

with jewels and lots of feathers. She was really one of the first Italian divas (...) I like to be a bit like Lady Diana, the princess of the people. By that, I mean that I like to be a 'national treasure' among my people, making them laugh but also moving them. (...) There's no space in Tuscany for a drag artist, and no one is willing to risk giving us that forum. The only work is in the few gay venues that we have here.

Farrel, 2019

The acts reviewed above authorize a metamorphosis from drag or trans performance into a permanent character self-contained in many notes about displacement, the ideal homeland, and their new globalized self. Rasmussen is, in this sense, an exception for being able to quit their job as an assistant in the New York City fashion industry and sign up a deal with a big publishing house. If one looks at the earlier cases of Vittar, Linn da Quebrada, and other Brazilian artists, all circumstances weighed, they strongly make the case of a struggle between queers and their transcendence from their hometowns and villages to join the cosmopolitan cultural industries, even if bringing along a series of repertoires and images from who they were.

This section sought to discuss the life and opinions of queer artists entrenched in global and local references. By highlighting both Western and non-Western contexts, their different affordances and localities broker new insights into a cultural model existing within the national circumstances. It carries innate material values and the limitations of social inequality and constraints to their voice. I also observed how this relationship with heartlands does not change completely but receives a globalizing treatment to fit the new demands of the industry, the fans, and their self-awareness based on new realities. I review trans vocabularies online in Chapter 4. In this chapter's final section, I debate the degree to which concepts such as *mestizaje* help to make sense of another queer cultural model that transcends origin, race, and ethnicity, as well as re-establish layers of affiliation in mainstream society. I approximate this concept to problematize the sense of foreignness that has shaped the careers of queer artists who gained prominence over the years.

*The cosmetics of transculturation: Harisu, Siufung Law,
Zanele Muholi, and Mahmood*

After stressing questions of location and how the place of one's birth matters to both the *national* treasure and the *peripheral* queer, it is also

possible to see globalized queerness causing a series of contrasts beyond the local or national boundaries and even transcending cosmopolitanism. In sum, I have exposed two main situations: Queer artists who have chased contacts and careers abroad by sticking to local names and references or performers who have neutralized local homophobia by situating themselves beyond the national mindset. The two previous sections have stayed in artists' trajectories that have negotiated their self-image based on these exchanges. Here, I flesh out an opposite situation: one of the international attachments whose localness is based on holistic elements such as behaviours, public statements, language, or aesthetic resources borrowed to critique their upbringing. I invite theories on *mestizaje* and transculturation to illustrate subtle inherited references that blended and magnified queer artistry. I believe that decolonial approaches are necessary to perceive contradictions between local or global constructions of queerness.

Mestizaje aids us by taking us back to when a few societies invested in a new profile of human beings, the *mestizo*, a purposeful hybrid person. While I do not intend to dwell on this concept and its anthropological or sociological ramifications focused on race, I take it on its discursive roots. Academics have seen *mestizaje* as centred on the context of Hispanic Latin America. It has fostered an aesthetic that lies in the intersection between race, ethnicity, religion, and culture (Samora, 1996). It echoes the population of Mexicans or their descendants in the early 20th century and later in the United States, often merged with the idea of *Chicano* (Stavans, 2013). Scholars have looked very critically at *mestizaje* as a kind of religious utopia that has not forged a sustainable form of political power at local and national levels (Miller, 2009). It is not needed to delve into the validity or contemporaneity of *mestizaje* to perceive its forging of, or attempt at, a nationally oriented idea of race and culture to transcend external categorizations, then particularly tied to colonization. Queerness, alike, is borne out with the same impetus of transcendence, in which one is or can be or will be, but possibilities are never entirely closed.

If one takes *mestizaje* beyond its nationalist ambitions and injects it into queer theory, one sees its recent leveraging as a unifying form of affection and transcendence of the racialized archetypes. Gender-related ideas can be mirrored on *mestizaje* because of the imperatives that tie societal position to gender performance as much as racial categorization does to one's social status. A helpful case study lands in Cuzco, Peru, where *mestizaje* has inspired the claims of racial authenticity from the patriarchal elite. In search of asserting its

masculine power over the local community, the masculine *mestizo* would be thus entitled to determine what the *Indians* are to, as some were fated to be agriculturalists because of their ancestry, i.e., the idea of *old vs new Inca* (De la Cadena, 2000).

Of course, scholarship has yet to conjugate further queer implications of *mestizaje*. What one can see from this analysis is how queer performance emerges as a sort of dividend from the patriarchal mestizo culture, which assigns identities to those within or outside their locality. Queerness, thus, appears as blurring the masculine aspect of this idea of mestizo. Firstly, *mestizaje* came into sight as an ethnic or racial hybridization in cultural identities, first imagined by Homi K. Bhabha (1985). It has also flirted with ideas of transculturation, as Fernando Ortiz saw it back in the 1940s (Rojas, 2008): transculturation is the threefold process of acquisition, loss and reinvention of a new culture based on foreign materials. For instance, Alicia Arrizón (2006:46) took on *Chicana* lesbianism to imagine *mestizaje* as a transcultural process that applied to gender and Latino performances in the United States. Arrizón perceived it as a 'juxtaposition' in which 'queer' and 'Latinidad' require the effects of representation not only through its materials: 'The performance of identity practices the configuration of discursive spaces.' That is, the knowledge of reconfiguring a self-referential discursive space based on the dynamics between queer globalization and cosmopolitanism: the interplay between distinct spheres of knowledge of other queer scenes, law advances, and new aesthetics or styles.

I settle this discussion between *mestizaje*, transculturation, and queer performance by highlighting the extent to which a few artists stand at this crossroads. Fully invested in commodified media identities, they have also relied on the effects of their representation rather than only on being themselves. For example, Cristiano Malgioglio remains an Italian artist, as Pablo Vittar continues to embed vocabulary from his native northeast Brazil in their lyrics. Whatever Vittar's global aspirations or Malgioglio's celebrity name-dropping in TV shows, there is a trade-off that, while staying locally, reflects their being ambassadors of queer globalized emancipation. These and other artists have broadened up the public discernment of what they can do, where they can do it and with whom in such a competitive global mediascape. As discussed earlier, the cultural 'juxtaposition' happens between their standing in native languages and the global English-language queer repertoire, which is part of an arsenal of discourses employed during frequent media appearances. These shows hint at their hybridity, whose

queerness relies on these superpowers of self-representation in the media.

Here, I add other non-Latino, non-Western scenarios to pinpoint a similar tension between fluidity, performance, and cultural rooting. For example, the case of Hong Kong weightlifter Siufung Law who described themselves as a genderqueer weightlifter (Amnesty International, 2017). Law has debuted on the public radar as a lesbian influencer, then as genderqueer. Law's interventions as a speaker or influencer are based mainly on their experience in China, a country with very limited or restricted legal rights provisions to cover its LGBTQ+ population. Law was born a female but has lived mainly as a trans man while competing in female competitions. 'Muscles have no gender,' they said to the press (Tsui 2018). Based in the US, Law's interventions have addressed the issue of dressing in bras or bikinis as a woman weightlifter while not completely opposing the requirement. Their position is one of being able to add new outfits to their practice. In sum, their message highlights the burden over those who struggle with specific compulsory patterns of femininity or masculinity (ibid., 2018).

Also from Asia, there is the case of Harisu, the stage name of Lee Kyung-Eun, a prominent transgender pop star in South Korea. Harisu assumedly underwent gender reassignment in 1995 and, since then, has appeared in several media pieces. Either baited by news put out by her social media or triggered by public curiosity, the press repeatedly reported on her verging on the bizarre to the point of claiming she had organ transplantations in her whole body. An article speculated about her transplanting a uterus to conceive children or plastic surgeries to conform to a certain kind of beauty standard. In a viral article published in 2019, columnist Lee Jae-Ik (2019) argued that the prejudice the artist suffered stemmed from the 'deep-seated Confucian values that lie at the heart of the South Korean society.' He argued against the values that Harisu embodies by remembering his trajectory. The author, a gay man, had been jailed for being homosexual decades ago on charges of citing Oscar Wilde, similar to the treatment the Irish author suffered himself in Britain back in the 19th century.

Both cases are miles away from the original settings of the debate on *mestizaje* and transculturation. However, both characters perfectly encased the idea of queer *mestizos* in times of queer globalization. Firstly, Law and Harisu have transcended national identities by temporarily taking visual or discursive assets from the global queer culture and transplanting them into the heart of their national context. The former is the gender-driven Chinese policies, and the latter is the

body politics that involve going against heteronormativity in South Korea. Secondly, their making as public personae borrows from the native imagery and repertoire (male vs female, pure body vs transplanted body). Still, they continue to communicate directly with the local public and their priorities. Third, in the case of Harisu and Siufung, their non-conforming gender identity clashes directly with impediments born within the borders of the nation, and so lies their motivations. Their gender fluidity does not intend to leave the nation or be projected elsewhere, even if they no longer reside in their countries. These facts matter to reconfigure discursive spaces from the outset. Therefore, as the new *mestizo*, their bodies and adopted culture evoke global connections and self-design to emerge as genderqueer or transgender versions that no longer have to correspond to categories assigned in their beginnings.

On another note, a new generation of queer artists is coming to the fore by incorporating features of tradition and queerness while criticizing the former. It is perhaps the case of understanding the *local* influence not as an antithesis of the international but as an outward and necessary stance to stand creatively and politically. This response from the inside of the national boundaries in a fluid, queer way invites the further understanding of *mestizaje* and *transcultural* responses as this dashboard of distinct archetypes, all of which are pressed at any point through an arsenal of local or global discourses. Alongside this generation of Asian queer personalities, two other artists stir this remix of cultures to another level of publicity.

The first is a photographer and self-identified visual activist (Human Rights Watch, 2013), Zanele Muholi. They are perhaps the most celebrated visual artist from South Africa in the West over the last decades. Featured in a major retrospective at London's Tate Modern in 2020, Muholi has excelled in brokering difficult questions about the South African situation regarding queer folks. In a series of interviews with prestigious photography publications, such as *Aperture*, Muholi has underlined their vision as an artist by providing very enlightening statements on where their South African presence starts or ends vis-à-vis the strategies used so that their work gets the recognition it deserves. Firstly, the most prominent part of their photographic work is made of self-portraits in highly contrasted white and black tones dramatically reinforced. The poses adorned South African props and hairdos embedded with local meanings (Saner, 2017). In brief, their work is inheritably attached to their life story, and so it is the narration of life as a black lesbian in Africa:

I just realized that as black South Africans, especially lesbians, we don't have much visual history that speaks to pressing issues, both current and also in the past. South Africa has the best constitution on the African continent and, dare I say, world—when it comes to recognizing LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex) persons and other sexual minorities. It is the only country on the continent that legalized same-sex marriage in 2006. I thought to myself that if you have remarkable women in America and around the globe, you equally have remarkable lesbian women in South Africa.

Aperture, 2015

Muholi later came out as non-binary (O'Hagan, 2020). Over the cycle of five interviews analysed for this chapter, their prominence grew significantly in the West. Muholi has been the recipient of France's Knighthood of the Order Arts and Letters as well as several bursaries and awards in Europe, to which they add:

They might be exciting, there might be entertainment attached to them, but in true honesty, all of these awards, trophies, and honors are political (...) Honestly even my communicating or conversing with you is political, in which I have a choice to say I'm taking this job or I'm taking this honor or I don't.

Willis, 2019

But what is transcultural or *mestizo* about Muholi's body of work? Here, I located the transculturation and *mestizaje* as part of their constant referring to the experience in Europe vs life in South Africa. There have been episodes of aggression in their team and robberies in South Africa (O'Hagan, 2020), but the sense of moving up and down, the gaze launched in Muholi's work returns to challenge the European gaze over their work. Overall, the main take extracted from these first-hand accounts lies in the Black, queer experience as this purposeful *other* created, whether in South Africa or other places. As powerful as the representation found in Muholi's cosmetics can be for representing South African affairs, it is the design of this everlasting *other* that stands out as the new hybrid being presented to the audience. The communication of this *other's* characteristics is fully lived up to when the transcultural aspect reaches other audiences, as Muholi admitted:

I was thinking as you cross borders, the racial profiling that happens, which has to do with who you are, the colour of your skin, the questions you're asked and the comments you get.

Saner, 2017

This aspect of black queer communicability was even more salient when Muholi acknowledged the interviewer in the *Aperture* (2015) conversation, who happened to be a Black American transwoman. As Muholi commented:

And I appreciate that I'm speaking to a person who probably feels like me, a person of color or a Black person – whether in America or in Africa – because you know for sure where you're seated, that this is not a position of comfort. This seat is hot, therefore we cannot dare to be callous.

Aperture, 2015

This process of transculturation of their presence starts once the photographs can be read, as Muholi emphasized, as a piece of *resistance* (O'Hagan, 2020) which can happen everywhere given that the state of queer oppression in South Africa reflects that of other parts of the globe. In line with the cultural model discussed here, Muholi embodies an integration between works found in different contexts in the West and many countries of the Global South. The same is true for Jeremy Greer and Ajamu X, black queer photographers active in New York and London, respectively. Muholi's series pin down South Africa as another binding site of tension for queer individuals. Their facing the viewer introduces an elaborated cosmetic that shines a light on a generation of minoritized artists that, finally, air their grievances against decades of exclusion and mistreatment from mainstream society.

Before ending the section, I would like to connect Muholi's political production to an otherwise recent pop act that has made its way through notoriety by trailing rather commercial avenues. Like Muholi, the life of Mahmood or Alessandro Mahmoud has been the object of some of his lyrics and a central piece for public curiosity in Italy. As a Milanese singer of Italian and Egyptian descent born in 1992, Mahmood won Italy's most prestigious music award in 2019, *Sanremo*. After a life in the suburb without his father, Mahmood's victory led to further recognition and thriving as the number one in the charts. His position here, nevertheless, has less to do with the charts and is equally relevant for the debate on the frontiers of queerness as a globalized feature of

contemporary culture. His work has brought to Italy, a deeply ethnocentric country with a lot to answer about everyday racism, a hint of alternative cultural models. Mahmood, to this day, is best known for his song ‘Soldi’, a rap whose title roughly translates into ‘money’. The award-winning song reads like a heartfelt letter to his father, who left him and his mother when he was five. The references to his father are all very much embedded in religious, migrant connotations juxtaposed with other references to pop culture, like in this excerpt of ‘Soldi’:

It looked like love to you, but it was something else
He drinks champagne during Ramadan
On TV they are airing Jackie Chan

Once one reads into Mahmood’s interviews, mostly conceded to Italian franchises of American outlets, such as *Rolling Stone* or *Vanity Fair*, there is a lot to be critical about what is not said due to his ascension to stardom. Whether frank accounts of a lived experience or media exaggerations to trigger the public’s curiosity, his presence as such as luminary stressed the mainstream cultural realm in a time of growing right-wing populism. As a destination for thousands of refugees and migrants, Italy sees boats arriving almost daily. Immigration has been based on a backlash by far-right parties, including fascist-reminiscent entities such as *The League* and the *Brothers of Italy* party, which won the 2022 general election. Recently, politicians on the right have seen Mahmood’s sudden popularity with suspicion. Matteo Salvini, perhaps the most prominent conservative politician and a fluent Twitter user, has personally discredited Mahmood’s fame and the content of his lyrics (*Today*, 2019).

This scenario of backlash has undoubtedly helped Mahmood’s prominence. But what does he have to say? In a handful of lengthy interviews conceded to Italian and English-speaking outlets, the singer has placed much effort to de-emphasize his homosexuality from his public persona.

In reality, I like Italian music a lot, and I listen to it often. If you must write in Italian, it is important to get an ear to what you hear around you because here we have our way of describing things. But yes, I grew up with international music, and the mood is certainly that of the artists I love the most: Frank Ocean, Jazmine Sullivan, Travis Scott, Beyoncé, Rosalia.

Tripodi, 2018

His most frequent concern has been casting himself as a regular Italian bloke, catholic-inclined, Sardinian-fluent, which would not have surprised anyone whose mother was born on that island. While lamenting the loss of the Arabic language as his father left too early to teach him, he has branded his music as ‘Moroccan pop’ (Rocca, 2019), while flirting with elements of the Arab culture in music titles and quick expressions. Still, he did the same with Japanese titles in *Inuyasha* and Spanish in *Barrio*. Perhaps, the cosmetics of fluidity in Mahmood, namely this collating of names, aesthetics, and thoughtless importations from other countries’ arts and crafts, is more part of his being Italian than his alleged foreignness. It is enough to remember how the considered masters in Italian cinema used to exoticize the racialized others, often by making white actors wear Asian or African costumes (De Franceschi, 2015), like in Michelangelo Antonioni’s *La Notte*.

What does set Mahmood apart against this backdrop? Should Mahmood play the Arab card on louder terms at all? It is unknown if the politics of race, ethnicity, and gender will weigh on Mahmood’s ambitions as a star. Engaging with the language, accents, and regional variations is the maximum expression of the *italianità*, the modes and ways of a very idiosyncratic nation. All these questions have accompanied Mahmood in his recent fame. It is worth noting that the Italian press has been very suspicious of his being from such a background. Most interviews have Italian journalists being especially inquisitive on whether he was able to display the *italianità* or a foreign culture, as if he should do one *or* the other, which prompted Mahmood to recurrently state things about his link to the country or otherwise:

As a child, I was not attracted to that world, like when you refuse vegetables as a child. Then you grow up, and things change. Today I cultivate memories. And I live it in everyday life: my hairdresser is called Mustafa, and I eat kebab with friends.

Rocca, 2019

In that sense, Mahmood places transcultural cues in his lyrics. Still, in his active life, as in his interviews, there is a sense of ordinariness to be conveyed that links back to the *cosmopolitan self*, which was mentioned earlier on. At the same time, his reticence goes on to also relativize his queerness. When asked about the importance of talking about his homosexuality to a broader audience if that was helpful or not, he said:

That's true, but I also think it's wrong, in a sense, to talk about these things. Declaring 'I'm gay' leads nowhere, if not to be talked about. Going on TV to Barbara D'Urso to tell about one's homosexuality seems embarrassing to me: so you go back 50 years.

Rocca, 2019

One of the main displays of globalized queerness has been this transit between big and small gestures to signal one's cultures or affinities, always in the flow and never settled for longer. Hence, by situating his presence in Italy but constantly going across borders, Mahmood exploits transcultural references all around. And yet, the artist's goal does not seem to be, necessarily, to profit from but to evade cultural duties that stem from the honours attributed to national treasures. As fellow Italian Cristiano Malgioglio does by name-dropping old names to justify his continuous relevance in the mainstream media, Mahmood does it via international references and clothing style.

When winning *Sanremo* for the second time in 2022, Mahmood and his fellow singer Blanco, a white Italian, followed the commercial lines of average romantic pop songs. However, the music video of *Brividi* had a shirtless Mahmood sharing intimate moments with a black man in a bathroom. Mahmood inhabits different scenes in the video, shot in a very dark sky of the Dutch winter. Directed by Italian director Attilio Cusani, the video hints at this different environment that casts Mahmood aside both visually, sexually, and nationally vis-à-vis his co-singer, who is instead shot on top of a piano inside a sort of institutional setting. Both ride small bicycles and meet outside at the end.

Under the perspective of transculturation, the video serves well to flag the unfitting recreated and assimilated under certain conditions. Mahmood meets other artists discussed in this section by displaying the fundamental elements of *mestizaje*. He lives off the exploits of his hybridity as an Italian and queer artist. Nonetheless, he does not necessarily support a deconstruction or a revisit of his ancestry, nor does he contribute to any sexual politics, which, in Italy, would undoubtedly play a positive role. In that case, globalized queerness characterizes this permanent loop between historical, cultural, and gender references that eventually become part of a repertoire to serve external forces, whether commercial, advertising, or conforming to the nation's limits while opening oneself to new images. Globalized queer artists think of themselves as diverse stands, but fewer are voiceful