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Immunity and Community
in Italian War Novels Set
in Afghanistan

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ABSTRACT: The concept of immunity as developed by Roberto Esposito is complementary with the category of community and contrasts the notion of security with that of external contamination. In this article, the logic of immunity is applied to two 2012 Italian war novels set in Afghanistan, namely Melania Mazzucco's *Limbo* and Paolo Giordano's *The Human Body*. In these novels, the space of the Forward Operating Base's so-called security bubble represents both the protective and the thanatopolitical sides of immunity, an ambivalent notion that offers the narrative framework to study Esposito's affirmative biopolitics. Both novels are part of the post-9/11 "return to the real," in that reconstruction and affect prevail over deconstruction and relativism. They thematize the mediatized experience of humanitarian and globalized warfare and raise questions about layered memories of war and national identity. Therefore, these narrations can be analyzed as examples of Vermeulen's narratives of affect, De Boever's narratives of care, and Breu's late-capitalist literature of materiality, studies that question the relationship between literature and biopolitics.

War as an abstraction does not make sense without the layered histories of the lives and deaths of individuals and collectivities, states and sovereignties.

—Srinivas Aravamudan, "Perpetual War," p. 1505

Introduction

Italy's military presence in Afghanistan since the start of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2002 and its commitment to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from their operating bases in the provinces of Farah and Herat have left many traces in Italian fiction and nonfiction. Leaving aside memoirs by soldiers and veterans as well as narrative journalism,¹ this article focuses on two 2012 novels that narrate military operations in Afghanistan and their devastating and long-lasting effects on individual soldiers. In *Il corpo umano* (*The Human Body*), Paolo Giordano tells the story of a platoon of Italian soldiers stationed in the Afghan desert of the Gulistan district in the Farah province.² As a journalist, the author visited their Forward Operating Base (FOB) "Ice" in 2010. Melania Mazzucco's novel *Limbo* narrates the same unpopular war, but she chose to do this from the point of view of a female soldier who was severely wounded during her tour of duty in the imaginary FOB "Sollum" in the real Farah province. Although Mazzucco, in order to write a novel about Annemarie Schwarzenbach, *Lei così amata* (*She so loved*), traveled in her protagonist's footsteps, the author never actually crossed the Afghan border.³ A television film adaptation of *Limbo* was broadcasted on RAI 1 in December 2015.⁴

Both of these novels contain an interesting stratification of internal, external, individual, and collective perspectives on Italy's participation in the Afghan peace mission. In fact, they can be seen as part of the post-9/11 "return to the real" tendency in literature, because in their narratives, reconstruction and affect prevail over deconstruction and relativism. In their representation, these narrations also reveal the profoundly mediatized character of contemporary globalized warfare, while at the same time raising questions about layered memories of war, public history, and national identity. Although the two novels have many themes in common, the narration of national war memories and the tensions between military politics and the home front are more pronounced in Mazzucco's *Limbo*; Giordano, on the other hand, also tends to foreground (as his novel's title already suggests) the theme of the human body in the context

1. Edoardo Albinati, *Il ritorno* (Milan: Mondadori, 2003); Ettore Mo, *Diario dall'Afghanistan* (Massa: Transeuropa, 2012); Valerio Pellizzari, *In battaglia, quando l'uva è matura. Quarant'anni di Afghanistan* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 2012); Giuseppe Amato, *L'eco dei miei passi a Kabul* (Milan: Mursia, 2014).

2. Paolo Giordano, *Il corpo umano* (Milan: Mondadori, 2012) / *The Human Body*, trans. Anne Milano Appel (New York: Viking, 2014).

3. Melania Mazzucco, *Limbo* (Turin: Einaudi, 2012) / *Limbo*, trans. Virginia Jewiss (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2014); *Lei così amata* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2000).

4. Lucio Pellegrini, *Limbo* (Rai Com, 2016), DVD.

of modern war. They share the motif of the so-called security bubble, a heavily protected space around a FOB in the Afghan desert that represents and symbolizes the desire for but also the impossibility of total immunity. Mazzucco and Giordano's protagonists are trapped within these margins of threat and protection.

This security bubble can be conceptualized with the help of Roberto Esposito's "terms of the political" (community, immunity, and biopolitics). Esposito's concept of immunity, which is complementary to the category of community and contrasts security with external contamination, proves especially useful in the following reflection on these two Italian war novels. In narrating the profound aporia whereby the "humanitarian war" in Afghanistan is both a peace mission and a war against terrorism, they both reveal the entanglement of an affirmative biopolitics and a negative thanatopolitics. Seen in this light, in fact, the FOB's security bubble and its various metaphorical elaborations reveal the contradictory dimensions of Esposito's idea of immunity: it offers biopolitical protection while posing thanatopolitical threats.

9/11 and the Return to the Real

September 11, 2001 ("9/11") appears to be a crucial date in the reflection on the end of postmodernism and the return to the real in contemporary literature and culture, and is of a particular interest here because the date of the al-Qaeda terrorist attack also justifies the war in Afghanistan in late 2001.⁵ In the Italian debate, an early reflection on the return to the real in the wake of a repositioning of writers and intellectuals on the "Western front" of the war on terrorism can be found in a volume of collected essays edited by writers Antonio Moresco and Dario Voltolini.⁶ In these writings, the concepts of a complex realism⁷ and of multiple realities⁸ are frequently

5. Brian Orend, "War and Terrorism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Global Ethics*, ed. Darrel Moellendorf and Heather Widdows (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 98–112, at p. 104.

6. *Scrivere sul fronte occidentale*, ed. Antonio Moresco and Dario Voltolini (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2002).

7. Critic Carla Benedetti, in her letter "from New York to the writers on the Western front," pleads for a concept of reality as a "feeling of complexity" (a "*sentimento del complesso*" [p. 14]), and writer Antonio Moresco defines it in terms of "taking in all," ("*prendere dentro tutto*" [p. 14]) and of unpredictable, abnormal complexity (p. 37). Carla Benedetti, "Il pieno," in *Scrivere sul fronte occidentale* (above, n. 6), pp. 12–18; Antonio Moresco, "L'occhio del ciclone," in *Scrivere sul fronte occidentale* (above, n. 6), pp. 32–53.

8. Writer Helena Janeczek, in "Una gonna per l'11 settembre," in *Scrivere sul fronte occidentale* (above, n. 6), pp. 232–242, explicates the point of view of an other, material reality with the help of an Afghan skirt.

used to question a one-sided military reaction that may be justified by the *jus ad bellum* but not necessarily by a presumed moral superiority of the West.⁹ According to these writers, this terminology should enable a literary confrontation with reality along the criteria of sincerity, profoundness, and radicalism, and in opposition to the discourse of postmodernism as expressing the end of History and the era of virtuality and unreality.¹⁰ The equation between a new kind of realism and the end of postmodernism is reiterated in the much-quoted 2008 survey for the literary journal *Allegoria* that starts from the question of whether September 11 changed our historical horizon by putting an end to the cultural climate of postmodernism, and whether this change had such an impact on contemporary writing as to legitimate the shift toward a “return to the real.”¹¹

As for the present international debate on the role of fictional writing after 9/11, Irmtraud Huber posits that the frequency in literary theory of new labels such as “realism,” “sincerity,” and “authenticity” suggests “some sort of return to the real,” but also shows “a shift of interest, rather than a rupture.” According to Huber, this literature “attempts to bridge the rupture (not to cover it), to be accessible (though not transparent), to create (but not to posit). After and because of deconstruction, it seeks to reconstruct.”¹² In his recent study on the contemporary novel, Pieter Vermeulen similarly concludes that “the traumatic legacy of September 11 has by now turned out to be a less compulsive intertext for postmillennial literature than it seemed only a few years ago.”¹³ Furthermore, 9/11 has been followed by a multiplicity of global events with different eventual structures, such as the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, that “require different strategies of engagement for which no narrative templates were available.” One of these strategies, affect, also a key notion of Vermeulen’s study, can be understood as an “ethics and politics of form.”¹⁴

9. Andrea Bajani, in “Il grande spot,” in *Scrivere sul fronte occidentale* (above, n. 6), pp. 146–152, meditates on the new *Narration* (“nuova Narrazione,” p. 147) that starts with a publicity palimpsest, combining the Taliban with the attack on the Twin Towers, thus legitimizing the new occidental Myth of the History of Liberty and its Values against moral disintegration (p. 149).

10. Antonio Moresco, “Lettera,” in *Scrivere sul fronte occidentale* (above, n. 6), pp. 7–8.

11. Raffaele Donnarumma and Gilda Policastro, eds., “Ritorno alla realtà? Otto interviste a narratori italiani,” *Allegoria* 20:57 (2008): 9–25.

12. Irmtraud Huber, *Literature after Postmodernism: Reconstructive Fantasies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 6–7.

13. Pieter Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 14.

14. Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature* (above, n. 13), p. 11.

In *Narrative Care*, Arne De Boever speaks of post-9/11 in terms of a political turn and a vitalist turn, characterized by a “renewed interest in the notion of life that is closely related to the study of emergencies, crises and exceptions.”¹⁵ De Boever’s aim is to “present the novel as a work of bioart that is traversed by both biopolitical concerns and by concerns with the care for the self and the care for others.”¹⁶ The novels selected to illustrate his “pharmacological theory of care” are described as “pharmacological texts”: “[i]nvestigating the complicity of the novel as a genre with what I have called biopolitics—a politics *over* life—they also seize the possibilities of life-narrative as a technique of emancipation and liberation (one could call this a biopolitics *from below*—a politics *of* life).”¹⁷

Complexity, reconstruction, affect, and care appear to be central notions both for the debate on the return of the real and for the two Italian post-9/11 novels analyzed in this paper. It is in fact possible to consider Mazzucco and Giordano’s novels as expressions of a “countertradition of literature” within postmodernism, that of the “late-capitalist literature of materiality.”¹⁸ In this context, Christopher Breu theorizes the concept of materiality as “a limit to biopolitics” and as “biopolitics’ and virtuality’s unconscious flip side—one that resists integration with the world of biopolitical control.”¹⁹ Breu’s inclusion of Esposito’s interpretation of thanatopolitics, in terms of biopolitics’ deathly opposite placed “around the logic of immunity,”²⁰ is especially effective in bringing the two Italian war novels on strategies of immunity closer to this literary countertradition of materiality and to “new realism.”²¹

In short, these two novels seem to fit in the third tendency described by Stijn De Cauwer and Pieter Vermeulen in their overview of literature and biopolitics, a tendency under the name of “literature vs. biopolitics,” which puts together a number of recent studies with

15. Arne De Boever, *Narrative Care: Biopolitics and the Novel* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 2.

16. De Boever, *Narrative Care* (above, n. 15), p. 13.

17. De Boever, *Narrative Care* (above, n. 15), p. 154.

18. Christopher Breu, *Insistence of the Material: Literature in the Age of Biopolitics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), p. 24.

19. Breu, *Insistence of the Material* (above, n. 18), p. 2.

20. Breu, *Insistence of the Material* (above, n. 18), p. 17.

21. For a critical summary of the debate on “new realism” in the Italian literary and philosophical context see, among others, Luca Somigli, “Negli archivi e per le strade: considerazioni meta-critiche sul ‘ritorno alla realtà’ nella narrativa contemporanea,” in *Negli archivi e per le strade. Il ritorno alla realtà narrativa di inizio millennio*, ed. Luca Somigli (Rome: Aracne, 2013), pp. i–xxii.

a more optimistic vision of the power of literature to question neoliberal biopolitics and to imagine alternative ways of life.²² Especially De Boever's conception of literature as a pharmakon, offering cure and poison at the same time, shows affinities with Esposito's notion of "the double bind implicit in immunitary dynamics": "This is the contradiction that I have sought to bring to attention in my work: that which protects the body (the individual body, the social body, and the body politic) is at the same time that which impedes its development."²³

The task Esposito sets himself in order to posit an affirmative biopolitics—to "overturn . . . the balance of power between 'common' and 'immune'" and to tackle the problem on two levels, "by disabling the apparatuses of negative immunization, and by enabling new spaces of the common"²⁴—is comparable to the task set for the novel to imagine an ethics, politics, and countertradition of narratives of affect (Vermeulen), life (De Boever), and materiality (Breu).

Mediated and Mediatized Experiences of War

The adoption by both authors of forms of mediated and multiple realities in their novels can also be traced back to Italo Calvino's influential neorealist resistance novel *Il Sentiero dei nidi di ragno* (*The Path to the Nest of Spiders*). Calvino famously approached the theme of partisan war not directly, but obliquely, through the eyes of an orphaned child and a very unconventional group of partisans, and he coined the concept of "neo-expressionism," instead of "neorealism," to designate Italian culture after World War II.²⁵ However, while Calvino in the late 1940s felt the need to other his personal experience as a partisan because his readers' community was so closely involved in the collective memories they wished to share and to judge, Mazzucco and Giordano evoke a material reality and an experience of the Real that, to their readers, is far away, unfamiliar, and indirect because it is inevitably mediated. Completely lacking is that direct form of communication between the author and his public, that anonymous voice of an era and a community, as Calvino described it.²⁶ In our two contemporary war novels, Giordano and Mazzucco

22. Stijn De Cauwer and Pieter Vermeulen, "Literatuur en biopolitiek," *Cahier voor Literatuurwetenschap* 7 (2015): 149–154, at p. 152.

23. Roberto Esposito, "Community, Immunity, Biopolitics," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 18:3 (2013): 83–90, at p. 85.

24. Esposito, "Community, Immunity, Biopolitics," (above, n. 23), pp. 87–88.

25. Italo Calvino, "Preface," in *The Path to the Nest of Spiders*, trans. William Weaver (New York: The Ecco Press, 1976), v–xxv, at pp. xi–xii.

26. Calvino, "Preface" (above, n. 25), p. v.

are forced to build their narrations on silence, on personal and hidden experiences that became better known to the general public only after several deadly incidents involving Italian soldiers demanded an intervention by the authorities in an effort to construct an appropriate public memory.²⁷

In order to convey the experiences of this new type of war more effectively and “affectively” to her readers, Mazzucco adopts in *Limbo* the perspective of the female soldier Manuela Paris who was in command of the thirty men of the Pegasus platoon in Afghanistan. Introducing this female platoon commander’s perspective in the predominantly masculine army setting can in fact already be considered a device used to facilitate the identification of the reader with faraway humanitarian warfare.²⁸ Through this female protagonist, Mazzucco’s novel foregrounds several devastating and unspeakable effects on the soldier’s body and psyche. After being severely injured in an ambush and suffering from PTSD, Manuela Paris is in fact forced to go back to Italy, where she must undergo a long and difficult mental and physical rehabilitation. An essential part of her therapy is the so-called homework, which occupies an autonomous layer in the novel’s narrative architecture:

her strategy of *avoidance*—as it was called in psychiatric jargon—was keeping her from working through the trauma; a symptom of PTSD, essentially, which she had to strive to overcome if she didn’t want it to become chronic and cripple her forever. He was even making her write about her military experience and the trauma: her *homework*, as he called it.²⁹

This homework constitutes Manuela’s effort to recollect and relive in writing her traumatic experiences in the far-away humanitarian war, which offered the circumstances for re-creation and self-destruction.

27. The attacks described in the novels are possibly inspired by two of the most dramatic episodes during the Italian presence in Afghanistan: the death of six Italian paratroopers killed by a Taliban suicide bomber in Kabul on September 17, 2009, which was followed by a day of national grief on September 21, and the four Italian Nato soldiers killed in an insurgent attack on October 9, 2010 in the Gulistan valley. Cf. Nick Squires, “Afghanistan: Six Italians Paratroopers Killed in Kabul Bomb,” *The Telegraph*, September 17, 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/6202856/Afghanistan-six-Italians-paratroopers-killed-in-Kabul-bomb.html>; “Four Italian Nato Troops Killed in Western Afghanistan,” *BBC News*, October 9, 2010, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-south-asia-11506805>.

28. Cf. Kimberly Hutchings, “Making Sense of Masculinity and War,” *Men and Masculinities* 10:4 (2008): 389–404, at p. 390: “it is the formal properties of masculinity as a relational concept, drawing its meaning from a logic of contrast (between different masculinities) and a logic of contradiction (between masculinity and femininity), that enable it to act as a prism through which to see, and make sense of, war.”

29. Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above, n. 3), p. 31.

Thus, Mazzucco introduces into her novel an albeit-moderate form of psychoanalysis, a therapy that in general plays an essential role in coming to terms with the effects of bio- and thanatopolitics on the human body: “[p]sychoanalysis and other materialist theories of the body seem crucial . . . for constructing a more adequate account of biopolitics’ and thanatopolitics’ intersections with the lived body.”³⁰

Although Giordano’s *Human Body* is apparently based on multiple points of view, it eventually becomes clear that, in this novel, there is one dominant perspective as well, namely that of medical officer Alessandro Egitto. Compared to Manuela, this male protagonist seems less involved: more like a bystander, but also a prudent and scrupulous spectator of the individuals in his platoon, their reactions, and their interpersonal tensions. Thus, in both narratives, a modern and anomalous war is revisited and mediated through the eyes of traumatized survivors who eventually lost their faith in the ideology of the immunity mechanism as described by Esposito: “[i]mmunity, necessary to the preservation of individual and collective life . . . if assumed in a form that is exclusive and exclusionary toward all other human and environmental alterities, ends up counteracting its own development.” This is the moment in which a distinction starts to be established between a negative and a “potentially affirmative mode” of biopolitics.³¹

The ambivalence surrounding the long conflict in Afghanistan also clearly emerges from its representation in the media. From October 7, 2001 onward, an international coalition has been involved in a war that is very complex from a military point of view, but that is also extremely mediatized and “diffused.” Hoskins and O’Loughlin coined the term “diffused war” to describe and analyze the modern interpenetration of war and media, which often leads to insoluble and unpredictable interactions between governments, armed forces, and different audiences: “[m]edia bring war closer in some ways, but keep it distant in others.”³²

In our two novels, this image of a mediatized and diffused war emerges in the private sphere as “self-fashioning” by means of various social media. Facebook, email, chat rooms, and videogames allow Italian soldiers in Afghanistan to escape to different realities. Similarly, those who stay behind depend on first-hand reports but also on news stories spread by the media to form a mental picture of

30. Breu, *Insistence of the Material* (above, n. 18), p. 189.

31. Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics” (above, n. 23), pp. 86–87.

32. Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin, *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), pp. 6–7.

the Afghan mission. Manuela's thirteen-year-old stepbrother, Traian, a typical teenager who worships his courageous sister, weapons, and war videogames, has put together a digital archive that clearly proves to him that his sister is a war hero, but Manuela herself immediately notices the discrepancy between these news reports that depict the immunity/community divide and her own personal experiences with thanatopolitics.³³

Twenty-first-century military operations often take place at enormous geographical and cultural distances—far away from communal Italy, in foreign cultures, and against unknown and invisible enemies called “insurgents”—that tend to undermine any collective memory of patriotism. Moreover, ideally speaking, modern military operations are concerned with bringing peace and democracy, rather than gaining a military victory over the enemy.³⁴ It is precisely the peaceful and humanitarian goals of her mission that convince Mazzucco's protagonist to make her appearance in a TV talk show. After emphasizing the ethical and humanitarian motivation behind this type of war,³⁵ Manuela also expresses her doubts about the legitimacy of exporting a presumably good model of justice when, in Italy, this same model is being violated every day. She therefore concludes that Afghanistan also functions as a mirror in which her homeland Italy can redeem itself:

In that faraway, devastated country, we project the image of what we should—to be, but which we can no longer appreciate here. Afghanistan is like a mirror, it lets us see a better image of ourselves.³⁶

Through the global diffusion and mediated experience of war, what we see here is the crisis of national identity to which Esposito's political thought responds by showing “the crisis of the project of

33. Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above, n. 3), pp. 30–33, and 218–222.

34. Cf. Christopher Kutz, *On War and Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 1: “We live also in an era of democratic wars, when democratic states pursue violent conflict in the name of peaceable ends, ranging from disarmament to democratization to securing access to natural resources.”

35. “She says that every war demands an ideal justification, which is necessary in order to gain consensus. In fact, when the world acknowledges the necessity of military action, no one dares dispute it. This may seem to be merely a way for those conducting the war to justify their actions, and in part of course it is; but in today's world, no one in any country—neither the government nor army nor the public—could commit to a war that it did not consider just. And today only an ethical or humanitarian motivation can be understood and accepted as ‘just.’” Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above, n. 3), p. 359.

36. Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above, n. 3), p. 360.

community conceived under the banner of immunization."³⁷ As explained by Greg Bird and Jonathan Short in their introduction to Esposito's political theory, in the globalized world

everything is inevitably brought into proximity and correlation, be it wars, natural disasters, climatic upheaval, or political and economic turmoil. There is, accordingly, nothing that can be effectively isolated, insulated, instituted, even immunized, as something apart, something that might be considered *proper* only to itself. In this light the globalized world appears as the sustained crisis of the proper and simultaneously as the endgame of the project of modernization as manifested in ever more intensified, crisis-ridden forms.³⁸

Esposito's answer is to be found in his search for "the original link between community and expropriation. Community does not shelter, contain, and protect us; rather, community is the very inauguration of an expropriation process." Exactly this process of deconstructing the proper gradually transforms the main characters of the novels, enabling them to reach "affirmative" freedom in an open model of community.³⁹

Layered Memories of War and National Identity

In fact, the aforementioned mediatization and diffusion of war also manifests itself in the public sphere. While in Italian mass media the much-debated Italian military presence in Afghanistan is associated first of all and explicitly with feelings of national pride, patriotism, and "*italianità*," the two novels oscillate between a critical reflection on the Italian military presence in Afghanistan and an extremely fragile and fragmentary discourse on Italy's national identity. This shows again how "the dominant Western philosophical-political idealization of an immunized and proper community is becoming increasingly untenable."⁴⁰

As is well known, Italy's collective memories consist of many different historical and social layers, often with profound internal tensions and divisions that have been studied from various angles.⁴¹

37. Greg Bird and Jonathan Short, "Community, Immunity, and the Proper: An Introduction to the Political Theory of Roberto Esposito," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 18:3 (2013): 1–12, at p. 2.

38. Bird and Short, "Community, Immunity, and the Proper" (above, n. 37), p. 1.

39. Bird and Short, "Community, Immunity, and the Proper" (above, n. 37), pp. 2, 8.

40. Bird and Short, "Community, Immunity, and the Proper" (above, n. 37), p. 2.

41. For a historical perspective on these tensions, see John Foot, *Italy's Divided Memory* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); a more cultural and literary analysis is found for example in Silvana Patriarca, *Italian Vices: Nation and Character from the Risorgimento to the Republic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

The representation of this fragile national identity and its memorial stratification is strongest in Mazzucco's *Limbo*, which makes abundant use of words like "Italy," "state," "nation," and "homeland" (*patria*). One of Manuela Paris's men, Lorenzo Zandonà, who died in an ambush, is buried in Mel near Belluno in a section of the cemetery that is reserved for Alpine heroes of the First World War.⁴² Lorenzo's mother, Manuela, explains the meaning of her son's death in terms of a "multidirectional memory"⁴³ that combines domestic and foreign history:

History is something beyond the intentions and aspirations of individuals; it's more like the tide. You can be part of it, but you can't stop or guide it. Lorenzo became a minuscule grain of sand in the history of that distant country, a history that for a short time was intertwined with Italy's. And maybe the meaning lies precisely in that strange tangency of parallel worlds destined to meet only in infinity—that the life of a guitar player from Mel was joined forever to those stones, sand, and mines, to the stars of that sky, because we are all one.⁴⁴

This memorial stratification linked to the concept of national identity emerges in other ways as well. "Sollum" in the novel is the name for the real "La Marmora" ISAF installation in the Herat province, Shindand district. This choice of renaming the FOB links the Italian military presence in Afghanistan to Italy's colonial and fascist past rather than to Italy's nationalist past (Alfonso Ferrero La Marmora was an Italian general and statesman who played an important role in Italy's Risorgimento). To the Italian soldiers, "Sollum" should in fact bring back memories of a compromised national identity: their predecessors fighting on the side of the Axis in 1941 against the British (Operation Brevity) in the Libyan Desert. As it turns out, Manuela's grandfather Vittorio fought on the Libyan front as well, but after the signing of the armistice on September 8, 1943, he left the national army and joined the brigades of partisan volunteers to fight with the Allies. Although Vittorio fought on different fronts, both in the fascist imperialist war and in the war to liberate Italy from fascism, his loyalty toward his origins remains unaltered. His granddaughter translates Vittorio's patriotism in terms of "duty" and "debt." On the third and last time Manuela speaks during the celebratory TV show, she has to answer the question of whether "she considers her dead comrades heroes or martyrs":

42. Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above, n. 3), p. 364.

43. Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 3.

44. Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above, n. 3), pp. 364–365.

She hesitates for a second and then says she is sure that they wouldn't have seen themselves as one or the other. They merely did their duty. Not that she can really explain what duty is. To her it's not so much what one is bound to by religion, ethics, or law. It's a personal debt.⁴⁵

This concept of debt is part of a relational ethics in which community takes the form of a collective debt that is owed to itself.⁴⁶

The Security Bubble: Between Immunity and Thanatopolitics

As a "mirror," the "deterritorialized" war in Afghanistan on the one hand acts upon the collective memory of Italian national identity, while on the other hand reveals its weak and untimely aspects. The tension between the defensive closure of national identity and its precarious exposure to the other becomes tangible within the limits of the aforementioned security bubble, the fortified zone in the Afghan desert that surrounds the Forward Operating Base—a small island in the middle of nowhere, a "limbo" in a hell where the Italian soldiers are exposed to invisible enemies, notwithstanding their extremely heavy protection. Both novels' epicenters consist of the rupture of this security bubble by surprise attacks with improvised explosive devices (IEDs) that disseminate terror and destruction in a "hostile" landscape: "In truth, like all operations since the start of the conflict, the mop-up operation in the area has been incomplete: the security bubble extends for a radius of just a few miles around the base. Inside there are still insidious pockets of guerrillas and outside is hell."⁴⁷

The security bubble represents a metaphorical identity space, a community of collective belonging set against a negative context of death and alienation. It represents a protected area in a war scenario that seems to be determined by what Srinivas Aravamudan calls men's "increasing capacity for self-annihilation."⁴⁸ Leaving this identity space has a profoundly alienating effect on Giordano's protagonist:

Something in him has definitively changed since they advanced beyond the security bubble, and especially since the bomb tech found the first explosive device; where he is now, in the heart of the valley, there's no longer any trace

45. Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above, n. 3), p. 360.

46. Bird and Short, "Community, Immunity, and the Proper" (above, n. 37), p. 9.

47. Giordano, *The Human Body* (above, n. 2), p. 28.

48. Srinivas Aravamudan, "Perpetual War," *PMLA* 124:5 (2009): 1505–1514: "To ask about war today is to reflect not just on past devastations and current human suffering but also on our indeterminate bio-ontological and ecotechnical future as a quarrelsome and death-delivering species" (p. 1506).

of modesty or shame. Many of the qualities that distinguish humans from other animals have disappeared. From now on, he reflects, he himself no longer exists as a human being. He's turned into something abstract, a cluster of pure alertness, of pure reaction and endurance.⁴⁹

In the “non-place” of the security bubble are the complementary but contradictory categories of “community” and “immunity,” the first one exposed to contact and contamination with the other, the second one intent on protecting life from external threats. The risk of the category of immunity or immunization is that, beyond a certain threshold, immunity's closure will entail the negation of life instead of its protection.⁵⁰ As explained by translator Timothy Campbell in his introduction to Esposito's *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, the situation after September 11 has been described in terms of a global autoimmunity crisis. Esposito, on the contrary, shows how to think an affirmative biopolitics through the lens of immunity: “[t]his opening to community as the site in which an affirmative biopolitics can emerge is the result of a dialectical reversal at the heart of the immunitary paradigm.”⁵¹ This also means, in the light of the war on terrorism, that terrorists should not be excluded from “*bíos*,” but instead, “what we need to do is to understand and practice differently the unity of *bíos* and politics in such a way that we no longer enforce the politicization of life (which is precisely what the war on terror is intended to do), but instead create the conditions for what [Esposito] calls a ‘vitalization of politics.’”⁵² Therefore, this “no man's land” can also be analyzed as the “Unpolitical,” defined by Esposito as the impossibility of representing the ethical or theological values of our political tradition—power, freedom, and democracy—outside the sphere of political conflict and ignoring their contradictory and aporetic core. In other words, the Unpolitical attests to the impossibility of representing the Good as something insurmountable.⁵³ It can thus be considered not as an ideology but as “the non-being of the political: what it cannot be, or become, without losing its constitutively polemic character.”⁵⁴

49. Giordano, *The Human Body* (above, n. 2), p. 201.

50. Roberto Esposito, “From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics,” *Annali d'Italianistica* 29 (2011): 205–213, at p. 209.

51. Timothy Campbell, “Translator's Introduction. *Bíos*, Immunity, Life: The Thought of Roberto Esposito,” in Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2008), vii–xlii, at p. xix.

52. Campbell, “Translator's Introduction” (above, n. 51), p. xli.

53. Esposito, “From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics” (above, n. 50), p. 206.

54. Esposito, “From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics” (above, n. 50), p. 207.

As has been shown, the ambivalence of the terms “community” and “immunity” leads Esposito to rethink biopolitics both in its destructive, negative form of thanatopolitics and in its affirmative and productive interpretation, opening it up to a possible transformation.⁵⁵ And it is precisely the category of “immunity,” with its ambivalent quality of negative protection, which can build a bridge between the two extremes and open up toward an affirmative approach to biopolitics in which life is no longer the object but the subject of political discourse. Consequently, life itself should also be reconsidered in terms of its “irreducible complexity,”⁵⁶ a notion both Mazzucco and Giordano construct by focusing their narratives on the “bare lives” and fragile bodies of their characters. By emphasizing the alienation their characters feel once they pass the borders of the security bubble, both authors also try to move “away from a rationality of bodies” and to think a new, virtual community “characterized by its impersonal singularity or its singular impersonality, whose confines will run from men to plants, to animals independent of the material of their individuation.”⁵⁷

Above all, the military community confirms the immunity paradigm in that it offers security to the protagonists’ identities as a closed and defensive structure—in particular, to the young commander Manuela Paris, who inherits her own identity mainly from collective army values and always “uses the plural. We, we, we”:

“I don’t believe in another life,” Manuela says. “This is the only life we have, it’s this certainty that makes the time we have worthwhile. We can’t waste it. We know we have to die. Giving one’s death is like giving one’s life. But if your death doesn’t contribute to life, then your life is truly lost. I can’t stand it. I wasn’t here, I couldn’t come, I was in the hospital. I couldn’t even say goodbye to them.” She breaks off suddenly and turns away. She catches a glimpse of the Virgin’s red dress in the painting. That and a symphony of angels. So many angels. She dries her tears on her jacket sleeve. This is the first time she has been able to cry.⁵⁸

The oath, the ceremonies, the parades, the state funerals in the Roman basilica of *Santa Maria degli Angeli e dei Martiri* have a profoundly patriotic and even existential meaning for this female soldier, who lists to Mattia, a mysterious man in his forties, the things that really matter in her life:

55. Esposito, “From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics” (above, n. 50), p. 212.

56. Esposito, “From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics” (above, n. 50), p. 212.

57. Campbell, “Translator’s Introduction” (above, n. 51), p. xix.

58. Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above, n. 3), p. 213.

"It's not like I want to marry you, Mattia," she says. "I'm just passing through, my work comes before everything else. The army, Italy, my Alpini, my family. Those are the things that matter to me, in that order. I don't know what you do and I don't really care. I don't know if you chose it or simply stumbled upon it. For me, work isn't something I do to fill my day or to earn a salary. It's a part of me. In fact, it's the truest part of me."⁵⁹

Mazzucco shows the reader a woman who is entirely devoted to her mission and who would have rather died together with her men than be expelled from the military community as a disabled war veteran. Immunity within the framework of her mission corresponds to the laws and rights of international warfare, such as the noncombatant immunity principle. This principle establishes that civilians are entitled to "due care" from fighters, which "includes all serious and sustained efforts, from the top of the military chain of command down to the bottom, to protect civilian lives as best as possible amid the difficult circumstances of war."⁶⁰ After her forced return to the civilian community without the symbolic security of the army to protect her warfare identity, she faces the public's incomprehension due to the crisis of collective values and patriotic feelings in Italy's civil society.

The incompatibility between the values that keep together the military community and those governing the community as a political and a biological body brings to the surface Esposito's apolitical dimension with its ambivalence toward the ultimate value of justice. Mattia, whom Manuela falls in love with during her rehabilitation, represents the extreme consequences of a politics of immunization in which life is not its subject. For his own protection, Mattia has been forced by the Italian justice system to change his identity because of his role as a key witness in a mafia trial. As a victim of a negative notion of biopolitics, excluding his individuality from "*bíos*," he needs Manuela's "difference" to produce a form of "autoimmunity" in order to contradict the dynamics of immunization that imply his individual withdrawal from the common space.⁶¹ For Esposito, drawing on Spinoza, the "elaboration of a new, non-immunitary semantics of a multiplicity of norms" is "both a defense of difference among life-forms and their associated norms and an explicit critique of otherness, which for Esposito inevitably calls forth immunization

59. Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above, n. 3), p. 142.

60. Orend, "War and Terrorism" (above, n. 5), p. 105.

61. Esposito, "From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics" (above, n. 50), p. 212; Esposito, "Community, Immunity, Biopolitics," (above, n. 23), p. 88.

from the implicit threat of contagion and death."⁶² In one of the letters from Hotel Bellavista in the final "Rewind" section of the novel, Mattia writes to Manuela that salvation is impossible, but that they can recompose each other into something new:

I like to think that the divergence, as you call it, was me. Because I was waiting for you, at the end of your dark night. That all the trivial, random acts of your life were leading you to me. I can't save you and you can't save me. All we can do is put ourselves back together again, and be something together.⁶³

Manuela's "we," which links the individual subject to an immunizing community, is here reformulated in terms of an impersonal "we" constituted in a space "in which individuation takes place thanks to every living form's interdependence with other living forms."⁶⁴ As a man who is condemned to death by the justice system's ambivalence, Mattia strongly polemicizes against the basic and irremovable ground of the political, which is the sovereign "wielding power,"⁶⁵ and together with a tremendous invective against the war and against Italy, he formulates an alternative form of "affirmative" patriotism that builds the land not starting from its fathers but from its sons:

The word *Italy* means nothing to me beyond the language I speak and the country I live in. I get annoyed when people talk to me about the homeland. For me the homeland isn't the land of our fathers but of our children. It's not an expanse of space or a history, but something alive and present, that each one of us carries inside.⁶⁶

In this attempt to put in motion a "vitalization of politics," the category of immunity at a historical and national level also operates at a microhistorical level in the personal lives of several of the novels' characters. One example in Giordano's novel is the medical officer Alessandro Egitto, who—after having fled from a personal war—immunizes himself daily with psychopharmacological drugs against painful existential questions:

The colleague reluctantly wrote out the prescription, urging me to see him again in a month. I did not go back. I found it more convenient to order a supply of the drug for the army, a sufficient number of boxes to get by for a

62. Campbell, "Translator's Introduction" (above, n. 51), p. xxxix.

63. Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above, n. 3), p. 351.

64. Campbell, "Translator's Introduction" (above, n. 51), p. xxxviii.

65. Esposito, "From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics" (above, n. 50), p. 206.

66. Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above, n. 3), p. 327.

long time. One pill a day, each to erase a single question to which over time I had found no answer: Why do wars break out? How does one become a soldier? What is a family?⁶⁷

Giordano thus inscribes his novel in those narratives described by De Boever as “pharmacological texts” in that it narrates “*through and beyond*” its critique of biopolitics, highlighting the cure and poison of its negative dimension of a politics “*over life*.”⁶⁸ It is not a coincidence that both novels focus strongly on the theme of the human body, declined in its variants of affirmative and negative biopolitics. Especially Giordano’s novel thematizes sick, humiliated, animalized, and tortured bodies. It sheds an equally cruel light on death itself, with soldiers’ bodies blown to pieces, literally pulverized by explosions:

The charred pieces of the Lince lie scattered over the dry grass. Ietri stares at them from behind the mud-spattered window. He could rub the glass with his forearm to see better, but a part of him knows that the dirt is mostly on the outside and it wouldn’t do any good. Peering more closely, he realizes that some of the burnt remains on the ground, the smaller ones, aren’t mechanical but anatomical. For example, there’s a boot still attached to its sole, upright, with something sticking out of it. He’s not sure what the others are. So that’s how a human body is blown apart, he thinks.⁶⁹

This “obscene”⁷⁰ scene of biological and technological destruction seems to fit neatly with what has been identified after 9/11 as a suicidal autoimmunity crisis. As has been shown, Esposito “refuses to collapse the process of immunization into a full-blown autoimmune suicidal tendency at the heart of the community.” The positive immunity evidenced by mother and fetus for Esposito is “the proof that immunity does not necessarily degenerate.”⁷¹ On other occasions in Giordano’s novel, bodies engage and fuse in sexual acts in an attempt to lose themselves but also to reconnect with other selves. However, the positive contamination, which Esposito identifies in pregnancy,⁷² rarely achieves this positive transformation for Gior-

67. Giordano, *The Human Body* (above n. 2), p. 277.

68. De Boever, *Narrative Care* (above, n. 15), p. 154.

69. Giordano, *The Human Body* (above n. 2), p. 221.

70. In his discussion of the notion of the “obscene” in literature, De Boever suggests that the horror of the scene described is made easier to digest by the narrative and its curative effect, which turns it into an example of “narrative care.” De Boever, *Narrative Care* (above, n. 15), p. 20.

71. Campbell, “Translator’s Introduction” (above, n. 51), p. xvii.

72. Esposito, “From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics” (above, n. 50), p. 212. What inter-

dano's characters and is blocked in an aborted body. The mind of the traumatized marshal, René, for example, produces a macabre fusion between a newly created and aborted life on the one hand and the terrible scene of the attack on his convoy with explosive devices on the other:

"It's too late."

"Rosanna, what the fuck did you do?"

The sheep hurtle down the slope and falter on their glabrous hooves, their faces contracted in terror. Something is wrong, there's no shepherd. They want to screw us. Fire, fire, fire with everything you've got. The truck explodes with a roar that leaves their ears ringing. They must be ready, they must be on their guard. The baby isn't yet a baby, it's a mosquito. They suck it out with a tube and in five minutes it's all over.

"Good-bye, René," Rosanna says. "Take care of yourself."⁷³

Concluding Remarks

In Giordano's novel, the body seems to represent the insoluble tension between community and immunity on both a physical and a psychological level. In Mazzucco's novel, on the other hand, a cognitive desire prevails to connect the various experiences of community and immunity, starting with the X-rays of Manuela's own fragmented body and continuing through a process of memorial synthesis. Mazzucco in fact succeeds brilliantly in narrating the devastating effects of PTSD, thus demonstrating that literary discourse—if compared, for example, to journalism—has the best instruments at its disposal to represent this syndrome.⁷⁴ Both novels are narratives about biopolitics in accordance with those studies that confirm literature's role as a safeguard for forms of life that are irreducible to biopolitics.⁷⁵

In Esposito's terms of an affirmative biopolitics, what is left for Mazzucco's and Giordano's traumatized military protagonists is

ests Esposito above all, is how his reconfiguration of the mother-fetus relationship could encompass his ideal reconfiguration of the immune paradigm. Penelope Deutscher comments as follows: "The image of interest to Esposito is the rejection of the fetus by the mother's body if it is genetically too *similar* to the mother. . . . This image offers a different means of conceptualizing immunity—it affirms the necessity or productivity of immune responses the absence of which would be catastrophic for life. They become the figure of a cohabitation with difference, an emblem for a different means of thinking about immunity." Penelope Deutscher, "The Membrane and the Diaphragm," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 18:3 (2013): 49–68, at p. 61.

73. Giordano, *The Human Body* (above n. 2), pp. 251–252.

74. Hoskins and O'Loughlin, *War and Media* (above, n. 32), pp. 67–68.

75. De Cauwer and Vermeulen, "Literatuur en biopolitiek," (above, n. 22), p. 153.

a last and fragile security bubble that could become the space for a “vitalization of politics” outside of the immunity paradigm. Although presented earlier as an asphyxiating and intolerant environment, after Afghanistan, the family is reassessed in various ways as an immunitary space of protection and identity that can potentially be transformed into a space of the common. This brings us back to Pieter Vermeulen’s suggestion to speak of “after-affects,” starting from the assumption that affect “serves as the name for *formal operations that aim to undo emotional codification*. To the extent that such codifications are assumed to have buttressed institutions such as the family, the nation, and the individual, their formal dismemberment points to modes of life that cut across such institutions of modern life.”⁷⁶ Just as Esposito starts from the constitutive ambivalence between immunity and community in order to conceive of the unpolitical, Vermeulen insists “on the capacities of ‘after-affects’ to cut across the customary categories to which the novel has traditionally referred the lives that it imagines—categories such as the subject, the individual, the nation, and . . . even the human.”⁷⁷ The tension between the domestic and the transnational sphere common to most of the post-9/11 novels discussed by Vermeulen is particularly felt in those novels where war “confronts contemporary life with a force that is undeniably more-than-human as well as irrevocably man-made.” This disjunction, according to Vermeulen, “makes the novel, as the form that has done more than any other to institute the individual subject, burst at the seams and admit more unruly forms of life and affect.”⁷⁸ In this way, the novel form can be viewed “as one site where the reorganization of human life that is underway in the early twenty-first century is being registered as an affect that remains to be captured.”⁷⁹ Vermeulen’s “after-affects,” Breu’s “late-capitalist literature of materiality,” and De Boever’s “narratives of care” all work toward an affirmative biopolitics and capture well Giordano’s and Mazzucco’s reconfigurations of community and immunity after September 11.

In *Limbo*, Manuela Paris rediscovers the strong love that connects her to her family, regardless of her father’s betrayal and the economic difficulties subsequent to her parents’ separation. As has been shown, her unsettling experience in Afghanistan also revives the memory of her grandfather, who, with his “horrible stories” about

76. Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature* (above, n. 13), p. 11.

77. Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature* (above, n. 13), p. 135.

78. Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature* (above, n. 13), p. 142.

79. Vermeulen, *Contemporary Literature* (above, n. 13), p. 152.

his six years as a soldier for Italy, was also the first to kindle her patriotism and her passion for the military profession. Back in Italy, she does not shut herself in a self-protective cage; because of her having been exposed to otherness in Afghanistan and her spontaneous affect for Mattia, she reassesses the value of reciprocity implied by the *munus* (“gift”) that is at the heart of the community,⁸⁰ and, freeing herself from the attempt to immunize the individual from what is common,⁸¹ she sees herself as projected toward the unknown. These are the final phrases of the novel: “When you try to avoid something, this effort is exactly what lets you face it. Be brave, Manuela. The first thing she sees is the glow of embers and a whiff of smoke that coils and disappears into the night.”⁸²

Alessandro Egitto, the protagonist of *The Human Body*, succeeds in resolving an old family conflict after his return in Italy, which gives him the opportunity to stop being nobody’s ally and to live a happier life. René, cured from the illusion of starting a family with Rosanna (who was carrying his child), eventually leaves the army in order to dedicate himself to the wife and child of one of his men who died in Afghanistan, succeeding in this way to break out of immunity’s protective cage by introjecting its negativity and transforming it into what Esposito calls “affirmative freedom.”

In all of these cases, the initially traumatic encounter with difference that urges the characters to look for immunized models of community to protect the proper gradually entails the affirmative disclosure of “appearing-outside-itself by existence,” which for Esposito embodies the meaning of “*communitas*.”⁸³

80. Esposito, “From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics” (above, n. 50), p. 208. See also Esposito’s meditation on the meaning of *munus*: “Its complex, bivalent meaning of ‘law’ and ‘gift’—and, more specifically, of the law of a unilateral gift to others—allowed me to maintain and even emphasize the expropriative semantic category that had been developed by the deconstructionists: to belong entirely to the originary *communitas* means to give up one’s most precious substance, namely, one’s individual identity, in a process of gradual opening from self to the other.” Esposito, “Community, Immunity, Biopolitics” (above, n. 23), p. 84.

81. Campbell, “Translator’s Introduction” (above, n. 51), p. xi.

82. Mazzucco, *Limbo* (above n. 3), p. 371.

83. Esposito, “From the Unpolitical to Biopolitics” (above, n. 50), p. 209.