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# Naples/Italy: An Accented Approach to City and Nation

## Abstract

Naples presents an intriguing case for the study of city and nation in cultural perspective. Historically viewed as a problem city and occupying an ambiguous place in the discursive construction of the nation, it has come to represent Italy in contemporary media and culture. This article reviews the historical construction of Naples in national discourse and interrogates new critical perspectives that re-evaluate the city in the light of postcolonial theory. Identifying the limitations of such theorization with respect to cultural representations of Naples' relationship with Italy, I draw on theories of cultural accentedness (Naficy 2001; Coetzee 2013) to propose a new approach to Naples, premised upon a reframing of national culture in terms of differently accented practices, discourses and interpretations. The approach is intended as a model for critical interrogation of the relationship between city and nation more broadly.

## Keywords

Naples; city and nation; historical discourse; postcolonial theory; cultural accent; *Gomorra*

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## **Naples/Italy: An Accented Approach to City and Nation**

Naples presents an intriguing case for the study of city and nation in cultural perspective. Historically viewed as a problem city and occupying an ambiguous place, at best, in the discursive construction of the Italian nation state, the city has come to enjoy extraordinary prominence in contemporary media and culture. The unparalleled international success of Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra* (2006), Elena Ferrante's 'Neapolitan novels' (2010-14) and their respective screen adaptations has propelled the city to the forefront of the cultural imaginary, igniting a new interest in Naples while reshaping the image of Italy at home and abroad.

The prominence enjoyed by Naples in the field of cultural production reflects a wider shift in the fortunes and image of the city, dating back to the 1990s and the introduction of direct mayoral election to Italy in 1993. Coinciding with the inauguration of the so-called 'Second Republic' and the associated renewal of the national political landscape following the devastating *Tangentopoli* corruption scandal,<sup>1</sup> direct mayoral election was designed to liberate Italy's cities from the ill effects of short-term planning and the subjugation of local interests to party-political ambitions at the national level. It empowered municipal administrations to take a more strategic approach to the governance and development of their cities (Fruncillo and Gentilini 2016). For a struggling Naples, mired in corruption and dogged by a long history of municipal mismanagement, the advent of direct mayoral election 'aroused palingenetic expectations' (Fruncillo and Gentilini 2016: 88) at the local level. The candidature of Alessandra Mussolini, granddaughter of the Fascist leader, attracted international media attention while, at the national level, her confrontation with Antonio Bassolino, a hard-line former communist, ensured that the contest was framed as the ultimate ideological clash and seen to resonate for the political future of Italy as a whole (see De Marco 2007). The eventual triumph of Bassolino was greeted as part of a progressive alliance uniting Italy and as evidence of Naples' conformity with national ambition and sentiment.

For Bassolino, the impact of direct mayoral election on the relationship between city and nation was so radical as to warrant the designation of the Second Republic as the ‘Republic of the Cities’ (Bassolino 1996). Certainly, for Naples, the effects were dramatic; under Bassolino’s two-term administration (1993-2001), the city underwent an astonishing period of renewal known as the ‘Neapolitan Renaissance’ (see De Marco 2007; Dines 2012; La Trecchia 2013; Marlow-Mann 2011: 159-88; Musella 149-55). Central to the success of the administration in regenerating the city centre, reinvigorating civil society and fostering urban citizenship was its cultural politics – its restoration of historically or culturally significant sites of collective identity (Bassolino 1996: 59), its support for cultural enterprise and its organization of a host of open-air cultural events designed to rebrand Naples as a city of culture and draw people back to neglected public spaces. In just a few years, a city that had become ‘a synonym for urban decay’ (Dines 2012: 7), disorder and dysfunction was rehabilitated as a model for urban regeneration, studied worldwide. More significantly, perhaps, Naples emerged as the symbol-city of a new Italy and a beacon of enlightened administration, demonstrating what inclusive politics, strategic regeneration and the fostering of urban citizenship might achieve under even the most challenging of circumstances. Not since the late nineteenth-century had the fortunes of Naples been so prominently associated with the successes or failings of the Italian nation state.

Despite the interrelatedness of the Neapolitan and the national in Italian political and media discourse since the 1990s, there is scant recognition in the critical literature addressing the city of the discursive ties that bind the fortunes and image of Naples to those of Italy in the Second Republic. Instead, scholarship relating to contemporary Naples and its cultural representation tends either to perpetuate the historical and critical tradition that approaches the city as an exceptional urban and social phenomenon, Other to a vaguely construed national and European norm, or – often as a counter to that approach – to bypass

considerations of the national in favour of critical explorations of the city's social and cultural practices inspired by globalization, transnationalism and postcolonial theory.

However, while certain Neapolitan cultural practices and products (popular music and the visual arts) may be seen to participate actively in processes of transnational cultural exchange, others – in the fields of literature, drama and cinema – continue to engage closely with the national context within which the city's image, identity and discourse are primarily constructed and understood. Such works often convey strong continuities between Naples and Italy and posit the relationship between the two as intimately entwined.

In this article, I provide a brief history of Naples's relationship with the Italian nation state, centring on the discursive construction of the city and the role assigned it in national discourse. I then proceed to interrogate more recent critical perspectives that challenge the received wisdom of historical discourse and re-evaluate Naples in the light of postcolonial theory. Having identified the limitations of that critical corpus for scholarly interrogation of forms of cultural production that remain preoccupied with the legacy of historical discourse and the place assigned Naples in the national cultural imaginary, I move to demonstrate that theoretical frames relating to cultural accentedness may be constructively applied to cultural production addressing the relationship between Naples and Italy. Analysing Saviano's *Gomorra* (2006) as an illustration of wider tendencies in cultural production, I argue for a consideration of the city and its cultural practices not as unique, exceptional or antithetical to the Italian nation state and its culture (as convention would have it) but as manifesting a locally accented expression of identity, phenomena and concerns that are frequently shared at the national level. While this approach is especially pertinent to the consideration of city-nation relations in Italy, a nation state characterized more by cultural diversity than homogeneity and where city identities long predate the invention of the nation, it is intended

to serve as a model for critical interrogation of the relationship between city and nation in other contexts.

### **Naples/Italy: A Fraught History**

Critical approaches to Naples are bound up with the historical construction of Naples and the rich repertoire of images and discourses pervading the cultural imaginary from the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century to the late-Nineteenth Century. The cultural shock registered by Grand Tour visitors to Naples – who struggled to articulate their reactions to a city provoking contradictory responses and often experienced as an assault on the senses – influenced and coloured understandings of Naples in the period of Italian Unification. However, the processes and discourses of Unification also had a role to play in the construction of a sense of Naples’ alterity with respect to the nation state and its claim to modernity.

The incorporation of the southern Italian Kingdom of the Two Sicilies into the new Kingdom of Italy in 1861 came about less as result of nationalist feeling and a desire for Unification on the part of Southern Italians than as a ratification of Giuseppe Garibaldi’s extraordinary victories in his unauthorized and unsolicited expedition to liberate the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies from Bourbon rule (see Riall 2009). The national Unification that followed has come to be seen by many scholars as a colonization of the Italian South by a Piedmontese elite, which imposed on the South a political and economic regime for which it was ill suited (Cassano 1996, 2012; Verdicchio 1997a; Schneider 1998).<sup>2</sup> Others reject such an interpretation. John Dickie, for instance, argues that ‘the *Mezzogiorno* was not the victim of a colonial type of exploitation by the North’ (1999a: 10), nor was it ‘subordinated to the North or to the state in a way one could even approximately describe as imperialistic’ (Dickie 1999b: 81). Rather, with the South politically marginalized and under-represented in

government at the outset of the new state, Northern politicians imposed liberal economic measures without knowledge of the detrimental effects they would have on a South that was largely agrarian and feudal, accustomed to protectionist policy and lacking in the infrastructure required to facilitate development. Though they differ in their explanation of post-Unification policy, scholars are united in their assessment of its effects: the North continued to develop industrially but the South failed to thrive under the conditions imposed and sank into economic dependency, with the former capital and financial centre of Naples particularly harshly penalized.

The divergence in fortunes across the Italian peninsula resulted in the production of a conceptual divide between North and South which, as Antonio Gramsci outlines, were never objective cultural and political entities but rhetorical effects of the very process of unification. In Gramsci's analysis (1999a: 80-81),

the 'misery' of the South was historically inexplicable for the popular masses of the North; they did not understand that Unification had not taken place on the basis of equality, but as the hegemony of the North over the South. [...] The Northern person thought instead that if the South did not progress after its liberation [...] it meant that the causes for the misery were not external, to be found objectively in economic-political conditions, but rather internal, innate to the Southern population. [...] Only one conclusion was possible: the incapacity, the barbarous state, and the biological inferiority of the population. [...] A North-South polemic on race and the superiority of the North and the inferiority of the south developed.<sup>3</sup>

As Gramsci explains it, the South's failure to develop under the enlightened administration of the new Italian state engendered a series of 'explanations' that located such failure not in



economic or political policy but in the ‘character’ of southern Italians. Such explanations – supported by a considerable body of post-Unification anthropological and associated studies of the South, known as *meridionalismo* – have been interpreted as racist (as per Gramsci), as a form of hostile regionalism, or as the product of ethnocentric discourses associated with the project of national building and modernization (see Dickie 1999a: 4-7). Regardless of their interpretation, the cumulative effect of such ‘explanations’ is the emergence of a new moral geography and the characterization of the Italian South as a problem – an uncivilized and barbaric place, in thrall to poverty and crime and in need of urgent corrective intervention on the part of the more civilized and modern north of the new nation state (see Dickie 1999a; Moe 2002). Significantly, the binary structure of such explanations replicated the existing construction of Italy’s position vis-à-vis Northern Europe, insofar as it pitted an exoticized, irrational, and primitive South against a rational and civilized North, with the tension between the two hinging on the relative perceived modernity of each (see Moe 2002: 112-25; 207-223). Viewed in that light, *meridionalismo* may be understood as ‘an exasperated will to vindicate the nation’s dignity’ by deflecting connotations of backwardness away from the heart of the emergent nation state to shore up Italy’s claim to modernity (Rosario Romeo, cited in Moe 2002: 21).

If the South as a whole came to constitute what Pasquale Verdicchio has termed ‘a national dissonant subject’ (Verdicchio 1997a: 21), Naples as the former capital was subject to particularly virulent iterations of its perceived alterity with respect to a national norm implicitly identified with the Italian and European North. The city’s pre-existing renown as a ‘paradise inhabited by devils’, a trope circulating as early as the 1500s, and a ‘demographic monster’ – an eighteenth-century epithet arising from rapid population expansion but redolent with a moralism that is indicative of Naples’ perceived divergence from bourgeois expectations of urban order, hygiene and privacy – coloured Northern Italian attitudes

towards the city at the moment of Unification (see Moe 2002: 156-86). As Moe details, the reluctance of the Neapolitans to rise up against their Bourbon rulers in advance of Garibaldi's arrival in the city was met with accusations of barbarism and suggestions that Neapolitans were a 'degraded people', deserving no better than authoritarian rule (2002: 147-49).

Subsequently, images of disease and metaphors of medical treatment pervaded the visualization of Naples in the reports of functionaries and emissaries sent to the city by the national government in Turin. There, Naples and its problems were configured as a wound or disease threatening to contaminate the rest of the peninsula and requiring the healing intervention of the North (Moe 2002: 176). The perceived urgency of the threat is best illustrated by missives sent to Prime Minister Cavour by Luigi Carlo Farini, the chief administrator of the south in the first months of Piedmontese control. Farini warned: 'If the national parliament with its great moral authority does not establish a bit of effective authority here, believe me, the annexation of Naples will become the gangrene of the rest of the state' (cited in Moe 2002: 176). For that reason, he argued that 'if Italy is to be saved or lost, it will be saved or lost with Naples and in Naples' and reiterated that 'the entire Italian question is now in Naples. To succeed there is to create Italy' (cited in Moe 2002: 176). In this way, the city's alterity with respect to the Italian North and its centrality to the project of nation building were firmly established.

The rhetorical construction of Naples as a particularly intense site of national concern was consolidated and disseminated through the texts of post-Unification *meridionalismo* (Moe 2002; Dickie 1999a). The prevalence of corporeal and pathological metaphors to characterize the city intensified in the wake of the cholera epidemic that devastated the city in 1894, an event that was constructed in journalistic and political discourse alike as the first great test of the new nation state (Snowden 1995; Dickie 1999a: 97-100). If, on the one hand, the cholera epidemic ensured that Naples became the beneficiary of national resources and

the focus of national efforts to improve the living conditions of its inhabitants, on the other hand, the wealth of scientific studies, sociological reports, journalistic essays and literary depictions that ensued resulted primarily in the solidification of Naples' reputation as an exceptional or aberrant urban reality, inhabited by a morally suspect underclass resistant to the civilizing mission of the Italian nation state.

That reputation would prove hard to shake. The discursive regime established at the foundation of the state in the late nineteenth-century cast a long shadow that still looms large in the cultural imaginary, in the media and in popular discourse. Throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, assertions of Naples' alterity and exceptionalism have resurfaced intermittently, typically when the experiences and fortunes of the city diverged from those of the centre-north of Italy, an area unquestioningly equated with the 'national'. The military division of Italy during the Second World War, for instance, physically reconstituted the post-Unification concept of a North-South divide and foreshadowed the marked divergence in the 1946 constitutional referendum between overwhelming support for the monarchy in the Italian south and for a republic in northern and central Italy at (see Ginsborg 1990:98; Foot 2019: 22-23). The founding narrative of the Italian Republic that emerged exacerbated the divide by triumphantly conflating national Liberation with anti-fascist Resistance in 1943-45; it thereby excluded the experience of Neapolitans (and other southerners), whose popular revolt and self-liberation from the forces of Nazifascism resulted in occupation by the Allies and detachment from the struggle to reassert Italian independence. On other occasions, the emergence of problems particular to Naples – an outbreak of cholera in 1973 and the rapid expansion of organized crime and associated outbreaks of violence in the 1980s and 2000s – were widely interpreted as evidence of the city's perennial dysfunction. With scant regard being paid to the contribution made by policymaking, structural failings and inadequate controls at the national level, all such

instances witnessed the re-emergence in the public sphere of what Nick Dines (2012: 5) has termed the ‘aberrant residue’ of familiar nineteenth-century discourses about Naples and its relationship with Italy. Consequently, the city continues to be viewed ‘as a pathological exception that is marked by unparalleled social and economic problems, peculiar cultural practices and an absence of law and order’ (Dines 2013: 413).

### **Rethinking Naples through a Postcolonial Lens**

Against that backdrop of Neapolitan exceptionalism and alterity, it is perhaps unsurprising that recent critical and theoretical engagements with Naples have sought to counter the discursive construction of the city as Other to a national norm and talk back to dominant discourses in the public sphere. Underpinning such efforts is a highly developed postcolonial consciousness emerging out of the rich corpus of postcolonial theory that has its origins in Antonio Gramsci’s interpretations of the Italian South.<sup>4</sup> As signalled earlier, over the course of the 1990s and in the context of a wider postcolonial turn in academic and intellectual circles, scholars of Italian history and culture developed a wide-ranging critique of the Italian nation state and identified in the process of Unification and the relationship between Italian North and South the dynamics of internal colonization. Cultural critic Paolo Verdicchio led the way in delineating a lucid framework for the consideration of southern Italy through a postcolonial lens and in countering the ‘preclusion of postcolonial discourse in Southern Italy’ (1997b: 191). For Verdicchio, as for Schneider (1998), the North-South divide and the associated binary construction of authority and inferiority, modernity and backwardness, progress and a-temporality may be understood to replicate the classic divide between East and West in Edward Said’s theorization of Orientalism. This replication, coupled with the historical racialization of Southern Italians in the period following Unification, led

Verdicchio to frame southern Italians as ‘unrecognized postcolonials’ (Verdicchio 1997b: 191).

As Verdicchio notes, discourses about Naples and Neapolitans lend themselves particularly well to postcolonial interrogation, given the recurrent recourse to orientalist constructions, pathological metaphors and racialized constructions of the city and its people in the public arena.<sup>5</sup> Over the course of the 2000s, two distinct strategies would emerge in critical engagements with Naples informed by postcolonial theory and seeking to disrupt the seemingly intractable influence of the historical construction of the city as deviating from national norms. The first such strategy is to decentre the nation and ‘legitimize’ Naples and its culture by reorienting comparative considerations of the city in relation to other geopolitical and discursive spaces (most notably the Mediterranean and the global South), and by shifting the gaze away from traditionally dominant forms of culture in favour of more popular modes of cultural production and culture from below. This approach is particularly evident in studies of contemporary art and music, where the concept of the ‘glocal’ is deployed as a privileged category for understanding the relationship between Neapolitan production and the transnational circulation of culture. Developed as a critique of marketing strategies that placed ‘a stress on everything “local” within the global setting’ (Robertson 1995: 35), Roland Robertson’s theorization of the glocal draws attention to ‘the simultaneity – the co-presence – of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies in globalization’ (Robertson 1997: 218). Understood to involve simultaneously processes of homogenization, hybridization, and creolization, the paradigm of the glocal invites us to consider how global frameworks contribute to reshaping and reconceptualizing local identities and practices. In accordance with theorizations of the glocal that insist on the importance of keeping three, rather than two, spatial frameworks in play – the local, the national and the global (Moore 2010: 319-20) – analyses of Neapolitan culture at the nexus of the postcolonial and the glocal

focus primarily on the alignment between the local and the global but are alert to the implications for the national discursive context.

The exemplar here is Patrizia La Trecchia's wide-ranging study of Neapolitan literature, cinema, music and art in the 1990s, which works to reorient understandings of Neapolitan culture beyond the familiar, restrictive brace of Italian paradigms (see also Pine 2012; Ridda 2017; VKY 2020). Side-lining the national context while acknowledging the enduringly negative impact of conventional national discourses, La Trecchia highlights the cosmopolitan hybridity of Neapolitan cultural production, its openness to non-local forms and its participation in global contemporaneity as evidence of the city's modernity and its capacity for innovation. Epitomizing the city's mediation between the local and the global is the assimilation of modern technologies and their languages into vernacular cultural forms. This is best exemplified perhaps by the transformation of the traditional Neapolitan dwelling of the poor – the one-room, street-level *basso* – into the highly technological and virtually connected space of the 'techno-basso' (La Trecchia 2013: 24-25; 99). But it is also present in the various ways in which Neapolitan cultural production of the 1990s critically incorporates, interacts with and innovates on global phenomena and cultural currents.

A similar tendency to acknowledge but decentre national discourses in favour new critical positions is evident in Nick Dines' ethnographic study of regeneration and urban spatial practice in Naples in the 1990s. Alert to the limitations of existing urban studies approaches to Naples, which 'have often been torn between the idea of a bewildering unique city and the urge to squeeze it into theories tried and tested elsewhere' (Dines 2012: 6), Dines turns to Jennifer Robinson's postcolonial critique of urban theory and her concept of the 'ordinary city' in order to displace conventional understandings of Neapolitan alterity. Robinson – a cultural geographer of South Africa – challenges 'the colonial and neo-imperial power relations that remain deeply embedded in the assumptions and practices of

contemporary urban theory' (2006: 6). She questions the labelling of cities as 'developed', 'developing' or 'global' and challenges a disciplinary tendency to view 'only certain wealthy, Western cities as having a privileged relationship with urban modernity' (Robinson 2006: 6). Positing that all cities are historically and geographically contingent, all exemplify different modes of urban modernity and all are involved in making new urban futures, Robinson calls for a more inclusive, democratic and cosmopolitan theorization in which all cities are understood as 'ordinary'. In applying Robinson's considerations to Naples, Dines parallels the concurs provides a model of how we might approach the city on its own terms, alert to the specificities of its urban and social fabric but also to its status as a city like any other, each with its own way of being urban and producing social and cultural life.<sup>6</sup> Although ostensibly resistant to comparative frameworks, national or otherwise, such an approach nonetheless sits well with the theorizations of accented thinking I address below.

A second strategy to be observed in critical engagements with Naples informed by postcolonial theory is to reclaim the terms and discourses associated with the city's supposed alterity while also deploying critical perspectives that expose and counter the power dynamics at play in the historical Othering of the city. This strategy is especially relevant to cultural representations because the history of Naples' relationship with a nation state that tends to identify with Northern rather than Mediterranean Europe remains the most important influence on the way in which the city is imagined, articulated and understood in public discourse and cultural production alike. The most significant contribution in this camp – Iain Chambers' substantial essay 'Naples: A Porous Modernity' (2008: 71-129) – responds less to the national than the wider European repertoire of discourses asserting Neapolitan alterity but exudes a consciousness of the imbrication of national and foreign discourses over time. The essay is indebted to two existing frameworks: Franco Cassano's seminal critique of discourses relating to the Italian South as a history of discourses from the North (1996; 2012)

and Walter Benjamin and Asja Lacis' theorization of Neapolitan porosity (1924). Inspired by Dipesh Chakrabarty's (2000) call to provincialize Europe in the study of postcolonial contexts, Cassano works to provincialize what we might term the 'Northern gaze' on the Italian South (see Glynn 2020). His aim is to develop a system of Southern Thought, which seeks 'not to think of the south in the light of modernity, but rather to think of modernity in the light of the south' (Cassano 2012: 1). Following Cassano, Chambers moves to rethink urban modernity in the light of Naples and reconfigure the city as a subject rather than the object of dominant, 'Northern' discourses of modernity.

That he does so while embracing the essentializing concept of Neapolitan porosity, theorized by Benjamin and Lacis in 1925, is significant. Rather than attempting to deny the exceptionality of Naples in the cultural imaginary, Chambers works to validate Naples' status as an 'Oriental' (2008: 83) or 'non-Occidental city' (2008: 86) by asserting the value of its non-alignment with established conventions and norms. Consonant with Robinson's articulation of the ordinary city, Chambers declares not only that 'Naples proposes its own configuration of modern life' (2008: 74) but that it thus exposes 'what elsewhere is invariably forgotten and overlooked' (2008: 86). Indeed, he argues that 'in refus[ing] the superficial optimism of those, invariably from more northern climes, who believe they are predestined for "progress" [...], Naples [...] perhaps reveals less about its own obvious shortcomings than about the limits and illusions of modernity itself' (2008: 87). Viewed through this prism, Naples comes to represent not the antithesis of modernity, nor an exemplar of arrested development, but a critical mirror on modernity, 'questioning its achievements while probing the system of values that legitimized it' (Bouchard and Ferme 2012: xiii). The subversion of the inherited Northern gaze on Naples facilitates a further insight. Observing that what he has 'learned from living in Naples is that the explanatory frames of historiography, sociology and anthropology are clearly insufficient' to 'render the city explicit in an imposed coherence'



(Chambers 2008: 92), Chambers hints at the failure of abstraction or disembodied knowledge to fully account for the experiential complexity of urban life. Naples instead ‘proposes a diverse sense of “understanding”, one that requires us to supplement a taxonomic cartography with an “atlas of emotion”’ (Chambers 2008: 92).<sup>7</sup> In thus effecting a shift away from disembodied modes of understanding and towards situated knowledges and emotional geographies, Chambers – like Robinson – signals the value of repositioning traditionally marginalized cities like Naples at the heart of critical enquiry and of validating such supposed outliers as vehicles of more nuanced and inclusive understandings of modernity and the urban.

How does this relate to the relationship between city and nation? The connection is far from obvious, given the lack of attention paid to the national in critical theorizations of Naples. However, such theorization provides a model for a potential reconceptualization of the city’s relationship to Italy and the role assigned it national discourse. For, just as Chambers provincializes the Northern gaze on Naples, so too might we provincialize the national discursive construction of Naples, upending its presuppositions to view the city and its relationship with Italy in a new light. To do so would mean not to look on the city in the light of the nation but to ask what the view from the city reveals about the nation state, its workings and its discourses. If, in the case of Naples, such questioning necessarily exposes the lack of inclusivity of purportedly ‘national’ discourses and practices, it also invites a revised understanding of city and nation informed by postcolonial theory. Such an understanding would unite Chambers’ subversion of the critical gaze on Naples with Robinson’s theorization of the ordinary city to rebalance the city-nation relationship, not by denying but by celebrating the supposed alterity of Naples as a quality of its essence as an ordinary city of Italy.

## **Cultural Representations and Accented Thinking**

While the critical insights afforded by postcolonial theory are instrumental to decentring a discursive regime that posits Naples as a problematic Other and facilitating the emergence of new conceptualizations of city and nation, an additional critical framework is required to support scholarly interrogations that extend beyond the city's urban fabric and socio-cultural practices to address the field of cultural representation. As already noted, literary, cinematic and theatrical works addressing Naples exhibit a far greater preoccupation with the historic construction of the city in the national cultural imaginary than contemporary critical theory. Cultural production is often heavily invested in the supposed alterity of the city and finds in its outsider status and distinctive cultural practices a source of inspiration and creativity. That is not to say, however, that cultural production endorses a view of the city as Other or portrays it as antithetical to the Italian nation state. On the contrary, since the 1990s, literary and cinematic explorations of Naples have interwoven the Neapolitan with the national and increasingly construct the city in alignment with, and representative of, national phenomena and concerns. This is equally true of nationally produced works like the TV soap opera, *Un posto al sole* (1996-), which portrays the Neapolitan apartment building in which it is set as a microcosm of Italian society, and of the substantial corpus of feature films set in Naples but addressing issues of broad societal significance (the impact of migration and Italy's transition to a multicultural society, precarious employment, criminality). It is also true, however, of the many cultural products emerging from Naples that mediate between the specificities of the Neapolitan context and Italy as a whole, highlighting the continuities between the two.

Such interweaving of the Neapolitan with the national demands a supplementary framework to the postcolonial critique provided by Chambers and Dines, one capable of acknowledging the asymmetrical legacies of the past while also reconceptualizing Naples not as antithetical to an undifferentiated national culture but as a variant within a heterogeneous

whole – a city culture among others, each with its own way of being Italian. Drawing on the work of Hamid Naficy and Carli Coetzee, I want to argue that such a relationship between city and nation is best conceptualized in terms of ‘accent’ or inflection. For Naficy, accented discourse is a feature of displacement and a form of communication favoured by those whose work and lives are inflected by the experience of diaspora and exile. Naficy’s theorization of ‘accented cinema’ describes how the cinema of exiled, diasporic or postcolonial directors relates to the supposedly neutral or value-free dominant cinema produced by a given society’s reigning mode of production. Characteristic of such cinema is its interstitial status – its acquisition of one set of voices from the cinematic tradition and of a second set of voices from the exilic and diasporic traditions; this reflects the ‘double consciousness’ (Naficy 2001: 22) of the films’ creators and results in a ‘multilingual, multivocal and multiaccented’ soundscape (2001: 24) within the films in question. Equally characteristic of such cinema is its ‘intensely place-bound’ quality (2001: 27), evidenced in its tendency to ‘emphasize visual fetishes of homeland and the past’, and its stress on ‘the accents, intonations, voices, music, and songs that also demarcate individual and collective identities’ (2001: 24-25).

Complementing Naficy’s theorization of accented cinema is Coetzee’s more overtly political elaboration of ‘accented thinking’, developed in response to the legacy of apartheid and its impact on knowledge and interpretation in the South African university. For Coetzee, ‘accented thinking’ is a way of thinking that is ‘aware of the legacies of the past and do[es] not attempt to empty out the conflicts and violence under the surface’ (2013: x). Rather, it insists on difference and disagreement because ‘it is precisely those discourses that acknowledge the asymmetrical legacies of apartheid, and draw attention to the enduring effects of the violent past, that can bring about the long ending of apartheid’ (Coetzee 2013: x). As with Naficy’s accented cinema, the defining characteristic of Coetzee’s accented thinking is that ‘it is not spoken in just one accent, but instead represents an orientation that

creates an awareness of and an “ear” for many and diverse accents, and for the diverse forms of knowledge and languages around us’ (2013: xi). It thus resists the drive towards homogeneity or absorption of difference in favour of heterogeneity and alertness to the existence of specific, even local orientations or fields of reference (Coetzee 2013: 7).

Responding to Coetzee’s assertion that ‘accenting’ is ‘an activity and a point of view that needs to be developed and cultivated’ (2013: x), I work to demonstrate that accented thinking may be constructively applied to the relationship between Neapolitan and national cultural practices, values, discourses and tropes in Italy. It is my contention that Neapolitan culture – and cultural production addressing Naples – stands in relation to national culture as accented cinema does to mainstream cinema and that the characteristics of accentedness outlined by Naficy and Coetzee pervade contemporary Neapolitan culture, discourse and practice. Like accented cinema, Neapolitan culture is marked by its exclusion from consideration of Italian national culture;<sup>8</sup> it frequently exploits its interstitial status and its acquisition of distinct sets of voices from the two traditions, Neapolitan and national, to speak simultaneously to different audiences. Also like accented cinema, cultural production addressing Naples is intensely place-bound and inclined to fetishize the city and its past; while such fetishization is often designed to rehabilitate Naples and celebrate its cultural particularities, there remains within Neapolitan culture and its representation an acute alertness to the divisive legacies of the past and the ongoing impact of historic inequalities that is reminiscent of Coetzee’s theorization of accented thinking. Finally, in accordance with both theorizations of accentedness, cultural production addressing Naples resists homogenization and assimilation into the unmarked national norm; this is evident not only on the aural plane, where an ‘ear’ for dialect, diverse forms of speech and modes of expression generates a multilingual, multivocal and multiaccented soundscape, but also on the level of

cultural practice where alertness to the customs, beliefs, rituals and performances particular to the city conveys awareness of alternative forms of knowledge and understanding.

### **Illustrating the Accented Approach: Roberto Saviano's *Gomorra* and Beyond**

Limitations of space preclude in-depth analysis of the diverse ways in which accentedness manifests in cultural representations of Naples. I focus here on Saviano's *Gomorra*, which provides an excellent starting point for discussion of the accented quality of contemporary cultural production addressing Naples in the context of the postcolonial turn. Despite the title allusion to a city of sin, the primary focus of *Gomorra* is not Naples *per se* but the 'economic empire' constituted by the Camorra and its 'colonial' exploitation of the territory and people over which it holds sway. Straddling investigative journalism, fiction, testimonial writing and impassioned literary activism, *Gomorra* provides a compelling, detailed and shocking account of the extensive reach of organized crime, its embeddedness with the system of global capitalism, its integration of legal and criminal activities, and its social effects.

Saviano's innovative interpretation of the Camorra as an 'economic empire' – as, in fact, 'l'incarnazione più pura del sistema economico che domina il mondo' [the purest incarnation of the economic system that dominates the world] (Benedetti 2006) – represents a radical departure from previous understandings of organized crime as a problem of social order, a consequence of the historical development of the Italian south and evidence of its social and economic failings. It thus consciously subverts the conventional wisdom that the 'true' location of the Camorra lies in a particular area of southern Italy rather than in the economic system of global capitalism (Bassi 2015: 52; see also Fulginiti and Vito 2011: 24 of 32).

The entanglement of the local and the global in *Gomorra*'s account of the economic empire constituted by the Camorra is highlighted throughout the text. However, in tacit acknowledgement of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's contention that nation states act in

the service of global capitalism (2000), *Gomorra* also works to expose the role played by national industries and institutions in facilitating Camorra power. It thereby nationalizes the problem of organized crime's imbrication with global capital and analyses three key sectors – high fashion, construction and industrial waste disposal – to construe the colonial exploitation of Naples by the Camorra as an extension of the historical imbalance of power between Italian North and South.

The critical reception of *Gomorra* as a 'visualization of the impact of neocapitalism on Italy' (Greene 2012: 246) – and not merely Naples – at the beginning of the twenty-first century is testament to Saviano's success in mediating between the Neapolitan and the Italian and tracing the continuities between the two. That success is no small achievement; despite scholarly documentation of the connections between the Camorra and the Italian state since national Unification (e.g., Benigno 2015; Fiore 2006), never before has the problem of organized crime in the South of Italy and its association with the national sphere been so effectively communicated to a wide readership. Crucial to *Gomorra*'s mediation between the Neapolitan and the Italian contexts is the text's 'double consciousness' and its deployment of, on the one hand, models and discourses inherently associated with Italian national culture and, on the other, approaches and emphases that are peculiar to Neapolitan culture and the historical representation of the city. This is best exemplified by the way in which Saviano brings to the 'national' discourse of *impegno* (O'Leary 2009: 220) – an Italian mode of socio-political intellectual engagement that is morally and ideologically inflected – a distinctive Neapolitan 'accent', constituted by attention to corporeality and an understanding of the body as a site of knowledge.<sup>9</sup> The equation between the corporeal and the Neapolitan rests on the prevalent historical and cultural construction of the city as a living, breathing organism, with individual sites or neighbourhoods identified with distinct body parts and functions.<sup>10</sup>

It is in the second part of the book that the national discourse of *impegno* comes to the fore, amid an intensified denunciation of Camorra power. Here, the narrator-protagonist draws on Pier Paolo Pasolini – a national icon of *impegno* and resistance to social injustice – as a model for his own literary testimony. In direct citation of Pasolini, he configures his narrative denunciation of the Camorra as ‘il mio *io so*, l’*io so* del mio tempo’ [my own ‘I Know’, the ‘I Know’ of my day] (2006: 233; 2007: 213), thereby demonstrating his embeddedness in a national culture premised upon the power of the written word to effect social change.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, however, it is in the Neapolitan language of embodiment that the narrator-protagonist’s consciousness of the Camorra’s totalizing power is first intuited and voiced: ‘era sui cantieri che *sentivo fisicamente, nelle budella*, tutta la loro potenza’ [It was on the construction sites that *I could feel – physically, in my gut – all their might*] (Saviano 2006: 231; 2007: 210, my italics).

From this point forth, the language of the body merges with that of *impegno*, as if to suggest, with Chambers, that Naples ‘proposes a diverse sense of “understanding”’ (2008: 92), located in the body, but – contrary to received understandings – entirely compatible with the national intellectual project of *impegno*. The body becomes the primary site of knowledge for the narrator-protagonist, whose visceral reactions to violence and injustice inform and express his moral and political opposition to the Camorra. Though evident to some degree throughout the book, this builds over the course of the narrative, reaching a climax in the final chapter. Here, the protagonist explores the toxic wasteland of the once-fertile plain now known as the ‘Terra dei Fuochi’ [Land of Fires], where the Camorra’s control of the disposal of illegal waste, deriving primarily from the centre-north of Italy, has resulted in catastrophic environmental devastation and dramatically elevated rates of cancer mortality. Roaming across the toxic plain, the protagonist’s revolt against the deadly tyranny of organized crime reaches its apogee. Physically assailed by all that he witnesses, in the form of a ‘bruciore che

mi saliva dallo stomaco e si irradiava fino alla nuca' [burning sensation rising from my stomach and radiating up my neck] (2006: 330; 2007: 299), he erupts with the consciousness that

In terra di Camorra combattere i clan non è lotta di classe, affermazione del diritto, riappropriazione della cittadinanza. [...] È qualcosa di più essenziale, di ferocemente carnale. [...] Porsi contro i clan diviene una guerra per la sopravvivenza [...]. E così conoscere non è più una traccia di impegno morale. Sapere, capire diviene una necessità. L'unica possibile per considerarsi ancora uomini degni di resistenza' (2006: 330-31)

[In the land of the Camorra, opposing the clans is not a class struggle, an affirmation of a right, or a re-appropriation of one's civic duty. [...] It is something more basic, more ferociously carnal. [...] To set oneself against the clans becomes a war of survival [...]. Knowing is thus no longer a sign of moral engagement. Knowing – understanding – becomes a necessity. The only necessity if you want to consider yourself worthy of breathing. (2007: 300)]

Armed with that knowledge, the final words of the narrative become a physical cry of opposition to the Camorra, which unites all the force of the body with the power of the word to denounce injustice: 'Avevo voglia di urlare, volevo gridare, volevo stracciarmi i polmoni, come Papillon, con tutta la forza dello stomaco, spaccandomi la trachea, con tutta la voce che la gola poteva ancora pompare: "Maledetti bastardi, sono ancora vivo!" [I wanted to shout, to scream, to tear my lungs out like Papillon. I wanted to howl from deep in my gut, my throat exploding with all the voice left in me: 'Hey, you bastards, I'm still here'] (2006: 331; 2007: 301).



In thus uniting the corporeal with the discourse of *impegno*, *Gomorra* exemplifies the ‘accented’ manner in which the Neapolitan may be seen to address national concerns and speak to a cultural and political constituency at the national level while also retaining a vernacular quality for a constituency of readers and activists closer to home.<sup>12</sup> Embedded in two cultures, Neapolitan and national, each with its own discursive properties, the narrator-protagonist unites both languages, mediates between them and, in doing so, speaks simultaneously to the local and the national.

As implied above, the approach taken in *Gomorra* is but one of several ways in which the Neapolitan speaks to the national in the corpus of cultural representations, illustrating the accentedness at play throughout cultural engagements with Naples. Despite the fragmentary and varied nature of the substantial corpus of cultural production addressing this ‘self-absorbed’ city (Chambers 2008: 84), it is possible to isolate a handful characteristics that we might consider distinctive of Neapolitan culture and the city’s cultural ‘accent’. Undoubtedly, corporeality remains the most prominent feature of that accent, manifesting in different ways across the corpus (as metaphor, metonym, somatope, embodiment) and bringing with it a series of associated connotations and discourses (relating to gender, pathology, affect, modernity, rationality, emotional and moral geographies). Beyond the corporeal, however, other characteristics that define the Neapolitan accent in the Italian cultural imaginary include those elements and forms of popular culture deemed so peculiar to the city (popular song, performance, comedy) as to typify Neapolitans themselves (musical, performative, comic, inventive/resourceful); these characteristics are often illustrated or enhanced by the presence of stock character types deriving from the historical repertoire (the *scugnizzo*, the *guappo*, the *malafemmena*, the *femminiello*, etc.) but updated for the contemporary world. Also constituting the Neapolitan ‘accent’ are the range of cultural practices and beliefs unique to the city, especially those considered anachronistic and associated with the afterlife or

underworld (superstition, ghosts, esotericism, magic), and a proclivity for hybrid or fragmented formal structures that are characteristically Neapolitan in their derivation and deemed to express the city's elusive, unknowable essence.

What marks these characteristics out as Neapolitan is both their peculiarity to Naples as a city with its own distinctive history and culture and their distance from a vaguely defined national norm. What distinguishes the national is, as a consequence, rather less clear-cut. As Naficy argues, emblematic of the dominant culture and reigning mode of production of a given society is its 'supposedly neutral or value-free' quality, its apparent invisibility arising from its discursive naturalization as the shared norms, behaviours, beliefs, customs and values of the population as a whole. Nonetheless, as the prominent example of *impegno* demonstrates, close examination of national discourses can unveil the emphases and inflections that shape the national. In the case of contemporary Italy, beyond the politico-cultural discourse of *impegno* emerging out of the post-war construction of Italy as a democracy founded on resistance to and self-liberation from Nazifascism, we might nominate the discursive construction of the national territory as the *Belpaese* (a designation incorporating both the natural environment and the cultural heritage); of its geopolitical identity as Mediterranean or Western European, depending on the context; of its people as 'brava gente' [good people], untainted by involvement in the worst evils of history, but also susceptible to vices such as corruption, craftiness, *mammismo*; and of its industrial production as uniquely artisanal and design-centred, in accordance with the terms of the 'Made in Italy' brand so carefully curated for audiences at home and abroad.

Just as Naples and Italy are characterized by a range of different cultural and discursive premises, so too Neapolitan cultural engagements with the national take different shapes and forms. The foremost national discourse of *impegno*, notably absent from the anthropological orientation of the 'New Neapolitan Cinema' of the 1990s (see Marlow Mann

2011), returns to the fore in the wake of *Gomorra*. This is true of not only of the numerous literary and journalistic anti-Camorra publications inspired by Saviano's work but also of more recent cinematic attempts to rehabilitate the image of Naples and reclaim it from association with criminality and dysfunction. Exemplary here is the Manetti bros.' *Song'e Napule* (2013), which co-opts the popular Neapolitan genre of neomelodic music on the part of the anti-camorra struggle and in doing so communicates to local and national audiences alike the compatibility of popular Neapolitan culture and a civic politics conventionally associated with and spoken in a national idiom. Elsewhere, esoteric practices and beliefs unique to Naples and conventionally interpreted as evidence of the city's alterity and distance from national modernity have been incorporated into nationally produced films that bring a distinctly Neapolitan accent to the image of Italy constructed in heritage film. Here, the cinematic construction of Naples in Ferzan Özpetek's *Napoli velata* (2017) may be seen to demonstrate the compatibility of the city's esotericism with the discursive construction of Italy as the Belpaese and to contribute to a redirection of the heritage gaze away from the Southern islands and 'rural idylls' favoured by cinematic consumers of Italy in the 1990s and towards the country's urban, artistic and cultural patrimony (see Small 2005; O'Leary 2016). A very different approach is taken in that other cornerstone of contemporary cultural representations of Naples: Elena Ferrante's Neapolitan novels. Here, the conventional metaphorical construction of Naples as a body expands beyond the construction of Lila (the brilliant friend of the first book's title) as an embodiment of Naples to the parallel construction of narrator-protagonist Elena as a metaphorical embodiment of Italy. This is complemented by a narrative arc which pits the unruly Lila as Other, in the nationally disciplined eyes of the narrating Elena, but *only until* such time as Elena's encounter with a form of feminism imbued with postcolonial overtones enables her to see both Lila and Naples

not as other to the dynamics and discourses of Italian national modernity but in continuity with the promises and delusions of national modernity (see Glynn 2019).

Such encounters between the Neapolitan and the national testify to the increasing perception and depiction of Naples as aligned with, rather than antithetical to, national dynamics and discourses. They signal also a changed relationship between city and nation in the context of the Second Republic, understood as the ‘Republic of the Cities’ (Bassolino 1996). At the same time, however, the persistence of a ‘double consciousness’ and an ‘ear’ for diverse languages and forms of knowledge across the corpus of cultural engagements with Naples is witness to the legacy and enduring influence of the conflictual past on the present.

## **Conclusion**

Though my focus here is on Naples, it is not my contention that an accented approach is – or should be – unique to the city and its relationship with Italy. Rather, building on Chambers’ observation that Naples exposes ‘what elsewhere is invariably forgotten and overlooked’ (2008: 86), I suggest that Naples enables us to discern the dynamics of city-nation relations, dynamics that operate more broadly but that tend to go unobserved, unrecognized and uninterrogated elsewhere. As stated at the outset, while the accented approach is especially pertinent to Italy, where urban identities and cultures predate the nation state and remain core elements of personal identity, it is also intended as a model for critical interrogation of the relationship between city and nation in other contexts. My contention is that, in provincializing the nation by reframing discussion of national culture as a whole in terms of differently accented practices, discourses and interpretations, which need not be structured as a hierarchy, we may come to a more conciliatory, democratic and inclusive understanding of the relationship between city and nation, wherever that may be.

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'Second Republic' denotes the inauguration of a new electoral system designed to counter the increasingly fragmented and unstable post-war political configuration of the 'First Republic'. *Tangentopoli* instead derives from the Italian for 'bribe' and refers to the extensive practice of exchanging bribes for public contracts; the scandal broke in 1992. See Hearder (2001: 270-74).

<sup>2</sup> The colonial interpretation of Unification is not new; already in the late nineteenth century, scientific racist Alfredo Niceforo declared of the South that 'Here, modern Italy has a lofty mission to accomplish and a great colony to civilize' (1898: 6).

<sup>3</sup> The translation is Verdicchio's (1997a: 26). See Gramsci (2005) for the complete essay in English.

<sup>4</sup> The postcolonial approach is supported by scholarship emerging from the Istituto Meridionale di Storia e Scienze Sociali in the 1980s; this 'underscored the region's economic vitality and re-examined anthropological formations, such as family networks and patron-client relationships, as sophisticated forms of social organizations rather than emblems of backwardness' (Bouchard and Ferme 2013: 6).

<sup>5</sup> Such discourses permeate all areas of public life, from football stadia to political discourse and media representation. Verdicchio's work, however, responds most directly to that of journalist Giorgio Bocca, who work consistently attacked the Italian south as 'the ball and chain that might suck us back into the Third World' (Bocca 1988: 124) and Naples as emblematic of the 'obscure malady' (1992) of corruption that typifies Italy (2006).

<sup>6</sup> The ordinary city approach parallels the Bassolino administration's emphasis on 'normalizing' Naples and its image, through appointment of a municipal officer for 'normality' *inter alia* (see Musella 2010: 150-51).

<sup>7</sup> The term 'atlas of emotion' is borrowed from Bruno (2002), whose psychogeographical exploration and mapping of the connections between urban space, architecture, cinema and the body provides a similarly allusive account of Naples to Chambers' own, but without reference to postcolonial analysis.

<sup>8</sup> As Fabrizia Ramondino (1994) noted, writers and literature from Naples – alone among Italian cities – tend to be identified exclusively with the city and labelled 'Neapolitan' rather than Italian, signalling the extent to which Neapolitan culture is marked by alterity and excluded from the national corpus.

<sup>9</sup> *Impegno's* national quality derives from the Italian intellectual's 'occupation of a civic/political role in relation to the nation of Italy' and as a 'curator of a national consciousness' (O'Leary 2009: 221). As suggested here,

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*impegno* is understood exclusively in moral and intellectual terms, without trace of the corporeal inflection introduced by Saviano.

<sup>10</sup> Indicative of the corporeal construction of Naples are the titles of literary works addressing the city, including *Il ventre di Napoli* [*The Belly of Naples*] (Serao 1884); *La pelle* [*The Skin*] (Malaparte 1949) and *Nel corpo di Napoli* [*In the Body of Naples*] (Montesano 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Pasolini's original (1974) denounces the political agents behind neofascist bombings in Italy in the 1970s. It acknowledges his lack of proof but attributes his understanding and denunciation of who is responsible to his mission as an intellectual and his capacity to interpret the events of his time.

<sup>12</sup> I am guided here by O'Leary's discussion of *impegno* as 'posited on the *entre nous*' (2009: 222), so that 'the committed artist must address his or her constituency in its own language' (2009: 224).