WHAT
A Transdisciplinary
Journal of Queer
Theories and Studies
EVER
whatever.cirque.unipi.it

Alice Parrinello

No country(side) for young queers.
Three contemporary Italian urban-rural narratives

Abstract: The paper presents an overview of three Italian takes on the queer rural-to-urban flight, by analysing *Generations of Love* (1999) by Matteo B. Bianchi, *La Generazione* (2015) by Flavia Biondi, and *Febbre* (2019) by Jonathan Bazzi. In most LGBTQ+ narratives moving to a big city is central, as it is associated with finding an accepting 'chosen' family. However, the move has recently acquired homonormative connotations: it is embedded into narratives of economic success and the individuals moving are usually white, cisgender, non-disabled, gay men. In the texts, the main characters correspond to the type. However, by analysing their relationships to their hometowns and their biological families, this paper argues that the characters find ways of challenging the homonormative paradigm through a spatial in-betweenness and non-conjugal bonds not reflected by laws. The main theoretical frameworks are the homonormativity definition by Lisa Duggan, the work on Italian queerness by Antonia Anna Ferrante, and the study on queer orientations by Sara Ahmed. This paper is inscribed into a larger trend of studies around the rural-to-urban move but sheds light on the Italian landscape.

Keywords: queer anti-urbanism; queer phenomenology; queer Italian studies; contemporary Italian literature; homonormativity.

> E crebbe così a ridosso di altri amori, di storie che non sarebbero mai state la 'sua storia,' ma che, in un certo senso, lui era in grado di elaborare per gli altri
>
> (Tondelli 2019: 133)[1]

1. Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a queer person in search for happiness, must move to the next big city. It is one of the most popular tropes in LGBTQ+ narratives, be it in cultural products or real-life events. The metrosexual narrative, as it has been defined by Jack J. Halberstam, states that moving from a small (minded) town to a big and accepting city

[1] And so he grew up next to other loves, to other stories that would never be 'his story,' but that, in a way, he was able to elaborate for others (this and the other citations in the paper have been translated from Italian to English by the author).

alice.parrinello@stx.ox.ac.uk
St Cross College, University of Oxford

Whatever, 4 2021: 411-430
doi 10.13131/2611-657X.whatever.v4i1.102

often embodies a queer person's coming out (2005: 36-37). Similarly, Kath Weston charted the phenomenon in her sociological studies, arguing that the formation of a gay collective imaginary developed spatially in connection to the city life (1995: 282). Its formation was reinforced by a process of othering of the countryside, seen as the city's intolerant other (Weston 1995: 274). This narrative has been widely adopted by the majority of the LGBTQ+ community, as Weston stated, "For not only did the rural-born claim that they needed to make the journey to the city to 'be gay': the urban-born voiced relief at having avoided the fate of coming out in rural areas where they believed homophobia to be rampant and 'like' others impossible to find" (1995: 282).

The pro-urban rhetoric can be seen as another facet of the homonormative process that is central to queer discourses today, as argued by Scott Herring (2010: 11). Homonormativity, the process of normalisation of the LGBTQ+ community, aims at the removal of queerness' most disruptive features in favour of a polished and neoliberal version of queer life (Duggan 2003: 50). Homonormativity involves mostly white gay (assumingly, cisgender, non-disabled, and middle-class) men and turns the gay civil rights movement into a fight solely for marriage equality and military service (Duggan 2003: 45). According to Halberstam, queerness used to fail to align to the heteronormative paradigm of capitalist accumulation, advancement, and family (2011: 89). However, these are now goals and key pillars of homonormative gay life, and urban gay life in particular.

While the vast majority of literature around urban-rural queer narratives maps displacements in the United States (Herring 2010; Johnson 2013; Gray *et al.* 2016), this paper investigates the depiction of the urban-rural divide in contemporary Italian works of fiction. In order to uncover how characters engage with and complicate the link between homonormativity and rural-to-urban narratives, this textual analysis confronts works that have a white gay man as the main character. The paper's analysis is twofold and acts as a magnifying glass: starting from the macro, such as the cities and the small towns cited in the works, and moving on to the micro, thus, focusing on the characters' family bonds and objects. While the former are analysed in contrast to the pro-urban gay imaginary, the latter are investigated through the lenses of Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology (2006).

The core texts analysed here are three contemporary Italian narratives of rural-to-urban flight. *Generations of Love* (1999) by Matteo B. Bianchi is

an autobiographical account of growing up gay in an Italian rural small town and of refusing to move to Milan as soon as possible. The graphic novel *La Generazione* (2015, Generations) by Flavia Biondi offers a twist to the trope, as it tells the story of a homecoming to the countryside, after the main character has lived for several years in Milan. Finally, the autobiographical *Febbre* (2019, Fever) by Jonathan Bazzi seemingly follows the urban narrative, as the author moved from Milan's hinterland to the city centre, only to challenge the move's unidirectionality.

Alongside an analysis of the spaces and the characters' trajectories, the paper's core analytical method is to trace their relations to their biological families. Such an investigation of the non-conjugal bonds in the novels is not only necessary due to the prominence they have in each of the works, but it is essential given the key role it plays in rural-to-urban narratives: living in the city meant being able to live queerly and finding a community – a new and larger chosen family – that would often replace the biological family (Weston 1997: 52). Additionally, non-conjugal bonds are investigated because they might allow for a new take on homonormativity through legal recognition or its lack thereof. Indeed, homonormativity promotes marriage equality by favouring dyadic relations and excluding all other types of relationality. Therefore, non-conjugal bonds prompt to question the exceptionalism and legal benefits associated to conjugal relations, their contribution to (homo)normativity, and whether a new legal recognition is needed.

Moreover, the core texts are examined not only through Anglo-American queer theory, but also according to the "mostre terrone femminelle" perspective[2] by Antonia Anna Ferrante, which is "la possibilità di provincializzare l'idea di queer, dunque, di riscrivere queste storie escluse dalla Storia per tessere dei legami affettivi e di complicità che somigliano a quelli di altre geografie che la linea retta non conosce"[3] (Ferrante 2019:49). Fer-

[2] Ferrante's monstrous perspective is connected to both '*terrone*,' an Italian slur indicating people from the South, and '*femminelle*,' a Neapolitan dialectal term that refers to homosexuals with a female gender expression. The words are reclaimed by Ferrante, much like the word 'queer' has been reclaimed by the LGBTQ+ community, in order to open up new ways of relationality, progress, and nation by bringing to the forefront those who live at the margins. While the perspective is rooted in the traditions of the South of Italy and the core texts are all set in the North, they are connected by their challenge to homonormativity.

[3] The possibility of provincializing the idea of queer, therefore, to rewrite those stories excluded from History to weave affective and complicity connections that seem like those of other geographies that a straight line does not know (Ferrante 2019: 49).

rante's theory was developed to reclaim a local specificity, and as a challenge to homonormativity and the queer Anglo-American tendency to homogenise different experiences (Ferrante 2019: 48). Therefore, the perspective seems fitting to this paper's aim of exploring Italian rural-to-urban narratives. Hence, the paper answers the following questions: how do the texts relate to the rural-to-urban imaginary? How do they complicate the homonormative paradigm associated with it? What is the role played by the main characters' trajectories and non-conjugal family bonds? Do the works provincialize the idea of queer and bring to the forefront often-excluded affective connections?

2. Small town boys

The works by Bazzi, Bianchi, and Biondi are all deeply connected to specific places, either real or fictional. Therefore, it is necessary to locate in space the three narrations and to chart the characters' movements, as they all offer a different version of the rural-to-urban migration. Each of the narratives gets more distant from the metrosexual paradigm, especially when the storyline appears to be the closest to normativity. Indeed, at a first glance, Bazzi's *Febbre* seems a canonical rural-to-urban story: following the author's biography, the novel accounts for his childhood in Rozzano, a satellite town near Milan, and his life as an adult in the city, in particular his coming to terms with his HIV-positive status. The structure of the novel, in which chapters about his childhood are interwoven with a present-tense narration, exemplifies the dualistic nature of the novel and of the author's locational attachments. However, even if at the core of the narration there is HIV, Rozzano has an undoubted prominence. Right from the beginning, Bazzi sets the precise coordinates that delimit his life, "Sono cresciuto a Rozzano, cap 20089, un paese piccolo ma neanche poi tanto, all'estrema periferia sud di Milano, costruito in mezzo alla campagna che costeggia il Naviglio, in direzione Pavia. […] Poco meno di 43.000 abitanti a Rozzano, stretti a ridosso della tangenziale Ovest"[4] (Bazzi 2019:24). Rozzano is presented as a dangerous, lower-class environment, and conservative regarding gender roles: boys are supposed to only like football, motorbikes, while girls have to have other

4 I grew up in Rozzano, zip code 20089, it is a small town, but not even that small, in the farthest outskirts of Milan, built in the middle out the countryside that runs alongside the Naviglio canal towards Pavia […] Rozzano has less than 43,000 inhabitants, all packed next to the West highway.

interests (Bazzi 2019: 27). This system is forcefully imposed on everyone, everywhere (Bazzi 2019: 28). Only when Bazzi gets older, is he confident enough to present in public in a less stereotypical way. For instance, he dyes his hair green and blue, or wears light blue tartan trousers "da gay",[5] which make him the target of bullies (Bazzi 2019: 147). They forcefully try to place him back within a socially accepted role (Bazzi 2019: 147).

On the other hand, Milan is presented as the promised land throughout the novel. As a kid, Bazzi idealised the city as merely a place imbued with freedom (Bazzi 2019: 90). As a teenager studying there, Bazzi values Milan for its gay-friendly-ness. In his high school class in the city, "Quasi tutte ragazze – quattro i maschi, più me – e una percentuale di gay, lesbiche e bisessuali da circolo LGBT. Questa è Milano. Essere queer va di moda, certe mie compagne sono lesbiche solo per una stagione. Gli etero decisi – non possibilisti – sono una minoranza"[6] (Bazzi 2019: 278). As the stereotypical big city, Milan stands up to its reputation by offering a polar-opposite environment to the one presented by Rozzano – Bazzi is free to be who he is, and he even eventually moves in with his partner there. In a canonical rural-to-urban narrative, the move to Milan and his queer domesticity would have coincided with a happy ending. However, Bazzi's HIV-positive diagnosis disrupts a canonical narrative, allowing Rozzano to regain prominence in the work. While in a severe depressive state, a specific fear fills his mind: the need to move back to Rozzano, should he become too debilitated by HIV (Bazzi 2019: 219). Such thinking progresses to the point that Bazzi ponders whether his boyfriend would bury him in Milano or in Rozzano (Bazzi 2019: 251). Rozzano haunts him, as exemplified by his thoughts after the diagnosis:

> […] Ancora oggi io ho paura che Rozzano rivendichi il suo dominio, che si riprenda ciò che le spetta. Che sbuchi fuori all'improvviso da qualche parte, dai documenti, dai miei tratti del viso marcati, dalla sciatteria nel vestire e che mi costringa quindi a tornare di nuovo al confino, tra le sue vie coi nomi dei fiori. […]
> Ho Rozzano incastrata nel nome, se parlo di me devo parlare di lei.
> Me ne sono andato, ma è tutta ancora qui. (Bazzi 2019: 32)[7]

5 That only a gay person would wear.

6 They were mostly girls – four boys and me – and a percentage of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals worth of an LGBT society. This is Milan. Being queer is fashionable, some of my classmates are lesbians just for a season. The strict heterosexuals – not curious – are a minority.

7 Up to this day, I am afraid that Rozzano will claim its control, that it will take what is right-

However, the diagnosis enables Bazzi to eventually re-evaluate his roots. At the end of the work, Rozzano is compared to the hospital where Bazzi goes for his medical check-ups (Bazzi 2019: 318-319). Both places have challenged him at first, as Rozzano has tried to impose on him strict gender stereotypes and as the hospital is connected to HIV-related prejudices (Bazzi 2019: 319). However, Rozzano has a double nature that fortified Bazzi, his town helped him develop a thick skin that is now invaluable, "Se oggi lo stigma non mi imbriglia poi molto, forse è proprio perché sono cresciuto in quel posto. Rozzano il veleno e l'antidoto"[8] (Bazzi 2019: 320). Rozzano as a *pharmakon* places itself within the disidentification paradigm used by Scott Herring to describe anti-urban spaces (2010: 114). 'Disidentification' has originally been coined by José Esteban Muñoz as "a mode of dealing with dominant ideology [...] that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology" (1999: 11). Bazzi does not reject nor assimilate to Rozzano, but he values the way the town shaped him. Rozzano has been invaluable for him, arguably even more than Milan.

Biondi's *La Generazione* offers a different approach to the rural-to-urban literature. First of all, it presents a different take than the one in *Febbre*, as the main character's small town is not located in Milan's hinterland, but in the fictional Pontecesello in Tuscany's countryside. Hence, it engages with a more defined rural-urban divide.

It is precisely a view of the countryside that introduces the narrative, showing Matteo travelling back by train to his hometown. The main emotion that imbues the panel[9] is the sense of dread that he feels about moving back; he feels empty, in a temporal limbo between his past life and his future (Biondi 2015: 5). He has failed at conducting a successful life in Milan – not being able to be independent or having a career, he merely depended on his (now ex) boyfriend (Biondi 2015: 28). Now, he feels deeply humiliated,

fully its. I am afraid that it will suddenly stand out, from my papers, from my pronounced facial features, from the sloppiness of my clothes, and that it will force me to go back to my confinement, in its flower-named streets. I have Rozzano framed in my name, if I talk about myself, I need to talk about it. I have left, but it is still here.

8 Today, if the stigma does not harness me that much, maybe it is exactly because I grew up in that place. Rozzano is the poison and the antidote.

9 I do not remember much about the journey. When the train left Milan behind, I felt empty. Vaporised. In a limbo between yesterday and tomorrow. I just remember that the sun came out after it had rained a bit in the morning. The green of the sunlit countryside filled my sight. It was tremendously painful.

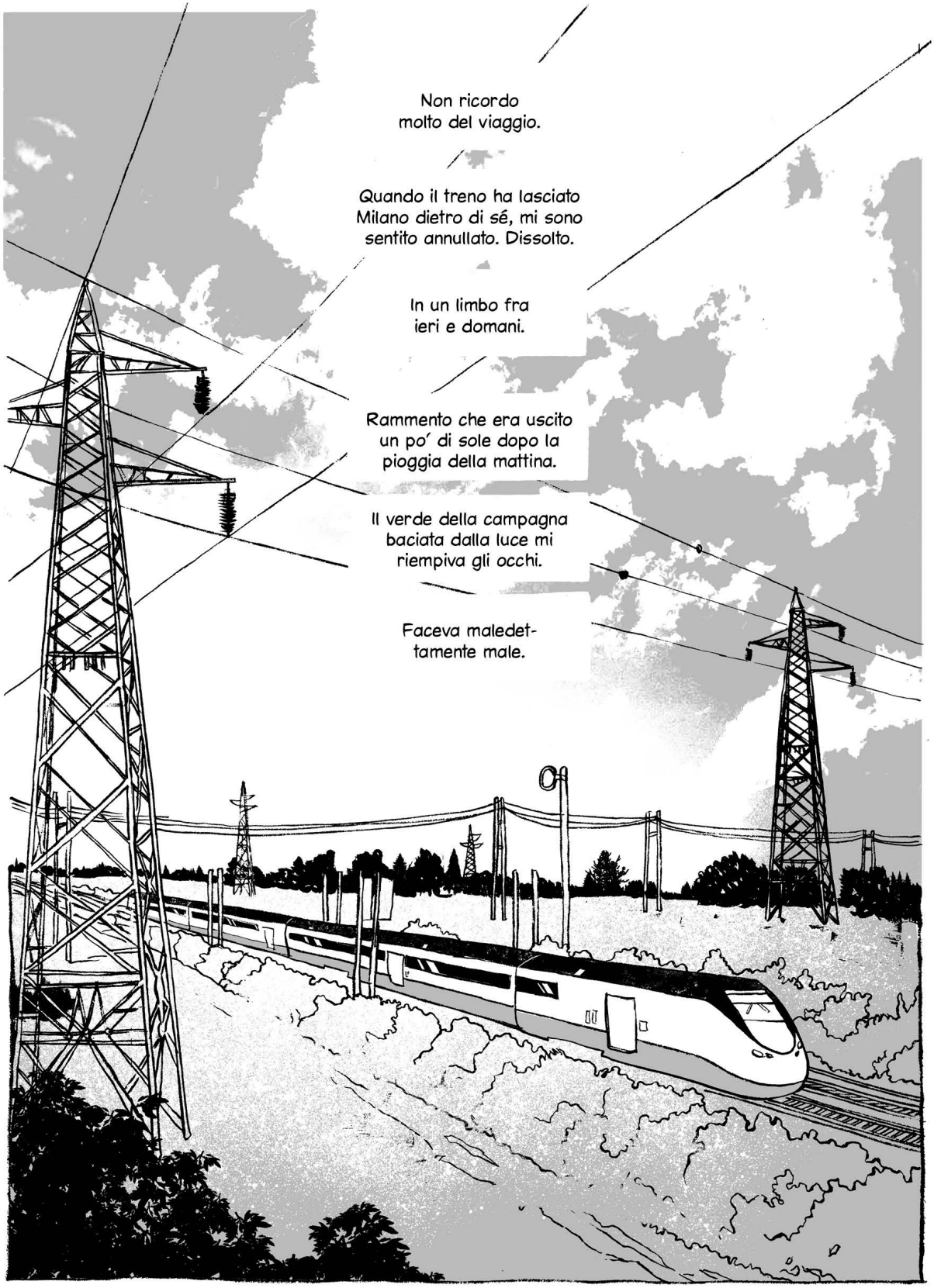

Photo © Flavia Biondi 2015, courtesy of Bao Publishing

as he needs to move in with his family since he has no resources (Biondi 2015: 17). His feelings can be associated with a neoliberal idea of accomplishment, which implies an ascendent financial success.

However, Matteo's attitude towards his hometown starts to change when he befriends Francesco, his grandmother's nurse. Francesco becomes his confidant, and he challenges Matteo's internalised biases, which make him see all country people as backward homophobes. Francesco says:

> Non capisco perché trovi così terribile il tuo rientro. Lo dici come se vivere qui fosse una condanna. […] Io ti sto inseguendo con un forcone, per caso? Non sono tutti così. Ovvio, se prendi come campione la vecchia generazione è un altro discorso. (Biondi 2015: 54)[10]

Francesco contests the view of rural people as close-minded homophobes. The conversation shows that Matteo had embraced the gay imaginary defined by Kath Weston, in which the city is a beacon of tolerance, while the country is instead a place of persecution (1995: 282). Before moving to Milan, he had not explored the reality around him, he merely adjusted his narrative to the canonical rural-to-urban flight and refused to look back. For this reason, Francesco argues that Matteo ran away to Milan in order to avoid coming out to his family and in particular to his father, preferring to believe that he would find acceptance in the big city rather than in Pontecesello (Biondi 2015: 54).

When Matteo goes back to Milan to see his (now no longer ex) boyfriend, he finally disrupts any possibility of the graphic novel to align to a canonical rural-to-urban narrative. Matteo decides not to move back to the city just yet, but to stay in his hometown for a while longer (Biondi 2015: 110-113). He does not reject the city nor the countryside, rather he embraces an in-between life (Biondi 2015: 111). Not choosing stability, he lives between spaces. Living in the liminality encapsulates queer disruptiveness, as it unsettles the spatial binary. Even if his story started on different tracks, he was able to deviate from a neoliberal paradigm and rejoice in his small-town living.

While Bazzi and Biondi's works find ways to be disruptive, they still partially align themselves with the rural-to-urban flight. Instead, Matteo

[10] I do not understand why you find your homecoming so terrible. You say it as if living here was a sentence. […] Am I chasing you with a pitchfork? Not everyone is like that. I mean, obviously, if you take into consideration the older generation things might change.

B. Bianchi's *Generations of Love* is radically different. The novel is immediately localised in the fictional Lentate Trovanti, the typical "Provincia Tranquilla"[11] (2016: 16). Its capitalisation exemplifies the author's awareness of grand narratives and the collocation of his hometown within them. Moreover, it is not just related to literary narrations or the gay imaginary, the rural-to-urban flight is also part of Bianchi's life, as it concerns most of his friends but not himself:

> Ho assistito a una vera e propria diaspora. Frotte di amici hanno cominciato a muoversi, trasferirsi, emigrare. Io, che predico costantemente il movimento come condizione essenziale di vita, forse sono l'unico che non si è mosso di un passo. Alberto ha lasciato la sua famiglia per trasferirsi in città, Marco ha conosciuto un americano, si è innamorato e l'ha seguito a New York, Claudio, letteralmente da un giorno all'altro, ha annunciato che sarebbe andato a Londra ("A ballare sui cubi!", per la precisione) e l'ha fatto. […] Mi sento un provinciale dell'immobilismo. (Bianchi 2016: 123)[12]

The novel is the autobiographical account of Bianchi's childhood and early adulthood in Lentate, as he only moves to Milan at the end of the novel. However, the move is not meant to free him from the small town's close-mindedness. Bianchi was already an out and proud gay at home. Bianchi's provincial life differentiates itself from Bazzi and Biondi's narratives, as, for once, the author does not move to Milan as soon as there's an opportunity. Instead of finding close-mindedness in the countryside, Bianchi finds it in the city, where a group of 'city gays' embody the homonormative stereotype. Bianchi meets them at the local gay centre while attending a talk given by a mayoral candidate, who, for once, is interested in the LGBTQ+ community (Bianchi 2016: 147). However, the group is only interested in appearances to the point that one of them says he will vote for a right-wing politician only because of his good looks. Overall, they are described as a typical product of neoliberal consumerism, as their distinctive features are a Dolce & Gabbana shirt and their 'lobotomy-worthy' comments (Bianchi 2016: 148).

11 Quiet province.

12 I witnessed a real diaspora. Hordes of friends started leaving, moving away, emigrating. It is possible that I am the only one that has not moved at all, I, who constantly preach movement as the essential condition of life. Alberto left his family to move to the city, Marco met an American, fell in love with him, and followed him to New York, Claudio, literally from one day to the next, announced he was going to London ("to dance on tables," more precisely) and he did it. I feel like an immobility provincial.

Bianchi's deep connection to the countryside is evident even from his description of dialect as his "lingua degli affetti"[13] (Bianchi 2016: 135-136). It is the language that his parents speak and that now affects his relationships (Bianchi 2016: 136). Such a deep connection to his land is probably the reason why Bianchi feels able to live openly, even in Lentate Trovanti, in his relationship with his partner, Alessandro, who uses dialectal words as well (Bianchi 2016: 135). Their connection to the countryside strays both of them from being represented as homonormative gay men – not a single Dolce & Gabbana t-shirt in sight.

The peculiarity of the novel is that it is not merely the author's actions that are disruptive to the rural-to-urban paradigm, but also various queer events that happen in Lentate Trovanti. For instance, as a child Bianchi used to attend the town's Mardi Gras parade. The event could have easily been the set of enforced gender roles, such as Rozzano. Instead, it features the first instance of queerness of the novel: Bianchi recounts how another boy defied gender norms by dressing up as 'Spring,' thus, wearing a flowery skirt, a veiled hat, and carrying an embroidered umbrella (2016: 25-26). The event went unnoticed by the rest of the town people, as they believed the boy to be a girl, but it was a watershed in Bianchi's life, "A noi, quel mascheramento da altro sesso, così ricercato e convinto, così privo di ironia, ci ha folgorato. […] Avremo sì e no, dieci anni. Il camp lo inventiamo noi quella sera"[14] (Bianchi 2016: 26). Seeing a boy in a girl's dress prompts the author to reclaim the invention of camp. The narrative overturns the trope that sees the city as more advanced and, instead, places Lentate Trovanti front and centre of a queer aesthetic development.

Additionally, Bianchi's novel disrupts the idea often held by LGBTQ+ people of being the only ones in their small towns (Weston 1995: 281). For instance, he meets a gay man at the local polling station (Bianchi 2016: 122). During the same election night, Bianchi is also approached by a straight-presenting lawyer who introduces him to Lentate Trovanti's cruising area (Bianchi 2016: 128) and even outs the polling station president, who is married with kids but has had various affairs with men (Bianchi 2016: 126). While the closeted fathers might have corresponded to the stereotypes on small towns' people, the presence of a cruising area in the

13 The language of affections.

14 We were dazzled by that other-sex-costume, so sophisticated and committed, so devoid of any irony. We must have been more or less 10-years-old. We invent camp that night.

"Provincia Tranquilla" (Bianchi 2016: 16) strongly disrupts the urban-rural binary. Bianchi's Lentate Trovanti shows that reality cannot be easily categorised into grand narratives and that the countryside and the city have a lot in common.

Overall, the texts by Bazzi, Bianchi, and Biondi all complicate in different ways the canonical rural-to-urban narrative. Indeed, they quite literally "provincialize the idea of queer" (Ferrante 2019: 49) by providing a nuanced picture of the small towns and the characters' relationships to them. Most importantly, their movements are not characterised by a rejection of either the city or of the small towns. Hence, they queerly blur rigid spatial binaries and take new paths that are in line with a "mostre terrone femminelle" perspective (Ferrante 2019: 49).

3. Television, photographs, and toys

The three main characters in the works are not only defined by their connection to their roots but by their attachment to their biological families. Exploring iterations of care in relation to the rural-urban divide might provide ways of challenging the homonormative paradigm. The goal is not to undermine the long history of chosen families that characterises the LGBTQ+ community, but to investigate non-conjugal attachments as sources of disruptiveness. These bonds are analysed in connection to various objects, which arguably reflect the family care. Indeed, in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), Sara Ahmed linked sexual orientation with the spatial orientation, in particular with the disposition of material objects inside a home (2006: 1-9). Heterosexuality has been normalised as the correct orientation (Ahmed 2006: 70) and, as such, it has influenced the way objects are arranged withing a household (Ahmed 2006: 87). The objects need to reflect the good life of the family, which means having achieved certain goals throughout life – marriage, children, and so on (Ahmed 2006: 21). According to this perspective, the queer subject is a deviant (Ahmed 2006: 21) and "to make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things" (Ahmed 2006: 161). Therefore, an analysis of the different objects is the springboard to question how the family relations dis-orient, how they are themselves dis-oriented, and how the family care disrupts homonormativity.

As previously discussed, *Febbre* offers a dual overview of the author's life, covering both his childhood and present life. In the present tense narrative, the author lives with his partner and two cats in a house in Milan

(Bazzi 2019: 20). However, analysing Bazzi's childhood home(s) and its objects is equally stimulating to understand how Bazzi was able to deviate from normativity. Right from the beginning, all of the houses in which Bazzi has lived are positively connected to the women in his life – either his mother, grandmothers, or other figures. They offered him a safe haven both through their actions and through the objects that they surrounded him with. The toys in particular were a controversial topic in his household, as his father wanted him to have 'boys' toys' such as a motorbike or a Ferrari jumpsuit and not 'female and pink toys,' complaining that his wife was raising a 'faggot' (Bazzi 2019: 61). Instead, his grandmother's friends gave him 'girls toys' that no one else wanted to buy him (Bazzi 2019: 91). The presents actively disrupted the compulsory heterosexuality that was imposed on the author by his father and queered the family orientation.

Another object that is part of Bazzi's queer phenomenology is the television. The object is deeply connected to Bazzi's mythography, as his mother named him after a TV show character (Bazzi 2019: 43). The television is essential in most households and is now at the core of the new domestic rituality, as argued Tiziana Terranova (Ferrante 2019: 7). Given its centrality in domestic lives, it should reinforce the heteronormative orientation of the family, borrowing Ahmed's words. Indeed, Bazzi spent a significant part of his childhood and adolescence watching telenovelas and an Italian dating show hosted by Maria de Filippi with his grandmother (Bazzi 2019: 74, 196). It should be noted that one of the most famous de Filippi shows is the heteronormative dating reality show 'Uomini e Donne'.[15] At the same time, Bazzi also watched by himself what are generally considered 'girls' cartoons' and, by dressing up as the female characters, he dis-oriented the family medium (Bazzi 2019: 77-78). By dressing up, Bazzi simultaneously challenged the virile image promoted by homonormativity and heterosexual gender norms. In order to do so, Bazzi found once again support in a female figure, as his grandmother recorded for him his favourite TV shows, such as the Wonder Woman show (Bazzi 2019: 117).

Furthermore, the television reflects family care in the present-day narrative of the work. After the HIV diagnosis, Bazzi suffers from anxiety and

15 Indeed, the show is called 'Men and Women' and is a dating contest in which a group of men or women has to seduce a member of the opposite sex. It is interesting to notice that after the legalization of same-sex unions in Italy, De Filippi has produced a male gay version of the show, whose homonormative traits have already been documented (Ferrante 2019: 27-29).

depression, and his mother starts visiting him daily to help him. Bazzi was already outside of the homonormative paradigm due to his status, but it is his mother's care that reinforces his divergence:

> Stiamo sul divano a vedere la televisione. Io sdraiato, senza più smanie di fare, andare, diventare o ottenere qualcosa. Senza slanci, interessi, senza più tutte le cose che mi separano, mi hanno separato, da lei. Mia madre seduta di fianco a me, ha messo la sua vita in stand-by. Madre e figlio, in un ritaglio di tempo e di spazio isolato dal resto e da tutto quello che è stato. (Bazzi 2019: 280)[16]

Her care is connected to a seemingly unproductive way of life. It is a lifestyle that takes place outside of the capitalist mechanism, and, in this void, Bazzi and his mother are able to find a new connection. By merely enjoying spending time together, they are actively practicing what Ferrante described as a micropolitics of resistance through affections (2019: 25). The television re-orients Bazzi, placing front and centre the importance of care and not productivity. Bazzi was (en)abled to queer the family objects and dis-orient them through the care of various non-conjugal bonds: his mother's and grandmothers' affection allowed him to defy homonormativity by challenging gender norms and neoliberalism. While Rozzano is described as backward, the care that surrounded Bazzi is definitely queer, and it allowed him to write a different story for himself. He did not need to move to Milan to find a support network, as he already had one in his mother and grandmothers.

In a similar fashion, *La Generazione* offers a re-orientation of Matteo and his family through different objects. Photographs are used to tell the family history and to orient it, "in the conventional family home what appears requires following a certain line, the family line that directs our gaze. The heterosexual couple becomes a 'point' along this line, which is given to the child as its inheritance or background" (Ahmed 2006: 90). At the beginning of the graphic novel, Matteo positions himself in opposition to the rest of the family, as he is not smiling in most of the family photographs the readers are shown (Biondi 2015: 40).

Matteo is pictured as a boy surrounded by his father and aunts. However, his attitude is creating cracks in the pictures that are supposed to portray

[16] We are on the couch watching tv. I am lying down, without the mania to do things, to go places, to get something. Without energy, hobbies, without all of the things that separate and used to separate me from her. My mum sitting next to me, she put her whole life on pause. Mother and son, in a clipping of time and space isolated from the rest and from all that has been.

Photo © Flavia Biondi 2015, courtesy of Bao Publishing.

a perfectly happy heterosexual family. As a queer subject, he disturbs the family order (Ahmed 2006: 161). The impression is reinforced by Matteo's thoughts of alienation in the present-tense narration.[17] He comes to terms with the isolation he had imposed on himself from the rest of his family, as a result of his inability to come out to them (Biondi 2015: 40-41). They had not supported him as a gay man, because he had decided to hide from them and their stories (Biondi 2015: 40-41). However, family care slowly allows Matteo to re-orient himself and his self-worth, as it is exemplified by another object: a wheelchair. As soon as Matteo returns to his hometown, he feels deeply humiliated by the situation. At first, he spends weeks not doing anything (Biondi 2015: 21).

During this period, his depression worsens, as his inactivity is portrayed in a series of strips that depict him staring into nothingness while he keeps repeating himself that he will act "tomorrow" (Biondi 2015: 19-21).

17 There was a thought that kept me up at night. Realising that I spent twenty years in a family, whose history I have deliberately ignored.

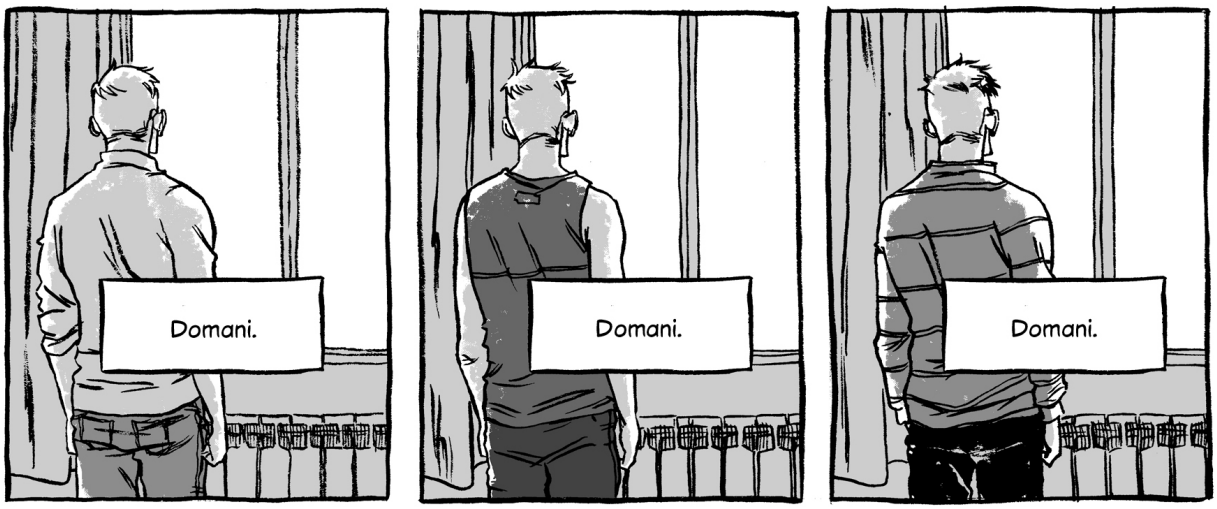

Photo © Flavia Biondi 2015, courtesy of Bao Publishing.

In *Febbre*, the moments of inactivity are positive, while Matteo's empty days bring no positive change. The situation takes a different turn when his aunt threatens to throw Matteo out because he is not contributing to the family's income (Biondi 2015: 33). To stay and earn his place, the family decides he will be the new caregiver of his grandmother (Biondi 2015: 34-35). Matteo learns from his aunts various nursing practices how to do daily domestic chores (Biondi 2015: 42-44, 59). The wheelchair that Matteo uses to help his grandmother is exemplary of his care and growth. At first, he is ashamed of being seen pushing her grandmother through town (Biondi 2015: 45-47). However, after a while, Matteo starts to see the value in his care towards his grandmother and such change is positively reflected in his own self-worth (Biondi 2015: 60). He is finally proud of himself (Biondi 2015: 60). The care is mutual; by helping his grandmother, Matteo is helped to grow. It is a truly revolutionary act in a neoliberal society and for a young man to appreciate the teachings of a group of unemployed middle-aged women (the antithesis of productivity) and, most importantly, to take care of them.

Another object that disrupts the norm is, once again, the television. Soon after his family has discovered Matteo's sexual orientation, they gather in the living room to watch 'Uomini e Donne,' the dating tv show hosted by Maria De Filippi.[18] They start discussing which male contestant on the show is more attractive and they include Matteo, who professes liking dark-haired guys more, and his family silently accepts him (Biondi

[18] The show's presence in *Febbre* as well (Bazzi 2019: 196) is a clear indicator of its mainstream status and as a key part of the Italian imaginary.

2015: 92-95). The scene's strength is in how Matteo queers 'Uomini e Donne,' a show that embodies heteronormativity. However, it is significant that it is his aunt who prompts Matteo to speak of his preferences. Her care for him has dis-oriented the scene in the first place, invalidating his own prejudice of countryside backwardness.

By the end of the graphic novel and after Matteo's coming out, the readers are presented with more photographs in an enlarged view of the same set depicted at the beginning of the work. This time the readers are shown a more complete image of the family wall; there are various pictures of the family through the years and also one in which Matteo is smiling (Biondi 2015: 128-129). Matteo's coming out has deviated the orientation of the whole family and queered their image, a disruption that has been enabled by their mutual care and the family's acceptance.

Generations of Love's disruptiveness to homonormativity and canonical rural-to-urban narratives, exemplified by the text's location in Lentate Trovanti, is enhanced by the care of Bianchi's sister, Caterina. She supported him long before his coming out by often challenging their father's homophobic views and becoming an LGBTQ+ activist in their household:

> Una sera, a cena, mio padre se ne uscì con la frase: "Quello lì è un culattone", riferendosi a un qualsiasi renatozero televisivo. Mia sorella si alzò da tavola urlando: "Non voglio sentire un linguaggio del genere. Per tua informazione e regola si dice omosessuale e non quei termini che usi tu, e poi gli omosessuali sono persone degne del più grande rispetto." E via che gli spiattella una lista di esime personalità del mondo dell'arte, della cultura, della storia, della musica, passando da Leonardo da Vinci ai Village People con una competenza stupefacente, lasciando mio padre senza parole, se non quelle di scusa, e lasciando soprattutto me in pieno sbalordimento. (Bianchi 2016: 34)[19]

Moreover, Caterina re-oriented the family and actively supported Bianchi by recommending and handing him various LGBTQ+ novels (Bianchi 2016: 36). These objects mirror her care, and they queer the family

19 One time, at dinner my dad said. "That one is a faggot," talking about a flamboyant man on tv. My sister rose up screaming, "I do not want to hear that type of talk. For your information, you should say 'homosexual' and not use those terms, moreover, homosexuals are people worthy of the highest respect." And then she started listing various eminent figures from the art world, from history, and from the music scene, going from Leonardo da Vinci to the Village People, with an impressive expertise, leaving my dad almost speechless, if only with words of apology, and especially leaving me in complete bewilderment.

home. The novels allowed Bianchi to know he was supported even before he himself came to terms with his sexuality. This non-conjugal relationship positively influenced Bianchi, to the point that he tried to subtly hint at this sexuality to his parents in a similar way, through books and articles. After his father reacts negatively to this coming out (Bianchi 2016: 157-160), Bianchi looks back at the hints he had dropped throughout the years to ease his future coming out:

> Io che in tutti questi anni ho cercato di condurre una politica silenziosa di indottrinamento, fatta di articoli di giornale lasciati strategicamente aperti sul comodino, di romanzi consigliati dalla critica "inter" e nazionale, di programmi dell'accesso e di dibattiti televisivi che fingevo di captare casualmente con saltelli misuratissimi di telecomando, mi credevo un laureato in educazione subliminale.
> […] Passando loro libri da leggere, indicando loro film da vedere, e soprattutto sforzandomi disperatamente di dimostrarmi tranquillo, sereno, soddisfatto della vita che stavo conducendo, cercavo di preparare il terreno proprio in previsione di questo momento cruciale, il momento in cui avrebbero dovuto capire che un figlio frocio non coincide con un fallimento. (Bianchi 2016: 159)[20]

The various objects described by Bianchi constitute his queer phenomenology, as they deviate his family's heteronormative orientation. Even if subtly, Bianchi disrupted the assumed heteronormativity of his parents while still living with them; he did not wait to be far away to do so, and his sister's support undoubtedly enabled him to challenge the norm.

By focusing on the importance of non-conjugal relations, Bazzi, Bianchi and Biondi have unknowingly employed the "mostre terrone femminelle" perspective theorised by Ferrante (2019: 49). They have brought to the forefront a type of relationship that is often overlooked in favour of a dyadic and conjugal one. The affective micropolitics of resistance against homonormativity (Ferrante 2019: 25) is enacted by mothers, grandmothers, aunts, and sisters. They create networks of care that contrast the normative and neoliberal paradigm. Indeed, if the individual and their economic success

[20] I thought of myself as a master in subliminal education, as I have spent the last years conducting a silent policy of indoctrination, made of newspapers strategically left open on the table, of novels recommended by national and international critics, of programmes and television debates that I pretended to have stumbled upon with careful zapping […] By giving them books to read, suggesting them films to watch, and especially by showing them I was calm, serene, happy with the life I was living, I was trying to pave the way for the crucial moment, the one in which they would have understood that having a faggot son did not equate with failure.

are at the centre of a neoliberal society, implying that economic growth should prevail on human connections, then caring for other people, especially elders and sick people, is indeed a revolutionary and disruptive act. Moreover, the non-conjugal family bonds complicate the rural-to-urban imagery: by not rejecting or being rejected by their biological families, the characters are not prompted to leave their small towns to find a chosen family in the city. Much like the countryside can be a place where the characters can thrive, similarly their familiar relations do not need to be truncated, rather they are a source of support. The texts allow for a wider re-discovery of biological non-conjugal relations and their importance to the LGBTQ+ community as a means to counteract the homonormative perspective.

4. Conclusion

Queerness is often associated with a counter-hegemonic and disruptive nature. However, pre-emptively classifying certain actions of the LGBTQ+ community as normative or antinormative is in itself a normalising attitude, as "no one set of practices or relations has the monopoly on the so-called radical, or the so-called normative" (Nelson 2016: 91). By looking at white, gay, non-disabled, cisgender characters and their relationship with the rural-urban divide, this paper has challenged homonormativity on two fronts. Firstly, by looking at the rural-to-urban flight in Italian articulations. Since they are never estranged from their families, the main characters in the works by Bazzi, Biondi, and Bianchi all live in the liminal space between the city and their towns, they constantly oscillate between the two, and when they move, it is never to cut ties definitely. Moreover, they all find value in their small towns. The in-betweenness between the city and the countryside in the works is not a mere biographical detail. Rather, it embodies the idea that the urban-rural binary does not really exist. As argued by Jack J. Halberstam, the binary is not real, "it is rather a locational rubric that supports and sustains the conventional depiction of queer life as urban" (2005: 190). The country's othering worked as a means to promote the urban lifestyle of success. However, these works have disrupted such binary by showing how much more nuanced queer life can be and expanded its possibilities.

The spatial queerness has been enabled by the strong attachment shared by the main characters and their families: the one between an adult child

and his parent and grandmothers in *Febbre*, between extended family members in *La Generazione*, and the one between siblings in *Generations of Love*. Indeed, the second front against homonormativity is their mutual care, as they have: contested the necessity of moving to the city, queered the family homes, and challenged neoliberalism, by placing to the front care networks rather than individualism. The adult care networks are also significant to the literary genre of the works analysed. The reciprocal care between his family and himself is described by Matteo in *La Generazione* as a "lungo racconto"[21] (Biondi 2015: 136). Biondi presents family relations as a narrative that connects and honours all of its members by keeping their stories alive. This line can be understood as a metanarrative remark that connects the graphic novel to Biondi's life, as the author also comes from a small town in Tuscany (Tribuzio 2018). Although not strictly autobiographical in its genre, *La Generazione* seems to tell Biondi's and her family's story. The "lungo racconto" description also speaks for both Bazzi and Bianchi's novels, as they are both autobiographical. Their narrations recreate the family care and, at the same time, pay tribute to it.

The family bonds in the core texts are "radical kinships" (Ferrante 2019: 25) that contest gender norms and (homo)normativity. Due to their disruptiveness, they can be described as part of to the "mostre terrone femminelle" paradigm (Ferrante 2019: 49). Their type of bonds is a further challenge to the norms; indeed, the connections do not constitute a nuclear family nor a dyadic marital relation, thus, they are not priorities nor recognised as much by society or the current legislation. Analysing the current legislation and proposing alternatives goes beyond the scope of the paper. However, it can be argued that extending the rights to non-conjugal relations would maintain their disruptive nature. Legally recognised non-conjugal relations could still be counter-hegemonic, as they would challenge the (straight and gay) marriage institution and its exceptionalism, and positively expand the number of new beneficiaries (Warner 2000: 98-99).[22] This paper has only analysed non-conjugal disruptiveness in relation to homonormativity and the rural-urban divide. However, it can be argued that the non-conjugal challenge to the norms is increasingly expanding. For now, one can look back at

[21] Long never-ending story.

[22] Michael Warner argued against gay marriage because it reinforces an exclusionary institution, since it does not involve a plethora of other intimacies, such as polyamorous relationships (Warner 2000: 98-99).

the beginning of the paper and say, a queer person in search for happiness does not, indeed, need to move to the next big city.

Alice Parrinello

St Cross College, University of Oxford
alice.parrinello@stx.ox.ac.uk

References

Ahmed S., 2006, *Queer Phenomenology*, Duke University Press, Durham NC.

Bazzi J., 2019, *Febbre*, Fandango Libri, Roma.

Bianchi M. B., 2016, *Generations of Love: Extensions*, Fandango Libri, Roma.

Biondi F., 2015, *La Generazione*, Bao Publishing, Milano.

Duggan L., 2003, *The twilight of equality? Neoliberism, cultural politics and the attack on democracy*, Beacon Press, Boston MA.

Ferrante A.A., 2019, *Pelle Queer, Maschere Straight: Il Regime di Visibilità Omonormativo Oltre la Televisione,* Mimesis Edizioni, Milano.

Gray M. L., Johnson C. R., & Gilley B. J., 2016, *Queering the Countryside New Frontiers in Rural Queer Studies*, New York University Press, New York NY.

Halberstam J.J., 2005, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, New York University Press, New York NY.

Herring S., 2010, *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism*, New York University Press, New York NY.

Johnson C.R., 2013, *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia PA.

Muñoz J.E., 1999, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis MN.

Nelson M., 2016, *The Argonauts*, Melville House, London.

Tondelli P.V., 2019, *Camere Separate*, Bompiani, Milano.

Tribuzio S., 2018, *Giovani spaventati guerrieri – I maestri del nulla di Flavia Biondi*, Finzioni Magazine, <https://www.finzionimagazine.it/f/giovani-spaventati-guerrieri-i-maestri-del-nulla-di-flavia-biondi> (last accessed 2021-02-22).

Warner M., 2000, *The Trouble With Normal*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA.

Weston K., 1995, "Get Thee To a Big City," in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies,* 2: 253-277.

Weston K., 1997, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. Columbia University Press, New York NY.