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## Elisa Giardina Papa (EGP) in conversation with Barbara Casavecchia (BC)

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*BC: Why did you choose to use a regional language for your title, instead of just English? Could you explain its layered meaning?*

*EGP:* The word ‘scantu’, in Sicilian, is a slippery term that points to fright, shock, grief, loss, or could also be simply understood as a ‘fear of living’.

*“U Scantu”:* *A Disorderly Tale* recovers the almost-lost tradition of the Sicilian ‘maare’, who were, and still are, women healers who help their communities get rid of the scantu. The power of the maare—whether magical or not, and in any case persecuted by the Inquisition—resides in the will to draw near to fear, loss, and grief along with those who traverse times of crisis and uncertainty. Their healing rituals, which often include nothing more than a dinner plate, some water, a few drops of olive oil, and the whispered utterance of beautifully rhythmic Sicilian words, gesture toward an ethic of social solidarity.

*“U Scantu”:* *A Disorderly Tale* steps into a propositional mode of counter-history to retrieve an abandoned practice of care in common and the

care of the commons. The work also rescues the myth of the ‘donne di fora’ (“women from the outside and beside themselves”) to redeem an imaginary that troubles stubborn dualities of gender, nature, and moral disposition.

Indeed, the ‘donne di fora’ were said to possess both the feminine and masculine; the human and the animal; the magical and criminal. To me, both ‘maare’ and ‘donne di fora’ belong to a rubric which I have been referring to as Queer Archives and Untamed Ontologies. There, I locate my interest in charting insurgent practices of life, care, and desire that I also interpret as collective anticapitalist, anticolonial, and radically queer repositories. If we need to begin with ‘u scantu’ to chart these alternative imaginaries, so be it.

More specifically on the choice of the languages. The Sicilian language, as you notice, appears right in the title in the first word, but it is also woven throughout the narration. The voice you hear in the film is in Sicilian, the text you read—in the subtitles—is in English. Sicily, an island positioned between continental Italy and Tunisia, is a space of cultural contamination,

unruly communion, and of vexing, yet imaginative, adaptation to the many colonizations, wars, migrations, and cultural and economic crises it has witnessed.

Our language carries the traces of this history—retaining and preserving words from Arabic, Greek, Latin, Catalan, French, and Spanish—but it also now carries the stigma of subalternity: you learn Sicilian from your mother and your grandmother, but you can never use it to write or speak in school. This is the language through which I first heard of the stories of the ‘donne di fora’, ‘donni di locu’, ‘donni di notti’, and how to ‘tagghiari lu scantu’ —how to cut/get rid of the fear.

The relationship between the Sicilian and the English is somehow resembling that of the complex dynamics between hegemonic and subaltern cultures, between modernity and magical thinking.

COLLECTIVE

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*BC: Architecture plays a very significant role. On the one hand, you chose to shoot part of the film in an ancient palazzo, i.e. a rather exotic and yet recognisable cinematic imagery, when it comes to the past splendours of the Italian South - think of The Leopard by Luchino Visconti, for instance. On the other hand, the action takes place in a retro-futuristic, remote Southern world that is much more difficult to associate with a precise space, or time.*

**EGP:** The first part of the film is set against the backdrop of Gibellina Nuova, a planned postmodern utopian city near Trapani. The third and final part of the film is shot in the ballroom and private apartments of Palazzo Biscari, a Baroque and Rococo palace built by the Prince of Biscari in Catania. Both were constructed after disastrous Sicilian earthquakes, respectively that of Valle del Belice (Belice valley) in 1968 and that of Val di Noto (Noto valley) in 1693.

As I mentioned earlier, the ‘donne di fora’ hold together absurd coexistences—they hold and exceed dualities of gender, nature, and moral disposition, but they likewise hold together an absurd coexistence of time. They belong to a mythological temporality, as well as to the profane, unfaithful time of oral culture—their tales changing with each telling. I wanted to retain this poly-temporality in

the film, whose time I have imagined as thick with layers, even if none of them are fully explained.

Gibellina brings to the film the complex temporality of ‘what might have been’. It is a past future, a recent future that never happened, maybe a failed future. Palazzo Biscari represents the time of the Inquisition, the two centuries in which the ‘donne di fora’ were persecuted as heretical. Yet, this Baroque palace, as you underline, also gestures to the cinematic time of the long-established representation of Sicily.

Finally, there is also a wider temporal scale, that on the island becomes more palpable: its recurrent earthquakes and volcanic eruptions are manifestations of the constant movement of the Eurasian and African tectonic plates, occurring in the depths of the Mediterranean Sea and spanning 100 million years.

*BC: Who are the teenagers that you have cast?*

**EGP:** They are not actors; the majority of them are students from a high school near Ballarò, the neighborhood of Palermo where I was living at the time. One is the cousin of a friend, others are sons or daughters of people I know in the city. “*U Scantu*” is a work born and raised in Palermo.

During the production of the film, poet Megan Fernandes flew in from New York to collaborate on the text that punctuates the visual narration. Artist and streetwear designer Mike Grapes from Savant Vision, based in Brooklyn, also came to Palermo. In less than a week, he created the looks for the bike tuners by repurposing and remixing items found in flea markets and second-hand stores, collaborating with local artisans.

The special bikes used by the young bike tuners were assembled in the workshop for custom car sound systems of Ciccio Ballarò. I like to think that this film served as a pretext for the gathering of many people who, on an island and in a city on the outskirts of Europe, came together to reimagine and tell the story of the ‘donne di fora’.

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**BC:** *The act of tying, binding and unbinding features prominently in the film. You keep its interpretation open: does it represent the magical power to bind individual wills, a form of punishment, or an expression of desire?*

**EGP:** This work is a tale, a disorderly one that weaves together facts and fiction. “*U Scantu*” traces the mythology of the ‘*donne di fora*’ through two distinct archives which violently collided during the Spanish domination of Sicily.

The first archive belongs to the Mediterranean oral culture—a socio-poetic and socio-magical unwritten archive of the multitude. The second pertains to the history of the Inquisition. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the syncretic immaterial heritage of the ‘*donne di fora*’ was reified in the trials for heresy perpetrated in Palermo under the Spanish Crown.

The tales of the ‘*donne di fora*’ became instruments of persecution for riotous, unruly, and politically troublesome women who were often punished for not being devoted to normative or proprietary notions of selfhood and sexuality. The work transgresses the limits of Inquisitorial documents and oral culture’s tales to conjure the radical imagination of the women who were believed—or believed

themselves—to be ‘*donne di fora*.’ The work leaps between the historical and the imagined to unbind the vibrancy of those lives from the judgment that struck them down. Hence, unbinding is not just a theme in the work; it is itself the methodology of the work.

There is also a more straightforward reason for the scene of binding and unbinding that you see in the second part of the film. It is a ritual that was actually performed by the ‘*maare*’, including those among the ‘*donne di fora*’ who were also ‘*maare*’, healers. I found an account of this ritual in the archive of the Spanish Inquisition in Sicily and in the book *Sud e Magia* (Magic: A Theory from the South, 1956) by the Italian anthropologist Ernesto De Martino. According to these documents, the ‘*maare*’, among other healing practices, would bind with a rope the person who had the “*scantu*” and then, after performing intricate words and gestures, cut the rope, and hence the fear.

This ritual traversed at least four centuries, documented in both the Inquisition archive and ethnographic accounts of ceremonial magic and witchcraft in Southern Italy, still practiced in the 1950s when De Martino was writing. This made me aware that the epistemological violence of the Spanish Inquisition trials, or any other technology of power deployed in Sicily, before and after the

Spanish Empire, was not able to fully erase this tradition. It strained and disqualified it, but did not fully erase it.

**BC:** *In your film and installations, there are often braids. You always wear one, so I am tempted to read them as a self-portrait, and maybe an interweaving with the hairstyles of our closest ancestors, our mothers and grandmothers. Does the braid also recall how, around the Mediterranean, female hair was often forced to be tamed, regimented, or hidden?*

**EGP:** It might also be my braid, and your guess is right; I wear it as my grandmother did. The only difference is that after she braided her hair, she would roll it up, in what in Sicily we call the ‘*tuppu*’. But the braid is also a reference to the archive of the ‘*donne di fora*’. The tales tell us that the ‘*trizzi di donna*’ (the braids of ‘*donne di fora*’) were a protection that they would sometimes cast on newborns, to be respected yet feared. Luigi Pirandello writes about similar imaginaries in his short fairy tale *The Changeling* (*‘Il figlio cambiato’*).

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*BC: If I remember correctly what you once told me, that ability to heal belonged to your grandmother. Did this work also serve you as an exorcism, to ‘cut the scantu’ about past passages in your life, or your family?*

EGP: They say my grandmother was a maara. Maybe she was, maybe she wasn't. She did ‘cut the scantu’ for me, or from me, once. I was seventeen, and I needed healing, as teenagers who try to grasp life too quickly often do. Whether or not I believed her to be a maara, those simple gestures belonging to an ancient grammar of social-poesis, belonging to a knowledge of wounds...I felt there was something magical about it. The magic of working through fear, with others, using whatever we have at hand.

In the situation of not having much, even olive oil will do. I think art sometimes can do that—when it lets go of the protocols of the hermeneutics of suspicion, the paranoid readings, or the outsmarting position of critical/conceptual stands. I am thinking of something akin to what, in the context of literary criticism and queer studies, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and José Esteban Muñoz have termed as reparative hermeneutics.

*BC: Last but not least: why did you use poetry to tell this story?*

The work leaps between the historical and the imagined. The stories of the ‘donne di fora’ have been systematized through anthropological and ethnographic studies by formidable Sicilian scholars like Elsa Guggino, Maria Sofia Messina, and Giovanna Fiume. Their writing has played a crucial role in the research phase of the film. Yet the film also embraces a sense of the disorder of telling. What I experienced each time I heard these stories from my family and the families of friends. With each retelling, the stories would subtly change, and I, too, found myself altering these tales during the production of the work.

We wanted to preserve this openness, the vibrancy of a tale that is not exhausted by its telling. Choosing poetry over prose, or any other genre, gave us permission to do so.

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