

The term *memory* not only implies the presence of a certain idea worth preserving, it also stresses the productive process of remembering by which the remembered is actively re-produced and chosen to be made visible. Illegitimate cultural memories, such as non-heteronormative gender categories, can be understood as ways of life that exist but are rendered invisible in a dominant cultural context. Especially in the ethnographic re-production of illegitimate cultural memory, questions about the power of representation become important. In this article, I shall argue that any ethnographic re-production of cultural memory is necessarily an interactive practice, bound to result in a desired visibility if researcher and interlocutor manage to find a common ground, or else to remain only the perspective of the researcher and not also that of the informant if they do not.

In order to demonstrate this, I shall draw upon my field-work with *femminielli* of Naples. *Femminiello* is not only a derogatory Italian term for an effeminate gay man, it also describes what may be defined as a certain gender variant¹ within the Neapolitan gender system. *Femminielli* are individuals who are born as boys but who, from early on, chose female names for themselves, take hormones and perhaps undergo plastic surgery, so that their bodies will appear more feminine without a complete sex change. By dressing like women, they become women in the social space of their neighbourhoods. Although they have complex and varied relations to their social surroundings and could adopt diverse trades, most *femminielli* earn their money as transvestite prostitutes. Their partners are males who consider themselves to be heterosexuals in a relationship with a woman. *Femminielli* often live in daily contact with their families and can be integrated into their neighbourhoods by fulfilling social roles such as organizing the *tombola* (a bingo-like game usually played only by women but sometimes organized for the whole neighbourhood) or initiating religious pilgrimages, which are at once occasions for passionate worship and joyful holidays from daily life in the quarter. Since the Neapolitan concept of the *femminiello* is hardly visible in areas such as the media or official religious life, it may be described as an illegitimate cultural memory. I shall first introduce some results of my research on *femminielli* and then discuss how illegitimate cultural memory like the non-heteronormative gender category of *femminiello* can be made visible. Concentrating on my rapport with one informant and one interlocutor, I hope to show that researchers as authors of ethnographies hold the power of representation in their hands, but that a rewarding ethnographic re-production of memory can be achieved only if the researched are willing to be represented in a particular way by the particular researcher.

The concept of *femminiello* has been written about in a few scholarly, artistic, and tourist texts, the oldest from 1897 by the Neapolitan criminologist and anthropologist Abele De Blasio (de Blasio 1897: 43-49). Deconstructive discourse analysis has revealed differences in the way different authors have placed the concept in the wider context of the city. They have considered the existence of *femminielli* either as a disgrace or as a sign of Naples's cultural wealth. De Blasio, disgusted yet at the same time fascinated, placed *femminielli* in *the land of the camorra* beyond the city walls.² A hundred years later, in a tourist text on the internet, Liliana Vastano places them at the centre of the city and sees them as a symbol for the heart of Naples (Vastano 1999).

As a cultural anthropologist trained in Gender Studies, I conducted seven months of fieldwork in a central district of the city called *Quartieri Spagnoli*, the Spanish Quarter. During three periods of data collection between April 2001 and December 2002, I met over 20 *femminielli* and used participant observation and open interviews to learn about the individual gender constructions and social networks of a handful of them. My fieldwork resulted in an ethnographic text that understands the category of *femminiello* as an emic concept of gender and sexuality that differs from hegemonic dichotomous notions of biological heterosexual or homosexual men and women.³ As my research suggests, despite their male bodies *femminielli* are socially female, and their gender role is historically connected to the economic, symbolic, and religious realms of Neapolitan daily life. Being a *femminiello* is one possibility of how to manage existence in Naples.⁴

Interlocutor or Informant

If ethnography as the representation of the history of a concept and the present lives of individuals is considered to be memory re-production, the question poses itself how to re-produce that memory? I believe it is necessary that any representation of others, be it scholarly or artistic, be governed by motives shared by both researcher and researched. Anthropological writing has always relied on othering the studied group. Far from neglecting differences, I would like to stress how important it is to search for common ground or, as Lila Abu-Lughod has called it, to write against culture, against the divide between the western self and the non-western other (Abu-Lughod 1991). Others should be approached in order to discover their reasons for consenting to be represented in an ethnographic text.

Gigi, my 35-year-old main interlocutor, runs a kind of brothel in the Spanish Quarter. At night she rents small rooms to *femminielli* prostitutes who come there with their clients. In the early evening hours the brothel unexpectedly turns out to be a meeting place for Gigi's extended family, her friends, and her neighbours. Gigi's brothel is a focal point especially of women's lives in the quarter. In my open interviews with Gigi, we came to a point where she stated her idea that my

ethnographic description of the acceptance she enjoys should function as an example for others. Gigi told me of other *femminielli* who did not receive the same support from their families, who had been thrown out of their parental homes and ended up living on streets rife with criminality and drug abuse. By reading about her case, Gigi believes, parents of other *femminielli* could be helped to accept the gender and sexuality of their children and their victimisation be averted. Aiding Gigi's cause became part of my work, its aim being to further the acceptance of *femminielli* in the official culture and encourage further studies that acknowledge *femminielli* not only as prostitutes but also in their roles as organisers of *tombola* games and religious pilgrimages.

Through Gigi I was introduced in the course of my fieldwork to Lella, Tania, Lea and other *femminielli*. Lella draws the winning numbers at the *tombola*, and Tania organizes pilgrimages. When I tried to win over the 66-year-old Lea or La Tarantina, the oldest *femminiello* in the quarter, for an interview, she only reluctantly afforded me the privilege of access to her world. She and I did not connect as I did with Gigi, Lella or Tania, all of whom believed I could represent them in ways which were consistent with their own ideas and which they desired. For Lea I was too young, not fluent in Neapolitan, too far removed from relevant media, and last but not least on Gigi's side. That is why Lea did not become an interlocutor but remained only an informant. Among the *femminielli* I met, Lea is the one who most of all and through her whole life has used representations of herself in different media to create her femininity. She has a history of being represented. She has always tried and still tries to control and manage her to-be-looked-at-ness thoroughly.⁵ Thus there already existed for her a standard of representation which she did not think I could satisfy.

I met Gigi first, in April 2001, and it was she who told me about the weekly *tombola* organized nearby in one of the small flats called *bassi*. She also told me that Lea and Lella would be there and that Lella often drew the winning numbers. When Enrico, Gigi's brother, took me one evening in October 2001, from Gigi's to the *tombola*, we arrived to find the *basso* full of older women busy playing the game. Everyone seemed to be talking, laughing and shouting. Despite the chaos, Enrico managed to introduce me to Lella, a tall, blond, and effeminate transvestite, who came up to the door. He told her that I was a friend of Gigi's and that I would like to watch the game. Lella then introduced me to Lina, tonight's game hostess, who sat near the entrance; she just shook my hand and returned to the wild proceedings inside. A few seconds later Lina and Lea kindly asked Enrico and me, who had not yet even entered the room, to leave. Lea, pushing softly, made sure that we went outside again. Lella followed us and apologetically explained the women were afraid that men would bring misfortune and deceit to the game. This was my first encounter with Lea.

Two days later, after a short visit to Gigi's at about 6 p.m., I walked to Lea's *basso* and found her and Lella standing in the street. They were talking to one another and their voices seemed rather male. Lea was wearing a housewife's apron and somehow reminded me of Charlotte von Mahlsdorf, a well-known Berlin transve-

sitive. I approached and told them that I had come from Germany to Naples in order to study the lives of *femminielli*. Lea immediately shied away and wandered off into her *basso*, leaving Lella to deal with me. Lella apologized once again for the women's wish to be left among themselves at the *tombola*, and added that otherwise their husbands would become suspicious. I agreed, and told her that I had read Luciano De Crescenzo who relates that normally men are not allowed at the *tombola* because trousers worn at the game (i.e. the presence of men) would bring bad luck (de Crescenzo 1979: 118-121). Lella disagreed, arguing that transvestites like her, who wore trousers, were allowed in. She continued that *tombola* was meant to be a women's game and a space for women only, like the men's card-games in the piazzas. Lella appeared to be open to my questions and offered her knowledge freely. But she, too, tried to figure out whether I was worthy of the information she could give to me. Researchers have themselves to be eloquent and somehow charismatic in order to be accepted by the wider community. They have to occupy such a position in order to surmount *femminielli*'s own doubts about themselves amidst a potentially prejudiced outside world.

On Monday, October the 15th 2001, I and my partner, Pat, who had come to visit me for a few days, met Lea in front of her *basso* about mid-day. After I introduced the two, Lea enquired whether we had enjoyed the pilgrimage a day earlier together with Lella and Gigi. We were telling her about it when Lea suddenly invited us into her *basso* to show me a German newspaper article that had once been written about her. From her cupboard she produced a photograph showing her posed in the nude and highlighting her breasts and her buttocks but hiding her genitals. She commented: "Now I look like this", pointing at her lips and cheeks which, filled with silicone, were sagging in a face that has grown old. "It's the doctor's fault", she added bitterly. Her blond hair was long but thin, and around her chin and her jaw I saw some stubble. The whitewash from the walls of her tiny room was coming down. She turned back to her cupboard and produced more photographs, which piled up next to her on the bed, a whole life there in front of us. The photos showed her with other transvestites in Naples and in Barcelona, where she had won prizes at beauty contests, wearing dresses that she had created herself, as she assured us. There were more nude shots displaying her breasts. Finally, she came to the German newspaper article. "Look", she said, "everywhere it says Tarantina". The photograph used in the article, however, was of her friend Coletta and not of Lea; and I had to tell her that the article was not in German but in Danish (from a 1995 issue of the *Berlingske Tidende*), and that I could not translate it for her. Somewhat disappointed, Lea then played us a video-tape entitled *I Femminielli*; the French television crew that had made the film had given her a copy. A few minutes later, a transvestite friend of Lea's, Maria Antonella, entered through the open door and Lea invited her to join us, since she too was in the video. First Lea is shown dancing in a golden costume at a *femminiello* wedding where Maria Antonella is wearing red; later Lea is seen once more, walking from her *basso* to a shop in the neighbourhood. Both Lea and Maria Antonella remarked how beautiful their costumes were and how the *femminiello* bride (she had

married a man) had since killed herself by taking an overdose of pills. In the scenes where Lea and Maria Antonella stage a *figliata*, a ceremony by which *femminielli* symbolize their motherhood, both started to giggle, especially when the new born child, a black puppet sporting a giant penis, was presented.⁶ After the video, Lea searched for a document that could prove she had had an affair with some famous man from Rome, but as she could not find it she told us instead about a fling she had with a film director who had given her a role in one of his films and who since died.⁷ Yes, Lea reflected, she had had a pleasant life. After her appearance in the film, she received postcards from everywhere; she produces postcards from New York, Paris, Prague, and Vietnam. Now, she says, she had become ugly and would rather not be photographed. Maybe some other time, in different clothes and with her hair made up. We say good-bye for now.

Another time, after visiting Gigi, I went to Lea's place in order to show her the photo book *dintorno dello sguardo* (Jodice 1997: 64). Without hesitation she takes the book with her, goes into her *basso* and lies down onto her bed. Then she asks me to follow her. I show her the photo session entitled *Audience* which the photographer Marco Calò took of Neapolitans watching television and for which Lea was one of the models. She grabs the book and runs outside. Following her, I watch her proudly showing her picture to the people that hang out nearby. Lea exclaims: "Look, another book about me!" After a while she returns the book and thanks me for having shown it to her. Yet another time I have with me *La Napoli di Bellavista*, a popular photo book by Luciano De Crescenzo. Delightedly reminded of old times, Lea pages through the pictures and recognizes people she once knew and has since forgotten. She knows the *femminielli* who are shown playing the *tombola* (pp. 118-121), and lets me know that one of them, Ta-chi, has a birth mark on her wrist and that another one, the beautiful Barbara, was killed in a car accident. One Wednesday in November 2001, Lea is in her *basso* leaning out of the window. I start talking to her and learn that she was born in Puglia and left home when she was nine to come to Naples. She tells me that she has spent time in Rome, Florence, Turin and Milan, but that Naples is the most beautiful city of them all. In Naples, she exults, there is everything. Lella joins us and makes us come to see Gigi. On our way to Gigi's *basso*, two young boys make fun of Lea's lips. She shouts and tries to teach them a lesson on how to behave and treat a lady. Gigi already has company, her neighbour Carmela. I notice that Lea, unlike everyone else, exchanges not a word with Gigi and soon leaves quietly. I offer to accompany her, but she refuses saying that she would soon be back, which she was not. All through November and December 2001 I see nothing of Lea but much of Gigi. If Lea visits Gigi, then only with Lella and very briefly.

During my third stay in Naples, from November to December 2002, I again look out for Lea. In the early evening hours of a Tuesday in November I find her cleaning her *basso* because, so she tells me, Valentina, an exceedingly beautiful *femminiello* will be coming tonight and work here. Lea brushes and sweeps the floors and cleans the kitchen, her sitting/sleeping room and her WC. She tells me that before she used to live in the same building but above in a beautiful apart-

ment. Then there was the earthquake in 1980 and everything was destroyed. In a hidden corner between kitchen and WC there stands a little cupboard. On top of it there are four lit red candles and behind them framed pictures of her dead parents from Taranto in Puglia and another one of a good looking 18-year-old friend who she says got struck by lightning. I have brought Don Kulick's book on the travesti of Brasil to show Lea the pictorial representations of these transgendered prostitutes. She finds them quite sad and criticises presenting people like that. And yet she eagerly observes the made up bodies. Lella joins us and also pages through the book. She too finds them rather sad and argues that the subjects deserved more flattering representations in less dilapidated surroundings. Like Lea, she too laughs at the lascivious poses and praises the well-built bodies of the travesti as splendid performances of female beauty, youth, and eroticism.

Finally in December 2002 I attend a *tombola* organized by Lella and Gigi where everyone can join, in front of Gigi's. About 80 people are gathered together, mostly women, many children and a couple of men. Lea joins the gathering accompanied by Mario Spada, a young photographer whom she has invited to take pictures of the event.

Conclusion

Although there are many visual and textual representations of Lea, there is no picture of Lea and myself to commemorate our meetings. Lea obviously enjoys seeing herself portrayed in media like photography and newspaper article, film and video. And yet despite many positive and productive exchanges, Lea hid from me, using the cold autumn weather as an excuse to crawl deeper into her *basso*, where she could not be seen easily from outside. Though I often came by to talk to her, she never wholeheartedly invited me to keep her company inside so I could hear more and write about her life. When I did get a glimpse through the open door or window, I only saw her lying on her bed watching TV. On one occasion when I met Gigi, Lella and Lea all together and asked if I might take their picture, Lea refused, explaining her refusal with the inappropriate track suit she was wearing and the state of her hair.

While in the course of our rapport Gigi, Lella, Tania and a few others became interlocutors, Lea largely remained an informant, not choosing to have me speak for her. Though I managed to find a common ground with the others, Lea and I did not interact on the same level, and so my account of our meetings reflects more my own than her perspective. Informants have power over their representation, but their control is incomplete. Taking an informant's refusal to be represented by the researcher as itself relevant field data restores the power of (non-) representation to the author of the ethnography. But a more rewarding ethnographic reproduction of the memory of *femminielli* and their historical and local social context occurs through an interactive practice in which the represented and the representor come to an agreement about how that representation is to be performed.

Literature

Abu-Lughod, Lila: Writing against culture. In: Recapturing Anthropology. Working in the Present. Ed. by Richard Fox. Santa Fe 1991, pp. 137-162.

Browning, Frank: A Queer Geography: Journeys Toward a Sexual Self. New York 1998.

D'Agostino, Gabriella: Transvestiten in Neapel. Translated by Eva Baumgart. In: Zibaldone. Zeitschrift für italienische Kultur der Gegenwart [Tübingen]. Vol. 12, no. 23 (1997), pp. 29-39.

—: Travestirsi. Appunti per una "trasgressione" del sesso. In: Sesso e genere. L'identità maschile e femminile. Ed. by Gabriella, Sherry B. Ortner, Harriet Whitehead. Palermo 2000 [orig. 1981], pp. 11-61.

de Blasio, Abele: Usi e costumi dei camorristi. Napoli 1897. Reprinted in: Abele de Blasio: Nel paese della camorra. (L'Imbroccata). Napoli 1901.

de Crescenzo, Luciano: La Napoli di Bellavista. Milano 1979, pp. 118-121.

Jacobs, Sue-Ellen; Cromwell, Jason: Visions and Revisions of Reality: Reflections on Sex, Sexuality, Gender, and Gender Variance. In: Journal of Homosexuality [Binghampton], Vol. 23 (1992), no. 4, pp. 43-69.

Jodice, Francesco: Dintorno dello sguardo. (Exib.-Cat.). Napoli Fotocittà / Istituto Universitario Suor Orsola Benincasa. Udine 1997.

Kulick, Don: Travesti. Sex, Gender, and Culture among Brazilian Transgendered Prostitutes. Chicago 1998.

Mulvey, Laura: Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. In: Screen [Oxford], Vol. 16 (1975), no. 3, pp. 6-18.

Nanda, Serena: Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India. Belmont, CA 1990.

Pardo, Italo: Managing Existence in Naples: Morality, action and structure. Cambridge 1996.

Notes

- 1 The term gender variance has been defined as: "cultural expressions of multiple genders (i.e., more than two) and the opportunity for individuals to change gender roles and identities over the course of their lifetimes" (Jacobs 1992: 63f).
- 2 Camorra is a Neapolitan version of the Sicilian mafia.
- 3 Similar studies have been conducted by Don Kulick about the travesti of Brasil and by Serena Nanda about the hijras of India, to name but two (Kulick 1998; Nanda 1990).
- 4 Italo Pardo has discussed many other ways of being in his ethnography (Pardo 1996).
- 5 The term *to-be-looked-at-ness* was used by an early feminist critique on film to mean woman's passive position as the object of the active male gaze (Mulvey 1975).
- 6 Thinking of two articles on femminielli by Gabriella D'Agostino, I asked Lea whether la figliata was still practiced. She said it had been staged only for the video and that in real life it is no longer done, since being a femminiello is nothing special anymore (D'Agostino 1997: 29-39; D'Agostino 2000: 11-61).
- 7 According to Frank Browning (Browning 1998: 69) Lea played the role of a blonde transvestite who, wrapped in a boa, runs alongside Marcello Mastroianni in a scene from Federico Fellini's film *La Dolce Vita* (1959).