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The Supernatural Closet: Examining Death, the Afterlife, Translation, and the Archive in *Le favolose* (2022) and *Tra le rose e le viole* (2002)

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Questions of language and translation arise in relation to discussions of transness in Roberta Torre's film *Le favolose* (Torre 2022) and Porpora Marcasciano's book *Tra le rose e le viole* (Marcasciano et al. [2002] 2020b). Both works place transness in parallel with the supernatural, describing trans women as *favolose*, which, although translated as “fabulous,” is etymologically derived from *favola*, meaning “fairytale.” The women portrayed in both works reveal nuanced personal understandings of gender, and I examine whether these linguistic deviations from the gender binary are related to questions of translation and language, culture, or the period in which they take place. Marcasciano's work stages an Italian-specific trans narrative, yet to be translated into English; Torre's film, however, allows Marcasciano and her peers to be understood by international audiences thanks to its English-subtitled release. When gender binaries are fractured, it makes sense to question the boundary between the real and the unreal in order to place ideas of queer space in conversation with theories of the supernatural. Eliza Steinbock describes a transgender character's filmic reveal as being a “violent moment of physical disclosure” (2019, 5). *Le favolose* works back from this to allow a trans-centered narrative to escape the finality of death *via* the creation of queer utopian spaces. The queer spaces in Torre's film revolve primarily around the closet, and the centrality of clothing in trans women's lives is highlighted in both texts. Closets form a sort of affective archive, recording the stories and emotions of the women who wore the clothes within them. The merging of documentary and fantasy in *Le favolose* and the creation of an alternative archive, as Ann Cvetkovich (2003) states, allow for the creation of history from absences and discussions of gender in relation to life, death, and anything outside these confines.

KEYWORDS translation, gender, archive, queer, film, LGBT, +, Italian

Introduction

Roberta Torre's *Le favolose* (2022) is a docu-drama that examines the lives of five trans women, reuniting in a villa where they spent their youth together. The reunion is under tragic circumstances: after finding a letter written by a friend, Antonia, who passed away some years before, they discover that she has been buried as a man by her family. They decide to correct this wrong by conducting a séance to speak with her, hoping to change her clothes in the afterlife. The delicately constructed narrative is interspersed with documentary scenes of intimate discussions of the real lives of the women who star in the film, all of them important activists in the LGBT+ community in Italy. Themes of the supernatural, death, and the importance of clothing and the closet are woven throughout the film, and I will examine the significance of these in relation to transness as a whole, making reference to queer theorists such as Eliza Steinbock and Ann Cvetkovich. Queer and trans identities are shown to fracture the boundaries between life and death, as they also fracture the boundaries between real and unreal, in relation to the supernatural.

I also discuss Porpora Marcasciano's work *Tra le rose e le viole* (Marcasciano et al. [2002] 2020), a collection of interviews with a number of people who identify as *transessuali* (transsexuals) or *travestiti* (transvestites), primarily trans women, about their lives in Italy, done in 1999, to examine how similar the experiences of these women are to those in the film. Queer fracturing of boundaries can also influence discussion of family, home, and community; I will explore how all of these factors are influenced by the presence of the supernatural in both works. Also under discussion are questions of gender and language, and how to deal with both the literary and visual translation of gender; I will explore how these questions can also cause a further fracturing of boundaries. Overall, this work intends to explore how the supernatural influences life and community for trans people, and how trans peoples' lives (and deaths) are archived, focusing in particular on the closet. Lastly, I will explore how language and translation play a part in the perception of these people and their lives across cultures, comparing examples from *Le favolose* and *Tra le rose e le viole*.

Currently, *Tra le rose e le viole* has no published English translation, so discussions throughout this piece deal with my own translations. *Le favolose*, however, has been officially released with English subtitles, and this is the translation which I discuss, alongside the original Italian release. I also discuss the idea of transness itself as a sort of translation, and the relationship between language and gender.

Other works by Marcasciano have English translations, but her legacy deserves to be more widespread, and it is my hope that Torre's film will allow for an increased interest in this history outside of Italy and perhaps lead to the

commissioning of more translations of her works, further diversifying our cross-cultural understandings of gender.

Gender, Translation, Illusion

Porpora Marcasciano is a central figure in the trans community in Italy, and has been for many decades. She is the author of several books that recount LGBT+ history in Italy, including *Tra le rose e le viole*, a collection of interviews with Italian trans women. Her activism heightened after the death of Pier Paolo Pasolini, with her involvement with groups such as FUORI! (Fronte Unitario Omosessuale Rivoluzionario Italiano) and MIT (Movimento Identità Trans), of which she was president between 2010 and 2016 (succeeded by Nicole De Leo, who also stars in *Le favolose*). MIT is the oldest trans organization in Italy and is responsible for campaigning for the introduction of Legge 164 (1982), which opened the door for legal sex change in the country. Today, Marcasciano holds a seat on Bologna's city council, using her position to campaign for LGBT+ rights. Marcasciano is at the heart of the trans community, and in analyzing her work, we are able to access an authentic view of the life of trans people in Italy. Marcasciano also appears as herself in *Le favolose*.

The preface to Marcasciano's *Tra le rose e le viole* is entitled *La storia trans, favolosa quanta necessaria* ("Trans history, as fabulous as it is necessary") (De Leo 2020, 7-17), and in the interviews, all of the women at some point use the words *una favola* (a fairy tale) or *favolosa* (fabulous) to describe themselves or other trans women, in a positive way. One woman describes putting on her jewellery: "quando li indosso mi sento in una cerimonia, in una favola, e di conseguenza mi sento favolosa" (when I put it on I feel like I am in a ceremony, in a fairy-tale, and consequently I feel fabulous) (Marcasciano 2002b, 50). While we could translate *favolosa* in English simply as "fabulous," etymologically *favolosa* derives from *una favola*, thus meaning "from the world of the fantastic or unreal," or "a fairytale." The heavy use of mythological and supernatural language carries across into *Le favolose* not only in the title, but also in the film's final séance scenes. Continued use of the term *favolosa/e* places transness and gender non-conformity as a characteristic outside of the category of the real, summoning visions of trans women as mythological figures. The supernatural throughout this piece is defined broadly as all that is outside of the laws of nature and science: for example, the afterlife, ghosts, magic, fairy tales, séances, superstition, or anything make-believe.

Although these mythic séance scenes are invented for the screen, the everyday lives of the women in both *Tra le rose e le viole* and *Le favolose* are also filled with elements of mythology. It could be said that this proximity to the supernatural is conjured by the works' protagonists in order to create an alternate, make-believe life for themselves, to shelter from the harshness of the real world in which they must live: the majority of those interviewed engage in sex work as their primary means of subsistence. Even those who claim not to

believe in these *favole* cannot help but dream; one woman writes, “non mi faccio troppe illusioni, alle favole non ci credo molto. Certo se avessi un colpo di fortuna [...] farei una casa per le trans, un rifugio ... un castello come nelle favole” (I am under no illusions, I don’t believe in fairytales all that much. Certainly if I had a stroke of luck [...] I would make a house for trans people, a refuge ... a castle like in the fairy-tales) (Marcasciano et al. [2002] 2020, 141). The villa in which the women shelter in *Le favolose* could almost be described as this castle from a fairytale, *un rifugio* (a refuge), showing how such fairytales might—to an extent—come true. In addition to a refuge after a night working the streets, the villa also forms a domestic space where the women live together as an imagined family. While this villa is fictional, the queer space it forms is a representation of real queer communities and groups, such as MIT.¹ Many women in *Tra le rose e le viole* also describe living with other trans people due to housing difficulties, often arising from prejudice and transphobia from landlords and neighbors. Sara Ahmed describes how “for some queers, for instance, the very act of describing queer gatherings as family gatherings is to have joy in the uncanny effect of a familiar form becoming strange” (2006, 177). We see scenes of the women spending Christmas together dressed all in red; they eat together, drink coffee together, bathe together. The boundaries of the heteronormative domestic space are manipulated and queered, with the women performing domestic and affective labour for each other, standing in for the family members they have otherwise lost to prejudice. Marty Fink discusses how queer families and caregiving arise from the AIDS/HIV era, as “HIV narratives continue to inspire queer and trans family formations for gender self-determination” (2021, 78). Ahmed explains how “in living a queer life, the act of going home, or going back to the place I was brought up, has a certain disorienting effect” (2006, 11). The women describe their experiences of this disorientation and resulting alienation: Sofia, for example, describes how she did not talk to her mother for 12 years, and was not able to return home for Christmas. It is because of this disorientation in certain spaces that trans people must reorient themselves by creating new queer spaces (with new queer families), such as that of the villa. For the women in *Le favolose*, the villa becomes home and yet returning is nonetheless disorienting due to the complex emotional memories contained there. In addition to this, however, the home space of the villa forms a sort of utopia, which, as Ahmed describes, is “full of the potential to experience the joy of deviant desires” (2006, 176).

Eliza Steinbock writes that “the modern and the postmodern claims for conceptualizing trans are primarily about epistemological correction, or uncertainty. Running through both claims, and both eras, is the perpetuation of the trans stereotype of *being* illusory or unreal” (2019, 28). This slippery state of gender-unreality denotes a kind of freedom as well as an axis of marginalization. Transness, in its very essence, is about existing outside of the binary of gender and therefore escaping, as Steinbock describes, the act of “inscribing gender truths onto the visual body-as-text” (2019, 28). These truths are, rather, self-inscribed,

as demonstrated in both *Le favolose* and *Tra le rose e le viole*. Some of the women describe themselves as *transessuale*, (transsexual) others as *travestita* (transvestite), and others narrate how after surgery, they had *diventata una donna* (became a woman). This gender self-inscription is enriched, rather than erased, over time; one can, after surgery, “become a woman” and stop “being (a) trans,” but one will always remain queer, having had the experience of transness and multiple genders. However, if gender is inscribed as text, then the language we speak would influence these truths and the text inscribed—if these gender truths are altered by translation, the boundaries and binary of gender are thus disrupted. It seems that text and language complicate the act of describing gender, and any attempt to describe gender does not, as Steinbock says, inscribe truth onto the visual body, but rather, it affirms the illusory and unknowable quality of gender as something with definable categories. We see this when, upon arriving at the villa, Nicole describes her dog as “come me, un po’ donna, un po’ no” (like me, a little bit of a woman, a little bit not), placing them both outside of the gender binary. This escape from the binary raises the question of one’s relation to space and it underlines deviation, multiplicity, and lack of belonging to a definable category as an important facet of queerness and of queer and trans autonomy—a blurring of the boundary between genders, pushing gender as a category, as Steinbock posits, into the unreal, or supernatural. What Nicole does by describing herself (and her dog) this way, is to, as Steinbock explains, “narrate and represent their lives and thereby mold the available conceptual models of gendered embodiment” (2019, 27).

In discussing gender in these terms, we also question the potential difficulty of translating the discussions of gender in *Tra le rose e le viole* from Italian to English. While the terms “transsexual” and “transvestite” are now generally considered outdated terms in English, their Italian equivalents are widely used by trans people themselves both in *Le favolose* and *Tra le rose e le viole*. Helen Hok-Sze Leung describes an incident in which, during a Q&A session following a screening of Sebastiano D’Ayala Valva’s *Transvestites Also Cry* (2007), titled *Les travestis pleurent aussi* in French, “several audience members noisily walked out, apparently offended by the filmmakers use of the term *transvestite* and the pronoun he deployed for the subjects in his film” (2016, 432). It is therefore evident that the term is contentious within the LGBT+ community, and despite D’Ayala Valva having consulted all those in his film on their preferences regarding pronouns, audience members still felt the need to protest. In a project working on the MIT archives, Stefania Voli and Ludovicò Virtù write that,

The uneven use that certain interviewees made of terms such as ‘woman’, ‘transsexual’, ‘transgender’ and ‘transvestite’ in the description of their gendered self revealed not only the instability of the definitions that accompanied the historical reconstruction throughout the narration, but also the fact that these definitions are socio-historical constructs produced by the context in which they are immersed (2023, 121).

Both of these examples allow us to consider the fragility of gender, the lack of stability and boundaries it holds, especially when attempting to express these concepts in language. Our inability to perfectly translate these concepts is drawn from the fact that the socio-historical backgrounds from which they emerged do not align with our own. When examining the use of language in queer Italian spaces, Serena Bassi notes that,

Whilst today the word “gay” has been incorporated into the Italian language as a loanword and is routinely employed to mean “homosexual,” in the first phase of the Italian gay and trans liberation movement the word circulated chiefly in subcultural milieus and would have sounded “foreign” and unfamiliar to the broader public, thereby opening up a space for a process of resemanticization of the English word in the Italian (2020, 371).

She goes on to discuss how social stigma around homosexuality came to be represented by “regionally marked derogative terms,” such as *frocia*, and the use of English loan words was used to reclaim “positive, progressive identity.” We see this process recreated through the frequent use of terms such as *transessuale*, *travestiti*, etc. Although these are Italian terms, they were, when first coined, neologisms arising from English words, giving them the “foreign” connotation that Bassi discusses. The rise of a queer sociolect, or slang, both in English and Italian, creates further neologisms and terms which may require explanation, or have less direct translations, alluding, as Bassi notes, perhaps to aspects of class or justice. While the English language has since had equivalent terms to *travestito* mostly fall out of use, a more affirming definition has been retained in the Italian as part of a sociolect. Hok-Sze Leung’s points are also relevant here, as she goes on to say,

What is clear is that there is no *one* way—not in a title, in a choice of pronoun, even less in a translation practice, to capture the experience, feelings, and identity of the people the film is portraying. The difficulty of cultural and linguistic transfer is evident in the discrepancy between the connotation of *transvestite* in English and that of *travesti* in Spanish and Portuguese (2016, 434).

The words used to describe one’s gender are an important part of self-definition and when considering any potential translation of these into English we must be conscious of how our translation may be altering ideas of gender according to cultural perceptions. As well as considering the difficulty of translating *travestito* or *transessuale*, the Italian tendency to use the definite article with a higher frequency than English leads to the pattern of people describing themselves as *un trans* (a trans) in the noun form, which might seem strange and potentially offensive to English speakers. We must also consider, when translating written works about gender, the opportunity to include a preface or a translator’s note to explain any translation choices we have made, as well as the agency we can exercise in including and translating paratextual material which can influence and even determine the political form and force of a text (Ruth Abou Rached

2017). However, when subtitling a film there are perhaps fewer opportunities to make clear the choices in language used, with a lack of paratextual material, and a number of alternative considerations to make, such as dialect, register, and music (Díaz Cintas and Remael 2014). However, the ability to see the people being described may allow the viewer to perceive the “gender truths inscribed on the body,” as mentioned by Steinbock (2019, 29) and can lead to events such as the one described earlier by Hok-Sze Leung. Although the translator may take precautions or provide explanations, there is still a possibility that diverse gender perceptions might be altered, even unknowingly, given the inherent challenges of translation.

Since Italian is inflected for gender, the gendered endings of the words the women interviewed in *Tra le rose e le viole* use to describe themselves position them nevertheless as trans *women* to whomever they are speaking, even when describing themselves as *transessuale* or *travestita*. English is a language with relatively little gender inflection; thus the words trans, transvestite, transsexual etc. are ungendered, and must therefore be qualified by adding “woman” or “man.” Mirko Casagrande discusses the difficulty in translating from English to Italian when dealing with gender, asking, “can what has been defined as ‘degendering and regendering process’ apply to the translations into grammatically gendered languages? Do these ‘surgical translations’ regender language as they regender human bodies and human identities as well?” (2011, 210). Although the challenges differ when translating from Italian into English, we must consider to what extent to degender gendered terms, especially when translating texts which deal with issues of gender nonconformity.

Gender is also considered in different terms in a language which is inherently more gendered than English, and gender-non-conforming Italians are innovating language to find new ways to describe people outside the binary, as examined by Jana Kenda (2022). Where adjectives and some past participles usually end with -a/-e to signify feminine, or -o/-i to signify masculine, many (overwhelmingly young) non-binary people replace these letters with an asterisk or ə, writing *andat** or *andatə* instead of *andato/andata* (for the past participle of the verb *andare*, meaning “to go”), with the use of the schwa in particular having been suggested by Vera Gheno (Sulis and Gheno 2022). However, this change in language functions more easily on a written level than a spoken level, as many are unsure how to pronounce the letter ə. The older generation of gender-non-conforming people in Italy have many ways of describing their genders and also of living their lives, which are all linguistically and phenomenologically of interest. Antonello, one of the people interviewed by Marcasciano, is described thus:

Non è una trans ed è difficile dargli una definizione. Usando un suo modo di dire potrebbe essere un femminiello, antico termine con il quale a Napoli si indicano gay, travestiti, transessuali, transgender e tutte le sfumature che stanno oltre il maschile.

(They are not a trans and it's hard to define them. Using their way of speaking they could be called a *femminiello*, an ancient term which in Naples indicates someone gay, transvestite, transsexual, transgender and all the nuances that fall outside of the masculine.)

(Marcasciano et al. [2002] 2020, 87).

In both *Tra le rose e le viole* and *Le favolose*, dialect words are used at times when the concept is not easy or possible to translate, such as *femminiello*, as above, or *pitigone*. Insisting on the continued use of these terms is important, and it reminds us that, “the anglocentric dominance of terms from gay and lesbian to queer and transgender has the power to modulate and modify, if not erase entirely, ways of knowing gendered embodiment and sexual desire through other languages” (Hok-Sze Leung 2016, 434). The use of regional terms also denotes a refusal to accept Bassi's insistence that these regionally marked terms have become derogative, thus showing both a pride not just in one's gender and sexuality, but also one's place of origin. It also represents a refusal to accept anglocentric dominance and the imposition of others' terms for one's own perception of their body. This further reinforces the right to choose how you are described—and it further complicates the act of translating this language.

Death and the Afterlife

Le favolose ends with the five female protagonists gathering to perform a séance to contact their deceased friend Antonia, another trans woman, in order to help her change the clothes she was buried in, since her family did not respect her gender identity and buried her as a man. The scene stages the appearance of two ghosts, as the women accidentally summon the ghost of another deceased trans friend, Massimina, before they are able to make contact with Antonia. While the five women who gather to perform the séance are real, and their testimony of their youth as trans women is also true, the characters of Antonia and Massimina are invented. Antonia and Massimina, although imaginary, represent the thousands of deceased trans people whose wishes have not been respected. The act of searching for one friend, and stumbling first upon another emphasizes to the women in the film just how many loved ones they have lost—something which is a reality for almost all older LGBT+ people alive today. Describing the motivation for this scene in an interview, Roberta Torre discusses having discovered the practice of families burying their trans loved ones in their previous identity, and she said, “mi è sembrato è un diritto usurpato, violato. È un diritto universale quello di essere ricordati per quello che si è stati” (It seemed to me like a right which had been seized, violated. It is a universal right to be remembered for who you were) (Scarpa and Basso n.d.).

When gender binaries are fractured, and those that fall in between find it hard to define themselves, the boundary between the real and the unreal may be broken to allow ideas of queer space to pass over into theories of the

supernatural, with discussion of the afterlife often playing a part in how one conceptualizes one's existence, as in the séance scene in *Le favolose*. Already, we have concluded that the difficulties of translating and describing gender can push gender as a category into something illusory or supernatural. In an article describing the funerals of murdered transgender women in Turkey, Asli Zengin describes how,

Death and its afterlives become vital to how trans people relate to one another and to society at large—including its relationship with religious authorities—through the creative work of living. Trans people turn death itself into ways of becoming political and intimate subjects, remaking the conditions of their living (2019, 97).

In the scenes of Antonia's death, religion is ever present; as her family members repeatedly describe their shame, an aunt says the rosary. All speech is whispered as if no one dared speak of her transition too loudly. The intricately decorated rosary beads are juxtaposed with the delicately beaded feminine garments in Antonia's discarded suitcase, which is looked down upon by disapproving family. Death is a recurrent theme in conversation about the lives of trans people, for example, when unsupportive family members often discuss the "death" of their children's prior identity, or with the coinage of terminology like "deadname." Contrastingly, death can be a positive metaphor for trans people, where there is the discussion of transition as a "rebirth": "sono rinata il 3 luglio sotto il segno del cancro" (I was reborn on July third under the sign of Cancer) (Marcasciano et al. [2002] 2020, 79). Trans people are able to reclaim the negativity surrounding conversations of death to remake and to reorient themselves. Many of the women describe themselves and their character primarily in terms of the traits they associate with their astrological sign; this use of astrology sits on the boundary of the superstitious and mythological, the real and the unreal. There are parallels in the dialectic between the queer spaces of the villa and the afterlife and the dialectic of the real and the unreal, as well as life and death. Transness, in its very nature, involves a tension with binaries of all kinds, including the super/natural.

The proximity and interplay of life and death thus are an everyday occurrence in the trans narrative, constituting a "queer temporality" which warps and distorts the linear timeline of the heterosexual cisgender experience (Halberstam 2005, Freeman 2010, Muñoz 2009). The afterlife therefore forms for these women a supernatural queer space which is a refuge outside of the boundaries of heterosexual norms, in a similar way to the villa, where they can reimagine the violence done to their friend by the family. Speaking of Antonia in the film, Mizia states how, "le hanno vestito da uomo perché credo che la sua famiglia non l'abbia mai accettata nella sua vera identità, e oltre a queste morte violenta, infatti le hanno ucciso due volte" (they dressed her as a man because I don't think her family ever accepted her true identity and as well as this violent death, well, they killed her twice) (Torre 2022). Here she positions the violence of misgendering Antonia through her funeral clothing as equal to the violence of death, and additionally posits that one can go through the experience of death

more than once. This is paralleled with conversations about “re-birth”: if phenomenologically it is possible to be re-born, it ought to be possible to re-die.

Death, in a literal sense, however, is central to the film’s narrative, with the damaging practice of those who bury their trans child wearing the clothes associated with their assigned sex at birth forming the central plot point of this docu-drama. Eliza Steinbock describes a transgender character’s filmic reveal as frequently being a “violent moment of physical disclosure” (2019, 5); however, *Le favolose* works back from this moment of narrative violence to allow a trans-centered narrative to escape the finality of death *via* the creation of queer utopian spaces. The affection and emotion shared between the women in this film centers around discussions of life and death, and being there for each other during these experiences. Our first glimpse of Antonia is when her family are gathered around her in her coffin, whispering, “una vergogna enorme. Fosse un bel ragazzo.[...] Non un travestito, un trans. Era un uomo così bello. È tutta inoperata” (an enormous shame. He was a beautiful boy [...] Not a transvestite, a trans person. He was such a beautiful man. She was completely pre-surgery) (Torre 2022). This is the violent disclosure of which Steinbock speaks: the family discussing Antonia’s physical transition, switching between the gendered adjectival endings used for her, exclaiming their shame over and over again as they mourn the fact that they have a transgender family member, rather than mourning her death. Only the close-up of pomegranates—a biblical symbol of death, life after death, and the resurrection—remind us that this is a funeral scene. When translating this scene to English, the gender switching between phrases is made more noticeable by using pronouns as a gender indicator—recalling the discussion of the “degendering and regendering of language” (Casagrande 2011, 210). There are many ruptures and difficulties created when someone dies, but this is especially evident in the case of trans people. When discussing the funerals of transgender women in Turkey, Asli Zengin explains that, “the afterlives of transgender deaths demonstrate how sex, gender, and sexual difference, as a social field of constant and emergent contestation, mark the gendered and sexual limits of belonging” (2019, 79). For someone like Antonia, whose family did not accept her in her chosen gender, these limits of belonging are made especially clear, and although the dominant religion in Italy differs from Turkey, Catholicism and Islam share similarities in their refusal to embrace the transgender community, both in life and in death (Campbell et al. 2019).

The Closet and the Archive

Central in the film, and often in the lives of trans women, is clothing. This is especially poignant in death, since, for many trans people, their final wish to be buried in the clothing which matches their gender identity is disrespected when their families do not accept them. The closet, as well as being a vessel, or an archive, for storing these clothes, is a well-known metaphor for unrevealed

queerness. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, “there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence” (1995, 68). For many trans people, not only is the closet a metaphor for the gender identity which they are keeping hidden, but often the clothes in the closet itself are also kept secret, to be worn only around close confidantes. In an interview Torre recalls how, “l’armadio, come si dice, nel film è un astronave” (the wardrobe, how do you say it, in the film, is a spaceship) (*Le Favolose: Videointervista a Roberta Torre*, YouTube, 2022), allowing us to imagine how the closet and the clothes within can hold a supernatural power: these clothes can transport the women to another dimension, where they can truly be themselves. Ann Cvetkovich explains, “the importance of fantasy as a way of creating history from absences, so evident in queer documentary and other cultural genres, demands creative and alternative archives” (2003, 271). The merging of documentary and fantasy in *Le favolose* and the creation of an alternative archive collating memory *via* the closet do, as Cvetkovich states, allow for the creation of history from absences. We see real photographs from the women’s youth during the film’s credits, and the clothes are used as a springboard for them to fill a space which was absent, by recreating memories previously unrecorded; in the scenes depicting the women enjoying dressing up and reminiscing, history and fiction are blurred. Multiple archives are created; a physical archive consisting of the wardrobe, but also a further visual archive of film and photographs. Although Antonia did not exist, her story could be considered a sort of “critical fabulation” as per Saidiya Hartman (2008), expanding on the memories of the real trans women in the film, based on the lost records of those trans women whose memories have been erased by these violently transphobic burial practices. Antonia is a woman who represents the story of all those who have died without having their trans identity honored in death.

Torre describes how “ho scelto questo oggetto, l’armadio, e l’ho riempito di vestiti proprio perché volevo che loro prendessero questi vestiti e ognuno di questi fosse un ricordo” (I chose this object, the wardrobe, and I filled it with clothes really because I wanted for them to take these clothes and for each of them to be a memory) (*Le Favolose: Videointervista a Roberta Torre*, YouTube, 2022). As memories, the clothes on screen are able to revive the women they belonged to. The conscious choice of clothing as the objects through which memories are recalled reflects the importance which the women in *Tra le rose e le viole* also place on the memories they have of their clothes. Nicole enters wearing a luxurious leopard print fur coat, Sandeh (another of the women present at the house) exclaims, “è quella la pelliccia di Massimina che si ha bruciata?” (Is this Massimina’s fur coat that she burned?) (Torre 2022). They discuss the coat’s history before Nicole teases them, saying, “a proposito di segreti... non sapete che cosa c’è su,” (speaking of secrets... you don’t know what is upstairs) (*Ibid.*), before the women dance up the stairs excitedly to

discover the gifts locked away in the closet. Yet, the clothes are more than just an item of bonding; the closet that contains them is also a metaphor.

The clothes contained within the closet also form an archive, a way of cataloging and preserving time. While the archive might conjure an image of boxes of documents, the queer archive is once again outside these constraints. The closet itself holds the articles contained in the archive. The clothes recall memories in the same way documents hold a written record of history. This queer archive allows us to recall David Wojnarowicz's *Magic Box* (n.d), an unconventional archive of objects collected by the New York artist during the AIDS crisis. An online catalogue of Wojnarowicz's work describes it as, "a unique collection of items that confounds traditional archival or art historical description" ("Magic Box - David Wojnarowicz Knowledge Base," n.d.). Describing her experience working with this archive, Olivia Laing writes, "it is not the archivist's duty to write biographies or to assemble an orderly narrative of past events. What they must do instead is gather and cherish the raw material of history, the fragile, stubborn things from out of which the past can be reassembled" (n.d, 188). This reassembly of the past is especially important for women like Antonia, whose family attempts to erase her true identity through her burial. The queer, non-conventional archive has been much theorized in relation to how it captures feelings and emotions in ways a conventional archive cannot. Cvetkovich explains that, "lesbian and gay history demands a radical archive of emotion in order to document intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism— all areas of experience that are difficult to chronicle through the materials of a traditional archive" (2003, 241). The scenes surrounding the wardrobe and the clothing in *Le favolose* are some of the most joyous of the film; we see the women dancing and waving around a variety of beautiful flowing garments. They swing on the doors of the wardrobe, wafting silks and chiffons in the air as they help each other undress and redress. We also see them lead the ghost of Antonia up to the wardrobe to perform the caring ritual of undressing and redressing her. The scenes are, as Cvetkovich describes, filled with intimacy, sexuality, love, and activism, but most importantly, for these women, the clothes represent memories. They show acts of mutual care for one another and true comfort and joy in being together. Together, they perform the act of reassembling Antonia's memory in the archive. To add an element of realness to this constructed archive, just before the credits roll, we see the women looking through photographs of themselves in their youth. Some of the women are looking through photo albums, others have their photos stored in old biscuit tins, another reminder that archives can be unconventional and take many formats. The everyday nature of the boxes in which the photos are stored add an element of sentimentality, compared to the uniformity of an archive box. This reminds us that, although this film contains some elements of drama, the women we see on screen have lived their lives as trans women in Italy, and these photos are physical traces in a real archive. In looking at these photos, we also cannot help but focus on their clothes. The film itself, furthermore, is material

which is likely to be stored in the trans archive at MIT. Through a project in 2020, they were able to reorganize and re-catalog their archive of material pertaining to trans people in Italy. During this project, they also interviewed many trans people to collect their memories as oral history. When speaking for this project, Marcasciano mentions that Marcella Di Folco, founder of MIT, “taught her to consider trans memory (and therefore the collection and preservation of related material) as a fundamental political activity” (Marcasciano, 2020a).

Iris Marion Young describes how “clothes often serve for women in this society as threads in the bonds of sisterhood” (2005, 70). The way in which Porpora waits for Nicole to arrive at the villa before opening the closet fully, yet sneaking a small peek through the door, shows anticipation for their shared recalling of the memories and bonds formed over the clothes in this closet. Young states how “women often have stories to tell about their clothes [...] and we often bond with one another by sharing these stories” (2005, 71), which is what the women in *Le favolose* in part have gathered to do. They sit and talk about their memories in the villa, and Porpora describes how she had tried on multiple occasions to sell it, but her emotional connection to the place was too strong, and she could not go through with it. The pair reminisce about their past as young trans women while they await the arrival of the other women, and as Nicole retrieves a coat from the closet, she talks about how she remembers Massimina burning the sleeve with her cigarette, a memory which is recalled also by the other women later on. We think of this again when Massimina appears, unexpectedly, at the séance, in the afterlife. This bond crosses the boundary between life and death and the real and the unreal in order to unite the living women with Antonia and Massimina in the realm of the supernatural. The reunion of these women also forms an onscreen collection of oral history (much as projects such as ArchiviST at MIT intended) and the film, in a way, mirrors real-life archive material, and could be considered a contained radical archive, reminiscent of Dunye’s *The Watermelon Woman* (1996).

We consider here also how touch functions in the film; *Le favolose* uses the language of the haptic throughout. There are close-ups of hands stroking luxurious fabrics—silk, fur, feathers—and we imagine how each would feel in turn. As the women help to dress Antonia, they caress her gently, leading us to wonder if a ghost can perceive their touch. Laura Marks describes how “senses that are closer to the body, like the sense of touch, are capable of storing powerful memories that are lost to the visual” (2000, 130). The visceral visual language of touch throughout the film allows the viewer to understand and imagine the emotional response of the women recalling their memories as they move throughout the villa and feel the delicate fabrics, which have been hidden in the closet. In the filmic space between documentary and narrative, the clothes act as narrator and mediator, in that they give the women space to recall memories in a natural and spontaneous way.

In contrast to the joy of this sensual memory sits the pain of knowing what is missing from the archive. As the women sit down to read the letter from Antonia, which includes a sort of will, bequeathing various belongings to each of them, her *vere amiche* (true friends), they argue playfully about who received the best item, each remembering in great detail her clothes, jewellery, perfume and other possessions, before Sandeh intercepts to say, “in realtà non c’è più niente, c’è solo il ricordo di Antonia” (in truth there is nothing left, only the memory of Antonia) (Torre 2022). Like many other women, her belongings are long gone and missing from the archive; in the hands of unsympathetic family members the items which, although seemingly valueless, hold immense sentimental value to those who loved her, were thrown away. Cvetkovich reminds us how “gay and lesbian archives are often ‘magical’ collections of documents that represent far more than the literal value of the objects themselves” (2003, 268). This is evident from the rich tapestry of memories woven by the women in *Le favolose*, as they speak about *il vestito verde* (the green dress) and *le scarpe Jean-Paul Gaultier in pelle scamosciata* (the suede Jean-Paul Gaultier shoes). They argue about the division of her belongings even knowing they are gone, because the memories attached to them are still valuable regardless of whether the objects themselves are present. This green dress is mentioned multiple times during the film, and we see archive footage of Antonia wearing it as a young woman, looking almost ethereal—the memory of the dress is magical and the true treasure, as Cvetkovich reminds us. Both tangible and intangible objects thus take on this “magical,” supernatural, archival quality, much like Wojnarowicz’s *Magic Box*.

The documentary medium is also an important mode of archiving and remembering the dead. As Cvetkovich explains, “gathering oral history is itself a form of mourning, a practice of revivifying the dead by talking about them and revivifying moments of intimacy that are gone” (2003, 238). Although in *Le favolose* the women are talking about a woman who is fictional, the story of Antonia’s death is an all too common one for trans women, and the invented narrative material interspersed with the documentary material from the other women’s lives is seamless, due to the realism of the experiences articulated. A large amount of the documentary testimony in the film is interspersed with the scenes of the women exploring the clothing within the closet. This creates a dramatic contrast between the joy they feel when surrounded by clothing and memories, and the sadness they feel when they recall their youth, often pre-transition. It also has the effect of cementing the relationship between clothing and memory, as each woman is filmed wearing a dress from the closet as she recounts memories to camera. These scenes are followed by various pieces of Super 8 footage of the women at the villa together, in the garden, at Christmas, not all of them happy, to create the illusion of tying the imagined narrative’s clothes and villa into the real-life memories. We also see Super 8 footage of Antonia, in the green dress she had asked to be buried in, firmly cementing her as part of the narrative of their youths. The editing of the footage gives the

impression that Antonia was a real person, and it would be hard to differentiate narrative from fact, were it not for the supernatural elements. In addition, the format of the Super 8 film is used to give the impression that the footage was created in the past, adding to the feeling that we are watching someone who is no longer with us. While the memories are able to metaphorically revive the dead, the narrative goes one step further to revive the dead literally in the séance scene. Torre's critical fabulation constructs for the invisibilized trans woman not only a history, but a voice. Crucially, the inclusion of transgender women as subjects and actresses in the film means that Torre is not speaking *for* the trans community, but instead she is giving them a platform through which their voices are amplified.

Conclusion

In *Le favolose*, Marcasciano poignantly tells us, “ne ho visto tante nella bara, travestite da uomini, senza traccia delle loro percorse, cancellate con violenza nella sfida finale” (I have seen many in their coffin, cross-dressed as men, with no trace of their journeys, cancelled out with violence in the final challenge) (Torre 2022). The film is filled with a sense of urgency to correct this violent practice surrounding the burial of trans people, but it also exists as an attempt to retrace the steps of those whose paths have been erased. Torre shows how, for many trans people, in death, the coffin is transformed into a closet as their families enforce the covering up of their chosen identity. *Le favolose* allows this coffin/closet dialectic to be further articulated through the séance as Antonia and Massimina are able to come out of the coffin, and thus come out of the closet once more. While we see progress has been made since the first publication of *Tra le rose e le viole* in 2002, and the release of *Le favolose* in 2022, it is still evident that the constant presence of death in the life of trans people is something seen as common-place, not just in the Italian context, but globally. Indeed, the 2020 edition of *Tra le rose e le viole* notes the recent reactionary backlash against trans rights movements, including a discussion of J.K. Rowling's transphobic comments in the afterword—statements which she has unfortunately continued to make with increasing severity and frequency ever since.

The ever-present reminder of one's mortality and the unstable political context we live in makes the archive ever more relevant. The primary texts I have discussed demonstrate the joy and the memory, which can be evoked by clothing and by shared experience of space, both literal and supernatural. They also demonstrate the richness of language, which refuses to follow a gender binary or fit neatly into predetermined categories. Overall, the translation of texts such as those discussed allows us to expand our cultural and linguistic understanding of gender and the archive allows us the opportunity to observe its evolution over time. Moreover, Fabrizio Di Stefano in the afterword to *Tra le rose e le viole* describes Porpora Marcasciano as being “unanimemente riconosciuta come

‘l’archivio vivente’ del movimento transessuale italiano” (unanimously being recognised as the “living archive” of the Italian transsexual movement) (2020a, 209). Roberta Torre’s work captures the women it portrays in an affective and emotional memoir, constructing itself as beholder, inhabitant, custodian, and co-constructor of the archive. Torre’s work also brings the lives of Marcasciano and the work of MIT to a larger audience. *Tra le rose e le viole* is an incredible account of the history and lives of trans people in Italy across a number of years, but one that is sadly not accessible to non-Italian speakers, as it remains untranslated. We need more cross-linguistic representation of gender deviance in ways that confound attempts to demand legibility of trans people’s lives to cis people. The more we all (trans people included) understand that these are socially constructed categories that can never fully encompass the infinitely generative plurality that is gender, the more we are able to learn about transness, and indeed, our own identities.

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Note

¹ MIT (Movimento Identità Trans - Trans Identity Movement) was formed in 1979 and Porpora Marcasciano was president from 2010–2016.

Nicole de Leo, who also stars in *Le favolose*, was President from 2016–2022.

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Notes on Contributor

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