

Transnational Neomelodica Music and Alternative Economic Cultures

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Music has the potency to conjure shared affective and aesthetic time and space and help crystallize moral sensibilities.¹ The contemporary Neapolitan-language pop music called *la canzone neomelodica* (neo-melodic song) is striking because it crystallizes, perhaps most notably, moral-political-economic sensibilities. *Neomelodica* is produced, distributed, performed and consumed in an alternative political economic culture, where the so-called formal, informal and illicit economies overlap. While *neomelodica* music, and many related musical genres, such as the Mexican *narcocorrido* and gangsta rap, give form to sensibilities that are of course no more moral-political-economic than those embodied by mainstream musics, their minority status renders their moral-political economies more marked.² The markedness of *neomelodica* music can be traced in the particular ways that it stages heightened affect, social contact and personal sovereignty through a loosely coherent repertoire of entrepreneurial tactics that animate the music's production, performance and circulation.

*Neomelodici*³ singers and their publics generally come from a shared milieu. The singers are often poor and/or underemployed young males (and some females) who seek opportunities to earn an income by performing live at private weddings and baptism celebrations. Pursuing these opportunities requires an investment that can range from a few thousand to tens of thousands of Euros. Most aspiring singers begin their pursuit by approaching one or more of the several songwriters and composers, many of them unschooled, for a package deal of usually five songs. Most composers have equally limited resources, working with limited music-making equipment such as a piano synthesizer and a computer. Often the equipment is second-hand and the software pirated. Composers also rent or share work space with other musicians in the many small recording studios in the center of Naples and in the urban *periferia* (periphery).

The *neomelodica* scene in Naples and its surroundings offers opportunities that are imbricated with the so-called formal, informal and illicit economies. Participants, who are largely male, employ moral flexibility to guide their “ethical practice” as they seek to realize their creative potential as savvy entrepreneur-artists.⁴ Performing at private parties for occasional, modest, under-the-table earnings can lead to greater things like local fame and higher earnings, or even an offer to get signed by a “legitimate” music label and perform in the dominant national music circuits. Many aspiring singers believe that getting closer to any sort of success, legitimate or otherwise, requires that they engage the services of the clandestine entrepreneurs who pirate TV transmissions. Then there are some singers who also align themselves with crime boss-impresarios who “guarantee” their success by underwriting it with usury, extortion, drug trafficking and territorial influence.

¹ Steven Feld, “Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style, of ‘Lift-Up-Over-Sounding’: Getting into the Kaluli Groove,” *Yearbook for traditional Music* 20 (1988): 74-113.

² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1993).

³ *Neomelodici* is the plural masculine of *neomelodico*. *Neomelodiche* is the plural feminine and *neomelodica* is the singular feminine form. *Neomelodico* and all of its forms can be used as either adjectives or substantives.

⁴ Jason Pine, *The Art of Making Do in Naples* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

The murky political economy of *neomelodica* song is best understood not as the “context” for the production, performance and circulation of an aesthetic form, but as stagings that give form to the affective-aesthetic potencies of music, crystallizing many key moral-political-economic sensibilities and experiences of a milieu. These performances of “economic culture,” when tracked along their transnational migrations, prove to be grounded in the particularities of time and space. Changes in locality and the kinds of relationships migrant communities of a given locality have to southern Italy, as well as changes in mediascapes, influence what sensibilities transnational *neomelodica* music performs. This essay extends the work of Pine (2012) on *neomelodica* in Campania by tracing ethnographically its circulation in Germany, Belgium and the United States, offering new considerations of the music’s capacity to give form to a sense of a broader “southern Italian” identity among creators, performers and listeners of the music.

A Brief History of “Neapolitan Song”

Before introducing *neomelodica* music, we should situate it among related Neapolitan vocal music. Naples is home to one of the earliest music industries with transnational articulations. This industry experienced significant growth during the latter years of the Festival of Piedigrotta, from around 1892 through the early twentieth century. The original focus of the festival was a religious procession to the sanctuary of the Virgin Mary on the day of her nativity, but by 1892 Piedigrotta came to be associated primarily with the great number of new Neapolitan-language melodic songs that untrained songwriters composed for the occasion with the express goal of promoting them.⁵ As one of the most notable festivals celebrated in one of Europe’s largest cities, Piedigrotta was anticipated months in advance and attended by thousands of people of all social strata, including tourists from other regions of Italy and beyond.⁶ For many people throughout Europe, the festival became synonymous with the competitive composition, staging, performance, distribution and sales of Neapolitan popular vocal music. Neapolitan song was located at the center of multiple, mutually articulating cultural and business activities that encompassed numerous local music publishing houses and several cafés and theaters that hosted promotional concerts. Advertising practices included jingles, posters, print advertisements and playbill cover art that drew inspiration and expertise from the thriving Neapolitan film industry. Moreover, promotion and advertising were fused in the numerous newspaper and journal articles that provided commentary and tracked intellectual debates about current song productions. Finally, distribution practices included sheet music collections sold in shops in the city’s central shopping district, bulk printing and street distribution of low-cost or free *copielle* (sheet music in the form of flyers), and a surfeit of roaming musicians (*posteggiatori*), who diffused the music among the poorer classes.

The texts, recordings and live performances of Neapolitan song during the time of the Piedigrotta festival circulated more widely beyond national borders when non-Neapolitan music publishing houses, such as the Milanese Casa Ricordi and the Leipziger Polyphon Musikwerke,

⁵ Ettore De Mura, *Enciclopedia della Canzone Napoletana*, vol. 3 (Naples: Il Torchio, 1969).

⁶ The festival was included in English-language guidebooks to Naples and attracted the interest of foreign visitors. The enormity of the festival convinced executives at the Milanese music label Ricordi and the German music label Polyphon to open branches in Naples and capitalize on a new market.

expanded their operations into Naples. Neapolitan melodic song's worldwide diffusion is also intertwined with the great Italian transnational migrations of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.⁷ Neapolitan emigrants abroad, particularly in New York City, continued to produce, perform and consume Neapolitan music, attracting listeners and collaborators of other immigrant, ethnic and/or racial backgrounds as well as the local mainstream publics.⁸

The broad reception and commercial success of the Neapolitan songs of this period, so broad that they were heard by many worldwide listeners as "Italian" songs, make them early examples of global popular music. At a strikingly early stage of globalization, when the entertainment industries of Europe and the United States were just beginning to form, Naples was home to a considerably developed transnational Neapolitan music industry. By the end of the nineteenth century, the repertoire that was produced during the years of Piedigrotta, along with other Neapolitan songs dating back to the seventeenth century, came to be known in Italy as "classic Neapolitan song" or simply "Neapolitan song." Despite their widespread commercial success, these songs were canonized as Neapolitan "cultural heritage" and "patrimony." At a time in Italy when the late emergence of operetta was igniting heated discussions around easy entertainment and declining quality of cultural production,⁹ Neapolitan song overcame the perceived contradictions between, on the one hand, popular diffusion and commercial success, and on the other, aesthetic value and regional/national cultural capital that dominated cultural critical discourse at the time.

The 1950s marked the decline of the classic song industry as television overtook records and sheet music in music circulation, linking Neapolitan, national and international circuits. The Festival of Piedigrotta was eclipsed by the newly established Festival of Naples, which some commentators argue encouraged artists to compose songs that were no longer attuned to Neapolitan affective-aesthetic sensibilities, but rather were aimed at pleasing non-Neapolitan jury members and national Italian audiences.¹⁰ When in 1951 the non-Naples based Festival of Sanremo was also launched, its standardized catchy ballads effectively established melodic Italian-language *musica leggera* (pop music) as the dominant music form in Italy. Television also linked dominant pop music scenes in the UK, the US, and Italy and by the 1970s inspired many new musical forms, influenced for example by rock and jazz, in Naples.

In the late 1970s to early 1980s, another popular Neapolitan vocal music world emerged that today thrives in a position of ambiguous alterity to the once-dominant "traditional" music industry that thrived in the decades before and after the turn of the twentieth century. *Neomelodica* is both an alternative music industry and alternative economic culture at the intersection of the formal, informal and illicit economies of Campania and beyond. It encompasses a range of sensibilities and practices that cause friction with dominant attitudes in

⁷ Neapolitan song's renown and commercial success have been so great that the corpus of works, the bulk of which were linked to the Festival of Piedigrotta, has long been and today continues to be, for many world-wide listeners, heard as "Italian" music. Many of the songs have also been translated into other languages.

⁸ See Simona Frasca, *Birds of Passage: i musicisti napoletani a New York (1895-1940)*, (Lucca: Libreria musicale italiana, 2010) for an account of the flows of music and people between Naples and New York City during this period. Emigrant Neapolitan music was also present in the cities of Philadelphia, Boston, and San Francisco, as well as in other countries, including Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, France, Great Britain and Russia.

⁹ Sorba, Carlotta, "The Origins of the Entertainment Industry: The Operetta in Late Nineteenth Century Italy," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 11, no. 3 (2006): 282-302.

¹⁰ Palomba, Salvatore. "Storia (personale) della canzone napoletana." In *Concerto napoletano: La canzone dagli anni settanta a oggi*, ed. Peppe Aiello, Stefano De Matteis, Salvatore Palomba, and Pasquale Scialò. (Lecce: Argo, 1997), 17-39

Naples regarding “Neapolitan culture” and dominant aesthetic and economic norms performed by the mainstream Italian music industry and its publics. From this normative perspective the *neomelodica* scene is perceived as embracing disorder and excess because sensibilities are often performed as an aesthetics of “contact”—which includes the phenomenon of affective entanglement¹¹—and because music composition, production and distribution are do-it-yourself and unregulated practices. Moreover, *neomelodica* music is disparaged because sometimes its performances and practices involve the participation of organized crime affiliates.



Neomelodica music composer at work in his home studio in Naples. Photo by Jason Pine. (2013)

¹¹ Pine, Jason. *The Art of Making Do in Naples*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.



Neighborhood of a *neomelodica* composer in the “periphery” of Naples. Photo by Jason Pine (2013).

Unlike classic Neapolitan song, *neomelodica* song has enjoyed national and transnational success largely limited to circulation among Southern Italians living throughout Italy, in parts of Europe and in North America. The reasons for these restricted national and transnational circulation are to be found in the music’s affective-aesthetic qualities and in the particular political economy in which it is produced, performed, distributed and consumed.



A wall in the quarter of La Kalsa in Palermo (Sicily) with the posters of local *neomelodica* performers. In Sicily there is a very lively *neomelodica* scene as old as the scene in Naples. Sicily, in fact, has contributed some of the most popular singers of the genre, including Carmelo Zappulla, Natale Galletta and Gianni Celeste. Photo by Francesco Pepe (2000).

These two dimensions are, in fact, entwined. In many ways, the aesthetic and political economic dimensions of the *neomelodica* music scene cohere in a self-referential and self-sustaining system, what might be called alternative culture industry.¹² Below we describe the *neomelodica* scene from an aesthetic and moral-political-economic perspective. We analyze how the unique ethico-aesthetic qualities of the *neomelodico* milieu and *neomelodica*'s relationship to other Neapolitan and Italian music genres have conditioned *neomelodica*'s national and transnational articulations while at the same time transforming transnational *neomelodica* into a unitary and fragmenting repertoire of "Southern Italian," rather than specifically Neapolitan or Campanian, identity.

Neomelodica

Neomelodica is the product of an uneven and sometimes strikingly awkward fusion of sounds and musical styles. These include the ornamental and melismatic vocal styles associated with Campanian "folk" music (*musica popolare*) and classic Neapolitan song; the sounds of electronic keyboards and guitars and the 1970s and 1980s synthesized rock and disco beats that used to suffuse mainstream Italian, Anglo-American and Latin American popular music; and lyrics sung

¹² Jason Pine, "Transnational Organized Crime and Alternative Culture Industry," in *Routledge Handbook of Transnational Organized Crime*, eds. Felia Allum and Stan Gilmour (New York: Routledge, 2011).

in a mix of Italian, “Italianized” Neapolitan, and contemporary everyday registers of the Neapolitan language as it is spoken among people of the popular classes.

Tony Ruvio, “La Più Vera Che C’è” (2012)¹³

This recent *neomelodica* song begins with a gestural electric guitar “rock” solo before taking on the sounds of Italian *musica leggera* without ever returning to the tonality or instrumentation of the song’s opening. This is one of several musical oddities that indicate the slapdash quality of many compositions and/or that the listener’s attention is directed at other musical features, such as the lyrics.

Gianni Marigliano, “A Gelosia” (2010)¹⁴

This *neomelodica* song entitled *Jealousy*, performed by the Italian-German Gianni Marigliano, combines electric guitar and string orchestra motifs, minor keys and one-off ornamentations, such as a voice echo and few bars of backup vocals, and what seems to be a repeating tempo correction.

In a 1997 essay, music critic Peppe Aiello coined the term *neomelodico*, or neo-melodic, which Federico Vacalebre, journalist for the Naples daily *Il Mattino*, subsequently made famous with his 1999 book, *Dentro il vulcano. Racconti neomelodici e altre storie dal villaggio locale* (Inside the Volcano: Neomelodic Tales and Other Stories from the Local Village). Aiello described the *neomelodico* repertoire as songs of “liberation” from dominant sexual mores and other customs. Aiello argued that, unlike classic songs, *neomelodiche* songs are candid and sometimes quite unadorned depictions of what some Neapolitans might consider unseemly themes: sexual desire, betrayal, family fissures, crime and imprisonment. He emphasized that despite these expressions of contemporary “realism,” *neomelodiche* songs refer to and sustain traditional values, namely the unquestioned sanctity of family.¹⁵

The poetics of the lyrics index a particular cultural geography, as when they highlight the quotidian experiences of the singer’s milieu, grounding them in depictions in a city’s *quartiere* (quarter) and/or its *vicoli* (the cobblestone alley-like streets in the historic center). Moreover, *neomelodica* song lyrics do not employ the “high poetic” form of the Neapolitan language in which bourgeois authors composed classic Neapolitan songs. Instead, the lyrics of *neomelodiche* songs are like “melodramatic realism.” That is, rather than sublimating quotidian reality, the songs dramatize everyday situations, even transforming them into hyperbole.

Since around 1995, this music has achieved immense local success with audiences mainly composed of people who are underskilled, underemployed, undereducated and/or who have limited access to resources. Many such fans live in the Campania region, of which Naples is the capital city, but there are also significant numbers of listeners in the southern Italian regions of Puglia, Calabria, Basilicata and Sicily, the last of these also the place of origin for a striking

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bq7EvpvFknY>.

¹⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8AkK2-KcE0>.

¹⁵ Peppe Aiello, “La comprensibile esistenza di una musica inaccettabile,” in *Concerto Napoletano: La canzone dagli anni settanta a oggi*, ed. Peppe Aiello (Lecce: Argo p.s.c.r.l., 1997), 74-113.

number of *neomelodici* singers who have adopted the Neapolitan language.¹⁶ In fact, Sicily has long been a place of Neapolitan song production, circulation and performance that has perhaps come close to rivaling the scene in Naples.¹⁷ The Sicilian cities of Palermo and Catania are major hubs for the production, distribution, broadcast and performance of *neomelodica* in Sicily and, as we will elaborate below, Sicilians dominate *neomelodica* in Germany and Belgium.

Scholars, journalists and *neomelodica* protagonists often describe this music as a descendent not of classic Neapolitan song, but of *la canzone sceneggiata* (song staged for theater and film) and, less frequently, *la canzone 'e mala* (song of the underworld). The former dates back to the early twentieth century and the latter to the late nineteenth century. Both the *sceneggiata* and *canzone 'e mala* are Neapolitan-language genres that narrate tales of honor crimes in which men claim personal sovereignty and protect it in the face of incursions by other men, including agents of government authority and organized crime affiliates. Two of the most notable singers who revived these songs in the late 1950s and early 1960s were Mario Merola and Pino Mauro, both from Campania.¹⁸

The musical genealogy that links *neomelodica* with these other genres places them all within the social imaginary elaborated around the figure of the “personal sovereign,” a masculine identity forged in gendered violence and dramatic contests of authority.¹⁹ This figuration does not serve as a model but instead a reference point around which some people may orient themselves—realized, for example, in the preference to handle conflicts with one’s own personal force, rather than by turning to “official” authority. However, some part of public perception directly associates this figuration of the personal sovereign with the camorra. Indeed, Neapolitan and Sicilian organized crime affiliates’ taste for *neomelodica* song, *la sceneggiata*, and *la canzone 'e mala* has encouraged this association, particularly when singers pay their respects to *camorristi* and *mafiosi* during their public performances and when they perform at the private parties of crime bosses, as when Mario Merola performed at the baptism of the son of Sicilian mafia boss Stefano Bontade in the 1980s.²⁰

However, Merola was not the first or last Neapolitan singer of the *canzone 'e mala* and *neomelodica* music scenes to address organized crime affiliates during public performances.²¹

¹⁶ Examples include the popular middle-aged singers Gianni Celeste, Carmelo Zappulla and Natale Galetta, and the younger singer Tony Colombo.

¹⁷ Mauro D’Agati, *Palermo Unsung* (Göttingen: Steidel, 2009).

¹⁸ Sicily was another important place of *sceneggiata* and *canzone 'e mala* production and circulation.

¹⁹ Pine, *The Art of Making Do in Naples*.

²⁰ At the beginning of a performance or in between songs, singers give their regards to friends, family and other associates who have provided support or helped them obtain success. When singers include crime clan affiliates in these greetings they are sometimes paying their respects to the self-proclaimed sovereign of the neighborhood in which they are performing. In the 1970s Mario Merola allegedly performed in New York with the financial backing of Frank “Funzi” Tieri of the Genovese crime family. See Adolfo Sessa and Adamo Sebastiani, *Sua Maestà: Mario Merola, Leggenda Sceneggiata Napoletana* (Milan: International Artist editore, 1980). For Merola’s performance for the Bontade family, see Pino Arlacchi, *Gli uomini del disonore. La mafia siciliana nella vita di un grande pentito Antonino Calderone* (Milan: Mondadori, 1992).

²¹ More recently, in 2013 Rosario Miraggio sang at the patron saint festival of the Madonna del Carmelo in Gragnano and dedicated the song “Io canto a te” (I Sing To You) to Nicola Carfora, a.k.a. Nicola the Fire, incarcerated *camorrista*. In 2012 the Neapolitan singer Raffaello Migliaccio paid his respects to Luigi Abbate, a.k.a. Gino the Machine Gun, incarcerated mafia boss from the Palermo neighborhood known as Kalsa. In Palermo in 2011 Neapolitan singer Vitttorio Ricciardi refused to comply with the request of crime clan affiliates that he pay his respects to imprisoned affiliates; as a result, he was forbidden to perform, sent back to Naples, and banned from Palermo.

These public acts of making “contact” with organized crime, rather than reveal that the music lionizes for its listeners the “violent criminal type” as their role model, or that the performers are the “voices of the camorra,” indicate that crime clan affiliates participate in affective-aesthetic communities shared by more ordinary fans of *canzone 'e mala* and *neomelodica*, that is, mostly Southern Italians of the lower classes.²² Moreover, these public acts of direct address are just one expression of a broader phenomenon of contact operative in multiple dimensions of *neomelodica* production, performance and circulation; they cannot be adequately understood in isolation from this broader phenomenon. *Neomelodica* is “easy” pop music, and the scene’s protagonists produce songs with market-ready rapidity, paying less attention to perfecting the musical form and its presentation, emphasizing instead a performance style that invites the unmediated participation of audiences. More than a medium that communicates particular ideological content, *neomelodica* is an opportunity for mutual presencing that allows performers and listeners to feel like protagonists.²³ These qualities give form to sensibilities that animate the moral-political economy of the *neomelodico* milieu and they can be traced in the vocal style, arrangements, and performance style that unite a diverse range of *neomelodiche* songs and *neomelodici* performers by way of a family resemblance.

Arrangements

Many *neomelodica* song arrangements combine minor chords and modulations with the ready-made beats pre-programmed in keyboard synthesizers or in music production computer software. Minor chords and modulations complement or reinforce singers’ vocal embellishments and heighten the music’s affective charge. The instrumentation, usually synthetically produced or digitally reproduced (but sometimes recorded live), seldom diverges from a standard configuration of piano, electric guitar, snare and bass drums, and, less often, violins. Songs follow the ordinary pop song structure of stanza-refrain-stanza-refrain-bridge-refrain and the arrangements are generally entirely subordinated to the lyrical melody. Songs frequently have brief and/or sparing introductions; when the introduction is longer, often it is in order to give space to a recitative. Rather than adding density or complexity to the lyrical melody, the arrangements have tended to locate songs in a common, immediately identifiable sonic ground. This has the effect of interpellating listeners’ bodies and attuning them to the singer’s voice and

²² Late nineteenth-century criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso coined the term “violent criminal type” to denote the quasi-racial category of person who is prone to perpetrating violent crime. Lombroso asserted that Southern Italians were more likely than Northern Italians to constitute this category; the “voice of the [crime] clans” is a popular phrase repeated in the public discourse that has congealed around the condemnation by some politicians, sociologists and journalists of *neomelodica* music as a medium for the cultural hegemony. See, for example, the binary opposition between “legal” and “illegal” expressed by the journalist Simone De Meo (“Ecco la camorra che canta: i neomelodici affiliati ai clan,” *Il Giornale di Napoli*, February 8, 2012). De Meo’s article begins with the following: “It’s a question of nuance: there are those who ‘sing’ and have decided to collaborate with the justice system, and therefore down with the shootouts and inter-gang vendettas. And there are those who sing because they are enchanted by the *camorra* and its false values, and that’s a whole other music: the invites by ‘clan friendly’ radio and tv broadcasters come rolling in, gigs at weddings and confirmations (up to 700 a year) come like a deluge and, most importantly, invites to piazza concerts flow in one after the other, consecrating the clan ‘minstrels.’”

²³ Pine, Jason. *The Art of Making Do in Naples* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

the lyrics, which, as arrangement composers know, are the primary interest of singers, songwriters and *neomelodica* music fans.²⁴

Vocal style

Performers sing the lyrics with a particular melismatic vocal style that tends, more than that of mainstream Italian popular music, to be sprinkled with microtones. Many singers also ornament their vocals with *gruppetti*, inverted mordents and *appoggiature*, which also include microtones. This vocal style, combined with an expressive gestural repertoire, enhances the affective charge of the music, which is highly valued among fans. Performers flamboyantly demonstrate, through these strategies of ornamentation, their vocal prowess, or at least their heartfelt investment in fulfilling the expectation that they demonstrate their prowess. Such good faith performances draw audiences closer.

This ornamentation inspires listeners to describe *neomelodica* as “Arab” music, consistent with popular descriptions of the form of spoken and sung Neapolitan of the milieu, as well as of one of the iconic places of the milieu, the neighborhood of the historic center called Forcella, also known as the *casbah*. Often this description is intended to be disparaging, in an orientalist spirit. Conversations with nearly one hundred songwriters, composers, recording studio managers, impresarios and singers about the pervasive use of these marked stylistics in *neomelodiche* songs, which number at least in the thousands, have elicited responses that have all fallen into one of two complementary conceptions of musical practice. The first conception is that *neomelodico* ornamental style comes from a shared spontaneous aesthetic disposition: “It’s how we sing”; “It’s in our hearts to sing like this.” The second is that *neomelodici* singers are performing in the affective register that they believe can most effectively reach their publics: “It’s what people expect when they are celebrating a wedding”; “That’s how you move your audience”; “It’s what people want to hear;” “When you are with family at a nice restaurant on the sea and you hear these moments in the music, you get goosebumps.”²⁵

While participants of the *neomelodica* scene were readily effusive about the affective-aesthetic potency of *neomelodica*, they were notably diffident and even obfuscating when conversations turned to the *neomelodica* market. Their sometimes aggressive verbosity, in fact, was a neurotic condensation of suspicion, competitiveness and fear—of losing advantages or revealing too much about situations of moral ambiguity, inviting judgment and exclusion from resources. People literally cornered me (Pine) so that they could recite soliloquies of honeyed self-adulation, or they presented readymade shellacked postcard versions of the musical life of the Neapolitan *popolino* (literally “little *popolo*,” or lower classes). The affective-aesthetic qualities of the music and people’s “speech about music” simultaneously concealed and revealed situations of high moral and material indeterminacy.²⁶ The scene’s participants emphasized the affective-aesthetic qualities of the music not only with outsiders such as scholars and journalists,

²⁴ For example, one composer regularly lamented the narrow tastes of the *neomelodica* music market. His true passion was Celtic-inflected arrangements but he was convinced that such a style would never go over well with *neomelodica* audiences.

²⁵ Pine, *The Art of Making Do in Naples*.

²⁶ Steven Feld, “Communication, Music, and Speech About Music,” *Yearbook for Traditional Music* 16 (1984): 1-18.

but also with one another; affecting and being affected are events of contact that enable participants to transcend “the details” of situations and attune themselves to the shared desire to successfully manage chronic everyday indeterminacy.

Neomelodico ornamentation, anchored by the simplicity and regularity of supporting arrangements, generates a shared aesthetic and affective time and space and performs a grounded sense of the local.²⁷ The “local” is produced in the core events of “traditional” family-making. For *neomelodica* music participants, ornamentation is an element of style that incites affective-aesthetic contact, naturalized as part of what is simply true and beautifully affecting. Steven Feld calls this phenomenon “iconicity of style.” Rather than referencing a style, ornamentation enacts style. Critics, however, perceive this ornamental style as regressive and expressive of a morbid attachment to tradition and locality.

Performance style

In an ideal performance, singers and their publics share the same affective-aesthetic time and space. They form an “intimate public.”²⁸ Audiences expect hyper-performativity as an indicator of the singer’s star status, which heightens the status and affective charge of the event and makes the singer “their star.”

“I Big,”²⁹ as stars are called in this milieu, whether they are popular only within their *quartieri* or throughout the Campania region and beyond, always remain accessible to their public. Audience members regularly participate in the singers’ performances, sometimes sharing the microphone, sometimes dancing with the singer. Fans will even put an arm around the singer and pose for pictures while a song is in progress. By performing songs and performing stardom in this manner, singers demonstrate their willingness to connect with their listeners and make affective contact with them.

An anecdote recounted by music journalist Antonio D’Addio, director of the only magazine dedicated to *neomelodica*, *Sciuè* (meaning “quick”), brings into relief the contrast between *neomelodico* performance style and that of the dominant, mainstream Italian music industry. In the late 1990s talent scouts from the label BMG Ricordi approached the widely popular *neomelodico* singer Luciano Caldore after hearing him perform at the Teatro Palapartenope in the Neapolitan neighborhood of Fuorigrotta. “They told him they were impressed by his performance and that they wanted to offer him a contract, but that he first would have to spend the next year retreating to a proper distance from his public,” D’Addio recounted.³⁰ After a year, for reasons we have not been able to discover, the contract did not materialize.

²⁷ Feld, “Aesthetics as Iconicity of Style.”

²⁸ Lauren G. Berlant, “Intimacy, Publicity, and Femininity,” in *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008). See also Martin Stokes, “The Tearful Public Sphere: Turkey’s Sun of Art, Zeki Müren,” in *Music and Gender: Perspectives from the Mediterranean*, ed. Tullia Magrini (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 307-328.

²⁹ “I” is the plural definite article.

³⁰ Antonio D’Addio, interview by Jason Pine, Naples, March 8, 2002.

The aesthetic qualities not only of *neomelodica* music production and performance, but also of its circulation, are consonant with the music's political economy. Singers hire the services of any of the tens of local recording studios to produce a CD. They then buy airtime on local and regional private or pirate television stations, during which they host their own live broadcasts to promote their services as live singers. The broadcasts are interactive, permitting viewers to call in to dedicate a song, lip-synched by the performer, to a loved one. Until about the mid-1990s these phone calls cost a few thousand liras (up to \$2) per minute. Most callers chat with the singers on the air and many of them already know the singer, their conversations marked by banal quotidian intimacies. Some of these intimacies verge on deeper complicities, when for example callers request song dedications with the message, *un presto ritorno a casa* (a swift return home), meaning the person in question is either imprisoned or is a fugitive of the law. In dedications such as these, the singer, the caller and the viewing public are engaged in a form of narrowcasting where communication happens via implied meanings tucked within reliably stable aesthetic forms and their accompanying affective talk.³¹

In this milieu songs are less likely to be received by fans as sonic artifacts in abstraction from singers' performances—both live and live lip-synched TV narrowcast. Rather, they are like the soundtracks of performers' intimate engagements with their public. Indeed, most *neomelodici* earn their money primarily from live gigs rather than CD sales. The value of artistic achievement is not necessarily determined by the quality of the product (the exchange value of an aesthetic object); more often the achievement is evaluated in terms of the qualities of the singer, such as his or her reputation and social networks, or simply the singer's performance as singer—that is, his or her demonstrated wherewithal to engage in the art of making do.

A significant number of singers have aspirations of making careers that extend beyond Naples and even beyond Italy. Most, at the start of their careers, believe that they will grow in the Neapolitan circuit and that eventually they will get the lucky break that will lead them to national and international fame. But the "traditional" lucky break never comes. This led some singers to at last give in to the temptation of substantial financial backing or the lure of guaranteed gigs paid in bulk in advance. These singers become major protagonists of local scenes and among Southern Italian listeners throughout Italy, in parts of Europe, and to a lesser extent, the US. In southern Italy they command prices of up to thousands of Euros for a single five-song gig, which can be one of ten such gigs on a single Sunday during late spring and summer, the high season for weddings throughout the south of Italy. The cost of this fame and fortune has been a form of indenture in which singers are obliged to sing when and where their "bosses" tell them.

Both groups of singers—those who do not receive the support of crime-affiliate impresarios and those who do—see the *neomelodica* scene as a rather permanent feature of popular public life in their milieus. Both types of singers know that if they continue to perform the same types of songs in the familiar performance style, they will more or less be guaranteed some form of income, even if it is at times sporadic. A more-or-less regular job is a very attractive opportunity for singers who are used to unemployment and limited access to powerbrokers (who control many public employment positions). A lucrative summer run of

³¹ Pine, *The Art of Making Do in Naples*.

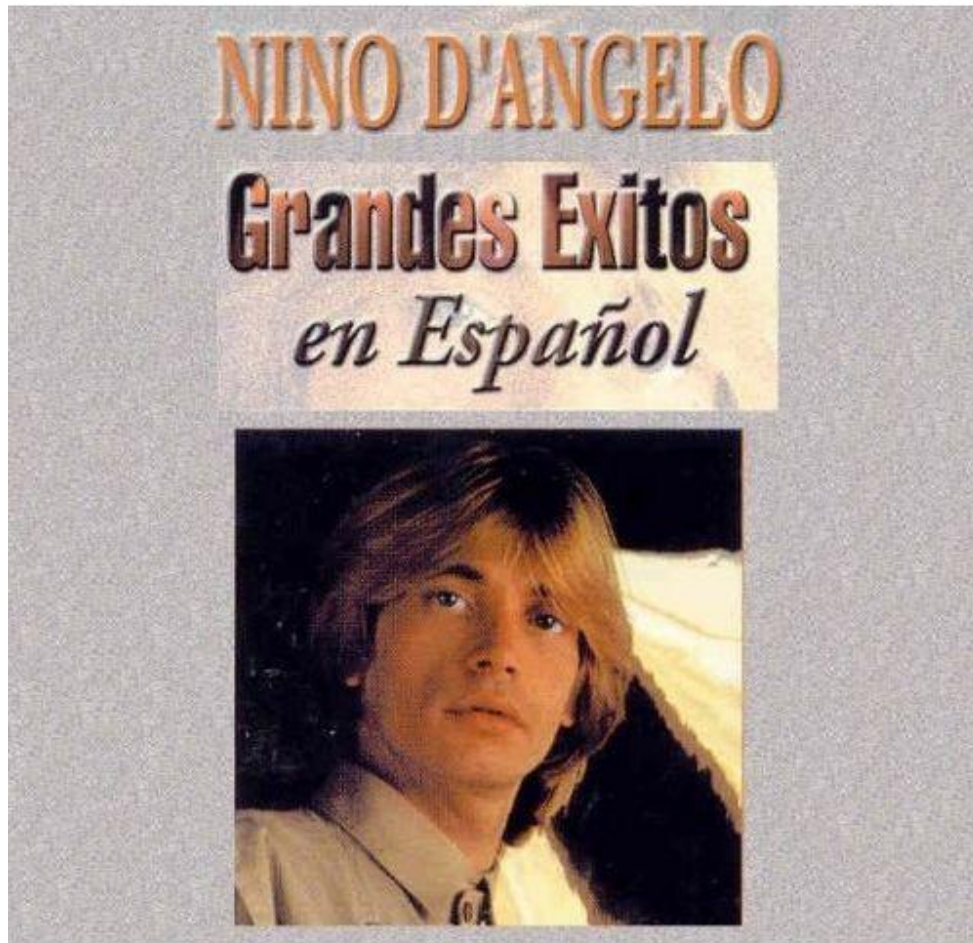
performance gigs is extremely seductive for singers who have entered the *camorra*-run entertainment circuits. As a result, both types of singers can experience a diminished initiative to break out of Naples.

Major music industry executives have very infrequently shown interest in *neomelodici* singers; Nino D'Angelo and Gigi D'Alessio are rare examples of *neomelodici* singers who have successfully captured international audiences that extend beyond people of southern Italian origin only. D'Angelo, the older of the two, has performed abroad since the late 1970s and has recorded almost exclusively Neapolitan-language songs.³² His early work circulated as film-*sceneggiate* songs (staged songs in cinematic form), which he performed as both actor and singer. D'Angelo's work, along with the work of other *sceneggiata* singer-actors such as Mario Merola and Pino Mauro, constituted a Neapolitan-language song repertoire that continues to conjure for listeners a transnational "southern Italian culture."



Turkish film poster from the 1983 film *Un jeans e una maglietta* directed by Mariano Laurenti and starring Nino D'Angelo.

³² The film, *Un jeans e una maglietta*, starring D'Angelo was a major hit in Italy and was screened in many countries, including Turkey. In 1987 D'Angelo recorded one album in Spanish in order to reach Spanish-speaking audiences. This was the first effort of a *neomelodico* singer to reach non-Italians in a language other than Italian. In the early 2000s, D'Angelo radically transformed his musical style so that it is no longer appropriate to label his music as *neomelodica*. D'Alessio also recorded a Spanish-language album, although in Italian pop style, with the same goal.



Cover of Nino D'Angelo's Spanish language album released in 1987.

D'Alessio, on the other hand, records most of his songs in Italian and quite regularly performs all over Italy and throughout Italian diasporas in cities such as Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Melbourne, and New York. D'Alessio's career hit a turning point in 1998 when he was signed by BMG, an important factor contributing to his success. Once signed, he began to transform his music and performance style, culminating in 2000 with an Italian language album aimed at reaching a broader audience. Other established *neomelodici*, such as Gianluca Capozzi and Gianni Fiorellino, have also chosen to sing in Italian, but with far less success.³³ A significant difference in their performances, it seems, is that D'Alessio retained some of the original *neomelodico* vocal style that he otherwise consistently employed in his music before his transformation began in 1997. Through a sort of linguistic cleansing, D'Alessio was able to shake his perceived regional identity *qua* morbid attachment to locality and use traces of his regional culture to stylize his dominant Italian music industry commercial product. His vocal style, a fundamental mechanism for producing the affective charge around which *neomelodica*

³³ Among the newer generation of *neomelodici* singers, Tony Colombo was signed by Warner Brothers in 2011 in his mid-twenties, but only recorded one album, comprised of mostly Italian language songs in a style quite imitative of Gigi D'Alessio. His success has been limited, however, as his subsequent recordings have been under the Seamusica label of Catania (Sicily), a major producer of *neomelodica*.

production, promotion and performance is executed, was reduced to a faintly charged sign of Neapolitaness. In this way, he capitalized on the perceived provincialism of “Neapolitan culture” without entrapping himself in it.

One way that figures in Italian mainstream media attempted to rehabilitate the rest of *neomelodica*—the proliferation of songs that remained localized in the milieus of the poorer classes of southern Italian regions—was to subject it to what Hebdige described as the “ideological form” of “incorporation.”³⁴ That is, commentators, such as Carlo Ferrajuolo, attempted to reel in the *neomelodico* “phenomenon” through discursive ordering by calling the music the “voice” of a class-conscious “subproletariat” and suggesting that the music is an expression of regional-cultural consciousness linked to “Mediterranean” and “peasant” vocal “traditions.”³⁵ In the 1990s commentators tended to overgeneralize a perceived ideological charge of the *neomelodico* genre based on a few, now iconic, songs. One such song is Stefania Lay's *A libertà* (Freedom), about a woman's struggle to free herself from her jealous, oppressive boyfriend. Another is Franco Ricciardi's *Core nero* (Black Heart), which claims an affinity between Neapolitan (descendants of the Saracens) and African racial and political identities. However, the desire to politicize the *neomelodici*, and thereby justify and redeem their music from its perceived anti-aesthetic tendencies,³⁶ went largely unfulfilled. In 2001 Federico Vacalebre, music journalist for the Neapolitan newspaper *Il Mattino*, expressed disappointment that the *neomelodici* had behaved like “bacconi” (Bacchuses) by limiting their efforts to “l’arte di arrangiarsi” (the art of making do) and squandering their opportunity to go “beyond the margins.” The result, he said, was a dying scene.³⁷ Instead, the scene indicated that although the industry was experiencing what protagonists described as a recession, it was far from moribund. What was dead was a regional and national media blitz that had failed to incorporate the “margins” of Neapolitan cultural production. The margins turned out to be just as “industrialized” and enfranchised as the national scene at the annual music awards in Sanremo, but according to a different economic logic.

Alternative Culture Industry

When *neomelodica* music failed to meet middle-class expectations that it politicize or folklorize the poor of Naples in the new millennium, it simply indexed the perceived unseemly world of Naples’ *vicoli* and *bassi*, the part of Naples that is often ruled by superstition, the irrationally

³⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Methuen, 1979). *Neomelodica* music was already popular in southern Italian diasporas in Europe in the 1990s—a theme discussed below in this section—but the commentary that dominated mainstream print and broadcast media addressed only the music’s popularity within Italian borders.

³⁵ The journalist Carlo Ferrajuolo writes, “Ad alcuni non piacciono [...] perchè la voce recupera stilemi di canto tradizionale, più vicini al canto popolare e contadino di Sergio Bruni che a quello da fine dicatore di Roberto Murolo” (Some don’t like them [Neapolitan songs] [...] because the voice revives traditional singing styles closer to the folk and peasant music of Sergio Bruni than that of the *fine dicatore* [roughly, a performer with refined vocal diction] Roberto Murolo). Carlo Ferrajuolo, “Melodia del nuovo millennio,” *Il Giornale di Napoli*, August 7, 1997.

³⁶ Hal Foster, “Postmodernism: A Preface,” in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster, (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), ix-xvi.

³⁷ Federico Vacalebre, interview by Jason Pine, Naples, December 4, 2001. See also Federico Vacalebre, “Dopo il successo, la protesta dei neomelodici: ‘Non siamo le voci di televicolo,’” *Il Mattino*, August 22, 1997.

insular relations of “amoral familism,”³⁸ and exaggerated displays of manhood by rogue, self-proclaimed sovereigns. In public discourse in Italy in the late 2000s, *neomelodica* came more often to refer directly to that which was often only implicit in the denigrating stereotypes the music aroused in the thoughts of disapproving listeners: the *camorra*. There are several contributing factors to this change. In 2006, after a violent crime clan war in Naples between 2004 and 2005 that resulted in some 60 homicides, Roberto Saviano published his shocking exposé on organized crime in Campania, *Gomorra*, which quickly became a national (and worldwide) bestseller. Both the clan war and Saviano’s book attracted international attention to what came to be known as the “crisis of Naples.” Also in 2006, writer and politician Isaia Sales³⁹ and sociologist Marcello Ravveduto gave a public presentation of their book, *The Streets of Violence*.⁴⁰ In the book, the authors suggest that *neomelodici* perform for a public that justifies the *camorra*. Sales and Ravveduto’s book presentation coincided with one of Minister of the Interior Giuliano Amato’s promised monthly monitoring visits to Naples since identifying the “crisis of Naples,” and Amato spoke at the event. He denounced the *neomelodici* for “exalting” *camorristi* (*camorra* affiliates) as “heroes.”⁴¹

These declarations ignited vigorous debate about censorship to which the voices of novelists such as Erri De Luca and musicians including Nino D’Angelo and Raiz, leader of the dub group Almamegretta, as well as *neomelodici* themselves, contributed. Indeed, censorship began to materialize in direct action in 2010 when the pubescent Giuseppe Junior’s music video *Very Beautiful (The Miniskirt)* was taken off YouTube in response to complaints from the antipedophilia association A Pact for Life, and in 2012 transmogrified into full-on criminalization when the public prosecutor sought the arrest of *neomelodico* Aniello Imperato a.k.a. Nello Liberti for inciting criminal activity with his music video *’O Capoclan* (The Crime Clan Boss), in which he sings the praises of Ercolano-area crime boss Vincenzo Oliviero (currently incarcerated) with the charge of incitement to crime.⁴²

Alternative Transnationalism

Neomelodica’s continued status as an alternative music industry that is largely excluded from mainstream national and global media circulation is in part dependent on the dominance of classic Neapolitan song. Classic Neapolitan song is a very widely shared cultural reference point for people in the Campania region and beyond. In Naples, people are intimately familiar with this repertoire; they know the lyrics to many of the songs and it is not infrequent that people draw from them poetic expressions with which they color their own everyday speech. People

³⁸ Edward Banfield, *Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: The Free Press, 1958).

³⁹ Sales held offices in the government of Romano Prodi in the late 1990s and later in the Campania regional government under Antonio Bassolino.

⁴⁰ Isaia Sales and Marcello Ravveduto, *Le strade della violenza: malviventi e bande di camorra a Napoli* (Naples: L’ancora del mediterraneo, 2006), 276. The authors grant that there are “exceptions,” such as Nino D’Angelo.

⁴¹ Ottavio Lucarelli and Conchita Sannino, “Napoli, Amato contro i neomelodici ‘Celebrano i camorristi come eroi,’” *La Repubblica*, December 14, 2006.

⁴² The request was denied but some forty affiliates of two rival clans, to one of which Liberti has been linked—in addition to memorializing one of the clan’s deceased bosses, the music video features three of the clan’s affiliates—were questioned by police in the area of Ercolano, where Liberti resides.

praise both artful lyrical imagery and stirring melodies of cherished songs, as well as the heartfelt performances of *neomelodica*'s many famous interpreters. Neapolitans are proudly aware of classic song's international renown and many are more than happy to share this repertoire of sentiments with outsiders through playful and heartfelt spontaneous performances.

Neomelodica, for many Neapolitans, creates dissonance in this soundscape. Unlike classic Neapolitan song, *neomelodica* produced in Italy comes directly from milieus comprised of undereducated, underemployed and/or poor individuals with limited access to resources. Their milieus are animated by the practices and sensibilities that are captured locally by the phrase *l'arte di arrangiarsi*, or the art of making do. This phrase, for its practitioners, means entrepreneurial engagements conducted with alertness, adaptability, and the full-on entwinement of affects and interests. For those who use it pejoratively, the phrase means unprofessional, slipshod, and/or counterfeit work or products. In contrast to classic Neapolitan song, *neomelodica* is on the whole ignored or rejected by mainstream culture industry as an unviable commodity form that is neither classic nor *popolare* (folk) nor "truly" pop.⁴³

The milieus in Italy from which *neomelodica* music emerges are also contact zones where the art of making do can bleed into organized crime. Protagonists of the *neomelodica* scene compose, promote and perform the music using their milieus' linguistic, aesthetic and entrepreneurial vernaculars, embodying qualities that conjure, for many critics, class stereotypes that serve to incorporate *neomelodica*, if not as folklore or subproletarian sound, then as criminal cultural hegemony. This dynamic tends to reinforce the self-referential tendencies of the *neomelodica* scene.

Moreover, *neomelodica*'s self-referential alterity affects the manner in which and the extent to which the music has circulated nationally and internationally, tending to follow the contours of Italian migrations. Several *neomelodici*, typically "I Big," have performed for southern Italian emigrant communities abroad and others, both Italian-born and foreign-born, have established careers abroad where they live. In both cases the music's reach has been limited to southern Italian diasporas and its circulation constrained by the alternative production, distribution and performance circuits that the scene's protagonists have forged expressly for *neomelodica* and other Neapolitan and Italian musics.

Until the late 1990s, *neomelodica* was popular among Neapolitan and Sicilian immigrants in the New York area, particularly in the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bensonhurst, a sales hub of Italian and Neapolitan LPs, cassettes, CDs, VHS cassettes and DVDs. The proprietors of the Bensonhurst music shop S.A.S. Italian Records, Rita Conte and her mother Silvana, recalled meeting several *neomelodici* in the mid-1990s, including Natale Galetta, Mauro Nardi and Mauro Caputo. These and other singers traveled to the New York-New Jersey area to perform in Atlantic City casinos such as the Trump Resort. Casinos offered their theaters rent-free if singers forfeited the best seats in the house to the casino owners, who in turn gave them as gifts to favored guests. Singers also performed in Brooklyn at private parties for Italian Americans in restaurants and at banquet halls, such as Gargiulio's in Coney Island and the Italianate baroque banquet hall El Caribe in Mill Basin. Singers have also performed at Italian American festivals in New York City, including the the Feast of Our Lady of Mount Carmel and St. Paulinus of Nola (the Giglio Festival) in Brooklyn's Williamsburg and the Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel in the Bronx.

For many years Silvana's brother regularly traveled to Naples to peruse the new recordings at the Neapolitan record label Zeus Records, bringing back selections to sell in

⁴³ Pine, Jason. *The Art of Making Do in Naples* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

Brooklyn. Silvana recalled that some Neapolitan singers also visited their store to personally deliver the CDs for the proprietors to sell. These connections between S.A.S. and *neomelodici* and their music dissolved at the beginning of the new millennium; her brother now orders select CDs from Zeus online. “People aren’t interested in the music anymore,” Silvana explained. When I spoke to three elderly Sicilian-American men who frequent the club, Società Figli di Ragusa (Sons of Ragusa Society), which is next door to Arcobaleno, another hub for Neapolitan music sales (now closed), we heard the same assessment.



Arcobaleno Italiano (Bensonhurst, Brooklyn), a record shop that, until 2010, sold southern Italian music and videos. Photo by Jason Pine (2010).



One of the proprietors of S.A.S. Records in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, a record shop that continues to sell southern Italian music and videos. Photo by Jason Pine (2010).

“Young people don’t want to hear this music,” a man in his eighties named Ernesto explained, “they don’t know anything about Italy.” He was referring to classic Neapolitan songs. The three men were familiar with the name Gigi D’Alessio (who performed at Manhattan’s Radio City Music Hall in 2011), but they assumed he sang classic Neapolitan songs.

Unlike classic Neapolitan song, *neomelodica* appears not to have made significant inroads in the Italian American scene. When *neomelodici* have performed in the New York Area, they have had to concentrate more on the classic Neapolitan songs in their repertoires. Two factors contribute heavily to this phenomenon. The first is that younger Italian Americans tend to be uninterested in Italian and Neapolitan music, preferring Anglo-American and African

American popular music, particularly hip-hop. The older Italian emigrants who are still interested in listening to Italian and Neapolitan music are unlikely to keep abreast of new trends, maintaining classic Neapolitan song (and *sceneggiata* songs) as their points of reference. Radio show host Anna Garofalo of Mount Vernon, New York confirms that most listeners are middle-aged or older and will listen to and enjoy some of the newer Neapolitan music but prefer the “older” (classic) songs.

Italian emigration to the United States saw its last peak in the 1970s. Since then, because of the transatlantic distance, circulating and multiple migrations between the United States and Italy has been relatively small in comparison to the patterns that formed in the 1960s and 1970s among Italian emigrants in Europe. Italians who moved to Belgium, Germany and Holland as government-sponsored guest workers at companies, such as Volkswagen and the dry-docking company De ADM, were primarily Southern Italians. These emigrants and their children listened to the music and watched the films of singers such as Merola and D’Angelo, who performed in Germany beginning in the 1970s and 1980s respectively. Their geographic proximity to Italy makes relatively frequent “return” visits to these countries possible, fostering enduring contact with relatives and friends in Italy. Traveling these routes, people of southern Italian descent participated in an informal circulation of Neapolitan music and videos that they purchased in Italy for personal use or as gifts for family and friends in diasporic communities. These circulations of people and cultural forms have strengthened southern Italian emigrants’ ties to Italy and helped develop a shared sense of “southern Italian” cultural identity. Significantly, the medium through which people from a variety of southern Italian languages and cultures—Sicilians, Pugliesi, Calabrians, Abbruzzesi, etc—have come to mutually identify as “meridionali” is Neapolitan-language music and dramatic-musical forms. This Neapolitan cultural mediation began with the major Italian immigrations during the height of the Neapolitan classic song industry. Significantly, because this industry saw elaborate expansion in New York City, classic song, unlike *neomelodica* in the last quarter of the twentieth century, became the medium for *meridionale* (southern Italian) identification among diverse southern Italian emigrants in North America.⁴⁴

These proximal geocultural relationships therefore helped establish Europe, more than North America, as an active market for *neomelodica*. The growth in *neomelodica* circulation in Europe has been stimulated by satellite television as well. The broadcasts of the Neapolitan satellite T.V. channel Napoli International, launched in 1999, reach multiple Italian diasporas in many locations on the continent. Primetime evening programming on this channel has tended to be dominated by classic Neapolitan song and the *sceneggiata* in its full-scale theatrically staged form while daytime programming gives airtime to more *neomelodica* and Italian-language music. *Neomelodici* who learn to sing classic Neapolitan song and make regular appearances on the satellite broadcasts access international publics with whom they can build their reputation and to whom they might eventually get an opportunity to introduce their own *neomelodiche* songs. Some of the programming on Napoli International is viewer call-in; calls come from locations in the U.K., Germany, Belgium, Switzerland and France. During visits to the studios of Napoli International (located outside Naples in Acerra), people recounted how relatives and friends have reconnected with one another on the air through these programs. They described how one Neapolitan family announced on the air the birth of their child to relatives living in Switzerland.

⁴⁴ Simona Frasca has documented the role of classic Neapolitan song in the formation of a sense of shared *meridionale* identity among Southern Italians in New York City (Frasca, *Birds of Passage*).

The handful of singers, all considerably successful in Naples, who travel to these international locations give performances consisting of a combination of classic Neapolitan and *neomelodiche* songs, and sometimes their sets are comprised solely of the latter. This is the case with the latest “Big” performers, such as Alessio and Tony Colombo, and with the *veteromelodici* (veteran *neomelodici* singers) from the late 1980s or early 1990s, like Gianni Celeste. In the case of the latter, the longtime enduring presence of these singers on the *neomelodica* scene in Naples has meant that they have built up a cumulative presence among older and younger emigrants via Napoli International and through the continued emigration, return migration and frequent travel (and hand-to-hand circulation of music recordings) to and from these southern Italian diasporas. In the case of the former, the growing trend in online music sales by Neapolitan and Sicilian recording companies, the general spike in use of social media platforms such as MySpace, Facebook and YouTube, and the relatively recent entry on the internet of Naples’ Radio Studio Emme within the *neomelodica* scene since around 2008 has enabled singers who are new to the scene to make a simultaneous impact on multiple Italian publics internationally.⁴⁵ Moreover, now that they are no longer limited by the programming of Napoli International, singers are able to perform their own original songs without first “seducing” their diasporic audiences with classic Neapolitan song.

Social media, in fact, turns out to be a highly appropriate tool for an alternative economic culture that has been largely excluded from dominant media circuits. These platforms allow *neomelodica* music industry protagonists to largely bypass the censorship of the dominant culture industry elite, and they permit protagonists and their fans to engage in the aesthetics of affective contact that have long characterized their use of private and pirate television.⁴⁶ Fans can feel close to singers through Facebook messages and chat, or even by posting comments on YouTube videos.

However, *neomelodici* of southern Italian descent born and living in Belgium and Germany have been recording and performing in these countries since as early as the 1980s and performing at private family celebrations in restaurants and banquet halls, as well as giving public concerts in small theaters and similar venues since the 1990s.⁴⁷ Moreover, private local and regional television stations began broadcasting *neomelodica* in these countries in 2010. In Germany, where there are some 600,000 Italian immigrants and integration has been one of the weakest among all the Italian diasporas, Italian immigrants and first-generation Germans of southern Italian descent have established their own small entertainment businesses that provide local diasporic communities of southern Italian origin with both Neapolitan and Italian music.⁴⁸ Much of this activity is concentrated in an easterly corridor running from Bavaria to Baden-Württemberg, Rheinland-Palatinate, Hessen and North Rhine-Westphalia, particularly the cities of Munich, Stuttgart, Mannheim, Worms, Darmstadt, Solingen, Düsseldorf, Duisburg, Wuppertal, Cologne and Frankfurt. Italo-Germans have established small networks of

⁴⁵ Online music stores include Seamusica, Zeus, and MondialMusic. Alessio, Raffaello, Gianni Celeste, and many others have Facebook profiles. Celeste also has a MySpace profile.

⁴⁶ That is, until hosts such as YouTube capitulate to regulators’ requests that offending videos be removed.

⁴⁷ There are a few Sicilian and Neapolitan emigrant *neomelodici* residing in Switzerland and France as well as Swiss- and French-born *neomelodici* of Italian descent. One of these latter singers, Salvo Minella, sings *neomelodica*-style songs in Neapolitan, Italian and French. The current prime minister of Belgium, Di Rupo, is the son of Abbruzzesi guest worker immigrants.

⁴⁸ Italians constitute the oldest and most stable immigrant group in Germany. Seventy-five percent of Italian immigrants in Germany are from southern Italy.

reciprocating businesses catering to Italo-German clientele that include music and music video production companies such as Generali Eventi in Wuppertal, FSR Record in Solingen, BelliRecord in Darmstadt and Saviset Music in Frankfurt and private TV broadcasters such as Napoli Mia Studio 5 Germania in Worms and BelliMusic in Darmstadt, as well as *bomboniere* (party favor) shops, and photography studios.



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Poster from a concert in Saarbrücken with Nino Belli, proprietor of Belli Musica from Music (2012).

In Cologne, *neomelodica* is performed at restaurants and small-to-medium-sized theaters for crowds that are primarily Italian German and Germans of Italian descent. Singers avail themselves of Italian German business networks to produce their music and promotional materials and to advertise their services. For example, Italian German singers have their photography and videos produced at Foto Cipolla and Interfoto La Cognata and bring a few sale copies of their completed CDs to these businesses with the hope of attracting new fans. The owner of Foto Cipolla, a man from Licata (a town near Palermo) with grown German-born children (who, he said, “fortunately” nevertheless feel Italian) said that business has been tough since the financial crisis of 2008 and that some of the competition was making things even worse. He explained that some photographers do cut-rate, slapdash and tax-evasive work, stealing clients from the more serious businesses. “But some of the clients come back eventually, because they know what quality they are getting,” he added.

At Interfoto La Cognata business was doing well according to its proprietor, Biagio La Cognata, also from Licata. He produces wedding photos and videos as well as music videos for singers, some of whose CDs were available for sale in his shop. Among the CDs there was also a feature-length DVD video that La Cognata co-produced with the entertainment company Generali Eventi. Generali Eventi was opened in 1999 by Italians who previously worked in local private television and radio broadcasting in Campania and who maintain their Italian business networks to organize events in Italy, partnering, for example, with the satellite TV station Napoli International. Additionally, with the collaboration of Interfoto La Cognata, Generali Eventi has also entered the feature video market with *Incontro: La regola del destino* (Encounter: The Rule of Fate). La Cognata said of the video that he and his friends made it “for themselves, for fun,” evidenced, perhaps, by the single public screening they conducted for it. However, we both found him to be diffident when we visited the shop on separate occasions in 2010 and 2013. In fact, his modest response was a reaction to the question, “Is there a lot of interest here in this topic (organized crime)?”

Set in Cologne, the movie follows a battle between southern Italian crime clans for supremacy in Germany.⁴⁹ A clan of Sicilian *mafiosi* in Cologne (originating in Licata) prepares to buy cocaine from a Columbian cartel and import it to Sicily, but the clan is loathe to pay the heavy tax imposed on them by the Neapolitans, who control the transport route. The Neapolitan *camorristi* are equally disgruntled about the taxes imposed on them by the Sicilians for their trash exports to Germany and Belgium. The film concludes when the balance is tipped in favor of the Neapolitans. A Neapolitan undercover detective, played by the film’s Neapolitan writer and director, Maurizio Del Greco, one of the proprietors of Generali Eventi, kills the Sicilian *mafiosi* and steals their drug money, securing for the Neapolitans tax-free trash exports to Germany. The soundtrack includes Neapolitan-language songs performed by the Italian German singers Nino Brancato, who sings the title song, *Incontro*, and Gino Dal Nero, who sings a cover of the famous *neomelodica* song *Nu Latitante* (The Fugitive).⁵⁰ The video adopts some of the narrative conventions (for example, melodramatic love-and-crime stories peppered with a few brief comic scenes) of the Neapolitan film-*sceneggiata*, which reached its height in popularity among Southern Italians in the 1970s and 1980s, and the DIY aesthetics (unevenly mixed audio)

⁴⁹ The presence of Italian organized crime in Germany, in this case the Calabrian networks known as the ‘Ndrangheta, came to public attention in 2006 when in nearby Duisburg affiliates of an organized crime clan gunned down six affiliates of a rival clan.

⁵⁰ *Nu Latitante* was originally recorded by Tommy Riccio in 1993 and in 2003 made into a film-*sceneggiata* in which Riccio played a minor role.

of the film-*sceneggiata*'s reincarnation in the 2000s as *neomelodica* musical cinema (mostly shot in video).



La Batte, on the bank of the river Meuse, Liège. Photo by Jason Pine (2013).



La Batte, Liège. Photo by Jason Pine (2013).



North African vendor at La Batte, Liège. Photo by Jason Pine (2013).



La Batte, Liège. Photo by Jason Pine (2013).

Generali Eventi also organizes events in Liège, Belgium. In fact, the Liège province, which borders Germany's North Rhine-Westphalia region, is another active hub for *neomelodica* music performance and distribution. In the city of Liège the multinational market known as La Batte, which extends for about two kilometers along the river Meuse, features a range of

everyday commodities such as inexpensive clothing (for example, sportswear, undergarments, t-shirts), health and beauty and household cleaning products, jewelry, food products and music. Among the Belgian, French, North African and Sub-Saharan African vendors there are several Italian and Italian Belgian merchants who sell Italian foods and Italian and Neapolitan music CDs, among which one can find the latest *neomelodica* music. Among the permanent establishments along the Riviera, one finds the small music shop Italia Disques, which specializes in Neapolitan music and video. Angelo Virzi, one of the owners of the shop, explained that their business is the primary hub for the distribution of Neapolitan music in Belgium and played a major role in making Neapolitan music popular in Belgium. Moreover, he argued that online customers trust his website more than they trust sites based in Italy. “They are not professional,” Virzi explained, discreetly referring to online Italian vendors’ slow response rate and not infrequent botched or unfilled orders, as apparently reported by many Belgium customers.



Italia Disques, Liège. Photo by Francesco Pepe (2010).



Italia Disques, Liège. Photo by Jason Pine (2013).



Proprietors of Italia Disques, Liège, from left to right: Vincenzo Ricchiuti and Angelo Virzi. Photo by Jason Pine (2013).



An Italian-Belgian street vendor at La Batte (Liège). Photo by Francesco Pepe (2010).

Italian and Neapolitan music has long been popular among Belgians. In 1959 Rocco Granata, the Calabrian singer who emigrated with his family to Limburgh when he was ten, released the Italian-language single *Marina*, the number one hit on Belgian pop charts.⁵¹ Moreover, Granata participated in Italy's Sanremo music festival (also known as the Italian Song Festival), whose broadcasts had been contributing to Italian and Neapolitan song's renown in Belgium (as well as Germany, Holland, France and Switzerland since 1955), as has the more widely broadcast Eurovision Song Contest since 1956.

Belgian and Belgian-Italian merchants and listeners do not use the term *neomelodico* to describe the contemporary Neapolitan pop music that we have been exploring in this essay. Rather, they call this music, along with other Neapolitan musics (for example, *la canzone classica*, *la canzone sceneggiata* and *la canzone 'e mala*), simply *musica napoletana* or *musique napolitaine*, despite the fact that the latest songs of the most squarely self-identified *neomelodici* circulate in cities like Liège. While taking a casual stroll in the historic center of the city, our attention was drawn by what, given the many Maghrebi residents of the city, we thought was loud North African music coming from a shiny car. Once closer to the car, we saw an olive-skinned white male man wearing dark sunglasses, an open shirt and gold chain with a *corno*

⁵¹ The song was enormously popular throughout Europe (and in Germany in particular) and in the United States.

(horn).⁵² A crucifix dangled from his rearview mirror. Listening more closely to the song that blared from his car radio, we realized it was *Dimmi che mi ami* (Tell Me You Love Me) by Alessio, one of the most popular contemporary *neomelodici*. The irony struck us: although we are intimately familiar with *neomelodica*, in Liège, it sounded to us like “Arab” music.

Nino Brancato, “E Dint A Viche È Stà Città”⁵³

In this song entitled *In the Vicoli of this City*, Italian German neomelodico Nino Brancato sings to his lover, whom he meets secretly “in the streets” of Cologne when her parents are asleep: “It’s almost midnight / Papa and Mamma are already sleeping / Quietly, quietly go down the stairs / in silence, so no one hears you.” Here the indexical relationship to Cologne expresses a topology of familiar and sexual relations among southern Italians in Italy and in emigrant communities alike.



Poster of a concert tour of the Italian Germans Enzo Settembre, Tonio Novembre, Tony Ruvio and Nino Brancato (2012).

⁵² The *corno* is used as a good luck charm in southern Italian cultures.

⁵³ This title, like many *neomelodica* music titles and lyrics, contains orthographic errors. Many Neapolitan speakers confuse eliding apostrophes with accent marks when writing in the language. In this case, the accent grave is mistakenly used in “È” (“Is”) and “Stà” (“Remain” or “Is”). The correct form is E Dint ’E Viche ’E ’Sta Città.”



Concert poster of the Sicilian *neomelodico* Tony Colombo and the Italian German *neomelodico* Nino Brancato on tour in Germany and Belgium (2013).



Nun ce' importa niente (Nothing Matters To Us), an upcoming song release by Gianni Cammalleri (2013).



A CD produced by Saviset of Frankfurt in collaboration with partners in Italy (2012).



Le Note dell'Amore (Notes of Love) by Davide Junior (2012).



Sogni & Realtà (Dreams and Reality) by Angelo Iacona (2011).

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Big New Year's Dinner at the Festsaal in Cologne with Sicilian German performer Massimo Truisi (2012).



Butta via quei vestiti (Throw Off Those Clothes), an upcoming song release by Massimo Truisi, available for purchase on the listed websites (2012).

The cross-border reach of Generali Eventi marks the strength of its networks while mapping some of the intercity performance circuits—from Munich, Mannheim and Worms to Cologne, Liège and Charleroi—traveled by *neomelodici* singers. The German Italian singer Enzo Settembre, for example, personally brought his CDs to Italian businesses in both Cologne and Liège. A closer look at the biographies of singers and producers reveals, moreover, that *neomelodica* music in Germany and Belgium is produced and performed by Southern Italians with ties to a variety of regions, including Campania, Puglia and Sicily. But strikingly, *neomelodici* singers with ties to Sicily appear to dominate these diasporas. Several *neomelodici* singers began their careers in these scenes and, after achieving a moderate level of success, signed on with Sicilian music labels such as Seamusica in Catania, have been broadcast on Sicilian and Campanian channels and have even given live performances in Sicily and Campania. Singers from Germany, for example, have shared the stage with successful Italy-based performers such as Gianni Celeste and Tony Colombo.



Foto Cipolla in Cologne has produced videos for the Italian German *neomelodico* Nino Brancato. Photo by Francesco Pepe (2010).



Storefront of Interfoto La Cognata, Cologne. Photo by Francesco Pepe (2012).



Poster for the video *Incontro: La regola del destino* on the door of Cologne's Interfoto La Cognata, one of the co-producers of the video (2012).



Pennino, a *bomboniere* (party favors) shop in Cologne. Photo by Jason Pine (2012).

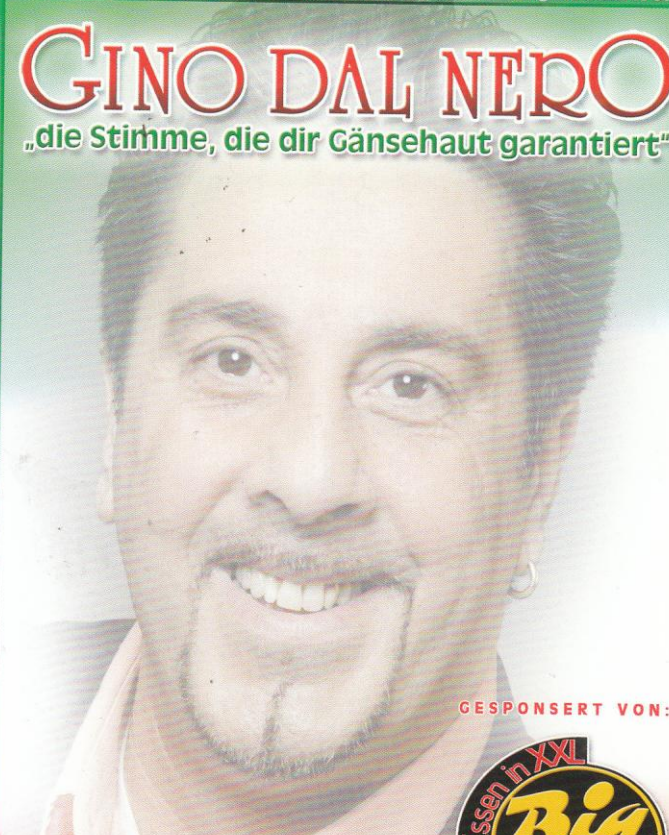


A display of DVDs at Pennino (Cologne). Photo by Francesco Pepe (2010).

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“The Voice That is Guaranteed to Give you Goosebumps.” Booking flyer of Gino Dal Nero, a German Italian *schlager*/*neomelodico* performer with Campania roots (2012).

Tony Colombo



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Concert flyer of Sicilian *neomelodico*, Tony Colombo in Charleroi, Belgium (2012).



Concert flyer for Sicilian “veteromelodico” (veteran or elder neomelodico) Carmelo Zappulla in Wuppertal, Germany (2012)



Cologne's Venloerstraße, a busy street populated with Italian and Turkish businesses. Photo by Francesco Pepe (2012).

Neomelodica Music and Organized Crime

The question of whether the *camorra* has an influence on the articulations of the *neomelodica* music industry in the United States and Europe remains, for now, elusive. Although the presence of *camorra* affiliates and operations beyond Italian borders in Europe and the United States has been partially documented,⁵⁴ it is unclear if, as in Campania, there are organized crime affiliate impresarios based outside Italy, or if singers who perform abroad receive the direct financial and network support of crime clan affiliates based within Italian borders. It is also unclear whether Italy-based singers performing abroad encounter organized crime affiliates in more ambiguous business relations, such as a Campania-based organized crime affiliate acting as broker between singer and emigrant party organizer. Finally, given the significant role Sicilians and Germans and Belgians of Sicilian origin play in the transnational *neomelodica* music scene, the question

⁵⁴ Luciano Brancaccio, "Magliari, imprenditori e camorristi: Il mercato del falso a Napoli," in *Alleanze nell'ombra: Mafie ed economie in Sicilia e nel Mezzogiorno*, ed. Rocco Sciarone (Rome: Donizelli, 2011), 431-523. Forgione, *Mafia export*.

of whether Sicilian *mafiosi* have a hand in the industry, in Italy and abroad, is well worth exploring.

However, it is clear that *neomelodica* music has entered into some nebulous international circulations through its criminalization by dominant culture industry forms such as major studio film productions and international print media. There are two instances in particular that are worth detailing. One was the release of the film *Gomorra* (2008) directed by Matteo Garrone and based on Roberto Saviano's 2006 book by the same name. As a stylized journalistic exposé on the *camorra*, the book lingers at the threshold between pulp fiction and true crime. Its references to *neomelodica* music work in concert with those of Sales and Ravveduto and Amato, ossifying in a discourse aesthetic of spectacular revelation about Naples and organized crime in a proliferation of new books, including Ravveduto's own more recent "tales of the *camorra*" recounted through film and *neomelodiche* songs and with a preface by Giuliano Amato.⁵⁵ One such "revelation" concerns the soundtrack of the film version of Saviano's *Gomorra*, which includes several *neomelodiche* songs, including Raffaello's *La nostra storia* (Our Story) and Alessio's *Ma si viene stasera* (But If He Comes Tonight). After the film was released, Italian newspapers, and subsequently other European newspapers, reported that some of the actors were fugitives or crime clan affiliates and that the author of some of the songs on the soundtrack was a fugitive of the law and a relative of crime boss Carmine Sarno, proprietor of the talent agency Bella Napoli.⁵⁶

That same year, another instance of incorporation through criminalization in the mainstream media occurred, this time at the hand of a *neomelodico* himself. In November of 2008, Gigi D'Alessio sat for an interview with Italian *Vanity Fair*. He talked about his "past" associations with Neapolitan crime clan affiliates. In 2001, he had been investigated for allegedly accepting financial backing from the Licciardi crime clan. After some months, the charge was dropped, but D'Alessio nevertheless felt compelled to return to the subject some seven years later. He explained, "If you're a singer in Naples and you begin to acquire a little fame, it's inevitable that you end up in such circles. But it's one thing to do one's job and it's another to collude." He added that it was impossible to refuse requests from *camorristi* to perform at their family functions. "Do you know how many times I received death threats?" he asked, repeating to *Vanity Fair* the ultimatums he frequently heard: "If you don't come to my son's wedding, I'll cut your throat"; "If you don't sing your stuff at my nephew's baptism lunch, I'll break your head."⁵⁷ Ostensibly, D'Alessio's motivation was to clear his name, but in the process he brought to mainstream public attention the polemic in which the *neomelodico* milieu has for the past several years been inextricably mired. By reviewing his past with *Vanity Fair* in this manner, D'Alessio distinguishes himself from contemporary *neomelodici* singers. He marks the time and space of his international success among publics more diverse than the intimate publics he knew in Naples, in southern Italy, and among emigrant communities. As a result, he unwittingly condemns less successful *neomelodici* singers to the self-referential world and highly conditioned circulations of the *neomelodico* milieu.

⁵⁵ Marcello Ravveduto, *Serenata ... Calibro 9: Storia e immagini della camorra tra cinema, sceneggiata e neomelodici* (Naples: Liguori, 2007).

⁵⁶ "Film anticamorra e la colonna sonora la fa un latitante," *Il Giornale di Napoli*, September 2, 2010. Garrone has established a pattern of casting organized crime affiliates in his films. He returned to Cannes in 2012 with *Reality*, which stars a former *camorra* hit man, Aniello Arena, who is serving a life sentence for a triple murder.

⁵⁷ Andrea Scarpa, "Chi l'ha visto? Gigi D'Alessio," *Vanity Fair*, November 26, 2006.

It is hard to trace how these polemics may have affected how prospective publics and dominant music industry protagonists perceive *neomelodica* music. Journalists and protagonists in the *neomelodica* scene in Naples suggest that dominant music industry elites in Italy tend to steer clear of singers who have potential entanglements with the *camorra*.⁵⁸ Beyond Italy, *neomelodica* music's bad reputation is less established. Most of the people (merchants, radio show hosts and fans) we spoke to in New York were not aware of the indeterminate connections between *neomelodica* music and organized crime. In fact, they were not much aware of the term "neomelodico," as there is no actual *neomelodica* music scene in New York to speak of. At the same time, in 2010 the U.S. MTV show *The Vice Guide to Everything* profiled *neomelodici* singers, whom they described as pop stars "owned by the mafia."⁵⁹ In Germany and Belgium, where there are rather active *neomelodica* music scenes, the music appears not to conjure up in public perceptions the specter of the *camorra* (or of the Sicilian mafia). One potential reason for this is that protagonists and fans in these countries seem to be largely working class or middle class, rather than underemployed and/or poor, and their performances of affective-aesthetic contact are less a collective celebration of the art of making do than they are a shared enthusiasm for "southern Italian culture."

Conclusion

Neomelodica song continues to thrive in Campania, in other regions of southern Italy and in other parts of Europe, but its transnational reach is conditioned by the music economy's alternative aesthetics of contact, its links to organized crime, both real and perceived, and its unflattering comparison to classic Neapolitan song. While classic Neapolitan song achieved global, cross-cultural success, *neomelodica* song has had a limited and uneven transnational reach because its alter status has meant it must avail itself of a collage of circulation strategies that include piracy, person-to-person promotion and sales and social media platforms, as well as piggybacking on the global renown of classic Neapolitan song. These strategies produce mixed results. While more *neomelodici* producers, performers and consumers are given the opportunity to participate in the music scene—and on a transnational scale—the scene itself remains, on many accounts, a self-referential alternative economic culture, albeit a less stigmatized culture, that only infrequently interacts with other music scenes locally, nationally and transnationally. There are indeed several interesting synergies between *neomelodica* music and other genres, from R&B and Hip Hop to German Schlager and Latin Free Style, but these appear to be rather exceptional and have not yet taken hold as enduring styles in their own right.

Tony Colombo, "This Is Love"

This recent song by the Sicilian *neomelodico* Tony Colombo and the Sicilian English dancer and former Big Brother participant Jimmy Barba is a singular example of a *neomelodico*'s attempt at a complete crossover into mainstream pop music by mimicking the audiovisual conventions of pop chart dance and hip hop artists.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Federico Vacalebre, *Dentro il vulcano: Racconti neomelodici e altre storie dal villaggio locale* (Naples: Tullio Pironti, 1999), 36-8.

⁵⁹ <http://www.mtv.com/videos/misc/603736/the-vice-guide-to-neomelodics.jhtml>.

The reciprocal relationships among *neomelodica* industry protagonists and participants in German, Belgian, and Sicilian and Campanian cities in the production, performance and circulation of the music not only trace many of the migration patterns of Southern Italians, but they also mark the contours of a shared cross-regional *meridionale* identity that comes into relief among migrant music protagonists and listeners. In contrast to much of the *neomelodica* produced and/or circulating in southern Italy, *neomelodica* circulating in Germany and Belgium, whether or not it is produced in these countries, does not readily index Naples or the moral geography that maps Naples as the regressive and disorderly capital of the Italy's "south."⁶⁰ In part because neomelodiche scenes in Germany and Belgium appear to be dominated by Sicilians and in part because its audiences in these countries are composed of people originating not only from Campania but from multiple southern Italian (and some northern Italian) regions, finding themselves in shared spaces of migration, Neapolitan-style, Neapolitan-language pop music in Germany and Belgium is experienced not so much as Neapolitan or even *neomelodica* as "southern Italian" (*meridionale*) music.

Like *neomelodica* produced in Campania or Sicily primarily for audiences in those regions, "*meridionale* music" conjures for its protagonists and listeners affective and aesthetic time and space. The moral sensibilities that are crystallized, however, concern ethnic identity rather than the moral political economy of the contact zones where the so-called formal, informal and illicit economies overlap.⁶¹ Based on our observations of some of the protagonists and songs of Germany and Belgium's Neapolitan-language music scenes, we have noticed that, at best, transnational *neomelodica* reanimates the perennial, archetypal economic drama of a "southern Italy" that bleeds migrants who are compelled to seek work far from the *meridione*, leaving behind and longing for the intimacies of family and place. This aestheticization perhaps does give form to a moral-political-economic sensibility, specifically the preference for "legal" emigrant work over the moral ambiguities of "making do" in the *meridione*, as the following Italian German song suggests.

Gino Dal Nero, "Nui Meridionale"⁶²

The refrain of this song, entitled *Nui Meridionale* (We the People of the *Meridione*), performed by the Italian German Gino Dal Nero, goes as follows: "We *Meridionali*, we are all alike / We have hearts as big as the sea / We don't want war, we care about this land / We are people of the sea and we have to sing." One way to interpret these lyrics is: *We Meridionali are goodhearted and care about our homeland, the meridione. To avoid self-destruction, we emigrate to find a way to make a living. And we feel the need to sing, no matter where we are.* Another, more direct interpretation might be: *Instead of participating in criminal activity in order to survive our homeland, turning life in the meridione into a daily war, we emigrate to make a living legally. And we carry our songs with us.*

⁶⁰ For the "moral geography" of Italy's "north" and "south," see Nelson J. Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

⁶¹ Pine, *The Art of Making Do in Naples*.

⁶² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RbAhC3Sp4Xs>.

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