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Neapolitan Social-Transgenderism: The Discourse of Valentina OK

Annalisa Di Nuzzo

1 Introduction

Anthropologie du proche (Augé 1996) offers a problematic definition of the "anthropological view", debating the meaning and the duties of an "anthropology of everyday life". According to this view, the anthropologist's job is to make over-interpretations on the cultural behaviours of a certain society which risks either "over"signifying elements or banalising them, thus producing a loss of epistemological identity. Certain aspects of contemporary social life such as kinship, marriage, gift-giving, and exchange are well suited to anthropological research (Héritier 2002). However, the use of material from anthropological observation creates the problem of developing a language and an *écriture* of diversity, as well as the choice of the materials themselves. Del Lago (1995: 41) conceptualises the description of a culture as being "a creative activity that we must take to an extreme as "writing about diversity". I mean rewriting from the point of view of

A. Di Nuzzo (✉)
Dipartimento di Scienze dell'Educazione,
Università degli Studi di Salerno, Fisciano, Italy

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others as a way of documenting their voice, as the presence of the "other" in anthropological practice, and as a covering for the other literary genres" [author's English translation].

Thus, the search for "contiguous" knowledge calls upon different academic fields and textual sources including anthropology, sociology, the novel, and drama, providing each of them with a continuous self-construction of their identities. So the anthropologist will keep on doing anthropology, the novelist will keep on writing novels, and the sociologist will keep on doing sociology, even though each one of them will draw on the others' work. Undoubtedly the excess of meaning that Augé (1996) speaks about contributes to enriching the complexity of the notion of time and space in traditional research and offers new defining horizons. Because of changes in space-time and its rapid transformation, the contemporary world has an ever-increasing need of an anthropological perspective able to provide a renewed and systematic consideration of otherness.

Against such a theoretical backdrop, this paper sets out to analyse the verbal and body language of the late Neapolitan transwoman Valentina OK,[1] a transperson who adopted and re-shaped the traditional figure of the *femminiello*. This figure represents a particular form of crossing over of gender that can be understood as social because it is accepted by the rest of the community and is found in most traditional cultures. The paper hinges on an analysis of media portrayals of Valentina OK and aims to stress their culture-specific ("locally specific") aspects. Following this introduction, Sect. 2 discusses how different cultures accommodate the presence of a gender that has both male and female elements, focusing on the Neapolitan context, while Sect. 3 introduces the television personality Valentina OK. I discuss how she played an important role in guiding young people and fostering acceptance of gender crossing. In the world of *femminielli*, of which Valentina OK represents an evolution, the dimension of constant change may be said to be a constitutive element. Their ability to adjust to time and contexts allows *femminielli* and Valentina OK to take on new roles. Following this discussion, in the conclusion, I argue that the consideration of and reflection upon Valentina's identity can contribute to a fuller understanding of gender.

2 Subtle Cross-Cultural Ambiguity: Crossings and Rituals in Cultures and Neapolitan Specificity

The combination of aspects of male and female gender identity is common to many cultures. In this process of gender definition there may be room for the existence of diversity, or better still for what is usually referred to as not normal or natural. According to Ruth Benedict, normal is culturally expected and socially approved behaviour, while abnormal is behaviour that is perceived as alien to the cultural model of a society (Benedict 1934). So each culture establishes what is normal and what is not, and some cultures develop ways to expel what is different while other cultures tend to integrate such elements. On the one hand, the notion of abnormal supports practices of social exclusion that Lévi-Strauss calls anthropoemic, that expel deviants, while on the other hand, anthropophagic societies digest abnormalities, integrating them into the group through specific functions and rituals (Lévi-Strauss 1966). Generally speaking, many traditional societies had a strongly ambivalent conception of abnormality that was able to combine positive and negative, lewdness and decency, norm and transgression. To make this liminality "acceptable", abnormality is sometimes endowed with magic powers linked to the extra-human, bestowing upon it divine and metaphysical power. These powers depend on its belonging to a dimension that escapes normal categorisations, providing the deviants with knowledge and ways of organising life. This unknown and mysterious dimension is perceived as a well of both beneficial and harmful power. "There is an energy, a surplus of meaning that circulates in the interstices of the categories into which the world is arranged. For this reason, the attitude towards the abnormal is mingled with fear" (Scafoglio 2006a: 158, author's English translation). A peculiar form of abnormality is deviance defined through choices of ambiguous sexual construction.

While each culture creates its own specificity, we can recognise some shared aspects, similar but not identical to, those that we find in the Neapolitan *femminiello* in the Native American *berdache* and in some Iatmul practices of transvestism studied by Bateson (1988) as well as in

the Hijra, a particular caste in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh (Reddy 2005). The common trait of the protagonists of these practices is that they are not male, not female; in different contexts they can be seen as homosexual, transgender, or queer. All these figures have a special relationship with the sacred and are welcome at public ceremonies as bringers of good luck and abundance. They look after children and elderly people and know effective cures and treatments for illness. Until her death, and still today in the Neapolitan collective memory, the figure of Valentina OK represented a continuity and a significant reshaping of this aspect of the sexuality of traditional cultures in post-modernity.[2]

Neapolitan culture is a great container of popular cultural traditions. However, we can ask questions about how definitions of cultural traditions are made and who makes them. For most of the nineteenth century, popular wisdom indicated what belonged to the community as a whole, to the exclusion of the "high" culture enjoyed by intellectual minorities. In this way, popular wisdom is a synonym of the non-intellectual, the traditional, and the archaic. Yet this nineteenth-century definition does not do justice to the articulate and significant internal diversities that make up a society.

With regard to our specific case study, reality is full of hybrid forms of popular rituals and mass culture, that require decoding. In Naples the difference between high and low culture has some very specific features. From the seventeenth century onwards, the nobility lived in close contact with the lower classes: there was a continuous transmission of the popular culture to the aristocracy. It was a sort of mutuality that would lead to the sharing of symbols, values, and meanings, which would bring about a cultural "circularity" among the different social classes (Scafoglio 1996).

Naples is a unique, extremely tolerant and open-minded city: some have called it "the big Mediterranean sponge", the porous city (Velardi 1992) absorbing and then releasing heat; a city which can condense, contain, and conciliate. It is in this context that the transgender person we are investigating here belongs. In all its manifestations, Naples-ness (or *napoletanità*) is full of ambivalence and seeming polarisations that bring about integrations which would be unconceivable in other societies. Valentina's role is certainly divergent compared with the socially codified definitions, namely the correspondence between anatomical sex and

social role, but at the same time it is accepted across the community and all social classes, just like the fluid crossing over between male and female that the *femmeniello* or *femmenella* has been able to interpret for such a long time. Neapolitan tolerance and the popular culture embody and render this a famous figure of diversity and liminality (Goddard 1987). In Neapolitan popular culture, the "*femminiello*" (a Neapolitan dialect word connoting an "effeminate man", a "sissy") is an icon of diversity and tolerance. For centuries, *femminiellos* have spent most of their lives in the alleys (in Mediterranean seaside cities, and towns, streets, and alleys are the places where social bonds are created and maintained), making up their faces, and constructing their body images and their place in society.[3] They have taken care of and protected others through a sometimes extreme theatricalisation that, according to Thomas Belmonte (1997), is part of every gesture and movement in Neapolitan culture. Some even argue that the construction of Neapolitan femininity as the strongly emotive and distinctively bodily-marked phenomenon it is, as represented by such icons as Sophia Loren, is the result of the *femminiello* being in charge of children's education. Theatricalisation not only involves transvestitism or the *femminiellos*' interpretation of their role, but also the way of interpreting male and female roles socially and emotionally. In this sense, in Neapolitan popular culture, being a *femminiello* is not an excess, but a way of living out liminality.

In Naples, *femminielli* marry in the traditional way. They walk through the streets with their grooms and go to restaurants that organise banquets for the whole community; they stand on the church parvis (the Catholic Church considers such unions blasphemous so they would not be allowed inside), they kiss each other, and make their wedding vows dressed in traditional wedding garb: the white dress and all the accessories including veil and flowers. After nine months, a child is born—always a boy—and the birth becomes a ritual representation which takes place within a house and is carried out more discreetly than the other rites. In same-sex couples where one partner is a *femminiello*, the latter pretends to be pregnant and carries out the famous rite known as the *figliata*, where all the phases of pregnancy are enacted: a swollen belly, relaxing on the bed and giving birth to a boy, generally a wooden puppet the size of a new-born baby with a huge phallus to highlight his male sex and strength (for a detailed

literary description of this event, see Malaparte 1981 [1949]). Sometimes, during the christening, the couple show him off, and a woman from the community brings the newborn baby around to make it look like a real baptism.[4] Thus, awareness of having a common social dimension is manifested in a concrete sense. The miracle is that the couple manage to carve out a definition of a role that in reality they do not have. This happens in a continuum of social sharing that does not take place anywhere else in such a ritualised way: "in Naples transvestism is not to be considered as a consequence of disguised virility, but the condition of a present integrated and fully recognised reality" (Simonelli and Carrano 1985: 27, author's English translation).

This is the context from which Valentina OK came. Within Neapolitan circles, as we shall see, she was more than accepted—she was loved. In the following section I show how she created an identity which yielded such a positive response from her audience.

3 Valentina OK

Valentina OK was a transperson who adopted and re-shaped the traditional *femminiello* figure. She used transvestitism and aesthetic surgery as the first steps towards image re-shaping (she died before undergoing transition surgery), internalising the values of *femminiello* culture, establishing continuity between old and new practices and using local television to spread what had all the appearance of a true social message.[5] (See also Di Martino in this volume on this issue.) Rosalia Porcaro, a comic actress who worked for the TV programme *Telegaribaldi* from 1998 to 2000, often did impersonations of Valentina OK: a transvestite imitated by a woman who disguised herself as Valentina. Perhaps it is true to say that only in Naples was it possible to play on the specular reciprocity of genre construction in a comic key.

A critically acclaimed singer, Valentina OK hit the headlines in local and regional news coverage and was written about in the national newspapers in the late 1990s; John Turturro devoted a few seconds to her singing act in his film *Passion* (2010). For several years, she hosted a television show where she would sing songs requested by audience members phoning in, dedicating them to friends or relatives, following a format

and structure that were particularly popular with the local networks. She had blond hair, a supermodel physique and an extremely melodic voice, and she reached the peak of her career when she was in her early twenties. Her transidentity, which bridged the established dichotomy between gender identity and anatomical sex, was the result of her choice to undergo a de-construction/re-construction process of her body: new breasts, hips and thighs, hair loss, beard removal and hormone and silicone injections produced a new, complex sexuality (as illustrated in Fig. 9.1). But the most unexpected fact—which immediately made

Fig. 9.1 Valentina during one of her shows

Valentina OK an atypical transperson, especially taking into account that the context was Southern Italy in the 1990s—was the extreme youth of most of her audience: children and pre-teens were her most devoted followers. The phenomenon may seem unusual at first, but is perhaps not totally unexpected in a city like Naples.

Her show was broadcast on Sundays in an early afternoon time slot, which implied a mainly family audience and, twenty years on, the family still represents the main target of these small local networks. Valentina OK interpreted her role as both a host and a singer by means of a personal communication strategy and an active use of the television medium, constantly referring to her sexual ambiguity. The camera angles were often fixed; in addition, the numerous close-ups were not only the result of her directors' inexperience but the consequence of a precise strategy that Valentina adopted in order to strengthen her personal empathetic relationship with viewers. Her glance, directed towards the camera, was engaging and fundamental in establishing contact with the audience. Her language was simple and apparently trifling, based on the stereotypical repetitiveness of the "phone call-musical request" format. A naive and familiar colloquial tone and "simplicity" were the strengths of her communication code—the OK in her name perfectly fitting with the mundane, repetitive nature of her small talk. And yet, Valentina addressed her viewers with conscious ability. She was determined to further a detailed social agenda on such issues as maternity, family, parenting roles, and the possibility of integrating transgressive gender definitions with serenity, respect, and tolerance, especially in those neglected and marginalised contexts where violence is commonly encountered. During phone calls, she often asked male viewers whether they were in a relationship and what their girlfriend's name was, focusing her conversations on life as a couple. Through their repetitiveness, these claims produced a celebration of stereotypes as well as feelings of a shared respectability which might have appeared incompatible with her character.

Table 9.1 shows a brief exchange taken from one of Valentina's many television programmes:

Her communication strategy was to appeal to different kinds of audience, as she clarified in an interview that I carried out in 1999 (Table 9.2).

Table 9.1 Extracts from the Telegaribaldi programme "Valentina"

Valentina: Ciao, Pronto chi sei amore	Valentina: Hello, who are you, love?
Spettatrice: Sono Katiuscia e ti voglio bene e voglio sentire la tua voce e la tua canzone	Viewer: I'm Katie and I love you and I want to hear your voice and your song
Valentina: Quale vuoi che ti dedico?	Valentina: What do you want me to dedicate to you?
Spett: Una qualunque basta che la scegli tu e la canti in diretta al telefono così io la posso cantare con te … (Iniziano a cantare insieme…)	Viewer: Anything as long as you choose it and you sing it live on the phone so I can sing along with you … (They start to sing together…)
Valentina: Un bacio fortissimo ti voglio bene e ti auguro ogni bene	Valentina: A big kiss I love you and I wish you every happiness
In un'altra telefonata Valentina porta avanti una sorta di monologo ecumenico in cui saluta tutti e tutta la città di Napoli nominando tutti i quartieri uno per uno:	*In another call Valentina makes a sort of speech to the city and the world where she greets everyone and the whole city of Naples, naming all the districts one by one*:
Valentina: Un bacio fortissimo per Elena, ai quartieri spagnoli, un bacio e un saluto per Enzo, per la mamma, per tutti quelli che soffrono, e che hanno problemi, vi voglio bene a tutti e un saluto per tutti i quartieri: Sanità. Forcella, e un bacio dappertutto e per chi non è libero "presto a libertà".	Valentina: A big kiss to Elena, to the Spanish Quarter, a kiss and a hello to Enzo, to mum, to everyone who's suffering and has problems, I love you all and I want to say a big hello to all the different districts: Sanità. Forcella, and a kiss everywhere. And for anyone who is not free, "get out soon".[a]
Spettatore: Grazie Valentina ti vogliamo bene, sei tutti noi, sei una brava ragazza, sei OK, canta per me	Viewer: Thanks Valentina we love you, you're all of us, you're a good girl, you're OK, sing for me

[a]The last comment is a coded message that many Neapolitans use to wish that anyone in prison be set free very soon

Valentina always achieved the desired result. In a similar way to the much-loved UK radio comedy characters Julian and Sandy, two gay men who also broadcast for a family audience on Sunday afternoons (see Baker 2002), part of her charm was that she was accepted and successful because she was seen as unthreatening: she was kind, interested in others, and she engaged in small talk. Her female audience expressed solidarity with her; Italian women, who usually do not establish positive

Table 9.2 Extracts from an interview carried out by Annalisa Di Nuzzo at the headquarters of Telecolore Salerno, Naples 28 June 1999

I: Perché il tuo successo e chi è il tuo pubblico?	I: What makes you such a success and who are your audience?
V: Io non voglio piacere solo agli uomini … io voglio piacere a tutti e non mi interessa essere comm' Pamela Prati na' bambola tutta sesso … io voglio essere amica di tutti quelli che mi telefonano … voglio far ascoltare la mia musica … e voglio dire una parola per i loro problemi, per quelli che soffrono, che stanno in carcere e poi voglio sentire i bambini … Il mio programma è la voce di tutti senza differenze e le mie canzoni parlano della vita e dell'amore. Proprio come quando parlo in diretta con il mio pubblico io dico quello che penso … io non faccio nessuna recita … sono spontanea	V: I don't just want men to like me … I want everyone to like me and I don't want to be like Pamela Prati, just a sex doll … I want to be a friend to everyone who phones me … I want people to listen to my music … and I want to say a word or two about their problems, something for everyone who suffers, something for those in prison, and I want to hear from the kiddies … My programme is the voice of everybody, without distinction, and my songs talk about life and love. Just like when I talk live with my audience I say what I think … it's not a performance … I'm just myself

relations with transpeople due to their strong Catholic upbringing—especially at that time—acknowledged the criteria of a fully shared beauty in her, due to her simplicity and lack of excessive ostentation, just like a good family girl.

Feminine but "no sex doll", Valentina claimed the right to express her opinion on her audience's problems and showed energy and strength in her decisions, clearly displaying a leading role as social guide, one which is traditionally masculine ("and I want to say a word or two about their problems, something for everyone who suffers: those in prison, and I want to hear from the kiddies … My programme is the voice of all, without distinction"). In this way she offered a distinct verbal model of positively aimed masculinity. Assertive but not violent or vulgar, feminine but not submissive or meek, Valentina displayed both the feminine abilities of the skilled conversationalist that Fishman 1980 describes as necessary to negotiate uncooperative male behaviour and the self-confidence and advice-giving role typical of male conversation (Tannen 1990). She did not live long enough to undergo full gender reassignment surgery,

Table 9.3 Extracts from an interview carried out by Annalisa Di Nuzzo at the headquarters of Telecolore Salerno, Naples 28 June 1999

I: Come hai vissuto il tuo corpo?	I: Tell me about your relationship with your body
V: Man mano che crescevo mi sono sentita prigioniera volevo esprimere i miei desideri e le mie emozioni attraverso un'altra me stessa che non voleva i peli sul viso, le mani nodose ma fianchi morbidi e seni femminili e desiderava allo stesso tempo essere forte decisa non volgare, trasgressiva e scandalizzare … io ci credo alla famiglia ai sentimenti di fedeltà e di rispetto, di amore verso i bambini che sono la mia gioia … volevo i miei valori senza ricorrere alle "arti femminili" per raggirare gli uomini. Ho sofferto molto per raggiungere il corpo che ho … Medicinali, cambiamento dei miei muscoli … un metabolismo stravolto … ma ho raggiunto il mio benessere e non sarà solo l'operazione chirurgica finale a cambiarmi, io sono unica e sonoinsieme più cose…	V: As I grew up I felt like a prisoner: I wanted to express my desires and my emotions through another myself who didn't want hair on her face or muscly hands, but soft hips and feminine breasts and at the same time I wanted to be strong and determined, not vulgar, transgressive, scandalous … I believe in the family, and feelings of loyalty and respect, and love for children, who are a real joy to me … I wanted my values without resorting to "feminine wiles" to get round men. I suffered a lot to get the body that I have … Medicine, changes to my muscles … my metabolism turned upside down … but I've found my peace of mind and it won't just be the final operation that will change me … I am unique and at the same time lots of things…

but as she clearly understood, the final operation would not have changed the unique being that she was (Table 9.3).

The repetitive obsessiveness of ritual phrases such as "Ti amo/I love you", "Mando un bacio a tutti/I blow a kiss to everyone", "OK", "Saluto…/I say hello to…", emphasises the phatic communication function of her speech, giving her viewers a sense of reassurance and belonging to a community, which is a typical aspect of private Neapolitan TV networks. It was (and is) an extremely varied world, which cannot simply be connoted as media for the underclasses, but one which shares a transversal element: social marginality. The peculiar composition of Neapolitan society implies a clarification of the role of the marginal classes. Marginality does not fall under the categories determined by one's social function or the related role one plays in the more or less consolidated

traditional hierarchy of the social classes; it depends on a series of distinguishing components and economic powers. Therefore, the peddler who owns a large truck and goes to every regional market is marginal; the person with a criminal record who rips others off using new information technology is marginal; the civil servant who "uses" bureaucracy to personal advantage is marginal. A chain of values is therefore established which is no longer ascribable to a typical census. The Valentina OK character understood this perfectly, and she interpreted her communicative text and based her role of social representation on the element of reassurance. The consequent message produced new schemes of gender definition together with values of diversity integration.

There was a strong, noticeable, and immediately engaging desire for clarity and acceptance in Valentina OK, even in personal contacts. Her hands (Fig. 9.1) highlighted the irreducibility of her masculine origin, pointing to a complicated diversity: an *abnormality* to be accepted. The audience shared this identity-alterity dialectic, the homogenisation of diversity found in the very marginality of those watching the show.

Needing a workable and new definition of "transgender", Valentina especially used her unique gender performance to talk to children and establish a special, engaging relationship with them, revealing a deep-rooted maternal dimension. During her show, the phone calls she received from this specific audience were characterised by a particular empathy, full of serenity and sweetness, together with Valentina's ability to access and share the world of the child with easy spontaneity. Sometimes the fatuous dynamics of the conversations opened up to reveal unsuspected relational skills, paving the way for real dialogue. So Valentina talked about the toys, childhood friendships, and habits of her callers as well as the importance of parents, especially the mother. Valentina's young followers almost saw her as a nouvelle Alice leading them to an (albeit provincial) TV Wonderland. Valentina continuously highlighted an atavistic but also present-day feeling in males, the biologically impossible but culturally desired feeling of maternity, which was more intensely lived out in her desire to lay claim to her acquired femininity.

Thus, like the most highly acclaimed stars in traditional Anglo-Saxon culture, she went to the children's hospitals in the city, bringing gifts to the neediest patients, gifts which she herself had received from more fortunate children. She was at ease moving through the hospital wards, asking about

the health of the patients, hugging and cuddling them, and the "event" was filmed each time to add a new scene to her tried and tested script. Ward nurses contributed spontaneously to the scene, greeting her warmly, kissing her and calling blessings down upon her in a surprising "order-disorder" contamination. A double ancestral need seems to emerge during these events, as identified by Simonelli and Carrano (1985): on the one hand the masculine expression of control and responsibility on the future generations (which is inevitably jeopardised in such crucial physiological moments as childbirth or breastfeeding, when the woman is the real protagonist), on the other hand the implicit declaration of freedom from feminine power on those same generations that Valentina OK has "adopted". Valentina OK's behaviour is a manifestation of these ancestral needs which still exist and characterise contemporary Neapolitan society, but also other contexts, where maternity has always represented a true matriarchy. A mainly matriarchal family structure still exists in Naples, with a significant influence on the children and their behaviours (Scafoglio 2006b) in an economically disadvantaged city with a lack of stability in masculine models. According to a line of research dating back to the 1960s,[6] in the context of the Neapolitan family and the social reality described above, a son may simultaneously repudiate and interiorise the maternal model, ultimately making a transgender choice. It was as an intrusive and power-wielding mother that Valentina OK talked to children, well aware of the seductive game she was sometimes playing with her young audience, in an almost subliminal way. Today, the narrow backstreets of Naples that provided a specific context and distribution of roles are disappearing and have been replaced by a sort of virtual backstreet within the local television networks, where the younger generations have an outlet for self-expression and entertainment offered by a new-found media visibility.

Valentina would ask questions, especially about the pre-teens' everyday lives. During a programme broadcast by the national TV network RAI 2, she repeatedly declared her particular interest in pre-teens, calling herself their confidante. She referred in particular to those children aged thirteen to fourteen going through a difficult puberty, especially if they were becoming aware of a gender identity different from their anatomical sex. This reference to age groups does not reflect those rigidly schematised by developmental psychologists (obviously Valentina was not abreast of academic developments), but it shows how she instinctively understood

the importance of this transitional phase from childhood to adulthood. Her interest in youngsters starts from childhood, with the young spectators who follow her and then she feels responsible, guiding and supporting them in the difficult phase when they become aware of their sexual orientation. The help of a person like Valentina could be crucial in finding what she herself defined as "the courage necessary to be what you really are, to establish your own identity in spite of everything, always with the help of the Lord, avoiding foolish, impulsive actions or selling out" (RAI 2 1998).

Valentina explained the reason for this unexpected success with a very young audience in an interview (Table 9.4).

Table 9.4 Extracts from an interview carried out by Annalisa Di Nuzzo at the headquarters of Telecolore Salerno, Napoli, 28 June 1999

I: Perché tanti ragazzi ti seguono?	I: Why do young people like you so much?
V: Forse perché sono diventata la loro confidente … specialmente per quei ragazzi di 13–14 anni che stanno passando un momento difficile perché si sentono diversi da quello che li vogliono far essere. Io posso essere per loro un esempio … non li voglio far soffrire ma piuttosto rendere possibile quello che è successo a me anche con l'aiuto della famiglia … si può trovare il modo. Per me la televisione è anche questo Valentina lo può fare per dire che si può trovare quel coraggio necessario per essere ciò che si è, per affermarsi a dispetto di tutto, ma con l'aiuto del Signore, senza colpi di testa, senza svendersi. I ragazzi di oggi che amano e seguono Valentina quando saranno adulti non si comporteranno come molti adulti di oggi, sono convinta che saranno diversi e non costringeranno i loro figli, se ci saranno problemi, a nascondersi, a fuggire, credo che da questo punto di vista sarà un mondo certamente migliore	V: Perhaps because I've become their confidante … especially for those aged 13–14 who are going through a bad patch because they feel different from what the others want them to be. I can be an example to them … I don't want to make them suffer, but to make possible what happened to me, also with the help of the family … you can find a way. Television is about this too. Valentina can go on TV to say that you can find the courage needed to be what you are, to affirm yourself despite everything, but with the Lord's help, without doing anything impulsive, without selling out. The kids who love and follow Valentina won't behave like a lot of adults today, I'm quite sure they'll be different and won't force their children to hide or run away if there are problems. I think it'll definitely be a better world from that point of view

During television interviews she would stroke a soft toy while sitting on a bed in a room that could have belonged to one of her followers, one of those children joining her numerous fan clubs in Naples and the surrounding area (she herself still lived with her parents). So it almost seemed natural that the Italian national television network would ask her to host a national show for children, an idea which was eventually shelved mainly because the rest of Italy was not ready to accept her progressive social message as Naples had done.

This is due to the history of the city, which has made possible the circulation of values beyond differences in wealth, role, or class. Over the years, Naples has been less influenced by the religious puritanism and bourgeois ideas of decency that Catholic culture (that censors any form of sexuality which is not targeted to Catholic marriage and family) has imposed on the rest of Italy. Pasolini[7] used to say that Neapolitans would not allow themselves to be changed because their culture is close-knit and cuts through class differences. For some, this has been a sign of provincialism and a rejection of modernity, but in this case it is a question of greater openness and autonomy.[8] Valentina knew what she was managing to achieve and how effective her communication was, as she herself put it: "Above all I would really appreciate it if people understood that I am a slightly different kind of transsexual person: I am not the kind of person who seeks to cause a scandal on TV or to exploit my looks and my body. I have my own sensitivity as an artist, which is why mothers choose to let their children watch my shows" (Elia 1997, author's English translation). Valentina was therefore trying to reach out to the whole family sphere, positively affirming her own diversity in order to bridge and mediate teenage conflicts and crises, avoiding social fracture and presenting herself as an example of someone who emerged from her own crisis in a positive way. Parents acknowledged her role, trusting her, following her on television, and expecting her to fulfil the function of teaching "openness towards the world" and towards the universe of feelings for "the other". She still performs this role even after her death, claiming positive values such as family, religion, and maternity to be passed on to future generations.

4 Conclusion

This chapter has tried to illustrate the fascinating process of integration of the different layers that coexist in Neapolitan culture. Naples has explored and reshaped the theme of sexual diversity through the figure of the *femminiello*. Identity is not built up through a simple play of opposites, but through gender transgression, side by side with social constructs. Indeed *femminielli* enjoy weddings, baptisms, and a series of other rites, in which all the others from the alleys (*vicoli*[9]) participate. They are also essential guests at traditional gatherings and rituals marking births, deaths, and marriages. Like all self-respecting communities, *femminielli* have ritualised these fundamental moments of their "being in the world". So there is a queer dimension that is implicit in some aspects of Neapolitan culture. This dimension, consciously ambiguous in relation to the different genders that coexist, is a deliberate choice to remain suspended between the two dimensions of masculine and feminine. Its starting point is the lacerated forms of the relationship between corporality and sexual identity, as Valentina shows, resulting then in new harmonies, "working" on the body to re-establish different relationships between identity and gender.

Judith Butler speaks of *Bodies that Matter* (1993), and of freeing oneself as Valentina did, from what she (Butler) calls *gender performativity*. Western culture has always tried to divide sex and gender, associating sex with matter (the body) and gender with culture. What makes Valentina remarkable is her alignment with a way of being that is essentially post-modern where the result consists of an integration of masculine and feminine identities that become and continuously cross over into each other, sustaining and problematising each other. To identify as transgender is often to endure a long and arduous process that combines pleasure and pain, a request for legitimate happiness and transgressive serenity. In interviews with, and statements by, Valentina the need emerges to overcome the logic of duality and to be seen as including both masculine and feminine elements, in other words as queer (Alfano Miglietti 2002). Each identity category—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and heterosexual—can coalesce into a general queerness that does not result in an ambiguous chaotic vortex,

but a mutual recognition. The challenge of queerness consists in the perpetual questioning of the established unity of sexual identity, which can constantly be redefined.

As Valentina suggested in our last meeting: "If you want to say who Valentina is, or what Valentina does, you can't. No one can". The construction of the personage is complete, like that of the mystery. The impossibility of definition is a characteristic of our time. It is the essence of "queer", as Halperin (1995: 61–62) describes it: "Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without essence".

Being female, male, or transgender, becomes an element of social visibility, a new category of socio-cultural transformation of which Valentina is a unique herald, detached from corporeality, from nature, a dream in the anthropological imaginary. The culture of the city of Naples, which tends to go beyond mere tolerance, to understand diversity and to be a cultural laboratory of post-modernity in which tradition is innovation, is ahead of its time and simultaneously an original reinterpretation. A city in which purity and danger, order and disorder, lawful and the unlawful, obscenity and purity, and the perverse and the ordinary continue to live without the need to reiterate modalities, rituals, and sanctions, Naples is a fascinating and multifaceted polymorph. It is rich in sensuality that restores zones of interdiction and offers original reinterpretations. Valentina was one of the thousand faces of this Neapolitan kaleidoscope.

Notes

1. Valentina died in September 2014.
2. On these comparisons see: Zito E. and Valerio P., *Corpi sull'uscio, identità possibili. Il fenomeno dei femminielli a Napoli*, Naples, Filema, 2010; Ferrari F., *Non gender specifico nel XXI secolo nell'Asia Meridionale.* "Trickster", n.3. università di Padova 2007; Butler J., *La disfatta del genere* Meltemi, Rome 2004; Zito E. and Valerio P. (eds), *Genere: femminielli. Espolarioni antropologiche e psicologiche*, Libreria Dante & Descartes, Naples, 2013; D'Agostino

G., *I Femminielli napoletani: alcune riflessioni antropologiche, in Genere: femminielli. Espolazioni antropologiche e psicologiche*, Libreria Dante & Descartes, Naples, 2013; pp. 75–106; Callender Ch., Kochems L. M., The North American Berdache, "Current Anthropology", 24, 4 (Aug.–Oct.). 1983; Héritier F., Dissolvere la gerarchia. Maschile/femminile II, Raffaello Cortina, Milan, 2004; Herdt G., *Guardians of the Flautes. Idioms of Masculinity*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1981.

3. As I will clarify in the following paragraphs, *femminiellos* meet up on the occasion of traditional celebrations like weddings and christenings. The *vicolo* (the narrow street where she has her home, a *basso*, a one-room flat at street level where eyes peep in and out) is the place where social relationships are maintained.
4. In seventeenth-century England, men known as Mollies conducted weddings among themselves, as well as enactments of childbirth (Norton 1992). They were not widely accepted like the *femminiellos*: in fact, they were criminalised.
5. For more details about Valentina OK and the changes in postmodernist Neapolitan culture, cf. Di Nuzzo (2007, 2009, 2013).
6. Victoria Goddard's research confirms the essential role of women in conserving group identity in the marginal classes in Naples. Maternal power is consolidated through the control and exclusion of males from areas of domestic skills. Victoria Goddard, "Women's Sexuality and Group Identity in Naples", in *The Cultural Construction of Sexuality*, ed. Pat Caplan (London: Tavistock, 1987). See also Sydel Silverman, "The Life Crisis as a Clue to Social Function" in *Anthropological Quarterly*, 40 (1967): 127–138.
7. Pasolini P. P., *La napoletanità*, in Saggi sulla politica e sulla società, Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude (eds), vol. I, Milano, Mondadori, 1999, pp. 230–231.
8. Giddens A., Identità e società moderna, Napoli, Ipermedium, 1999.
9. See footnote 3.

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