

The ‘Greedy Southern Woman’ as a National Italian Cliché: A Preliminary Proposal

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Introduction

Unpacking the charged cliché of the ‘Greedy Southern Woman’ involves analytical confrontation with some of the many axes of exclusion that characterise Italy, intended as a patriarchal, Northern-centric and body-normative society. Furthermore, it involves a critical grasp of the violent modes of visualisation that coordinate the exposure of bodies, practices and subjectivities that are considered anomalous within the ideal norms of the nation: on this premise, drawing upon the work of Perera¹ and Feldman,² we have previously deployed the concept of ‘scopic regimes’ to describe contemporary Italy³. Among other things, our work on Italy as a ‘scopic regime’ briefly suggests that laughter has a crucial function in facilitating audience acceptance and digestion of these violent visualisations. Although not discussed in that publication, this theoretical insight is connected to the Bakhtinian notion of ‘ritual

¹ Suvendrini Perera, ‘Dead Exposures: Trophy Bodies and Violent Visibilities of the Nonhuman’, *Borderlands-e-journal* 13, no. 1 (2014), 1-26.

² Allen Feldman, ‘Violence and Vision: The Prosthetics and Aesthetics of Terror’, *States of violence* 10, no. 1 (2006), 425-468.

³ Marcello Messina and Teresa Di Somma, ‘Unified Italy, Southern Women and Sexual Violence: Situating the Sexual Assault TV ‘Prank’ Against Emma Marrone within the Dynamics of Contemporary Italy as a Scopic Regime’, *Tropos* 6, no. 1 (2017): 1-18.

laughter',⁴ intended as a powerful and ambivalent practice that has the function of forcing those who are laughed at to change.

In this study, we will combine the notions of “scopic regime” with that of “ritual laughter”, analysing comic and frivolous representations, such as films, advertisements, TV shows, etc. In particular, we aim to unearth precisely the hidden violence embedded in these representations, commonly disguised as innocent spectacles by means of the ritual, cathartic power of laughter. We shall situate our critical position against each of the above-mentioned axes of exclusion (i.e., northern-centrism, sexism and body-normativity), by also identifying and revealing the crucial points in which these axes intersect each other. Primarily, we subscribe to the theoretical contributions that have identified and criticised the forced positionality of the South as Italy's Other,⁵ as the negation of the ideal, positive qualities that characterise the nation,⁶ and as the racialised recipient of a continued, uninterrupted colonial violence, both physical and symbolic, perpetrated by Italy as a monoglossic, northern-normative country.⁷ As we have shown in previous work,⁸ the colonial subjugation of the South

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

⁵ John Dickie, 'The South as Other: From Liberal Italy to the Lega Nord', *The Italianist*, no.14 [Special Issue - Culture and Society in Southern Italy: past and present] (1994), 124-140.

⁶ Gabriella Gribaudi, 'Images of the South: The Mezzogiorno as Seen by Insiders and Outsider', *The New History of the Italian South: The Mezzogiorno Revisited*, Robert Lumley and Jonathan Morris (eds.) (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1997), 83-113.

⁷ Joseph Pugliese, 'Whiteness and the Blackening of Italy: La Guerra cafona, Extracomunitari and Provisional Street Justice', *PORTAL Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies* 5, no. 2 (2008).

⁸ Marcello Messina, 'Matteo Garrone's Gomorra: A Politically Incorrect Use of Neapolitan Identities and Queer Masculinities?', *gender/sexuality/Italy*, no. 2 (2015), 179-187; Marcello Messina, 'Gendered Metaphors of Territorial Subordination, Theologies of Independence and Images of a Liberated Future: Sodaro & Di Bella's L'Assami as a Sicilian Decolonial Allegory', *Muiraqitā*, 5, no. 2 (2017), 91-143.

by the North of Italy is governed by a set of gendered metaphors that function both as triumphal allegories of the military conquest/annihilation of the southern territories, and as literal *laissez-passers* for the continued, indiscriminate consumption/exploitation/humiliation/elimination of Southern female subjects within the Italian national space.

In order to illustrate the intersection of these violent racio-gendered practices of visualisation with the axis of body-normativity and food consumption, we take our cue from Francesca Calamita, whose seminal work on ‘voracious dolls’⁹ unearths the complex web of discourses embedded in Italian food advertisements portraying women. Calamita suggests that the adverts involving women and food, on top of objectifying female bodies, are connected to a sexual hunger that eventually represents a menace for men. In addition, as argued by Livio Giorgioni,¹⁰ from the late 1970s onwards, the obsession with food that had characterised post-war Italian cinema is supplanted, both in society and in visual culture, by a desire to lose weight, whereby weightiness and excessive appetite start being seen as markers of backwardness. The conflation of this backwardness, a characteristic that is constantly assigned to the South, with an anomalous voracity and exuberance that menaces the patriarchal, northern-centric order, is key to understanding the emergence, in the 1980s, of new Southern female characters with noticeable relationships with food consumption, preparation and serving.

In this particular work, based on our subjective experiences as members of the audience, we will focus on a number of films, TV shows and advertisements that would literally be broadcast on television while we were having lunch or dinner with our families, especially

⁹ Calamita, Francesca, ‘Voracious Dolls and Competent Chefs: Negotiating Femininities and Masculinities in Italian Food’, *gender/sexuality/italy*, no. 1 (2014), 1-13.

¹⁰ Livio Giorgioni, ‘Pane, amore e fantasia: il cibo nel cinema italiano dal dopoguerra ad oggi’, *La grande abbuffata: percorsi cinematografici fra trame e ricette*, Livio Giorgioni, Federico Pontiggia and Marco Ronconi (eds.) (Cantalupa: Effatà Editrice), 28.

between the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. We will then add a much more recent case study from 2016. Our analysis, however, is to be intended as covering a larger timespan than the one examined here: in particular, a separate essay on Leonardo Pieraccioni's films from the 1990s and 2000s, involving critical discussion on Tosca D'Aquino and Anna Maria Barbera, is currently in progress.

Undesirable Servants

The cinema and, in general, the visual culture of the early 1980s are characterised by several Southern female characters that serve food and are excluded by the main love plot. In *Il tango della gelosia* (Tango of Jealousy),¹¹ Diego Abatantuono plays Diego, a Southern bodyguard working in the mansion of a rich prince. While preparing breakfast for her landlord, the housemaid, another Southern subject, asks Diego out: 'If you asked me: "let's go dance", I could even accept. At the end of the day I don't dislike you at all, does it make sense?'.¹² Disgusted and offended by the maid's proposal, Diego responds by unleashing a series of racially loaded insults against her:

Listen, hourly-paid maid, what are you fantasising about? Look, the magical dream that you had in your little brain is over. But seriously, do you really think that someone like me, 100% Milanese, can take someone like you, a filthy Southerner, *terruncella*, 1.20 m tall to dance? Out of my way, look for someone of your social level to go dancing with! Grab some countryside bumpkin, someone from Trani, Cerignola, Canosa maybe;

¹¹ *Il tango della gelosia*, directed by Steno (Ypsilon Cinematografica, 2015).

¹² 'Se tu mi dici: "ci venghi a balla?"', Io potrei sempre accettare. Insomma tu non mi dispiaci affatto, me so' spiegata?' *Ibid.*

they will immediately take you to dance. I like northern women, as they have a certain charm, so to speak. Not an African like you, southern women are anchored to a lot of bollocks: pride, shame, jealousy... And carry that tray on your head, like Negro women, so that it doesn't slip off, Abdullah! ¹³

Diego's racist slurs against the housemaid summarise most of the discursive arsenal at the disposal of racist Northern ontologies of the South: Abatantuono's character initially displays classist snobbery ('Listen, hourly-paid maid'), and then goes on to unleash an incredible amount of racio-gendered insults against the woman. Diego's tirade against short, backwards and repulsive Southern women is centred around the concept of 'Africa' as a nebulous and yet eloquent buzzword that evokes an entrenched colonial imagery, upon which Italy as a country is heavily based. According to Joseph Pugliese,

the deployment of the loaded signifier 'Africa,' as the lens through which the South was rendered intelligible for Northerners, marks how the question of Italy was, from

¹³ 'Senti, ragazza a ore, che stai fantasticando, guarda che il magico sogno che hai vissuto nel tuo cervello, è finito, cara. Secondo te, ti pare che uno come me, milanese al 100%, può portare al ballamento na schifezza di meridionale, terruncella, alta un metro e venti come te? Ma levati di mezzo, cerca qualcuno della tua stazza sociale p'andà a ballà! Ciappa qualche bifolco di paese, qualcuno di Trani, di Cerignola, di Canosa magari, ti portano subito a ballà quelli. A me piace la donna settentrionale, con un certo, diciamo, fascino. No africana come te, la donna meridionale è ancorata ad un sacco di puttante, a tutta la tradizione della famiglia, appesa all'albero come le scimmie, aggrappata ad un sacco di stronzate: l'orgoglio, la vergogna, la gelosia... e mettilo in testa sto vassoio, come fanno le negre, così almeno non ti scivola, Abdullah!' *Ibid.*

the very moment of unification, already racialised by a geopolitical fault line that split the peninsula and its islands along a black/white axis.¹⁴

In the 1980s, Apulian actress Gegia embodied the very same stereotype of subservient and gregarious Southern woman. For instance, in a Lavazza advertisement she appeared as a clumsy housemaid who prepared coffee for the popular Roman film and TV star Nino Manfredi, who called her a ‘witch’ in return. Similarly, in the 1982 film *Bomber*,¹⁵ Gegia is Susanna, a restaurant-keeper that is mainly preoccupied with feeding the protagonist, boxing coach Bomber (Bud Spencer), for whom she has developed a crush. In this film food is literally intended as the one and only possible means of seduction employable by such a subservient and markedly Southern character. With her characteristic Salentinian accent, Gegia/Susanna prepares Bomber all sorts of delicacies. While Bomber is flattered by Gegia’s gastro-erotic courtship, this love plot never takes off during the film, as the male protagonists are much more interested in pugilism.

By contrast, in *Acapulco, prima spiaggia... a sinistra* (Acapulco, First Beach... on the Left),¹⁶ the male protagonists, comedy duo Gigi & Andrea, from Bologna, are interested precisely in erotic adventures at beach resorts. Gegia is Miranda, a manicurist who works at Gigi & Andrea’s local barbershop. While serving the two young men, Gegia/Miranda, who has a crush on Andrea, listens to their plans to go on holiday to Acapulco, and declares that she ‘would like to go, too’.¹⁷ Andrea replies: ‘I’m sorry, but we already have dates’,¹⁸ but

¹⁴ Pugliese, ‘Whiteness and the Blackening’, 3.

¹⁵ *Bomber*, directed by Michele Lupo (Elio Scardamaglia, 1982).

¹⁶ *Acapulco, prima spiaggia... a sinistra*, directed by Sergio Martino (Cinematografica Alex, 1983).

¹⁷ ‘Mi piacerebbe venire anche a me ad Acapulco.’ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ ‘Eh mi spiace, siamo impegnati.’ *Ibid.*

importantly, Gegia/Miranda here is not quite seen as an undesirable woman by the comedy duo. In fact, earlier in the barbershop scene, Gigi had found himself admiring her body: ‘Andrea, Miranda’s bum is not that bad, is it? Have a look!’.¹⁹ In his reply, Andrea lectures Gigi as to the reasons why they cannot consider Gegia/Miranda as a potential partner: ‘Don’t you see she’s got a flat bum? Also, she’s a Moroccan, come on!’.²⁰ Gegia’s categorical exclusion from the duo’s erotic adventures is openly motivated by her positionality as a Southern woman, and confirmed by the use of a racially loaded signifier (‘Moroccan’), semantically coextensive with the aforementioned term ‘Africa’. The rustic flavour of Gegia’s exuberant corporality and personality, is, in Gigi’s words, ‘healthy, genuine, reminiscent of my roots’,²¹ and, at the same time, constantly excluded from the collective erotic fantasies negotiated by the two characters as an indissoluble duo. Skinny and exotic bodies are what populates their homo-socially projected fantasies: a rich Englishwoman desperate to cheat on her husband, a local northern Italian tobacconist, etc. Forced to give up Acapulco for the local beach resort of Cesenatico, where all their pick-up attempts fail, they return to a deserted mid-summer Bologna. Here, they see a woman walking from a distance, possibly a foreign tourist, and start chasing her, only to realise with shock and surprise that it is Gegia/Miranda. Once again, Gegia can deploy her best means of gastro-erotic seduction, inviting Gigi and Andrea to a *Ferragosto*²² lunch at her place. After finishing his meal, Andrea is finally seduced: ‘We ate really well! Well done, bravo!’.²³ While Gigi goes upstairs with Gegia’s Sardinian friend Bonaria, Gegia/Miranda can finally fulfil her romantic dream with Andrea. Strikingly both

¹⁹ ‘Andrea, mica male il culo di Miranda, eh? No, dico, guarda lì!’ *Ibid.*

²⁰ ‘Ma non vedi che è basso? E poi è una marocchina, dai!’ *Ibid.*

²¹ ‘È sano, genuino, mi ricorda le mie radici.’ *Ibid.*

²² A public holiday celebrated in Italy on the 15th of August.

²³ ‘Abbiamo mangiato proprio bene! Brava, brava!’ *Ibid.*

Gegia/Miranda and Bonaria are violently constructed as Southern female characters who are always available, patiently waiting for the return of the male, Northern hero, ready to feed him and make love with him when he chooses to. Despite offering food, shelter and love to these two failed, wannabe playboys, both Bonaria and Gegia/Miranda are exposed to their cruel depreciation. Right after being introduced to Bonaria, Gigi calls her “*un cesso*” (literally, ‘ugly like a toilet’), and then impudently asks her to show him her breasts. Moreover, before Bonaria’s arrival, both Andrea and Gigi had tried to trick Gegia/Miranda into working as an escort:

(Andrea): ‘Take my advice, if I were you, I would put myself about more! [...] Also, you’re already a manicurist, you’ve got a nice little bum, if you give yourself away for money, you’ll become rich’ [...] (Gigi): ‘After all, we’re in the North here, are you afraid you’ll spoil it?’ (Gegia): ‘What are you talking about? You cheeky pair!’ (Andrea): ‘If you put an advert up on the papers... Something like... Manicurist available...’ (Gigi): ‘With discrete, independent access’ (Andrea): ‘...independent access, fellatio²⁴ expert, you need to say that’ (Gigi): ‘Totally confidential’ (Andrea): ‘...totally confidential, getting it on and on and on.’ (Gigi): ‘and then you’re done’ (Andrea): ‘and there you have it’.²⁵

²⁴ The original Italian is ‘*arte bolognese*’, literally ‘Bolognese art’, a coded term for phallic oral sex, deriving from the horrendous cliché according to which women from Bologna are allegedly more inclined than other Italian women to perform fellatio.

²⁵ Andrea: ‘Io la darei via di più! [...] E poi tu, manicure sei già, hai un bel culetto, se la vendi per dei soldi diventi ricca!’ [...] Gigi: ‘Tanto qui siamo al Nord, hai paura che si consumi?’ Gegia: ‘Ma che discorsi fate? Siete due bricconcelli!’ Andrea: ‘Se tu metti un bell’annuncio sul giornale... AAA manicure offresi...’ Gigi: ‘Ingresso indipendente.’ Andrea: ‘...ingresso indipendente, esperta arte bolognese, che ci vuole quello.’ Gigi: ‘Massima

This disgraceful exhortation to prostitution confirms the construction of these Southern female characters as empty and deserted territories, *terrae nullius* where the male protagonists can literally do and say whatever they want. Importantly, in the above dialogue, Gigi literally uses his own Northerness ('we're in the North here') to validate and defend the reasonableness of the proposal he and Andrea are making to Gegia. In a spasm of cultural pride, Gegia responds precisely by calling upon her Southerness: 'Are you crazy? I am a real, serious manicurist, don't you know? [...] And on top of that... I am a Southerner, and I would never give myself if there wasn't a lot of passion involved'.²⁶ Rejected, excluded, depreciated, and only reconsidered as a last resort, Gegia/Miranda proudly voices her defiant agency against the racially charged intervention/manipulation manifested by Gigi & Andrea. Right after that, though, and in keeping with her subservient gastro-erotic character, she serves her two male guests a family homemade liquor.

In these same years, the cliché of the undesirable, female Southern servant reaches its peak in *FF.SS. - Cioè: ...che mi hai portato a fare sopra a Posillipo se non mi vuoi più bene?* (F.F.S.S. - Or: Why did you Take me up to Posillipo if you don't Love me Anymore?).²⁷ While the film itself is originally meant as a parody of the traditional stereotypes of Southern people, it often ends up reproducing the same clichés, or even adding up other problematic images. The protagonist Lucia Canaria (Pietra Montecorvino), is an aspiring singer who works as a toilet

riservatezza.' Andrea: '...massima riservatezza, che ci dà, che ci dà, che ci dà.' Gigi: 'Hai risolto.' Andrea: 'E via!' *Ibid.*

²⁶ 'M che sei scemo? E poi io sono una manicure sul serio sai? [...] E poi... io sono una meridionale, e non mi darei mai se non ci fosse di mezzo un bel po' di sentimento'. *Ibid.*

²⁷ *FF.SS. - Cioè: ...che mi hai portato a fare sopra a Posillipo se non mi vuoi più bene?*, directed by Renzo Arbore, (Eidoscope Productions, 1983).

attendant in Naples, then moves with her manager to Milan, Rome and Sanremo in search of success in show business. Lucia is affected by the *napoletanite* (Neapolitanitis), a condition whereby she faints every time she sees or smells Neapolitan food. Lucia's refusal of her own local, identitarian food is counterpointed by her repeated relegation to repugnant and sickening settings: regardless of where she travels to, she immediately starts working in the local toilet, surrounded by sounds of excretions and flushing toilets, and exposed to filthy, if amusing, limericks written on cubicle walls. In between these various restroom experiences, she lands occasional showbiz jobs. Her first job in Milan for a toothpaste advert is formatted as the typical comparison between a person who uses the product and one who does not: Lucia appears with her teeth disfigured by black spots, whereby it is difficult to distinguish stains from actual food remnants. While the 'healthy' characters of the advert show their shining grins, Lucia starts weeping while still displaying her disfigured dentition, finally crying: 'Jatevenne!' (Neapolitan for 'Go away!'). The oral cavity must necessarily be intended as the access point of food in the body, and the filthy spots that disfigure Lucia's mouth are obvious references to modes and circumstances of food consumption that are always already in excess of a perennially North-centric idea of normality and moderation. The fact that this immoderation is assigned to a subject that already refuses Neapolitan food retraces a collective 'assimilationist itinerary' that 'is shaped by the torsions of violent contradictions'.²⁸

In the particular case of Lucia, the violent contradictions that mark this assimilationist itinerary draw attention to the potential development of eating disorders. Psychiatrists such as

²⁸ Joseph Pugliese, 'Assimilation, unspeakable traces and the ontologies of nation', *Asian and Pacific Inscriptions: Identities, Ethnicities, Nationalities*, ed. Suvendrini Perera (Victoria: Meridian, 1995), 229-254.

Giovanni Maria Ruggiero and Marcello Prandin,²⁹ as well as Ann M. Cheney,³⁰ drawing on personal and heteronomous ethnographic work,³¹ associate eating disorders in Southern Italy to the troubled relationship of closed, ‘backwards’ communities with ‘modernity’ and social change. In disavowing these approaches, we want to critically unpack the concept of ‘modernity’ on which such analyses are predicated. Taking our cue from Enrique Dussel, we want to expose the ‘myth of modernity’³² as a set of fallacious assumptions and deliberate self-effacements on which the violence of Eurocentric coloniality is founded. Transposing this myth to the national boundaries of the Italian nation-state, what is persistent and resilient in ethnographic incursions in the South is the ambivalent role of the North, eternally acknowledged as a model of virtuous civilisation, cooperation and civic cohesion, and eternally invisibilised in its role of continued perpetrator of both physical and symbolic violence over the South.

Returning to *FF.SS.* and to the toothpaste advert, the contrast between the normative whiteness of the teeth of the Northern, healthy protagonists, and the blackened, depreciated grin of Lucia functions as a powerful chromatic metaphor of the racialised violence that inscribes the North/South relations in Italy. Analyses of behavioural disorders in Southern Italy

²⁹ Giovanni Maria Ruggiero and Marcello Prandin, ‘Tradition, Transition, and Social Cognition in Italy: Are They Correlated with Eating Disorders?’, *Eating Disorders in the Mediterranean Area: An Exploration in Transcultural Psychology*, Giovanni Maria Ruggiero (ed) (New York: Nova Biomedical Books, 2003), 127-139.

³⁰ Ann M. Cheney, ‘Emotional Distress and Disordered Eating Practices Among Southern Italian Women’, *Qualitative health research* 22, no. 9 (2012), 1247-1259.

³¹ For example, Ruggiero and Prandin draw upon highly controversial work, such as Edward Christie Banfield, *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958); and Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

³² Enrique D. Dussel, ‘Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism’, *Nepantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000), 471-473.

should not overlook the multiple agency of the North of Italy in setting bodily norms and aspirations, determining situation of infrastructural imbalance and economic disenfranchisement, and constituting violent regimes of visualisations that always involve the South as an eternally imperfect, repugnant, inferior appendix of the North. Against this violent scopical regime, singing at the Sanremo Festival, Lucia reclaims her unextinguished self-determination, accompanied by a choir of other Southern subjects: ‘South, South, we are from the South / We are short and black’.³³ This ‘tactical blackening [...] in the face of a virulent and violent caucacentrism’³⁴ is complemented by an equipollent, proud and coextensive reclamation of the same food Lucia had so far refused in the film: ‘the tomatoes for the ragout, the pizza, the mozzarella [...] the macaroni to eat’.³⁵ By reclaiming and affirming her unextinguished Southernness, Lucia, at least symbolically, comes to terms with her refusal of Neapolitan food.

Marisa Laurito as Patient/Undomesticable Wife

The 1980s were also the years when Marisa Laurito, a Neapolitan actress who already had several years’ experience in theatre, gained popularity within cinema and TV. In the national Italian imagination, Laurito embodies the perfect cliché of the *napoletana buongustaia* (Neapolitan female foodie), always preoccupied with the preparation and consumption of food. This characteristic feature of Laurito’s persona determines, right from the start, her relegation to secondary, gregarious roles in films, whereby she can only act as the housewife that cares for the home while her husband is involved in the main film action. In slightly different terms,

³³‘sud sud, nui simmo ro sud / nui simm curt e nir.’ *FF.SS.*

³⁴ Pugliese, ‘Whiteness and the Blackening’, 2.

³⁵. ‘e pummarole po’ ragu / a pizza ‘a muzzarella [...] / e maccarune pe’ magna.’ *FF.SS.*

both *Mi faccia causa* (Sue me)³⁶ and *A tu per tu* (Face to Face)³⁷ relegate the character interpreted by Laurito to the same role.

The opening sequence of *A tu per tu* perfectly encapsulates the polarised domestic power relationship existing between the Northern protagonist and his vigorous Southern wife. At the start of an animated family quarrel, Gino (Paolo Villaggio) threatens to punch his wife Elvira (Marisa Laurito) who, as a response, slaps him in the face and calls him to the kitchen to have breakfast. In the kitchen, while Gino eats the food Elvira has prepared, she continues to scold him. Annoyed by Elvira's tirade in Neapolitan, Gino unleashes his most stereotypical anti-Southern hatred: 'Learn to speak Italian, *terrona!* You've been living here for twenty years now, and I still need a translator and the subtitles to understand you!'.³⁸ Gino's racist insults do not silence Elvira, who continues by angrily listing to her husband all the bills they need to pay as soon as possible. This is one of the last interactions between Gino and Elvira, and soon after that he leaves for the adventure that constitutes the core of the film.

This scene exemplifies the cliché of the undomesticated, recalcitrant Southern woman who represents a threat for the Northern patriarchal order. Villaggio/Gino's remark on the fact that Laurito/Elvira still speaks Neapolitan despite her twenty years spent in the North, deploys directly the trite narrative of unassimilability that has historically been used against diasporic Southerners in various geographical contexts, associated in turn to a 'racio-gendered vision of southern Italian women as lawless, immoral, vindictive, violent and murderess'.³⁹

³⁶ *Mi faccia causa*, directed by Steno (Fulvio Lucisano, 1984).

³⁷ *A tu per tu*, directed by Sergio Corbucci (Adige Films, 1984).

³⁸ 'E impara a parlare italiano, *terrona!* È vent'anni che vivi qui, e ci vuole l'interprete e i sottotitoli per capirti!'

Ibid.

³⁹ Lara Palombo, *The Racial Camp and the Production of the Political Citizen: A Genealogy of Contestation from Indigenous Populations and Diasporic Women*, Ph.D. thesis (Sydney: Macquarie University, 2015), 194.

Following the script, the ‘immoral’ Neapolitan woman, suddenly abandoned by her husband, happens to have an affair with a *carabiniere* (military police officer). Importantly, the love relationship is not shown by means of magniloquent, voluptuous images, but suggested by means of a food scene: upon one of the rare phone calls from Gino, Elvira picks up while she and her lover, half-naked, are enjoying a generous portion of spaghetti. Once Gino hangs up, relieved, they complement their ‘sinful bites’⁴⁰ with a glass of wine. In this way the unassimilable, undomesticable Southern woman is constructed as an adulterous and voracious lover. Marisa Laurito literally came to embody Gloria Anzaldúa’s trope of the ‘shadow-beast’,⁴¹ that is to say the undefeated, frightening woman that populates men’s nightmares. For her screen husbands, Laurito is always potentially on the brink of a sexual and/or gastronomic rebellion. Christian De Sica, who plays Laurito’s husband in *Mi faccia causa*, frightfully imagines her and her mother working as prostitutes to make ends meet, due to the huge expenses they incur by buying food.

In the same years, Laurito’s TV persona presents her, if possible, as even more exuberant and voracious than the characters she interprets in films. Always keen to show her energetic body, she often performs *la mossa* (literally, ‘the move’, a Neapolitan breast/shoulder shimmy), while constantly chattering about her food preferences and her best cooking tips. In advertisements, she becomes the celebrity spokeswoman of Pasta Voiello. In 1989, she is one of the participants at the Sanremo Music Festival with the song *Il babà è una cosa seria* (‘The *babà*⁴² is a serious thing’):⁴³

⁴⁰ Calamita, “Voracious Dolls”.

⁴¹ Glória Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (San Francisco CA: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 39.

⁴² Neapolitan soft bun, soaked in liquor and filled with cream or custard.

⁴³ Salvatore Palomba and Eduardo Alfieri. *Il babà è una cosa seria* (Fonit Cetra, 1989).

What cheers me up / is the smell of tomatoes / As what makes me happy / Is pasta with
ragout / Luck is transitory, everybody knows that / Love, love, love comes and goes /
But the macaroni stay / There's nothing to do about it. / I feel more good-hearted and
beautiful, / I make gnocchi with mozzarella, / And if life gets bitter / I make it sweeter
with a *babà*!⁴⁴

Laurito's floorshow persona is suspended between the toxic construction of a female character, that is derisible on account of her insatiability, and the proud affirmation of a Southern woman who defiantly neglects body-normative regimes of skinniness in order to openly voice her willingness to attain pleasure from food.

Comedy impressions of Laurito have often ridiculed her relationship with food. In the TV programme *Fantastico* (1988), for example, Anna Oxa made fun of Laurito's habitual and gratuitous references to Neapolitan food:⁴⁵ 'the difference between good afternoon and good evening is the same that exists between the *pasta cresciuta*⁴⁶ and the *panzarotto*'.⁴⁷ In the 1991 edition of the comedy TV show *Avanzi*, Cinzia Leone imitated Marisa Laurito by appearing dressed in flamboyant outfits, adorned with food: most notably, in an episode of the TV show,

⁴⁴ 'A me quello che mi consola / E l'addore d'a pummarola / Perché quel che mi tira su / Songo 'e zite con il ragù / La fortuna è fugace, si sa / L'amor, l'amor, l'ammore viene e va / Ma il maccherone resta / Non c'è sta niente 'a fa'. / Io mi sento più buona e più bella / Facci' o gnocco c'a muzzarella / E si 'a vita amara se fa / Si addolcisce cu nu babà!' Ibid.

⁴⁵ Anna Oxa, 'Imitazione di Marisa Laurito', *Fantastico 1988*, 1988. 'La differenza che passa tra un buon pomeriggio e una buona sera è la stessa che passa tra la pasta cresciuta e o panzarotto.'

⁴⁶ *Pasta cresciuta*, or *zeppole*, are traditional Neapolitan fried pastry balls.

⁴⁷ While the word *panzarotto*, or *panzerotto*, indicates a different dish in almost each Southern Italian region, in the Neapolitan tradition the word refers to fried croquettes of mashed potatoes.

she appeared with a fish stuck in her cleavage.⁴⁸ In the previous episode, when the presenter Serena Dandini introduced the mock-Laurito to the in-studio audience: ‘I’m here [...] waiting for a very important person, a renowned woman from the TV, who has been...’ (Avanzi, 1991a)⁴⁹, the audience members interrupt Dandini and break in a noisy, collective laughter, while we hear one of the spectators: ‘Sure! A woman, [you must be joking], hahaha’ (Avanzi, 1991a).⁵⁰

The cruel carnivalization of Laurito’s proud femininity contemplates and involves her de-feminization. Her exuberance, her marked Southernness and her outspoken food indulgence are all elements that are signified as incompatible with a moderate, desirable womanhood. This decisive de-feminization anticipates the final, self-punishing retreat of Laurito from her exuberant, politically charged relationship with food. She features in a mid-1990s TV advert for diet food Slim Fast: in the first few seconds, we are shown a classical 1980s sequence of her performing *la mossa*; then the screen splits and we are shown the new, thin Laurito. The images are counterpointed by these words: ‘Once I was dancing on TV, and all of a sudden... tra! My dress got ripped. Now I am perfectly slim: look! I’ve lost 10 kilos in the last two months with the Slim Fast plan!’.⁵¹ Through this advert, Laurito’s political defiance against body-normativity and food restraints is totally emptied, and her persona is violently put back on the track of the constantly scrutinised, eternally domesticated feminine bodies.

⁴⁸ Cinzia Leone as Marisa Laurito, *Avanzi* 18 March 1991.

⁴⁹ ‘Sono qui [...] in attesa di un carico molto importante, una primadonna della TV che è stata...’ Cinzia Leone as Marisa Laurito, *Avanzi* 11 March 1991.

⁵⁰ ‘Si, donna, hahaha’ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ ‘Una volta stavo ballando in TV, e a un certo punto... tra! Si è rotto il vestito. Adesso sto in linea perfetta: guarda qua! Sono dimagrita 10 chili in due mesi col piano Slim Fast!’. Slim Fast, *Spot con Marisa Laurito*, n.d.

Miss'Illude as Greedy Southern Woman

In this section, we take a considerable chronological leap to the 2016 debut of Neapolitan comedian Rosaria Miele, in the comedy TV show *Made in Sud*. In her stand-up performances, Miele interprets Miss'Illude, a 'curvy young lady who is outside the traditional standards for beauty contests'.⁵² With her body 'not suited for beauty contests', Miss'Illude appears on stage running, dancing, shaking and shouting. Fatima Trotta, one of *Made in Sud*'s presenters, punctually interviews her:

(Trotta): 'Tell me about one of your best strengths.' (Miss'Illude): 'Every morning I go to the gym.' (Trotta): 'Tell me about one of your weaknesses.' (Miss'Illude): 'Once I'm out of the gym, I go to the restaurant'.⁵³

Food consumption is in fact at the core of Miss'Illude's character, and Trotta continuously remarks on this aspect, scolding her about the fact that she can only think about food:

(Trotta): 'You always think about food, miss. Why are you so... let's say... chubby? Have you always been like this?' (Miss'Illude): 'No, I was so thin I looked like a little

⁵² 'Una formosa signorina che non ha i canoni classici per un concorso di bellezza.' Fatima Trotta cit. in Alessia Di Raimondo, 'Fatima Trotta, l'intrattenimento innato di una donna *Made in Sud*'. *Il giornale digitale*, 29 February 2016.

⁵³ (Fatima): 'Un suo pregio?' (Miss'Illude): 'Tutte le mattine vado in palestra.' (Fatima): 'Un suo difetto?' (Miss'Illude): 'Appena esco vado al ristorante.' Miss'Illude, *Made in Sud*, 4 April 2016.

bird, look at me' [shows photo of thin self]. (Trotta) 'But... miss... you were so beautiful, what did you do to yourself?'⁵⁴

By affirming that Miss'Illude *was* beautiful, Trotta explicitly implies that, due to her bodily weight, she is not beautiful anymore. Right from her stage name, after all, Miele articulates this exclusion from the discursive field of 'beauty': 'Miss'Illude' can be roughly translated as 'Miss Delusion', intended as Rosaria's delusion about winning beauty contests. Excluded from the phantasmagorical domain of beauty, Miss'Illude, who constantly brags about eating any sort of things, eats her competitors under the special training devised by her fellow comedian Peppe Step:

(Peppe Step): 'Thanks to my special training, Miss'Illude, despite ranking 3rd, won!'

(Trotta): 'Sorry, but if she came third, how could she win?' (Miss'Illude): 'I ate the first two!' (Trotta): '[...] this one literally eats everything!'⁵⁵

Trotta plays the role of the body-normative, desirable woman who commiserates, when she does not openly insult Miss'Illude. Overall, though, these comedy sketches convey a powerful political content, as they promote and dignify models of feminine beauty that are constantly

⁵⁴ (Trotta): 'Signorina, ma lei pensa sempre al cibo. Ma perché lei è così... diciamo così in carne? È sempre stata così?' (Miss'Illude): 'No, io ero talmente magra che sembravo un uccellino, guardate com'ero!' [...] (Trotta): 'Ma signorina, ma era bellissima, ma che ha combinato?' Miss'Illude and Peppe Step, *Made in Sud*, 12 April 2016.

⁵⁵ (Peppe Step): 'E grazie ai miei allenamenti, Miss'Illude, ad un concorso di bellezza, nonostante sia arrivata terza, ha vinto!' (Trotta): 'Scusate, ma se è arrivata al terzo posto, come ha fatto a vincere?' (Miss'Illude): 'Me so magnata e pprimme roje!' (Trotta) '[...] ma magna qualsiasi cosa questa!' Peppe Step, Miss'Illude and Nonno Moderno, *Made in Sud*, 30 May 2016.

relegated to public shaming and derision. In almost every sketch, in fact, Miss'Illude's vigorous and exuberant corporeality culminates in her flashing her knickers to the audience. This eloquent act of self-affirmation as a woman is usually addressed to Trotta, who embodies the normative model of woman. Even the reference to anthropophagy, we contend, must be intended in a political sense: that of absorbing, digesting and deconstructing received notions of womanhood and beauty in order to reformulate them in the context of a queer, peripheral, constantly neglected and belittled space of existence.⁵⁶ Miss'Illude proudly disavows colonial teleologies of thinness and physical domestication by sardonically flagging her willingness to remain as she is:

If you're waiting for me to become beautiful, if you're waiting for me to become thin, and if you're waiting for me to become your nasty girl, you can keep waiting as much as you like, all you need is a miracle!⁵⁷

Conclusions

We have examined cinematic and televisual representations involving Southern Italian women and their relationship with food consumption, food preparation and body weight. In most of the cultural manifestations discussed here, these relationships with food and weight are also

⁵⁶ Cf. Larissa Pelúcio. 'Traduções e torções ou o que se quer dizer quando dizemos queer no Brasil?,' *Revista Periódicus* 1, no. 1 (2014), 68-91.

⁵⁷ 'Se aspetti che divento bella, se aspetti che divento magra, e se aspetti che divento una monella, hai vuogli'e spettà, ci vuò no miracolo.' Miss'Illude, *Made in Sud*, 4 April 2016.

connected to specific temperamental attributes that, in the sexist and Northernist mythologies on which Italy is predicated, construct these women as patiently waiting wives/partners to whom the male protagonist can always return, or as undesirable, unmanageable, or even repugnant individuals who are straight off excluded from the adventures of the male (often Northern) hero. Furthermore, in the specific case of the two films with Marisa Laurito examined in this paper, i.e., *A tu per tu* and *Mi faccia causa*, the image of the wife who waits at home conflates with that of the unmanageable woman that is always on the brink of disrupting the patriarchal domestic order.

Importantly, almost all the female characters presented in this analysis are at some point put on the spot, criticised or even insulted for something that has to do, directly or indirectly, with their Southernness, and that is then linked back to any perceived anomaly in terms of behaviour, eating, and/or weight. An important exception to this recurrent trend is the case of Miss'Illude: however, this exception is easily explained with the fact that pretty much all the characters that interact with Miss'Illude in *Made in Sud* are also Southerners. This fundamental exception, we contend, tells us precisely that investigation of behavioural and eating patterns in the South of Italy cannot ignore the (symbolically when not physically) violent influence of the North in shaping Southern lives and aspirations. Trite tropes of locally circumscribed endemic backwardness, recalcitrance to modernity and vertical patronage are not only offensive, but also urgently inadequate and chronically insufficient to assess determinate phenomena – we say this without questioning the colleagues' scientific excellence and the importance of their fieldwork and findings.

In our analysis of the various toxic representations scattered around the various media products examined here, we have constantly attempted to identify, illustrate and dignify the spaces of disobedience painstakingly and vigorously reclaimed by almost every one of the characters discussed in this work. Obviously, this does not mean denying the fundamental

ambivalence of these screen personas, who, despite any possible spasm of rebellion, are partly complacent with the patriarchal, North-normative scopic regimes that inevitably shape their cinematic and televisual apparitions. For example, in celebrating the rebellion of Miss' Illude, we have overlooked the self-flagellating elements embedded in her character, who always points the attention to her contrast with the ethereal body-normativity of the presenter Fatima Trotta (whose Southern accent is also much less marked than Miss' Illude's). By encouraging the national TV audience to laugh about her own body, Miss' Illude inevitably flags her acknowledgement of dominant Northern-normative, patriarchal, body-normative female models. To most members of the audience, she might only signify as an overweight, markedly Neapolitan, bizarrely self-derisive woman – a paradigm that in the national common sense is to be avoided at any cost.

Miss' Illude, pretty much as all the other characters that relate to the cliché of the 'Greedy Southern Woman' that we tried to unearth in this work, is strongly marked by the aforementioned 'torsions of violent contradictions'⁵⁸ that inevitably characterise any Southern, queer, Other, marginal project aspiring to national recognition. Overall, the 'Greedy Southern Woman' is a fairly recurrent cliché in Italian popular culture, deeply anchored to a national imagery that, in different ways, perceives both women and Southerners as potential anomalies to be constantly domesticated.

⁵⁸ Pugliese, 'Assimilation', 243.

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