



## Spaghetti Sissies Queering Italian American Media

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palgrave  
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### CHAPTER 3

## Spotlight: Annie Rachele Lanzillotto

*Annie Lanzillotto*

### THE HYPHEN

"You're worse than an Italian man," a *Fiorentina* friend once told me. We were neighbors in Brooklyn. She also owned a house in a *frassettoni* of Florence. I knew what she meant. I was a dichard flirt. I didn't have what Americans call "boundaries." I talked to everybody in the street. I'd talk to anybody. Women sat on my lap in social settings, some woman or another would end up sitting on my lap. Flirting with the world was the *sangue* inside me. I am an old dyke; a lesbian. I believe "suction" and not "protrusion" is the life force of the universe. I believe women have triple the power of men. I get sucked in. It's visceral. I can feel it. The way the ocean pulls you in, the way the moon pulls the ocean, the way a woman pulls you in. It's the life force. The pull to the center of the force field, gravity, magnetism, the earth's iron core, all pull. That's how all the planets are held in place spinning in orbit around the sun. It's funny to me that

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superheroes are portrayed with powers that propel outward from them. I think a dyke superhero would have a magnetic power, the whole world would be pulled to her, right up into her cunt. Big suction energy. The whole sea could go inside her. The sky, the earth. She'd never have the need to throw a punch or ever have any projectile; no bullets, nothing that shoots, ever.

My superpower as an artist helped me define my lesbian identity with my family living in *Italia*. When I first sought out my cousins in the *paese* around Bari, I didn't speak much Italian and just a fluttering of syllables of 1900 era Barese. We tried to understand line drawings of each other. They'd ask why I wasn't married, why I wasn't traveling with a man, and after stumbling through conversations, they concluded: "*Abbiè s'... teatro*." I was a woman of the theater; being an artist made it easier in Italy to be recognized as gay. I remember that moment, when I felt for the first time that I made sense to them, all through one word that gave me a context: *teatro*.

Over the decades, I got to know some of them with much more intimacy, and we learned of each other on nuanced levels, especially as my language proficiency increased. I remember when I handed my Italian cousins copies of my first book, in the subtitle is the word "butch." There's no translation for the word butch in Italian. On my book tour through the *Mezzogiorno*, this word was a sticking point. For me, it became a game: let's see how many near-synonyms in Italian, scholars and translators and readers could come up with. No word hit the proverbial nail on the head. No word that exuded butch strength or did the flip we do to reclaim power from words that once oppressed us. As an Italian American I live in that hyphen the world has created for us. I am the hyphen rather than being Italian or American, I am the hyphen, and it looks like a minus sign. My heart is always half in two places. Will it ever come together? Will I ever feel like I belong anywhere outside of my works of art?

In the *Mezzogiorno*, above being gay or an artist I was *L'Americana*. The one who returned after a century. A couple of years ago in the *paese*, I visited a nursing home a bunch of times to visit my aunt who was in, what turned out to be the last year of her life. We walked side by side through the halls singing loudly, "*O Maria quanto sei bella*," which she taught me. We were a two-person procession to the divinity of Mary. A nun stopped to say hello and asked my aunt who her visitor was. My aunt looked up, and with twinkly eyes the color of the Adriatic Sea, said loudly, "*L'Americana*." She was so proud. Not many American *nipoti* made it

back and went day after day to the nursing homes in the villages in the heel of the boot.

A couple of my cousins came to a performance I did in Matera. That was a thrill; to hand them my books and CDs and to feel the acknowledgment that there is an artist in the family. In Italy, having an artist in the family, I feel it means more than it does in the US. Artists have a place, are valued, are understood to create quixotic works, and live quixotic lives outside hegemonic values. Art is the marrow of the land right along with *vino* and *olio*—is *l'arte*. The drumbeat of Sicilia. The elders singing in devotional street processions. The *sciocco* carrying beats and deities from Africa sweeping up into the heel, the arch, the toe, the triangle, the boot kicks. The *maestrale* floating *madonnas* from Constantinople to Barese fisherman. Everyone knows some Dante by heart and Puccini and Verdi *arias*, and in many senses everyone is an artist. The care with which *gelato* is scooped and handled as delicately as if you were diapering a newborn, there's an artistry you experience all day long from the first *cappuccino* in the morning to the art of conversation and interaction in the *piazza* at night. I don't mean to paint *Italia* in high gloss colors, yet in my *piccolo paese*, any night of the week in a *caffè* bar, everyone is there: dykes, artists, elders, everybody, whoever you're looking for, whoever you want to talk with or grab into a game of *Scopa*!

One defining moment came for me in 2018, when I performed at *Sicilia Queer Filmfest* in Palermo. I remember reading a poem called "Licking Batteries" which is about me learning as a kid to point my tongue on a battery cathode to see if there was any juice in it. The stingy salty sensation was the key. The poem goes into later in life, sexual applications of this skill. I remember vividly the faces in the audience. The young lesbian couples, butch/femme, holding onto one another, eyes glowing as I read. Over the course of a few days, then a return trip to Palermo, I made a couple of friends and listened to the troubles some of the young twenty-something-year-old dykes were having with their very Catholic mothers not accepting them. I began to write a letter to the mothers:

*Carissime Mamme Palermitane*

Time is ruptured  
You will never get this time back  
Your daughter will always remember  
the days and nights you shut the door on her lover  
These closed doors are never erased

Invite the opposite. Invite them in. Invite all of them.  
Your daughter loves you but cannot be other than who she is  
No sooner could she change the color of her eyes  
    You could no sooner change her  
    as you could make ocean waves  
    break in the opposite direction  
Be her hero. Love her unconditionally  
Invite her friends over  
You are missing out on the best party of your life  
You have wasted years already, drenched your daughter's soul  
with the battle fatigue of being gay  
and not accepted not celebrated by you  
She loves. She is healthy. These are facts.  
Celebrate your daughter's life,  
not the picture in your mind of your daughter's life but your daughter's life.  
For she lives. She aspires. She is building a life with a foundation of love.  
Get to know the woman she loves  
Enter the conversation  
Dive in. Open  
Embrace her love and you will gain a friend for life  
and another daughter who loves and sparkles for her  
Do not drive them away  
You are missing the greatest joy of your life  
Years from now when your heart opens in sickness or old age  
you will grow to regret the years you now waste  
Years from now, when you call your daughter's name, when you need her,  
she will be there to catch you—but let her come to your bedside  
remembering you were always there for her, rooting her on,  
cheering her, supporting her, guiding her, lifting her soul.

I am still writing this letter.