

Spring 2023

I Femminiellø: Unearthing Sanctified Queerness

Francesca Stone Houran
Bard College, fh1530@bard.edu

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Recommended Citation

Houran, Francesca Stone, "I Femminiellø: Unearthing Sanctified Queerness" (2023). *Senior Projects Spring 2023*. 317.

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I Femminiellø: Unearthing Sanctified Queerness

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of the Arts and The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Francesca Houran

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2023

Dedication

To my lovely grandmother Patti, and my late grandfather Mike. I hope you are confused and amused, endeared and fascinated with the particular direction my scholarship has taken. I love you both immensely.

Acknowledgements

There are so many I have to thank for pushing me in new directions of curiosity, scholarship, and identity throughout my project. First and foremost, I would like to thank the community of Femminiellə for the wisdom, old and new, they have to offer my generation of queer scholars. Thank you to Jess Kohl, who so willingly allowed me to engage with her experience as the photographer of such a vibrant culture. To Susan Merriam, who grounded me so much in my sporadicity this year. It is thanks to you that I was able to put real words on the page. To Franco Baldasso, who has worked tirelessly alongside me for many semesters, instilling in me such passion for Italian culture and language. It is because of you that this project is as unique and nuanced as it is.

I would like to thank my beautiful friends I became close to during my time in Italy. Mary, Alessia, Tina, and Wayu (Eee-Taa), thank you all for making a new country feel like home. Your curiosity, playfulness, and creativity brought me to such realms of childlike wonder that I like to remember in times of stagnancy. Thank you to Freya, who pushed me to stay in and write but also go out because, well, “we deserve a treat.” Thank you to Oliver, who has guided my curious spirit more than they could ever know. You have helped me navigate my identity as a queer person, scholar, and writer for years. This project would not be what it is without your strange biblical literacy and creative influence. Thank you all for broadening my horizons.

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Introduction

Today, we reference the entertainment phenomenon of drag as lighthearted and playful. A comedic theater, a night out, a cut-throat reality television show. Drag is indeed a performance, but this seeming creative role-play may derive from innately ritualistic origins. Drag queens today say ‘yes, of course we can laugh at ourselves, revel in a freak-show of our own making,’ as they would likely be made out to be freaks anyway. But there are vestiges of a deeper, rather inevitable behavior in the practice, which is all to say its comedic nature is truly a survival mechanism for something that would otherwise be societally pushed out. Fortunately, we can see a form of it (however assimilated) become more and more celebrated today.

Let’s imagine that a historic church has been converted into a commercial business. The poor old church would have been left to rot in the little town, now overrun with charming atheists and agnostics, if it did not market itself as something less intense, less inhibiting. Its function as a space goes through similar if not the same motions, but with an air of self-recognition, all to develop a more palatable ritual, and is therefore less alienating. All can enter the newly-restored bar, club, or bakery, appreciating the colored light spotting through original stained-glass windows, communing under high ceilings, laughing, singing, and listening within the constructed soundscape of heavenly acoustics—all as did its original, pious inhabitants. Are these guests tricked into experiencing sensuous worship? The church thus assimilates, heralding more unknowing devotees, invoking the same senses and experiences. There lies the ritual, assimilated and distorted, in today’s drag performance. My working definition of *camp* is that of queer resistance in secular amalgamation. It is queer sanctity—disguised, concealed, painted over per necessity. Has this sanctity been lost or simply undergone metamorphosis?

This project serves as an unearthing, in the figuratively archeological sense, of the religious roots and foundations of queerness, often overlooked in contemporary gender discourses, through the exposing of pre and post-modern queer religious iconography specific to the Neapolitan third-gender community of the femminiellə*. Although the femmininellə have origins in a long lineage of non-binary forms and figures throughout global and Italian history, they have been more recently brought to the surface of gender discourses through the avenue of photography, showcased in digital and physical exhibition spaces.

I establish background knowledge on the figural lineage to which this third-gender group is connected from Mediterranean antiquity to modernism in my first chapter, titled *Genesis*. I then discuss the geographical, cultural, and architectural space in which this particular group was able to develop, arguing that Naples, and more specifically, a neighborhood called Scampia, serves as fertile ground for gender nonconforming subjects to emerge in my next chapter, *The Garden*. My last chapter, *Revelations Beyond The Scripture*, focuses on how photographer Jess Kohl uses photography and her online platform to amplify this gender group and bring a marginalized subject (even within progressive gender discourses and the discipline of queer studies) to the center of the more secularized contemporary arts world.

This project will be one of very few scholarly studies of femminiellə ever conducted. I have experienced a rather gaping hole in academia in regards to this particular gender group throughout my research, and hope that further anthropological, sociological, and historical study can be published in the coming years. I am lacking an extremely significant perspective in my study, one of the femminiellə themselves, who I was unable to contact during the course of my research. In terms of my connection to my project's subject, I, of course, admit a clear remoteness, in terms of physicality and identity. As a queer Italian-American who has spent a

‘more-than-a-vacation’ amount of time in Italy (six months), I feel I am closer to the subjects of the femminiellə than many, but I am still far from understanding certain complexities of identity of which native Neapolitans and third-gender individuals may be familiar. I do locate myself as an outsider—a 21-year old American liberal-arts student hovering a magnifying glass over a delicate, living culture. However, I hope that lens that I offer to my readers is focused and accessible, transparent and un-deceiving.

In sharing my topic with my peers, I have been met with questions that do not quite line up with the cultural complexities I have discovered regarding this third gender group. Common questions such as, “Are they AFAB or AMAB¹?” or “So, they’re trans-women?” are fairly unanswerable in regards to the femminiellə, as those questions are in-fact embedded with ethnocentric vernacular, often used by English-speaking youth to categorize transness, inapplicable to a centuries-old Neapolitan gender identity. I hope the entirety of my project will give my peers an alternative lens through which to look at gender nonconformity with more nuance on a global and historical scale, as it has so affected me. My research contributes to a broader conversation, and hopefully can be utilized within the discipline of queer and gender studies but also in the immediate lives of queer people as a validation agent.

*Many third-gender Neapolitans use the gender-neutral term ‘femminiellə’ (Masculine being femminiello/i and feminine being femminiella/e) when verbally referring to the gender group either in the plural or singular. In the gendered language of Italian, non-binary adjectives or nouns to describe people do not exist in the academic language. There are many arguments that developing an alternative ending for gendered romance languages such as Italian, Spanish, and French would practically anglicize and/or belittle these cultural languages. We can see this in the rejection of the term ‘Latinx’ by the majority of Americans of Latino descent in recent years,

¹ AFAB: Assigned Female At Birth, AMAB: Assigned Male At Birth

with only 3% of Latin Americans using the term in 2020.² Often solely used in the realm of higher education and elite progressives looking for gender-neutral terminology, the term is meant to be inclusive yet detracts from linguistic accuracies.

In Italian, masculine plurals serve as default, especially when referring to a group that has even the possibility of male members. However, a particular Neapolitan ending in Italian called the Schwa and represented by the symbol ⟨ə⟩ has been contemporarily adopted by queer communities in Italy. Coming from a natural pronunciation of masculine nouns in the Neapolitan dialect, the pronunciation of ə is that of an extremely relaxed vowel, sounding to my American ears much like taking an uninhibited gulp of water. Although I have never come across the feminized ‘femminiella/e’ or encountered the Schwa in writing throughout my research, I have found that many femminiellə casually use the Schwa version of the word when speaking rather than the Italianized, academic “femminielli” (fem-EEN-yell-EE). As a student and researcher hoping to usher the femminiellə into more global academic disciplines and discourses, I was not entirely sure if I should utilize a word that is seemingly preferred by scholars but perhaps not used often by the very subjects at hand. However, any gender-neutral letter or symbol pasted at the end of every root word would be similarly contested in its cultural and linguistic inaccuracies. The Schwa, however, is distinct from something like an X because it ascribes to Neapolitan dialect pronunciation and is not an anglicization. ⟨ə⟩ is just a written symbol meant to signify an authentic natural pronunciation in Italian whereas an X, for example, does not signify an actual sound in Spanish. Throughout my writing, I will be utilizing the gender-neutral Neapolitan ‘femminiellə’ as to give autonomy to contemporary femminiellə and perhaps steer

² Luis Noe-Bustamante, Lauren Mora, and Mark Hugo Lopez, “About One-In-Four U.S. Hispanics Have Heard of Latinx, but Just 3% Use It.” *Pew Research Center*, August 11, 2020, <https://www.pewresearch.org/hispanic/2020/08/11/about-one-in-four-u-s-hispanics-have-heard-of-latinx-but-just-3-use-it/>.

away from what the majority of cisgender scholars may project linguistically onto the third-gender group.

The suburb of Scampia on the outskirts of Naples hosts a long-standing community of people known as femminiellə (directly translated as “little-women-men”, with a tone of sweetness and/or endearment, which is not derogatory, but can be used as such).³ This third-gender role is particular to Neapolitan tradition, culture, and history, separate from the established binary and distinct from the identities of transwomen or gay men.

Femminiellə have traditionally served an important role in Neapolitan society, playing an authoritative part in religious ceremonies and cultural activities. Statistics and data providing information on femminiellə today are lacking in scholarship, but there is significant information present within the art historical world that can be analyzed to provide a better picture of their origins, complex identity, and how they function in society today. Sources point to the idea that this identity is highly respected by their surrounding communities, from everyday Neapolitans to camorra bosses. Although there exists a supposed adherence to other social deviances and prostitution, femminiellə are still thought of as virtuously mystical, and of embodying good fortune.⁴

British photographer and filmmaker Jess Kohl published a series of photographs of the femminiellə in 2020, depicting their homes, religious paraphernalia, and the surrounding architecture of Scampia. Kohl had an exhibition of her work showcased at the Palazzo Delle Arte in Naples the same year.⁵ Through exploring the oscillations between the seductive and repellent and the sacred and sinful, this project uses these contemporary photographs taken by an outsider

³ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine.

⁴ Jess Kohl, “Queens of Scampia,” interview by India Doyle, *Twin Magazine*, 2020.

⁵ Jess Kohl, “Jess Kohl Solo Exhibition Anime Salve at Palazzo Delle Arti Napoli,” interview by Lee Sharrock, *FAD Magazine*, September 9, 2020.

of those typically ‘othered’ as a case study regarding the depiction and reception of gender nonconforming people in a particular Neapolitan context, informed by knowledge of non-binary forms and figures that have been fetishized, revered, or disfavored throughout Italian and Mediterranean myth and history. The photographs and their corresponding modes of exhibition work to catapult a long-sequestered foundational religious subject to the forefront of contemporary gender discourse.

Chapter One: “Genesis”

This chapter will establish general background knowledge on non-binary forms and figures in history. It will explore how the third gender exists theoretically, literally and artistically, pointing to the femminiellə’s origins. The historical context outlined in this chapter will allow readers to understand the femminiellə with more nuance. Organized chronologically, it will cover the most prominent sexually deviant identities of Ancient Anatolia, Classical Antiquity, Byzantine society, and the seventeenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Through analysis of ancient Anatolian priests, the Hermaphrodite in classical mythology, Byzantine eunuchs, seventeenth-century castrati in Italy, and intersexuality’s interactions with Romantic and Modernist movements, this chapter will set up a broader foundation in understanding the active participation of a third gender in any society. The shifting nature of their place in any given class or caste structure does not detract from their permanence. Each given society grapples with the inevitability of the third-gender in whatever way they can, pushing the sexually deviant to the margins, elevating them to fame, or utilizing their presence to rationalize other social deviances. Visual culture and literary analysis will make up the majority of evidence from which one can derive an understanding of each group’s distinct role in their given society. Over the course of shifting and turbulent political structures, establishment of kingdoms and nation-states, and fluctuating dominant religions, there was always a persevering third-gender figure that survived, whether that was on the margins of society or directly in the center, embodying roles from prostitute to priest. The chapter will provide a foundational understanding of how the femminiellə emerged from a pre and post-modern world riddled with this tidal push and pull between mythologization and rejection of formal gender deviance. The femminiellə

exist as a part of this greater canon, or rather grand lineage, of persisting gender nonconforming people in greater Europe as well as a more localized southern Italy.

The Priests of Galli

Aligned with Italian folk culture, the Priests of Galli are traditional figures exhibiting signs of femminiellø origins in a pre-Roman Anatolian world. Figure 1 is a marble relief housed at the Capitoline Museum of Rome which depicts a Gallus priest. The Magna Mater, or Cybele, is a fertility goddess of the Anatolian and Mediterranean region dating back to the 6th Century BC.⁶ Her cult, through all its transformations and transfigurations over the centuries, is known to have had very particular sacred figures, ones that invoke her through ritual objects, self-ornamentation, castration, and ritual group performances. The Galli in these ancient sculptural renderings, can be seen to wear effeminate clothing, headdresses, and jewelry on their ears, wrists, and necks. They are thought by historians to have referred to each other and themselves in the feminine ‘Gallae’, though they were born with male genitalia⁷. Their castration is clearly in the desire for emasculation, and through this service to their goddess, they are rewarded with prophetic powers. It is extremely similar to the basis and purpose of eunuchs throughout European history, in that through detachment from sexuality, one can gain a certain wisdom or perspective, and is more susceptible to the will of god in their sexual purity.

When engaging with such descriptions of these priests’ ornamentation, regalia, and ritual, I could not help but compare it to my modern understanding of drag. The familial nature of such priests, adorning with makeup and jewelry, participating in group-performance seems all too

⁶ Dorothea Rohde, “Jaime Alvar: Romanising Oriental Gods. Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras, Translated and Edited by Richard Gordon, *Religions in the Graeco-Roman World* 165, Leiden / Boston 2008,” *Sehepunkte* 9, no. 9 (January 1, 2009), <http://www.sehepunkte.de/2009/09/15299.html>.

⁷ Teresa Hornsby and Deryn Guest, *Transgender, Intersex and Biblical Interpretation* (SBL Press, 2016), 47.

familiar. The transfiguration of the self as a vessel for another spirit, alter-ego, or goddess can be comparatively understood between these seemingly separate phenomena. One could argue that femminiellā, and all contemporary queer communities, hold fast to the values of their foundational predecessors.

The Ancient Hermaphrodite, Divine Duplicity

The myth and form of the Hermaphrodite is integral to understanding Ancient Greek and Roman society and ideals. How exactly the story of Hermaphroditus has transformed over time to fit a particular era's social and religious ideologies is complex. However, through formal analysis of its ancient forms and analysis of various origin stories, I will trace some of the main developments of its significance as a cultural figure.

The Ancient Borghese *Hermaphroditus* (Fig. 2, Fig. 3), discovered under the grounds of a Catholic Church in Rome in the first decades of the 17th century, is now in the collection of the Louvre in Paris. One of the multiple ancient copies discovered thereafter is featured in the Uffizi museum in Florence. The Uffizi copy sits in its own dark room, alone, with a single spotlight illuminating its marble surface (Fig. 4). The room can not be entered by visitors, and the work can only be gazed at through windows looking in. The tension and torsion from the body's head to its feet, along with the twisted bedding, and isolated placement in a space, all work to create a dual sense of innocent playfulness and taboo eroticism.

Beginning with the form's head and face, one can find familiarity with the Hellenistic stoicness of expression. The gaze lacking true direction, neutrality of the half-smile, and resting nature of facial muscles are consistent with similar statues of classical antiquity, man, woman, or hermaphrodite. This particular face easily could be that of man or woman, its androgyny as a continuation of what is typically more focused on: the body. The head--sporting short hair

riddled with perfect rippling waves- is turned to the side and cradled in elongated arms bent at the elbows, displaying a true state of idyllic relaxation and resting.

Down towards the neck to the shoulders, the body becomes a bit more gleaming with potential energy, and undoubtedly, more explicitly erotic. When viewing the side of the form featuring the face, the upper body turns away, the gleaming marble highlighting muscular shoulder blades, biceps, and spinal divot of the body. A small breast is visible, crushed between the weight of the body and the soft mattress underneath. The other side of the form features another breast pressed into the surface, along with extreme inward torsion of the torso. This results in a protruding line of muscle, rippling across the side of the body's stomach, framing a peek of its muscular, masculine, toned abdomen.

The buttocks and legs of the hermaphrodite are fairly feminine, perfectly rounded, with no bones or muscles poking through their full-figured form. The legs are extremely playful, one bending at the knee up in the air, splaying restless toes and working to excitedly twist a sheet in conjunction with the other foot on the mattress, trapping the fabric.

The bedding and pillow are persuasive, convincing the viewer of their softness, protesting the hard stone material of which they are made. The sheet, manipulated and twisted by the legs of the hermaphrodite, mimics the torsion of the human body, the folds of the fabric echoing the folds of muscle and fat. The pillow on which the head rests is subject to gravity and weight of the head. The pattern of soft, square quilting is met with a hardness, and immovability. It is not particularly malleable, but strong, flat, and gridded. The duality between the softness of the pillow and the strength of the mattress, reinforces the duality of the both masculine and feminine nature of the hermaphrodite body.

The male genitalia, only visible when the head is viewed from the back, are small and subtle, almost disguised by folds of bedding. The sculpture, most often viewed from the front, from which one can gaze upon the face and not the genitals, works to hide the amusing, pleasurable, or wicked secret that is the penis, something to discover if one were to take a walk around the entirety of the form. The figure is clearly two sided, with one feminine side, and one masculine.

A reproduction of this hermaphrodite in the form of a small statuette, created by Italian artist Susini in 1639, sits in a case at the MET Museum (Fig. 5). The base of his hermaphrodite has latin inscriptions, two different statements on either side of the form. The side featuring the face reads “DUPLEX COR UNO IN PECTORE / SAEPE INVENIES. / CAVE INVIDIAS. [trans.: Often you will find a double heart in one breast. Beware of treachery.]” The side depicting the back of the head and male organs reads “DUPLICEM FORMAM UNO IN CORPORE VIDES. / MIRARE PULCHRITUDINEM. [trans.: You see a double form in one body. Marvel at the beauty.]”⁸. One statement, clearly villainizing the hermaphrodite’s duality, the other, commending its beauty. These two statements conjoined in the piece are self-referential and ironic. The conjoining of these two statements emulates the duality they reference. Most interestingly, it is the feminine side of the sculpture where Susini references deception. On the side revealing deviance, beauty.

The Borghese sculpture’s inaccessible placement in the Uffizi, as one of the only artworks in the Museum isolated in this way, creates a sense of ‘otherness’. It is not *to be contaminated*, or otherwise not *to contaminate*. Visitors must wait in a specific line to catch their glimpse of the deviant body, and cannot see it from all sides. The Hermaphrodite’s placement

⁸ Susini, Giovanni. Hermaphrodite. 1639, Metropolitan Museum, New York City. *Metmuseum.org*

and reception today arouses curiosities surrounding the complexities of public interaction with gender-deviance in the context of ‘high art,’ and avoidance of historical and contemporary realities of gender when receiving the mythologized classically antique.

The *Hermaphroditus* is just one of many examples of elevated non-binary forms in the discipline of art throughout history, religious movements, and geography. In antiquity, newborn children and all physiological deviances from the norm, including those defined now as intersexuality, were indications that the human race was no longer as it should be.⁹ Sexual difference was thought of as a sign of monstrosity, and monstrosity was a sign of moral decay sent from the gods. The term ‘androgynous’ and ‘hermaphrodite’ both refer to a variation in genitalia straying from typical categorizations rooted in religiously deemed Nature. In Book IV of his *Metamorphoses* Roman poet Ovid tells the story of Hermaphroditus, the child of Hermes and Aphrodite, as an explanation for homosexuality in a man’s vengeance, motivated by his transformation to a gender nonconforming body that seemed to “have no sex and yet to have both”.¹⁰ This transformation takes place through the demigod’s rape as a child, by a nymph who calls upon the gods to meld their bodies forever in her love for him. The pond in which this assault takes place is then cursed by Hermaphroditus, and any man who touches its waters will similarly undergo a transformation to ‘half man’ - referring to a passive homosexual. In antiquity, the bottom in all sexual relations was understood as the woman’s role inherently. Homosexuality was not necessarily shameful but acting as a woman was deemed ‘passive’.

When looking back on antiquity and the sexual and bodily freedoms depicted in its art, we gain a false idea of the antique world as a sexually liberated utopia, whereas their actual customs were fairly conservative. Yes, the ancient sculptures of the Hermaphrodite were

⁹ Luc Brisson. *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in Graeco-Roman Antiquity* (University of California Press, 2002).

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 58.

considered beautiful and worthy of thought in antiquity, but the intersex person was not a celebrated figure in the day-to-day reality of the ancient world. Possession of both sexes in antiquity, whether in myth or in reality of intersex individuals, was a sign of divine anger, heralding the decay of the human race. The myths of Hermaphroditus and the story of prophet Tireseas, who was transformed temporarily into a female, have been utilized and retold in whatever ways each society feels fit in terms of cautionary tales. However, what has stayed true throughout manipulations of myth, is that the beings that experience either simultaneous or successive awareness of living as both or neither genders, host a wisdom unattainable to others, and in that wisdom, host a sense of divinity.

Eunuchs, Imitating the Angels

We see this myth of intertwined gender-deviance and wisdom played out in reality through the detailed documentation of the lives of eunuchs and the all-encompassing roles *intentionally castrated* individuals played in a post-Classical society.

Much like many sociological understandings of the socially versatile prostitute, eunuchs and their counterparts, due to the overarching power of sterility, simultaneously play the roles of advisor, monk, caretaker, accountant, and prostitute, but most broadly, the role of the intermediary. First, we must understand exactly how eunuchs constitute a third gender altogether. In Gilbert Herdt's collection of essays titled *Third Sex, Third Gender*, the chapter titled "Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Gender in Byzantium" by Kathryn Ringrose is particularly relevant. The term *eunuch* is based on the figure's sterility for which they gain certain social, intellectual, or spiritual powers.¹¹ Their lack of ability to procreate also predetermines them as distinct from man or woman. As Ringrose describes, "Byzantine society, like the Roman society

¹¹ Kathryn Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Gender in Byzantium," In *Third Sex, Third Gender : Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books; Cambridge, Mass, 1994), 86.

from which it grew, was patriarchal in structure.”¹² Therefore those without that reproductive ability did indeed embody a third gender. Ringrose adds, “Children, because they did not procreate, constituted a similar anomaly”,¹³ often thought of as hosting a greater clarity or morality.

Byzantine sources tell us that eunuchs had a third culture that existed within their gender group, identifiable by “characteristic speech patterns,”¹⁴ dress, mannerisms, and body language that created not just a physiological but a learned behavioral distinction. Eunuchs were socially mobile, filling roles across all genders and social classes, serving as secretaries, prostitutes, maternal figures, accountants, court singers, and doctors.¹⁵ Most radically, this third gender group clearly served a particular role in which they could provide “Transactions across boundaries,” “mediating, brokering, and transmitting messages between persons who were confined by etiquette,”¹⁶ dealing with the sick and dead post-mortem, and therefore acted as a bridge between all socially constructed castes and intercessor between the physical and metaphysical worlds. The messenger, that of immediate reality and that of the supernatural, is often a role prescribed to angels. As the angel Gabriel told the mortal Mary of her brush with the heavens, so did any given eunuch pass messages between the realms of kings and subjects, gods and men. Matthew 19:12 even mentions eunuchs as such: “For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others--and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it.”¹⁷ Epiphanius, for example, breaks down this verse in its categorization of three groups, the first

¹² Ibid, 90.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, 95.

¹⁵ Ibid, 96.

¹⁶ Ibid, 97.

¹⁷ Matthew 19:12 (BSB).

two not as particularly virtuous, but the last as worthy - those being voluntarily celibate men who “imitate the angels.”¹⁸ So who exactly fits into this category as those who choose their own identification as non-procreative and therefore as divine third gender individuals? The femminiellə perhaps, although they are not necessarily celibate.

All divine communications aside, the very eunuchs that were playing these powerful parts in courts and churches were simultaneously playing actual parts in local theaters, serving as prostitutes, entertainment, and embodying a synchronous status of lowly outcast.¹⁹ They enacted every social role, but we rarely mention or even know their names. Although they are central to the functioning of significant institutions, they never actually achieve elite status. The paradoxical, juxtaposed nature of Byzantine eunuchs is one reflective of the myriad of polarized social roles performed by third gender groups across culture and period. If they are so special as to speak to higher ranking individuals including those of the supernatural, why are they still forced into the lowest castes and services of society? The depiction of angels in Christian art has familiarly been, if not the explicit androgyne, the effeminate male. Although in the actual Bible they are described in a less palatable way, certainly with “a human likeness”, but four faces, four wings, calf feet, and sparkling “like burnished bronze.”²⁰ The biblically accurate angel could be easily misconstrued with an unnerving monster. It is important to mention that demons are indeed fallen angels. And so the polar duplicity stands.

Castrati, The Deviant Elite

Alternatively, there is a European third-gender group that maintained a level of elitism, those who fought their way out of the lower-castes by forcing gender deviance. Castrati were often compared to angels in regards to their sweet voices, high enough to reach ranges of

¹⁸ Ringrose, 100.

¹⁹ Ibid, 98.

²⁰ Ezekiel 1:5-9 (NKJV).

children, but contrastingly more developed and emotive. Women of course, could also reach these shrill octaves, but were not allowed to perform and simply not believed to host the divine vocal potential of men. Androgynous and widely adored by peasants, aristocracy, and the church alike, Patrick Barbier notes that “when people expressed pity for them the castrati Carestini and Salimbeni burst out laughing”.²¹ It makes sense that two of the most famous castrati of all time would pity those, in turn, who were not castrated. The story surrounding a laughing Carestini and Salimbeni emphasizes a greater canon of third-gender individuals understanding that they embody a precious ‘unknown’ in their nature, an enlightenment of sorts, that cannot be understood by simple men or simple women. For boys who would otherwise live impoverished lives in the Italian south, most were grateful to be given the opportunity to rise above the working man, and elevate oneself through castration and vocal training. The Kingdom of Naples in the 16th century even issued a decree “allowing any peasant with at least four sons to have one of them castrated in order to serve the Church”.²² The voices of the castrati were understood to be necessary for enacting the praise of God, worthy of suppressing manhood. In the words of sixteenth-century theologian Robert Sayer, “The voice is a faculty more precious than virility, since it is through his voice and his reasoning that man is distinguished from animals.”²³ In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, castrati were famous, and often had Beatles-esque crowds of swooning female fans in their achievement of celebrity-status. The castrati serve as an example of gender-deviance allowing for social, spiritual, and financial elevation. In the late eighteenth century, they gradually but surely died out, as women became more widely accepted in the realm of music and performance. Through this emergence of the primadonna in opera,

²¹ Patrick Barbier, *The World of the Castrati : The History of an Extraordinary Operatic Phenomenon* (London: Souvenir, 1998), 2.

²² *Ibid*, 20.

²³ *Ibid*, 122.

Castrati were no longer valued more highly than their naturally shrill female counterparts. Their role in society became more and more redundant as women's roles became more and more encompassing.

In a 1734 portrait of the great Farinelli, one of the most famous Castrati of all time, the Italian artist Nazari paints a handsome man leaning on a piano, skin white as snow, lips pink as a rose (Fig. 6). A still life to the right of the piano harbors sheet music, a book of sorts, a quill pen, a well of ink. Farinelli stands proudly in his blue and gold waistcoat, one gloved hand on his hip, the other bare hand on the instrument. A shy dog lurks in the shadows of the portrait's left corner. His face comes off undoubtedly boyish, with nicely groomed eyebrows, rosy cheeks, and a painted birthmark above his lip. What is unclothed is perhaps what is valued most about him, his charming face and right hand, used by most operatic singers as a tool in visualizing and physicalizing airflow whilst belting. His body, a pyramidal mass under fabric, is an afterthought.

The depictions of castrati are dignified, respectful, and fairly asexual. These figures were not fetishized, nor were they particularly feminized, as were the priests of Galli or hermaphrodite. Castrati were pictured as masculine, young, handsome men with a very important, highly-coveted skill. A surprising visual aspect of a gender deviant group whose very title signals to their genitalic mutilation, is that their depictions never focus on, nor allude to their bodily lack. In contrast to a figure such as the hermaphrodite, the presence or absence of genitals is not the show-stopping, gasp-worthy visual effect of the form. What is focused on regarding the Castrati is their face and musical grandeur.

Hybridity and Monsters

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, third gender individuals affected how society categorized and rationalized social and psychological 'types.' Intersex people, whether

those castrated or those born with ‘atypical’ genitals were received in greater Europe throughout history as expansively socially mobile figures. Beyond antiquity, the notion that sexual deviance serves as a signal of moral decay from the heavens takes a more scientific turn in the nineteenth century with the emergence of Mary Shelly, Darwin, and Freud. The third sex as “a regressive phenomenon” and a “degradation of reproductive evolution”²⁴ similarly poses any original or developed signs of sexual deviance as a mutation of sorts, now aligned with enlightenment values. Although they survived it, the femminielli and other third-gender groups were further intellectualized and therefore ostracized during this span of time.

In eighteenth century London, there were different names, however demeaning, assigned to distinct variations of homosexuals, serving as a myriad of gender identities. Sapphists; lesbian women, Tommies; masculine women, Mollys; effeminate men, and Sodomites; gay men.²⁵ The term hermaphroditism was yet again used as a mode of rationalizing homosexuality, just like in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* centuries before. But the cause and effect worked in the opposite direction, homosexuality was now what caused hermaphroditism. Lesbians’ clitorises would grow into penises due to mutual masturbation, men would take on the passive role of women if they engaged in sex with a man, and so on. All this psychoanalysis and rationalization of sexual deviance becomes quite ridiculous and far-fetched, especially for those of us reading in the twenty-first century. Nevertheless, it was backed in terms of interest and curiosity by a movement gaining traction in the art and collecting world of nineteenth-century Europe, hybridity. Animal parts sewn together, birth-defects preserved in jars, the curiosity cabinets of

²⁴ Gilbert Herdt, *Third Sex, Third Gender : Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History* (New York: Zone Books ; Cambridge, Mass. 1994), 76.

²⁵ Randolph Trumbach, “London’s Sapphists: From Three Sexes to Four Genders in the Making of Modern Culture,” In *Third Sex, Third Gender : Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books ; Cambridge, Mass, 1994), 112.

wealthy European collectors were brimming with monstrous hybrids. Eighteenth-century Enlightenment meets Nineteenth-century Romanticism, and Mary Shelly publishes *Frankenstein* in 1818.

To me, *Frankenstein* has been completely wrung dry. We have squeezed out all possible analyses from its dark, gothic depths in countless stuffy seminars. It is popularly seen today as a queer story, and a *New York Times* article titled “Why *Frankenstein's* Monster Haunts Queer Art” from 2017 clearly outlines the monster’s resonance with trans audiences in particular regarding familial rejection, body dysmorphia, and sexual reassignment surgery.²⁶ But this monster resonated with its contemporary straight audiences as well, an audience that was both repulsed and endeared by a hybrid representing man, god, and those in between. Sound familiar?

Like Shelley, artists ascribing to Romanticism such as Goya and Gericault were questioning the divide between man and monster. Alternatively, between the collectors and the monstrosities they collect. The furthered categorization of species, and consequently of humans, becomes strictly ‘scientific’ with the emergence of Darwin, with “*Origin of Species*” published in 1859. Then, we learn how to categorize our inner selves (rather than just our bodies) through the publications of Sigmund Freud.

Freud, in his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), discusses homosexuality at length, but barely touches the idea of transgenderism. He, like many at the time, thought of homosexuality and transness as one and the same, or phenomena that held similar roots in a person's psyche regarding, mostly, how they were brought up as children. Sexual abuse as a child or mutual masturbation with same-sex individuals resulted in a stunted, passive homosexual man

²⁶ Charlie Fox, “Why *Frankenstein's* Monster Haunts Queer Art,” *The New York Times*, October 13, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/13/t-magazine/art/frankenstein-monster-queer-art.html>.

(or active homosexual woman), and any transition to another sex was seen as further embracing that homosexuality. Gay men were themselves thought of as already a third gender of sorts, “a feminine brain in a masculine body.”²⁷ as supported by the distinct genders categorized by sexuality in eighteenth-century London.

Gilbert Herdt’s *Third Sex, Third Gender*, speaks to a wide variety of post-Roman understandings and social roles fulfilled by the sexual deviant. Herdt’s introduction poses the question, “Is sexual dimorphism inevitable in human affairs?”²⁸ consecrating the seemingly consistent pattern of a third gender group’s emergence in almost every major culture, including but not limited to ‘two-spirit’ Native Americans and Hijra-caste Hindus. In his chapter, Herdt credibly argues that the third gender always exists, however can sometimes be lost in the underbelly of such societies, reasoning: “In the more extreme cases, sociologists have long suggested, the deviant or forbidden third sex or gender leads individuals to avoid being identified; that is, they are forced to adapt the appearances and accoutrements of hegemonic social roles and practices. Alternate or ‘deviant’ third-sex and third-gender roles are thus typically displaced to the illicit, immoral, or illegal margins of society.”²⁹ The trend of third gender groups encompassing societal roles deemed immoral, most often those of prostitutes, still can be understood as fairly stereotypical today. It is not so much that sexual deviance is inherently associated with criminality, but rather that the sexually deviant are pushed to exist in vice, as society forbids them to exist in virtue.

In response to all things hybrid, Modernism in European art of the twentieth century more positively adopted the multiplicity of form and being. Less nightmarish, more... dreamlike.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (London ; New York: Verso, 1905), 8.

²⁸ Herdt, *Third Sex*, 11.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 57.

A modern take on classical sources, Italian artists like Giorgio De Chirico and his younger brother Alberto Savinio wrote and painted metaphysical subjects, often those that lie within the categorization of hybrid³⁰. A particular example of this Italian Modernist take on hybridity is Savinio's 1944 *Il Riposo di Hermaphrodito* (Fig 7). It is a painting completed years after Savinio released his 1918 novel titled *Hermaphrodito*—in which the hermaphrodite in question is revealed to be surprisingly Jewish³¹. Savinio's take on European Modernism can be seen as differentiated through his Mediterranean influence. His rendition of the sleeping hermaphrodite is one in the midst of a dreamy landscape, with atmospheric blobs of pink, white and blue. A delicate, open eye rests in a collection of clouds above. The hermaphrodite is turned away from the viewer at the base of a tree, and we cannot see their face nor their genitals. Their musculature is both hard and soft, with paradoxical feminine curves that seem stunted by masculine rigidity. A red cloth is draped around its body, and instead of the back of a head, the hermaphrodite cradles what looks like a swirl of ram's horns. This take on the figure is both idyllic and paradoxical. It is both male and female, perhaps both human and animal. Savinio's final anecdotal novel, in which he explores his own childhood through an alternate version of himself named Nivasio Dolcemare, reveals his understanding of the hermaphrodite is that of "the ideal image of perfection. He is not a divine neuter, however, but the divine all-in-all."³² In this, Savinio speaks of this differentiation between the androgynous blank slate vs. hyper-gendered dual state. His personal divine figure is that of the all-gendered, omnipotent hermaphrodite.

The femminiellø have survived due to the efforts and persistence of queer figures past, assimilating to social roles as they come. In either the abandonment of sexuality or the elevation and expansion of one's sexuality, traditional roles of the priest, eunuch, virgin, androgyne, or

³⁰ De Chirico in particular painted mannequin-like figures that often had no sex.

³¹ Alberto Savinio, *Hermaphrodito* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore, 1974).

³² Alberto Savinio, *Childhood of Nivasio Dolcemare* (Eridanos Press, 1987), 29–30.

even prostitute, dictate a certain sense of mobility between both social classes and spiritual realms that does not exist for those that sit comfortably within the binary. Within the contexts of myth, antiquity, and modernism, there existed three transgressions: those of man and woman, those of child and adult, and those of human and animal. Each is absolutely connected in the context of divinity, in that purity seems to exist when these duplicates are both absorbed and extinguished by an individual. The being that can be all genders at once, all maturities at once, all species at once, is also the being that transcends all of the categorizations altogether. The deviant has always been paradoxical. The being that is deemed a monstrosity is simultaneously speaking most intimately with the gods. These figures are—and have always been—angels for some, fallen-angels for others.

Chapter Two: “The Garden”

As the last chapter introduced broader information pertinent to specific instances of non-binary gender forms and figures in more global history, this chapter will telescope in on The Mediterranean, southern Italy, Naples, and its more focused neighborhood of Scampia. Within that more localized context, I will describe the ways in which architecture, sociological phenomena, and relationships between people that connect to the femminiellə are highly influenced by the natural environment and land. Throughout this section, readers will understand the physical geography of the port city of Naples as a distinctive liminal space in which unique architectural and social structures can thrive. It will also discuss the local criminal organization known as the Camorra or the Neapolitan mafia and consequential embedded crime and prostitution in Scampia, and three different ceremonial processes surrounding the femminiellə that take place in Naples. I will draw from news sources, literature, Malaparte’s historical fiction ‘La Pelle’, and the television series of Gomorrah in order to understand various presentations of Italy’s cultural and sociological worlds. I argue that the geographical and locational reality of southern Italy as a physical bridge between regions, along with the resulting aesthetic and sociological culture of such a reality is a main constructor of the intermundane nature of femminiellə. In this chapter I want to show how the space of liminality, represented by the area of the Mediterranean and more specifically Scampia, helps to produce a liminal subject. In order to do this, I will introduce the reader to the geography of the mediterranean and the architecture of Naples and Scampia.

Mediterranean Space, Liminal Subjects

Mediterranean space, being the land people and societies constructed surrounding the Mediterranean sea, is one of the world's most beautiful and heavenly, contested and turbulent

regions. In all physical and meta-physical planes and disciplines, it is where worlds collide. The Romans called it Mare Nostrum, or Our Sea.³³ In the antique world, the rift was lateral, between Rome in the west and Greece in the east. As time has passed, it has become a rift turned on its axis, aligned with most other polarizations regarding the ‘Global South’. The rift now stands between the European north and the African south. It is a confluence of parallels and opposites, flexibility, vulnerability, and porosity. It is a world of tourism, hospitality, unrelenting movement, and odysseys. Islam, Judaism, and Christianity clash and intermingle in its dark choppy waves and also share in its glimmering splendor. American tourists bathe on beaches whose very same waves swallow up duct-taped rafts filled with those promised a new beginning. The great global exchange of sensuality lies here. Music, spices, perfumes, architecture, sex - all that one could hear and taste and smell and touch can travel for miles to this epicenter of trade. Italy harbors a strange position in all this madness. It is the peninsula, the very literal bridge to Europe for its African and Middle-Eastern neighbors. It is not necessarily the destination, but rather an intermediary. A liminal space, a path to the great beyond. It is the great bathhouse for those to escape their contemporary realities, enjoy, relax, and be on their merry way. Where does that leave those who call this space home? Historically, Korea, as a related peninsula between the two powerful and distinctive forces of China and Japan, has grappled with establishing a sense of national and cultural identity. Southern Italian identity, especially that of the Neapolitan variety, is similarly difficult to define. They have access to such a grand globality, yet are still isolated within a decentralized identity as an intermediary. The open ocean gives an illusion of freedom, yet locals are often entrapped within the grips of poverty and surrounding chaos. This goes especially for those living on islands or port-cities such as Naples.

³³ Franco Baldasso, “Founding Myths: The Middle Sea and Ulysses.” *The Middle Sea: Mediterranean Encounters in Italy*, Bard College, September, 2022.

Originally a Greek settlement, Naples or Napoli (meaning “new city” in Greek) was greatly utilized as an import and export hub in the Mediterranean since antiquity.³⁴ Both the island of Sicily and the port Naples, much like Jerusalem or Istanbul, function as widely diverse multicultural centers whilst adhering strictly to their major religions values in terms of social and architectural standards. Like most tourist centers, there is a rift that exists between the world of the foreign gaze and the world of local culture. In July of 2022, I explored the city of Naples as an American student and tourist and can speak first-hand as a witness to experiencing the city as an outsider. I was particularly drawn to the Spanish Quarter, known for its vibrant street art. As I walked around the bustling maze, among other tourists, taking pictures of painted doorways, murals, and crumbling moldings, I could not help but feel like a voyeur. In particular, the “bassos,” ground floor apartments with garage-like doors, painted with such instagrammable motifs stood out to me as a symbol of my delusion. The Spanish Quarter was extremely poor, and once I looked past my art-focused camera, I saw that I was essentially participating in a more disguised variety of slum-tourism. Parents and children were seated on their front steps, escaping the heat of their one-room homes as I took pictures of their decorated bassos. The few windows I could peek into revealed full families sharing a single bed, with no more furnishings other than a stove and the occasional rotating fan. Those living in the Spanish Quarter listen and watch the foreign tourists pass them by, hearing photo clicks, oos and ahs, formal tours and drunken laughter, often less than a foot away from where they wake up every morning. It was a place of two worlds. I inhabited one, the Neapolitans another. We both participated in a sort of gaze, but I saw them and their environment as a unique ‘other’ and they saw me, presumably, as more of the same. This phenomenon is one that infects most if not all forms of tourism. In fact, HBO’s popular series *White Lotus* touches dramatically on the separate worlds of the foreign guest and

³⁴ Ibid.

the local, the reality of the worker and the delusion of the customer. With their second season taking place at a contemporary resort in Sicily, the topics of fetish, saviorism, and colonialism are hinted at but never explicitly defined in the show. However topical and popular *White Lotus* may be, it does not provide integral evidence to my arguments, so I will not be discussing it at length. Regardless, the show gets at one significant point: In a liminal, transitory space, whether it be a Roman bathhouse, island resort, or tourist destination, everybody is always intensely *watching* everybody else. Illustrated by Figure 8 (2010), the jam-packed buildings, narrow streets, and stacked balconies in most Italian cities, specifically in Naples, can create an air of surveillance unknown to most Americans. As we obsess over privacy and private property, especially that of our homes, the architecture of Naples and its outlying neighborhood of Scampia begs the community to watch over one another. Although often invisible to American tourists, Neapolitan space fosters a strong sense of community and solidarity among locals. The intentional urban planning of such spaces does encourage virtuous connectedness, but also results in a sense of constant surveillance and control by neighbors, tourists, police, and crime organizations alike. This structuring of Neapolitan space allows certain socially deviant groups to exist within the transitory nature of the city, whether *femminiellə* or mafia.

Architectural Neurosis

A woman charmingly hugs her torso with one arm, while the other bends at the elbow to sensually touch her neck on a balcony looking over Scampia (Fig. 9). In Kohl's portrait, the *femminiellə* is blurred and her facial details are fairly indistinguishable, but she stares longingly, almost in nostalgia towards the camera, facing the dark inner room away from Vesuvio and her neighborhood. The concrete complexes rise and fall in a line behind her, echoing the mountains' rise and fall beyond the gray haze of the valley. She is wearing a colorful, tight fitting dress,

sporting bright greens, blues, pinks, and cleavage. Her long bob stops before her shoulders, emphasizing the length of her neck. She stands in the corner of the balcony, not as separate or above the aesthetics of the neighborhood but as an intrinsic part of it. She is not a tourist, a visitor, or a foreigner to this place. It is a part of her and she is a part of it.

The residential complex known as *Le Vele*, or “The Sails,” was made up of seven triangular concrete buildings in Scampia. Their silhouette resembles that of a sail, towering and tapering off in the wind. The buildings focused on exterior living spaces, balconies and alleys, leaving the interior apartments to a minimum. The sails were built between 1962 and 1975, and whether or not they were built to encourage community living or criminal behavior is up for debate. This type of architecture refers to late-Modernism, and perhaps the failures of an idealized modernist utopia. Four of the buildings have been destroyed, and the government plans to demolish more, leaving one for ‘redevelopment’.³⁵ In 2006, The Italian author Roberto Saviano wrote an investigative journalist book titled *Gomorrah*, which inspired the homonymous film by Matteo Garrone and a popular HBO television series of the same name of which Saviano serves as executive producer. In his book, Saviano chronicles his infiltration of the Camorra cartels in Scampia, among *Le Vele* and Neapolitan society. The 2008 film and popular series *Gomorrah*, first televised in 2014 thereafter filmed the majority of their shots in Scampia, in the *Vele* complex. The close-knit nature of Neapolitan architecture could be described as ‘criminogenic,’ one that is “likely to cause criminal behavior.”³⁶ Scampia was “One of the world’s largest open-air drug markets”,³⁷ and since Savinio’s publication, the police have cracked

³⁵ Roberto Saviano, “Naples Is Demolishing *Le Vele*, Symbol of Its Camorra Past. But I’m Not Celebrating,” *The Guardian*, March 8, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/08/naples-camorra-vele-demolition-im-not-celebrating-roberto-saviano>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Tim Small, “To Live and Die in Naples,” *Vice*, August 3, 2008, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/exadqj/live-die-naples-147-v15n8>.

down on what was once an open stage for mafia gang wars and violence. The demolition of the sails was a grand controversy. In an attempt to redact a camorra past, the day-to-day residents of the complexes lost their homes and associated memories with their neighborhoods.

Naples is also known for its “rioni,” outlying neighborhoods designed as closed community districts. Rione, however, can be directly translated into ‘ward’. They are often poor, homogeneous neighborhoods, almost like suburbs that are literally surrounded by walls with one entrance and exit point out of the complex. The architecture of Le Vele di Scampia and other rioni undoubtedly mirrors that of actual prisons. Gray uniform concrete, its regularity mimics confinement. Enacting modernist values, the strong industrial materials and geometry was at one point, meant to propel Naples into a more global modern age. However, it is a powerful aesthetic designed to control and contain, physically and mentally perpetuate disparities. The proximity of buildings and balconies dissolves any sense of privacy. Vicinity breeds community, but also claustrophobia, violence, and paranoia. In her 1953 publication *Il Mare Non Bagna Napoli* (that can be translated as “The Sea Does Not Reach Naples”), Anna Maria Ortese speaks of the great phenomenon of this “neurosis” particular to Naples.³⁸ Her *Neapolitan Chronicles* are a hybrid of journalism, fiction, and poetry, and have since set a standard for Italian narrative literature, inspiring Elena Ferrante’s *L’amica Geniale* (Which consequently became another HBO series). These themes of surveillance, close-knittedness, and paranoia in architecture shape a very particular culture of crime in Naples and Scampia.

How exactly this culture of crime manifests in Italy is different from the Godfather-esque American rendition due to Neapolitan space as distinctly liminal. The camorra, Naples’ regional mafia branch, has been operating in southern Italy since the seventeenth century, with deeply

³⁸ Anna Maria Ortese, *Il Mare Non Bagna Napoli* (Milano: Adelphi Edizioni, 2019).

embedded roots in most aspects of Italian life and culture.³⁹ Although their myriad of clans and members are well known by foreign tourists and Italian police alike, this organization has the power and influence to evade detection and extinction, even when police-protected journalists like Saviano oust locations and details of certain operations. It is a variety of crime-work that feeds off of Neapolitan culture, utilizing the particular dense architecture to survey, evade, hide-out, and take-out enemies. The mafioso identity is surprisingly more complex than a hierarchy of macho men in suits. In fact, there are 10 times as many female mobsters in Italy than there were 20 years ago.⁴⁰ News broke in February of 2009 that the first known transgender mafia boss, known as Ketty Gabriele, was arrested after acting as a ‘capo’ or leader of a drug and prostitution ring for the Scissionisti clan. Ketty ran the operations in Scampia specifically in 2009.⁴¹ Gabriele’s mugshot from the night she was arrested paints a picture of a girl, disappointed that she could not fulfill her duties, but nevertheless attempting to maintain her pride and strength (Fig. 10). Hastily bleached hair is pulled behind her ears, thin and feminine brows furrow delicately, and a gray dribble of mascara runs down one of her rosy cheeks. Although the mafia isn’t generally keen on homosexuals or transsexuals in their midst, somehow Ketty was put in a position of power and accepted into this world of underbellied crime. Information on Ketty is scarce to nothing, with the same brief details repeated in multiple Italian newspapers. One can only speculate her story, intentions, and contemporary living conditions.

³⁹ Umberto Santino, “Mafia and Mafia-type organizations in Italy,” in *Organized Crime. World Perspectives*, ed. Albanese, Das & Verma (Wayback Machine: October 29, 2013), 82–100.

⁴⁰ Michael Day, “There’s No Glass Ceiling for Women in the Mafia, Apparently,” *The Independent*, December 18, 2015, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/italian-mafia-sees-huge-increase-in-women-mobsters-and-they-re-often-more-violent-than-the-men-a6779061.html>.

⁴¹ Falvio Bufi, “Transgender Gang Boss Arrested: From streetwalker to Camorra boss - A gangland first,” trans. Giles Watson, *Corriere Della Sera*, February 13, 2009, www.corriere.it/english/09_febbraio_13/transgender_boss_c9fcd6c0-f9dc-11dd-b292-00144f02aabc.shtml

How exactly was Ketty's gender identity utilized by the clan as a profitable factor in their business on the streets of Scampia? Was she destined for this life? Was she accepted for who she was in this closely surveilled, deeply intimate community of the mafia?

Although seemingly unconnected, the femminiellə and the camorra are intertwined, and feed off of each other in order to survive. The particularity of Neapolitan space, perhaps in its liminality, allows for both these socially deviant cultures to thrive and coexist with each other and the surrounding community without much interference.

Montevergine, A Queer Pilgrimage

A black Madonna stands at the pinnacle of a 37 mile pilgrimage from Naples to a small mountain town in Avellino. She is housed in the Sanctuary of Montevergine. This particular Virgin serves as the patron saint of queer Neapolitans, a protector of minorities. The supposed miracle that took place 750 years ago at the site “may be the only recorded miracle in church history in which the Madonna saves a pair of same-sex lovers from homophobic violence”,⁴² in which two gay men were left for dead in 1256 by their community who witnessed their homosexuality. The sanctuary, having survived centuries amidst destruction of pagan spaces, is also the original site of the ancient goddess Cybele's temple. It was here that the Priests of Galli “celebrated her cult with night-long orgiastic ceremonies, in which explosive drumming, drunkenness and torch-lit dancing were essential elements”.⁴³ In that this space was historically used by the femminiellə's priestly predecessors, it now functions as a holy site for modern-day

⁴² Kittredge Cherry, “Madonna of Montevergine: Patron of LGBTQ People since Medieval Times,” *Qspirit* (blog), February 2, 2023, <https://qspirit.net/madonna-montevergine-lgbtq/>.

⁴³ Annabel Howard, “Gay Madonnas in Montevergine: The Feast of Mamma Schiavona,” *The White Review*, June 2011, <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/gay-madonnas-in-montevergine-the-feast-of-mamma-schiavona/>.

femminiellə, LGBTQ people and allies, drawing power from the presumably syncretised Mother-Goddess and Christian Madonna.

These days, queer Italians join femminiellə to travel, sometimes by foot, to the long-standing temple for an annual Candlemas festival on February 2nd. The trek is called “juta dei femminielli”, translated to “ascent of the femminielli”. According to the various youtube documentations watchable online, it is a procession comparable to a sort of Pride Parade, but with traceable ancestral origins and a deep religious context. A video on youtube posted and presumably filmed by Carmine Schiavo documents the 2023 procession.⁴⁴ It begins with a crowded hall filled with people singing a folk song in Italian with the accompaniment of accordion, hand drum, and tambourine. The video then focuses on a particular femminiellə, walking towards the altar of the church, with the procession surrounding them and musicians trailing behind. The femminiellə sports large golden hoop earrings, a beaded necklace and an orange headscarf on top of a simple green top and casual Nike sweatshirt. She sings along with devotees, opens her hands wide at certain points, and covers her face with her hands during others. She is wrought with emotion, crying as she clasps her hands together in a prayer position as the song ebbs and flows. When the song picks up in pace, she begins to dance, all eyes on her. Another devotee takes over, and begins to address ‘Mamma Schiavo’ (trans. The Slave Madonna/Mother), directing his speech towards her image at the altar. As he finishes his prayer, the music slowly comes back in and the crowd participates in the crescendo, using little handheld instruments that sound like clappers. The cameraman focuses yet again on the femminiellə at the front of the crowd, hands in a prayer position in front of her face while surrounding devotees sing. She leads the crowd in dance and song, always looking towards Madonna's image with

⁴⁴ Carmine Schiavo, “Candelora 2023 Santuario Di Montevergine ‘Juta Dei Femminielli’. Un Rito Antico per Mamma Schiavona,” Youtube video, February 5, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EuEkHcLtGZc>.

twinkling eyes of love and admiration. The video then transitions to a crowd outside, dancing to more folk music. Everyone seems to have little hand held percussion instruments, from which emerge bundles of colorful ribbons that ornament one's dance. When one's hand closes, the instrument loudly clicks, and so all can participate in the percussive nature of the music, even while dancing. Although the femminiellə in the video is unnamed, the description posted on the youtube video states that it is an "Invocation for Healing by Marcello Colasurdo," perhaps as the organizer of the ceremony. I found Colasurdo to be an Italian actor and singer through a quick Google search. About half the images I could find of him online showed him in drag or effeminate clothing, but nothing proclaiming that he was a femminiellə himself. He is pictured in a photo of the 2017 Candlemas celebration taken by Gianfranco Vitolo (Fig. 11).⁴⁵ The photo features the same femminiellə as the 2023 celebration, then in a pink head scarf and shawl, arms open wide, palms up, in dance. Colasurdo is the mustached figure next to her, facing the crowd and clearly mid-song along with his crowd of fellow queer and allied devotees.

Matrimonio, A Queer Marriage

In 2018, the Italian news network La Repubblica published a video on Repubblica TV documenting yet another annual femminiellə ritual that takes place in the surrounding areas of Naples.⁴⁶ It is called the "Matrimonio dei Femminielli," or the "Wedding of the Femminielli" and takes the form of an annual Easter parade, another widely celebrated, incredibly significant Catholic holiday.

The holy matrimony is at its essence a grand reenactment, a profound theater, in which people come together in song, dance, and ornament. The matrimonio is said to have been

⁴⁵ Cherry, "Madonna."

⁴⁶ La Repubblica, "Napoli, Le Nozze 'Senza Senso' Dei Femminielli: 'Nonostante Tutto Siamo Ancora Qui,'" Youtube video, May 18, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqDGR1A2Ejo>.

founded on a sixteenth-century Renaissance theater performance called Zeza's wedding, in which women's roles were, as usual for that period, played by men. The significant roles, bride, groom, parents of the soon-to-be spouses, are all played by gay men or femminiellò. The bride and groom are nominated or volunteer from surrounding communities each year.⁴⁷

One femminiellò in the video, dressed in flowery blue headdress, veil, and glittering makeup states: "La bellezza di questo matrimonio è che non ha senso... tu vedi la sposa, di un femminile che non è femmina, e lo sposo che è virile ma non è virile, vedi gli invitati, vedi tutta il pacchetto e dentro non è vero niente!" ("The beauty of this marriage is that it makes no sense... You see the bride, feminine but not female, and the groom who is virile but not virile, you see the guests, you see the whole package and inside nothing is true!"). She uses the Schwa plural of 'femminiellò' rather than the masculine 'femminielli' when speaking.

Her name is Ciro "Ciretta" Cascina, and she is playing the role of the groom's mother in the 2018 celebration. She states there "Exists an element of play, a way to laugh at the seriousness of conventions" ("esiste un elemento di gioco, un modo di ridere sulla serietà delle convenzioni") at the heart of the celebration. At the end of the bridal procession, cake, feast, and performances, the femminiellò partake in a transformation. Wigs, eyelashes, and dresses come off, and the facade is finally dissolved.

Jess Kohl took a series of images in Pagani, outside Naples of the matrimonio in 2018. Figure 12 shows a black and white photograph posted on Kohl's instagram featuring that year's bride and groom, sitting in their chartered carriage on the way to matrimony. The femminiellò-bride is adorned with sparkling earrings, necklace and tiara. The groom, not a femminiellò but a member of the gay community, holds an umbrella over him and his bride,

⁴⁷ Victoria Fiore and Lorenzo Ambrosino, "Naples' Beloved 'Third Sex' Wedding," *BBC*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20190624-naples-beloved-third-sex-wedding>.

dressed in suit, bow-tie, and white flowers clipped to his jacket breast. To the unknowing eye, the marriage appears undeniably authentic.

La Figliata, A Queer Nativity

Following the matrimony, nine months later in fact, another ritual takes place. There are a few documented rituals of this ceremony, however there is the existence of more detailed examples in Italian literature, one prominent one being in the book ‘La Pelle’ or ‘The Skin’ by Italian author Curzio Malaparte in 1949.⁴⁸ The non-fiction novel follows Malaparte as he leads American soldiers around a defeated post-war Italy. In a chapter titled, ‘The Son of Adam,’ Malaparte brings a young soldier with him to a house of femminiellə, and watches as they participate in a ceremony known as La Figliata. The term La Figliata does refer directly to the translation ‘The Litter,’ but also refers to another cultural object. There exists an almost gruesome comparison between this birthing ritual and a variety of regional soft cheese. La figliata is widely known in Italy as a buffalo mozzarella that hosts smaller balls of mozzarella within a larger sack. When one cuts open a figliata, the smaller balls beautifully spill out of the slit in its surrounding skin.

The chapter engages with the perspectives of both a knowing Italian (Malaparte) and his outsider American acquaintance, Jack. The explicit and strange chapter was censored in many translations and publications of the book. Malaparte, before the ritual begins, refers to the femminiellə as “A strange, miserable, marvelous people.”⁴⁹ The ritual itself is described as a sort of group birthing. One femminiellə, dressed in a feminine nightgown, is seen groaning and crying out on a bed surrounded by empathetic friends. After this enactment of labor, rich with foaming mouths, chanting, and cries of pain, the femminiellə produces a wooden doll from

⁴⁸ Curzio Malaparte, *The Skin*, trans. David Moore (New York: New York Review Books, 2013), 131-153.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 144.

between their legs. The woman who pulls the doll from the mother hoists it into the air, and cries “O blessed one, blessed by the Madonna! O miracle child!”⁵⁰ The surrounding femminiellə then take on the identities of newborn infants, almost as if possessed by a child’s spirit. High pitched cries fill the room while they rub their eyes and widely open their mouths. The mother figure is given the doll to cradle and embrace before it is handed off to a sort of father figure to similarly admire. After an abrupt sit-down dinner, the femminiellə begin what is seemingly the next stage of the ritual. Malaparte essentially describes a homosexual orgy that takes place, with no actual intercourse described. The scene, narrated by Malaparte, is uncomfortable and strange, involving “infantile moans,”⁵¹ crying, and buttocks-kissing. It is indeed sexual, but simply not erotic. The femminielli encapsulate this alternate liminal space between sex, family, and eroticism, emphasizing their adaptability and malleability as liminal subjects.

This particular description of a femminiellə ritual is certainly informed by negative biases and misunderstandings. However, it is widely known that forms of La Figliata live on today as a fertility ceremony involving an enactment of childbirth by a femminiellə, most fittingly around 9 months after the Easter wedding parade. What is a more radically gendered act than childbirth itself? For the femminiellə, the extensive role-playing of bringing life into this world is sacred. Whether or not there is a living, breathing organism that enters the world between their legs is perhaps not as significant as the embodiment of the journey of childbirth and womanhood. However playful these ceremonies may be, within the ritual of both the wedding and the childbirth we see clear values involving generativity and enactment of familial bonds, perhaps as a petition against societal denial of such experiences for sexually deviant people throughout history.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 147.

⁵¹ Ibid, 150.

The few rituals summarized in this chapter are deeply embedded within the particular space and nature of Southern Italy and Naples. The geography as a land bridge and centered position in the Mediterranean, along with rich folk history and distinct architecture allows for development of deviant identities, and, in turn, their celebration. The Mediterranean serves as a foundational garden, perhaps even as an Eden, for liminal figures such as the femminiellə to prosper.

Chapter Three: “Revelations Beyond The Scripture”

This chapter will further telescope in on Jess Kohl’s Photo series titled The Queens of Scampia. It will cover contemporary exhibitionary space, including online platforms and Kohl’s exhibition at a contemporary art museum in Naples. This chapter will guide readers through the exploration of more modern depictions of femminiellø with a range of visual analyses of specific photos by Kohl, and sections discussing her role as a photographer representing these very particular marginalized subjects. Though the hermaphrodite, castrati, and gender nonconforming forms may have been sexualized and sensationalized throughout history, Kohl’s contemporary photography provides autonomy and respect to her subjects in a contextualized domestic and intimate setting. Moreover, this chapter will argue that Jess Kohl’s photography ushers the femminiellø towards a more central position in the greater global LGBTQ discourse through its curated inclusion in contemporary arts spaces.

Alessia

The clip is 34 seconds long. A woman fills the frame, sitting outside and slowly flipping through a large photo book placed in her lap. She puffs on a long white cigarette—it never leaves her pink-stained lips. The ash grows longer and longer, clinging to the cigarette still, probably doubling its size by the end of the video. A disposable mask is loosely hanging around her forearm as she turns the pages, backtracks, skips some, and turns the pages some more (still smoking of course). A gold band glimmers on her right ring finger, her nails painted a deep red. Her left hand clutches her phone and a black sequined purse while still securing one side of the book. Dark eyebrows furrow under large black sunglasses in curiosity and scrutiny. Red, gold, black and white, photos of bedrooms, bathrooms, and domestic shrines visible for mere seconds, Alessia peruses through the book. I gaze at her while she gazes at herself. The clip, posted on

Jess Kohl's instagram on December 16th 2022 is described in the caption as "Alessia looking through my photos of her taken over 4 years."⁵²

Instagram, strangely enough, has been a vital resource for me throughout my years of art historical study. The public institution that social media has become, oftentimes replacing the roles of the museum or the public library is of course lacking in actual credibility, reviewing, and fact-checking. But when it comes to sharing imagery and art, Instagram and other platforms can also be used as highly accessible resources, for students, curators, and publishing artists alike. I came across Jess Kohl's instagram page after a post popped up on my 'explore page' featuring her photography of a troupe of drag queens with Downs syndrome, *Drag Syndrome*, published in British Vogue's Pride series in 2020.⁵³ As my senior project ideas began to come to fruition involving contemporary photography of gender deviance in the context of Italy's long lineage of non-binary forms and figures, Jess Kohl's photography series of femminiellø published in Twin Magazine perfectly meshed with my broader themes. However, after reviewing the publication⁵⁴ I could not keep myself from exploring the more interactive exhibition of Kohl's instagram page, serving as a vast network of photos not featured in the magazine, other fringe communities, tagged personae, and videos of photo subjects. Most interestingly, a casual video posted in December of 2022 of femminiellø Alessia, flipping through Kohl's photographs taken of her over a period of years.⁵⁵ She wears a strapless dress, large cat-eye sunglasses and holds a thin lit cigarette in her mouth as she peruses around the glossy pages of photos in silence. The sounds of vehicles passing and some light chatter are audible in the background of the short clip. Instagram

⁵² Jess Kohl (@jess.kohl), "Alessia looking through my photos," Instagram video, December 16, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CmOisDeKQCu/>.

⁵³ Alice Newbold, "Prepare to Be Blown Away by the Power of Drag Syndrome," *British Vogue*, June 23, 2020.

⁵⁴ Kohl, "Queens of Scampia."

⁵⁵ Kohl, "Alessia."

is truly an overwhelming and infinite exhibitionary space. Curated often by artists themselves, the digital space allows artistic autonomy, public accessibility, and easily draws lines and connections between artists, subjects, and subcultures. Not to say this metaverse is without flaws, especially those involving algorithmic bias and content censorship. Regardless, as someone who could not attend Kohl's 2020 exhibition *Anime Salve* at the Palazzo Delle Arti Napoli in person, the conglomeration of art, links, videos, and references made available on Instagram truly enveloped me in the realm of her work.

II Femminiello

Jess Kohl's "Queens of Scampia" interacts with a larger cannon of Mediterranean and Italian art already discussed at length in chapter one. However, it also can be used to reflect upon a mid-18th-century painting by Italian painter Giuseppe Bonito, depicting two figures, a femminiellə and her companion (Fig. 13). It is now housed at the Portland Museum of Art in Oregon.⁵⁶ The femminiellə, older and more masculine, is in the state of being dressed by a younger effeminate male. Referencing poverty, the femminiellə is missing a tooth and has an enlarged, pronounced thyroid gland (a condition known as goiter) poking out of the top of her ruffled corset. The necklace of red coral being placed on the femminiellə is a symbol of good fortune, as defined by the museum label. In a video lecture regarding the painting, curator Dawson Carr states that "Images of real people crossdressing are extremely rare in the history of European art. This was, of course, because of widespread and enduring prejudice against gender nonconformity virtually throughout the continent and of course it was passed on to us. This painting exists only because of a very special situation:" He puts beautifully, "a little pocket of acceptance of a local community of male-to-female crossdressers known as femminielli."⁵⁷ This

⁵⁶ Giuseppe Bonito, "Il Femminiello," *Portland Museum of Art* (Portland, Oregon. 2014.107.1).

⁵⁷ Portland Art Museum, "Lecture: Gender Bending in Eighteenth-Century Naples," *Youtube*, June 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rn3KOS71q5A>.

little pocket of acceptance in Scampia did indeed foster imagery we have of any third-gender people in the historic archive, whereas other cultures around the globe may have not documented their own inevitable deviances in such a preservable way, especially not for the purpose of aesthetic.

What is so comparable about this eighteenth-century painting and Kohl's portraits may be the mirrored love and compassion between a femminiellə and a secondary figure in an intimate, domestic setting. Jess Kohl's photography of femminiellə Alessia and her mother were some of the most powerful images out of her series for me. Figure 14 encapsulates a deep sense of intimacy between Kohl and her subjects, and between the subjects themselves. The bed and pillows on the right, smushed as if someone had just recently awoken, harbors an nondescript book on its surface, resting delicately. Red paint has been scraped and chipped to reveal a yellowing under-layer across the wall, hinting at the remnants of a long-forgotten headboard behind the disheveled mattress. A framed Virgin teeters at the edge of the frame as it so clearly teeters, tilted and gleaming, on the wall behind the figures. Alessia herself sits in half-shadow, skin gleaming like moonlight and eyes closed in emotional embrace with her mother. The mother, Amalia, hand resting on one side of Alessia's jaw and kissing the other, pulls her daughter closely to meet her soft lips. Alessia finds herself sandwiched between two mothers: the Madonna, and her blood mother. Both maternal and eternally loving, she is embraced by family and faith.

Jess Kohl

Kohl embodied a different kind of intimacy in order to reveal such deep-seated images with her camera. Photography as an art form can be one that is as incredibly revealing as it is incredibly dangerous. Consent of subjects can often be evaded, and real people can become

fetishized poster-persons for outsiders' agendas. In the field of art history, photographers such as Diane Arbus and Robert Mapplethorpe have been accused of potentially perpetuating 'othering' and fetishization of marginalized identities through their camera. Diane Arbus is an extreme example of an artist with little to no context or connection to her subjects, showcasing and profiting off of disabled and trans people in her work. She participated freely in representing the historically othered as 'freaks.' Mapplethorpe, however, worked more closely with his black gay photo subjects in their shared sexual identity—many of whom were friends—and in my opinion, more ethically depicted the beauty and complexities of an underrepresented group. An outsider entering a world of the unknown, a cultural underbelly at that, can be a dangerous or prosperous thing. Referring to *La Figliata* mentioned in chapter two, how can we compare and contrast the experiences of American soldiers brought by Curzio Malaparte to witness a femminiellø fertility ceremony to the experience of this British photographer set out to understand and amplify the Neapolitan third-gender?

I am extremely grateful to have been able to interview Jess Kohl about her experience in Scampia as a photographer. When asked about her position as an outsider, she stated “it was important for me to spend time there without a camera primarily, getting to know my collaborators as people first before photographing them.”⁵⁸ She has been taking photos of her primary subject, Alessia, and her mother over the course of four years. Also a filmmaker, Kohl feels that photography is much more of an intimate mode of communication than filming. In an interview with Lee Sharrock she states that “when making a film I’m able to feel more invisible than when taking photos, which is part of the process that I prefer. Taking a photo feels more intrusive somehow – there is a certain pressure when capturing a single moment, for both the photographer and subject. When making a film, I feel more able to blend into the background

⁵⁸ Francesca Houran, email interview with Jess Kohl, March 2023.

and just keep the camera rolling. With both formats, I aim to spend as much time as I can with my subjects, and create long lasting bonds.”⁵⁹ These bonds she creates are made easier partially by her own queer identity, intuitively furthering “a feeling of understanding and connection.”⁶⁰

Kohl, in the interview with Sharrock, states that she sees her work as “accumulating research – an anthropological study of the human condition, with a specific focus on gender and sexuality.”⁶¹ Naples, having the second largest trans population in the world, seemed like one of the best places to conduct this photo-research.

Kohl seems incredibly aware of her role as a photographer of queerness, understanding the ‘freakshow’ form that this kind of anthropological documentation can take if handled poorly. In her interview with India Doyle for *Twin Magazine*, Kohl reflects: “The role of queer people as entertainment for the heterosexual mainstream is something I’ve noticed throughout my exploration of global queer cultures. It seems to be a means for society to accept ‘the other’, if they are able to pigeon hole queerness, and it exists with a primary purpose to entertain.”⁶² This photographic series, for Kohl, was meant to depict “a feeling of intimacy and tenderness” that she felt is “often lacking in the representation of trans lives, which are frequently sensationalised and sexualised.”⁶³

Cultural Dialect

One of the largest obstacles Kohl faced was that of a language barrier, as none of her subjects spoke English and she spoke very little to no Italian. Intimacy is difficult to attain, especially when “everything is filtered through a translator,”⁶⁴ as Kohl recalls. This language

⁵⁹ Kohl, “Jess Kohl Solo.”

⁶⁰ Houran, interview.

⁶¹ Kohl, “Jess Kohl Solo.”

⁶² Kohl, “Queens of Scampia.”

⁶³ Houran, interview.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

barrier is one that even Italians face when confronted with the Neapolitan dialect—and one that Neapolitans themselves face when confronted with the distinctly queer vernacular of the *femminiellə*.

During my study in Italy, I met someone who became one of my very closest friends. Wayu, Tuta, or “Ee-Taa” as I called him, was from Bangkok, Thailand. We spent most days of the summer together, traveling from Trento to Rome, Rome to Bari, Bari to Naples on 10 hour train rides and 12 hour buses packed-full of similarly pungent transients. During our journeys, times of both mobility and stillness, I set out to learn Thai. Tuta taught me what he thought could be most useful in terms of our friendship. Phrases like “Girl, you look so good!” and “Stop lying, bitch!” (all with a tone of love and companionship), rolled off my tongue easily by mid-summer. I was very excited to share my language learning with my other Thai friend at Bard. When I showcased my fluency to her over facetime, she had absolutely no clue what I was saying. It wasn’t that my pronunciations or tones were subpar, it was that Wayu had only taught me how to speak in a queer vernacular—the casual dialect used by Wayu and his gay Thai peers. I had later learned that even the nickname “Ee-Taa” I used to refer to Wayu (constructed by adding the sound “Ee” before either syllable of one’s name) is only how gay youth would refer to one another. We see similar vernaculars in American English. Queer vernacular today in the U.S. derives majorly from African American Vernacular English. Now we see (propelled majorly through social media) heterosexual society adopting this Queer AAVE. It is, if you will, an appropriation of appropriations. Just as eunuchs during the Byzantium were recognized to have identifiable “characteristic speech patterns,”⁶⁵ as do other cultural groups. Regardless, the vernaculars fostered within queer and other marginalized communities around the world speaks to the capability of underground, underbellied cultures persevering and surviving in a

⁶⁵ Ringrose, “Living in the Shadows”, 95.

heteronormative world. The linguistic boundaries between Jess Kohl and her subject's dissolve a bit in the presence of their shared experiences as queer people, and all the points of connection beyond what is spoken.

Rosaria

In the intimate, domestic space a figure asserts power with a hand on her hip, a tilt of the head, and direct eye contact. She is surrounded by a pristine dwelling, her mother's bedroom, one clearly of worship and devotion to God. Swirls of thin white paint on the walls allow an underlying blue to shine through, inviting a sense of the sky and the celestial. The room is primarily white and gold, with a relief of Madonna and child at the head of the well-made bed, and a decorated cross nailed to the wall to its left. A madonna figurine is on the bed-side table to one side, and a small anonymous frame stands upright on the other table, accompanied by an indistinguishable golden object. A small dog, resembling a chihuahua is captured in a state of what seems like fear and anger. It stands on-edge, tail up, next to the bed and turns its head towards the camera.

Jess Kohl's image of a particular femminiellə, Rosaria, explores ideas of third-gender roles in adherence to Catholicism. Figure 15 is one reminiscent of female portraits of the European artistic canon including Titian's Venus of Urbino, Manet's Olympia, and Vermeer's countless women sitting by windows.

Rosaria is dressed in red wedge-sandals, long white socks, a black pencil skirt, a fitted white t-shirt, and an over-the-shoulder sash of sorts, supporting a medallion-like golden form hanging in front of her torso. Her nails are painted red, she hosts a scrunchie on her right wrist, and wears a ring on her left ring finger signifying marriage. There is a blurred tattoo visible on her left forearm. Her hair is dark and straight, falling back behind her shoulders as white earrings

pop through its lengths. Her legs are parted slightly open, with her feet planted on the tile floor beneath her. The skin on her arms and legs are hairless, moisturized, and glowing. Her face slightly sags with age, but she sports dark and thin drawn-on brows, black eyeliner, and plump, slightly-open lips.

The photograph alludes to a larger canon of portraiture, particular those depicting prostitutes or women of the working class. Manet's *Olympia*, although nude, similarly sits dignified on her bed, wearing heels and jewelry, staring into the eyes of the viewer. She is also visually echoed by a familiar of sorts, an on-edge, black cat with an arched back.

The femminiellø clearly poses for the photograph, with the contrived placement of her hands, modelesque gaze, and upright posture. She is seductive, but also intimidating in her confidence. The viewer enters her space, where she is in charge. Her guard dog, religious paraphernalia, and shining medallion, all serve to protect her. Her identity, her body, her gender, her labels are unimportant at this moment, as she is solely demonstrating her strength and dignity as it is rooted in faith. It is clear that she is a devoted worshiper of God, and he has granted her in turn; confidence, stability, and wisdom.

Anime Salve

This photo, along with the rest of Kohl's portrait series, was exhibited in 2020 at the Palazzo Delle Arti in Naples in a solo show titled *Anime Salve* (Solitary Spirits). The title of the exhibition comes from a Fabrizio De André album popular in Italy. The September exhibition featured a room dedicated to religious imagery and made "to resemble a sanctuary including images of homemade shrines that are scattered across Naples."⁶⁶ Curated by Italian arts collective, *Collettivo Zero*, the exhibition was well-received in Naples to Kohl's knowledge. What perhaps was most exciting for the photographer was to see her subjects regard themselves

⁶⁶ Kohl, "Jess Kohl Solo."

as worthy muses. Kohl thinks especially for her closely acquainted subject Alessia, it was “quite surreal and moving for her to see these images on display”⁶⁷ in *Anime Salve*.

Pepe

The femminiellø looks down on the viewer with direct eye-contact (Fig. 16), asserting power and assurance. Her face is wrinkled but commanding and riddled with indicators of her past, with a scar on her upper lip, dark eyeliner, and tattooed eyebrows. Her bleach-blonde hair pops against tanned skin, and two large gold hoops shine, dangling on either side of her face. Behind her, in her boyfriend’s home, a blurred blown up portrait is visible in a gold and white ornamented frame. The blurred side profile of a shirtless, tan man with a buzz-cut on the beach is a family member of her boyfriend. He is younger, with no bleach blonde hair or makeup, but the resemblance is strangely striking, as though they themselves were related. The man in the blurred picture turns slightly towards the camera from his hunched shoulders, confidently, as she currently does at this moment. He is a dominant figure, but she overpowers him. His gold chain has been replaced by golden hoops, his buzz cut with long, bleached locks, his grimacing smile with a self-assured pursing of lips. The picture encapsulates the femminiellø’s respect for and idolatry of herself, in the context of a parallel masculinized and familial idolatry.

What is most interesting about the femminiellø, showcased through such iconography, is their adherence to Catholicism. It is perhaps what pushes them most to the margins of a more global LGBTQ discourse. Their faith and gender nonconformity seem to work to amplify one another. Kohl’s photography of both the femminiellø and of surrounding Scampia shows the merging of these two worlds thought so-unattached. Catholic imagery surrounds every non-binary figure in their domestic spaces, as their faith and gender are mutually symbiotic.

⁶⁷ Houran, interview.

When portrait photography is presented and inspected by the subjects themselves, it can create a dynamic where one is forced to examine their own cultural resonance. In the femminiellə's ability to see their own selves in a societally respected exhibitionary space, their identities as significant figures are validated. Much like Alessia flipping through a publication of her own portraits, the femminiellə as exhibited by Jess Kohl in 2020 were able to see themselves in a contemporary dignified light, rather than a historical one, accepted and celebrated by the often-exclusive modern art world. Marginalized subjects may finally revel in seeing themselves reflected as truly iconographic. In this also, conversations about femminiellə identity can expand beyond Catholic contexts, and enter all queer discourses while maintaining authenticity.

Conclusion: “In The Image of Maria and Cones”

The realms of queer studies and contemporary art are both fairly secularized. The femminiellə offer a different approach to viewing and receiving queerness as anthropologically valid. Through their inclusion in the modern art world as iconographic subjects they are ushered into the center of a world that previously kept them at the margins. Further inclusion of the femminiellə in global critical art discourse and disciplines can allow for more nuanced conversations on queerness as integral to humanity, tradition, and religious practices. The femminiellə and other pious queer figures utilize orthodoxy as a means of resistance, countering ethnocentric generalizations about gender deviance.

The femminiellə identity is perhaps a return to the idealized mother-goddess as a response to localized and global patriarchy. The Christian Madonna is stripped of her humanity in her virginity, whereas the alternate Mary Magdalene is stripped of her humanity in her hyper-sexuality. These two Marys model the two societal categorizations of woman as either nun or prostitute, vessel or object. The femminiellə play with this binary categorization of woman, as they embody both sacred and sexual figures. The femminiellə’s identity is strongly tied to reverence of the mother-goddess as the Madonna. They raise the notion that perhaps we are not made in the image of Christ, but in the image of his mother.

But what are these images of non-binary figures at their core? I, again, reference the interesting dynamic between the androgynous anti-gender and the compounded hyper-gender. There exists even a contemporary gendering of these two forms (although in my opinion, they are one and the same). The Androgyne is widely understood in the modern West as masculine, while the hyper/dual-gendered individual is assumed to be feminine. The majority of figures illustrated throughout this project as connected to the femminielli lie on the dual/hyper gendered

side of things. Masculinity is the *default* in patriarchy, so the blank-slate, ‘original’, anti-gendered form remains undeniably boy-like. Eve was made from Adam’s rib.⁶⁸ The assumed ‘artificial,’ further-gendered subject is an exaggerated female figure, perhaps with some masculine attributes, but still with overpowering femininity. Think of gendered bathroom signs: the human figure on its own ascribes to an androgynous human shape, yet is assumed naturally to be male, whereas the female is the original male shape with something... ‘extra’ (a skirt). ‘The masculine’ is considered the human blueprint from which all other genders derive. This belief, rooted in patriarchy, demands the androgynous be masculinized. It is because of this ‘masculine non-binary’ ideal that I have been subject to much peer skepticism regarding my own non-binary identification. I exhibit too much femininity, and do not fulfill their masculine notion of idealized androgyny.

I long to be shaped like a cone. Most days, I strive for pyramidal composition. Flattening my chest whilst draping myself in a long gown, its skirts reach downwards and outwards, like encroaching foliage at the base of a mountain. I like that my long, straight hair, when worn down, flows towards my feet like water, accentuating this tent-like silhouette. A strong foundation, a distinct facial pinnacle—the cone is a shape that simply envelops. Both paternal and maternal, I am enrobed as a priest, enthroned as the Madonna. This minimal shape articulates my own gender more than words or pronouns ever could. *Shape* is not to be taken lightly when it comes to matters of identity. Shape is form, and form heavily influences our own recognitions of gender. We pad hips, broaden shoulders, bind chests, and grow tits. We cover, cut, and grow our hair, we wear clothes that mold our waists or shoes that make us grow two inches. For many of us, shape is the ultimate expression of gender and the ultimate expression of self. As a species,

⁶⁸ Contrastingly enough, all humans begin as biologically female in the womb, which is why we all have nipples.

our ability to influence our individual form so much is something to celebrate. Our malleability is what makes us human. If we look at the etymology of ‘trans’ we come to understand it as physically or metaphysically the ‘in-between’, the ever-fluctuating, the anti-stagnant, the mobile. Queerness does not have to signify *transcendence*, regardless of its sanctified histories. To be queer is to be *radically human*. What shape do you want to be?

Figures



Fig. 1. *Relief of a Gallus, Priest of Magna Mater*. 2nd century CE (Capitoline Museum, Rome).



Fig. 2. *Hermaphroditus, front*. 2nd century CE (Uffizi Museum, Florence).



Fig. 3. *Hermaphroditus*, back. 2nd century CE (Uffizi Museum, Florence).



Fig. 4. *Hermaphroditus*, in room 38. 2nd century CE (Uffizi Museum, Florence).



Fig. 5. Giovanni Francesco Susini. *Hermaphrodite*. 1639 (MET Museum, New York).



Fig. 6. Bartolomeo Nazari. *Portrait of Farinelli*. 1744 (Royal College of Music, London).

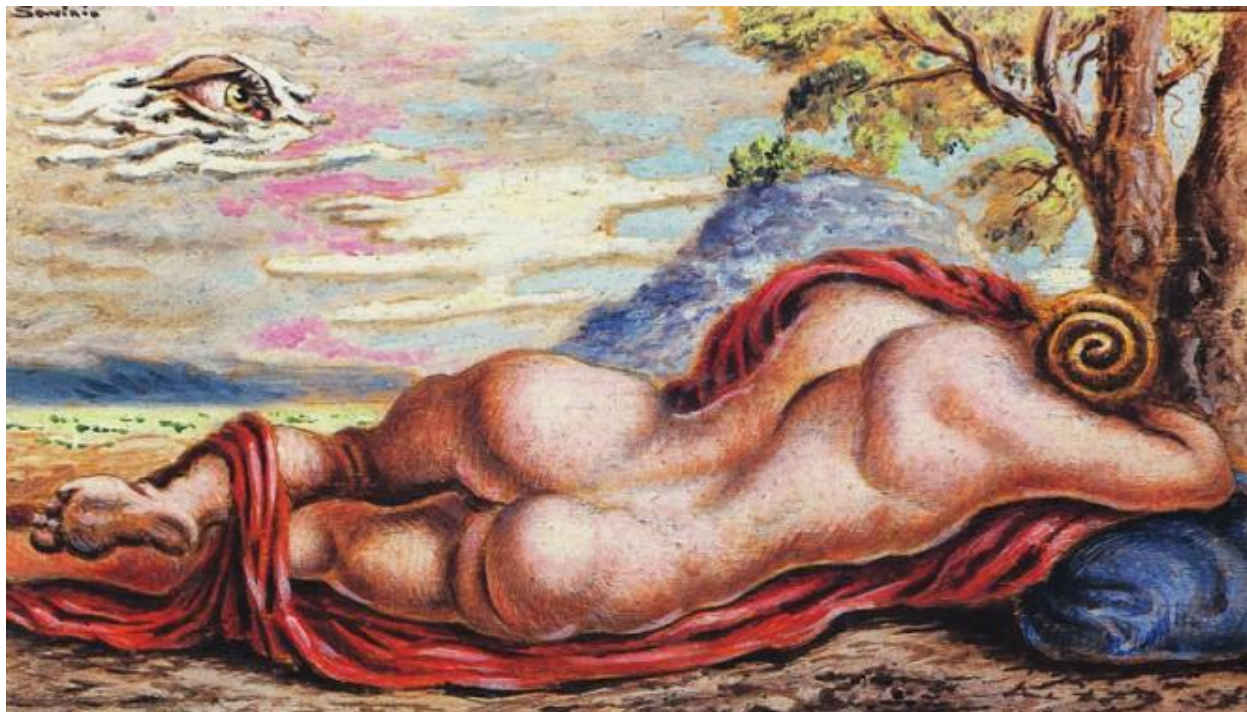


Fig. 7. Alberto Savinio. *Il Riposo Hermaphrodito*. 1944-45 (Private Collection).

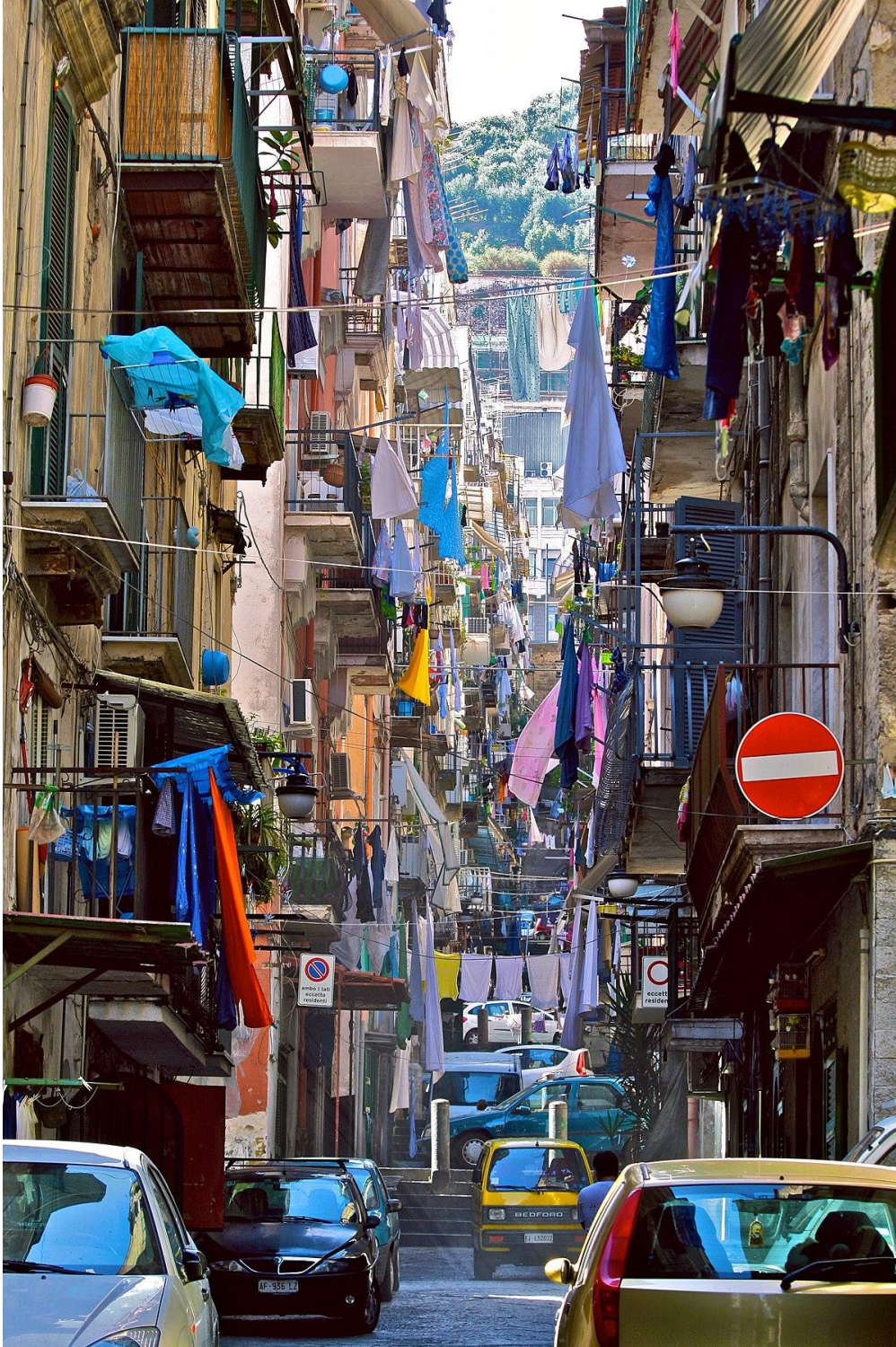


Fig. 8. Jeroen Bennink. *Laundry Day in Naples*. 2010.

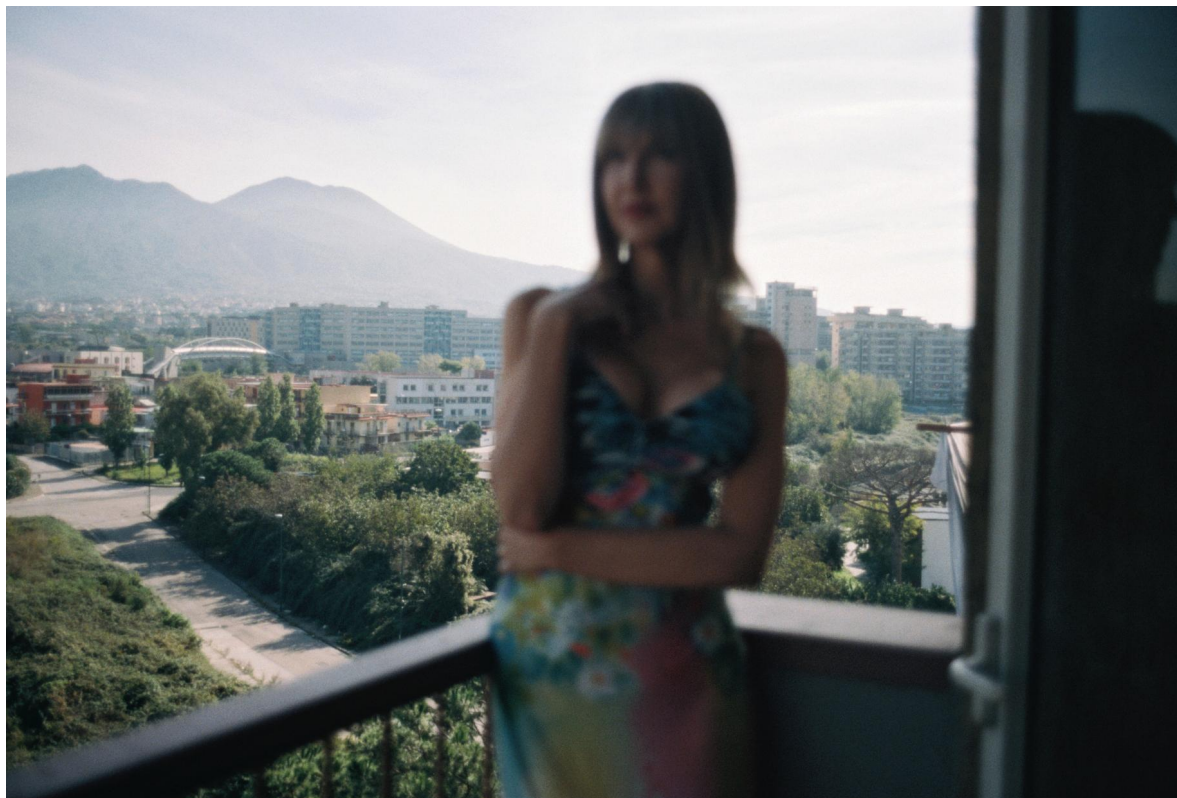


Fig. 9. Jess Kohl. From *Queens of Scampia*. 2020.



Fig. 10. *Ketty Gabriele mugshot*. 2009.



Fig. 11. Gianfranco Vitolo. *Ascent of the Femminielli*. 2017.



Fig. 12. Jess Kohl. From *Matrimonio Dei Femminielli*. 2018.



Fig. 13. Giuseppe Bonito. *Il Femminiello*. 1740/1760 (Portland Art Museum, Oregon).



Fig. 14. Jess Kohl. "Alessia and Mum", from *Queens of Scampia*. 2020.



Fig. 15, Jess Kohl. "Rosaria", from *Queens of Scampia*. 2020.



Fig. 16, Jess Kohl. "Pepe", from *Queens of Scampia*. 2020.

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