

È sempre esistite

A conversation with Rinetta Fellini

Accompanying Dallas Fellini's exhibition *Strada Statale 696*

May 9, 2022

Prior to exhibiting Strada Statale 696, I spoke with my Nonna, Rinetta, about her experiences growing up in Celano, the small Italian town where she was born. Over the years, my Nonna has mentioned people who she knew as a young girl in Celano who were queer or trans. After spending a short amount of time living in Italy, I became fixated on these stories, which my Nonna had only ever mentioned in passing. For me, these stories represented an important—albeit repressed—history of queer and trans presence in the same Italian towns and cities that had come to make me feel abject in my own trans experience. My Nonna is now 87 years old, and while some of her memories are fading she is always animated when she has the opportunity to talk about her life in Celano. I sat down with her and my father Michael, who helped the two of us navigate the linguistic barrier that has unfortunately often defined our relationship, and asked her about the queer people she lived alongside in Celano.

- Dallas Fellini

Dallas: So the project I'm doing is about Celano, that's why I wanted to talk to you and ask you some questions.

Rinetta: Do what you need to do. You ask me, if I know, I'll answer.

D: I was interested because Dad told me that you used to know some people in Celano who were gay. And last time I was here—remember you were telling me about the gay man you knew in Celano?

R: I was a young girl and I remember that man. And all the boys, they made fun of him and took him for a joke.

Michael: How old was he?

R: Over 25. And sometimes they took him far away, into the country, in a little house far away from Celano. They would say "there's a girl there, a nice girl." And he'd go, poor guy. He goes there and they give him a beating.

D: And how old were you?

R: I was maybe 15. I tried to understand this but I never understood it correctly. But I remember that guy lived near the piazza where they had the carnival. I always looked to him and I used to think “poor guy.” I don’t know why they did that to him.

D: That's horrible.

R: It was bad. I know they always took him as a joke.

D: That’s interesting that he lived near the piazza.

M: It wasn’t the main piazza, it was the small piazza where they had the little carnival when you were a kid.

R: There were always lots of boys; they played on the stairs by the church. But they took him as a joke. Maybe for the other boys it was something funny—do you know what I mean? Because I don’t think everybody understood that [being gay]. Now, everyone understands a little bit more that it’s natural. Everybody needs to be in their own way; they’re born like that. Leave them on their way, that’s all. But before it was bad. The parents would kick them out of the home, the poor kids.

M: They’re still doing that, some parents. Did you know any other kids in Celano that were kicked out of the house?

R: I knew one boy, he lived close to Linda. He was my age, we’d go to school together. His name was Gianni. Those boys used to talk about him too, saying he was a girl.

M: What do you mean?

R: He’s a boy, but acted really *delecatto* [delicate]. He acted feminine, like a girl. Even his voice, when he talked, was a little bit different from the other boys. And his brother was my age and we used to go to school—at that time I was 13 or 14 years old. And he used to say to me “my brother is gay.” But not many people our age during that time knew what ‘gay’ was, because parents would try to hide that sort of thing. They were ashamed to say that this girl or this boy is gay. But why were they ashamed? They didn’t want the other kids to understand. It would be very good if they explained it to the kids, but maybe they didn’t even know that 100 years ago.

M: We're talking the 40s, right? That attitude of being ashamed was so common, especially in a little village like Celano.

R: Now it’s like an open field—at the school they explain everything.

D: Yeah, and there's information on the internet.

R: It's beautiful. I like that. Anyway, I want to ask you—are you having a problem like this? Is somebody giving you a problem?

M: Do you mean is somebody treating Dallas badly? Is somebody taking them to the mountain and beating them up—that's what you're asking?

R: No, even if some people are just taking you for a joke. Is somebody bothering you?

D: No, I'm okay usually. Sometimes it's hard, seeing the way that people treat me and the way that people react to the way I look, but I'm okay.

R: Don't worry if somebody says something to you...

D: You'll beat them up?

R: Sure, why not! [laughs]

M: But yeah, even today not everybody is comfortable with this.

R: Even now, some parents don't accept their kid like that. But why? I remember Gianni, the boy from Celano, his parents owned a cinema next to the post office. He was a reserved, serious, nice boy. And the people started to look at him and say he's not a boy. What can he do? Why can't he just be the way he is? They didn't take him seriously. You can't let people do that to you. Do what you want to do. You are born like that, enjoy the way you are. God made you like that. And *vaffanculo* if anyone says anything. If you listen to people, they'll never make you happy... *Che cazzo non parlo inglese* [what the fuck, I don't speak English]! Are you still doing Italian lessons?

D: Not anymore. I took some Italian classes in Firenze, but it was very basic.

R: Okay. So, if somebody gives a problem to you, you know what to answer. *Pensa per te. Come se dice?*

D: Think for yourself.

R: No one else will make you happy. Everyone is just jealous if you are happy. And all the people are the same, don't say that English people don't do the same because I hear English people talk together against somebody else all the time. The whole world is like that. But you think for yourself.

M: *Ma oggi, é meglio che negli anni '40.* [But today, it is better than in the '40s.]

R: It was a bad, bad time. I left and came here not because I wanted to come to Canada but because my family didn't want me to marry Papa. They wanted me to marry *un ragazzo buono, piu ricco* [a good boy, a richer boy], but I loved Valentino. They wanted me to be with a "good" boy and a "good" family, but I like everybody. I like poor people, I don't like rich people. I feel more connected to poor people, that's all.

M: So what happened when you said "I'm going to Canada because I'm gonna go marry Valentino"—what did your parents say?

R: Listen to me. All these years me and Valentino used to talk, and people used to say "Valentino is the boyfriend of Rinetta." And I went out to talk to Valentino one day, at our house where Quintina's office is now. That night, I was talking with Valentino, and he said to me that his cousin got a visa to go to Australia and that the first chance he got to apply to bring someone else to Australia he would bring Valentino. His cousin is still there, 95 years old now. Papa was telling me this and I said, "damn you, idiot!" Because I wanted to be with him. And then I had to tell my Mama that I was going to leave everything to go be with Valentino in Australia. So my Mama looked at me when I said this and she knew this love was serious and that it was important to me. She said if you have to go somewhere else don't go to Australia, go to Canada with your brother and at least he can have some company—because my brother was 18 and already in Canada alone. And I accepted that and I tried to convince Valentino to wait. I wrote a letter to my brother and I said to Valentino: instead of going to Australia let's go to Canada. Poor Valentino, he wanted to leave the country as soon as he could because it was just after the war. He needed to get out, his Papa never took care of him or nothing, his life was hard in Italy. So he accepted what I asked him. He gave up the chance to go to Australia for me and he had to wait to go to Canada. Can you imagine how much we loved each other? It took my brother a year to go through all the applications to bring me over to Canada. And then once I got over here I had to wait a year before me and my brother could make a sponsorship for Valentino to come over. And then the consulate didn't let him go to Canada at first because he was sick when it was time for him to get on the boat, so he had to wait even longer to come over. Poor Papa, he suffered lots to come here. Look how much patience he had to have—it shows love is the most important thing.

D: Yes, it is.

R: And you love that girl?

D: Yes.

R: Good. I like her too. You don't have to feel shame, Dallas, for nothing, because these things are natural. *Come se dice? È sempre esistite.*

M: It's always existed.

R: All the time.