

Introduction

Italian Trans Geographies: Retracing Trans/Cultural Narratives of People and Places

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In the documentary film *Comizi d'amore* (*Love Talks*, 1965), director Pier Paolo Pasolini travels across the Italian peninsula like “a sort of traveling salesman” to interview Italians about their opinions on gender and sexuality.³ Throughout his journey, Pasolini discusses love and sex with people of all ages and different socioeconomic backgrounds: children and the elderly, male chauvinists and emancipated women, northern factory workers and southern peasants, families vacationing at the beach and young people having fun in a dance hall, illiterates and intellectuals. By gathering so many voices, *Comizi d'amore* succeeded in showing a multifaceted—though often reticent and rather conformist—perspective on questions that are still relevant more than fifty years later, including sexuality, marriage, gender roles, and sex work. However, if one considers that while making this film Pasolini was keeping his homosexuality hidden from his audience, it seems paradoxical—and certainly ironic—that the only voices that remained completely unheard in *Comizi d'amore* are those of sexual and gender minorities. Still, despite being excluded, these underrepresented people and their narratives become a central object of discussion in the movie: indeed, all Pasolini’s interviewees, when asked about “sexual abnormality,” rush to distance themselves from what they regard as a disgusting abomination or a pitiful illness, and promptly condemn those *invertiti* (inverts)⁴ who transgress from the norm. Nevertheless,

this patriarchal and androcentric view, while demonstrating a repulsion for any form of sexual and gender diversity, at least acknowledges the existence of “deviant” men; conversely, the possibility that *invertite* (literally, “female inverts”) might exist is not even remotely recognized in the film.⁵

Italian Trans Geographies is modeled after Pasolini’s thought-provoking “love talks” but changes the narrative point of view from the cisgender crowd to trans people and expands the inquiry beyond the Italian peninsula, interrogating members of the Italian American diaspora as well as trans migrants who moved to Italy.⁶ In giving voice and visibility to this alternative perspective, we—myself and the two other editors of this book, Marzia Mauriello and Summer Minerva—have drawn especially on the practice and poetics of Porpora Marcasciano. Marcasciano is a sociologist, human-rights activist, and leading figure of the Italian trans movement who since the 1980s has been at the forefront of struggles for gender self-determination and civil rights in Italy. In conjunction with her LGBT+ activism, she has engaged in extensive documentation, combining her commitment to trans liberation with her passion for storytelling. Her accounts of grassroots trans history include memoirs, essays, and collections of interviews, among which are *AntoloGaia: Vivere sognando e non sognando di vivere; I miei anni settanta (AntholoGay: Living Dreaming and Not Dreaming of Living; My Seventies*, 2007; 2nd ed. 2016), *Favolose narranti: Storie di transessuali (Fabulous Narrator: Stories of Transsexuals*, 2008), *L’aurora delle trans cattive: Storie, sguardi e vissuti della mia generazione trans (The Dawn of the Bad Trans Women: Stories, Fragments, and Experiences of My Trans Generation*, 2018), and *Tra le rose e le viole: La storia e le storie di transessuali e travestiti (Among Roses and Violets: The Story and the Stories of Transsexuals and Transvestites*, 2002; 2nd ed. 2020). As she stated in her introduction to *Elementi di critica trans (Elements of Trans Critique*, 2010), a volume that resulted from a seminar organized by Marcasciano and other trans activists, a key component of the trans movement resides in an ongoing process of self-recognition and narration. That process, much like the 1970s feminist engagement with self-discovery and collective sharing,⁷ has its roots in the nexus between gaining individual awareness (the practice of starting from oneself) and participating in a movement, an idea that Marcasciano expands upon: “Reflecting and thinking about one’s path means reappropriating it; it means becoming writers of *our own* history and, by writing it, giving *our own* meaning to it.”⁸ By contrast, if people are unable to retell their history in their own terms, it will be impossible to build a new future and envision different paths that can challenge those generated by the words of patriarchal—and explicitly as well as implicitly

transphobic—narratives. This is why storytelling can serve as a personal and political instrument of transformation.

But what is the storytelling strategy that has the potential to change dominant narratives and reframe the expectations of the cisgender audience? The revolution, Marcasciano has contended, is achieved through laughter;⁹ in fact, her use of humor has been a successful strategy to “make space where there is no space”¹⁰ and win over a non-trans audience that might be inherently biased or simply unequipped to comprehend gender diversity. Likewise, the adoption of comedic or ironic elements is a storytelling device to which other gender nonconforming authors anthologized in this volume have similarly resorted, in order to create an immediate, and perhaps unexpected, connection with their audience.¹¹ Ultimately, for Marcasciano, performing the role of contemporary bard of the trans movement is a constructive form of activism.¹² Words have a world-making function, she has maintained, and giving voice to experiences has the potential to foster future geographies, perhaps even dreamlike, joyful ones, by opening new cognitive and affective routes across gendered spaces and gender identities.¹³

Inspired by Marcasciano’s poetics—a poetics in which storytelling, entertainment, political action, and fanciful visions are intertwined—this volume charts overlooked sites of Italian culture through narratives of gender nonconforming people. The overarching goal is to generate new cultural spaces of memorialization, critical reflection, and opportunities for interaction in the present. Playing on the interpretative potential of the word “trans” (“across” and “beyond”), *Italian Trans Geographies* shows how trans people have been shaped by the places they have traversed and, in turn, have contributed in shaping those places. The book illustrates how documenting stories of gender transition is not solely a question of LGBTQ+ civil rights; it is a much broader matter that involves diving into the centuries-old syncretism of Italian culture, venturing into migration journeys, challenging white monoculturalism, and moving across issues of class, race, and gender inequality. In the accounts in this volume, Italy functions both as a place for the investigation of the trans experience in its relation to a specific territory and as a larger “identity factor” that contributes to the construction of one’s subjectivity. If the geographic focus of our investigation is on Italy, this geography does not remain within the country’s borders: Italy becomes simultaneously a magnifying lens and an enlarged context, filled with identity symbolisms. In the trans narratives of people and places featured in this collection, the Italian peninsula represents a multifaceted space of transitions: an ancient Mediterranean landscape where cultures have mingled for centuries; the

land of the economic miracle, in which the influence of American cultural and economic models has been pivotal; a diasporic land, abandoned and idealized. This is particularly visible in the narratives of Italian American trans people, whose ethnic background interacts with their trans identity, embodying the multidimensionality of the identity experience and arising from their inherent, and incessant, crossing of borders.

There are two key terms in this volume: “trans” and “geographies.” “Trans” is adopted here as an umbrella term that, in providing a unifying label for gender variance, cannot encompass all the many specific diversities and concerns expressed by gender nonconforming individuals. This aspect is effectively stated in the aforementioned book *Elementi di critica trans*; there, Nicoletta Poidimani maintains that trans experiences have been grouped together in an all-encompassing category in order to be socially represented but notes that this category is difficult to map with precision, as “it constantly pushes its borders further and further, reaching the point of subverting itself.”¹⁴ Areas of inner subversion include, on the one hand, trans-normativity tendencies—people who try to erase their transition path to exclusively affirm their post-surgical identity¹⁵—and, on the other, the acritical adoption of a queer fluidity that might misrepresent the experience of trans subjectivities (e.g., transsexual or intersex people) and generate a “globalized indifference” for the specificity of their struggles.¹⁶ Poidimani’s view is in line with trans studies scholars who have warned of the risk of exclusively identifying trans individuals with narratives of gender transition, “as if certain concrete somethings could be characterized as ‘crossers,’ while everything else could be characterized by boundedness and fixity.”¹⁷ The many stories in this book contribute to charting the diversity inherent to trans identities and the contradictions underlying the unifying trans category. Some authors can hardly position themselves within the notion of gender and might agree with Marcasciano’s assertion that “among heterosexuals I felt gay, among gay men I felt like a trans woman, and among trans women I felt I was something else or, better yet, somewhere else.”¹⁸ Others have embraced a masculine or feminine identity without modifying their bodily appearance; still others have decided to modify their bodies or go through gender reassignment surgery to better express their gender identities. And yet, for the majority of them, coming out and transitioning did not represent a final destination but rather marked an important milestone in a path made by and opened to many other experiences. Touching on this point, LGBTQ+ activist, performer, and educator Egon Botteghi has made clear that it would be too confining to use his trans identity as the only measure of his

engagement. Botteghi goes on to explain that, as an environmentalist, he has participated in numerous projects in his hometown, Livorno, in Tuscany. For example, since 2015, he has been involved in the collective reappropriation of an abandoned green area that was converted into an urban garden. As Botteghi concludes: “Trans people can carry on very important struggles in their territory, and the complexity of their identities cannot be exhausted by their being trans, so that their engagement and their whole existence are seemingly flattened on this one thing.”¹⁹ To summarize, a crucial point raised by Botteghi is that while identities inevitably create gendered spaces, those spaces should never become places of stalemate and self-confinement.

Regarding the second key term, “geographies”: the exploration of the relationships between trans bodies and their surrounding spaces is certainly not novel to this book. Indeed, the nexus between sense of place and gender identity has been investigated by a variety of studies, which all predicate their arguments and assessments on feminist, queer, and critical race theories and practices that have demonstrated the ways in which “social differences are the effects of how bodies inhabit spaces with others.”²⁰ There are, however, some discipline-specific aspects of this research that should be noted.²¹

Since the 1980s, geographers of gender and sexualities have shown that “space is fundamental to the ideological and material production of the dominant and normative,” and this interconnection might indeed explain why LGBTQ+ communities initially developed in marginalized areas—“gay ghettos”—at the periphery of heteronormative desires and behaviors.

More recent research has reframed the stark divide between normative and transgressive spaces to articulate how geographies are constantly defined and redefined by the interplay between the material and the figurative, the corporeal and the imaginative.²² Spaces are not intrinsically straight or gay, and people who identify as LGBTQ+ embody multiple diversities that go beyond attempts to assimilate “on the basis of largely capitalist and heteronormative values” or confining themselves to transgressive spaces.²³ In light of this reframing, studies in the emerging subfield of trans geographies have been focusing instead on the “importance and distinctiveness of trans* and intersex people,”²⁴ giving consideration to how different “bodies and spaces . . . revolve around, resist, and live in-between and beyond binary gender.”²⁵ Trans people have indeed generated new social codes and modes of interactions in places perceived as ordinary (e.g., workplaces, public restrooms, or sports venues).

Geographies of “r/existence”—Marcasciano’s term²⁶—can be located everywhere, yet, historically, urban settings have been a particular arena for

the rise of LGBTQ+ groups. “Rainbow cities” across the world represent “a milieu of political, economic, cultural, urban and social aspects [that have been] crucial for LGBT inclusiveness.”²⁷ Cities have put forward political agendas centered on “the issue of the equality of citizens,” becoming sounding boards for the need for legislative action at the national level.²⁸ In the case of Italy, the proposal of a law against homo-transphobia in 2020 (the Zan Law)²⁹ and the introduction of same-sex civil unions in 2016 demonstrates how Rome, Bologna, Naples, and other Italian cities have been a driving force in modeling inclusive local legislations that have typically resulted from the “virtuous triangulation [of] mayors–associationism–cities.”³⁰

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the academic field of trans studies originally developed from the reconstruction of subaltern geographies—bars, clubs, hotels—in cities such as San Francisco and New York, where, in the 1960s, police repression, criminal exploitation, and LGBTQ+ activism reached a turning point.³¹ This is indeed the setting of Leslie Feinberg’s autobiographical novel *Stone Butch Blues* (1993), the bildungsroman of a young factory worker who finds themselves fighting for gender self-determination and workers’ rights, first in Buffalo and then in New York City. Moreover, it is important to recall that the Stonewall Inn—the bar where, on June 28, 1969, the most monumental civil rights uprising took place in New York City’s Greenwich Village—is one of those urban sites in which diasporic geographies contributed to the construction of a subversive North American landscape during the following decades. Those at the heart of this rebellion were not just Sylvia Rivera, an American activist of Latinx descent, who is believed to have started the protest, and Marsha P. Johnson, one of the first Black icons of the trans movement in the US.³² The exploration in this volume draws attention to the intricate gendered and cultural geographies that developed within gay bars. In these establishments run by the local mafia (which illegally served alcohol to the transgender and homosexual clientele), the Italian American mobsters’ exoticized masculinity converged with queer expressions of sexuality and gender. Yet, for some, having a shared Italian ancestry with the mafiosi bar owners helped activists fighting for equal rights as LGBTQ+ to break through certain identity barriers.³³

However, also these niche spaces outside mainstream culture ended up reproducing geographies of exclusion that reinstated hierarchical binaries. As Renato Busarello recalls in *Elementi di critica trans*, in the late 1970s, the rising Italian LGBT+ movement eventually rejected the performativity of “the fairy, [or] the transvestite” to embrace a mainstream path that identified

the sole subject of fights for civil rights with the masculine gay.³⁴ This shift mirrors what happened in the post-Stonewall epoch in the US, when it became clear that racialized street queens and sex workers like Rivera and Johnson remained isolated. While they were still participating in groups like GAA (Gay Activists Alliance) and GLF (Gay Liberation Front), their struggle for survival was at odds with the assimilationist politics of the movement.³⁵ Indeed, in 1986, when the New York City Council finally approved a homosexual rights bill, there was no mention of trans people. Furthermore, both in Italy and in the US, trans women were often antagonized by feminist groups, who felt that trans women were reproducing sexist stereotypes and, despite wearing female clothes, still benefited from their male privilege.³⁶ As these inner conflicts show, even the outposts of sexual liberation and gender equality ultimately generated problematic inner geographies of oppression and inequity.

The type of academic research developed by the aforementioned studies on gender and space finds an obvious “geographic” limitation in its narrow circulation, typically within academia. *Italian Trans Geographies* seeks to reach a broader audience by mapping the intersections of space, place, culture, and gender variance, through texts authored by either trans people or by allies who have closely collaborated with trans individuals and respected their authorship. If one were to categorize the nonfiction works anthologized in this volume—memoirs, interviews, scholarly essays, poems, documentary films, songs, performances, and photographs—within a particular genre, it might be within the tradition of the transition memoir. One of its pioneering voices was Jan Morris, a renowned travel journalist who recounted her personal journey across genders through “variable construction[s] of gender relations in different local-cultural space/places.”³⁷ Yet, if in the 1970s Morris’s influential autobiography *Conundrum* (1974) helped debunk taboos about transsexualism and reposition trans identities within social spaces, it also served as a generator of recognizable clichés (e.g., the trope of being trapped in the wrong body or the idea of gender reassignment surgery as a lifelong destination) that made trans narratives acceptable to a cisgender audience.³⁸ Addressing these fixed conventions, Julia Serano, in the opening of *Whipping Girl* (2015; first ed. 2007) candidly admits that her book was going to disappoint “non-trans” readers who were expecting another “confessional tell-all . . . one that begins with my insistence that I have been a ‘woman trapped inside a man’s body’ . . . one that explains the ins and outs of sex reassignment surgery.”³⁹

Undoubtedly Romina Cecconi's autobiography, *Io, la "Romanina": Perché sono diventata donna* (1976), the first book authored by a transsexual person in Italy, fits the script mocked by Serano. Romanina describes surgery as "the crowning achievement of [a] lifetime" and the final overcoming of a mistake of nature.⁴⁰ Still, her book testifies to the possibility for gender nonconforming people to gain agency as narrators of their own story, a story that dominant narratives have either medicalized or criminalized. *Io, la "Romanina"* provides a valuable testimony of everyday life as a gender-variant and low-income person in 1960s Florence, at a time when cross-dressing was considered a crime, laws against homophobia and transphobia were nonexistent, and local institutions exerted the power to define "what bodies [were] allowed to do, when and where."⁴¹ In her hometown, Romanina had been incarcerated and repeatedly fined by the police for her "socially dangerous" behavior and for soliciting on the Lungarno (the streets right next to the river Arno); as a punishment, she was eventually sentenced to staying confined to the remote village of Volturino, in southern Italy.⁴² Cecconi's path to gender transition was dotted with migration journeys: initially, she traveled with an itinerant circus, *il Gratta*, doing an impersonation of Brigitte Bardot. She then moved to Paris to work as a burlesque dancer at *Madame Arthur*, a drag cabaret in the Rue des Martyrs, and she finally relocated in Switzerland to undergo surgery.

Io, la "Romanina", in its twofold process of storytelling and reappropriation, demonstrates how, in Italy, literature has offered an important venue for gender-variant people to speak for themselves and shift normative perspectives. Another notable, but radically different, case is the seminal work of Mario Mieli, comprising his masterpiece *Elementi di critica omosessuale* (1977, translated as *Towards a Gay Communism: Elements of a Homosexual Critique*, 1980, rev. ed. 2018), numerous articles, and his autobiographical memoir, *Il risveglio dei faraoni* (*The Pharaohs' Awakening*, posthumous publication in 1994). Mieli never exclusively identified as trans; rather, he embodied a type of polysexual and polymorphous gender fluidity that today could be defined as pansexual or genderqueer but that he dubbed "transsexual."⁴³ His idiosyncratic view of "transsexualism" constituted a driving force in the Italian and international discourse of gender liberation. Through his activism and literary work, Mieli was one of the protagonists of 1970s counterculture, at a time when (proto-)LGBTQ+ collectives began spreading across the peninsula and challenging heteronormative conventions.⁴⁴ One of the most significant developments during those tumultuous years was the 1977 movement, a sociopolitical laboratory that loosely joined a constellation of

collectives, groups, and individuals (students, unemployed youth, workers, gender minorities) who shared the need to experiment with forms of life that were alternative (or “oblique”) to the rigid order and stifling institutions of both capitalist society and leftist organizations, including the Communist Party and trade unions.⁴⁵ In her memoir *AntoloGaia*, Marcasciano situates Mieli within a broader historical geography of LGBTQ+ liberation: “Three years earlier [Stonewall, June 28, 1969,] Sylvia Rivera had launched the bottle at the cops; a year earlier [April 5, 1972,] Mario Mieli and Alfredo Cohen, together with others, had organized a sit-in in Sanremo against a conference of sexologists who still considered homosexuality an illness.”⁴⁶ The protest against the Congresso internazionale di sessuologia su comportamenti devianti della sessualità umana (Sexology International Congress on Deviant Behaviors of Human Sexuality) resulted in the birth of FUORI! (Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano [United Italian Homosexual Revolutionary Front]), a group officially founded in Turin in 1971, which constituted the Italian Gay Liberation Front.⁴⁷

For Mieli, liberating sexual desires was the first step toward the creation of an alternative communist society beyond gender polarities, a society radically different from heteropatriarchal capitalism, which either represses or exploits sexual desire.⁴⁸ His activism traced a “geography of experiences” across places and cultures, spanning Italy, England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Morocco, the US, and India.⁴⁹ Unapologetically cross-dressed, he queered a myriad of private and public spaces, ranging from his family’s bourgeois house, which became the first seat of FUORI!, to convention centers, squares, and museums, where he improvised scandalous performances. Mieli proclaimed that it was possible to turn ordinary places into revolutionary geographies: “Factories, occupied manufacture plants, feminist spaces—or female homosexuality—and supermarkets, trams, cinemas, public restrooms can turn from ghettos into places where we make love.”⁵⁰ In 1974, he left FUORI! because cofounder Angelo Pezzana and other members of the group had joined the Partito Radicale (Radical Party).⁵¹ Mieli then created a new autonomous collective, Collettivo Autonomo di Milano (Autonomous Collective of Milan), which rejected the possibility of using parliamentary politics as a forum to achieve revolutionary ideals.⁵² Still, the Collective led to the dissemination of a grassroots LGBTQ+ movement across Italy, which generated the formation of other groups, such as the Collettivo Frcialista in Bologna and the Collettivo Narciso in Rome. Marcasciano was a cofounder of the latter, which was eventually renamed Circolo Mario Mieli. However, unlike FUORI!, the goal of Collettivo Narciso was to situate the process of

LGBTQ+ liberation within an all-encompassing narrative that could unite all the oppressed of the world around common objectives and one shared enemy: bourgeois capitalist society.⁵³

The 1977 liberation movement was the epicenter of the rising LGBTQ+ discourse in Italy, and more specifically, of trans liberation; the movement acted as a catalyst for new demands: first and foremost, the need to give voice to creativity, corporeality, and stigmatized desires and to locate these forms of life outside the space-time of wage labor. A site that particularly testifies to the aftermath of 1977 is the so-called Cassero, in Bologna, a historical building in Porta Saragozza, one of the city's ancient gates. In 1982, after a period of heated debates and negotiations, the city of Bologna assigned it to house Circolo 28 Giugno (an LGBTQ+ association that was the successor to Collettivo Frcialista during the social turmoil of the 1970s).⁵⁴ This was the first time an Italian LGBTQ+ community was officially granted the use of a public space by a municipal government in Italy, and its trans component, as Marcasciano recalls in *AntoloGaia*, had a fundamental role in the "storming of Cassero": trans activists were among the people who marched at the forefront and cut the ribbon during the inauguration.⁵⁵

However, even before the creation of an iconic space like the Bolognese Cassero, a trans protest took place at a public swimming pool in Milan in 1979. A group of transsexuals, wearing men's swimming trunks so as to expose their naked breasts, expressed their dissent for not being "recognized as such by the state, and recognized even less as women."⁵⁶ From that moment, according to Stefania Voli's historical reconstruction, transsexual activist groups began to proliferate in many Italian cities, organizing to claim their civil rights, protesting against discrimination, and advocating for a law allowing "them to change their sex and name in accordance with their chosen gender identity."⁵⁷ Such mobilization led to the creation of the Italian Transsexual Movement (Movimento Italiano Transessuale [MIT]), formally founded in 1981. This national association fostered the creation of regional branches in major cities across the peninsula. A crucial year for trans rights was 1982, when the "Italian parliament approved Law 164: Rules Concerning the Rectification of Sex-Attribution, [a] law [that] made it possible for transsexuals to proceed with the surgical adjustment of sex characteristics and change of registered name."⁵⁸

Since the late 1980s, the city of Bologna has become the most important hub of the trans movement, with the founding, in 1988, of MIT Bologna (which in 1999 became Movimento Identità Transessuale [Transsexual Identity Movement]), and then, in 2017, Movimento Identità Trans [Trans

Identity Movement]). This separate regional section became the new de facto leading group in Italy, causing a sort of schism within the national trans movement.⁵⁹ In 1994, after obtaining its headquarters in via Polese 22 and funds from the Emilia-Romagna region, MIT established a health center (a *consulorio*), after which many other community-based projects took off, including Progetto Moonlight (to reduce the risks associated with prostitution), “lo sportello Cgil” (to help trans people find jobs), welcome centers for gender nonconforming homeless people, and services for trans inmates at Carcere della Dozza.⁶⁰ In addition, MIT has organized cultural events open to the greater community; one of these is Divergenti (Divergent), an international film festival of trans cinema, which in 2020 celebrated its tenth year. Finally, the process of documentation that Marcasciano has promoted as a narrator and public figure led to important archival projects in Bologna: the Centro documentazione Sylvia Rivera (which houses Marcasciano’s personal archive and a special collection of materials donated by Cecconi) and, more recently, the audiovisual Out-Takes Archive.

This brief overview of key places and events that have shaped the Italian political geography of the trans movement is certainly important from an historical perspective. However, it raises a question that this volume tries to address: Would it be possible to map personal journeys of gender self-determination and liberation without exclusively tracing the history of “places out of place,” such as streets where demonstrations took place, gender reassignment clinics, gay bars, police stations, legal courts, and seats of national LGBTQ+ associations? Put differently, can a map that only relies on these places of transgression actually reframe the typical expectations of the non-trans audience, involve this audience in appreciating and understanding trans people’s voicing personal and political concerns, and ultimately create new shared venues of dialogue and mutual interaction?⁶¹ The trans narratives of people and places gathered here, besides serving as examples of the historical geography sketched above, testify to surprising—and at times problematic—sites of Italian trans/culturalism that have often been omitted from geographies of anti-normativity: religious festivals in Naples, everyday life in Roman working-class neighborhoods, traditional family gatherings in Brooklyn, extravagant Italian families and matriarchs who recall the houses and the “house mothers” of *Paris Is Burning* (1990), friends’ reunions in New York, pilgrimages across the Atlantic Ocean, and political activism in Northern Africa.⁶² Exploring these places implies, first of all, repositioning trans people within history and social spaces but also reflecting on the shifting relationships among bodies, genders, and places; entering into a dialogue

with cisgender allies; and respecting the diversity that informs individual trans experiences. What emerges from this remapping is a complex web of interrelated stories that are simultaneously personal and collective, both memories and testimonies. These trans narratives neither attempt to make trans people “pass” nor exclusively celebrate them as champions of a subversive movement. Overall, these accounts succeed in recounting anti-normative movements as well as what Andrea Long Chu has called “nonnormative attempts at normativity,” by embracing a perspective that “refuses . . . the pomp of antinormativity . . . for something slower, smaller, more tuned in to the ways in which ordinary life fails to measure up to the political analyses we thrust upon it.”⁶³ Finally, the stories in *Italian Trans Geographies* call into question the current LGBTQ+ macro-narrative of inclusion and dominant Anglophone gender discourses by asking: What if retracing Italian cultural and historical geographies could unsettle taken-for-granted Western notions of places, boundaries, and borders? And, finally, how can mapping overlooked geographies reshape the Anglo-American globalized understanding of LGBTQ+ movements or academic concepts of queer antinormativity?

The eight parts of this volume are arranged in four sections representing the three large geographic areas within the borders of the Italian peninsula—southern Italy, central Italy, and northern Italy—and beyond its borders across the Atlantic. Included in each section are a variety of creative works and scholarly essays, which analyze key issues emerging from the self-narratives.

The journey begins in southern Italy. Part 1, “Memories of Transitions,” presents excerpts from Marcasciano’s memoirs (*AntoloGaia*, *L’aurora delle trans cattive*, and *Tra le rose e le viole*) and a selection of poems by Giovanna Cristina Vivinetto—a “living archive” of the trans movement and an emerging poetic voice of trans liberation. Marcasciano and Vivinetto, in very different styles and literary mediums, have chronicled their personal coming outs and the peculiar sociocultural dynamics of acceptance and machoistic denial surrounding gender variance in the south of Italy.

Part 2 focuses on the *femminielli* (or as they often refer to themselves, using the feminine form, *femmenelle* or *femminelle*), an archaic gender-variant community rooted in the city of Naples and nearby areas.⁶⁴ Their unique theatricality has informed Neapolitan folklore, inspired countless creative works, and generated iconic characters such as “la Tarantina.”⁶⁵ This section’s opening chapter, by Eugenio Zito, Paolo Valerio, and Nicola Sisci, locates the *femminielli* in the context of Neapolitan cultural history, providing an in-depth analysis of the first written documents that testify to the existence

of this community and of the myths and traditions tied to these sacred figures across genders. The *femminielli* were, and in certain niche areas still are, the undisputed protagonists of performative rituals that have involved the entire Neapolitan *popolino* (the local underclass), such as playing the game of *tombola* (similar to bingo) and participating in re-enactments of weddings and births. The contribution of anthropologist Maria Carolina Vesce, from her 2017 book *Altri transiti* (*Other Transitions*), discusses how the *femminielli* have resiliently survived in the contemporary world. Vesce advances the hypothesis that highbrow culture has attempted to transform these local figures—their rituals, folklore, religiosity—into a Neapolitan cultural heritage. On the one hand, this process has implied a revalorization of their traditions, while on the other it has fueled the assumption that the *femminielli* no longer exist and therefore need to be memorialized as an extinct culture. The chapter ends with an interview with two Neapolitan activists, Ciro Cascina and Loredana Rossi, who have both embraced and personally reinterpreted the gender identity of *femminielli*.

Part 3, “A Felliniesque *Dolce Vita*,” reveals the hidden party life in which trans people in central Italy participated from the 1960s to the 1980s. The section begins with Marcasciano’s description of downtown Rome in the 1970s and early 1980s. In the area around Termini Station, southern migrants, trans sex workers, and “misfits,” as well as writers, poets, eccentric divas, beauticians, and “*bombardere*,”⁶⁶ created the syncretic landscape of a unique Roman *dolce vita*, where Felliniesque fantasy and Pasolinian subaltern reality clashed. This part also includes a few excerpts from Cecconi’s biography, including her narrations of nightlife in Florence’s Lungarno, her picaresque adventures across Europe and then back to Italy, and her time confined to the village of Volturino.

Part 4, “Narrating Trans History as a Meaningful Experience,” presents more recent retellings of trans experiences, which have contributed to generating new narratives about gender variance. Chapter 10 is from the anthology *Elementi di critica trans*, which deliberately echoes Mieli’s cult classic *Elementi di critica omosessuale*. In the opening conversation—which took place in 2008, at a Tuscan *agriturismo* (a farmhouse resort)—a group of trans scholars and activists discuss the importance and the challenges of recasting a meaningful trans (hi)story that can feel simultaneously personal and collective. Chapter 11 is the script of Egon Botteghi’s performative workshop “Non siamo nat@ ieri” (“We Were Not Born Yesterday”), which debuted in 2019 at the Centro Donna (Women’s Center), in Livorno. The performance mixes verbal and visual narration with various actions/events

around town. In this work, Botteghi resuscitated two stories from the past known only through legal and medical documents: the life of Giovanni Bordoni, a man who, in 1743, died in the hospital of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena and was discovered to be a woman and the journey of Harry Crawford (named Eugenia Falleni at birth), an Italian migrant, native of Livorno, who moved to New Zealand in 1877. While effectively retracing overlooked geographies of transition and belonging, Botteghi's project also maps experiences of class, gender, religious beliefs, and race discrimination.

The northern Italy section opens with part 5, "Stories of Trans Identity and Activism," which features different trans experiences united by a similar commitment to activism. This part begins with two chapters showcasing Marcasciano's memoirs, both set in the Emilia-Romagna region. Chapter 12 narrates the historical "conquest" of the Bolognese Cassero (the first LGBT center in Italy) from the perspective of trans activists; chapter 13 is an interview with Lisa, a Brazilian trans woman fighting for civil rights and a residency permit in a highly touristic beach area on the coast of the Adriatic, the Riviera Romagnola. The section proceeds with an excerpt from Massimo D'Aquino's autobiographical novel, *Cammino rasente i muri: Autobiografia tascabile di un transessuale (I Was Walking Close to the Walls: Pocket Autobiography of a Transsexual Man)*, (2019). Here D'Aquino, who has been involved in the trans association Libellula Italia, recounts his path to "conquer his place in the world" as a trans man and a migrant from the south to the north of the Italian peninsula. The last text of part 5 is a conversation with three LGBTQ+ activists—Christian Ballarin, Giorgio Cuccio, and Libyan refugee Mazen Masoud—who are currently all based in northern Italy. They talk about their stories of FtM transitions; their engagement in support groups and transfeminist collectives; and their reflections on Italian language, a binary gendered language that poses obvious linguistic challenges to nonbinary identities.

Part 6, "Testifying to Voices and Images of Transness," explores how artists have experimented with a variety of mediums—music, cinema, and photography—to retell personal stories of transness. Musician Helena Velena, in "Perverse Polymorphs Proto T*" at the Dawn of 1980s Italian *Riflusso*," contextualizes the emergence of a discourse of trans liberation in Bologna and analyzes the role that the music scene played, both in Italy and the US, in fostering alternative models of masculinity and femininity. Chapter 17, "A Trans Revolution and Its Contradictions," is an interview that Danila Cannamela conducted with filmmaker Simone Cangelosi. The conversation focuses on the central role that Marcella Di Folco—a leading

figure of the Bolognese MIT, with a rich experience in acting—has played in Cangelosi’s work and on his current project of creating an archive in Bologna that would preserve the history of Italian trans and queer people. Chapter 18, coauthored by Danila Cannamela and Stella Gonzalez, examines a selection of photographs from Lina Pallotta’s portrait of Marcasciano. This photographic work—an intimate visual journey traversing Naples, Bologna, Rome, and New York—is a reflection on Pallotta’s nomadic friendship with Porpora, which has succeeded in crossing places, genders, and sociocultural revolutions.

Part 7, “Transitions across the Ocean,” brings to the fore understudied connections between Italian heritage and LGBTQ+ activism in the US. This chapter opens with the personal testimony of Michela Griffo, collected by Summer Minerva. Griffo’s story, “Io sono sangue” (“I Am Blood”), sheds light on the unforeseeable intersections between Italian American LGBTQ+ protesters and the gangsters who ran gay bars, which developed from their shared knowledge of southern Italian dialects. Chapter 20—“What Does It Mean for the Italian American Community to Be Trans?”—features writings by Italian American and Italian Canadian trans activists and artists who have elaborated on their Italianness and gender identity through short stories and poems.

Part 8, “New Italian American Migrations: Back to Italy,” returns to the south of Italy, the epicenter of the Italian diaspora and starting place of this geographic inquiry. Chapter 21, “Summer Within: A Journey of Migration and Reconnection,” authored by Danila Cannamela, is an analysis of Minerva’s film *Summer Within* (forthcoming in 2023).⁶⁷ The movie recounts a counter-migration journey from New York to Naples, in search of roots and a sense of belonging. The chapter discusses the different levels of identity that have contributed to Italian American constructs of home and displacement, and how the film explores these unresolved contradictions. Chapter 22, “A Queer Italian Pilgrimage,” retells the experience of a group of Italian American trans people who, in 2019, visited Naples for la Candelora (Candlemas) a sacred festival greatly attended by the *femminielli*. The piece includes the transcript from a community conversation with queer Italian American pilgrims who express their longing for a cultural identity that can encompass simultaneously their Italian roots and queer/transness.

The volume ends by suggesting, in its conclusion, several possible paths and directions for current and future research in the emerging field of Italian and Italian American trans studies. What all of them have in common is the idea of “starting from ourselves”—that is, from the acknowledgment of

our disparate points of view and research interests—and together we might envision how this interdisciplinary field can lay the foundations for new routes of collaborative inquiry, teaching, and learning, while creating more diverse and inclusive curricula across disciplines.

Ultimately, the geographic approach of this book underscores the notion that trans narratives, in retracing diasporic movements, liminal identities, and a precarious sense of belonging, can reorient our understanding of the slippery concept of Italianness. “What is the real Italy? The one that people see in my investigation or the one that nobody sees?,” Pasolini asks writer Alberto Moravia, in *Comizi d’amore*, venting his frustration with the answers of his interviewees, which do not even scratch the surface of sexual and gendered taboos. Pasolini’s question can be considered the point of departure of this journey, which delves into blind spots in Italian and Italian American culture while highlighting overlooked points of junction and friction between LGBTQ+ global discourse and local realities. The 2020 Netflix documentary *Disclosure: Trans Lives on Screen* offers an example of how, in North America, the debate over transgender identities and their representation has gained great visibility, beyond academia. However, *Disclosure*, like many scholarly works produced in the US, employs umbrella terms and constructs of race, class, and gender that do not exhaust the complexity of trans embodied experiences in Western societies. The narrators gathered in this volume “queer,” or “reorient,” the comforting notion that Western cultures share a homogeneous Anglo-American discourse and language of LGBTQ+ liberation. These voices suggest that switching the focus on the Italianness that still remains unseen or misrepresented can turn invisible and silenced spaces into what Marcasciano has affirmed are “meaningful experiences.”⁶⁸

Notes

1. This timeline is based on a private document that Porpora Marcasciano shared with us. We have edited and expanded her timeline to better fit the purposes of this volume.

2. Jorgensen was not the first to undergo gender reassignment surgery. In 1931, Magnus Hirschfeld, neurologist and pioneer of modern sexology, had performed the operation that turned the Danish painter Einar Wegener into Lili Elbe—the first transsexual woman of history. For more on this, see Maria Carolina Vesce, *Altri transiti: Corpi, pratiche, rappresentazioni di femminielli e transessuali* (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2017), 91–95.

3. Acknowledgment: This introduction is derived in part from an article published by Danila Cannamela in *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 27, no. 4 (2022): 600–22, available online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354571X.2021.1965753>.

4. “Invert” is an outdated, often derogatory, term used to designate homosexuals and, more generally, any form of sexual and gender diversity; it is no longer in use in English. When Sigmund Freud spoke of inversion, in the first of his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905)—“The Sexual Aberrations”—he was not speaking of gender inversion but rather same-sex. However, generally speaking, the term “invert” came to refer to behaviors that fell outside the traditional categories of male and female within a two-gender system and conflated same-sex desire with gender variance, positing homosexual men as women trapped in men’s bodies and homosexual women as men trapped in women’s bodies. This reversal of gender traits, called “sexual inversion,” was believed to be inborn; male inverts were thought to be inclined, to a greater or lesser degree, to traditionally female pursuits and dress, and vice versa. The term persisted in the US as late as the 1960s. On this, see in particular Umberto Grassi, Vincenzo Lagioia, Gian Paolo Romagnani, eds., *Tribadi, sodomiti, invertite e invertiti, pederasti, femmine, ermafroditi: Per una storia dell’omosessualità, della bisessualità e delle trasgressioni di genere in Italia* (Pisa: ETS, 2017). For an historical perspective see also Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis: Eine Klinisch-Forensische Studie (Sexual Psychopathy: A Clinical-Forensic Study)* (Stuttgart: Enke, 1886); and Genny Beemyn, “A Presence in the Past: A Transgender Historiography,” *Journal of Women’s History* 25, no. 4 (2013), 113–21.

5. On lesbianism and gender nonconforming women in Italy, see Paolo Pedote and Nicoletta Poidimani, eds., *We Will Survive: Storia del Movimento LGBTIQ+ in Italia* (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2020); and the work of Laura Schettini, in particular, *Il gioco delle parti: Travestimenti e paure sociali tra Otto e Novecento* (Milan: Mondadori, 2011).

6. We are adopting the term “trans” to indicate subjectivities whose gender identities do not align with the sex assigned at birth, or, more generally, individuals who do not exclusively self-identify using binary and heteronormative gender constructs. Further clarifications on our use of LGBTQ+ terminology are provided throughout this introductory chapter.

7. On Italian feminism and its focus on language and narrative agency, see Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Graziella Parati and Rebecca West, eds., *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice: Equality and Sexual Difference* (Teaneck, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002); Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1990); and Cesare Casarino and Andrea Righi, eds., *Another Mother: Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

8. When not otherwise indicated, translations from the Italian original are our own. Porpora Marcasciano, *Elementi di critica trans*, eds., Laurella Arietti,

Christian Ballarin, Giorgio Cuccio, and Porpora Marcasciano (Rome: Manifesto-Libri, 2010), 17. Excerpts from the opening day of this seminar are translated in chapter 10 of this volume.

9. She made this statement in the documentary short *Divieto di transito (No Trespassing)* directed by Roberto Cannavò (Humanreels, 2020).

10. We are borrowing the reflection about humourism and space from Paola Mieli, *Figures of Space: Subject, Body, Place*, trans. Jacques Houis (New York: Agin-court Press, 2017), 76.

11. On the use of humor and irony, see in particular the essay by Helena Velena (chap. 16) and the interview with Simone Cangelosi (chap. 17), as well as the reflections shared by Ciro Cascina and Loredana Rossi (chap. 7) and our conversation with Christian Ballarin, Giorgio Cuccio, and Mazen Masoud (chap. 15).

12. The use of the term “bard” came from a personal phone conversation of Cannamela with Marcasciano (March 4, 2021). It is important to mention that, in her role of bard, Marcasciano has also collaborated on, and inspired, several projects included in this volume: Lina Pallotta’s photographic portrait “Porpora,” exhibited at Officine Fotografiche in Rome, in 2019; Simone Cangelosi’s documentary *Una nobile rivoluzione (A Noble Revolution)*, 2014 about trans activist Marcella Di Folco; Roberto Cannavò’s 2021 film, *Porpora*, and Roberta Torre’s 2022 film *Le Favolose (The Fabulous Ones)*.

13. On this, see Marcasciano *AntoloGaia* and *Elementi di critica trans*. See also Serena Bassi, “Excerpts from *The Dawn of the Bad Trans Women: Stories, Fragments, and Lives of My Transgender Generation* by Porpora Marcasciano—Translation,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (2019): 124–31. Generally speaking, all Italian 1970s liberation movements engaged in a recasting of dominant language as a political counteraction; on this practice, see Andrea Hajek, *Negotiating Memories of Protest in Western Europe: The Case of Italy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Andrea Righi, *Biopolitics and Social Change in Italy: From Gramsci to Pasolini to Negri* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

14. Arietti et al., eds., *Elementi di critica trans*, 127.

15. Arietti et al., eds., 93, 99.

16. Arietti et al., eds., 118.

17. Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, “Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 3–4 (2008): 11.

18. Marcasciano, *AntoloGaia*, “Le tracce dei sogni” (“The Traces of Dreams”). This passage is translated in chapter 1.

19. Personal conversation with Cannamela (via Messenger), November 18, 2019.

20. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

21. It is outside our scope to provide an exhaustive overview of queer theories that conversate with our geographic approach. However, a few publications partic-

ularly resonate with, or complement, our focus on space and trans identities; see Elizabeth Freeman's exploration of temporal and sexual dissonance in *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Susan Stryker's revised version of *Transgender History*, rev. ed. (New York: Seal Press, 2017); Jack Halberstam's "low theory" and the critique to heteronormative definitions of success in *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Heather Love's investigation of the sociological origins of queer theory, in *Underdogs: Social Deviance and Queer Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021).

22. On this, see Kath Browne and Jason Lim, eds., *Geographies of Sexualities: Theory, Practices and Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Kath Browne and Leela Bakshi, "We Are Here to Party? Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans Leisurescapes beyond Commercial Gay Scenes," *Leisure Studies* 30, no. 2 (2011): 179–96; Johnston Lynda, "Gender and Sexuality I: Genderqueer Geographies?" *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 5 (2016): 668–78.

23. Brown, Browne, and Lim, introduction to *Geographies of Sexualities*, 12.

24. Some scholars and activists use "trans*" (with an asterisk) to designate the many different identities gathered within the umbrella term trans. However, as editors, we decided to go with "trans."

25. Johnston, "Gender and Sexuality I," 674.

26. Marcasciano, *Laurora delle trans cattive*, appendix.

27. Fabio Corbisiero, *Over the Rainbow City: Towards a New LGBT Citizenship in Italy* (Milan: McGraw-Hill Education, 2015), 8.

28. Corbisiero, *Over the Rainbow City*, 8.

29. The law was approved by the Camera (the Italian House of Representatives) in November 2020, but, in October 2021, the Senate voted against it.

30. Fabio Corbisiero and Salvatore Monaco, *Città arcobaleno: Una mappa della vita omosessuale nell'Italia di oggi* (Rome: Donzelli, 2017), 7.

31. See Stryker, *Gay by the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1996); Stryker, *Transgender History*, rev. ed. (New York: Seal Press, 2017); and Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds., *The Transgender Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

32. Lorenzo Bernini offers a more detailed explanation of the legendary role of Rivera during the Stonewall riots: "As the story goes, it was a transgender activist of Puerto Rican and Venezuelan origin, Sylvia Rivera, who started the clashes by throwing an empty bottle of gin at a policeman—most probably, it was Stormé DeLarverie, a butch lesbian and drag king, born of a black mother and a white father, who stirred up the crowd to fight. In any case, in the years following, Rivera went on to found STAR (Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries)"; see Bernini, *Queer Theories: An Introduction; From Mario Mieli to the Antisocial Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 106.

33. On this, see in particular the story of Michela Griffo in chapter 19.

34. Arietti et al., eds., *Elementi di critica trans*, 43–44. See also Mario Mieli, *La gaia critica: Politica e liberazione sessuale negli anni settanta. Scritti (1972–1983)*, eds. P. Mieli and Prearo (Venice: Marsilio, 2019); Gianni Rossi Barilli, *Il movimento gay in Italia* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1999); and Maya De Leo, *Queer: Storia culturale della comunità LGBT+* (Turin: Einaudi: 2021).

35. On the discrimination issues within LGBT+ groups, see in particular Martin Duberman, *Stonewall* (New York: Dutton, 1993), 235–39; and Stephan L. Cohen, *The Gay Liberation Youth Movement in New York: “An Army of Lovers Cannot Fail”* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 89–94.

36. On the debate between trans activists and feminists, see the interviews with Giorgio Cuccio and Simone Cangelosi in chapters 15 and 17 of this volume; see also Marcasciano, *Laurora delle trans cattive* (the chap. “La Scapigliatura trans” [“The Trans Bohème”]).

37. Here we are adapting an observation of Doreen Massey in *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 178.

38. Juliet Jacques, “Forms of Resistance: Uses of Memoir, Theory, and Fiction in Trans Life Writing,” *Life Writing* 14, no. 3 (2017): 357–70.

39. Julia Serano, *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity* (New York: Seal Press, 2015), 1.

40. Romina Cecconi, *Io, la “Romanina”: Perché sono diventato donna* (Florence: Vallecchi, 1976), 159. On the notion of the error of nature, see also 172–73. The excerpt “In Switzerland” is translated in chapter 9 of this volume.

41. Brown, Browne, Lim, “Introduction,” 4. As Laura Schettini clarifies in her introduction to Marcasciano’s *AntoloGaia*, gender transgressions in Italy were handled by the police, in line with the norms of *Testo Unico di Pubblica Sicurezza* (Tups), in 1926, and later on, with the laws of the so-called Codice Rocco, a new penal code adopted in 1931.

42. See Cecconi, *Io, la “Romanina”*, 182–203; Marco Luceri, “Le mie notti da Romanina” (“My nights as Romanina”), *Corriere fiorentino*, November 11, 2015. https://corrierefiorentino.corriere.it/firenze/notizie/arte_e_cultura/15_novembre_11/mie-notti-romanina-46c8c89c-885d-11e5-b112-d5532a056ec2.shtml; Stefania Voli, “Broadening the Gendered *Polis*: Italian Feminist and Transsexual Movements, 1979–1982,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 3, no. 1–2 (2016): 237–47; and Paolo Pazzi, “Romanina, la donna pipistrello” (“Romanina, the Batwoman”), *Orlando Magazine.it*. April 13, 2019: <https://www.orlandomagazine.it/2019/04/13/romanina-la-donna-pipistrello/>.

43. Mario Mieli, *Towards a Gay Communism: Elements of a Homosexual Critique*, trans. David Fernbach and Evan Calder Williams (London: Pluto Press, 2018), 254; and Bernini, *Queer Theories*, 116.

44. See Rossi Barilli, *Il movimento gay in Italia*; Voli, “Broadening the Gendered *Polis*”; and Bernini, *Queer Theories*.

45. See Michael Hardt and Paolo Virno, eds., *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); Hajek,