

# “Merde Alors!”

## A Neo-Fascist Daddy Is Marching on Brussels

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**ABSTRACT** In recent history, Italy has repeatedly emerged as a successful laboratory for political experiments. After WWI, Fascism was invented there by Mussolini, and it quickly spread across Europe. In the 1990s, Berlusconi anticipated Trump’s entrepreneurial populism. Today, there is a risk that Italy will once again perform the role of a political avant-garde: that it will export to Europe a sovereign populism of a new kind that is nonetheless in continuity with disquieting features of the worst past. The essay performs a close reading of the programmatic speech that Minister of Home Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister of Italy Matteo Salvini delivered in July 2018 at the thirty-second annual gathering of the Lega party. Its aim is to detect the presence in it of the politics of abjection (Judith Butler), a “Fascist archetype” (Umberto Eco) that affects both racialized and non-heterosexual people.

**KEYWORDS** Italy, neo-Fascism, populism, Matteo Salvini, queer theory

This man worked for the carnival, you dig? And to start with it was like a novelty ventriloquist act. After a while, the ass started talking on its own. He would go in without anything prepared . . . and his ass would ad-lib and toss the gags back at him every time. Then it developed sort of teethlike . . . little raspy incurving hooks and started eating. He thought this was cute at first and built an act around it . . . but the asshole would eat its way through his pants and start talking on the street . . . shouting out it wanted equal rights. It would get drunk, too, and have crying jags. Nobody loved it . . .

—William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*

### Warning

These pages stink. Their content is highly inappropriate. To a sensitive reader, this article might sound obscene and disgusting. And indeed it is: the anal drive governs its analysis. It is also, I hope, bitterly hilarious: its tone is deliberately ironic, or

rather sarcastic. My hope is that the reader might find it possible to grin in the face of a very dramatic situation (our present), or even experience a masochistic enjoyment of being involved in morally unbearable political processes.

Critical theory can sometimes convey a false sense of safe distance from the object scrutinized: the subjects of critical theory often remove or detach themselves from the phenomena that they criticize. On the contrary, the subject who wrote this article does not—I do not—feel safe at all, or innocent at all, but profoundly enmeshed in the psycho-political processes of repression and foreclosure that far-right rhetorics exacerbate with abjection, but which constitutively shape the imaginary and affective structuring of the social. We are all implicated in the dirty and messy thing itself (the political): this is what I aim not only to demonstrate but also to display or perform. Because of this involvement, we are responsible, and if we still recognize the values of the left and democracy, we *have to* respond.

In the background of the text, readers will sense an engagement with a set of timely questions: what do we mean by *far-right populism*? What relationships can be traced between these new political forms and right-wing movements and parties from the past? Are we facing the risk that Fascism and totalitarianism will make a comeback, or are we confronting an authoritarian turn in the neoliberal governance of the world that is radically new? My aim is neither to offer definitive answers to these questions nor to update the political theory of forms of government but rather to offer an example of critical rhetorical analysis. This essay will scrutinize the communication strategy of a particular far-right populist party, the Italian Lega under Matteo Salvini's leadership, in order to understand a way of imagining and constructing the political that circulates in the contemporary public sphere: in Italy but not only in Italy, and in Europe but not only in Europe. The narrative will develop as a series of flows or an assemblage. It will follow the repetitions, contradictions, swerves, approximations, euphemisms, double-binds, double entendres, subtexts, coded messages, and Freudian slips of a mode of reasoning that is far from reasonable. But a reasoning that is nevertheless working efficaciously to the end of aggregating a national people against a transnational elite, mixing traditional “ideological glues” of the Right (religion, racism, sexist chauvinism, and homo-trans-bi-pan-phobia) in a *new schmaltzy rhetoric of “love”* that befits new forms of communication in post-patriarchal and neoliberal times.

Psychoanalytic categories will be used together with interpretive concepts taken from anticolonial and queer theories. Suggestions will be taken from literature and film. The aim is to explore how *sexual fantasies* affect the political sphere, producing distinctions between “us” and “them,” between friends and enemies, between humans and those less than “human”: abject subjects including migrants, Roma, and other racialized and non-heterosexual people whom the “transnational elite” is accused of championing. In sum, this is a partisan contribution that

opposes the spread of a far-right rhetoric by interpreting it not as Fascist but as neo-Fascist. That is, as a populist communication of a new kind that is nonetheless in continuity with disquieting features of the worst past: permeated by Fascist archetypes updated in order to befit social media and shape a neoliberal political marketing different from historical Fascism's propaganda, but nevertheless *Fascist* for its anti-democratic, illiberal, and discriminatory character.

As a consequence, this essay intentionally runs the risk of being itself rhetorical: not just as a description of a new political phenomenon, but as a call to action and for resistance to the return of a past that has never ceased to haunt us. Whether it is effective in understanding Salvinism and persuasive in opposing it in Italy and neo-Fascist populism elsewhere, each reader is of course free to decide.

### 1. Swearing

Loosely translated, the phrase means “holy crap” or “holy shit.” It is the expression of disagreement that Jean Asselborn, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Luxembourg, addressed to Matteo Salvini, Minister of Home Affairs and Deputy Prime Minister of Italy: *Merde alors*. The setting was the European meeting on immigration held in Vienna on September 14, 2018. It was a meeting held behind closed doors, and Asselborn was not aware of being recorded with a mobile phone. As soon as the video, uploaded on the web, went viral, he accused Salvini of deploying “the methods of the Fascists from the thirties.” About three weeks earlier, the Italian politician and philosopher Massimo Cacciari had also had an outburst. The Italian government, represented by Salvini as its Minister of Home Affairs, had decided to close ports to rescue ships for migrants, and during a television interview, Cacciari had stated: “In the current situation, whoever is not ashamed and outraged is a piece of shit.”<sup>1</sup> More than mere coincidences, these two inelegant statements made by such members of the democratic and liberal European intelligentsia as Asselborn and Cacciari are symptoms of an exasperated situation. In a world where Trump, Putin, Erdogan, and Bolsonaro are in power, and sovereigntist parties such as Orban's Fidesz and Salvini's Lega are on the rise, those who still hold onto (or those who still delude themselves into holding onto?) the humanitarian vocation of Europe find relief from their perceived powerlessness through the act of swearing.

If we focus not just on the form of Asselborn's speech act, but on its specific content, and if we put it in contact with the subsequent charge of Fascism that he addressed to Salvini, we can try to push the interpretation a bit further. The utterance was not a generic curse, but an excremental one — one that conflated, momentarily, the two orifices used for nutrition and for defecation, also two fundamental erogenous zones. If we were to play a free-association game, we might say that Asselborn got so irritated by Salvini at the Vienna meeting that he ended up spitting shit out of his mouth. Or, to borrow an image from a movie, we might say that Assel-

born turned into a talking anus, like the one depicted by David Cronenberg<sup>2</sup> in the shape of a bug in his adaptation of William Burroughs's milestone *Naked Lunch*.<sup>3</sup> One might also recall another film, Pier Paolo Pasolini's allegory of Fascism *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*<sup>4</sup>: in particular, the final scene of the film's second infernal "circle," "The Circle of Shit." As Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutiot write in their aptly titled article, "Merde alors,"<sup>5</sup> the scene featuring the banquet of feces is a "revealing moment" that discloses key dynamics in the brutal sexual dictatorship conceived by the Marquis de Sade under Louis XIV's kingdom in France and transposed by Pasolini to Italy under the Italian Social Republic (the military regime imposed by Mussolini on Northern Italian territories when they were occupied by the German army, from September 1943 to April 1945).<sup>6</sup> Despite using one of the commonest slurs in the French language, Asselborn's statement perhaps represents a "revealing moment" as well: it connects Fascism and Leghism with a specific kind of sadism in which anal enjoyment (or *jouissance*) represents the taboo, the repressed, and the obscene secret. This "revelation" might even confer a new meaning on the hashtag that has been used against the leader of the Lega: #salvinimerda (#salvinishit).

As soon as he took office in the Ministry of Home Affairs in May 2018, Salvini announced that he would carry out a census of Roma people in Italy—an ethnicity-based census that, fortunately, Italy's antifascist Constitution forbids. Additionally, he expressed his regret that he could not deprive Italian Roma of their citizenship: "Unfortunately, you must keep Italian Roma here at home," he said.<sup>7</sup> His use of the adverb *unfortunately* here, though, should not mislead us: living in a home haunted by unwanted presences is a necessary part of his political project. This is confirmed by the pivotal "security decree" passed in October 2018<sup>8</sup> and, according to surveys, much welcomed by Italian citizens. The intended goal of the decree, like that of the impossible Roma census, is the expulsion of so-called "illegal migrants" based on a "zero tolerance" disciplinary logic. Given the extreme difficulty of practicing forced repatriations, however, the actual logic behind the decree is that of a double bind:<sup>9</sup> it has been estimated that the number of "illegal migrants" will increase by around three hundred thousand in the next three years.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, the number of disembarkations had decreased during the previous center-left government, which funded the Libyan police forces—the ones that imprison migrants in camps where, as the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Raad al-Hussein, reported in November 2017, extortions, beatings, tortures, and rapes happen regularly. "Out of sight, out of mind" was the refrain of the previous Minister of Home Affairs, Marco Minniti. The strategy of his successor, Salvini, is instead to keep people's sights and minds well focused on a social emergency that does not exist. He indeed needs the presence on the Italian territory of *subjects who have to be expelled but are not really expellable*, in order to direct Italian people's sadism onto these subjects. This is why he makes proclamations against Roma people, closes ports, approves a security decree that produces insecurity, and so forth.

At the Vienna meeting, in order to underscore the foreignness of African migrants to Italians' "civilized" lifestyle, Salvini characterized the former in terms that are unacceptable for our liberal consciousness: that is, in terms of slavery instead of paid work. These are the words that outraged Asselborn:

I heard some colleagues say that we need migrants because the European population is aging. My opinion is different. I think I have been placed in government and am paid in order to help our youth have as many children as they used to have some years ago. I am not here to eradicate *the best of African youth* in order to replace the European youth who cannot afford having children. This might be the need in Luxembourg, but in Italy we need to help our children to have other children, and not to have new *slaves* to supplant the children we no longer have.<sup>11</sup>

Obviously, Salvini avoids mentioning that the reason migrants do not have access to regular jobs resides in the Italian legal system (and the European law system as well, pace Asselborn and Cacciari), which he himself is making stricter and more contradictory. Apart from this omission, what is most striking in his reasoning is its slippage from demography to the realm of work. For him, the possibility of a mixed-race European population is unacceptable to such an extent that the role he imagines for African migrants in an aging Europe cannot be that of new European citizens who make children, but rather that of slaves, with no citizenship and no rights, who work at the service of European citizens. Such a discursive slippage clarifies the euphemistic and hypocritical nature of the phrasing that Salvini initially used. He said "the best of African youth." But what he really meant all along was "the African slaves, the African scum that in no case shall mix with Europeans."

Asselborn's reply, in contrast, was absolutely flawless on the level of argumentative logic. He reminded Salvini that Italians have been migrants themselves (actually, they continue to be migrants nowadays, and extensively).<sup>12</sup> Migrants, not slaves, who guaranteed their families' survival with their remittances: "In Luxembourg, dear Sir, we had thousands of Italians who came to work, migrants who allowed you in Italy to have money for your children." Then, clashing with the clear argumentative logic of these words, the slur erupted: "Merde alors!" This did not clinch the argument, but threw it into an abyss of signification: into the black hole of enjoyment, which Cronenberg represents as a bug, to which Sade and Pasolini dedicate a banquet—the black hole that it is now time to enter. Merde alors: hold your nose.

## 2. Slaves and Children

In Salvini's intervention in Vienna, the reference to generational succession and reproduction is not exceptional. Nor is the reference to slavery. Together with contradiction and euphemism, the double bind and the double entendre, these are

typical tropes in his current rhetoric. In order to understand this rhetoric, a retrospective glance at the fast evolution the political leader went through in just a decade can be useful. At the beginning of his political career, his messages were mainly heinous, aggressive, and vulgar. “The Lega Nord has a hard-on [ce l’ha duro]” was the famous slogan by Umberto Bossi, the mentor of Salvini, founder of the party, and advocate of the secession of Northern Italy—the imaginary “Padania”—from the rest of the country. And Salvini reproduced Bossi’s chauvinist manners to taunt Southern Italians. At the annual gathering of the party in Pontida<sup>13</sup> in June 2009, for instance, he sang: “Something stinks, even the dogs are running: it’s Neapolitans coming. . . . Naples shit [Napoli merda], Naples cholera, you make all Italy feel ashamed.”<sup>14</sup> And again, in October 2012, he stated that only the North of Italy deserved to belong to Europe, whereas the South “cannot afford the euro and should have a different currency.”<sup>15</sup> In the past six years, water has been flowing under the bridge: Salvini turned the Lega Nord (the Northern League) into just the Lega (the League); he won votes from Southern Italians; and, together with the populist and putatively “post-ideological” party called the 5 Star Movement, he formed a coalition government that risked incurring an infringement from the European Commission against the whole of Italy.<sup>16</sup> Above all, during this time, Salvini replaced Neapolitans with other polemical targets, and he learned that polemic alone is not enough: for the sake of votes, it may be convenient to appear as victims rather than perpetrators.<sup>17</sup> His current rhetoric is a successful mix of fear and rage, reassurance and hope, and he conveys these ambivalent feelings through euphemisms, coded messages, and contradictory arguments, of which we have already examined an example. Additionally, Salvini abandoned the guise of the independentist agitator and started wearing more humble clothes: during public speeches and interviews or in the many videos he posts on social media—wearing sweatshirts and undershirts, and even displaying his chubby bare chest—he talks “like a dad.” This is Salvini’s new political mask: the big boy, once naughty, has now settled down and started a family. As a dad, he is now worried about the future of his children. A quintessential example of his new rhetoric is the programmatic speech that he delivered in July 2018 at the thirty-second annual gathering of the Lega in Pontida, the slogan of which was “good sense in government.”<sup>18</sup> This speech will be the focus of this article, since it provides a key example of the contemporary far-right’s communication strategy and its relationship with the Fascist propaganda of the past.

Following Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, but also Pierre Rosanvallon<sup>19</sup> (and the three are just different examples of a much broader debate in political theory), we can define populism as a variation of democracy in which the feeling of belonging to the political community is expressed in negative terms of rejection rather than in positive terms of adhesion. What characterizes the argumentative structure of populism is not a specific ideology, but the opposition between a

people and an elite—with the latter accused of ignoring the needs of the former. The populist character of his “goodsensical” government emerges in its clearest shape in the speech that Salvini delivered in Pontida.<sup>20</sup> Here the elite is portrayed as a cultivated, liberal, leftist, and pro-European cabal. It certainly includes Asselborn and Cacciari: “snobbish” and “radical chic” intellectuals living in their “attics,” sitting on comfortable “armchairs,” together with journalists filled with envy (in Italian slang “rosiconi”), who dare show their worries about the success of the Lega.<sup>21</sup> While the “people” is neither a specific social group nor a class, it does not include the less affluent or the less cultivated, nor does it correspond solely to the workers (the tie between the Lega and entrepreneurs from the Italian North remains steadfast). It is neither a conglomerate of corporations nor the result of a rational pact between individuals. In Salvini’s rhetoric, “the people” is first and foremost “a collection of family units” made of “self-absorbed couples with their kids,” as in Valerie Solanas’s depiction of patriarchal society in *SCUM Manifesto*.<sup>22</sup> In a sense, Salvini’s “people” does constitute a family of sorts: “This is not a party gathering, this is not a rally. This is a Sunday family meeting, a day of communion and community. . . . Each of you is my brother and my sister. The children of each of you are my children.”

As in the most traditional families, the father and husband speaks on behalf of his children and wife: he takes for granted that they agree with him. Yet Salvini’s tone is not authoritarian or imperious, but sentimental and altruistic. Although he claims fatherhood toward everyone, he does not portray himself as a patriarch, as the father of the fathers and mothers in the audience, but as a father *among* fathers and mothers, whom he addresses as brothers and sisters, almost like a deacon celebrating a rite. His sermon opens with a tribute to Gianluca Bonanno, a Leghist member of the European parliament who died in a car accident, and to “all our friends who,” like him, “passed away”: Salvini comes down from the stage to hug Bonanno’s mother, and the two of them kiss the “tree of life” that Bossi planted years ago in memory of dead Leghist militants. And his sermon ends with the leader holding a rosary:<sup>23</sup> “I always carry it with me: an exploited woman made it,” he explains, and then adds, “that woman could very well be Nigerian or Italian.”<sup>24</sup> In this way, Salvini portrays himself as a pious and merciful father who does not forget the dead and the neediest, even the Nigerians, especially when they are women to be saved from sex trafficking.<sup>25</sup> (Do not be deceived by this. Remember that in Vienna, Salvini first addressed African migrants as “the best of African youth” and then called them “slaves.” I will return to this kind of discursive move.)

Or rather, I have to correct myself: he does not portray himself strictly as a “father.” As I noted before, Salvini portrays himself more as a “dad.” He does not address a people made of mothers and fathers, but one made of moms and dads, that is, a people comprising parents looked at from the perspective of children demanding attention, containment, and protection. In this way, Salvini activates

a generational short circuit, becoming dad and child at once: he is both reassuring and endearing; he offers protection while asking for it.<sup>26</sup> His tone is steady, balanced, virile—a master class in style compared to Asselborn’s and Cacciari’s outbursts—but the most ferocious contents of his political program are conveyed in a tender and even schmaltzy manner: “to forget *all compassion* for murderers and rapists,” to equip police with electric tasers, to close ports to ships aiding migrants. All such measures are equivalent to “working towards a better, cheerful, and smiling Italy.” Each argument takes a repressive, punitive shape; and yet Salvini does not take up the role of the irresponsible macho man any longer, nor the role of the authoritarian father. Instead, he takes up the role of the good-hearted dad. Oftentimes he states that he is not propelled by revenge, anger, or hate, but by love: “I see love here,” he says of the Lega rally, “I see no envy, no jealousy.”<sup>27</sup> He then quotes Catholic poet Davide Rondoni and explains that “love is the task of the fearless.”<sup>28</sup>

This way, the feeling of love, understood less in terms of an excessive and exceptional burning passion than in its more ordinary connotations, covers in pink the electoral slogan of the Lega: “Italians first.”<sup>29</sup> Because, when he quotes Rondoni, who says that lovers are fearless, Salvini means that something worth fearing does exist—or rather, someone: someone who must be left out of the Italian people gathered under the loving embrace of the Lega.<sup>30</sup> What is frightening is not the elite, the clique of pro-European intellectuals and journalists, but other subjects who are supposedly protected and championed by these elites. Salvini takes a detour in his speech, but he eventually reaches the conclusion that everyone in the audience is expecting from him. What’s frightening is “that filth called the Mafia, the Camorra, and the ’Ndrangheta.” “Filth” that is “filthy” (*schifezze che fanno schifo*), he says, redundantly, while promising that, with “courage,” he will “eradicate them from our country.”<sup>31</sup> This “filth” is immediately connected to other “filth”: for criminal organizations like the Mafia and the Camorra, he announces, “the party is over” (*la pacchia è finita*), just as it is over for the “smugglers of human beings.”<sup>32</sup> The latter expression recurs in Salvini’s communications: it is the slogan used to justify the closure of ports to rescue ships, and it is one that the audience knows well, just as it knows that the ultimate referents of “filth” are not Mafia-aligned smugglers but their boatloads of suffering human beings. This is the last link in the metonymic chain drawn by Salvini. What he means is that “the party is over for migrants”: *they* are frightening and filthy; *they* are the *enemies* of the people, protected by the pro-European elites.

The tone is literally belligerent: Salvini does not forget to commemorate the anniversary of the end of the First World War. “Our grandfathers and their own grandfathers,” he proclaims, died to defend the borders of the Italian nation.<sup>33</sup> It is thus time to get back to defending these borders—with courage, pride, and of course with love:



Here we have people who love, people who got their pride back. . . . I would not be able to look at myself in the mirror if I were not using the twenty-four hours a day that God provides me with to defend the history of this country. And I can tell you that right now, for the third time in one month, there is a ship filled with *slaves* which is not docking in Italy but is going elsewhere. Elsewhere! (Emphasis added)

Here the argument that Salvini summarizes in the Vienna meeting is fully developed. Not women and men, but families made of women and men, of moms and dads, must gather under the love of the Lega's people, blessed by its God and its martyrs—a people which is itself a family. Together, they can find the courage to defend their children from those threatening them, who are both fearsome and “filthy”: not only the snobbish elitists and Mafia-aligned criminals and smugglers, but also the slaves carried on their boats (sexual slaves and trafficked women included?). Slavery: not a euphemism in this case, but a dysphemism that designates, in Pontida as well as in Vienna, African migrants with their black skin, made into the representatives of all migrants.

### 3. The Wrong Hole

We can thus consider Salvini's performance in Vienna as a reprise of his anti-migrant rhetoric, but only partially. Unlike the short speech in Vienna, the longer intervention in Pontida assembles other enemies supposedly protected by European elites alongside migrants, who are described through both cultural and pop-cultural references. They too are filthy, as filthy as Neapolitans used to be in the past. But they are not Roma. Their entrance is “sponsored” by Coca-Cola, the drink that epitomizes US imperialism, which Salvini contrasts with Italian olive oil. Even more curiously, as a way into this new argument, Salvini points to the work of philosopher Simone Weil:

Simone Weil used to say that duties come before rights: this is something those who have been living in Italy for a long time now, and especially those who will come tomorrow, have to keep in mind. . . . *And speaking of immigration:* Simone Weil herself, who can't definitely be charged with populism, sovereigntism, Fascism, racism, Nazism, or Martianism, as we usually are, wrote that everything that uproots human beings or prevents them from putting down roots is a criminal act. This is what Brussels, Berlin, and Paris have been trying to do in the past years. Uprooting us. Erasing women and men in order to have numbers and consumers. At the service of multinational corporations such as Coca-Cola, which sponsor *pride parades* in our cities to conquer new consumers. Someone then comes to tell us that Coca-Cola is healthier than Italian olive oil. They should drink it if they like it so much! I prefer olive oil. I prefer the products of my sea and my land. (Emphasis added)

Olive oil, obviously, cannot be consumed in the same way as a sparkling beverage (please, do not try this at home, unless you need a laxative). But it is clear by now that neither logical sequence nor full intelligibility is among Salvini's priorities. On the contrary, his interventions include subtexts that only small circles of his supporters can understand. His tendentious reference to *The Need for Roots* by Weil,<sup>34</sup> a philosopher of Jewish origin who converted to Christianity and certainly can't be charged with Fascism or Nazism, as Salvini points out, becomes fully legible only when it is read alongside two other passages in the speech. After recalling Bonanno in his opening, Salvini celebrates the electoral success of the Lega by offering an aphorism: "If you can dream it, you can do it." The alleged author of this motto is Walt Disney, the visionary father of animated feature films whose past, despite his wholesome image, is rather ambiguous: controversies around Disney's anti-Semitism and his alleged sympathy for National Socialism are still ongoing.<sup>35</sup> At the end of the speech, in an effort to reaffirm that the scope of the new Lega extends beyond Northern Italy, Salvini enumerates the flags being waved among the audience: he acknowledges the Venetian flag with the lion of Saint Mark, many regional flags of Italy, that of Putin's Russia and even — this is key — that of the State of Israel.<sup>36</sup> Along with his earlier reference to Weil, these references to Judaism and anti-Semitism (at the beginning, middle, and end of his speech) are neither casual nor really meant to address accusations of his alignment with neo-Fascist and neo-Nazi movements. The contradictory figures of the converted philosopher, the State of Israel, and the film producer suspected of anti-Semitism come together in the service of what is in fact a non-contradictory message. Salvini pushes aside a tragic page of history by enacting a stupid, if tacit, reconciliation between Fascism and anti-Fascism, between racism and human rights, making all parties stand on the same level. After all, the deceased deputy Bonanno, whom Salvini mourns in his speech, before being a member of the Lega Nord, was a member of Movimento Sociale Italiano (afterward renamed Alleanza Nazionale), a far-right party founded by former members of the Fascist party who were nostalgic for Fascism. Of course, this is not common knowledge; nor does everyone know who Weil is or about the shadow of anti-Semitism cast on Disney's past. Yet the intended recipients of these encrypted messages can easily decipher them. Salvini is saying, in effect, "Times have changed, and new alliances are needed, so that the pagan tree of life planted by Bossi can be invoked together with the Catholic and the Jewish God against a common threat." This threat becomes explicit later on, when another trope of Salvini's emerges, one that he shares with other leaders of contemporary far-right forces all over the world.

The minister has many followers on social media: about 3.3 million people on Facebook, 1 million on Instagram, and 935,000 on Twitter. Helped by his spin-doctor Luca Morisi and a sizable communications team — "la Bestia" (the Beast), as

they call it—he remains frenetically active on social media. He publishes around four hundred posts per month.<sup>37</sup> Lately, the language in his posts has become milder, although he does not censor his followers in any way, and they continuously leave violent and vulgar comments. From time to time, the constant flow of Salvini's posts decrying migrants, journalists, and the European Union is interrupted by pictures of cute animals, mainly kittens. Salvini's wall gets pet-washed.<sup>38</sup> Animals appear twice in his Pontida speech as well. On the first of these two occasions, Salvini pairs imagery of animals with imagery showing the children who are fond of them: both are used as symbols of vulnerability and innocence and are deployed to justify his securitarianism. He affirms that people who mistreat and abandon animals, as well as those who rape children, are to be "harshly punished," rather than rehabilitated: "Prison should rehabilitate; but to rehabilitate someone who raped a little boy or girl is far from my understanding and way of life. We will work toward harsh punishments for those who mistreat animals, too. I say this at the beginning of summer, that should not be the season of abandoned pets anymore." On the second occasion when animals appear together with children in the speech, Salvini, defying logic as usual, manages to conflate animal rights and pro-hunting positions, while simultaneously providing a point of entry for the interpretation of his references to Fascism and Judaism: "Leftists pester hunters in defense of the environment and animals, and tolerate the monstrosity of Islamic slaughtering, which makes animals suffer." What Salvini is saying is that it is not the time to pick on Southern Italians and Jewish people any longer; instead we should target African migrants—or, in his words "slaves"—and especially the Muslims who make animals, the object of our children's love, suffer.

But the enemies named in Pontida are not just migrants, as I have noted. In addition to Muslims, Salvini's references to Weil's "roots" and to her conversion are meant to identify another enemy that the Lega shares with Catholic fundamentalists and other far-right movements, another menace from whom children need to be protected. Salvini begins by saying, "*And speaking of immigration,*" but he then immediately moves to a different topic: this enemy, he explains, is allied with the European culture of rights and US imperialism, organizes "pride parades," and relates to Coca-Cola in the same way we—those of us who are women and men instead of sexless consumers—relate to genuine olive oil. Once again Salvini can afford to be reticent: he can avoid naming his target, because the audience knows perfectly well who the addressees of his disgust are. They are the objects of a disgust that is once again encoded in the word *filth*. Salvini continues:

Not numbers: men and women, with their rights. We are not here to strip rights from anyone. . . . Everyone in his own bedroom does what he likes, with whom he likes, and *where he likes*. But as long as I can voice my dissent and blood runs through my veins,

I will always defend the right of the voiceless, the right of babies to have a mom and a dad, and the right of women not to be wombs for rent. *The sheer thought of wombs for rent is filthy for me*, of the woman as an object, of babies being sold in malls. This is not progress: this is *the end of a civilization*. (Emphasis added)<sup>39</sup>

Wombs for rent: this is a derogatory way to name surrogacy—a practice that is illegal in Italy, but that, for Italians with enough money, can be arranged abroad. This practice is mainly deployed by heterosexual couples, but Salvini's disgust is not provoked by them. Instead, it takes aim at those who celebrate their pride under the auspices of the American beverage. These are gay men, depicted here as traders of children and exploiters of women. In this way, women appear in the Pontida speech not only in the traditional roles of mothers and prostitutes but also in the form of victimized surrogates: simpletons with no agency and in need of the leader-dad's protection.

US capitalism undermining the Christian roots of Europe, the commodification of children, the erasure of sexual difference, the replacement of women and men with neutral subjects: all of these themes clearly reference the campaign against so-called “gender ideology,” a campaign (or better, crusade) that started in the mid-1990s and that brings together members of the Catholic hierarchy, anti-abortion associations, and far-right movements from all over the world. All fight against rights for women and sexual minorities, as well as against anti-discriminatory and sexual education in schools.<sup>40</sup> The Italian Parliament approved legislation for same-sex civil unions only in May 2016; and it did so in a highly discriminatory way that does not recognize same-sex couples as families and defines civil unions as “specific social formations.”<sup>41</sup> Assisted reproductive treatments are not permitted; nor is adoption allowed in any form—not even when the partner has a child from a previous relationship. This level of discrimination, however, is clearly not enough for Salvini.<sup>42</sup> In January 2018, during his electoral campaign, he participated in a conference titled “Oltre l’inverno demografico” (“Beyond the Demographic Winter”), organized by the committee called Difendiamo i nostri figli (Let's Defend Our Children) and the Associazione Family Day (Family Day Association). Here, the center-right coalition to which the Lega used to belong committed itself to “abolishing or profoundly changing” the law allowing for civil unions, because it “offends the family” and leads “to the end of the human.”<sup>43</sup> After becoming an institutional figure, in Pontida Salvini tones down his rhetoric and declares that he does not “mean to strip rights from anyone.” At the same time, however, he does not restrain himself from showing his disgust for surrogacy, which becomes the symbol of the new forms of kinship that are at last starting to be recognized in Italy after decades of advocacy by lesbian and gay movements. The underlying logic is once again that of the double bind, the same logic that also informs Salvini's

security decree and his announcement about the Roma census: “goodsensical” government needs same-sex couples as yet another scapegoat.

“The sheer thought of wombs for rent is filthy to me,” daddy says, without caring about the effect that such a statement might have on Italian children who were born through surrogacy. But if we listen attentively, it becomes clear that what is “filthy” for Salvini is neither the womb hosting the artificially fertilized egg nor the vagina through which the egg is implanted. The filthy orifice is of a different kind. “Everyone in their own bedroom does what he likes, with whom he likes, and *where he likes*,” he says with no small hypocrisy. But from his hypocrisy, a Freudian slip emerges. In fact, what does he mean by “where he likes,” if this sex scene is already set in the bedroom? Does he mean that people in their bedrooms do what they like on their beds, on their floors, in their closets, hanging on their chandeliers? “Where he likes” was not planned in the speech, for it does not appear on the text published online (which is why I call it a Freudian slip).<sup>44</sup> More than the setting, this locution refers to the part of the body involved in the nonreproductive act of penetration that Salvini imagines between the two men who trade babies. Not the vagina, but the anus. In bed, “everyone does what he likes, where he likes,” he says. But the message that Salvini is conveying is: “The sheer thought of men having sex in the wrong hole is filthy for me.” The “merde alors” that came out of Asselborn’s mouth in his denunciation of Salvini’s racism is thus also apt as a way to denounce his homophobia. And more generally—as Asselborn himself suggested after the Vienna meeting—to denounce his Fascist methods.

#### 4. The Captain’s Butt Cheeks

And here we come to the central point. In what sense can one call Salvini—who, to remind you, here serves as a representative of the global phenomenon of the political success of the far right—a Fascist? More than seventy years after the liberation of Italy from Nazism and Fascism, how can one compare the Lega to the Partito Nazionale Fascista (National Fascist Party), and Salvini’s leadership to Mussolini’s?

In October 2018, a few months after the start of the coalition government that brought together the 5 Star Movement and the Lega, a provocative pamphlet by Michela Murgia titled *Istruzioni per diventare fascisti* (*Instructions on How to Become Fascists*) was published, and it sparked a wide-ranging discussion. Murgia’s argument is that Fascism should be considered “a method” with the “extraordinary capacity to contaminate everything.”<sup>45</sup> Many intellectuals—even on the left, even among those most reviled by Salvini—have polemically engaged with Murgia, arguing that Fascism is instead a particular historical regime, and that history does not repeat itself. In their opinion, drawing a parallel between the new Italian populism and Fascism is a form of trivialization that produces false alarms.<sup>46</sup> On the

contrary, however, several celebrated intellectuals have throughout the twentieth century shown that Fascism as a category can be used meta-historically to name an anti-democratic, illiberal, and discriminatory function of the political that can recur after historical Fascism, taking on neo-Fascist configurations.<sup>47</sup> In the 1940s, for instance, the Frankfurt School under the direction of Theodor Adorno started a research project on the psychology of Fascism.<sup>48</sup> Analogously, in his preface to the 1977 English edition of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, Michel Foucault suggested that we consider Fascism and anti-Fascism as two opposing ways of life.<sup>49</sup> And finally, in a well-known lecture in 1995, Umberto Eco warned against what he called "eternal Fascism" or "Ur-Fascism," that is, a constellation of political "archetypes" that have always been present in modernity.<sup>50</sup> Many of these archetypes reemerge in Salvini's Pontida speech, though in a concealed and softened form: the syncretistic worshipping of tradition, the celebration of blood and soil, the rejection of critique and disagreement, a diffidence toward intellectuals and cultivated people, the appeal to a frustrated middle-class, the understanding of the people as a "monolithic entity expressing one common will."<sup>51</sup> And finally, "the fear of difference":<sup>52</sup> racism, xenophobia, sexist chauvinism, homo-trans-bi-pan-phobia.<sup>53</sup> But in the Pontida speech, there is even more than this. Those who are capable of reading between the lines can detect references to the historical experience of Fascism, sympathetic winks at those who are nostalgic for it, and a call for consensus within neo-Fascist circles. It is no coincidence that neo-Fascist movements have acquired more visibility and acceptance in Italy since the Lega has come to power. A few weeks after the annual rally of the Lega, Salvini replied to some journalists' critiques with a Fascist motto: "The more the enemies, the bigger the honor." The tweet was posted on July 29, the anniversary of Mussolini's birth, and it was accompanied by a winking emoji sending a heart-shaped kiss.

There is no doubt that, on an aesthetic level, Salvini's leadership is far from Mussolini's. First of all, he is not supported by the disciplinary logic of propaganda but by the neoliberal logic of marketing.<sup>54</sup> Unlike the "Duce" Mussolini, the "Captain"—as Salvini is called by his supporters—does not embody normative ideal behaviors; he does not have an exceptional personality to which he invites people to conform. On the contrary, he shapes his own personality around the statistical norms of his followers. The look and the lifestyle he often exhibits on social media are very distant from Mussolini's in-your-face psychotic masculinity—patriarchal, and at once authoritarian and libertine—which made the average Italian man of the first half of the twentieth century dream and feel inadequate at the same time. And Salvini is far as well from both the moral austerity of the founding fathers of postwar Italy and the vulgar displays of wealth and young women around which Silvio Berlusconi built his success. A forty-five-year-old divorcé with two children (a boy and a girl), recently dumped by TV presenter Elisa Isoardi on

Instagram,<sup>55</sup> Salvini settles for the antiheroic (but not totally anti-erotic: it depends on one's tastes and fancies) role of "dad." He looks like a neighbor anyone might have, who proudly brings children to play soccer or volleyball, who rushes to the mall to buy groceries after work, and who can finally relax on the weekend by having a beer in the cafeteria next door. He is no role model: he is a man like many others, a man among men, and like many other men in present times, he tries to show his masculinity in the ways he is able: by reverting to a patriarchal imaginary from the past, an imaginary of which, however, he manages only to be a caricature. All these features make him likeable to some and very damaging to others. Because the liturgy of the dad-like Matteo might as well be the faded copy of the Fascist trinity "God, Fatherland, and Family";<sup>56</sup> the load of hatred that nourishes the ritual remains unchanged despite being disguised by layers of love.

I am aware that the cinematic images from *Salò, or the 120 days of Sodom* and *Naked Lunch* that I alluded to at the beginning of this essay when referring to Asselborn's outburst might seem gratuitous and repugnant. But they are meant to evoke on an affective level the powerful psycho-political archetype summoned by Salvini when he pronounces the word *filth* (*schifezza*). In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler calls this "abjection," describing it as a double movement of expulsion and repulsion through which others "become shit."<sup>57</sup> In particular, the banquet of feces in *Salò* and the talking anus-bug in *Naked Lunch* are metaphors for the kind of phobic and sadistic aversion that male homosexuality traditionally arouses in men.<sup>58</sup>

Freud provided a classic description of this homophobic aversion, a description that can well be applied to Salvini's rhetorics of abjection and fatherhood. In his narrative of sexual development ranging from the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* to *Civilization and its Discontents*—in which the protagonist is always the white heterosexual cisgender man—civilization forces the subjects, beginning at an early age, to perceive the anus and its products as disgusting.<sup>59</sup> And once these subjects become adults, they turn the anus and its products into symbols for everything that must be expunged from life in common. The taboo of anal enjoyment, in short, is for Freud the premise for sociality. But it also serves the pivotal function of establishing the primacy of genital reproductive sexuality over all other forms of sexuality: thanks to this taboo, and if nothing goes queer, over time the son will take on the role of the father in Oedipal generational succession. The libidinal energy of the repressed anal drive, instead, will feed both the paranoid fear of falling back into it, and the sadistic enjoyment of persecuting those who have been singled out as its disgusting representatives: gay men, as Pasolini and Burroughs point out. Yet not just gay men: in *Black Skin, White Masks*, for instance, Frantz Fanon goes back to Freud's theorization to show that the phobic aversion to Black men also has psychosexual origins. Racism, in his analysis, is ultimately a synecdoche for the fantasy projected onto the colonies of a primeval, unleashed, and violent sexuality

barred from white civilization. In this way, the Black man is transfigured into a huge phallus, which arouses revulsion and fear, but also envy—and attraction. In Fanon’s view, behind the phantom of the Black rapist there lies the desire to be penetrated, even “ripped open,”<sup>60</sup> by that monstrous phallus: an unconscious desire that the racist woman shares with her man—a masochist desire, then, as well as a homosexual one. In short: the huge, erect phallus of the Black man is a mask for the contracted anus of the white man, the primary source of abjection both in the metropole and in the colonies.

I do not mean to take these fascinating theories literally, but I cannot help noticing that they strongly resonate with Salvini’s conflation of gay men and African men, with the collapse between “immigration” and “pride parades” that he stages after referring to Weil. In Lee Edelman’s words from “White Skin, Dark Meat”:<sup>61</sup> “The repression of anal pleasure within the regime of the [Oedipal] Western symbolic” “entangles . . . anti-black racism and homophobia in complex relation to each other” and “gives rise to the phallus, as a sort of carrot, and to disgust, as a sort of stick.”<sup>62</sup> The shift in the Lega’s rhetoric from Bossi’s “hard-on” to Salvini’s “good sense” thus should not mislead us. Though delivered in the limp language of an endearing paternalism, the Pontida speech remains fully located in the symbolic to which Edelman refers, one that it shares with far-right Italian movements nostalgic for historical Fascism, whose main “ideological glues” nowadays are the Catholic crusade against the rights of women and sexual minorities, and the nationalist campaign against “Muslim and African invaders.”

In fact, according to Laclau, Mouffe, and Rosanvallon, the populist polemic against the elites is not tied to a specific ideology, and nevertheless, it always needs “ideological glues.” Whereas the populism of the “Captain” is expressed as a protest against a pro-European clique of intellectuals, the rhetoric of abjection that Salvini mobilizes against homosexuals, migrants, and Roma people conveys an extremely dangerous ideological glue. Edelman, in this respect, is extremely instructive when, in *No Future*, he discusses the political use of childhood as “the empty placeholder of [social] totalization.”<sup>63</sup> Many critiques have been made of his interpretation of the sexual drive as a death drive in this book, and his argument’s anti-political implications. Nevertheless, the contribution that Edelman’s argument makes to our understanding of the psycho-political functioning of contemporary far-right rhetoric is undeniable. The structuring of the social requires processes of expulsion, repression, and foreclosure that involve libidinal investments; contemporary far-right rhetoric reactivates these processes against racialized and sexualized minorities in a specific, virulent way, which we have now learned to call “Ur-Fascist abjection.” By means of the argumentative apparatus that Edelman himself calls “the Fascism of the Baby’s face”<sup>64</sup> (a “Fascist archetype,” Eco might say), the Child endows those who take up the task of protecting future generations with a salvific



role—and sends deeply into abjection, into shit, those who are made representatives of an unliveable life, one that does not deserve any future because it corrupts younger generations.

In the captain/daddy's view, the threat comes not only from migrants and homosexuals but also from their offspring—children who are not considered worthy of contributing to the repopulation of the country he claims to be fond of, and who are thus contrasted with those children who are born from “moms and dads” of pure Italian blood. The child-to-be-defended is therefore not any child but the sign of a future that has to be identical to the present. The son repeatedly evoked by Salvini is one who will take his place one day in the generational chain. Any other possibility is as “filthy” as the choleraic Neapolitans that he once did not hesitate to call, literally, shits. Huge Coca-Cola cans tearing children from their mothers' wombs, slave invaders whose reproduction is barely imaginable, and unnameable children who should never be born: apocalyptic figures of the end of civilization and humanity,<sup>65</sup> like Cronenberg's talking-anus bugs or Pasolini's coprophagist libertines. It is thus as if Asselborn, turning into a talking asshole himself, had mirrored the Italian deputy prime minister, thereby identifying, provisionally, with him. It is Salvini's fantasy to embody a people exclusively made up of white, straight, fertile Italian families. It is his fantasy to embody the will of this people, its sentiments, and also its sphincter, deriving enjoyment from its evacuation of excrement and even more from its retention of it. Double bind, double enjoyment.

In recent history, Italy has repeatedly emerged as a successful laboratory for political experiments. After the First World War, Fascism was invented there by Mussolini and quickly spread across Europe. In the 1990s, Berlusconi anticipated Trump's entrepreneurial populism. If Salvini will become, as he says, the presidential candidate for the sovereign front in the European Commission, then there is a risk that Italy will once again perform the role of a political avant-garde: that it will export to Europe a populism of a new kind, one that is nonetheless continuous with disquieting features of the worst past.<sup>66</sup> History does not repeat itself, to be sure, but a neo-Fascist daddy is marching on Brussels. With clenched butt cheeks.

## APPENDIX 1: THE STICK AND THE CARROT

What I think Edelman does not stress enough in “White Skin, Dark Meat,” is that in the Fascist politics of abjection, intertwined racism and homophobia can be disentangled in many different ways. In the 1950s, the redemption of the Black phallus, working as a “carrot,” justified, for Fanon, the use of disgust as a “stick” against—or inside—the anus of white homosexuals. Conversely, today's marriage rights can be the “carrot” to convince same-sex couples to participate in the kind of familial love celebrated by Salvini, thereby unloading (deceitfully?) the “stick” of disgust, which homosexuals have carried for a long time, and transferring it onto the shoulders of migrants. This is already happening in the US, North-

ern Europe, France, and Germany, where political leaders such as Marine Le Pen and Alice Weidel (who came out as a lesbian) manage to recruit gays and lesbians into the ranks of the far right, by presenting the latter as the stronghold against homophobic violence allegedly perpetrated by Muslim invaders. (The Netherlands was a pioneering context for this: Pim Fortuyn paved the way for characters such as Renaud Camus and Milo Yiannopoulos.) There is even the risk—which Salvini deploys instrumentally, though this is not a good reason for failing to mention it—that male homosexual couples, in their attempt to fulfill the reproductive functions of heterosexual families, may contribute to new forms of exploitation of women’s bodies. Solanas somehow sensed this in her metonymic delirium, when she shot Andy Warhol and his partner Mario Amaya, as if hitting them was enough to deal a mortal blow to the conglomerate of family units that is patriarchal society.

For the time being, Salvini’s soft paternalism prevents Italy, where same-sex unions are a recent phenomenon, from fully realizing this “homonationalist” process.<sup>67</sup> Yet, my hope as a queer academic and a gay man is that lesbian and gay citizens and their allies are able to activate democratic antidotes and to reject the carrot of a poisoned exclusionary integration; that they are able to detect the Fascist archetypes present in the Lega, identified by Murgia in her short pamphlet; that they are able to take up the difficult, yet not obvious, challenge of finding alliances between LGBTQIA+ movements, feminist movements, anti-racist movements, and fully democratic citizens in order to resist the politics of abjection that remains such, even when it is enacted by a neoliberal and sovereigntist populism.

## APPENDIX 2: REALITY CINEMA

The meal of human feces and the talking-anus bug are “metaphors for the kind of phobic and sadistic aversion that male homosexuality traditionally arouses in men,” I claimed above. Now I have to account for this statement, and I will do this quickly. Picture the ending scene of *Salò, or the 120 days of Sodom*: after staging a metonymic chain where male homosexuality, anal pleasure, and coprophagy suggest the overturning of masculinity, Pasolini gives the last word to two soldiers of the (Fascist) Italian Social Republic. While the four libertines who represent the powers of the Fascist regime—the Duke, the Bishop, the President of the Court of Appeals, and the President of the Central Bank—are brutally torturing their young working-class and partisan prisoners, the two soldiers, who are also young, fantasize about the girls waiting for them once the orgy of violence is over. Then they start a clumsy waltz between the two of them. One can therefore conclude, as Bersani and Dutiot seem to,<sup>68</sup> that the enjoyment staged in Pasolini’s film adaptation of Sade’s text points first and foremost to the repression of homosexuality, which is crucial for the construction of sublimated homosexual bonds in historical Fascism.<sup>69</sup>

Not only in historical Fascism, though. In 1976, Italian police confiscated *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*, and the film’s producer, Alberto Grimaldi, was charged with obscenity and corruption of minors. Pasolini did not have the time to be prosecuted because he was murdered by the seventeen-year-old prostitute Pino Pelosi before the film was released.

Fourteen years earlier, in Boston, Burrough's novel *Naked Lunch* was also withdrawn from circulation, accused of obscenity for its descriptions of homicidal orgies with minors involved. When Cronenberg turned *Naked Lunch* into a movie, thirty years later, he made the talking-anus bugs stand for the paranoid super-ego of the protagonist, William Lee. Lee accidentally kills his girlfriend, just as Burroughs did, in a silly attempt to emulate William Tell. But his sense of guilt, whose symptom is an obsession with being fought over by the secret intelligence services of competing powers, does not originate from this accident, or from his drug addiction: instead, it is rooted in homosexuality. This is what turns Lee, Burroughs's doppelgänger, into an outlaw and a traitor who cannot be incorporated into the organizations that seek to control his mind.

The censorship that descended on these two different yet similar works, in the 1960s in the US and 1970s in Italy, to some extent proved that Burroughs and Pasolini were right. And so is Edelman. The repression and sublimation of anal enjoyment are Fascist archetypes, and the Child of the heterosexual couple, the Baby, the Minor, is the worst enemy of the figure who is thus made into the apocalyptic representative of that antisocial enjoyment. In this case, it is reality that becomes a raw metaphor for theory: Solanas shoots Warhol and Amaya, Burroughs kills his betrothed Joan Vollmer, and his book is censored because of the infanticides and pedophilia that it describes, just as Pasolini's film is censored for its corruption of minors. Finally, Pasolini is murdered by an underage hustler in the worst of the settling of scores.

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#### Notes

1. This outburst happened in the context of the Italian TV program *In Onda*, broadcast by La7.
2. Cronenberg, *Naked Lunch*.
3. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*.
4. Pasolini, *Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma*.

5. Bersani and Dutiot, “Merde alors.”
6. The Italian Social Republic, or Republic of Salò, was established in September 1943, after the Italian king, Vittorio Emanuele III, signed the armistice with the Allies. It was recognized only by Germany, Japan, and their puppet states, and was finally overthrown in April 1945 by the anti-Fascist resistance.
7. Custodero, “Salvini shock.”
8. Eventually approved by the parliament in November 2018.
9. The double bind is the result of a schizophrenic communication that conveys contradictory meanings at once. See Bateson, *Steps*.
10. According to ISPI (Istituto per gli Studi di Politica Internazionale, or the Institute of International Political Studies, [www.ispionline.it](http://www.ispionline.it)), the number of “illegal migrants” in Italy will increase from 490,000 in December 2017 to 622,000 in 2020. See Tonacci, “Decreto sicurezza.”
11. The quotations are taken from the recording of the spat between Asselborn and Salvini, available in Decrestina, “Il significato di ‘Merde alors’” (translation is mine, emphasis is added).
12. In the *Dossier Statistico Immigrazione 2018*, published by Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS, the number of Italians living abroad in 2017 (more than 5,114,000) almost equals the number of foreigners living in Italy (5,144,000). While the Italian population living abroad has increased by 141,000 in one year, the number of Italians living on Italian soil has decreased by 203,000 in the same period, in spite of 147,000 foreign residents who managed to obtain Italian citizenship in 2017 (without them, Italy would have lost 350,000 citizens in one year).
13. Pontida is a small town in the province of Bergamo, Lombardy. On April 7, 1167, an oath was set that constituted the Lombard Lega: a military union of independent cities in the Po Valley aimed at countering the restoration of Frederick Barbarossa’s imperial power in the region. In 1990, one year after founding the Lega Nord through the merging of separatist movements that already existed, Umberto Bossi chose Pontida as the site for the celebration of the annual gathering of his party.
14. The recording is available in “Salvini contro I napoletani.”
15. MilanoToday, “I meridionali.”
16. The infringement procedure was avoided by means of a correction of the budget package planned by the Italian government. On the history of the Lega, see Curcio and Perini, *Attraverso la Lega*; Passarelli and Tuorto, *La Lega di Salvini*.
17. See Giglioli, *Critica della vittima*.
18. The quotations that follow are taken from Salvini’s speech in Pontida (Salvini, “Pontida 2018”). My interpretation of Salvini’s rhetoric is partly indebted to Raimo’s report “Come smontare la retorica.”
19. See Laclau, *On Populist Reason*; Mouffe, *For a Left Populism*; Rosanvallon, *Pensare il populismo*.
20. It is worth mentioning two other interventions by Salvini along similar lines, namely, the speeches he delivered at two rallies of the (Northern) Lega held in Piazza del Popolo, Rome: one in February 2015, to pressure the Renzi government to resign, and the other in December 2018, to thank the electorate and to support the Lega–5 Star Movement coalition government. The first rally was joined by a parade of neo-Fascist militants from CasaPound party. At the second rally, drawing on the inspiring figures who will be dealt with later on, Salvini added references to Pope John Paul II (in recognition of “the Christian roots of Europe”), Alcide de Gasperi (“a good politician thinks not of the coming elections but of

- the coming generations”), and Martin Luther King Jr. (“For someone to find enemies, to speak one’s own mind is enough”).
21. Salvini enters the stage while tenor Matteo Tiraboschi sings the aria “Nessun dorma (Vincerò)” from Puccini’s *Turandot*. The presenter, deputy and former “*ultra*” of the Atalanta soccer team, Daniele Belotti, introduces Salvini on stage by screaming loudly: “Thanks Captain! Thanks Pontida! Here is our federal Secretary and Minister of home affairs. The whole world is watching us today, so let Macron, Merkel, Sánchez, Saviano, and all those who offend the Lega while sitting in their snobbish armchairs hear that people are supportive of their minister. His leadership is steady, strong, determined, proud, and it has made people rise up. He is now being attacked, and we are defending him. Let the people in New York’s attics hear that people here are with their minister. Matteo! Scream it louder! Let your voice be heard in Paris! Matteo! Matteo!” During his speech, Salvini himself addresses some left-wing Italian journalists sarcastically: “Kisses to Gad Lerner. Long may he live and work. To him, to Eugenio Scalfari, Michele Santoro, Fabio Fazio, and all the doomsayers filled with envy [*rosiconi*]: may your life be long: kisses.”
  22. “Our society is not a community, but merely a collection of isolated family units. Desperately insecure, fearing his woman will leave him if she is exposed to other men or to anything remotely resembling life, the male seeks to isolate her from other men and from what little civilization there is, so he moves her out to the suburbs, a collection of self-absorbed couples and their kids.” Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 48.
  23. Salvini showed a rosary both at the end of his electoral campaign (when he wielded it alongside a Bible) and at his swearing-in ceremony as minister.
  24. Additionally, Salvini says that, no matter the nationality of this woman, she ought to be granted the right “to see her children being born in her country, without being uprooted and sent to the other side of the world.” Then he concludes, “Everyone’s happy in his own country.”
  25. The principle of exceptionalism is also present in the “security decree,” in which residence permits based on humanitarian protection (established by the 1998 decree Testo Unico sull’Immigrazione, or the Single Text on Immigration) are replaced by temporary residence permits given “in *special* circumstances” to people who need medical care for “*exceptionally* serious” health conditions, to victims of violence, in case of “*contingent* and *exceptional* calamity,” and for acts of “*particular* civil valor” (emphases added).
  26. I suspect that former judge and writer Gianrico Carofiglio did not grasp the function of this generational short circuit when journalist Lilli Gruber interviewed him on November 21, 2018, in the context of the TV program *Otto e mezzo* (La7). Carofiglio commented on Salvini’s sarcastic statement delivered after the European Commission rejected Italy’s planned budget: “Did we get a letter from Brussels? Okay, so let’s now wait for Santa’s letter.” After reminding the minister that “Santa does not send letters: he receives them,” Carofiglio argued that this joke is an example of “violence against meaning in language” and the “disdain for the meaning of words and for the destiny of citizens in this country.” In the days that followed, many people on the web teased Salvini for his mistake and his belief in a graphomaniac Santa Claus. But if we take a closer look, we see that, as a dad, Salvini finds himself in the position of those who usually read the letters that their children send to Santa. And as a child, he still has the right to believe in him.
  27. When talking of the European people, he says they should “get back to loving each other.”

28. Rondoni, *La natura del bastardo*, 111: “Mi fanno male le nuvole nel petto / le finestre rotte degli occhi / il cuore che ha luce dura / di stazioni, viavai, / (lo sai, lo sai) / amare è l’occupazione / di chi non ha paura.”
29. This slogan dominates the main stage right behind the speaker, together with the title of the rally, to which I have already referred: “Good sense in government.”
30. “The country we are about to rule for thirty years is not afraid of anything or anyone,” he would say later in the Pontida speech.
31. “Uproot from this wonderful country, and we will need courage, that filth that is called the Mafia, the Camorra, and the ’Ndrangheta. That’s filthy for us.”
32. “In Pontida we are thereby announcing that the party is over both for smugglers of human beings and for Mafia and Camorra.”
33. “In 1918, the First World War ended: a war in which our grandfathers and great-grandfathers died to defend our borders. To honor their sacrifice, as people in government we have the duty to defend the borders and not to let the sacrifice of many boys who died for their families and fatherland be in vain.”
34. Weil, *Need for Roots*.
35. “We shall not put a limit to our dreams for, as Walt Disney said, ‘if you can dream it, you can do it.’”
36. “The flags I see on this lawn—that of Israel and of Marche, that of Piedmont and of Russia, that of Venice with its lion and those with many other symbols connecting each and every one of us—are telling sixty million Italians (though softly and humbly): get out of your houses, down from your coaches, out of the shops, tribunals and schools where you are. If people move, they win. Let’s get back our dignity, as well as our will to work, to win, to smile. Nothing is forbidden or impossible for people like you.” In other excerpts, Salvini highlights the presence of flags from Southern Italy as well.
37. See Tonacci, “Politica e social.” In particular, Salvini publishes many videos (like the one displaying a furious Asselborn) that provide the audience with the illusion of a direct relation with the self-reporting leader, who refuses any mediation by the journalists he reviles.
38. See Kington and Carassava, “Matteo Salvini.”
39. This is how the quotation ends: “I ask our mayors and governors to re-center politics on families and kindergartens, to allow women to be mothers and workers at the same time. One cannot choose to either become a mom, which is the most beautiful challenge in the world, or to keep working.”
40. On this topic, see Kuhar and Paternotte, *Anti-Gender Campaigns*; Garbagnoli and Prearo, *La crociata “anti gender”*; Bernini, *Queer Theories*.
41. “The current law establishes civil unions between same-sex people as specific social formations” (Law May 20, 2016, n. 76, art. 1, comma 1).
42. The audience in Pontida knows very well that two important representatives of anti-abortion and “anti-gender” movements have been elected in parliament as deputies of the Lega: Lorenzo Fontana, federal Vice-Secretary of the Lega and Minister for Family and Disability (who entered his public office stating that homosexual families do not exist), and Simone Pillon, author of a draft law to change divorce that would strongly undermine women’s rights.
43. Alliva, “Aboliremo le unioni civili.” Salvini and Fontana (for the latter, see the previous note), together with the governor of the Veneto region, Luca Zaia (Lega), and the center-right

- mayor of Verona, Federico Sboarina, officially supported the Thirteenth World Congress of Families, held in Verona on March 29–31, 2019 (World Congress of Families, “About the Congress”). This meeting gathered reactionary and extremist movements.
44. See Salvini, “Matteo Salvini a Pontida.”
  45. Murgia, *Istruzioni*, 95.
  46. A similar claim can be found in the editorial of the *New Left Review* “What Is Trump?,” where Dylan Riley states that the comparison between the Trump administration and Fascism is informed by “a false immediacy in which the past appears as a reservoir of ‘lessons,’” a sense of immediacy that “distorts the central question of contemporary politics” (6–7).
  47. On the persistence of specters of totalitarianism in the present, see also Forti, *New Demons*.
  48. Adorno et al., *Authoritarian Personality*.
  49. Foucault, preface.
  50. Eco, *Il Fascismo eterno*.
  51. Eco, *Il Fascismo eterno*, 46.
  52. Eco, *Il Fascismo eterno*, 39.
  53. See Eco, *Il Fascismo eterno*, 45; and Murgia, *Istruzioni*, 41–46.
  54. On this difference, see Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics*; and Bernini, “Not in My Name.”
  55. Isoardi’s post on Instagram is dated November 5, 2018. A few months earlier, on April 6, she published a series of pictures on Facebook in which she was ironing a white shirt (most likely Salvini’s), accompanied by the words: “A day for the lionhearted.”
  56. Murgia (*Istruzioni*, 41–46) agrees with Eco (*Il Fascismo eterno*, 45) in this respect.
  57. “The repudiation of bodies for their sex, sexuality, and/or color is an ‘expulsion’ followed by a ‘repulsion’ that founds and consolidates culturally hegemonic identities along sex/race/sexuality axes of differentiation. . . . The boundary between the inner and outer is confounded by those excremental passages in which the inner effectively becomes outer, and this excretive function becomes, as it were, the model by which other forms of identity-differentiation are accomplished. In effect, this is the mode by which Others become shit” (Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 133–34). Butler is here commenting on Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* as well as on Young’s *Abjection and Oppression*.
  58. In this connection, see “Appendix 2: Reality Cinema.”
  59. Obviously, this should prove true for women as well. But women, for Freud, are constitutionally inclined to develop a “polymorphous perverse sexuality,” hence what he calls an “aptitude for prostitution.” See Freud, *Three Essays*, 57.
  60. Fanon, *Black Skin*, 138.
  61. Where he discusses, next to Freud and Fanon, the studies on racism carried out in the US by Jordan (*White over Black*) and Kovel (*White Racism*).
  62. Edelman, “White Skin,” 101–2. For more recent queer work on race and abjection, see Amin, *Disturbing Attachments*; and Scott, *Extravagant Abjection*.
  63. Edelman, “Learning Nothing,” 124.
  64. Edelman, *No Future*, 75.
  65. For my use of the term *apocalypse*, see Bernini, *Queer Apocalypses*.
  66. In this respect, I agree with Éric Fassin when he refers not only to the “populist moment” in international politics, but also to the “neo-Fascist moment” in “Il neoliberalismo.”
  67. On the concept of homonationalism, see Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages*.

68. According to Bersani and Dutiot (“Merde alors”), the reason why Sade’s (male) libertines prefer torturing young boys is that symmetry allows for a higher degree of identification of the perpetrator with the victim. In their essay, the two authors offer an ultimately redemptive account of *Salò*. My interpretation emphasizes instead the antisocial, and “apocalyptic,” nature of homosexuality in Pasolini’s last film and in general in all his work. A different interpretation can be found in McGlazer, “*Salò* and the School of Abuse,” which refuses to label the film either prophetic or apocalyptic, and instead finds in the film a pedagogical intention: an effort to school spectators by showing them that they are not free from what McGlazer calls, with De Martino (*La terra del rimorso*), the “bad past”—and this because the “bad past” is not properly past, but liable to return. The same impulse, in sum, that animates this article.
69. See in this connection, Benadusi, *Il nemico*.

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