

GAIA GIULIANI – JÚLIA GARRAIO – SOFIA JOSÉ SANTOS ONLINE SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL MORAL PANIC AROUND MIGRANTS IN EUROPE

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Abstract

The authors address the role played by digital media in developing an ideological and identitarian discourse characterized by fear and moral panic about Others across Europe. In “Online social media and the construction of sexual moral panic around migrants in Europe”, they begin with analysing the securitization devices introduced in many countries of the EU and their work along specific gendered, sexual, and racialised lines. The article examines the role of digital media in amplifying the “sexual moral panic” about migration. Taking Italy and Germany as case studies-sites, we argue that digital media have strongly contributed to the dissemination and escalation of fears of invasion and of dangerous sexualities framed by constructions of race and gender. Their contribution unveils the ways in which colonialist and racist legacies that are historically sedimented in both Italy and Germany get reorganised “online” (i.e. through social media). These, in turn, produce a very specific post-colonial dimension reinforcing widespread hatred of the Other and new processes of racialisation, which include, among others, gender stereotyping.

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Keywords

online social media, intersectional representations, “migrant and refugee crisis”, sexual crimes, Germany and Italy

Introduction

In the context of the production of a “European identity”, in the face of the migrant and refugee crisis which occurred from the period 2015/2016 on, digital media have contributed widely to shaping an ideological and identitarian discourse based on fear and moral panic. The massive arrival of refugees, the terror attacks in Paris and Brussels, the New Year’s Eve sexual assaults in Cologne – to name just a few – were perceived as serious challenges to the very idea of Europe as a welcoming and inclusive “imagined community”. Several individual member states, often pushed by major advances in their anti-immigration parties, have been key actors in leading the reintroduction of European national border controls, the monitoring of non-Europeans, the Othering of bodies according to gender, race, sexuality and religion, the construction of walls and fences, the development of systems of detention and securitization and the promotion of anti-immigration policies. Digital media and particularly online social media have played a major role in creating subjectivities around the crisis and promoting processes of Othering, leading to the successful securitization of specific groups and the creation of moral panic concerning those same groups.

This essay examines the role of digital media in amplifying the “sexual moral panic” around migration. We argue that digital media strongly contributed to the dissemination and escalation of phobias of invasion and dangerous sexuality framed by constructions of race and gender coming from widely shared orientalist and colonial archives of racialized rape. These archives sustain the representation of male Muslim and Black migrants and refugees as subverting the sexual order of the European “imagined community”.¹ Two European nations, Italy and Germany, will be at the core of our analysis. We examine digital media circulation of images and videos regarding sexual crimes committed by migrants (namely the rape and murder of young woman in Macerata by a Nigerian migrant in January 2018, the rape and murder of young woman in Rome by a Nigerian migrant in October the same year, the 2015 New Year’s Eve sexual assaults in Co-

logne, and the rape-murder of a student in Freiburg in 2016 by an asylum seeker). The article argues that gender, sexuality, race and other categories of difference were crucial in the social media construction of these events as political crisis and threats to European identity. In this sense, it is a contribution to the wide range of research which examines the processes of making sexual violence (in)visible and the cultural-political entanglements underlying the racialization of rape in contexts of social tensions around migration and multiculturalism.² Furthermore, it exposes the pervasiveness of femonationalism – the exploitation and co-option of feminist agendas and, specifically, the fight against gender violence by Islamophobic and anti-immigration political actors³ – in contemporary Western European politics.

Our reflection on how circulating discourses and images in Italy and Germany recall what Ann Laura Stoler⁴ and Gloria Wekker⁵ have respectively called the “colonial” and “national archive” building on Edward Said’s definition of cultural archive⁶; moreover, the “figures of race”⁷ that spring from colonial and national archives are based on the idea that sexual moral panic has a long genealogy and that its more recent recurrences need to be read against the grain of a postcolonial mentality that today reinforces widespread claims of national primacy. Also, we argue that the online social media environment is particularly efficient in producing, validating and disseminating these “figures of race” and more broadly the “colonial” and “national archive” from whence they spring. As such, the moral panic around migrants and refugees – Blacks and Muslims in particular – the gendering and racialization of threat and fear, intertwined with phobias framed by the dichotomy of “us versus them”, cannot be understood without critically examining online social media.

2. For instance: Grewald, *Racialised Gang Rape and The Reinforcement of Dominant Order: Discourses of Gender, Race and Nation*.

3. Farris, *In the Name of Women’s Rights: The Rise of Femonationalism*.

4. Stoler, “Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance,” 90; Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*.

5. Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race*, 2.

6. Said, *Orientalism*.

7. Giuliani, “Monstrosity, Abjection and Europe in the War on Terror.”

1. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

By “figure of race” we refer to a figuration that has been sedimented nationally and transnationally along colonial and postcolonial times and that refers, specifically, to the construction of the postcolonial male Other as uncivilized, violent, hypersexualized and socially dangerous. In our cases, the male Other is the black migrant and asylum seeker (Nigerian and Senegalese in the two deadly rapes occurred in Italy) and the Middle Eastern and Muslim refugee (in the cases analyzed in Germany). These figures, in their fundamental differences (deriving the one from anti-black and the other from anti-Muslim stereotypes) converge in a discourse that, by contrast, sustains the claim of the “color of the nation”, whose whiteness is threatened by the “invasion” of the “uncivilized” former colonized and/or a barbaric and violent East.

As we will show, the “color” of the nation is invariably claimed by the right-wing constellation of parties and movements we take into consideration. Their claims refer to different theories of invasion – more or less conspiratorial – that assume the existence of a traditionally conceived national community that finds its bonds in a variably strong “blood and soil” ideology. This same constellation seems to partially reconcile with fascist and Nazi history and political theories, while somehow purged of a blatant nostalgia.

Our research on the extreme right and its presence on online social media, specifically Facebook, aims at an understanding of the “elementary forms”⁸ of racism that are activated and circulated far beyond their Facebook pages and the social media itself: it aims at unpacking the disruptive force of these elementary forms as able to instill the current widespread moral panic. In fact, some of the images and discourses produced or sustained by the far right in Italy and Germany are made today a very commonly accepted repertoire and feed an imaginary, as testified by the case of Democratic Party representative and president of the Friuli Venezia Giulia region, Debora Serracchiani, who stated, referring to the case of the attempted rape of a young girl in Trieste by a refugee from Ghana in 2017, that the rape committed or attempted by a humanitarian protection seeker was “double”, that is, against its victim and also against the sheltering na-

tion. Other examples which exemplify how «tropes of the radical right... moved into centrist discourses»⁹ are the famous *Focus* cover and the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*'s frontpage about Cologne representing «the white German woman's body as the nation that is being violated by “borderless” Europe and “failed *Willkommenskultur*”».¹⁰ In our opinion, such examples testify for a European “imagined (national) communities” dangerously exposed to a mentality that, up until very recently, was thought to belong exclusively to very few ultra-nationalists.

This essay is part of an on-going transdisciplinary project at the Center of Social Studies, University of Coimbra: *(De)Othering: Deconstructing Risk and Otherness: hegemonic scripts and counter-narratives on migrants/refugees and “internal Others” in Portuguese and European mediascapes*. This project sets out to critically examine media representations of migrants, refugees and “internal Others” in Portugal and across Europe while mapping out their interconnections with particular narratives in the field of security and within the War on Terror.

1.2. Populism, securitization and online social media

Still a contested concept, populism can be understood as «an ideology that considers society to be ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, the “pure people” versus the “corrupt élite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people»¹¹. The people although presented as immanent within populist discourses, is a construct: they «are neither real nor all-inclusive but are in fact a mythical and constructed sub-set of the whole population».¹² Even if all populism claims an anti-elitist and anti-pluralist position,¹³ representing and cham-

9. Weber, “«We Must Talk About Cologne»: Race, Gender, and Reconfigurations of ‘Europe’.”

10. Boulila and Carri, “On Cologne: Gender, Migration and Unacknowledged Racisms in Germany,” 288.

11. Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 543.

12. Ibid., 546.

13. Müller, *What Is Populism?*

8. Hall, “Race, Articulations, and Societies Structured in Dominance.”

pioning the “true” people,¹⁴ the populist “thin” ideology does not stand alone, but rather coexists with “fuller” or “thicker” ideologies, such as communism, socialism, religious fundamentalism, ecologism or nationalism,¹⁵ offering in each case a particular meaning and set of characteristics to “the people”.

Whereas left-wing populism constructs the “imagined community” of “the people” around class, right-wing populism also stems from an understanding of “the people” as culturally homogenous, fundamentally good and honored,¹⁶ but tends to define “the people” based upon the notion of nation¹⁷ whose «identity and common interest» is juxtaposed «with the identity and interests of “others”, usually minorities such as migrants which are supposedly favored by the (corrupt) elites».¹⁸

As populist ideas and proposals are a discursive construct and to be successful are required to mobilize and engage their political audiences, the communicative tools - and I would add communication apparatus - «used for spreading populist ideas are just as central as the populist ideas themselves».¹⁹ Communication is, thus, instrumental for populist forces and, thus, populists discourses revolve frequent times around issues of security. Notwithstanding a fundamental and universal common ground concerning what (in)security means, what an individual or collective subject conceives as a relevant threat and a meaningful security referent depend mostly upon each subject’s own circumstances. In point of fact, a security issue results not necessarily from an objective threat (and subsequently from an objective need for security) but rather from a process of social and intersubjective construction, that is, it emerges «not necessarily because an existential threat exists but because the issue is presented and framed as such».²⁰ As «communication, and particularly social-

ized communication, the one that exists in the public realm, provides the support for the social production of meaning»,²¹ the narratives that circulate within that public realm are of key importance concerning (in) security, and pivotal for populist discourses.

Making sense of the security social construction process, Buzan, Weaver and de Wilde²² coined the term “securitization”, which is seen as a complex, intersubjective and socially constructed “speech act” which causes a specific issue, idea, object, subject, group or event to be labelled and, hence, perceived as a security issue or a threat. This means that by naming something or someone as security-related he/she/it becomes precisely that for a particular audience (*ibi-dem*). As Hall illustrated via the Israeli and Palestinian conflict and the impact of discourse and narratives to perceive and understand “security”,

Palestinians fighting to regain land on the West Bank from Israel may be described either as “freedom fighters” or as “terrorists”... Whether the Palestinians are terrorists or not, if we think they are, and act on that “knowledge,” they in effect become terrorists because we treat them as such. The language (discourse) has real effects in practice: the description becomes “true”.²³

As it is constructed and perceived as real, audiences tend to subscribe to said security narratives. In turn, these narratives open the floor to validate and legitimate harder security policies to approach the perceived threat. That is why, for Buzan, Weaver and de Wilde, security «rests neither with the objects nor with the subjects but among the subjects».²⁴ However, securitization’s speech act does not merely happen if someone uses the word ‘security’, but rather through the production of a threat to something or someone’s existence by a securitizing actor, the acceptance of said threat by its audience, and the suggestion of emergen-

14. Reinemann et al., “Populist Political Communication: Toward a Model of Its Causes, Forms, and Effects.”

15. Mudde, “The Populist Zeitgeist,” 544; Plagemann and Destradi, “Populism and Foreign Policy: The Case of India”, 285.

16. Greven, “The Rise of Rightwing Populism in Europe and the United States,” 1.

17. Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson, “Populist Online Communication: Introduction to the Special Issue,” 4.

18. Greven, “The Rise of Rightwing Populism in Europe and the United States,” 1.

19. de Vreese et al., “Populism as an Expression of Political Communication Content and Style: A New Perspective,” 425.

20. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for*

Analysis, 24.

21. Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society,” 239.

22. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*.

23. Hall, “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power,” 203.

24. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde, *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*, 31.

cy measures that will successfully deter the identified threat.²⁵ In sum, successful securitization entails a securitizing actor's speech act validated by its audience, and the move of the perceived threat from a politicized realm into the domain of security, henceforth requiring extraordinary measures to remedy it. Populist successful securitization moves may create what Cohen labelled a "moral panic", that is, the process through which a «condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests».²⁶ The threat is framed in such a way as to be interpreted and perceived as a disruption of the social cohesion and the social order, thus assuming a moral dimension.

The construction of these security narratives does not occur, nonetheless, instinctively, nor does it emerge within a discursive and ideologically unfilled context.²⁷ Rather, it is a process that is rooted and sustained upon a broader ideological, historical, power-driven, and identitarian discursive structure – where gender, nation, race and class perform key roles – that shapes and validates it.²⁸ In this context, narratives and messages are constructed in order to have a compelling and mobilizing meaning to their specific audiences. This is mainly accomplished through an efficient articulation of text and subtext, denotation and connotation, visual and verbal language, that articulates the perceived threat and the existing class, nationalist, gendered, and racialized imaginaries of the alleged threatened community. Sub-text and connotation are activated through enduring and ingrained ideational structures, imaginaries, conventions or dominant codes in each society, being, thus, defined within society.²⁹ Hence, for Fairclough «discourse, and any specific instance of discursive practice, is seen as simultaneously (i) a language text, spoken or written, (ii) discourse practice (text production and text interpretation), (iii) sociocultural practice».³⁰

Among the different discursive actors integrating societies, the media perform a key role in the creation and successful distribution of specific ideologies,³¹ particularly those conveying populist and (in)security narratives. If mass media are a chief actor in successful securitization processes and populist narratives, online social media do not stay behind and introduce an "online opportunity structure"³² which foster efficiency and effectiveness of said narratives.

The importance and centrality of online social media within these processes lies in part on its increasing ubiquity, but most importantly on its own/current narrative production processes and the wider fake news and post-truth context.³³ In this frame of reference, information diets are increasingly supported by personal beliefs, survival and exclusionary identitarian rhetorics and emotions³⁴ through which facts and evidence are read privileging connotation processes that articulate today's concerns with the preservation of particular "imagined communities". In fact, online social media has democratized the gatekeeping processes and practices that Couldry³⁵ coins as "voice as a process", that is, the understanding and acknowledgment that all are entitled to give an account of their experiences, perspectives and political aspirations, thereby contributing to public debate and, hence, informing and influencing political action. However, unlike traditional gatekeepers which are bound to professional ethical and deontological codes of conduct, online social media gatekeepers tend to use personal preferences and emotions as agenda-setting and framing criteria,³⁶ rather than being professionally accountable for their "editorial" choices.

Production disruptions aside, online social media also entail differences concerning dissemination, favoring othering processes, securitization moves and

31. Ibid.

32. Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson, "Populist Online Communication: Introduction to the Special Issue," 2.

33. Bakir and McStay, "Fake News and The Economy of Emotions: Problems, Causes, Solutions"; Ball, *Post-Truth: How Bullshit Conquered the World*; Lewandowsky, Ecker, and Cook, "Beyond Misinformation: Understanding and Coping with the 'Post-Truth' Era."

34. Rochlin, "Fake News: Belief in Post-Truth."

35. Couldry, *Why Voice Matters. Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism*.

36. Singer, "User-Generated Visibility: Secondary Gatekeeping in a Shared Media Space."

25. Ibid., 26.

26. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, 1.

27. Barrinha, "The Political Importance of Labelling: Terrorism and Turkey's Discourse on the PKK."

28. Santos, Roque, and Santos, "De-Securitising 'the South in the North'? Gendered Narratives on the Refugee Flows in the European Mediascape," 455.

29. Dyer, *Advertising as Communication*, 101.

30. Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 97.

moral panic. First, the value of disseminated information is determined not by the value of the post itself but rather by the interactions it generates.³⁷ Interaction is mainly supported by “like” and “share” commands, which serve as a way for users to communicate with their online communities which posts they believe to be worth taking into account,³⁸ most times endorsing the message. Large amounts of interaction can result in “virality”.³⁹ This interaction-led logic privileges assertive and shocking understandings of threat, fear, and (in)security, potentially creating “moral panic”⁴⁰ and thus promoting and serving a populist “us vs them” dichotomy.⁴¹ Second, online social media tend to personalize content through algorithms which, in turn, curate posts and information concerning users’ preferences leading to an “amplification of ideological segregation” as algorithms tend to automatically recommend “content an individual is likely to agree with”.⁴² This reduces understanding of opposing views and leads to what the literature labels as “echo-chambers”.⁴³ Third, online social media boasts a high-speed velocity through which content can circulate,⁴⁴ becoming particularly effective in disseminating specific narratives.

The ecology of online social media creates unprecedented opportunities to intensify the spread and efficiency of populism.⁴⁵ By opening the floor to new “socially accredited”⁴⁶ gatekeepers and allowing the generation and dissemination of narratives and frames in ubiquitous and individually-tailored echo-cham-

bers,⁴⁷ alongside the “Facebook disclosure” logic,⁴⁸ narratives circulating on online social media might stand in for the “true voice of the people”, particularly in a time of increasing distrust in traditional media. In point of fact, online social media give populist groups the ability to communicate quickly and directly to their followers, connecting to them and to their imaginaries and creating a feeling of empathy and belonging.⁴⁹ Through opening the possibility to circumvent traditional gatekeepers, make use of their own framing (usually through simplification and emotionalization) concerning the issues on their (security) agenda and being able to explore language used in their own terms through instant-posting and instant-messaging, the online media environment is a fertile ground for populism.⁵⁰

Within this framework, and concerning online communication strategies, right-wing populism tends to privilege connotation processes that articulate today’s concerns with the preservation of racialized national “imagined communities” along with specific gendered imaginaries. This is mainly put forward through exclusionary identitarian rhetorics, including «emotional appeals and personal insults», a «calculated break of supposed taboos» and a dismissal or even «disrespect of formal and informal rules (for instance, “political correctness”)». ⁵¹ The more ethnocentric the formulation of the people/nation is in populist right-wing discourses, the more excluding and xenophobic the stand against what those discourses conceive as the “others” are.⁵²

37. Deuze, “What Is Journalism? Professional Identity and Ideology of Journalists Reconsidered.”

38. Ozanne et al., “An Investigation into Facebook ‘Liking’ Behavior an Exploratory Study.”

39. Ernst et al., “Extreme Parties and Populism: An Analysis of Facebook and Twitter across Six Countries.”

40. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*.

41. Greven, “The Rise of Rightwing Populism in Europe and the United States.”

42. Flaxman, Goel, and Rao, “Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption,” 299.

43. Sunstein, *Republic.Com 2.0*; Flaxman, Goel, and Rao, “Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption.”

44. Jackson et al., “Assessing Meaning Construction on Social Media: A Case of Normalizing Militarism.”

45. Engesser et al., “Populism and Social Media: How Politicians Spread a Fragmented Ideology,” 1113.

46. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*.

47. Flaxman, Goel, and Rao, “Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption.”

48. Wills and Reeves, “Facebook as a Political Weapon: Information in Social Networks.”

49. Engesser, Fawzi, and Larsson, “Populist Online Communication: Introduction to the Special Issue.”

50. Ibid.

51. Greven, “The Rise of Rightwing Populism in Europe and the United States”, 1.

52. Ibid., 2.

Those girls are ours: constructing the color of the nation against the murderous beasts in Italy

In the context of an increasing moral panic toward the alleged unruly invasion of migrants and asylum seekers in Italy and its consequences in terms of the so-called violation of the Italian (white) “imagined community” symbolic and physical body, sex crimes perpetrated by migrant men have been payed particular attention and ascribed meaning connected to specific gendered and racialized idea of the nation.

Far from being a construction elaborated only by extreme-right movements and parties, the image of male migrants and refugees as hypersexualized, sexually repressed and aggressive potential criminals is shared by a large array of political formations and public opinion. Traditional and digital media have contributed decidedly to this construction, profiting from the fear of invasion that has structured Italian public opinion since the 2000s.⁵³ This construction draws from a very well sedimented colonial archive that has persisted beyond the end of national and international colonial experiences and that has been revitalized by discourses on terrorism, loss of identity and civic conquests, and national security.⁵⁴

Figures of race, proceeding from the colonial archive and referring to black and brown bodies are accompanied here by other figures from the national archive depicting the internal abject (specifically the Roma man) as a natural-born rapist. Here I am referring to the rape and murder of Renata Reggiani which occurred in the capital's outskirts in 2007 by a Roma man with mental disability. Against Roma people and their camps, the personal and State violence that followed the murder was brutal and indiscriminate. More recently, these figures have been very successfully mobilized by the Italian extreme right movements and parties and inserted into an imaginary of fear that lead those same parties to gain substantial electoral success in local, national and European elections (especially for the Lega), as well as leading to the Parliament's approval of the Decreto Salvini (24.09.2018) on im-

migration and asylum-seeking, the reform to the Law of Legitimate Defence (Law n. 36, 26.04.2019) and the application of the Close Ports policy (since June 2018).⁵⁵

Under consideration here is the online social media (Facebook) discourse(s) that have been articulated regarding these figures, by both mainstream right and extreme right parties, in order to understand what kind of imagined “community and its enemies” are widely circulating and structuring Italians' self-perception.

We examine social media circulation of posts, images, videos and comments regarding two sexual crimes: firstly, the rape and murder of Pamela Mastropietro, an 18-year-old woman in Macerata by three Nigerian migrants in 2018. Mastropietro had left the rehab clinic near Macerata where she lived to buy drugs in the main city, and was found dead – her body bleached, chopped and put in two bags – was left by her attackers near a provincial way outside Macerata. Desmond Lucky and Lucky Awelima were subsequently found guilty of rape, while Innocent Oseghale was found guilty of murder and given a life sentence (sentence emitted in 29.05.2019). The terrible crime, characterized by the right as the result of the deeds of the Nigerian mafia in Italy, lead former Lega candidate to the local government, and former member of Forza Nuova, Luca Traini, to shoot six black persons (namely: Nigerian Jennifer Otiotio, Festus Omagbon and Gideon Azeke and Ghanian Wilson Kofi, Gambian Omar Fadera and Malian Mahmadou Touré) from his car while shouting « *Viva l'Italia!* [Heil Italy!]».

The second crime to be considered is the gang rape and murder of Desiree Mariottini, a 16 year old girl in Rome (October 2018) by five men – three Senegalese, a Nigerian and an Italian. The girl had gone to Quartire San Lorenzo in Rome to buy drugs with the help of a black Italian woman (Antonella Fauntleroy), and was left in an abandoned building with the three pushers who then raped and murdered her.

53. Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*.
54. Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender in Modern Italy*; Burdett, *Italy, Islam and the Islamic world*.
55. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/dec/07/vulnerable-migrants-made-homeless-after-italy-passes-salvini-decree>; <https://www.wakeupuk.net/italy-passes-salvini-backed-self-defence-law-to-protect-homeowners/>; <https://www.politico.eu/article/matteo-salvini-migration-italy-ports-closed-to-migrant-vessels/>. See also Griffini, “The Civic Discourse”.

53. Wodak, *The Politics of Fear*.

54. Giuliani, *Race, Nation and Gender in Modern Italy*; Burdett, *Italy, Islam and the Islamic world*.

The Facebook pages I have considered are those of four entities existing among parties and self-defined movements of the Italian right and extreme right – Lega, Fratelli d'Italia [FdI], Forza Nuova [FN], CasaPound [CP] – and the personal pages of their leaders, respectively, Matteo Salvini, Giorgia Meloni, Roberto Fiore and Simone di Stefano.⁵⁶ These parties and movements have been selected for three reasons, the first of these being their rise in visibility and electoral consent⁵⁷. Although their electoral success may vary⁵⁸ as well as their number of party/movement members, all of them have reached a considerable increase of political and electoral local and national consent and/or major visibility in the national traditional media. Sec-

56. Facebook pages were checked from the 18th to the 24th of June 2019. The keywords used for the research are 'Pamela'/'Pamela Mastropietro' and 'Desirée'/'Desirée Mariottini'. The following data reflect the discrepancy in consent and attention paid to the various FB pages I have considered: 'Lega – Salvini premier': Likes: 517,009; Followers: 511,812; personal page 'Matteo Salvini' (party leader): Likes: 3,686,280; Followers: 3,809,750; 'Fratelli d'Italia' official page: Likes: 198,081; Followers: 199,761; 'Fratelli d'Italia Camera': Likes: 20,664; Followers: 21,554; 'Fratelli d'Italia Roma': Likes: 13,017; Followers: 13,056; 'Fratelli d'Italia Macerata': Likes: 509; Followers: 514; 'Fratelli d'Italia Marche': Likes: 3,037; Followers: 3,051; personal page 'Giorgia Meloni' (party leader): Likes: 1,105,069; Followers: 1,110,738 'Forza Nuova official page': Likes: 248,923; Followers: 248,248; 'FN Macerata': Likes: 823; Followers: 843; personal page 'Roberto Fiore' (party leader): Likes: 40,237; Followers: 40,850; 'CasaPound Italia': Likes: 276,791; Followers: 280,152; 'CasaPound Italia Roma': Likes: 24,772; Followers: 25,597; 'CasaPound Macerata': Likes: 4,103; Followers: 4,139; personal page 'Simone di Stefano' (party leader): Likes: 139,448; Followers: 142,884. The personal page of the founder of CasaPound, Gianluca Iannone has not been analyzed having no posts published on the two cases under scrutiny. Posts in the Facebook pages I have taken into consideration vary from a maximum of 30 posts to a minimum of 4. The highest number are registered in Matteo Salvini and Giorgia Meloni's personal as well as party's local and national pages but also in CP's local FB pages ('Macerata': 24 posts on Pamela). Follows FN and as the last, CasaPound Italia. Many of the posts contain links to far-right newspapers or to the party's official website: for instance, on Mastropietro's case, 22 are posts published by FdI official page, some of them containing links to lavocedelpatriota.it and the official website of the party fratelli-italia.it; in Mariottini's case there are 60 posts, 20 of which contain a link to declarations published on fratelli-italia.it; in Mastropietro's case there are 4 posts, published by CP Italia, and mostly containing links to ilprimatonazionale.it (CP's official newspaper) and giovaniadestra.it. For a survey on the Italian extreme-right on-line networks see Tateo, "The Italian Extreme Right On-Line Network".

57. In general, for a genealogy of the extreme-right in post-Fascist Italy see Ignazi, *Extreme Right Parties in Western Europe*; Ferraresi, *Threats to Democracy: The Radical Right in Italy After the War* and Spruce, "Empire and Counter-Empire in the Italian Far Right".

58. Lega: 17, 4%; FdI: 4,3 (National elections 04.03.2018); CP and FN less than 3% (no representatives in Parliament). After the vote results CP declared that it would not run for election anymore and that the party returns to be a movement.

ond, although their differences – two of them, FN and CP are openly fascist, while Lega and FdI (although the second is the offspring of postfascist Movimento Sociale Italiano [MSI] and then Alleanza Nazionale [AN]), do not label themselves as such – they have a strong and well defined ideological apparatus. Matteo Salvini's new Lega is an exception: Salvini's Lega made a radical turn in 2017 when from an autonomist and federalist formation it became a nationalist and sovereigntist party, a populist radical right party (like FdI) which is today the main point of reference for and allied to the neo-fascist right.⁵⁹ Third, and most important, Salvini's new Lega – that renounced the noun North 30 years after its foundation – has been defined by journalist Paolo Berizzi as «*il grande traghettatore* [the great boatman]»⁶⁰, the taxi on which neo-fascist Italy jumped since it was conceived as the only political party which could make a difference at the legislative and executive level. The consent Lega gained from the extreme right was cherished by Salvini's new party: as Berizzi reminds us, Lega's adhesion to the sovereigntist movement launched by CP in 2015 (CP, Lega and FdI) and celebrated in a joint demonstration on the 28th of February, 2015. In 2018 Salvini's candidature as Premier was supported by the Sovereigntist Party, a new party founded by Francesco Storace and Gianni Alemanno, respectively leaders of La Destra and Azione Nazionale (both former members of MSI, then AN). Finally, Salvini made the extreme right's slogan (forged by Mario Borghezio, Lega's European Parliament Member, traditionally close to Italian neo-fascism and strong supporter of CP), "*Prima gli italiani* [Italians first]", his own party's main slogan for his 2018 electoral campaign. With this anti-Europeanist and anti-migrant slogan, Salvini's Lega prepares the electoral conquest of Central and Southern regions.⁶¹

From my survey, it appears clear that there is a strong convergence between the main discourse articulated by Salvini, defining the rape by a refugee or an asylum seeker under humanitarian protection

59. Griffini, "The Italian Far Right at The Crossroads of Populism and Nationalism". Griffini support this distinction drawing on for instance, Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe*; Zalsove *Closing the Door?; Castelli Gattinara Framing Exclusion in the Public Sphere*; Piccolino and Henrichsen, *Liaisons Dangereuses?*.

60. Berizzi, *NazItalia*. p. 133 (kindle version).

61. Giovannini, *Europa anno zero*.

as “double” (as a crime against both the victim and against Italian society), and discourses produced by all the extreme right Facebook pages’ posts. Besides this, it represents a leitmotiv shared by very different political forces – from moderate left to extreme right – and is claimed by a considerable number of Facebook members. In fact, as it appears in the online tabloid *Blastingnews*’ report of the interview given by Salvini to the television program *W l’Italia* (Rete 4, 27.10.2018), wherein he claims the “double nature” of such a crime,

Matteo Salvini’s stance on rape when committed by migrants is far from unusual. Many think that rape is worse when committed by non-Italians. As migrants are guests of the nations, when they commit such a crime, they are twice guilty for betraying the trust that was bestowed upon them.

The same position is confirmed by Giorgia Meloni, leader of FdI, on her personal Facebook page: 28 posts published between Feb the 5th 2018 and May 29th 2019 assert the “bestiality” of the culprits, who were not meant to be in the country and enjoy humanitarian protection.

Meaningful to our analysis is the reappropriation by all four parties of the white female murdered body and its celebration as that of a martyr of a general “uncontrolled immigration”/“the invasion” (FN official page: 27.10.2018) or of a more specific “process of replacement”: that is, a femonationalist agenda that appropriates the feminist agenda of the fight against gender violence into a nationalist frame. While the fear of invasion can appertain to a very wide array of political forces⁶², the fear of “replacement” derives from an extreme right theory that sees the left-wing parties’ mild approach to what is felt as the urgent need to close Italian borders as coming from a plot aiming to replace the white race with other races.⁶³ CP openly adheres to this theory, while the other 3 formations do not have a univocal positioning regarding it.⁶⁴

62. Lega Nord and the poster (for the national election in 2008) where Italians were likened to Native Americans invaded by colonizers and forced eventually into reservations. https://www.corriere.it/Primo_Piano/Politica/2008/03_Marzo/07/pop_lega_pellerossa.shtml

63. Rosati, *CasaPound Italia*, 128 and ff.

64. Note: Attilio Fontana President of the Region Lombardia in a

The specific discursive strategies adopted in this discourse imply the denial of the drug addiction of both Mastropietro and Mariottini and their representation as “pure victims” (the victim of a black man’s rape and murder is in itself a martyr, a sort of virgin Maria Goretti, no matter if she was or was not living a “pure” life). This necessary representation leads Giorgia Meloni, as reported by ‘Fratelli d’Italia Camera’, re-posting from an article on *ilgiornale.it* (28.12.2018), to declare that Mariottini was a virgin at the time of her rape and murder. As if to confirm the discursive strategy of martyrdom, in a post published on 05.02.2019 by Meloni which contains an abstract of her interview with journalist Lucia Annunziata (on the latter’s television show *In mezz’ora*), the secretary of the party claims the right to bury Mastropietro in the Verano monumental cemetery in Rome, as a martyr of the nation. On 26.10.2018, 14.11.2018, and 18.11.2018, three posts are published with links to articles in *fratelli-italia.it* which claims the dedication of the 25th November, day of the fight against, and commemoration of, the victims of gender violence, to Desirée Mariottini. In a post published on 05.05.2018 (5,578 likes; 544 comments; 886 shares) on her personal Facebook page, the day of Mastropietro’s funeral, Giorgia Meloni writes «*A Dio, piccola*[God’bye, sweetheart] ». This comment clearly refers to Mastropietro as an innocent victim (a flower, a baby), and daughter of the nation. The same characterization is given to both Mastropietro and Mariottini by Roberto Fiore in a post on his personal Facebook page on 23.10.2018 (307 likes; 26 comments; 260 shares). On 30.01.2019, in very successful post (3,125 likes; 151 comments; 505 shares) on her personal page, Meloni describes Mastropietro as a «daughter of the Nation, forgotten and humiliated by its Institutional representatives», innocent victim of the left’s do-goodism (naive optimism) that is «preoccupied with everybody but our own people». The same tone is used by Salvini in his personal page: in a post published on 05.05.2018, Salvini remembers Mastropietro in the day of her funeral «Have a nice journey, Pamela, beautiful girl victim of the ferocity of those who do not deserve to be called a man. To

radio interview (Radio Padania, 16.01.2018) stated that the «white race is in danger».

you, a flower and a prey [*sic*]» (16,221 likes; 1,451 comments; 1,952 shares).

This discursive element is clearly shared also in a post published in the FN official page on the 08.03.2019, to report on the FN female section's action in many cities pinning posters that connect Mastropietro and Mariottini to female icons of patriotism (Palestine) and pro-life choices. A nationalist, white, pro-life and limitedly emancipationist feminist agenda is invoked (against pro-gender and multicultural feminisms supposedly linked to the murders). The same position is confirmed by the post published on 'FN Macerata' on 04.05.2018, which reports on installation by FN of a sign that renames the street where Mastropietro was found dead «*Pamela Mastropietro. Vittima della mafia nigeriana*». Comments depict her as a martyr. On the 30.01.2019 (the anniversary of Mastropietro's murder) 'FN Macerata' posts the speech of its movement's coordinator Martina Borra, saying that Mastropietro was «Italy's daughters killed by an alien beast». CP Italia official Facebook page aligns with this sentiment, posting an article from *giovaniadestra.it* where she is “purified” and described as «a girl of a clear, the clearest, complexion. She was almost blonde» who was forgotten by antifascist and left-wing parties and movements as they deny the primacy of Italians and the defense of their (white) national identity. Similar tones are deployed by 'CP Macerata', which reports, on 11.04.2019, that CP local members removed graffiti which read «*Pamela tossica* [drug addict]»; the “cult of the dead” is reclaimed and inserted in a broader discourse on the defense of the marginal (Mastropietro as a vulnerable creature who fled a rehab clinic and was found dead at the hands of “beasts”). On 14.06.2019 Mastropietro is memorialized in a post where the state is blamed for having forgotten many of its martyred girls.

At stake here is what Gaia Giuliani has defined as the construction of the “color of the nation” that, in this case, is seen as a collective process (thanks to the nature of the medium, although posts can be made only by Facebook page managers and comments are filtered).⁶⁵ In the case of Lega (as shown by posts by Salvini on the Salvini Premier page commenting the

murder of Mariottini in Rome), the “color of the nation” is described through its wounded identity by “subhumans” blacks, “beasts”, “infamous worms” (2 posts published on 26.10.2018). The culprits’ “sub-humanity” – that only deserves the death penalty – is claimed also by CP (di Stefano on his personal page, 29.05.2019) and FN, whose leader, Roberto Fiore calls them “cannibals” (27.08.2018). Against these “monsters” (including Antonella Fauntleroy, described as Satan on FN's official page, 15.02.2019), the nation is implied to be “human, white, civilized”. Therefore, the place where the crime happened needs to be “cleansed” with excavators (like the Roma camps and the abusive slums where migrants and refugees live).⁶⁶ In one of the two posts (26.10.2018), Salvini, like President Serracchiani a year earlier, invokes harsher sentences for those migrants who commit crimes, as well as their immediate expulsion (62,755 likes; 12,909 comments; 14,112 shares) and elsewhere talks about chemical castration. In response to his statement, Facebook posts invoke the death penalty: «rather than strict-regime prison, we should bring here death penalty or do as we used to, that is, execute them in a public space» (3081 likes) or «let them get killed in our prisons» (1,329 likes). In Mariottini's case, in the dedicated 13 posts (between the 24.10.2018 and the 14.11.2018, collecting around 25,000-50,000 likes), Salvini states his personal and political attachment to the case (he goes to San Lorenzo where the crime occurred, to meetings of the Comitato per l'Ordine e la sicurezza della città di Roma and with the local population): again, he invokes the mass expulsion of illegal migrants, whose crimes (rapes) require higher sentences and even chemical castration and alleges that the culprit of the barbarian invasion is the left (and the previous government). In a post published on 29.05.2019 that collected 34,536 likes and 3,669 shares on his personal page, Salvini comments on the life sentence of Innocent Oseghale, confirming his position against the death penalty. Nevertheless, many of the 4,566 comments invoke the death penal-

65. Giuliani, *Il colore della nazione*, 1-14.

66. Many of the posts contain links to the online national right-wing press (*Il Messaggero, La stampa, ilgiornale, Quotidiano nazionale*), some online tabloids (*tiscalipress*) and some online local journals (*foggiatodayandilgiornalediBrescia*).

ty for homicide or higher penalties for murderers and rapists who are immigrants and drug dealers.

When openly anti-racist television host and journalist Gad Lerner contested Salvini on his racist positions, shifting attention to the vulnerability of Mariottini (who was the daughter of a drug dealer and, at 15 years old, heroin-addicted herself) Salvini's supporters on Twitter and Facebook accused Lerner of claiming she was responsible for her own death (*corriere della sera* online, 28.10.2018).⁶⁷ On 01.08.2018, under a post by Giorgia Meloni on the FdI official page containing the demand for a life penalty for Oseghale, published on *fratelli-italia.it*, commenters alternately demand repatriation and conviction in his own country (where people are said to die in captivity), lynching, evisceration, stoning, forced labor in Italian prisons, the death penalty and public execution. He is labelled sarcastically as the «clearest example of human evolution» and as a «cannibal».

Chemical castration is invoked also by Salvini for the gang rape in Viterbo perpetrated by representatives of CP against one of their party's member (11 and 12 April 2019) but the moral outrage, as well as the death penalty that is invoked for migrants and refugees, here does not apply. The death penalty is also invoked by the leader of FN, Roberto Fiore who also called for the public exhibition of the bodies of the criminals (05.02.2018). In the same post, he promises the creation of a pool of lawyers to defend Traini against the accusations of racism – he is seen as justified by the murder of Mastropietro; to investigate against the Magistrature that could release the drug-dealer Innocent Oseghale for not committing the crime; and to investigate the Nigerian Mafia in Macerata and the whole country. The most liked post published to Fiore's personal Facebook page (1,493 likes; 458 comments; 1,465 shares) is a comment on the possible release of Innocent Oseghale where riots are invoked in this case (07.02.2018). Comments invoke the lynching: «do not let him go, cause surely there will be someone ready to kill him»; «I hope that

they will let him go and that the girl's father will kill him outside the prison», «even better, we are waiting for him!»; «[we should] use the same bleach he used to disfigure poor Pamela». Interestingly enough, FN stresses that «*L'IMMIGRAZIONE UCCIDE!* [immigration kills!]» referring to the murder of Mastropietro and, invoking «eye for an eye» (09.06.2018), justifies Traini's shooting (note that Salvini in a post on his personal Facebook page states the same, «migrants bringing death to Italy» (14.03.2019)). In this interpretation of the facts (involving Mastropietro, a Polish woman in Rimini and a 15 year old Italian girl in Jesolo) accompanied by the slogan «*Non parlare con gli sconosciuti* [Don't talk to strangers]» rape is portrayed as committed only by strangers (migrants and refugees). Many comments invoke lynching. This association is confirmed by another slogan «*ECCO IL RISULTATO DELLA VOSTRA INTEGRAZIONE!*[look at the result of your integration!]», which appeared in a post published on 26.11.2018 and was also written on posters posted in 25 of Italy's major cities' main squares and buildings, showing a hooded man apparently in the act of strangulating a bleeding white woman. CP's statements in its local and national Facebook pages on the direct relation between murders, immigration and loss of national primacy confirm a similar position. On 06.02.2018, 'CP Macerata' publishes a post where they compare the less attention paid by institutions to murders committed by migrants to the much higher attention paid to those where migrants are the victims:

When David Raggi got his throat slit by an illegal migrant in the town of Terni, the media went absolutely silent, no state representative showed up. However, when the Nigerian Emmanuel accidentally dies after a brawl with an Italian, the media immediately took up the news, the public is overwhelmingly shocked, and Boldrini and Alfano attend the funeral. When the Italian Pamela is cut in pieces in a voodoo ritual in Macerata, the media barely reported the news, and no state representative attend the funeral. When migrants are shot (as a revenge for the murder of Pamela), media went nuts reporting the news, the public was outraged, and Minniti showed up only two hours after

67. To be noted, a year earlier when the crime of the gang rape of a 13 year old girl perpetrated by Italian white young men for two years at the end of the 1990s was denounced and when the public opinion of the little town San Martino di Taurianova, Calabria, blamed her for being a «whore», Salvini and his supporters were not so active (no post can be found on the issue).

the incident. This represents the perfect synthesis of the current regime of politically correct self-hatred.⁶⁸

In CP Macerata, many of the posts are comments to articles published in the online version of the movement's journal *ilprimatonazionale.it*: the first refers to the alleged voodoo ritual in which the corpse of Mastropietro was used (02.02.2018), the second to the ferocity (and barbarity) of the Nigerian mafia and its crimes in Italy (04.03.2018), the third to the release of two of the Nigerians involved (07.06.2018). Here comments invoke the death penalty, convictions in their country of origin after repatriation and lynching. Other posts refer to the details of the murder and the dismembering and are accompanied by hashtags demanding an end immigration and the sheltering of refugees (for instance in a post published on 21.03.2019, the hashtags accompanying the statement are #StopAccoglienza #NoSPRAR #MacerataSicura [#stopsheltering #NoProtectionForAsylumSeekers #MacerataSecure]). These demands are echoed by statements made by di Stefano on his personal Facebook page in the 6 posts dedicated to Mastropietro's case: on 02.02.2018 di Stefano comments about the need for a serious debate on the death penalty alongside a poster which reads «*Fuori tutti* [Everybody out]» (5,603 likes; 324 comments; 2,482 shares). Interestingly enough, although Salvini's posts do not directly invoke the issue of national primacy, among the comments (2,283) to one of his posts published on 30.01.2019 many imply that the left is a sort of a "traitor" of the race/nation, alleging that it only becomes mobilized when a victim is not white.

As emerges from the posts analyzed, expressions of horror and fear in response to the murders convey moral panic and fury against migrants and refugees in general, as potential criminals as such. Fears of invasion are underpinned by ideas of black Otherness that are forged on the base of those "figures of race" that al-

68. Emmanuel Chidi Namdi, 36, died of injuries he sustained when a local man, who had reportedly been racially abusing Namdi's wife, attacked him in the town of Fermo. Amedeo Mancini, 39, allegedly referred to the 24-year-old woman as a "monkey" and attacked Namdi when he attempted to defend her, according to Italian media reports. Namdi fell into a coma and was pronounced dead two days later. Less than a year later, on May 12, 2017, Namdi's killer was released from house arrest.

low a generalization of the depravity of the rapists and murders to include all incoming male (black) people («everybody out!»). Against the "beasts", controversial figures like those of Mastropietro and Mariottini are reappropriated as innocent martyrs ("flowers") and daughters of the nation. Against the beasts, then, the moral reprobation is twofold, since their crime is against a person and the national "family" to which she belongs. This family is not meant to include Nigerian and Senegalese black migrants, refugees, and humanitarian protection seekers – nor Roma, as is confirmed by the many references made by Salvini to Roma camps to be destroyed together with refugee and migrants illegal slums as well as the failed approval in Parliament of the Law of *Ius Soli* and the rise in Italy of anti-Roma racism.⁶⁹ As confirmed by descriptions of Mastropietro and Mariottini, the color of the national family is undoubtedly white – if not ultimately whitened by the same racial crime black men have committed.

1.5 **Object masculinities: narratives of sexual moral panic by the German far-right to contest immigration and asylum**

In 2015, the despair of Syrian refugees trying to reach safe haven, the awareness of the pervasiveness of racism and xenophobia in the history of Germany and acts of violence against asylum seekers and shelters led a considerable part of the German mainstream media to adopt an ethically framed stance of condemnation of racist attacks and hate speech against migrants, while embracing the *Willkommenskultur* [welcoming culture] and Merkel's slogan «*Wir schaffen es* [We can do it]». A study of German media observed that 83% of the 34000 articles about refugees published in 2015 in the German press were positive.⁷⁰ As anti-refugee sentiments were increasing among large sectors of society so was the mistrust concerning mainstream media. A survey conducted during the "refugee crisis" re-

69. <https://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/news/2017/04/anti-gypsyism-italy-activists-call-action>; <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/salvini-is-escalating-war-on-italys-roma-community-by-deploying-soldiers/>. See Tintori, *Ius Soli the Italian Way*.

70. Haller, *Die 'Flüchtlingskrise' in den Medien: Tagesaktueller Journalismus zwischen Meinung und Information*.

vealed that 55% of the respondents felt systematically cheated by the media.⁷¹

Foreign correspondent Carmen Valero identified this period as «an arduous stage in the passage of the mass media into the era of digital knowledge and the post-truth».⁷² Indeed, social media contributed decisively to the dissemination of hoaxes about refugees, many concerning stories of rape.⁷³ Such rumors, along with news in mainstream media about the difficulties in managing the arrival and housing of asylum seekers, the exhaustion among volunteers and aid-workers, the thousands of refugees in the Balkan route trying to reach Germany and the growth of the far-right, began to weaken the enthusiasm around the *Willkommenskultur*. In Fall 2015, the anti-Merkel narrative «*Wir schaffen es nicht* [We can't do it]» – claiming that the arrival of migrants was overburdening Germany, the state was losing control and chaos was about to erupt – became dominant. This narrative was decisive in framing the coverage of the 2015/2016 New Year's Eve sexual assaults in Cologne and the rape-murder of a student in Freiburg in 2016.⁷⁴ Nourished by the well-entrenched Orientalist tradition of depicting Arab/Muslim men as embodying deviant and aggressive masculinities and prone to sexual crimes, the perception of rape and more broadly of gender-based violence as expressions of patriarchal cultures that are imported through immigration from Muslim countries became a key frame within which to discuss migration in Germany. In an emblematic expression of femonationalism, rape became a marker of social exclusion in the construction of the imagined community. In a context of ethnic anxieties and nativist backlash against immigration, the «ethnicization of sexism»⁷⁵ which pervaded the mediatization of events in Cologne strengthened the public association be-

tween Islam and «gender violence, feminism, and gender mainstreaming», thus reinforcing the positioning of «Islam as the racialized Other to Germany, to Europe, and to the West».⁷⁶ In sum, the sexual assaults were translated into already existing cultural interpretation patterns⁷⁷ that sustained the reading of the events as an attack on the German nation, which in turn strengthened the discursive positions of the far-right.⁷⁸

The present analysis of the Facebook national page of the German far-right party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) [Alternative for Germany] aims to contribute to knowledge about the role played by social media in spreading and legitimizing narratives that use sexual violence as a privileged gendered discourse to contest immigration and asylum. By examining the processes of communication adopted by this page, namely the performative intersection of iconography, text and sources, this analysis argues that the very nature of social media favors the dissemination of simplistic explanations for complex issues; hence the promotion of the narrative of rape as a racialized crime which can be solved in Germany simply by restricting immigration and restoring borders. The reasons for choosing this page derive not only from its role as one of the main outlets of communication between the AfD and its electorate (it has 467 thousand followers),⁷⁹ but also from the very nature of the party itself. As the main far-right party in the German political spectrum, the AfD is a party whose anti-establishment rhetoric made it popular and granted it an important role inside the German political system.⁸⁰

71. Köcher, «Mehrheit fühlt sich über Flüchtlinge einseitig informiert.»

72. Valero, «Notes from the Field: Fake News and a Profession in Crisis: A Foreign Correspondent Reflects on *Willkommenskultur*,» 194.

73. Ibid. 192. Initiatives such as the online map HOAXmap were created and updated precisely to uncover rumors and false reports that were contributing to the increasing moral panic around migration: <https://web.archive.org/web/20160213015135/http://hoaxmap.org/ueber.html>

74. Herrmann, «Unbemerkt Botschaften. Wie Populismus in die Leitmedien einfließt,» 151.

75. Dietze, «Ethnosexismus. Sex-Mob-Narrative um die KölnerSilvesternacht.»

76. Weber, ««We Must Talk About Cologne»: Race, Gender, and Reconfigurations of 'Europe'».

77. Werthschulte, ««Nach' Köln ist wie 'vor' Köln. Die Silvesternacht und ihre Folgen.»

78. Boulila and Carri, «On Cologne: Gender, Migration and Unacknowledged Racisms in Germany,» 288-291.

79. The AfD has a national page and several regional pages, which cover the regional politics of each federal state and hence have less followers. For instance, AfD Berlin has 29 thousand followers and AfD NRW has 46 thousand followers.

80. Founded in 2013 to oppose German federal policies concerning the eurozone crisis, the AfD elected 7 members of the EU parliament in the 24 May 2014 European elections (7.2% of the votes). In 2015-2016, opposition to migration and Islam became the main focus of the party. Its popularity and success in regional elections increased. The membership numbers increased from 16,386 in 2015 to 26,409 in 2016. In the 2017 federal election, the party became the third party in parliament with 12.6% of the votes (94 seats) and, as the two most

Its Facebook page targets an “anti-system electorate” who tends to distrust mainstream media (see the pervasive slogan *Lügenpresse* [liar press] among its ranks) and who is sensitive to rumors and conspiracy theories about the “élite’s betrayal of ordinary Germans”. However, as a party with parliamentary seats, AfD’s public communication must comply to the code and limits imposed by the German constitution. As a space of dissemination of extremist discourses within the frames established by the German law on racism and hate-speech, AfD’s Facebook page is a useful source to examine how extremist rhetoric enters mainstream communication and frames debates on migration.

This analysis refers to the period between August 2015, the peak of the “refugee crisis”, and April 2017, the month after the verdict of the highly mediatized trial of the rape-murder in Freiburg;⁸¹ that is, it covers the successful AfD’s breakthrough into the German Federal Parliament in the 24 September 2017 federal election. This period, which can be summoned as a period during which the mainstream media’s welcoming euphoria from the summer 2015 was reversed into increasing hostility towards migrants,⁸² covers two key events that contributed decisively to the sexual moral panic around refugees and the changes in German public opinion: the sexual assaults in Cologne on New Year’s Eve, often perceived as a turning point in German media coverage of the “refugee crisis”,⁸³ and the rape-murder in Freiburg,⁸⁴ which is less known abroad, but which was a key galvanizer of several German debates regarding the monitoring and surveillance of

refugees.⁸⁵ The media coverage of the rape-murder in Freiburg was marked by tense debates about the code of conduct of mainstream media, the rights of unaccompanied minors and the use of biometrics (DNA, fingerprints, etc.) and techniques of data storage and analysis to profile migrants and refugees.

The object of analysis is the AfD’s virtual posters, which have become a trademark of the party and a central element of its communication. Posted in the AfD’s Facebook national page with an average of 30 to 60 per month and marked by a certain homogeneity (blue background and the party’s logo in the bottom right corner), these posters make for the majority of the party’s Facebook’s posts and convey what the party considers the key elements of its political program and values in its communication with its electorate. After addressing the process of communication by which these posters operate, the analysis examines the quantitative and qualitative evolution of the posters with references to sexual crimes and finally identifies the key narratives promoted by these posters.

The posters are embedded in a three-step system of transmission of information, as they are accompanied by a short contextualizing text and a link to the source of the information in the poster (usually a newspaper article). See the poster «*Frauen werden zu Freiwild* [Women are becoming fair game]» (12.10.2015), which is the first poster of the period under analysis with references to sexual violence perpetrated by asylum seekers. By being identified as part of the AfD’s fall series «*Asylchaos & Eurocrise stoppen* [Stop asylum chaos & Euro crisis]», the poster postulates the existence of a sexual threat to women in Germany deriving from the politics of asylum. The source for this claim is an article published by journalist Phillip Woldin in the center-right newspaper «*Die Welt*»: «*Wie Frauen in Flüchtlingslagern zu Freiwild werden* [How women became fair game in asylum facilities]» (11.10.2015), which addresses the risks of sexual violence and harassment that refugee women face in overcrowded asylum facilities in Hamburg. The article quotes the proposal by some specialists advocating the creation of sepa-

voted parties formed a coalition, the main opposition party.

81. This time frame excludes the highly mediatized rape-murder of 14 year old Susann Feldmann by an Iraqi asylum seeker in Mainz in May 2018. The victim was Jewish-German and the debates and political discourse about her murder require an examination of anti-Semitism in contemporary Germany which, due the length limits of this article, is beyond its scope.

82. Hemmelmann and Wegner, “Refugees in the Media Discourse : Patterns of Coverage in German Media.”

83. Bielicki, “Cologne’s New Year’s Eve Sexual Assaults: The Turning Point in German Media Coverage.”

84. Maria Ladenburger, a 19-year-old medical student, was found raped and drowned on October 16th 2016 in Freiburg. DNA evidence linked an unaccompanied underage Afghan refugee, Hussein Khavari, to the crime. He was arrested on December 3rd 2016 and convicted to life imprisonment on March 22nd 2018. The trial revealed that Khavari had lied about his origins (he was Iranian) and his age (he was 24) and that he had previously been convicted in Greece for robbing and severely injuring a student in Corfu after throwing her over a cliff.

85. The highly mediatized murder of 15-years old Mia Valentin in December 2017 in Kandel by her former boyfriend, an Afghan asylum seeker, who had been denied asylum status, will not be examined in this article because the crime did not involve rape.

rate housing for single refugee women as one possible solution for the problem. In sum, a newspaper article about the sexual threats endured by refugee women in Germany is at the origin of a poster denouncing refugees as a sexual threat to German women. The bridge between the source with the subliminal message “we need to protect refugee women” and the poster’s message “we need to protect our women from refugees” is established in the 141-word text that accompanies the poster. This short text argues that, instead of discussing the possibility of housing refugee women separately, German politicians should regard sexual violence among refugees as proof of their inability to integrate in German culture and take measures to protect German women from the sexual violence refugees are practicing in large scale against refugee women. By referring to the «DieWelt»’s article, AfD uses mainstream media to give credibility to its claims; however, the 141-word text discredits the approach undertaken by the same newspaper article, hence contributing to a pervasive topic in the party’s discourse: discrediting mainstream media.

In the process of creating sexual panic, the short text not only narrows the complexity of the issues addressed, but also adopts a frame of analysis which is contrary to the newspaper’s approach: what in the newspaper’s article is addressed as a problem of gender-based violence exacerbated by logistics is transformed by the AfD’s text into culture-based violence emanating from the countries of origin of the refugees. This discursive strategy exposes emblematically how sexual violence is racialized and transformed into a cultural marker to exclude refugees by the far-right. Furthermore, the poster «*Frauen werden zu Freiwild*» signals another important pattern in AfD’s engagement with the topic of sexual violence: in the period under analysis, the posters about sexual violence perpetrated by migrants are practically the only posters that address sexual violence.⁸⁶ As sexual violence perpetrated by “native Germans” becomes invisible in the communication of the party, it is othered from

German culture as an import through immigration and asylum.

Since the attention of Facebook’s viewers tends to be attracted by pictures and short texts (and a significant portion of the audience does not click the link to access the source of information for the poster), the poster is the most visible part of the three-step transmission of information and the part that conveys the dominant message, with which AfD’s followers establish a dialogue in the comment box and through shares. Followers’ comments and shares tend to endorse and reinforce the message of the poster; therefore, the analysis of a poster like «*Frauen werden zu Freiwild*» indicates that AfD’s process of communication encompasses not only the translation of stories circulating in mainstream media into far-right narratives (how “gendered violence against refugees” is transformed into “refugee violence against Germans”), but also how Facebook’s structure, which is favorable to the amplification of the impact of visual messages through the comments box and shares, can contribute to the intensification of the sexual panic around migration and asylum.

As the analysis of the poster «*Frauen werden zu Freiwild*» indicates, the narrative of sexual panic around asylum was already in place before the sexual assaults in Cologne; however, it was after these events that it gained increasing centrality in the party’s communication. In January 2016 two posters directly addressed the events, one blaming Merkel’s policies (05.01.2016) and another Islam (22.1.2016) for the sexual assaults, while a third, «*Deutsche Medien: Vertuschungen, Verschweigen, Lügen* [German media: Cover up, conceal, lie]» (10.1.2016), echoed another 2015 pervasive narrative which accused German media of hiding the extent of crimes committed by refugees. Nonetheless, it is only after May 2016, when migration had definitely replaced the Euro crisis as the main topic of the party’s propaganda, that posters with references to sexual crimes became a regular presence in AfD’s page, with an average of one (June-September, November) or two (May, October, December) posters per month. 2017 intensifies this pattern: months with one poster (January, February, May, July, November), two posters (March, April, December) and three posters (September, October) with references to sexual

86. The few exceptions which refer to sexual crimes perpetrated by non-migrants are also intended to contest migration. See, for instance, the poster about a rapist who got away (31.03.2018). AfD blames refugees for overburdening the German justice system, making it impossible for tribunals to do their job properly.

violence. The only months without posters referring to rapes perpetrated by refugees (June and August) coincided with terror attacks in Europe (London and Barcelona), which were the main generators of moral panic around migration in the party's posters during these two months. 2018 signals a further intensification of the topic of sexual violence: with two posters per month in March and April and three in January and February.

The intensification of the sex panic around migration in the party's Facebook communication is sustained not only by the increasing numbers of posters with references to sexual crimes, but also by the evolution of their iconography, which becomes more graphic after the rape-murder of Freiburg. Red spots representing blood, pictures of faces of young white women expressing sorrow, pain and fear, and photos of women and girls hiding their faces in shame become more frequent in the posters. The intensification in the depiction of sexual violence as horror is emblematically exposed by the most recent poster of the corpus: the poster which carries the words «*Sex Attacke auf 12-jähriges Mädchen: Merkels Gäste machen Jagd auf unsere Kinder* [Sex attack on 12-year-old girl: Merkel's guests are hunting our children]» (12.04.2018) and pictures in the background a little girl hiding her face and stretching her hand against the camera in a self-defense gesture. While the 2015 and 2016 posters link male migrants to sexual violence against women, after 2017 other layers (pedophilia, zoophilia)⁸⁷ are added in the discursive construction of the male Muslim as representing a perverse and deviant masculinity. The Muslim man is depicted not only as a danger to German women but also, and increasingly, as a danger to German children. This subtext interacts with other narratives that pervade AfD propaganda of the same period, namely with those posters which depict migration as a threat to the well-being of "our children" (school violence, lower family allowances, "big replacement") and which announce the party's political proposals in defense of the (hetero-nativist) family.

In sum, the analysis of the data collected from AfD's national Facebook page indicates that sexual crimes were used in this period by the AfD to promote

87. See, for instance, the poster «*Neue Ponys? Machen die selber* [New ponies? Do it yourself]» (11.11.2017).

its key demands regarding the securitization of asylum and immigration (closing borders, further introduction of biometrics to profile migrants and detect false minors, deportation of convicts), to attack political opponents (Chancellor Merkel, pro-migration politicians like Claudia Roth from the Green Party) and to create distrust in the "system" (mainstream media, justice system); it also signals that party's securitization discourses and political struggles were structured by a pervasive nativist narrative that claims that the future of the German people is at risk due to migration. In that sense, the iconography of posters about sexual violence depicting blond women has to be examined in connection with the many posters depicting blond blue-eyed children as two sides of a narrative of existential ethnic panic about the future of the nation. Sexual violence and nativity converge in the construction (or rather perpetuation) of a German nation imagined according to a nativist frame which excludes the "new Germans",⁸⁸ who are depicted as carriers of crime and violence and hence perceived as a danger capable of destroying the German nation from within. One of the few posters to have been reproduced more than once in AfD's national page is the poster depicting a sporty woman in the middle of nature with the text speckled with red drops «*Nur noch mit Pfefferspray, Verteidigungskurs und keinesfalls alleine! Joggen in einem Land, in dem Du gut und gerne lebst?* [Only with pepper spray, self-defence classes and never alone! Jogging in a country where you live well and like to live?]

1.6 Conclusions

As an intersubjective social construction, the notion of security is largely based on representations

88. "New Germans" is an expression often used in pro-migration discourses.

of what to protect and what is a potential threat to the survival and/or development of what a particular community cherishes and, subsequently, intends to save and protect. Representations emerge and evolve in a context of historical background, national “imagined communities” and, most of all, power relations. Discursive realms such as the media are a pivotal area where representations are created, circulated and validated. Online media, particularly online social media, being ubiquitous and entailing communication processes which democratize and automatize gatekeeping processes, and valuing interaction and emotions rather than ethical and deontological content, are key actors.

Focusing on the Italian and German extreme right’s visual and written discourses on the relation between (migrant and refugee) “invasion” and sex crimes against (white) women, this article shows that their representations of migrants/refugees in online media accounts place the emphasis on male migrants’ and refugees’ alleged dangerousness for the nation. By color of the nation we have intended the conflation between whiteness, the nation and the murdered/raped body of the young (white) girl according to what has been defined as a femonationalist agenda. This conflation recovers from Orientalist imaginaries and colonial and national archives specific “figures of race” (the black, the Arab or the Muslim man respectively in the two cases of Italy and Germany) against which racialized and culturally encoded ideas of the Italian and German national “imagined community” are articulated. For the Italian case, notions of invasion and replacement are supported through colonial ideas of the deadly dangerousness of black and male Otherness, both based on and confirmed by the image of the nation as “pure” and vulnerable. In Germany, as immigration and asylum became more and more divisive (and contested) issues in German political debates during and in the aftermath of the so-called “refugee crisis”, sexual crimes perpetrated by asylum seekers were increasingly used by the parliamentary far-right, the AfD, to promote the securitization of refugees, asylum seekers and immigration, to strategically attack political opponents, and to create distrust in the “system”. This political communication strategy was mainly put forward by activating and constructing a pervasive nativist narrative nurtured by orientalist

imaginaries that establishes a dichotomy and hierarchy between “real Germans” and racialized (potential) “new Germans” (migrants, refugees, asylum seekers and their children), and claims that the future of what is proclaimed to be the “true” German people is at risk due to the threatening cultural traits of migration groups and the hosting of refugee communities from the Middle East and Muslim countries. In this narrative and its iconography, the body of the nation and the body of the raped woman increasingly conflate and as such emerge as a source of ethnic “moral panic”.

These conclusions lead us to engage with a wider debate on the enduring colonial archive still upheld by European societies, through which the national “imagined community” is construed, whether explicitly or implicitly, as racialized (white). The racist subtexts deployed by the far right to describe both Italian and German societies is far from being restricted to a far-right ideological stance and is rather common to an imaginary that pervades a more ubiquitous political culture. For, we align with the many scholars who advocate for a profound decolonization of national and European imaginary and a public reflection on both the legacy and the rearticulation of colonial racist cultures and power relations structuring the space of Europe and the producing the limits and hierarchies of its society.

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