partnerships was only passed in 2016, and as yet there is still no same-sex marriage.<sup>1</sup> Politicians from multiple political parties and senior figures in the Catholic Church regularly make antagonistic statements about the LGBTQ+ population, reflecting views that are implicitly and explicitly supported by wide swaths of the Italian populace.<sup>2</sup> Not least, "Family Day" and "No gender" advocates continue to campaign against initiatives that seek to increase a culture of acceptance and respect for embodied difference.<sup>3</sup> Mainstream Italian media is routinely criticized in the international press and among progressives in Italy for its superficial and homophobic representations of sexual minorities, while a strong body of scholarship continues to flourish contesting its racist portrayals of migrant populations, refugees, black Italians, and other people of color or racialized ethnic minorities in Italy.<sup>4</sup> Recent proposals to reform citizenship laws that would facilitate more pathways to naturalized citizenship for many migrants and second-generation youth have been shelved repeatedly.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, varying degrees of precarity and uncertainty continue to adversely impact many LGBTQ+ and migrant activists, artists, and associations.

In this fraught sociopolitical climate, queer activism, theory, and practices are more necessary than ever. Despite – or perhaps due to – these adverse circumstances, there are those who continue to carve out queer spaces for the expression of crucial dissident ideas and ways of being, as discussed in some of the articles in this special issue. Their actions and initiatives disrupt normativity and suggest other ways of conceptualizing the body, sexuality, gender, race, community, politics, artistic practice, and intellectual inquiry. Such practices and embodiments often disrupt narratives that cast Italy as "backward," pointing out that the country has its own traditions of dissident thought, exemplified by figures like Mario Mieli. They may also problematize assimilationist lesbian, gay, and feminist politics that focus on same-sex marriage as a primary goal, while side-lining questions such as trans identity and rights, employment, housing, issues of migration and citizenship. Instead, queer coalitions are proposing more radical agendas.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The law that favorably recognizes same-sex partnerships is Law 76/2016, known as the Legge Cirinnà.

<sup>2</sup> For example, in June 2018, the Families Minister Lorenzo Fontana declared that gay families simply do not exist. See De Luca, "Fontana."

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Vatican's view on homosexuality, the family, and so called "anti-gender" groups that claim that the heteronormative family is under attack from "gender theories," see Garbagnoli and Prearo, *La crociata*.

<sup>4</sup> See Smythe, "Black Mediterranean" and Bond, Bonsaver, and Faloppa, *Destination Italy*.

<sup>5</sup> For a contextualization of the *jus sanguinis* ("right of blood" or citizenship by inheritance), which currently denies Italian citizenship to children born in Italy to parents who are not Italian citizens, and the *jus soli* campaign ("right or soil" or birthright citizenship), see Camilli, "Ius soli." Recently, the Leader of the Lega and Deputy Prime Minister Matteo Salvini has again refused to discuss any changes to the law: see "Ius soli, Salvini".

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, the essays collected in Zappino, *Il genere*.

Our commitment to supporting and making space for scholarship on these questions derives from a shared desire to highlight injustices, to research and voice a critique of all forms of discrimination and violence, to maintain a critical relationship with the vast spectrum of ongoing debates relating to the multiple aspects of our identities, and to analyze initiatives, texts, and movements that take a queer stance in relation to the cis-heteropatriarchal cultures that get prescribed as normative. We are also motivated by the current insurgent status of what we would call “Queer Italian Studies,” as an academic field of enquiry.<sup>7</sup> Theories and scholarship on queer literature, history, cultures, and embodiments, and LGBTQIA+ rights, are still struggling for visibility in Italian and Italianist academia. We have all witnessed, experienced, and discussed instances in which established academics take homo/bi/trans/queerphobic positions. Such moments and their surrounding attitudes and behaviors can have a range of negative and discriminatory impacts. They may consolidate existing power imbalances by preventing emerging scholars from building their careers; they may marginalize innovative scholarship that challenges entrenched, normative narratives, thereby perpetuating problematically outdated disciplinary paradigms and epistemological frameworks; and they may impact the economic standing and mental health of undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as more experienced (although often untenured scholars) who identify as LGBTQIA+ and/or those who wish to pursue research on related issues.

Unfortunately, we do not know enough about the extent and complexities of this problematic situation, due to a relative lack of research into LGBTQIA+ identities, research, and politics in the university environment. As Kristen Renn points out, our understanding is severely limited by the paradox that while research and theoretical debates on the concept of queerness take place in many universities, higher education itself is neither “an especially queer system of organizations [n]or a system of especially queer organizations,” and is therefore truculently resistant to change.<sup>8</sup>

In Italy, queer scholars and activists have critiqued the marginalization or even exclusion of both LGBTQIA+ scholars and theories. Vincenzo Bavato has noted the “oasi accademiche rimaste apparentemente immuni dai cambiamenti teorici, critici e sociali degli ultimi venti’anni” [academic oases that have remained apparently untouched by the theoretical, critical and social changes of the last twenty years]; Elisa Arfini laments the “mancata istituzionalizzazione” [failed institutionalization] of gender and feminist studies, let alone queer studies.<sup>9</sup> Federico Zappino comments that not only are gender, feminist, and queer studies not recognized as intellectual disciplines, but that scholars are often attacked for including texts that engage with or raise queer issues on their reading lists. Furthermore, these attacks may come from both neo-fundamentalists and those who consider themselves to be “progressive” in some way, but who are unconvinced that a gender/queer/feminist approach to their discipline is *really* scientifically and intellectually valid.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that Zappino is not a tenured academic, but a scholar and activist who speaks from outside the ivory towers, who questions the relevance of seeking to include gender/queer/feminist studies within institutionally defined disciplines, since this would be merely tokenistic if it were not accompanied by a queering of the institution itself.<sup>11</sup>

Zappino’s words here evoke a series of complex questions. Aside from the aforementioned point about discrimination against LGBTQIA+ individuals and issues, these include: ongoing

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<sup>7</sup> Ross, Heim, and Smythe, “Queer Italian Studies.”

<sup>8</sup> Renn, “LGBT.”

<sup>9</sup> Contributions by Bavaro and Arfini in Pustianaz, *Queer in Italia*, 35, 31.

<sup>10</sup> Lolli, “Generi.”

<sup>11</sup> Lolli, “Generi.”

debates about how “queer” the field of academic queer studies is after all, in light of a creeping sociocultural and political homonormativity in gay and lesbian movements and scholarship;<sup>12</sup> the tense dynamic between academics and activists that is often reified into a binary, which problematically assumes that scholars might not also be activists and that scholarship and pedagogy are not activist pursuits. These are issues with which we, too, have engaged in recent collaborative projects. This special issue emerges from a series of five workshops that we organized together under the rubric of the “Queer Italia Network” ([www.queeritalia.com](http://www.queeritalia.com)), sponsored by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which took place between 2016 and 2018. Through these events, we built a transnational network of scholars, activists, and cultural practitioners who are engaging meaningfully with queer sexualities, identities, cultures, scholarship, and politics in or related to Italy.<sup>13</sup> Some of the key aims of the project included: to encourage debate and exchange between academics and those working outside the academy; to reflect on the kinds of intellectual activism that are ongoing within university environments; to queer institutional spaces and practices; and to consider intersectional practices and politics of solidarity between queer and other subjectivities marginalized by the state. The workshops themselves confirmed the rich variety of intellectual, activist, and creative initiatives that are being undertaken and developed by those with interests in queer (and/in) Italy, both within and beyond the academy. They also demonstrated how the struggle for LGBTQIA+ visibility within academia in many ways both reflects and contributes to perpetuating the socio-political marginalization of queer groups inside and outside our universities.

This special issue of *g/s/i*, “Queer Italian Cultures,” builds on previous scholarship published in this very journal, as well as on many other publications and initiatives.<sup>14</sup> It represents another push toward forging multiple spaces and sites of dissent or critical engagement within our fields, toward the dismantling of hegemonic and heteropatriarchal sameness, and toward securing our right to explore and define the permeable boundaries of our fields of study, our politics, and our embodiments on our own relational terms. There are and have been many Italians and Italianists who disrupt normativity by positing other ways to conceptualize the body, sexuality, gender, race, community, politics, artistic practice, and intellectual inquiry. In showcasing these voices and ideas, we broaden access to these bodies of knowledge, and deprioritize Anglo- and Anglophone-centric ways of theorizing and framing difference. “Queer Italian Cultures” brings together insightful reflections that focus on issues of critical theory and practice, with an aim of developing innovative theoretical approaches to queer questions and of engaging in depth with the key issues of language, interdisciplinarity, representation, performance, politics, identity, and migration across various platforms. As readers will appreciate the use of “queer” varies across the articles in this special issue, though in no way should it solely be defined by the way it is presented in this issue. The articles collected here are by no means exhaustive of what queerness can mean, to which people or practices it might refer, what politics it may constitute, or what systems it might disrupt. Not represented in this issue, but close to our respective political and research investment, are matters ranging from transfeminist resistance, migrant and G2 movements and related antiracist solidarity efforts, more

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Halberstam, Muñoz, and Eng, “What’s Queer?”

<sup>13</sup> This network is itself now part of GIFTS (Rete di Studi di Genere, Intersex, Femministi, Transfemministi e sulla Sessualità [Network of Gender, Intersex, Feminist, Transfeminist and Sexuality Studies]), which is a broader network of scholars working on gender, feminist, and queer issues within Italian academia, but who do not necessarily focus on Italian culture in either research or teaching.

<sup>14</sup> In *g/s/i* see, for example, Frascà, “Being Ernesto” and Bassi, “Translational Queer Practice.” Both Frascà and Bassi attended Queer Italia workshops. For queer scholarship on Italy more broadly see: Cestaro, *Queer Italia*; Antosa, *Omosapiens*; Chemotti and Susanetti, *Inquietudini queer*. Lorenzo Bernini (who also participated actively in the Queer Italia workshops) has published *Apocalissi queer* and *Le teorie queer*.

capacious queer media representation, intersectional queer disability justice, and anti-carceral interventions and responses to various configurations of crisis and violence against women, LGBTQIA+ people, and racialized minorities. In reflecting on what aspects of queer thought, embodiment, or practice did not make it into this final publication, we are also acutely aware of the contentious position that the term holds for many Italians and Italian speakers who do not embrace it as theirs at all. We are not invested in forcing terminologies on those who, for historic, linguistic, socio-cultural, or somatic reasons choose other language that better represents their positionalities and communities.

The first four articles all engage with queer activism in/and Italy, in different ways. Eva Nossem analyzes how the English term “queer” has been adopted, what it means, and how it is resignified in the Italian context. Matthew Zundel considers the thought and practice of Mario Mieli, a key figure in the recent queer past. Alberica Bazzoni explores the relationship between queer and feminism in contemporary media, culture, and activism. Michela Baldo’s discussion broadens the debate in a transnational frame, focusing on Italian translations of Spanish post-porn texts. In contrast, the final two articles both examine film texts and engage with relatively new queer perspectives that have not been explored in great detail in relation to Italian culture. Danila Cannamela draws on queer ecocriticism, while Samuele Grassi is inspired by theories of somatechnics.

In the first article, Nossem explores some of the ways in which the term “queer” is used and contested in Italy. She focuses on semantic issues such as the connotative aspects of the word that have, in some instances, been “lost in translation” as it traveled from Anglophone contexts to Italy. She provides a history and contextualization of the evolving usage of the term in English, before moving to an analysis of how its particular flexibility and semantic potential have been received and (re)created in Italian. Through critical reflections on how, where, and when the term first appeared in a series of dictionaries, as well as on its usage in academic texts and by activists, Nossem traces the ongoing tensions surrounding this apparently “untranslatable” term. She suggests that on some level, the semantic loss of the offensive meaning of queer in English, has rendered it politically toothless in Italian. By contrast, as Nossem explores, some locally marked Italian terms, which are considered by some to be loosely equivalent to queer – namely *frocio*, *frocio*, *femminiella* and *ricchione* – can be seen to function in a parallel way to queer in English, since, when used for self-definition, they connote a similar political drive to reclaim and reject any normative attempts at stigmatization.<sup>15</sup>

The focus on Italian terms with queer connotations is extended backwards with Zundel’s contribution. He notes that Mario Mieli has been hailed by scholars as a theorist, and by activists as a hero of gay liberation, and identifies the dangers of categorizing him as either one or the other. The article subsequently focuses on queer performativity as Zundel draws on Eve Sedgwick’s influential work to explore how Mieli’s theatre and spontaneous performances encouraged a performative coming to consciousness of the repressed queer self. Zundel shows how Mieli’s theory of *transessualità* (not “transsexuality” as broadly understood today, but rather a reformulation of Freud’s polymorphous perversity by which he meant our unconstrained desires that come to be repressed through the inculcation of socio-sexual norms) is embodied in his performances, not only does he use his body and his words as a vehicle to express his *transessualità*, but he kindles an awareness in his audience of their own repressed desires. Building on and in dialogue with recent critical reappraisals of Mieli’s thought, Zundel’s discussion highlights the rich complexities of his ideas and practices and confirms that there is much more to be said about this queer Italian pioneer.

Bazzoni’s article, in contrast, is focused on the present moment, and cuts to the heart of the tense relationship between some feminists and queer scholars and activists in Italy. Through an

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<sup>15</sup> See Nossem’s discussion of the nuanced meanings of these terms.

analysis of both academic and media texts, she traces and interrogates a discursive opposition that has developed, in which those who consider themselves queerly aligned see sexual difference feminism as a retrograde, essentialist position which insists on the biological body and motherhood as key elements of women's subjecthood. Conversely, feminists of sexual difference criticize queer theory and activism as a theoretical hollowing out of women's embodied experience, that leaves them with no identity and returns us to a revived version of the universal (white male) subject. Bazzoni productively and incisively identifies and critiques the misrepresentations and theoretical gaps on both sides of the debate, and considers emerging activist movements and communities in which queer and feminist ideas and individuals are brought together to forge a more inclusive vision. This includes events such as the festival *Lesbiche fuorisalone*, a lesbian fringe event that takes place during Milan Design Week, and the anti-violence movement *Non una di meno* ("Not One Woman Less").<sup>16</sup> Arguing against essentialism in favor of the continued recognition of differences, Bazzoni demonstrates the continuing relevance of feminist work by scholars such as Rosi Braidotti, and the importance of alliance, rather than opposition, as a political strategy.

Bazzoni reflects on transfeminism as a driving force that is integral to much queer feminist activism in contemporary Italy. Baldo's article also engages with transfeminist activist, in relation to DIY translation of Spanish post-porn texts by Diana Torres and Itziar Ziga. She discusses the relationship between Spanish and Italian transfeminism, noting that while both are anti-capitalist, postcolonial, anti-racist, transnational, and sex positive, Italian transfeminism has a different relationship with queer thought and activism. Through an analysis of workshops and performances inspired by these texts, which engage with issues such as slut-shaming, prostitution rights, violence against women, and the relationship between bodies and technology, Baldo shows how both the translations themselves and the process of producing these have led to dynamically contagious forms of affective alliance and activism. Drawing on critical ideas of both the "performative" and the "activist" turns in translation studies, Baldo argues that these translations are generative: they catalyze additional translations, impact on the consciousness and bodies of those who are involved in and learn about them, stimulate practices of self-learning, and have led to the creation of new or enlarged activist networks.

These explorations of activism articulate, among other issues, an enduring, self-conscious critique of discourses on embodiment, which continues in the final two articles, in relation primarily to cultural texts. Cannamela asks how queer cinema constructs and depicts scenarios, environments, and characters who disrupt the enduring norms of mainstream society. She analyses Fabio Mollo's *Il padre d'Italia* [There is a Light] (2017), which follows the story of a queer couple (a gay man and a pregnant woman) who embark on a road trip from north to south Italy. Her analysis is informed by feminist ecocriticism and queer ecology, and situated in relation to broader feminist debates, movements and politics, including "Non una di meno," sexual differences feminism, and LGBTQ activism. She suggests that the film creates an "eco-logos" which deconstructs both normative conceptions of the fixed home and idealized visions of a "green" eco-home; it questions dominant models of gendered and sexed identities, instead proposing an ongoing, unsettling journey through destabilized and destabilizing models of masculinity, parenthood, and livable environments. Nature is untethered from its historical associations with normatively gendered social roles, and our relationship with the natural world is thus open to new interpretative possibilities. "Blue ecology" is referenced as a way of thinking through our "enmeshedness" with the natural world; it is a

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<sup>16</sup> Lesbiche fuorisalone. <https://it-it.facebook.com/FuoriSaloneDelleLesbiche>. Web. Accessed 28 August 2019. Non una di meno. <https://nonunadimeno.wordpress.com/tutte-le-pagine-non-una-di-meno/>. Web. Accessed 22 May 2019. In English it has been translated as "Not one woman less, not one more death." See, for example, Friedman and Tabbush, "#NiUnaMenos!"

perspective that foregrounds and values compassion and vulnerability, as well as encouraging a politicized response to the world around us. Moreover, Cannamela suggests, we can see this film as an attempt to instill a form of, or empathy for, a “blue ecology” in its audience.

In the last article, Grassi also analyses film texts, specifically, Luca Guadagnino’s *Call Me by Your Name* (2018) and Gianfranco Rosi’s *Fuocoammare* [Fire at Sea] (2016). Reflecting on how these films de/reconstruct naturalized differences, Grassi critiques the spectrum of classed, gendered, sexed, and racialized identities that are foregrounded in these films, and those that are excluded, in relation to discourses of “Italian-ness.” Recent theories of somatechnics – that is, considering the body as a cultural construct and its relation to technology – and materialist feminism are employed to analyze the embodied power dynamics in both narratives. Grassi explores the presences and absences in both texts in relation to ideas of “progress” and “backwardness,” and asks to what extent they connote neo-imperialistic conceptions of identity. While both films ostensibly focus on disenfranchised identities and subjects (e.g. gay men and black migrants), they are, he suggests, also complicit with normative discourses, as they privilege white, homonormative men, or “other” black migrants in relation to the “presumptively white” residents of Lampedusa. Ultimately, Grassi argues, they reinforce rather than challenging Manichean binaries (such as white/non-white; heteronormative/queer).

These articles both resonate and diverge, as we can see in the emergence of recurring themes (e.g. transfeminism, queer activism, the body), as well as a rich variety of diverse critical perspectives and frameworks. The scholarship and critical contributions in this special issue confirm the vitality, critical acuity, and momentum of queer scholarship on Italian culture, the dynamic creativity of queer Italian activism, both past and present, and the importance of undertaking and supporting this (activist) work in all its manifestations. We hope that this work contributes to the proliferation of queer Italian cultures, and that it might be a harbinger of the expansive and dynamic work, currently thriving and yet to come, in Queer Italian Studies.

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