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Abstract: This article examines the figure of the *femminiello*, a complex sexual identity rooted in the Naples area and now gradually disappearing. It challenges the common claim that femminielli have always been accepted within Neapolitan society—one often framed as liminal and in opposition to North-Western hegemony. The femminielli's very existence has frequently been cited as proof of Southern Italy's (Naples' in particular) supposed innate inclusivity. By exploring their gender identity, geo-cultural context, and traditional social role and public perception, this article dismantles that assumption. While acknowledging that femminielli have enjoyed some degree of visibility and recognition, and thus tolerance, the author argues that: (a) this recognition has come at the cost of having to conform to a sexualized and marginalized stereotype and a cis-hetero normativeness; (b) their existence has been instrumentalized to construct a (self-) Orientalist mythology of Neapolitan society as the "inclusive other." Based on this analysis, the article suggests that the case of femminielli offers a lens to understand Naples' ongoing subaltern relationship to the North of Italy and the North-Western world at large, despite the city's recent surge in media visibility.

Key words: Femminielli, Naples, South, queer, orientalism

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Naples, Sexual Diversity and Self-Orientalism: *Femminielli* as a Case Study

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This article arises from a deep discomfort with representations and self-representations of Southern Italy, particularly the Naples area, as an exotic, somewhat primordial, liminal place and, as such, inherently inclusive. More specifically, it focuses on the portrayal of sexual diversity and the stereotype of the Neapolitan *femminiello*—a sexual identity spanning between homosexual man and the trans woman, which will be fully defined later.¹ As we shall see, the *femminielli* have often been cited as proof of Naples' supposed inclusive essence, in opposition to the allegedly bad and more normative North of Italy and the Northern-Western world more broadly. Through critical reflections on the question of the *femminielli*, it aims to expose the mythological, hence misleading, nature of depictions of Naples as a city naturally open to diversity, especially sexual diversity.

To do so, this article will draw on gender theory and specific literature on the *femminielli*. At the same time, it also relies on key concepts from subaltern studies, such as orientalism and folklore, as well as media studies scholarship on visibility, particularly trans visibility. The philosophical concept of essentialism, central to the field of cultural studies, will also recur frequently. It is important to clarify from the outset that essentialism is understood as the belief that objects, and in this case, identities, have inherent attributes that define them, constituting their core and unalterable essence.² An essentialist view of Naples sees a set of characteristics as intrinsic to Neapolitan identity. Essentialist views of Naples can be either positive or negative. Negative ones are largely constructed from the outside.³ By contrast, positive ones often emerge from a convergence of external and internal perspectives. This article focuses on the positive view that Naples is intrinsically defined by traits such as openness, liminality, and, consequently, fluidity and inclusivity.

What this view overlooks firstly, hence the discomfort from which this article arises, are the numerous and systemic cases of anti-LGBTQI+ violence occurring in the Naples area. These do not make Naples a homotransphobic city as a whole, but they certainly challenge the narrative of its inclusivity, one that would be difficult to sustain for any other city. This narrative does not hold up against the assault, which included sexual violence, that took place on January 11, 2024, against two trans women visiting Naples as tourists.⁴ Notably, the attack occurred in the Quartieri Spagnoli (Spanish Quarters), the Neapolitan neighborhood traditionally associated with the *femminielli*.⁵ Nor does it hold up against the death of Maria Paola Gaglione, a cisgender woman murdered by her brother because of her romantic relationship with a trans man.⁶ Nor against the suicide of the young trans woman Chiara, who, as reported by LGBTQI+ organization Antinoo

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¹ This term is used interchangeably in both masculine *femminiello/i* and feminine *femmin(i)ella/e* forms, even by those who identify as such. Notably, they often shift between masculine and feminine forms when referring to themselves. For example, the *femminiello* known as *La Tarantina* (The woman from Taranto) uses both the masculine and the feminine form in their autobiography *La Tarantina* by Gabriella Romano. Within this complex landscape, this article adopts the masculine form *femminiello/i*, as it remains the most widely used in both literary and academic texts.

² Regarding essentialism and its broader implications, including its relevance to anti-trans rhetoric, see Atwood et al., "Gender Essentialism."

³ See Benigno et al., "Napoli, rappresentazioni, stereotipi."

⁴ See *Corriere del Mezzogiorno*, "Napoli." Crucially, the statement by Naples' Councillor for Equal Opportunities claims that the incident is "light-years away from the culture of our city" (lontano anni luce dalla cultura della nostra città). For a broader perspective, see Arcigay, "Report omotransfobia 2023." It is worth noting the scarcity of available data on homo-transphobia in Italy.

⁵ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Italian into English are my own.

⁶ See *Open*, "Caivano." For a better understanding of the context of this murder, see also Migliore, "Ciro Migliore." Regarding the media narrative of the case, see Ladu, "Omotransfobia nei quotidiani italiani," 82–100.

Arcigay Napoli, “had spoken out about her marginalization and the bullying she endured after deciding to express her female identity” (aveva denunciato la sua condizione di emarginazione e il bullismo che era costretta a subire da quando aveva deciso di esprimere la sua identità femminile).⁷ Nor against the reflections on the femminielli and the broader Neapolitan context developed in this article.

Naples as the Inclusive Other

Before outlining a profile of the femminielli and examining some of their representations and uses, attention must first be paid to the context of reference and the main issues relating to the politics of its representations and self-representations. In relation to the Northern-Western world, the port city of Naples, reaching into the Mediterranean, has often been regarded as the frontier of Europe, hence, liminal and multicultural by nature.⁸ Its supposed natural inclusivity stems from this view, as if historical and geographical facts automatically, and without question, translate into matters of culture and identity, culminating in the idea of an inherent essence. The city also allegedly holds a position that could be described as atemporal, almost untouched by the capitalist modernity driven by Northern Italy and, on a broader scale, the Anglo-American world. As Maurizio De Giovanni, a nationally renowned Neapolitan author often invited to reflect on *napoletanità* (Neapolitan identity), stated in an interview:

Naples is a city built in layers, like an onion. Over time, across different eras, only the surface changes—the part visible from the outside—while its essence, its deeper reality, remains constant in its fundamental elements. This is due to a unique topographical condition, rare for a major city: the center is compressed between the sea, mountains, and hills, resulting in a stratified population growth. There is no clear division between rich and poor neighborhoods—contact is constant, and the tensions arising from this proximity repeatedly surface.... Naples remains unchanged—whether in the 1930s, the 1980s, the post-war period, or today.⁹

De Giovanni presents reluctance to change (and consequently to progress) as a value. Discussions of this kind seem to imply that falling behind economically, socially, and politically—or rather, being left behind—has preserved, on the one hand, the pristine essence of a slow, ancient, and open Mediterranean and, on the other, a nature resistant to North-Western (bio)capitalist paradigms.¹⁰ This perspective only superficially resembles Franco Cassano’s argument in his well-known *Il pensiero meridiano / Southern Thought*.¹¹ What emerges here is not, as in Cassano, a rejection of the binary and colonial approach that frames Naples as something other and exotic within the context of the South’s severe disadvantages. Rather, it reverses that approach by willingly embracing atemporality (or a less romantic obsolescence) and the imposed status of “other” in

⁷ Antinoo Arcigay Napoli, “Ragazza trans suicida a 19 anni.” See also Coviello, “Napoli, Chiara, ragazza trans.” In this article, particular attention should be paid to the discriminatory environment in which the young woman lived, and to the analysis of Neapolitan trans activist Daniela Falanga, who underscores the lack of adequate institutional support.

⁸ On the origins of the view of Naples (and the South of Italy more generally) as Europe’s frontier, see Rao, “Napoli e il Mediterraneo.” For a critical reconsideration of Mediterranean port cities’ multiculturalism, see Driessen, “Mediterranean Port Cities.”

⁹ De Giovanni, “Intervista.” “Napoli è una città fatta a strati, come una cipolla. Nel tempo, nelle epoche, cambia solo la parte superficiale, quella che si vede dall’esterno; l’essenza, la realtà più profonda, rimane costante negli elementi fondamentali. La cosa dipende da una specialissima condizione topografica, unica per una grande città: il centro è compresso tra mare, montagna e colline, per cui la popolazione cresce in modo sedimentario. Non c’è divisione tra quartieri poveri e ricchi, il contatto è perenne e le difficoltà di questo contatto emergono costantemente.... Napoli è uguale a se stessa, anni Trenta come anni Ottanta, dopoguerra come oggi.”

¹⁰ For an overview of this condition and its evolution, see at least Pier Francesco Asso, “New Perspectives”; Jesús Fernández-Villaverde et al., “Accounting.”

¹¹ Franco Cassano, *Il pensiero meridiano*.

exchange for recognition of a distinct sociocultural role, and a unique and peculiar identity.¹² This dynamic recalls Antonio Gramsci's conceptualization of *folklore*. This term refers to cultural elements, customs, and narratives that subaltern popular masses perceive as their own and in opposition to the dominant class's culture.¹³ Nonetheless, Gramsci argues that, upon closer analysis, folklore is not truly indigenous but rather "tied to the culture of the dominant class" and draws from the latter "motifs which have then become inserted into combinations with previous traditions."¹⁴ Furthermore, by constructing what the Marxist thinker calls "cultural hegemony," the ruling class "not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages to win over the active consent of those over whom it rules."¹⁵

This self-representation of the South as the "other" constructed by and within the hegemonic cultural system—and subsequently accepted, internalized, and fostered by the South—can be understood likewise through the concept of self-orientalism. The foundation for theorizing this concept is, of course, rooted in Edward Said's work.¹⁶ For Said, orientalism is the phenomenon by which the West has constructed and imposed a stereotypical image of the East. Even when framed positively, this image reinforces the idea of a mysterious other, outside of time and thus outside of modernity (rather than presenting an alternative modernity) and ultimately inferior, therefore providing an ethical foundation for colonialism. The concept of self-orientalism, although still rather undertheorized, has been developed in response to critiques of Said arguing that he conceives the relationship between East and West too rigidly, as a "one-way power relation."¹⁷ Koji Kobayashi, Steven J. Jackson, and Michael P. Sam define self-orientalism as follows:

Self-Orientalism refers to the wilful (re-)action of non-Western individuals and institutions to "play the Other"—that is, to use Western portrayals of the non-West—in order to strategically gain recognition and position themselves within the Western-dominated global economy, system and order. In contrast to counter-Orientalism, self-Orientalism involves a certain degree of suppression of self-representation in accepting and performing the West's stereotyping....Self-Orientalism should not be regarded as "a passive strategy of the inferior" because it asserts the Orient itself within a dominant discourse through appropriation of the West's stereotyping or active exploitation of "the West."¹⁸

However, the definition of "Self-Orientalism has a side closely linked with cultural nationalism that obscures the ethnic and cultural differences within an essentialist discourse of [national] homogeneity."¹⁹

It is within this framework that discomfort also arises toward the idealized image of Naples as a city inherently inclusive of sexual diversity. As we shall see in further detail in the next three sections of this article, the figure of the femminiello has been regarded as fully accepted within the social fabric without recognizing that such acceptance has, in fact, meant the conformity of diversity to a stereotype and the acceptance of subalternity in exchange for a certain degree of

¹² Concerning the portrayal of Naples as otherness and how recent scholarship has been increasingly attentive to the problematic implications of this status, Ruth Glynn writes that "against that backdrop of Neapolitan exceptionalism and alterity, it is perhaps unsurprising that recent critical and theoretical engagements with Naples have sought to counter the discursive construction of the city as Other to a national norm and talk back to dominant discourses in the public sphere." Glynn, "Naples/Italy," 232.

¹³ I am providing here a synthesis of Gramsci's conception of folklore, which he explored in the twenty-seventh notebook of Gramsci, *Quaderni del carcere*, 3:2309–18. More specifically, it primarily draws on the first note of the twenty-seventh notebook, available in English in Gramsci, *Cultural Writings*, 188–91.

¹⁴ Gramsci, *Cultural Writings*, 194.

¹⁵ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 244.

¹⁶ Said, *Orientalism*.

¹⁷ Kobayashi et al., "Globalization," 158.

¹⁸ Kobayashi et al., "Globalization," 161.

¹⁹ Kobayashi et al., "Globalization," 161.

social recognition. Furthermore, it has been surreptitiously employed to demonstrate Naples' inclusivity and, by extension, a kind of moral superiority of the South over the North-West—one that, however, does not seem to redeem Naples and the South from their ongoing state of subalternity.

In this light, the case of the femminielli encapsulates a broader issue that extends beyond gender alone, while still demanding its own specific analysis. Anthropologist Gianfranca Ranisio writes that by “integrating these individuals into daily life and assigning them specific roles,” Naples has “acknowledged and incorporated sexual diversity” (*integrando questi soggetti nella vita quotidiana e attribuendo loro ruoli specifici...la diversità sessuale è stata considerata e integrata*).²⁰ The very existence and integration of femminielli would thus serve as proof of this acceptance. In the same interview mentioned earlier, De Giovanni refers to a femminiello character in his *Commissario Ricciardi* series and states that she is “fully accepted by her people and an integral part of their world” (*totalmente accettata dalla sua gente e fa parte a pieno titolo del suo mondo*).²¹ It is worth noting that most of these claims come from cisgender Neapolitans or scholars who work in or on Naples. Hence, they fall within the realm of Naples' self-representations, but they are not self-representations in terms of sexuality. While it is legitimate to study and discuss groups different from oneself, it is clearly a problematic conflict of interest when those claiming Naples is an inclusive city are not the femminielli themselves, but the cisgender Neapolitans. Moreover, as we shall see, it seems that these claims owe more to self-orientalizing myth-making than to objective reality, as they overlook the many different lived experiences of local LGBTQI+ individuals.

From a gender perspective, this discrepancy between widespread narratives and factual reality in Naples reflects a broader contemporary phenomenon that Stephanie N. Berberick defines the paradox of trans visibility:

Simply put, transgender media narratives are steadily increasing, but so are homicides of transgender people. Yet corporate news coverage investigating the violence remains scant. Still, mainstream media lauded their representation of trans communities despite neglecting the prevalence of homicides against transgender people.²²

Within this framework, the presence of femminielli has been used to support the narrative of Naples' liminality and inclusivity. This presence, however, has often been misunderstood, mistaking for inclusive a society that, as Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton argue, accommodates diversity “only insofar as [it] can be forced to hew to hegemonic modalities,” fostering a marginalized and sexualized stereotype.²³

Femminielli. Meridian Sexual Identities

The identity of the Neapolitan femminielli, male at birth, exists on a continuum between homosexual men—whose gender performance has stereotypical traits of effeminacy, typically performed in a deliberately exuberant and theatrical manner—and trans women. This concise and, as such, inherently open definition must necessarily be followed by three remarks. First, this article refers to femminielli as *sexual identities* and, in the title, speaks of *sexual diversity*. A strict distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation is hardly applicable to femminielli. Hence, this article places this identity along a continuum with sexual orientation at one end and gender at the other, and uses *sexuality* as an umbrella term. Crucially, this clarification also highlights how established categories may not be applicable to certain cultural spaces, as is the case with Naples

²⁰ Ranisio, “Attraversamenti di genere,” 107.

²¹ De Giovanni, “Intervista.”

²² Berberick, “The Paradox of Trans Visibility,” 124.

²³ Reina Gossett et al., “Known Unknowns,” xxiii.

and Southern Italy. With this in mind, Francesca Romana Ammaturo proposed the notion of meridian sexualities:

With this expression we intend a form of negotiation between gender, sexuality and space that is not restricted to the global South but also of the periphery of the global North....The term “meridian sexualities” places emphasis on Cassano’s idea of the South being able to become a subject of thought, rather than an object of gaze by others. Hence, when we refer to “meridian sexualities” we are, effectively, thinking about all the (European) peripheries where queer lives are obliterated, and where activists’ work is dismissed as being a close transposition of Anglo-American LGBT identity politics.²⁴

A second remark concerns more specifically the placement of the *femminiello* on a continuum with male gender at one of its extremes. From the entire secondary literature, frequently corroborated by people who identify as *femminielli*, a definition emerges—perhaps simplistic but still relevant—of the *femminiello* as a person who, born male, feels and behaves as a woman, yet does not identify as a “real woman.”²⁵ If we accept that, contrary to biological sex, gender is a cultural construct, a performance and not an essence, then a person born with male genitalia who feels and behaves as a woman is a person of female gender. Frances Clemente argues that this is often linked to the impossibility for *femminielli* to have biological children, perceived as the ultimate proof of not being “real women”:

The *femminielli* adhere to a model which equates the condition of being woman with the condition of being (natural) mother....The belief that real femininity can only be conquered through maternity causes the *femminielli* to fall within a normative consideration of the “female” gender, a belief which is indeed problematic since it strongly contradicts the overcoming and subverting of gender categories which the *femminielli* perform.²⁶

Against this backdrop, Clemente asks whether *femminielli* subvert or essentialize gender. This question does not undermine the need to consider and prioritize the worldview and self-perception of these individuals. However, essentialist and cis-heteronormative views of identity and social roles are not uncommon among them. *La Tarantina*—one of the most prominent *femminielli* in the media—states in her autobiography that gender-affirming surgery is “useless” (*inutile*).²⁷ Surgery appears to be uncommon among *femminielli*, if not disqualifying for inclusion in the category. Scholar Marzia Mauriello writes that “the *femminielli* do not...consider themselves trans....The reasons for this distancing lie primarily in their conception of the body: despite advances in medical and surgical fields, the *femminielli* reject bodily modification through medical intervention” (*i femminielli non...si considerano trans....Le ragioni di tale distanziamento riguardano soprattutto la concezione del corpo: nonostante gli avanzamenti in ambito medico e chirurgico, i femminielli rifiutano di intervenire sul corpo per modificarlo*).²⁸ Furthermore, *La Tarantina* describes same-sex marriage as “nonsense...a provocation, a way to attract attention...a grotesque parody” (*una sciocchezza...una provocazione, un modo per attirare l’attenzione...uno scimmiettamento grottesco*).²⁹

Some of the reasons for these views can be identified in the following passage—concerning the progressive, yet not total, contemporary disappearance of the *femminiello* figure—

²⁴ Ammaturo, “The More South You Go,” 95.

²⁵ The use of quotation marks around “real woman,” “real women,” and “real womanhood,” signals a critical stance toward these expressions, which circulate widely in public discourse and are particularly relevant to the topic under discussion.

²⁶ Clemente, “Subverting or Essentialising Gender?,” 319–20. Regarding *femminielli* not identifying as “real women,” see the interviews with two individuals who identify as *femminielli* in D’Agostino, “Preface,” 100–102.

²⁷ Romano, *La Tarantina*, 72.

²⁸ Mauriello, “Corpi dissonanti,” 11.

²⁹ Romano, *La Tarantina*, 73.

from *L'aurora delle trans cattive / The Dawn of the Bad Trans Women* by Neapolitan trans sociologist and activist Porpora Marcasciano:

The little, contained, ancient world of the *femminielli* was already being replaced by another world—an oversized, postmodern world. You could say that replacement was a move away from the *femminiella* to the category of the trans woman—but also, I guess, from the *femminiella* to the cis gay man...it was not so much other people who pushed the *femminielle* out; it was they who consciously separated from the mainstream world. The reason for that is obvious, really: the walls and borders between our world and mainstream society were defensive; we raised those walls to protect our territory—the only place where we could survive and not break.³⁰

Any attempt to define and understand femminielli's perception of their identity and role in society must necessarily take into account this survival-driven defensiveness.

The third remark concerns the concept of continuum, used here as an epistemological tool for those who, starting from a conception of gender in line with models developed in the Northern-Western world, wish to translate this figure into such a framework. As reported in anthropological studies based on interviews with individuals who identify as femminielli, especially in the works of Mauriello and Maria Carolina Vesce in fact, these individuals simply identify as femminielli, rejecting more or less explicitly what they appear to perceive as normative gender and sexual orientation paradigms (cis/trans, heterosexual/homosexual), viewed as foreign to the context they belong to.³¹ Mirroring Marcasciano's words above, Mauriello writes that “for these subjects the word *trans* refers to a specific world/experience, which some subjects who identify otherwise wish to distance themselves from.”³²

Moreover, the concept of continuum does not imply fluidity. As documented by Mauriello, it emerges from interviews with various individuals who identify as femminielli that these “do not really contemplate fluidity.”³³ This identity would be quite rigid, even though it lies in-between male and female genders. This view is echoed in several statements in *La Tarantina's* autobiography. Speaking about her difficult childhood, she writes: “I was the youngest of five children: two sisters, two brothers, and me, who, let's say, never really saw myself as either one of the brothers or one of the sisters. I didn't feel like I belonged to either side, I felt apart” (*Ero l'ultimo di cinque figli, eravamo due sorelle, due fratelli e io, che, diciamo, non mi sono mai calcolato né come uno dei fratelli, né come una delle sorelle, non stavo né di qua né di là, mi sentivo a parte*).³⁴

For this reason, several scholars have used the concept of third gender for femminielli, a concept also applied to other non-Northern-Western sexual identities.³⁵ The concept of third gender has been widely criticized by Evan B. Towle and Lynn M. Morgan, who argue that it has been used to show how non-Western societies have institutionalized and thus accepted sexual diversity. Instead, the two scholars argue:

The distinction between “Western” (oppressive) and “non-Western” (potentially liberatory) gender systems has the unfortunate effect of essentializing other cultures....The “third gender” concept encourages Westerners to make poorly informed assumptions about the meaning and significance of gender dynamics in non-Western societies...re-creating worlds of other culture “to suit our own intentions.”³⁶

³⁰ Marcasciano, “Excerpts from ‘The Dawn,’” 126.

³¹ See Mauriello, “Se sei gay”; Mauriello, *An Anthropology of Gender Variance*; Vesce, “Corpi che cambiano”; Vesce, *Altri transiti*.

³² Mauriello, *Anthropology of Gender Variance*, 5–6.

³³ Mauriello, *Anthropology of Gender Variance*, 29.

³⁴ Romano, *La Tarantina*, 35.

³⁵ See Di Nuzzo, “Napoletanità e identità,” 138–41; Mauriello, *Anthropology of Gender Variance*, 30–34; Ranisio, “Attraversamenti di genere,” 121–27; Zito and Valerio, “I femminielli napoletani.”

³⁶ Towle and Morgan, “Romancing the Transgender Native,” 490.

There would thus be a “tendency to romanticize, to assume that people living in societies that recognize ‘third genders’ must enjoy greater liberation and freedom.”³⁷ In this light, the definition of femminiello as a figure suspended on a continuum between a homosexual man and a trans woman seems more appropriate. In the absence of an analytical definition of femminiello by those who identify as such, it seems more accurate to refer to one’s own categories, but to do so openly and with an awareness of the—at least partial—fallibility of any attempt to translate from one cultural system to another.³⁸ Furthermore, it should be clarified that it would be inaccurate, in the name of this indeterminacy, to resort to the idea of queerness, since *queer* typically refers to a subject that stands in opposition to the biopolitical system and hegemonic view of gender roles and sexuality at large in a given culture.³⁹ This seems not to be entirely the case with femminielli, as seen when considering the issue of maternity and “real womanhood.”

Femminielli: Geocultural Context

Research on the femminiello identity inherently involves the Neapolitan context to which it is closely tied. While the origins of this figure are ancient and uncertain, it should be specifically placed in the working-class neighborhoods of the city center—primarily in the Quartieri Spagnoli, an area near the prestigious Via Toledo, but historically inhabited by the less affluent and a territory of criminal activity.⁴⁰ In recent years, the Quartieri Spagnoli have undergone a significant transformation, becoming a destination for mass tourism. Their typical *bassi* (street-level dwellings), once inhabited by Naples’ most disadvantaged social groups, are now largely occupied by restaurants; the upper floors have often been converted into tourist accommodations. Throughout the neighborhood, decorations proliferate that evoke the supposedly lively, warm, and colorful essence of Naples.⁴¹ Today’s Quartieri Spagnoli perform this “essence.” Despite the undeniable economic benefits for the city, this transformation has also radically altered the area’s social fabric, turning it into the center of the tourist-driven process of displacement that has been affecting the entire city in recent years.⁴² Nonetheless, from a historical perspective, and still in the public perception today, this area has come to represent a *mise-en-abyme* of the entire city: a poor, crowded place, where the public dimension of life is particularly developed; a liminal place, both spatially close and socioculturally and economically distant from the center; a place with its own customs, rituals, and traditional figures, including the femminielli themselves.⁴³ Such representations are found in the autobiographical accounts of many femminielli. One example is *La Tarantina*, who describes arriving in Naples after being rejected by her family and leaving her hometown in Apulia:

And so there I was in Naples...it was also the first time I had ever seen such a huge city....I was right in the middle of life in the *Quartieri*, a wild mix of prostitutes, shopkeepers, street vendors, cigarette smugglers...everything!....A prostitute called out to me: “What are you doing out on the

³⁷ Towle and Morgan, “Romancing the Transgender Native,” 487.

³⁸ On questions of translation, diversity, and queerness, see Epstein and Gillett, *Queer in Translation*.

³⁹ Aware of the extensive debate surrounding this term, I refer here to the concept of queer developed by Butler, as discussed in Kornak, “Judith Butler’s Queer Conceptual Politics.”

⁴⁰ Maria Carolina Vesce, “Et io ne vidi uno,” 58–65.

⁴¹ For a description of the aesthetics characterizing Quartieri Spagnoli, see for instance Messina, “Il vento del cambiamento.” This article also draws an important distinction between the lower part of the neighborhood, closer to Via Toledo and more exposed to mass tourism, and the upper part, which has experienced far less of it.

⁴² See Esposito, “Tourism-driven Displacement” and García-Pérez et al., “Paralelismos en la transformación.” About the Quartieri’s new tourism-oriented economy, see Bruno and Fotina, “Napoli, così il murale.”

⁴³ On the subculture of the popular neighborhoods of Naples, see Florio, *Storie di guappi e femminielli*.

street at this hour, boy? What are you up to?” I said: “I don’t have a home, I’m not from here.” She immediately realized I was a homosexual and said: “Come with me, *femminiè*, don’t worry.”⁴⁴

In the chaotic streets of Naples, *La Tarantina* immediately found a form of recognition through the word *femminiello*—a “home” she had never had. Her autobiography includes several other positive depictions of Naples. Yet these stand in stark contrast with the many systemic episodes of violence that she herself and her friends experienced in the city, reflecting a recurring tension in *femminielli*’s narratives. Toward the end of the account of her life, spent in the Quartieri for the most part, *La Tarantina* writes:

My life has been good on the one hand, but bad on the other. I’ve seen a lot of cruelty and violence. I’ve suffered many humiliations, and I’ve felt the scorn of people who, thinking themselves “normal” and therefore superior to me, would sometimes insult me or spit in my face.⁴⁵

Nevertheless, many scholars working on *femminielli* have suggested that, particularly in popular neighborhoods like the Quartieri but more generally in the area of Naples, their diversity is fully accepted: “Every alley has its *femminiello*,” writes Luigi Maria Lombardi Satriani, “accepted by the community” (ogni vicolo ha il suo *femminiello*, accettato dalla comunità).⁴⁶ Gabriella D’Agostino argues that this figure “is not considered a deviant” (non è considerata deviante) by the Neapolitan community and speaks of full “integration into the group” (integrazione nel gruppo).⁴⁷ Ranisio talks about “a reality that is accepted and integrated, another way of being, which the city and its culture have always included, despite censorships and various attempts at criminalization” (realtà accettata e integrata, un altro modo di essere, rispetto al quale la città e la sua cultura sono sempre state inclusive, nonostante le censure e i vari tentativi di criminalizzazione).⁴⁸ Sergio Zazzera argues that *femminielli* are “an image of a diversity that the open-mindedness of the Neapolitan people has always made welcome” (immagine di una diversità che l’apertura mentale del popolo napoletano ha reso sempre ben accetta).⁴⁹ Giuliano Scala states they are “fundamentally accepted as a recognized social reality capable of carving out its own role and lifestyle” (fondamentalmente accettati in quanto realtà sociale riconosciuta capace di ritagliarsi un proprio ruolo e un proprio stile di vita).⁵⁰

All of these and many other voices from the scholarship reflect the rather widespread opinion that the acceptance of *femminielli* in the social fabric is virtually total. However, this assertion of acceptance or inclusion has not been adequately problematized in the scholarship, as will be emphasized in the following section. For now, it is worth inquiring about the unique conditions in Naples that would have enabled such inclusion. In the scholarship supporting the thesis of inclusion, there is no precise answer, no clear sociocultural explanation. Once again, the somewhat evanescent idea of Naples as a liminal space, a “European city extending into the

⁴⁴ Romano, *La Tarantina*, 53–54. “Ed eccomi quindi a Napoli...era la prima volta poi che vedevo una città così immensa....Ero nel bel mezzo della vita dei Quartieri, c’era un via vai pazzesco di prostitute, commercianti, venditori ambulanti, gente che vendeva sigarette di contrabbando...di tutto!...Una prostituta mi apostrofò: ‘Ma che fai *miezzi*’ a via a quest’ora *guagliò*, che stai facendo?’ Dissi: ‘Io non tengo una casa, non sono di qua.’ Si accorse subito che ero un omosessuale e infatti disse: ‘Vieni con me, *femminiè*, non ti preoccupare.’”

⁴⁵ Romano, *La Tarantina*, 67. “La mia vita è stata bella, da un lato, però anche brutta da un altro e ho visto molte cattiverie, violenza, ho subito tante umiliazioni, ho sentito su di me il disprezzo di chi, ritenendosi ‘normale’ e perciò superiore a me, a volte mi insultava o mi sputava in faccia.”

⁴⁶ Lombardi Satriani, “Preface,” 7.

⁴⁷ D’Agostino, “I *femminielli* napoletani,” 92.

⁴⁸ Ranisio, “Attraversamenti di genere,” 133. The reference to censorship and criminalization in this quote reflects what seems to be a common tendency to hint at problems that the *femminielli* may have encountered in the allegedly inclusive context of Naples without ever really giving these problems full consideration. A similar case, as will be seen later, is that of the exercise of prostitution by the *femminielli*.

⁴⁹ Zazzera, “Preface,” 5.

⁵⁰ Scala, “Chillo è nu buono guaglione.”

Mediterranean, a symbol of what lies ‘halfway’ between archaic stratifications and post-modern pushes” (città europea protesa nel Mediterraneo, simbolo di ciò che sta “a metà strada” tra stratificazioni arcaiche e spinte post-moderne) comes to the fore.⁵¹ This idea seems to require not only further and more precise explanations of what this supposed geographical liminality means in practice on the anthropological, social, and cultural levels; it also seems to reinforce an acceptance of the colonial geography constructed by the North-Western hegemony and grounded in a rigidly binary system (North-South, West-East—in which the latter term is “the other”). The border, the *limen*, that Naples would represent is then the seal of this binary system, which it eventually reaffirms and strengthens. The question of the femminielli perfectly encapsulates these patterns, exposing their orientalist underpinnings. As Vesce writes:

These mythical ancestors of LGBTQI+ people have thus come to represent a unique local identity unmatched across the national territory, further fueling the process of differentiation and distancing between a welcoming yet backward South and the rest of the country, progressive and fully liberated.⁵²

Naples’ alleged feminine essence is also among the reasons why the city is seen as a particularly inclusive environment where femminielli have found acceptance. Similar to the perception of Italy as a woman, this idea is widespread in the public discourse.⁵³ More surprisingly, however, it is also found in the scholarship. Eugenio Zito, Nicola Sisci, and Paolo Valerio write:

Naples is a city that carries within its unique culture the ancient feminine soul of the Mediterranean. Anthropological literature emphasizes the city’s feminine nature....Naples is still the menstruating city of San Gennaro and Santa Patrizia....Naples, as a feminine city, allows men to express the feminine side of their nature, even within a context that has always been influenced by the patriarchal order.⁵⁴

Along the same lines, Mauriello also writes:

Naples has actually been defined in various scholarly works as a feminine city...because of its symbols, rituals, and cults, and its mythical, sirenic, foundation....Some of its symbols and ways of representation can be considered gender fluid and liminal, such as the Neapolitan mask par excellence, Pulcinella....Furthermore, the Neapolitan patron saint, Gennaro, “performs” his miracle through the melting of blood, which recalls menstruation....And the mythical founder of the city, Parthenope, is a siren, a half-and-half creature represented in various ways over the centuries but who undoubtedly incarnates doubleness and also the liminal state of belonging to different worlds.⁵⁵

The first excerpt not only fails to detail what is meant by femininity, but also seems to rely on an oversimplified, essentialist, and patriarchal view of femininity. It does not explain which characteristics of the city (and of the entire Mediterranean) would align with such a stereotype, nor how and why this “feminine city” would allow men to express their “feminine side.” Reiterated in the second excerpt, the same idea is then conflated with that of fluidity—something that Mauriello

⁵¹ Zito and Valerio, “Introduction,” 16–17.

⁵² Vesce, “Et io ne vidi uno,” 72. “Questi antenati mitici delle persone LGBTQI+ si sono così ritrovati ad identificare un’identità locale ineguagliabile sul territorio nazionale, rinfocolando il processo di differenziazione e distanziamento tra un Meridione accogliente ma arretrato e il resto del Paese, progredito e pienamente liberato.”

⁵³ On the depiction of Italy as a (beautiful) woman, see Gundle, *Bellissima*. More specifically, on the feminization of Naples see, for example, Guerrieri, “Napoli è femmina”; Malgieri, “Napoli è come una donna.”

⁵⁴ Zito et al. “*Et io ne viddi uno*,” 44. Napoli è una città che porta stratificata nella sua peculiare cultura l’antica anima femminile del Mediterraneo. La letteratura antropologica sottolinea la natura femminile della città....Napoli è ancora città mestruata di San Gennaro e Santa Patrizia....Napoli, città femminile, consente dunque a degli uomini di manifestare il lato femminile della loro natura anche in un contesto che ha sempre risentito dell’ordine patriarcale.”

⁵⁵ Mauriello, *Anthropology of Gender Variance*, 42.

herself, as highlighted earlier, said was far from the self-perception of femminielli—and further justified through mythological-religious narratives that may have had some cultural influence, but whose actual and practical impact on the living conditions of non-cisgender or even non-heterosexual subjects, not to mention women in general, remains unproven.⁵⁶

In conclusion, the widely circulating idea of Naples as an inherently inclusive city, and as such a home to unique identities like the femminielli, seems to rest on rather confused and weak premises. These should be considered “mythologies,” according to Roland Barthes’s definition.⁵⁷ For Barthes, mythology is a social construct—arbitrary in nature—that, through its circulation in public discourse, imposes itself (or is imposed) as something natural rather than historical. In other words, an arbitrary narrative that becomes, in public perception, something seen as natural, immutable, and objectively true. Such seems to be the nature of the idea of Naples as a naturally feminine and liminal city in its essence, one that, on a more abstract level, is used to reinforce the aforementioned North vs South dichotomy and the more general tendency toward self-orientalism. Nevertheless, it is used to explain the uniqueness of the femminielli, as a case of sexual diversity that is accepted, included, and institutionalized by the community.

Once the premises fall and the ideological mechanisms are explained, however, an undeniable fact remains: femminielli appear to have benefited, in fact, from some form of inclusion, some recognized social role, some visibility. But what do we mean when we talk about the inclusion and visibility of the femminielli? Do we mean true freedom of self-determination and expression, and normal living conditions, social and economic? Answering these questions requires more careful consideration of their role in the Neapolitan sociocultural context and the costs that this alleged inclusion may carry.

Femminielli: Social Role and Perception

Reconstructing the historical evolution of the social role of femminielli is complex, also because of the scarcity of sources and the progressive disappearance or transformation of this identity. This disappearance or transformation is sometimes perceived with a sense of foreboding, sometimes as a sign of progress, as Danila Cannamela explains:

Although younger generations of trans and gay people have severed any connection with what is considered a self-debasing, feminized product of the underclass, the number of scholars, cultural associations, and LGBT+ groups interested in preserving the femminielli’s traditions has grown exponentially in the last few years.⁵⁸

These identities are, then, on the one hand, in the process of disappearing and, on the other, discussed and represented more today than in the past. This article does not attempt to reach a conclusion about whether this disappearance is positive or negative—a rather unproductive issue, but also one that is not entirely respectful of people who, as will be discussed, have had to adapt to a stereotype in order to have a livable life. Rather, what is of interest here is how this figure has historically been perceived, conceptualized, and instrumentalized, and how similar dynamics persist today.

From their representations in literary texts and in the testimonies of inhabitants of Naples’ popular neighborhoods, two main occupations have been historically assigned to the femminielli: domestic work and prostitution. It is interesting to note how scholarship has placed more emphasis on the former, while the latter emerges more clearly in the narratives of those directly involved.

⁵⁶ Regarding the role of women in the family and the world of work in Naples, “feminine city,” see Goddard, *Gender, Family and Work*, 145–213.

⁵⁷ See Barthes, *Mythologies*, 109–59.

⁵⁸ Cannamela, “Italian Trans Geographies,” 612–13.

Even in this case, the interest in the self-orientalizing use of *femminielli* to support the idea of Naples as unique, different, and inclusive seems greater than the interest in genuinely understanding what their actual condition has been, and what the perception of sexual diversity is today within the Neapolitan community. Referring to the occupations traditionally held by these individuals, Mauriello writes:

People who self-define as *femmenelle*-trans, claiming that they have maintained some particularities of the classic *femminielli*, engage in what are considered to be womanly activities such as cooking....Domesticity is thus part of the feminine performance and so it comes to belong to the *femminielli*....The classic *femminiell*[o]...follows the female model, often assuming theatrical tones and manners.⁵⁹

In this case, as for many others in the scholarship, reflections on the idea that these individuals have no room for emancipation from “what are considered to be womanly activities such as cooking” are kept to a minimum. Nevertheless, D’Agostino speaks of true integration:

The difference from the male gender manifests during adolescence. Families do not consider the event a tragedy and do not marginalize the member; rather, they integrate them into the close and extended family circle, as well as into the broader context of the alley, the street, and the neighborhood. The *femminiello* engages in household chores, runs errands for neighbors, and is entrusted with watching over the younger children by the women of the neighborhood who work outside the house.⁶⁰

It is interesting to note how, within this presumed system of integration, a subordinate role is reserved for *femminielli* in relation to cisgender women: in the original Italian text, the word *neighbors* is in the feminine, but more importantly, the *femminiello* would replace women who work outside the home in domestic tasks, in jobs that a non-cisgender person cannot usually aspire to. This reveals a crucial point for understanding the role and social perception of *femminielli* and any form of non-cisgender/non-heterosexual sexuality assimilable to this stereotype within the Neapolitan context: society provides a space for existence and sustenance for these individuals as long as they accept, conform to, and do not challenge a certain hegemonic system—in this case, a patriarchal and normative system that tolerates non-cisgender and non-heterosexual people but reaffirms their inferiority and confines them to a stereotype.

This subordinate position has often been internalized by the subalterns themselves in exchange for acceptance and sustenance, and an association with tasks commonly regarded as feminine—to the point where this social role becomes intrinsic to the *femminiello*’s supposed essence. This process resembles the previously mentioned conceptualization of folklore in Gramsci, whereby subaltern groups appropriate customs and worldviews developed by dominant groups until they consider them their own, an intrinsic aspect of their identity and traditions. It is

⁵⁹ Mauriello, *Anthropology of Gender Variance*, 48.

⁶⁰ D’Agostino, “I *femminielli* napoletani,” 92. “La diversità rispetto al genere maschile si manifesta nell’adolescenza. Le famiglie non considerano l’evento una disgrazia e non emarginano il loro membro; piuttosto lo integrano nella cerchia familiare ristretta e allargata e nel contesto più ampio del vicolo, della strada, del quartiere. Il *femminiello* si presta alle faccende domestiche, svolge commissioni per le vicine, a lui si affida la sorveglianza dei bambini più piccoli da parte delle donne del vicinato che lavorano fuori casa.” Miano Borruso also reports the perspective of a *femminiello*, further confirming the traditional role of *femminielli*: “Pasqualina, a *femminiello* now approaching sixty, told me in an interview that ‘before’—in that indeterminate time of historical memory—the *femminiello* helped with household chores, did sewing work, washed the laundry—heavy work for women when there was no washing machine—and the neighbors would assign them various errands and entrust them with watching over the younger children and the elderly” (Pasqualina, un *femminiello* ormai vicina ai sessant’anni mi raccontava in un’intervista che “prima,” in quel tempo indeterminato della memoria storica, il *femminiello* aiutava nelle faccende domestiche, realizzava lavori di sartoria, faceva il bucato, lavoro pesante per le donne quando ancora non esisteva la lavatrice, le vicine li incaricavano di fare le commissioni di diverso tipo e gli affidavano la sorveglianza dei bambini più piccoli e degli anziani). Borruso, “Femminielli,” 222.

important to clarify that acknowledging this does not mean blaming the failure or complete lack of a queer subversion in the identity and performance of the *femminielli*. We can agree, to a certain extent, with what Luca Starita argues:

Unlike queer people, however, who claim their existence at the margins of a society that does not account for them, often protecting these margins from an outside force that seeks to normalize them, *femminielli* are deeply embedded in the Neapolitan social fabric, playing very specific roles and often exaggerating stereotypical traits of what femininity is through the lens of masculinity....The figure of the *femminiello*...is rooted in a stereotypical representation of women and their roles, contributing to the spread of a misogynistic view that places men at the center as the interpretative filter of reality.⁶¹

However, it should be noted that for non-cisgender people in the Naples area, this stereotype has in fact provided recognition, protection, a space for existence. If this has been possible, it is due to a necessary, or at least understandable, compromise with and justification of patriarchal hegemony.⁶² What one should question is rather the cis-hetero-normative community to which they belong. On the one hand, this community has forced sexual diversity into an acceptable stereotype that does not challenge the gender role system. On the other, it has more recently used *femminielli* to demonstrate Naples' inclusivity and diversity (if not its queerness), but has instead constructed a mythology for moral self-legitimization and an instrument of self-orientalization in opposition to the North-West.

The lack of consideration for the prostitution of *femminielli* should also be understood against this background. In the secondary literature on *femminielli*, references to prostitution are, in fact, condensed into timid and reticent references and largely glossed over. Corinne Fortier is one of the few scholars who has discussed the topic extensively, based on field research conducted between 2004 and 2007:

Prostitution is the primary occupation for the majority of them—an activity that, as everywhere else, is socially recognized as typically feminine....*Femminielli* live in harmony with the other inhabitants of the neighborhood. Their main activity—prostitution—is in fact completely tolerated.⁶³

Here too, however, the notions of tolerance and harmony are invoked without considering that prostitution is no more than what the community allows them to access.

Those directly affected speak more extensively about prostitution as a necessity and acknowledge the lack of alternative opportunities for non-cisgender people in Naples. In a short documentary on *femminielli* produced by the Italian public broadcaster Rai, a person identifying as a *femminiello* states: “I engaged in prostitution because I had to survive, that’s how I got by. No one accepted me for who I was” (*Mi sono prostituita perché dovevo campare, andavo avanti così. Non mi accettava nessuno per quello che io ero*), a perspective that starkly contrasts with the

⁶¹ Starita, “*Femminiellə napoletanə*.” “A differenza delle persone queer, però, che rivendicano il loro vivere ai margini di una società che non li prevede, spesso proteggendoli questi margini da un esterno che vorrebbe normalizzarle, *ə femminiellə* sono inseritə profondamente nel tessuto sociale napoletano, interpretando ruoli ben specifici e, spesso, estremizzando tratti stereotipati di quelle che sono le caratteristiche della femminilità attraverso gli occhi della mascolinità....La figura del *femminiello*...affonda le radici in una rappresentazione stereotipata della donna e del suo ruolo, che contribuisce a diffondere una visione maschilista che mette al centro l’uomo come filtro interpretativo del reale.” Starita uses the gender neutral “*ə*” when referring to the *femminielli*. Since the “*ə*” is not used in English for this purpose, I have used the masculine form for the reasons explained in fn2.

⁶² See the concept of system-justification in Jost and Banaji, “The Role of Stereotyping.”

⁶³ Fortier, “*I femminielli o la rivalità*,” 191–92. “La maggior parte di loro ha come lavoro principale la prostituzione, attività che, come ovunque altrove, è socialmente riconosciuta quale tipicamente femminile....*I femminielli* vivono in armonia con gli altri abitanti del quartiere. La loro attività principale, la prostituzione, è di fatto completamente tollerata.”

previously mentioned notion of harmony and acceptance.⁶⁴ In another documentary on femminielli, a trans woman states: “It’s not easy to be thrown out of your home and have to work as a prostitute on the street. It’s a stereotype that already exists, and I don’t want to aspire to that. But sometimes, to survive...you do it” (“Non è facile essere buttata via di casa e fare la prostituta per strada. È uno stereotipo che già c’è e io non voglio ambire a questo. Però a volte per sopravvivere...si fa”).⁶⁵ Drawing on personal experience, Marcasciano also reflects on this predetermined fate for trans women and the long-standing near-synonymy—adopted even within the trans community itself—between *trans* and *prostitute*:

For years we’d say “I do trans” to mean “I do sex work.” Prostitution was so enmeshed and entrenched in the trans experience that just mentioning the word would automatically make you think of sex work, and the other way around. So the exact meaning of I do trans was “all that we were allowed to do and be”; it implicitly referred to what was reserved for us—and yet not provided for nor given to us—for our survival and our resistance. Prostitution was the foundation of our existence; everything else about the trans experience revolved around it. Prostitution was work, vocation, theater and drama, the means and the end, a ritual, a rule, our mark. It was our identifying mark....For a trans woman, living without selling sex was unthinkable....None of us would even dream of crossing the fence that had been built all around us to separate us from the rest of the world. As one of the characters in *Priscilla* says: “I don’t know if that ugly wall has been put there to stop us getting out and isolate us, or to stop them getting in so that we stay safe.”⁶⁶

Particularly significant, in the quoted passage, is the final sentence, which seems to encapsulate the general condition of the femminiello: having been marginalized, having seen the complexity of sexual diversity reduced to a stereotype, yet accepting such marginalization and stereotyping to find a space in which one can “stay safe” within a patriarchal and sexually normative context.

In one of the previously mentioned documentaries, the interviewee speaks about another source of income that femminielli are, as Marcasciano says in the excerpt above, “allowed”: the “raunchy tombola raffle” (tombola scostumata).⁶⁷ Femminielli—or even people who do not necessarily identify as such and whose aesthetic is closer to that of drag queens, while still retaining some of the femminielli’s typical traits, such as the use of the Neapolitan dialect—take center stage in these events, where they draw the numbers in the game of tombola, traditionally played in Naples during the Christmas holidays. What characterizes this game is precisely its “raunchy” nature, as the femminiello gives a highly theatrical, humorous, and sexualized performance. Although traditions related to this figure are gradually disappearing, such events remain quite popular today. The key to their ongoing popularity lies precisely in these theatrical performances of the femminielli, characterized by the two typical features that the cisgender Neapolitan audience expects from them: comedy and sexualization. While sexualization can indeed be a free and consensual affirmation of one’s sexuality, and comedy can be likened to the concept of trans joy as a form of resistance to bio-capitalistic oppression, we should still acknowledge that, in the first place, tombola scostumata represents one of the few sources of income for the individuals in question, hence making the question of free will complex to approach.⁶⁸ In the second place, this income is possible because the audience seeks and receives a reassuring performance of sexual

⁶⁴ “La Napoli dei femminielli,” at 3:08–21.

⁶⁵ “Femminielli: The Legacy,” at 4:12–32.

⁶⁶ Marcasciano, “Excerpts from ‘The Dawn,’” 129–30. *Priscilla* refers to the 1994 film *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, directed by Stephan Elliott.

⁶⁷ “La Napoli dei femminielli,” at 3:08–21. “I no longer prostitute myself because I get by with the tombola. The tombola scostumata is the real Neapolitan tombola with bad words in it” (Oggi non mi prostituisco più perché vado avanti con le tombole. La tombola scostumata è la vera tombola napoletana con delle parolacce vicino).

⁶⁸ On the concept of trans joy, see Rage, “Trans Joy as Resistance” and Westbrook and Shuster, “Transgender Joy: Flipping the Script.” On the sexualization of the trans, see Anzani et al., “Being Talked to.”

diversity, as this is reduced to a comedic event and flattened into a well-known stereotype that does not challenge existing conceptions.⁶⁹

The tombola is only one of many rituals and traditions associated with the femminielli. One of the best-known and still well-attended today is the Candlemas celebration at the Montevergine sanctuary, not far from Naples.⁷⁰ Other public rituals, now extinct, included the femminiello's "childbirth" and marriages between femminielli.⁷¹ What these events share is that they trigger a mechanism we might define as carnival-like, referring to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of carnival, that is, a temporary subversion of the order and social norms.⁷² However, this is indeed something momentary, a brief period of freedom and visibility that, as seen above, does not truly represent (and indeed likely misrepresents) the lived experience of the femminielli, nor that of diversity in Naples in general. On the contrary, it reinforces their status as "other"—tolerated just long enough to be laughed at or sexualized, made visible but never truly included.

These dynamics are especially clear in the documentary *Le Coccinelle: Sceneggiata transessuale* (The Ladybugs: Transsexual Melodrama).⁷³ The documentary follows the lives and music careers of four performers, known as Le Coccinelle, who fully match the profile of femminielli. They mostly sing at restaurants during baptism and communion celebrations in the Naples area, yet another common activity for femminielli. Their performance style is similar to the raunchy tombola, though generally with less vulgarity and more artistic effort. Many of their songs, even when light-hearted, touch on the everyday realities of being femminielli. At the same time, the performers are fully aware of how they are perceived. One of them says, with resignation: "The people who see you when you go to a restaurant...they're not looking at the art; they're always thinking: 'The femminielli! The femminielli! This is great, now we're going to have some fun'".⁷⁴ This perspective is also voiced in one of their songs, much more melancholic in tone compared to the usually lively and spirited pieces that Le Coccinelle typically perform:

I think about it and it makes me sad, but what can you do? If life has given me this fate, I need to take it as it comes, by now I need to live it. When I was a kid, sometimes, just for fun, I'd play at being a mom, wearing dresses and stiletto heels. Nobody cared, nobody believed I really had the feelings of a woman. But on my papers, I'm Antonio De Filippo. It bugs me, I feel it, but I keep quiet. Nobody's ever suffered like I have; only God knows what I went through: teasing, humiliation, nights at the police station. I've always lived with my back against the wall. Until one day I started a group of performers, Le Coccinelle. Everyone looks at us and talks: "The short one is ugly, Giacinto's the youngest." Nobody cares about Le Coccinelle as artists, because for the people, yeah, for the people, for you...for you we will always—really always—be just a bunch of femminielli.⁷⁵

While at the beginning of this article a passage from *La Tarantina's* autobiography presented the term femminiello as a "home" for a non-cisgender person in post-war Naples, this song by Le Coccinelle (alongside several other examples mentioned here) reveals a different perspective and a deeper awareness, on the part of some of these individuals, of their actual role and perception within the Neapolitan community.

⁶⁹ In an interview, a person identified as femminiello states: "They see us as jesters...we always make jokes, we make fun, we tease everyone. That's how we are, it's part of our culture, we stand up to everyone. We have this characteristic that God has given us... 'Uè, I'm coming with my *femminiello* friend, you know what laughs we'll have!'" Mauriello, *Anthropology of Gender Variance*, 52.

⁷⁰ See Ceccarelli, *Mamma Schiavona*.

⁷¹ On the ritual of femminielli's childbirth, see Clemente, "Subverting or Essentialising Gender?" On the femminielli's marriage, see Zito, "Un matrimonio nella baia."

⁷² On the concept of carnival, see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*.

⁷³ Pirelli, *Le Coccinelle*.

⁷⁴ Pirelli, *Le Coccinelle*, at 13:45–14:00. The English in this and the following quotation from *Le Coccinelle* is my own translation from Neapolitan.

⁷⁵ Pirelli, *Le Coccinelle*, at 10:53–12:13.

Conclusions: Trap Doors

The preceding section has shown that carnivalesque and hyper-sexualized representations (and the very existence of this profile in the geocultural context of Naples) have provided femminielli with some form of visibility and recognition, just as they have for sexual diversity in general. This is especially true today: while the identity of the femminiello is gradually fading, it is also, more than ever, a subject of representation, debate, and visibility in the broader discourse on gender issues, extending well beyond Naples and Southern Italy. The question of visibility is, however, very complex, and visibility is not beneficial in itself. Regarding the recent rise in the visibility of trans people in the media, with particular reference to Black trans individuals, Jaden Janak writes:

Visual media make Black transness legible, and yet visibility-based activism is a road that leads to flattened understandings of Black trans life. Visibility, at least in the traditional sense, is a fraught project for trans people, whose moment of coming into visibility is often the moment of violence...The paradoxical notion that hypervisibility can bring about erasure, so much so that certain populations are never seen in the public imaginary beyond stereotypes or statistics.⁷⁶

Although Janak refers to a different context, clear parallels emerge. Therefore, it is fitting to conclude this article with a reflection on visibility. Drawing on Gossett, Stanley, and Burton, we can turn to the concept of the “trap door”:

We are living in a time of trans visibility. Yet we are also living in a time of anti-trans violence.... This is the trap of the visual....If there is one trap in the representation’s instrumentalization, so is there another in its figuration and, more precisely, its simplification...the gap between representation and reality....Representations do not simply re-present an already existing reality but are also doors into making new futures possible....In today’s complex cultural landscape, trans people are offered many “doors”—entrances to visibility, to resources, to recognition, and to understanding. Yet...these doors are almost always “traps.”⁷⁷

In the context of the recent media and artistic attention devoted to Naples, the issue of the femminielli intersects with and encapsulates the broader question of Neapolitan and Southern Italian identity. Through literature (Elena Ferrante above all), cinema (from Paolo Sorrentino’s films to TV series like *Mare Fuori* and *Gomorra*), and music (especially the rap scene), Naples and Neapolitan identity have asserted themselves in the national media.⁷⁸ Amid Naples’ historical disadvantage compared to Northern Italy and the North-West geo-cultural area and the persistence of anti-Southern discrimination, Naples is, just like the femminielli, somewhat visible and recognized. However, this is mostly possible as long as Naples is represented or represents itself through pre-established paradigms, making it difficult to distinguish between what is authentic and what has been constructed externally and later internalized, between orientalism and self-orientalism, between celebrating diversity and reducing it to a monolithic entity, between a “door” and a “trap.” The relationship between center and periphery—between the “liminal Naples” and the North-Western world—mirrors, in turn, the dynamic between Naples’ rich city center and the impoverished Quartieri Spagnoli, the historical home of the femminielli. On one side, privilege; on the other, just steps away, the subaltern “other.” One that is conveniently kept close to exploit its supposed extravagance, exoticism, mystery, and even bestiality. A convenient queerness, the right queerness, as long as it does not transgress boundaries.

⁷⁶ Janak, “(Trans)gendering Abolition,” 259–60.

⁷⁷ Gossett et al., “Known Unknowns,” xv–xxiii.

⁷⁸ On this “prominence in contemporary media and culture” and “unparalleled international success,” as Glynn puts it in Glynn, “Naples/Italy,” 227, see for example Coen, “Mille set da Gomorra”; Ferré, “Geolier, il rapper napoletano.”

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