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Pathways through the sea: decolonial geopoetics of the Mediterranean in Italian folksong

Abstract: *Extending and connecting scholarship on decolonial geopoetics, critical Mediterraneanism and maritime (wet and more-than-wet) ontologies, this paper discusses Genoese folksinger Fabrizio De André’s political, poetical, and geographical work on the Mediterranean Sea. De André has been considered as a pioneer of “World Music” for his linguistic and historical research on sounds and stories of the Mediterranean. Yet, a socially and politically committed intellectual, De André fostered agendas that went well beyond the role that this author played in the history of Italian and international folksong, and should interest scholars in geography, geopolitics and geopoetics. Exploring his original texts and recollections, I argue that De André’s works open ways to connect critical studies on the Mediterranean to broader scholarship on decoloniality and relational ontologies. This emerges especially through his commitment to challenge cultural and linguistic borders, listening to “histories from below” and denouncing the colonial violence of states and other oppressive powers in North-South Mediterranean relations. Furthermore, De André’s geopoetics fosters ideas of Mediterranean entanglements between land and sea that challenge statist territorialities, enhancing different geopoetic and geopolitical imaginations to address current matters on migration, racism and exclusion.*

Keywords: Mediterraneanism; Geopoetics; Pluriverse; Anarchism; More-than-wet ontologies

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Extending and connecting scholarship on critical Mediterraneanism, more-than-wet ontologies and decolonially-inspired geopoetics, this paper addresses the construction of plural and empathic notions of the Mediterranean by Italian *cantautore* Fabrizio De André (1940-1999). It is worth noting that the Italian term *cantautore* (quite the equivalent of French *chansonnier*) has specific nuances in relation to its generic translation, “folksinger”. In fact, although often inspired by popular songs, Italian *cantautori* are the authors of their texts and often pay tribute to canonized poetry in their intentional merging of grassroots and intellectual poetical genres (Eco 2016). The definition *cantautori* has also specific contexts as it denotes a recognizable movement that characterises Italian music since the second half of the twentieth century. Thus, the term *cantautore* [and its plural *cantautori*] will be used here in the original Italian.

Working with collaborators such as Mauro Pagani, De André engaged with both poetical/ethnomusicological research and radical politics, considering the sea as a place for exchange and cultural conversation rather than a frontier or a space dividing “civilizations”. I especially address texts and contexts of his songs on the Mediterranean, which were the result of sustained research on languages and histories of that sea, which exposed how much the language of De André’s city, Genoa, is contaminated by words and sounds coming from the Southern and Eastern shores of the Mediterranean. In Italian scholarship, De André’s geopoetics called the attention of a philosopher committed to the study of Mediterranean (geo)politics and cultures, Franco Cassano (1943-2021).

An exponent of critical Mediterraneanism (Romano 2019) arguing for a “Mediterranean alternative” to hegemonic geopolitics (Cassano and Zolo 2007; Ferretti 2023a; Giaccaria and Minca 2011) and an author interested in decolonial notions of pluriverse as “a world in which

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many worlds fit” (De la Cadena and Blaser 2018), Cassano considered De André’ texts and music as part of the Mediterranean understood as an “irreducible pluriverse” (Cassano 2012, xlvi). Cassano commented De André’s 1984 LP *Crêuza de Mä*, a Genoese expression (meaning literally “mule-track to the sea”) that indicates narrow pathways from the hills to the sea that characterise Ligurian landscapes, and which I translate here in its metaphorical and relational signification of “pathway through the sea”. In De André’s narrative, these pathways continue on the sea through the Mediterranean networks of sailing routes that unite the opposite shores. For Cassano, De André rediscovered this way: “The new power of ancient Southern journeys. Not only do the album’s lyrics narrate a variety of beautiful and terrible stories tied to this sea, but the music weaves together rhythms and instruments from many Mediterranean countries [after discovering] that the Genoese language has more than two thousand Greek and Turkish words, which are the heredity of the ancient mercantile trade between cities in the Mediterranean region” (Cassano 2012, 134).

While other works on Mediterranean music mainly focus on twentieth-century contaminations with African sounds that were mediated by Blues (Chambers 2020), De André’s songs are based on original research recovering languages, stories and sounds from Mediterranean cultures taken in their in-betweenness (De André 2011f). My argument is twofold. First, De André’s production contributes to critical Mediterraneanism by furthering ideas of decoloniality and pluriverse that seek plural dialogues among peoples and cultures, which are connected but maintain their respective specificities like in the decolonial identities that Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui (2018) defines as “motley” rather than “mixed”. In this sense, current decolonial agendas are consistent with the pluralist, anti-racist and anti-nationalistic thinking of Fabrizio De André.

Second, extending current ideas of geopoetics as an instrument to counter social and environmental inequalities (Magrane et al. 2020; Cresswell 2022), I argue that De André's songs contribute to critical geopoetics by containing both social denunciations and insights to think new territorialities. De André was aware of the challenges that entanglements of land and sea launch to notions of state and bounded territory, and his Mediterraneanism can still contribute to geopolitical literature that questions principles of exclusive sovereignty (Agnew 2021; Minca 2019). Importantly, the very idea of Mediterranean as a concept that is irreducible to its mere liquid element constitutes an original standpoint in relation to the emphasis on oceans that has characterised most "maritime" geographical scholarship.

In the first part, I discuss my idea of "Mediterraneanism" highlighting the insights that my case offers to both decolonially-inspired geopoetics and geographical scholarship considering the sea as a relational phenomenon to be read in its "excess" through wet and more-than wet ontologies. I define "excess" as all the relational (human and non-human) components that exceed the materiality of the sea (Steinberg 2022; Peters and Steinberg 2015). In historical terms, "excess" matches the works of authors who considered shores and terrestrial networks as parts of Mediterranean relationalities (Braudel 1949; Malkin 2018; Horden and Purcell 2000) instead of only addressing "the surface of the sea itself" (Abulafia 2011, xvii). In the second part, I introduce De André's texts and contexts based on his autobiographical interviews and archives. In the third and fourth parts, drawing upon recent scholarship on postcolonial Italy and the 'Black Mediterranean', I analyse De André's ideas of Mediterranean relationalities through his texts in Sardinian and Genoese.¹

¹ All citations from songs and texts in languages other than English have been translated by the author.

1. Mediterraneanism, waterish worlds and decolonial geopoetics

I use here the term “Mediterraneanism” as a broad equivalent of what Giaccaria and Minca define “Militant Mediterraneanism”. That is, “the idea of an alternative Mediterranean modernity” (Giaccaria and Minca 2011, 355) as opposed to the original colonialist views of Mediterranean wholeness that were questioned by Michael Herzfeld (2005). In addition to Cassano, an Italy-based author whose works are key to define this critical Mediterraneanism is Iain Chambers. Chambers discusses postcolonial Mediterranean perspectives, with special reference to migration, by arguing that one should not think of the Mediterranean, but “with the Mediterranean” (Chambers and Cariello 2019, 11), questioning any “stable identity politics” (Chambers 2018, 7) in a sea whose plural histories are characterized by “*métissage*, *creolité* and hybridity” (Chambers 2018, 152).

Chambers argues that the multiplicity and diversity of Mediterranean voices challenges all universalistic politics of assimilation, allowing for mobile encounters to be thought in a “malleable and unsettled way, as a continual interweaving of historical and cultural currents” (Chambers 2007, 37). These ideas on fluidity draw upon the “unstable unity” (Chambers 2007, 37) of the Mediterranean that was exposed by French historian Fernand Braudel (1902-1985) in classical works such as *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (Braudel 1949). Braudel's notions of networks and multiple temporalities inspired the concept of Mediterranean “connectivity” discussed by Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, who stress how the openness to receive foreign travellers that the sea favoured was already

considered a challenge by the most conservative parts of Mediterranean societies during the Antiquity (Horden and Purcell 2000).

Some Braudelian inspiration also characterises Irad Malkin's works considering the concept of network as key to understand how the ancient Greek civilisation did not build its identity through territorial cohesion, but exactly from the networked structure of its cities and shores, spatially working "like islands" (Malkin 2018, 70). Malkin draws upon postmodern understandings of networks such as Deleuze and Guattari's notion of "rhizome", a form that opposes hierarchies between centres and peripheries. Like Malkin, Claudio Fogu stresses the need to rediscover a rhizomatic Mediterraneanness to overcome imperial ideas of Mediterranean political unity inaugurated by the Roman empire, a conceptual shift that Fogu expresses through metaphors such as the transformation of the Mediterranean "from fishing net to spider web" (Fogu 2020, 6) and from *emporion* to *imperium*.

While all these authors reference Braudel, most of them criticise his views for having "overestimated the determinism of Mediterranean geography" (Malkin 2018, 45) without always grasping the importance of the "human hand ... in moulding the histories of the Mediterranean" (Abulafia 2011, xxx). Chambers stresses Braudel's "pronounced failure" (Chambers 2007, 158) in taking distances from French imperial views of a unique (and Europe-dominated) Mediterranean, and in which matters such as Blackness and slavery are substantially ignored (Proglia et al. 2021). Hence, the importance of dealing with postcolonial, decolonial and critical scholarship to make sense of the geopolitical and geopoetic framework of De André's Mediterranean, understanding its relevance for current debates.

For authors such as Franco Farinelli and Predrag Matvejević, the history of the Mediterranean is best expressed by the cartographic genre of the *Isolarium*. That is, a collection of maps in which each island is represented in its individuality beyond the need of a uniform scale, which conversely corresponds to the genre of the atlas and to “cartographic reason” (Farinelli 2003; Matvejević 1999). This latter is based on “the linear temporalities associated with solid land and the singular histories that are narrated through fixed memorialisations” (Steinberg 2022, 1). Conversely, in pre-geometric Mediterranean worlds, the recursive itineraries of traditional seasonal navigations were first told (one may say “sung”) in Homer and Hesiod’s tales, which are the object of contemporary discussions on geographical myths (Essebo 2019; Hepach 2022). Nevertheless, most cultural and historical geographies on seas and islands visibly underplayed the Mediterranean to mainly focus on oceanic spaces.

Recent scholarship on “wet” and “more-than wet” ontologies argues that maritime spaces can “destabilise notions of bounded space and linear time as tools (and representations) of social power” (Steinberg 2022, 12). This discussion started by acknowledging that an “Euclidean conception of space as a stable surface provides unwelcome constraints that separate spaces from the matter and meanings that occur within” (Steinberg and Peters 2015, 248). Thus, relational, dynamic and immanent geographical approaches transcend mere materiality as well as “flat” visions of the world, given that human and non-human subjects interact in plural and unexpected ways. In more-than-wet ontologies, the challenge is not only to understand the fluid and mobile nature of relationality in “a world of flows, connections, liquidities and becomings” but also to grasp “the reimagining and re-enlivening of a world and our being-in-the-world” (Peters and Steinberg 2019, 294). Following Peter’s and Steinberg’s idea that the ocean cannot be reduced to its liquid elements given its plural and multidimensional relations with its shores,

one can argue that the Mediterranean is a key complement for a more-than wet ontology which understands multiple dimensions of land and water interactions including what the authors call “excess”. That is, all the relations that exceed the mere materiality of the sea, chiming with what Chambers defines as the “liquid materiality of the Mediterranean” (Chambers 2007, 5) and with all the terrestrial relations of the Mediterranean, whose roles have been highlighted by authors such as Braudel, Malkin, Horden and Purcell.

My case shows how the Mediterranean understood as both a metaphor and a concrete historical place can extend this scholarship by contributing to overtake “disciplinary terracentrism”. That is, the Mediterranean and the Ocean both contribute to question “the hard-bordered binaries of home and passage, root (stasis) and route (mobility), and self and other that predominate in Western, continental ontologies” (Steinberg 2022, 3). Among literary references going beyond Western human-natural divides, Steinberg identifies works by Caribbean authors Edouard Glissant and Daniel Maximin, who are also among the inspirers of decolonial geopoetics as discussed by Angela Last (2015 and 2017). Inspired by Glissant’s *Poétique de la relation*, several scholars engage with postcolonial ideas that different imaginaries can be shared as “every identity develops itself in relation to the Other” (Glissant 2007, 23). Crucially, Glissant argued that blurring identities also implies to “relativise the very notion of territory” (Glissant 2007, 23). That is, the static idea of bounded land classically criticised by critical geopolitics (Elden 2013; Agnew 2021).

Like Cassano’s Mediterranean, Glissant’s Caribbean is a relational and multilingual space which opposes the totalitarianism of one language and one culture. Critical Mediterraneanists would subscribe to Glissant’s statements such as: “Thinking of the Other is useless without the

Other in your thought” (Glissant 2007, 144). Likewise, Glissant’s ideas of an “irreducible singularity” (Glissant 2007, 174) escaping “absolute truths” (Glissant 2007, 175) can foster productive pluriversal dialogues between Caribbean and Mediterranean geopoetics. It is worth noting that geographical scholarship still argues that Caribbean authors bring an “oceanic perspective” (Steinberg 2022, 5) to geographies breaking “the nationalist narrative of history finding its apogee in the bounding and consolidation of a sovereign territory” (Steinberg 2022, 5) including related pretensions of racial and civilisational superiority of the coloniser (Lehman, Steinberg and Johnson 2021). Thus, I would contend that the Mediterranean as a geographical concept can extend the notion of “excess” if we consider its entanglements of land and sea, with related histories and more-than-human relations. Mediterraneanism can likewise extend current ideas of geopoetics understood as a tool for investigating relational spaces.

As Tim Cresswell has recently argued, “thinking and writing about place in a relational way is appropriate for a time of emergency” (Cresswell 2022, 374). Furthermore, Eric Magrane defines geopoetics as an inclusive field which connects “poetry and critical geography” (Magrane 2021, 11) by encompassing different genres such as: “Performative practice, site-based installation or field research, community practice, and other forms of artistic product and/or literary essay and multigenre writing” (Magrane 2021, 12). Drawing on insights by Deleuze and Guattari and by geographers such as Derek McCormack, Cresswell includes folk music in the geopoetic realm, discussing the use of refrains. A refrain can be defined in geopoetic terms as the pivot of a circular movement that generates “a repeated act of territorialization and deterritorialization through which things are constantly configured and reconfigured in assemblages. The refrain is a repeated return” (Cresswell 2022, 385). While the return is a characteristic of Mediterranean *peripli* as noted above, the refrain is a structural

component of the songs that are analysed here, where it plays geographical roles of both localization and disorientation.

In addressing the “co-constitutive nature of words and worlds” (Hawkins 2020, xiii), geopoetics is currently considered not only as intellectual or artistic creation, but also as “an action, as something to be done” (Magrane *et al.* 2020, 1). This purpose was significantly enacted by Italian *cantautori*. While merging different genres such as music and poetry, these authors played key roles in Italian experiences of political radicalism and counterculture in the 1960s-1970s, when concerts and political demonstrations often overlapped (Balestrini and Moroni 2003; Vanwagenen 2022). It is worth noting that, in Italy, *cantautori*’s texts are now fully recognized as “poetry” and part of the history of Italian literature well beyond their earliest definition of “light music”. In this process, De André’s texts were an emblematic case, although their “canonisation” started after his death (Cotroneo 1999) and did not always include their prickliest political contents.

While De André was among the protagonists of the “ethnic turn” in Italian music, his collaborators unanimously recollect how his main interests were literary. For Ivano Fossati: “Fabrizio was a man of letters...I never saw him running to buy a new LP, but I often saw him running to buy a new book” (Fossati, in De André 2011g). Pagani similarly stresses the “maniacal care” with which De André polished the metrics of his songs to fit his stories in their exact grids of verses and syllables, an art in which “he was by far the best of all” (Pagani, in De André 2011g). This poetical canonization of *cantautori*’s works as a genre seeking poetical equilibrium between words and music was endorsed by famous Italian poets such as Mario Luzi (1914-2005) who corresponded with De André on these matters (De André 2011g).

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Matching the geopoetic scholarship discussed above, De André's Mediterranean geopoetics explores routes traced between land and sea. Geopoetic scholarship considers tracks as more-than-human ways used to move "along various terrains" (Turnbull 2020, 119). To these terrains, De André added liquid surfaces, following Braudel's definition of the Mediterranean as made by "sea and terrestrial routes" (Braudel 1977, 76) that find continuity in innumerable ports understood as hubs of a sea-land hybrid circulation network. De André stressed several historical, cultural and linguistic points suggesting some unity of the whole Mediterranean basin in the sense of what geopoetic scholars, following Doreen Massey, call "throwntogetherness". That is, the capacity of creating at each time "a living, changing landscape that is and is not home" (Acker 2020, 132). The instability of the relation to home of the Mediterranean sailors who are the main characters of *Crêuza de mă* contributes both to destabilise ideas of fixed belongings, and to construct a Mediterranean (motley) identity through songs/poems that become, performatively, topo poetic places (Cresswell 2020). Yet, De André's work should be understood in its biographical, historical and geographical contexts as I discuss in the next section.

2. Stories of poets and revolutionaries

One of the dominating maritime republics in Middle Ages Mediterranean, the "Superb" Genoa became a stronghold of workers' movements based on the industries living on her port during the twentieth century and one of the leading cities of partisan resistance in 1943-45. In the afterwar, Genoa was the city of the earliest Italian *cantautori* "school", whose first generation was represented by famous names such as Gino Paoli, Luigi Tenco, Bruno Lauzi and Umberto Bindi. Although heterogeneously, these artists shared the common influence of French

chansonniers such as Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel, of North American artists such as Bob Dylan and Leonard Cohen, and of the Italian traditions of popular and political songs (Lega 2008). De André was arguably the most representative exponent of this cosmopolitan fusion.

Born in 1940 to a bourgeois family, De André developed a nonconformist attitude which led him to take distance from his milieu of origin since its adolescence, when he joined the anarchist movement (Finzi 2018). Acquainted with working-class activists and former partisans such as Genoa FAI (*Federazione Anarchica Italiana*) member Elio Fiori (1924-2006), De André read: “Bakunin, Malatesta and Luxembourg; and since 1957 [he] went to the anarchist locals in Genoa” (De André 2022, 262) and in Carrara (Deregibus 2003, 44). Until his late days, he continued to generously fund anarchist journals *Umanità Nova* and *A-Rivista Anarchica* because, as he stated in his recollections: “I have never found ... any political positioning that offered me something better in ethical or social terms” (De André 2011f). Thus, even after reaching economic and professional success he continued to claim that he was: “Surely, an anarchist, one who believes to be clever enough to can rule himself” (De André 2022, 15).

Anarchism was reflected in his early songs of the 1960s, characterised by a strong antimilitarist inspiration, such as “La Guerra di Piero” [Piero’s War] and “La Ballata dell’Eroe” [The Hero’s Ballad]. In these texts, De André expressed views that would become classic in anarchist antimilitarism and radical pacifism of the following decades. That is, the intransigent ethical refuse to kill someone wearing “a uniform of a different colour” (De André 1964) coupled with the idea that there are no “just” wars. The political communication of Italian pacifist

movements (Pivano 2002) would be strongly marked by the bitter sarcasm that concluded “Ballata dell’Eroe”, describing the loneliness of the dead soldier’s widow sharing her bed with a medal while: “The Fatherland is proud of having another hero ‘in memory’” (De André 1961).

Equally, the songs that De André dedicated to the prostitutes, transvestites and petty offenders living around Genoa’s Old Port aimed at calling attention to: “So-called lumpenproletariat, neglected people with whom we, the anarchists, were the only ones to deal” (De André 2011f). These included famous songs such as “La Città Vecchia” [The Old Town] and “Via del Campo”, in which local prostitutes took their vengeance as victims of a violent society by deriding silly bourgeois customers who dreamt of romantic love with them (De André 2011c). Genoa Old Port as described in these songs was geopoetically inserted in De André’s Mediterranean connections, as I discuss below.

Finally, it was not only about the sea that De André engaged with geographical models that are alternative to ideas of state sovereignty and bounded territory. It was the case with the works that he dedicated to the Romani people, the most numerous “Gipsy” ethnic group in Italy. As Romani representative Giorgio Bezzecchi recollects, De André approached this community to know better their culture, expressing strong interest for spaces and society of a stateless people. “De André approved our concept of freedom in relation to nature and space, and the gipsy notion of [non-linear] time” (De André 2011b). Beyond his fascination for and identification with “a people that is affected by dromomania”, De André expressed clear awareness of the challenges that Romani spatiality brought to mainstream (geo)politics.

He especially criticised the proscription of nomadic peoples from conventional histories of Italy. “Our historians prefer to see people under the form of nations or even of states, but the gipsies cannot be a state as they do not possess a territory” (De André 2011b). While the distinction between peoples, nations and states is crucial to the classical anarchist thought with which De André was familiar (Gutiérrez and Ferretti 2020), the Genoese *cantautore* politicised his interest in Romani ethics claiming that without states and frontiers there are no armies or wars. For De André, Romani people: “Would deserve the Nobel Prize for Peace because they circulated all over the world for 2000 years without any weapons” (De André 2011b). Against the racist commonplaces about Romani and Sinti that are quite widespread in Italy, De André contended that: “You may tell me that Gipsies steal. It is true, they have also stolen in my house, but they are happy with little loot ... Most importantly, I have never heard of Gipsies stealing through a bank” (De André 2011b). Not only De André was close to the “last” in society: he also argued that stealing “through a bank” is a more serious offence than stealing few objects from a house, echoing the famous Pierre-Joseph Proudhon’s (1840) slogan “property is the theft”.

In a song that De André partially composed in Romani language, the author expressed his wishes to “follow this migration” by “being wind” (Khorakané, in De André 1996), a motto that may summarise the geopoetic programme that De André had inaugurated in 1984 with *Crêuza de Mă*, which is above all about errancy. In the same vein, Glissant considered Biblical and Homeric myths as “books of exile and often errancy” (Glissant 2007, 26). For De André, this errancy was expressed by the *peripli*, circumnavigations of Mediterranean sailors escaping ideas of linear time and geometric space that are conversely grounded in land and state territorialities as I discuss in the next section.

3. Singing Mediterranean geopoetics

Pluriversal peripli

In their book *Italy and the Mediterranean*, Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme discuss Mediterraneanism highlighting “the pluralism of cultural heritages that gave life to Mediterranean civilisation” (Ferme and Bouchard 2013, 27) and criticising the lasting prejudices on the alleged a-historical backwardness of the “South”. These authors dedicate some pages to *Crêuza de Mä*, which they deem the earliest example of Italian engagement with “musical syncretism in the Mediterranean” (Ferme and Bouchard 2013, 95). They eventually define *Crêuza* as an example of the connectivity discussed above by providing “a link between sea and land” (Ferme and Bouchard 2013, 99). Published in 1984, *Crêuza* had a big and unexpected success as for both sales and critique, being considered the pioneering Italian work in World Music (Fabbri 2003). Amazingly, in one of the numerous interviews that De André (author of the LP texts) and Pagani (author of the LP music) gave, the latter provocatively asserted that *Crêuza* was “not an album of World Music, but an adventure novel” (Pagani, in De André 2011f). Or, for De André: “A small Odyssey ... from Bosphorus to Gibraltar” (De André 2011f). Indeed, the narrative *fil rouge* of the work was the recursive travel of a sailor, a *periplus* that is narrated through materiality and feelings that start from the bodily sensations perceived by the protagonists of the opening song, titled “Crêuza de Mä” like the full LP. Eventually, a group of sailors who stop for a night, “exit[ing] the sea to dry up our bones” (*Crêuza de Mä*, in De André 1984) in a tavern after a storm.

There, their first bodily impression is hunger after an uncomfortable journey. “What will you give to fill these empty bellies? Something to drink, something to eat. Small fried fish, Portofino white wine” (Crêuza de Mă, in De André 1984). This Eno-gastronomic experience of people who are “drying” themselves is part of the same relationality that more-than-wet ontology defines as the “excess” of sea. Referred to oceans, this excess “reaches onto dinner plates and barbeques across the globe through the corporeal and embodied act of eating. The ocean is plant life. It is fish ... a meshwork” (Peters and Steinberg 2019, 300). This is even more evident in a Mediterranean environment characterised by close and continuous proximity between land and sea. Wherever their tavern was located, the menu of De André’s sailors was eventually constituted by typical Ligurian fish and wine, expressing more-than-human “abyssal intimacy” (Lehman, Steinberg and Johnson 2021, 212) with their land and related sea.

The following morning, the sailors express less material feelings such as nostalgia of home, as after that night of revelry the ship’s cordage will metaphorically become “the rope, rotten by water and salt, which bounds us and brings us back into a sea pathway” (Crêuza de Mă, in De André 1984) to start the journey again. Nostalgia is especially addressed by another song, “D’ă mê Riva” [From my shore], a letter that the sailor writes to a woman, asking that she “forgets [his] anguish, as I am thinking of you looking at the sun. And I know well you are looking at the sea” (D’ă mê Riva, in De André 1984). Shared by the thousands of “Mediterranean sailors scattered all over the world” (Romana 2000, 137), the sadness of distance and loneliness is partially relieved, in “D’ă mê Riva”, by the few souvenirs that the narrator finds in his “sailor’s chest”: “Three velvet skirts, two covers, the mandolin, a hard wooden inkpot and, in a black beret, your photo as a young girl, to can kiss again Genoa on your mothball-smelling mouth”

(D'ä mē Riva, in De André 1984). Bridging the opposite sides of the sea is there an act of love which is not only intimate, but also political as I discuss below.

In De André's works, the corporeality of these sailors' crews (essentially male and heterosexual, at least in *Crêuza*) was also made of less romantic ideas of love. The second song of the LP describes the sexual experience that the sailor has with Jamin-a, a prostitute arguably met in the Southern or Eastern shore given that the sailor calls her "black shining star", but also "sultana of the whores", while wanting to keep his "last vital breath" (Jamin-a, in De André 1984) for her. While this song apparently matches the exoticisation of the object of desire that was typical of orientalist literature (Said 1994), it is worth noting that De André explained that, rather than as a physical person, Jamin-a had to be understood as a dream that allows evading for a while from a wretched condition during his sailor's *periplus*. Jamin-a is: "The hope for a truce before a gale force eight or even a possible shipwreck ... the hypothesis of a happy adventure that finds its place in a corner of the sailor's fantasy" (De André 2011c).

Another *Crêuza* song resumed De André's theme of Genoa prostitutes, in which the author stood against common bourgeois morale, "A Dumenege" [Sunday]. De André wrote "A Dumenege" after archival research in which he discovered that, in the seventeenth century, Genoese prostitutes were relegated in a specific neighbourhood from which they only could exit on Sundays. Thus, De André imagined the Sunday walk of a group of prostitutes meeting the morbid curiosity of local publics, and sketched a satirical geography of Genoa downtown, in which each neighbourhood corresponded to one of the insults that these girls received while calling there, repeated in the refrain (A Dumenege, in De André 1984). This was part of De

André's concerns for the irrational behaviours of conformist crowds, that he associated with the mass support received by twentieth-century totalitarianisms (De André 2022).

Thus, in "A Dumenege", a person appears not to shout the prostitutes, but to shout the Director of the Port, who was insulting these girls remaining hidden in the crowd. As city brothels were taxed to finance public works, this man received his profits from the same women whom he publicly despised. The nonconformist protagonist of the song addresses this "evangelizer" with epithets such as "piece of shit" and demasks his hypocrisy by shouting that: "Among these girls who earn their bread by working naked there is your wife" (A Dumenege, in De André 1984). Scratching at the same time the bourgeois moral, the Church, and the authority by siding with their victims was a classical theme of De André's songs, expressed again in the typical Mediterranean location of Genoa's alleys, where the presence of prostitutes has been historically very visible due to the presence of a major Mediterranean port. As Bouchard and Ferme note, De André's songs "acknowledge the real life of a port city like Genoa, since sailors and prostitutes belong to an economy of exchange that is characteristic of the (temporary) migration of labour from one shore of the Mediterranean to the other" (Bouchard and Ferme 2013, 101).

De André's personal acquaintance with the prostitutes and transvestites with whom he hanged out in these alleys during his youth thanks to the discretion offered by this casbah-like environment gave him "the possibility of knowing a part of humankind that I would not have been the occasion to meet otherwise" (De André 2011a). This proximity became political solidarity, as it has been recently recognised by representative of Italian sex workers Carla Corso, who recollects that, listening to De André's songs, she felt "her dignity rising" (Corso

2018, 38), so that they were among the inspiring texts for launching their associations. Likewise, in the last Dé André's LP *Anime Salve* [Lonely Souls], the protagonist of "Princesa", a transexual person migrating from Brazil to Italy, was considered by activist for trans people rights Porpora Marcasciano as a piece further calling public attention on discriminated categories (Sabatini and Marcasciano 2018), being also appreciated by LGBTQI+ historical leader Franco Grillini (2018).

As for further social denunciations, *Crêuza* included an antimilitarist song, "Sidun", telling the story of the 1982 bombing of the Lebanese city of Sidon by the troops of general Sharon. The protagonist is a middle-aged city dweller who mourns his little child crushed by a tank amidst the apocalyptic scenario of a city that "burns ... in this big sky of fire, for your little death" (Sidun, in De André 1984). On the one hand, this followed De André's earlier denunciations of the criminal nature of all wars, aggravated there by religious and ethnic hatred, with the protagonist looking at: "The eyes of soldiers like raging dogs, foaming at the mouth: lambs' hunters chasing people like game, until our rough blood has satisfied their desire. And after the iron in the throat, the irons of prison come [spreading] the poisonous seed of deportation in our wounds, so that anything of ours can no longer grow from the plain to the harbour" (Sidun, in De André 1984).

On the other, Mediterraneanist themes emerged through the song's location in one of the earliest cradles of ancient Mediterranean civilisations. As De André explained in an interview: "Sidun's 'little death' should not only be seen as the death of a little child. It should be metaphorically understood as the civil and cultural death of a small country, Lebanon. That is, Phénicia, which although discreetly, has arguably been the most important nurturer of

Mediterranean civilisation” (De André 2011d). While this remark accounts for De André’s acknowledgement of the Afro-Asian roots of Mediterranean civilisations (Bernal 1978), it also chimes with militant Mediterraneanist themes opposing all fanaticisms and unique identities (Cassano 2012; Chambers 2018).

In this vein, the most “liquid” of *Crêuza*’s songs, “Sinan Capudan Pascià”, tells the story of a Genoese sailor, Cicada, who was taken prisoner by the Turks and compelled to row in their galleries. In his late days, Cicada sardonically recollects how, thanks to his cleverness and opportunism, he managed to make his career among the Turks after saving the Bey from a shipwreck. “The Bey was thinking to Mecca and saw the houris on a shoal. I turn the helm westward, saving his life and his ship” (Sinan Capudan Pascià, in De André 1984). Cicada represents the opportunism of the social climber, but also the double consciousness that, according to W.E.B. DuBois, characterises colonial subjects taken between more cultures, as well as the need to address the shortcomings of Western narratives in which, for Chambers, “the Muslim Mediterranean” (Chambers 2018, 148) is almost completely overlooked. Cicada also represents the exile’s estrangement and unhealable nostalgia discussed by postcolonial literature (Said 1994) that De André represented as the inescapable cycle of the sailor: “You leave, and once you have left you start to regret” (De André 2011e). As I discuss in the next section, language is a key feature to understand De André’s invention of the Mediterranean.

Inventing a Mediterranean Esperanto

The linguistic operation that De André performed, in association with Pagani’s musical research, was something unprecedented in Italy. Genoese is very different from Italian, almost impossible to understand for Italians of other regions. Additionally, De André’s Genoese was

the result of his own historical and linguistic research based on early dictionaries and etymologies, which made him conclude that, in addition to terms of French and Iberian origin, Genoese contains more than “2000 Arabic or Turkish words”, so that “we are an appendix of the Maghreb” (Romana 2005, 115). An anecdote told by De André exemplified how few were those who grasped his intellectual operation at the beginning, as after *Crêuza*’s launch: “A Ricordi sales manager phoned me saying that he was desperate as: ‘Not even the Genoese can understand your album’” (De André 2011e). While the LP’s final success disavowed this early impression, what counts is that De André wanted to create an idiom that was not a dialect provincially expressing his local identity, but the “invention of a tradition” (Fabbri 2003, 35), a language representing the whole of “the Mediterranean basin” (Valdini 2007, 273).

As De André recollected to anarchist journalist Luciano Lanza: “With Pagani, we wanted to speak again in ethnic ways ... trying not to confuse ethnic music with folkloric music, because folkloric music is the music that the people make for the fun of the higher social classes. Conversely, ethnic music is the music that the people make for themselves” (Lanza 2018, 21). Yet, the research that De André carried out studying “Arabic and pre-Islamic literature” (Viva 2016, 192) resulted in words and sounds that provoked the initial astonishment of Italian publics, to which De André reacted during his concerts with jokes like: “Have you heard? Turkish band, Arab singer” (De André 2011e). As Pagani recollects, their original idea was to work on a sort of “invented language ... the language of a sailor, someone who left twenty years earlier and served in crews including Sicilians, Spaniards, Genoese, Arabs” (Pagani, in De André 2011e). Then, Pagani started to compose music singing in “macaronic Arabic” (Pagani, in De André 2011e). Bouchard and Ferme associate these linguistic inventions with the *Sabir*, the so-called *Lingua Franca* spoken in the Algiers Regency (1516-1830), although

further scholarship demonstrates that this language was “much less heterogeneous than is generally thought” (Baglioni 2017, 203), being overwhelmingly based on Italian and Spanish words. For Pagani, De André’s “genial idea” was finally to use Genoese, arguing that: “Genoese is already this. It is ‘mixed language’ per excellence” (Pagani 2003, 129), which resolved the problem of giving effective poetical force to a completely invented language.

De André noted that his research resulted in “a syncretistic experiment aiming at inventing a language in which all the peoples of the Mediterranean could identify” (De André 2022, 224). He started from the idea that the sea “divides and unites peoples and continents” at the same time, targeting a possible “synthesis of the Mediterranean basin, which is actually a small lake” (De André 2011e). De André made the example of the recordings of Genoa fish sellers that he included in *Crèuza*: “Voices singing, luckily for me, in D ... Do you think they are so far from a dater’s seller in Algiers?” (De André 2011e). Indeed, De André was familiar with French-speaking poets and novelists of decolonisation and had been impressed by a visit to Algiers. There, he felt both familiarity in relation to Genoa and curiosity about the traumas that local dwellers had lived, wondering about: “Children who were born and raised in the OAS [The fascist French para-military organization that fought against Algerian independence] period ... This arguably made them grow painfully but more quickly than others” (Sassi and Pistarini 2008, 264). Finally, in the context of a long history in which the maritime republics (from all shores of the Mediterranean) were “free states circulating not only merchandise, but also ideas and culture” (De André 2011e), De André defined the Mediterranean as an interactive space which overtakes and blurs all ideas of terracentric boundaries.

As for Pagani's musical research, *Crêuza* was the result of "years of work" (Pagani 2003, 128) in which the musician listened to "not less than 1,500, maybe some 2,000, records" from all over the Mediterranean. Pagani's main fieldwork for *Crêuza* took place in Algeria to "discover a cultural geography of these places" (Pagani 2003, 126) including Arabic, Turkish and Berber contributions which already accounted for great musical complexity. An important part of this fieldwork was "the research of new sonorities and music instruments" (Viva 2016, 189), which included the use of "Turkish and Greek ethnic instruments, the Arabic oud, the Andalusian guitar, the Neapolitan mandolin" (Pagani, in De André 2011e) and also instruments that Pagani's team had literally to "invent" by finding "some of them in market stands, sometimes with a fruit case as resonance chamber" (De André 2022, 224)

While, after *Crêuza*, De André continued his research in new directions, the B side of the successive LP that he co-authored with Pagani, *Le Nuvole* [Clouds], includes a sort of mini concept-album with four songs in Mediterranean languages other than Italian: two in Genoese, one in Neapolitan and one in Gallura Sardinian. It is with Sardinian cultures that De André's ideas of the Mediterranean found a decolonial complement, as I discuss in the next section.

4. Colonised Mediterraneans

Consistently with former De André's geopoetics, it can be said that *Crêuza* is an early attempt to give voice to those whom Gabriele Proglia defines "the wretched of the Mediterranean" (Proglia 2021, 60), applying Frantz Fanon's anticolonial concepts to current migratory matters. In this vein, recent scholarship has addressed the notion of "Black Mediterranean" following pioneering works on postcolonial Italy that question "what it means to be Italian" (Lombardi-Diop 2012, 19) after a complicated history of external and internal colonialism and

multidirectional migratory fluxes (Giglioli 2017). Authors discussing the Black Mediterranean stress the need for “documenting forms of resistance” (Proglione et al. 2021, 16) from the Black archive of a “sea whose history is full of dark spaces” (Proglione 2021, 74). They wish to overcome the colour-blindness of most Mediterranean histories and to address the current “Mediterranean cemetery” (Hawthorne 2023, 26) by denouncing the shameful inhumanness of securitarian discourses on migration, leading to sacrifice the life of thousands of migrants for the defence of “Europe Fortress”.

As Camilla Hawthorne discusses, addressing these contradictions is necessary to understand how new Italian identities are reshaped by migration, despite continuing resistances to acknowledge “Italian Blackness” (Hawthorne 2023, 19) in a context of persisting racism and refusal of national models other than the dominating (white) representations. For Hawthorne, the Mediterranean plays contrasted roles in these discussions. First feared by scientific racism after national unification amidst Italy’s “multiple Southern questions” (Hawthorne 2023, 194), Mediterranean “influences” were later used for nationalistic claims of the Mediterranean nature of Italian civilisation, which “excludes Blackness” (Hawthorne 2023, 182) as these narratives see the Sahara as a frontier between “Black” and “non-Black” Africa, this latter being considered as closer to European identities.

Yet, Hawthorne notes that, despite these contradictions, Mediterraneanist ideas like “contamination” can facilitate “opening a space for Black persons within the nation” (Hawthorne 2023, 179), in a period where the Mediterranean “is anew associated with the idea of a Black thread” (Hawthorne 2023, 212). However, one should “not fall into a too romanticised view of Mediterranean and multicultural melting pot” (Hawthorne 2023, 252).

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As for De Andrés's "wretched", Blackness is not often displayed in his songs. Yet, while the Black Mediterranean exposes the need to rediscover conflicts and resistances, De André's Mediterranean is never irenic and crosses racial and colonial lines in several points on several scales. It is the case with the (ideally associated) struggles of Native Americans and those of Sardinian colonised proletarians, this latter taking place again in a Mediterranean environment.

Since the half of the 1970s, De André went to live in Gallura, northern Sardinia, thinking that he could have been a farmer once retired as a singer. Yet, social contradictions reached him also in this isolated countryside: in 1979, De André and his wife, Milanese singer Dori Ghezzi, were kidnapped by Sardinian bandits and remained prisoners in a cave for 118 days. Once released, instead of fleeing from the island, De André publicly forgave his material kidnappers, recognizing that they were proletarians, used as pawns by rich principals, and that they did all that was in their possibilities for treating their prisoners humanely (De André 2022). He remained in Sardinia and developed a growing interest for local cultures, dedicating his 1981 LP, *L'Indiano* [The Redskin] to exploited and colonised Sardinian proletarians.

This importantly recalls the notion of "internal colonialism", which was first inspired by works of a Sardinian intellectual, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who elaborated it in relation to the Southern Question following the 1861 Unification, through which the Savoy monarchy "subjugated Southern Italy and the Islands and reduced them to the status of exploited colonies" (Gramsci 1957, 28). Later applied to English colonialism in the Celtic Fringe (Hechter 1978), internal colonialism is currently discussed by Latin American decolonial literature to denounce lingering colonial relations of oppression at the expenses of indigenous and Afro-descendant communities (Mignolo and Ennis 2001). It is also addressed by studies on the ambiguous roles

played by the other big Italian island, Sicily, in shaping Italian identities in relation to the periodical migratory crises in the Mediterranean (Giglioli 2017). Relatively more isolated than Sicily as for migration flows, Sardinia was identified by De André as a sort of reservation created by internal colonialism through both class and cultural discrimination.

A reader of a strenuous defender of Sardinian colonised proletarians, feminist and anticolonial novelist Joyce Lussu (Bubola 2003, 107; Ferretti 2023b), De André introduced a novelty in this framework, that is a direct comparison between Sardinians and Amerindians. De André often expressed sensitivity towards the history of the indigenous genocide. In 1992, he refused to participate in the celebrations that the city of Genoa dedicated to the 500 years of Columbus's "discovery", arguing that, in America, "there was place for everybody but the Indians, who lost it" (Franchini 2000, 61), and that one should have instead seized the occasion to apologize for colonial massacres. A traveller and a curious person, De André went to North America to see Indian reservations, and although in a quite idealized way, he made a comparison between indigenous societies and pristine Sardinian communities. "Anarchist experiences, living in full freedom, where the leaders were freely chosen, where the respect for the elderly and for the 'diverse' was sacred: a respect that we managed to destroy ... We should rediscover these values of being close to nature, including the taste of being happy with few belongings" (De André 2022, 219). The songs of *L'Indiano* tell stories of shepherds, bandits and destitute Sardinian people. While Sardinian language was used rather occasionally by De André, and without the same linguistic research that he made with Genoese, De André's interest in Sardinia was expressed both by *L'Indiano* and by a song in Sardinian, "Monti di Mola", which appeared in *Le Nuvole*.

In this song, De André fully inserted Sardinia in his Mediterranean human and more-than-human landscapes. Stressing the ancient links between Genoa and Sardinia, which includes a Genoese-speaking community in Carloforte and has long been a maritime hub for Genoese sailors, De André defined Sardinia as “an older Liguria” (Franchini 2000, 64). As it often happens in the Mediterranean, it is in the islands’ mountainous hinterlands that early traditions survive. In Sardinia, local languages and cultures were recovered by the Sardinian independent movement “Sardinia and Freedom”, that De André joined for a while claiming that: “As an anarchist, I can only be in favour of creating a left/libertarian movement” (Franchini 2000, 29). In this context, the story told in “Monti di Mola” can be considered as emblematic of the connection between land and sea, as well as humankind and nature, that constitutes De André’s interpretation of Albert Camus’s [and later Cassano’s] *Pensée du Midi* (Cassano 2012; Camus 1951).

Written in Gallura dialect and recalling Latin-American magic realism, of which De André was a fan, the song imagines the romantic engagement between a male human and a female donkey, who met for the first time in a bush where she was pasturing, and he was going to collect wood. Their romance, compared to the consumption of the honey of a myrtle tree by bees, mobilised the main natural elements of the Mediterranean, water and wind, as the donkey “had eyes like the sea” while from the boy’s nostril “the Mistral blowed” (Monti di Mola, in De André 1990). Accepted socially as the entire village was preparing for a solemn wedding, their union was impeded by the authorities, not because the newlyweds belonged to different species, but because, “from the documents, they resulted to be cousins” (Monti di Mola, in De André 1990). With a refrain repeating the lovers’ tender words, this song symbolizes the union of humankind and nature in a sort of idealistic coming back to societies more respectful of environments,

which is fully inserted in De André's themes and in the broader genealogies of critical Mediterraneanism as recently discussed by geographical scholarship (Ferretti 2023a).

Conclusion

As an anarchist, De André expressed his idea of sea freedom through an example that was not taken from the Mediterranean, but from the oceans. That is, pirate Samuel Bellamy who “never had any letter of marque. Thus, he was a pirate and not a corsair ... He never killed his victims [and established] a sort of anarchist republic in the middle of the Atlantic” (Sassi and Pistarini 2008, 302). This paper has shown an alternative Mediterranean way of understanding sea spaces as mixtures of liquid and solid matter within constant hybrid relationships involving humans and nonhumans actors towards “further frontiers for understanding a world beyond the static simplicity of landed place” (Peters and Steinberg 2019, 305). This critical perspective is associated with both critical Mediterraneanism and pluriversal decoloniality in which the unifying role of the sea does not mean uniformity, but ceaseless connections made of both dialogue and conflict in a motley set of acting entities. Eventually, Cassano's idea of the Mediterranean's pluriversal irreducibility. Furthermore, consistently with Cresswell's definition of “poem-as-place making” (Cresswell 2020, 184), De André's works produced visions of Mediterranean cultures that are still impacting Italian literature and politics, especially in radical circuits, which suggests further studies on decolonial Mediterraneans.

All this coheres with the political intentions that De André wittingly displayed in his songs, calling attention to and human compassion for marginalized groups to foster empathy towards “diverse” people who are the object of racial or social stigma, from migrants to transvestites and prostitutes. De André's Mediterranean still speaks to broader ideas of a borderless world

challenging political, religious and civilisational frontiers that the Italian *cantautore* defined as part of nationalistic “catastrophes”, which generate wars and incomprehension, proclaiming conversely the principle of human (and more-than-human) solidarity beyond frontiers.

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