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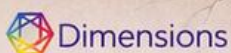
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Editorial Introduction

Reimagining Motherhood and Mothering in Contemporary Italy: Cultural Representations, Political Struggles

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1. No Country for Mothers

Building on Rich's (1976) influential distinction between "motherhood" as a patriarchal institution and "mothering" as a lived, embodied, relational and potentially empowering experience, this special issue explores how maternal identities are constructed, contested, and reimagined within contemporary Italian culture. Taking a cultural studies approach, it investigates the politics of representation by analyzing how motherhood and mothering emerge across literature, popular culture, social media, and public monuments. Following Woodward's insight (2015) that "people make sense of experience" – including maternal experience – "through cultural representations as well as material conditions" (p. 93), the issue brings together interdisciplinary perspectives to examine the maternal as both a site of meaning-making and sociopolitical negotiation.

In contemporary Italy, motherhood has become an increasingly prominent and contested issue (Lazzari & Charnley, 2016). It features more visibly across political and cultural discourses, yet it is

frequently framed in reductive and polarized terms, ranging from conservative, right-wing, and populist celebrations of “righteous motherhood” to ambivalent or critical feminist perspectives (Pető & Juhász, 2024). Set against the backdrop of demographic decline, ongoing debates over reproductive rights, and evolving definitions of family, motherhood has emerged as a key site of ideological struggle. In response, the government, driven by a neoliberal and socially conservative agenda, has established the Ministry for Family, Natality, and Equal Opportunities, a move that underscores institutional efforts to “resolve” the fertility crisis by advancing a traditional, heteronormative model of motherhood rooted in reproduction, family cohesion, and national identity (Frigeni, 2024b).

Yet, despite the symbolic centrality of the maternal figure in Italian cultural imaginaries, Italy remains, in many respects, no country for mothers (Minello, 2022). Material support for motherhood is lacking, and structural barriers – including inadequate childcare provision, rigid labor market structures, persistent gender wage disparities, and minimal paternal participation in caregiving – continue to constrain women’s ability to reconcile mothering with paid employment. Italian welfare policies remain anchored in a familist paradigm that presumes the mother as the default caregiver, thereby marginalizing alternative family configurations and erasing the diversity of maternal subjectivities (Gusmano, 2023). This disconnect gives rise to a profound contradiction: while motherhood is idealized and celebrated in national rhetoric, it is often unsupported and even penalized in practice.

Italian cultural and political contexts continue to be shaped by a deeply entrenched maternal ideal that carries considerable symbolic weight while simultaneously restricting women’s actual agency. As Bassano and Tiralongo (2018) observe, the word “woman” in Italy still evokes a predetermined “destiny,” bound to culturally embedded expectations around maternity (p. 107). Motherhood remains a central trope in the national imaginary (Morris & Willson, 2018), although it often functions more as myth than as lived reality: mothers are revered within private and symbolic domains, yet denied meaningful presence or influence in the public sphere. This idealized figure draws heavily from religious iconography, most notably the Madonna and child, which frames mothers as selfless, pure, and desexualized beings (Bravo, 1997). Despite the waning institutional power of the Catholic Church, its cultural legacy persists in secular narratives, continuing to valorize a maternal model rooted in sacrifice and devotion, particularly toward sons. O’Reilly (2021) terms this dynamic a patriarchal and maternalist construction of motherhood: one that exalts maternal self-abnegation while systematically withholding social, political, and economic recognition from actual mothers. Within this framework, motherhood is often framed as the ultimate fulfillment of female identity, generating a fundamental contradiction: maternal labor is idealized rhetorically yet devalued materially. Mothers are thus caught in a double bind, celebrated symbolically but unsupported in practice, their agency constrained by an ideal that obscures the diversity and complexity of real maternal experiences.

The persistent tension between symbolic valorization and material neglect of motherhood in Italy reflects a broader institutional failure to support maternal citizenship in substantive terms. As Giorgio (2012) observes, successive governments, irrespective of ideological orientation, have consistently favored rhetorical affirmations over policies that address the structural and social realities of mothering. A salient example is the 2016 “Fertility Day” campaign, introduced by then Health Minister Beatrice Lorenzin, which, under the guise of addressing demographic decline,

reduced women to reproductive agents and reinforced biologically determinist notions of female value. The initiative was met with widespread criticism for its regressive framing of womanhood as primarily defined through procreation. This dynamic has been further exacerbated under the leadership of Giorgia Meloni, Italy's first female prime minister, whose government has advanced a conservative, pronatalist agenda. The appointment of Eugenia Maria Roccella – an outspoken pro-life figure with essentialist views on gender and motherhood – as Minister for Family, Natality, and Equal Opportunity, exemplifies the state's strategic alignment of maternal empowerment with normative, heteronormative ideals of womanhood (Frigeni, 2024b). Within this framework, maternal legitimacy is contingent upon adherence to a narrowly defined model of motherhood: cisgender, heterosexual, biologically reproductive, and embedded within the traditional family unit.

Consequently, non-normative maternal identities and family formations are routinely excluded from institutional recognition and public discourse. These include surrogacy, prohibited by a universal ban enacted in October 2024, trans and queer parenthood, and other alternative caregiving constellations. Despite their lived validity, such experiences are frequently pathologized, rendered invisible, or delegitimized, reinforcing a restrictive and ideologically charged conception of reproductive justice. This selective visibility serves to consolidate dominant narratives while foreclosing meaningful engagement with diverse maternal subjectivities. Italian legislative and cultural discourses continue to be underpinned by what Gusmano (2023) identifies as "relational normativity," comprising three interrelated paradigms: heteronormativity, which positions heterosexuality as the normative sexual orientation; mononormativity, which presupposes monogamy as the default relational structure; and monomaternality, which acknowledges only one legitimate mother figure—typically a cisgender, monogamous, biological mother. These ideologically entrenched paradigms exist in tension with shifting demographic trends. Increasing numbers of women are delaying motherhood into their forties, while the proportions of childless women – those who may yet have children – and childfree women – those who reject motherhood altogether – are steadily rising. These developments underscore the growing incongruity between contemporary reproductive practices and the state's prescriptive model of maternal identity.

This inhospitable climate for mothers must also be understood within the broader "culture war" currently reshaping Italy's sociopolitical landscape, which centers on gender, reproduction, and national identity. These conflicts extend far beyond the realm of formal policy or legislation; they are enacted through what De Blasio and Selva (2024) describe as "communicative and cultural processes" that harness media platforms, political rhetoric, and institutional authority to shape public sentiment and normalize particular ideological positions. At the core of this polarization is a clash between conservative Catholic and sexual-difference feminist positions – frequently aligned with pro-natalist, biologically essentialist discourses – and the countervailing demands of queer, transfeminist, and intersectional movements committed to bodily autonomy, reproductive justice, and the deconstruction of binary gender norms. The so-called "gender ideology" panic plays a central role in this cultural struggle (Montecchio, 2024), functioning as a potent moral crusade that channels anxieties about shifting gender roles and legitimizes reactionary policy interventions. This moral panic has fueled renewed attempts to curtail LGBTQ+ reproductive rights, redefine parental roles strictly along biological lines, and promote a narrowly defined vision

of citizenship grounded in heteronormative, patriarchal, and natalist values. Through these dynamics, motherhood – and, more broadly, reproduction – becomes a key terrain on which battles over identity, belonging, and power are fought.

Within this broader context, feminist discourse on motherhood in Italy is ambivalent. While the maternal figure may seem an outdated subject of feminist inquiry, for Italian feminists, it remains a vital and unresolved concern. As Casarino and Righi (2018) suggest, “we are never quite done with the mother” (p. 1). Mothering has long represented a central thread in feminist genealogies (Ammirati, 2020), particularly within Italian feminism since the 1970s, which has sought to dismantle patriarchal myths that conflate womanhood with reproduction and care. Yet contemporary feminist discourse often exhibits a symbolic void around the maternal. There is a pervasive sense of alienation and disorientation among feminist mothers, caught between the pressures of patriarchal norms and the critiques of feminist thought, struggling to articulate diverse and evolving maternal identities. Within this broader cultural and political landscape, feminist discourse on motherhood in Italy is marked by a profound ambivalence, caught between a critical legacy that has historically challenged the patriarchal construction of maternity and the pressing need to reclaim and rearticulate maternal experiences in light of contemporary feminist struggles. This ambivalence, partly rooted in the matriphobic tendencies of second-wave feminism, reveals the difficulty of acknowledging and legitimizing the many ways of being – or not being – a mother today. As Vianello (2021) notes, experiences of feminist mothering are frequently marginalized, if not silenced, within dominant feminist discourses. For many, motherhood remains either an anachronism to be sidelined or a taboo to be avoided, especially in its more complex or non-normative forms.

Italy thus lacks a cohesive, feminist, mother-centered narrative capable of both critiquing institutionalized motherhood and imagining new maternal futures. What is needed is a feminist reappropriation of the maternal, one that recognizes the multiplicity of mothering practices and promotes theoretical and political frameworks attentive to their lived realities. In previous work, I have argued for the necessity of introducing a matricentric perspective in Italy: a mode of feminist thinking and activism that centers mothers’ experiences and foregrounds the maternal as a critical site of resistance, negotiation, and possibility (Frigeni 2024a). Such an approach reveals that an Italian matricentric feminism already exists, albeit often in muted, contested, or marginal forms, and it urgently needs to be voiced. Within this framework, cultural production and representation play a crucial role: they do not merely reflect social realities, but actively participate in shaping them. As such, the maternal offers a powerful lens through which to interrogate the politics of gender, care, and citizenship in contemporary Italy.

2. Cultural Narratives of Mothering and Motherhood

In a context where, as Woodward (2022) observes, “motherhood has long been an absent presence, assumed by and yet left unrecognized and unstated” and what is most often missing are mothers’ own voices (p. 9), it becomes crucial to examine not only how mothering is lived, but how it is represented. Narratives structure how people interpret their position in the world, align with collective identities, and engage with systems of power. Storytelling organizes facts, emotions, and experiences into meaningful frameworks, enabling individuals to navigate complex

social and political environments (Bruner, 1991). This narrative structuring does not simply communicate existing identities or institutions; it plays an active role in constituting and transforming them. Consequently, exploring representations of motherhood means grappling with how maternal identities are discursively constructed, stabilized, or challenged through stories – stories that are always embedded in broader cultural, ideological, and political matrices.

Representations of motherhood – across cinema, literature, television, visual art, social platforms, and urban narratives – do not merely reflect reality, but shape cultural understandings of the maternal. As Hall (1997) and Foucault (1978) have emphasized, representation is a key site where power is articulated and contested. Motherhood, far from being a private or purely biological matter, is a deeply mediated construct, defined by shifting scripts of normativity, virtue, sacrifice, and deviance. Within this framework, representations of motherhood are never neutral or purely descriptive; they are interpretive acts that shape how maternal identities are understood, valued, or contested within the social and political sphere. Narratives, then, become both the terrain and the tools of ideological struggle, capable of reinforcing dominant paradigms or opening space for counter-hegemonic redefinitions of what motherhood can be.

Drawing on several theorizations of motherhood and mothering, this special issue takes seriously the idea that cultural representations are performative: they shape what motherhood can be, what forms of maternal labor are recognized or erased, and whose maternal identities are granted legitimacy. By turning to representation, we gain insight into how mothering is implicated in broader cultural negotiations of agency, citizenship, belonging, and care. On the one hand, as Henriksson, Williams and Fahlgren contend (2023), “narrativity [is] central for understanding the importance of motherhood” (p. 6). Mothering, like representation, is fundamentally a relational practice, embedded in affective, social, and discursive exchanges that shape how we understand both the self and the world. To mother is not merely to perform a set of biological or cultural functions, but to engage in a dynamic process of care, negotiation, and meaning-making. Motherhood, in this view, is not simply a biological or individual state, but a relational practice shaped through narratives that circulate in cultural, institutional, and interpersonal contexts. As Somers (1994) argues, identities are formed and sustained through narrative structures that are socially embedded; they emerge not in isolation but through our location within broader relational and political networks. Narratives of motherhood thus serve not only to describe, but to produce maternal subjects, simultaneously shaping who mothers are and how they are recognized – or disavowed – within the public sphere. This insight foregrounds the political stakes of cultural representation: to tell stories about motherhood is also to negotiate power, legitimacy, and belonging within society.

On the other hand, representation, far from being a static mirror of reality, is better understood as a dynamic and refracted process – a dialogic act that situates subjects in relation to others and within broader symbolic and cultural orders. In this sense, both mothering and representing operate within what feminist theory defines as a space of relationality, a space that is not only interpersonal, but also imaginative and political. The act of imagining alternative relational and social configurations is not a peripheral concern but lies at the heart of feminist theory and activism. As Baumeister and Horton (2015) argue, the feminist imagination enables world-making practices by envisioning relational forms and values that challenge normative constraints. Echoing this, feminist writer Olufemi (2020) asserts: “The feminist imagination carves out a site of agency

that forms the impetus for action ... It enables resistant acts to take place by dismantling hegemonic notions of what is permissible under current conditions" (p. 35). This imaginative work is integral to the politics of representation, particularly when it comes to motherhood.

As Henriksson, Williams, and Fahlgren (2023) note, "in narratives, in texts, motherhood gains meaning on existential and symbolic levels" (p. xx). From this perspective, the maternal – and its cultural representation – becomes a potent lens through which to interrogate dominant ideologies and to envision relational, embodied, and transformative alternatives to them. Representational practices across literature, media, and visual culture do not simply reflect maternal experience; they actively shape the social expectations, ethical norms, and institutional structures that govern maternity. Analyzing these representations, then, becomes a critical feminist method for understanding how motherhood is mobilized within political discourse, reinforced or challenged by cultural narratives, and redefined by feminist, queer, and decolonial interventions seeking to reimagine what maternal identity can mean in contemporary society.

3. Positioning the Maternal: Voices, Formats, Perspectives

This issue combines interdisciplinary approaches, drawing from sociology, political theory, gender studies, cultural analysis, and visual culture. It explores how traditional ideals of motherhood coexist or collide with more subversive, intersectional, or precarious maternal narratives in contemporary Italy. Contributors examine how cultural texts grapple with the institutionalization of motherhood, the moralization of maternal choice, and the pressure to embody impossible standards of care and sacrifice.

Key questions addressed in this issue include:

- How do representations of mothering reflect or resist Italy's political, religious, and cultural discourses on gender and family?
- What narrative and symbolic strategies are used to construct or deconstruct maternal imaginaries in literary and cultural texts?
- To what extent do contemporary works by LGBTQ+ individuals, migrants, or artists from marginalized backgrounds challenge hegemonic models of motherhood?
- How do intersectional perspectives – considering class, race, disability, and sexuality – reshape what is thinkable and sayable about mothering?
- What is the current state of Italian literary criticism on motherhood? What are its dominant theoretical approaches, unresolved tensions, and emerging directions?
- How are alternative family structures, reproductive autonomy, and maternal labor negotiated in cultural texts in light of evolving social and identity frameworks?

By centering on representation, this special issue does not aim to displace lived maternal experiences but rather to interrogate the cultural logics through which those experiences are rendered visible, intelligible, or delegitimized. Representation is approached here not as a substitute for material realities, but as a critical site where meaning is produced, contested, and

potentially reimagined – a terrain, in other words, for feminist critique, political resistance, and speculative reconstruction of the maternal.

As Kaplan (1992) observes, “the mother has been everywhere ... but always in the margins, always not the topic per se under consideration. The mother, that is, [is] generally spoken, not speaking; she [is] usually discussed as an integral part of a discourse ... spoken by an Other” (p. 3). In the Italian context, the maternal figure remains omnipresent in political rhetoric, visual culture, and public discourse, yet mothers themselves are rarely granted full subjectivity or discursive authority. This special issue addresses that paradox by foregrounding maternal voices and critical perspectives across multiple formats: scholarly essays, a book review paired with an author interview, a piece of feminist reflection, and an in-depth dialogue with a scholar of Italian literature.

This special issue is divided into two complementary sections. The first, “**Voices**”, brings together a range of contributions that explore motherhood through personal, creative, and dialogic forms. It includes interviews with authors and literary critics, autobiographical poetry, and a piece of feminist reflection. These contributions offer alternative and affective modes of engaging with maternal experiences, expanding the space of discourse beyond traditional academic formats.

The second section, “**Analysis**”, features scholarly essays that draw on theoretical frameworks to examine literary texts, visual culture, and broader cultural narratives. These essays explore how motherhood is represented, contested, and reimagined in contemporary Italian contexts, with particular attention to questions of identity, power, and resistance.

Taken together, these contributions map a constellation of maternal representation and resistance, engaging with a terrain that remains both politically fraught and under-theorized. Rather than offering a unified thesis, the issue eventually invites readers to consider the multiplicity of ways in which maternity is constructed, negotiated, and potentially transformed across disciplinary, cultural, and aesthetic boundaries.

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Research article

Breaking the Maternal Bronze Figure: Vera Omodeo *Dal latte materno veniamo*

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Abstract

This article examines the contested politics of maternal representation in contemporary Italy by analyzing *Dal latte materno veniamo* (From Mother's Milk We Come), a bronze sculpture by Italian artist Vera Omodeo. The study explores how public monuments function as ideological sites where meanings of motherhood, femininity, and citizenship are negotiated. Drawing on feminist theory, urban cultural studies, visual culture, and Rancière's concept of the distribution of the sensible, the article investigates the institutional controversies surrounding the sculpture, from its rejection by the Municipality of Milan to its subsequent appropriation within the Italian Senate and eventual installation in public space. It argues that the monument exposes the tensions between patriarchal and feminist constructions of motherhood and illustrates how maternal embodiment is alternately celebrated and politically instrumentalized. Omodeo's work does not reproduce a singular narrative of maternity and produces an ambivalent position. The statue thus becomes a site of dissensus that challenges conventional monumentality and expands debates on visibility, care, embodiment, and public memory. Ultimately, the article contends that maternal monuments should be understood as dynamic arenas, where competing visions of gender, citizenship, and historical recognition are contested.

Keywords: Dal latte materno veniamo, motherhood, maternal embodiment, public monument, public art, Italy, Vera Omodeo, gender politics, symbolic representation, sociopolitical debate.

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1, Introduction

This article examines the symbolic and sociopolitical meanings inscribed onto representations of motherhood in contemporary Italy through the case study of a public monument. Specifically, it investigates the debates surrounding *Dal latte materno veniamo* (*From Mother's Milk We Come*), a bronze statue by late Italian artist Vera Omodeo (1923-2023), to analyze how maternal embodiment is constructed, contested, and politicized in Italian cultural discourse. The public controversies surrounding this monument reveal not only the gendered tensions embedded in public space, but also the ideological uses of motherhood within current political narratives. Motherhood in Italy today occupies a paradoxical position, situated at the intersection of enduring cultural ideologies and structural inequalities. Italy currently has the lowest fertility rate in the world – fewer than 1.3 children per woman – despite over half of Italians expressing a desire for two or more children (Minello, 2022). This disparity, known as the “fertility gap,” reflects broader systemic barriers, including economic precarity, lack of institutional support for families, and persistent gender inequalities. As Bettaglio (2016) argues, Italy presents an increasingly “antimaternal” landscape in which delayed parenthood, voluntary childlessness, and declining birth rates coexist with normative cultural expectations that continue to define women primarily through motherhood. In this context, motherhood remains a central feature of female identity, shaping not only how women view themselves but also how they are socially perceived, regardless of whether they have children (Morris & Wilson, 2018).

From a structural perspective, Italy's challenges can be understood through the lens of what Goldscheider, Bernardth and Lappegård (2015) term the “incomplete gender revolution.” While women's participation in the labor market has increased, with approximately 56% of mothers now employed (Minello, 2022), the division of domestic labor remains deeply gendered. Italian society continues to operate within the first phase of this theoretical model, in which women enter the workforce but men do not proportionally increase their caregiving responsibilities. The second phase, a more equitable distribution of domestic labor, remains largely unrealized, creating tensions between women's economic participation and caregiving obligations.

However, policy and labor conditions tell only part of the story. Cultural narratives also play a critical role in shaping maternal subjectivity. Bravo (1997) describes how the “myth of motherhood,” a set of ideals rooted in Catholic doctrine, nationalist sentiment, and neoliberal individualism, continues to uphold a model of maternal self-sacrifice and emotional labor that is often unattainable. These cultural expectations regulate women's behaviors and identities, even as societal and economic conditions make traditional maternal roles increasingly unsustainable. Recent political developments have further entrenched these normative ideals. In 2022, the Italian government established the Ministry for Natality, Family, and Equal Opportunities, under the leadership of Eugenia Maria Roccella. This institutional move reflects a broader conservative turn that frames demographic decline as a “civilizational emergency,” positioning traditional, heteronormative family structures as solutions to national crisis (Frigeni, 2024). The result is a form of “populist maternalism” that claims to celebrate motherhood while simultaneously reinforcing exclusionary gender roles and marginalizing non-traditional family forms, including LGBTQ+ identities.

Within this politicized climate, even cultural artifacts such as public monuments and artworks become battlegrounds for competing visions of maternal identity. Statues, in particular, function not merely as decorative objects, but as visual texts that inscribe dominant ideologies and “iconographies of oppression” into public space (Zoppi, 2025). As such, they offer valuable insight into how motherhood is imagined, idealized, and contested in the Italian sociopolitical imagination. This article explores how representations of motherhood in public artworks are not neutral, but deeply embedded in ideological struggles over gender, nationhood, and cultural memory. While such representations are often co-opted to uphold conservative narratives about the family and women’s allegedly natural roles, they can also serve as potent counter-sites of resistance, capable of unsettling dominant visual regimes and reimagining maternal narratives. Drawing on feminist theory and urban cultural analysis, this article argues that maternal monuments function as dynamic agents within the cultural landscape, as sites where dominant ideologies are not only inscribed, but also interrogated and contested. Through the case of Omodeo’s *Dal latte materno veniamo* – recently thrust into public and institutional controversy – this study examines how visual representations of motherhood in Italy operate as both mirrors and mechanisms of sociopolitical discourse. Ultimately, the article seeks to illuminate how such representations shape and are shaped by broader struggles over visibility, recognition, and the normative boundaries of maternal identity in public space.

2. Monuments, Gender, and the Politics of Representation

The representation of history, ideology, and social identities – what Hall (1997) describes as “regimes of truth” – does not simply mirror reality but actively shapes it. These regimes establish normative frameworks for how individuals and communities are understood, categorized, and positioned in relation to one another. Representation, in this sense, becomes a site of power: a mechanism for constructing social reality through the repetition of culturally sanctioned images, narratives, and symbols. Kern (2020) emphasizes that gender plays a constitutive role in how urban space is navigated and experienced. For women and other marginalized groups, the city is often a space of surveillance, vulnerability, and constraint. As architect and critic Darke poignantly states, “our cities are patriarchy written in stone, brick, glass and concrete” (in Kern, 2020, p. 41). This formulation captures the embeddedness of gendered power within the material fabric of urban environments, where public monuments play a crucial symbolic role.

Monuments are among the most visible and durable forms of public representation. Far from being passive or objective reflections of history, they are powerful ideological instruments that produce and enforce selective narratives about the past. Traditional commemorative practices have overwhelmingly celebrated male achievement and national heroism, systematically excluding or marginalizing women, non-heteronormative subjects, and racialized histories. Female figures, when present, often appear in allegorical or symbolic guises, including mothers, muses, martyrs, rather than as historical agents in their own right (Wallace, 2021). Such representational patterns reproduce patriarchal logics of gender, authority, and visibility. As Carson and Pajaczkowska (2000) argue, visual culture is not merely decorative or expressive, but fundamentally political. It reproduces ideological norms by disciplining who can be represented, how, and in what roles. The phrase “breaking the bronze ceiling” crystallizes these dynamics by

drawing attention to how the medium of bronze – long associated with permanence, honor, and state-sanctioned memory – has historically excluded women and other marginalized subjects (Rozas-Krause & Shanken, 2024). In this sense, public space is not just a visual field but a battleground of visibility, where identity, legitimacy, and belonging are constantly negotiated.

To unpack the political implications of this visibility, Rancière's (2004) concept of the "distribution of the sensible" offers a foundational framework. For Rancière, the political is not limited to formal institutions or governance, but is rooted in aesthetic regimes, systems that organize what can be seen, heard, and recognized as meaningful. These regimes determine whose experiences count as knowledge, whose voices are audible, and whose presence is acknowledged or erased. Politics, in Rancière's view, arises through dissensus: an interruption of the dominant sensory order that reconfigures the field of the visible and sayable. Within this framework, monuments are not inert historical markers, but key components of the sensory regime. They affirm certain truths while silencing others, legitimating dominant forms of identity and belonging while rendering other possibilities unimaginable. Monumental interventions, whether artistic, activist, or both, become political to the extent that they disrupt this regime, thus making marginalized identities perceptible and destabilizing normative visual codes.

This political-aesthetic logic extends to the broader spatial context in which monuments are situated. Urban space itself is never neutral. As Kong and Law (2002) note, cities function as both the product and conduit of power, shaped not only by governance and economics but by symbolic and cultural inscriptions. The naming of streets, the design of spatial hierarchies, and the placement of monuments all work to stabilize specific ideological orders. The city is thus not merely a backdrop but a semiotic system, a language that encodes and communicates values, hierarchies, and exclusions. It renders visible the desires of those in power while often silencing the needs and stories of those at the margins. From a semiotic standpoint, urban space can be understood as a syncretic text, a site where multiple symbolic codes coexist, conflict, and are negotiated (Bellentani, Panico, & Yoka, 2024). Monuments within this urban text are not static conveyors of meaning but open, contested terrains. They are places where competing groups struggle over the legitimacy of historical narratives, the representation of collective memory, and the visibility of subaltern identities. The recent surge in monument activism globally reveals how these structures are increasingly recognized as not only aesthetic forms but also ideological instruments that entrench hegemonic memory and suppress dissenting or alternative histories (Nelson & Olin, 2003).

However, feminist monument activism, as Wallace (2021) underscores, goes beyond seeking representational parity. Its goal is not merely to insert women into existing frameworks of commemoration but to deconstruct the very principles of monumentality. This includes challenging the assumptions of permanence, heroism, and abstraction that underpin traditional commemorative logic. Feminist interventions in public art and commemoration foreground relationality, care, multiplicity, and fluidity. They propose a radical reimagining of public memory as a space of continuous dialogue rather than static celebration. As Wallace (2021) puts it, feminist monument activism "opens up the potential for new forms of monuments that act as tools for social change," making visible those experiences, identities, and solidarities that dominant urban narratives have historically rendered invisible (p. 229). In doing so, feminist approaches not only expand the field of visibility but redefine the terms through which social recognition and historical

legitimacy are granted. They reconfigure the aesthetics of public space, not by reinforcing dominant forms of visibility, but by imagining new ones that make space for difference, dissent, and collective transformation.

This radical reimagining is particularly relevant in relation to motherhood, a theme that occupies a paradoxical position in public discourse: omnipresent in its symbolic weight yet constrained by dominant ideological frames. While maternal imagery has a long history in visual and commemorative culture, it has frequently operated within narrow boundaries that naturalize and idealize motherhood, reinforcing normative gender roles. Representations of mothers, especially in monumental form, have historically functioned to affirm nationalistic, moral, and patriarchal narratives, celebrating women primarily in their reproductive and nurturing roles. These portrayals often rely on sentimental aesthetics that strip maternal subjects of complexity, politicizing them while simultaneously rendering them apolitical. Feminist critique challenges this instrumentalization of the maternal and instead insists on its heterogeneity and political significance. By exposing the ways in which maternal iconography has been deployed to discipline female bodies and social expectations, feminist theorists and artists alike seek to disrupt the assumed neutrality of maternal figures in public space. As Buller (2017) notes, many maternal monuments perpetuate “hegemonic constructions of maternity” that frame motherhood as timeless, selfless, and biologically determined (p. 1).

In contrast, feminist approaches envision maternal representation not as fixed or purely symbolic, but as historically situated and contested, open to ambiguity, affective depth, and social critique. Breastfeeding, in particular, emerges as a potent and controversial site within this field of tension. Once relegated to the private sphere and burdened by moralistic judgment, it has been increasingly reclaimed by feminist artists as a gesture of embodied resistance. As Buller (2017) highlights, such works disrupt dominant visual regimes by foregrounding the maternal body not as passive or sanitized, but as dynamic, visible, and politically expressive. In reclaiming the maternal body from invisibility or fetishization, these interventions offer alternative ways of thinking about care, interdependence, and corporeality within the public realm.

3. The Case of Milan: Exclusion, Motherhood, and the Politics of Commemorative Visibility

Milan offers a particularly revealing case of the gendered dynamics that structure urban commemorative landscapes. Out of 124 public statues in the city, only four are dedicated to women. These include *L'albero delle donne* (*The Women's Tree*), a collective and abstract homage, alongside three individual tributes: artist Rachele Bianchi (1925-2018), journalist and Risorgimento figure Cristina Trivulzio di Belgiojoso (1808-1871), and astrophysicist Margherita Hack (1922-2013), whose statue was unveiled only in 2022. Two additional statues, honoring poet Alda Merini (1931-2009) and educator Giuseppina Pizzigoni (1870-1947), are in development. Still, the numerical disparity remains glaring: 120 statues commemorate male figures. This asymmetry is mirrored in the city's toponymy, where 2,538 streets are named after men, compared to only 163 after women, many of whom are religious figures such as the Madonna, reinforcing archetypal, symbolic femininity over concrete historical agency (Bortolani, 2019). Such disproportions are not merely quantitative; they reveal underlying symbolic economies through which visibility, legitimacy, and historical relevance are unevenly distributed. In this sense, public monuments

serve not only as markers of memory, but as instruments of cultural transmission, encoding values about whose contributions are worthy of spatial permanence. They render gender inequality materially visible while simultaneously naturalizing its historical persistence.

Milan is also home to one of Italy's most controversial monuments: the statue of journalist Indro Montanelli (1909-2001). While Montanelli holds a prominent place in the national media canon, his legacy is inextricably linked to his colonial past, most notably, his public admission of having purchased and sexually exploited a twelve-year-old Eritrean girl during his tenure as an officer in Italian-occupied East Africa. Montanelli's justification – that such practices were acceptable within the cultural norms of the time – has been widely condemned as a rhetorical strategy that naturalizes colonial violence and sexual exploitation. As Scego (2019) argues, his narrative reframes an act of gendered and racialized violence as a quaint anecdote of colonial masculinity, effectively erasing the profound ethical and political implications of his actions. The statue's location in the Giardini Indro Montanelli, adjacent to Milan's Porta Venezia district, an area with a historically significant Eritrean population, further exacerbates its symbolic violence. It functions not only as a monument to an unrepentant colonialist, but also as a marker of the continued marginalization of racialized and gendered bodies in Italy's urban fabric. Acts of feminist and transfeminist resistance have repeatedly targeted the statue, most notably when activists from *Non una di meno* covered it in pink paint as part of a public denunciation. These interventions exemplify a broader struggle to politicize commemorative space and to contest the historical narratives enshrined in urban iconography. As Montanari (2024) suggests, such monuments often reproduce dominant hierarchies under the guise of neutrality, rendering colonial and patriarchal violence invisible. In this context, the symbolic occupation and re-signification of monuments, whether through feminist toponymy or direct action, should be understood as strategies within a wider framework of feminist urban activism aimed at reclaiming public space (Salvatori, 2023).

The case of *Dal latte materno veniamo* illustrates how maternal imagery in public space becomes a similarly contested site where ideological tensions surface. Like the Montanelli statue, it reveals the symbolic power of monuments to either reinforce or challenge dominant narratives about gender, embodiment, and historical memory. Originally rejected by city authorities for being too ideologically loaded, Omodeo's sculpture stirred institutional unease – a reaction that underscores how representations of motherhood are often confined to narrow, sentimentalized frameworks that deny their political dimensions. Rather than being simply a matter of artistic taste or municipal protocol, this rejection reflects broader anxieties about the presence of female, and particularly maternal, bodies in the public realm. This reaction reflects what Kern (2020) describes as the gendered logic of urban space, where women's bodies are subject to both social control and symbolic erasure. At face value, Omodeo's statue could be seen as reproducing a familiar aesthetic tradition: that of the maternal figure as an emblem of purity, nurturing, and continuity. Such iconography aligns with what Adrienne Rich termed "patriarchal motherhood," in which women are venerated not as complex historical subjects but as idealized moral archetypes. Within this visual regime, the maternal body is made legible only insofar as it upholds national, familial, or moral orders. Yet *Dal latte materno veniamo* simultaneously resists these reductions. Its affective intensity, corporeal expressiveness, and the controversy surrounding its public display suggest a departure from the conventions of monumental neutrality and abstraction. Rather than offering a sanitized or mythologized image of maternity, the statue foregrounds a maternal presence that is

embodied, vulnerable, and emotionally charged. This aligns with feminist notions of care and ethical responsibility as politicized practices, as elaborated by thinkers such as Ruddick (2009). In this reading, Omodeo's work enacts what could be called a maternal counter-aesthetic: one that challenges the depoliticization of care and insists on its place within civic and commemorative discourse.

The ambiguity of the sculpture, oscillating between conservative legibility and radical potential, reinforces its significance. Its delayed acceptance into the city's visual and spatial lexicon becomes part of its critical meaning. The discomfort it generates is not incidental but constitutive: it marks a rupture in the normative codes that govern what kinds of bodies and identities may appear, and under what conditions. As Rancière (2004) argues, political rupture emerges when previously invisible or inaudible subjects interrupt dominant distributions of the sensible. In this light, *Dal latte materno veniamo* can be seen as more than a tribute to motherhood. It stages a broader interrogation of public memory itself: who is remembered, how, and to what end. By foregrounding a figure that is both symbolically overloaded and institutionally marginalized, it exposes the fragility of the commemorative order and gestures toward alternative vocabularies of recognition. In doing so, it points to the possibility of a feminist reimagining of monumentality, one rooted not in permanence or abstraction, but in relationality, affect, and embodied presence.

4. The Stories Imposed Upon the Statue and the Stories Told by the Statue

Omodeo's *Dal latte materno veniamo* has emerged not merely as a monument, but as a charged site of contested visibility, where competing ideologies inscribe divergent narratives of femininity, maternity, and public space. Its reception and the debates have sparked reflection on what Rancière (2004) terms the "distribution of the sensible": the political-aesthetic order that defines who can be seen, what can be said, and which subjects are permitted to occupy public consciousness. Within this regime, maternal bodies are frequently either hyper-visible in mythic and symbolic forms, or invisible as active political subjects. Omodeo's sculpture unsettles this binary, rendering visible a figure traditionally excluded from civic commemoration – the nursing mother, embodied, affective, and situated at the boundary of private and public, nature and culture. Originally offered to the city of Milan by the artist's daughter, the statue quickly drew support from feminist organizations such as *Toponomastica Femminile* and *DonneinQuota*. These groups recognized it as a rare and significant intervention into a male-dominated commemorative landscape, an opportunity to mark public space with an image of caregiving, relationality, and female presence. However, the commission overseeing public art in Milan rejected the statue, citing its subject matter, and specifically, the act of breastfeeding, as overly "subjective" and "not universally shared" (Bernacchia, 2024). This response, which recommended relocating the statue to a hospital or church, underscores an enduring discomfort with maternal imagery in civic space. It also reinforces what Buller (2016) identifies as the persistent framing of the lactating body as controversial and in need of regulation. The rejection exemplifies broader cultural anxieties around maternal visibility, echoing what Lee (2018) notes about the paradox of breastfeeding in contemporary society: while public health campaigns promote it as ideal, its public visibility remains taboo. By proposing to remove the statue from civic view and instead situate it in spaces marked by care, spirituality, or biology, the commission reaffirmed a cultural logic that restricts

maternal presence to the private or symbolic sphere, where it can be celebrated but not confronted.

Moreover, this rejection reflects what scholars such as Young (1990) and Irigaray (1985) have long identified as the structural exclusion of female embodiment from the public sphere – an exclusion that becomes especially acute when that embodiment is maternal. Young argues that liberal democratic spaces have historically constructed the ideal political subject as disembodied, rational, and autonomous – qualities aligned with masculine norms – while relegating embodied difference, particularly female and maternal bodies, to the private, domestic, or symbolic margins. Irigaray similarly critiques Western metaphysical traditions for defining the feminine as a silent, invisible “other,” whose generative capacities are appropriated as metaphor (e.g., for the polis, for nature, for origin) while her concrete presence is erased. Within this framework, the maternal body is not only excluded but appropriated, valorized only as a figure of nurturing abstraction, stripped of specificity and agency. The discomfort surrounding the statue’s depiction of breastfeeding thus underscores a persistent cultural logic: motherhood is celebrated when sentimentalized, privatized, or mythologized, but marginalized when made visible as a complex, lived, and potentially disruptive reality. As Young notes, the maternal body troubles the spatial boundaries that underpin liberal modernity, blurring the divide between private care and public citizenship, between passive nature and active political subjecthood. When motherhood enters public space not as an abstract value (e.g., “the motherland,” “family values”), but as an embodied, affective, and relational presence, it exposes the ideological fault lines that govern visibility itself. Omodeo’s sculpture, with its frank portrayal of lactation and maternal intimacy, confronts these boundaries head-on. It challenges what Irigaray describes as the patriarchal tendency to efface the specificity of female corporeality, especially in public representation. Rather than idealizing the mother as pure origin or moral symbol, the statue insists on the visibility of maternal labor: physical, affective, and ethically charged. It invites viewers to reckon with a body that is neither wholly private nor safely symbolic, but insistently present: tactile, exposed, and politically unruly. In doing so, the rejection of the statue reveals not simply aesthetic conservatism, but a deeper discomfort with maternal agency as a force capable of reconfiguring the terms of public recognition itself.

Despite its initial rejection, the statue later became a tool for right-wing ideological instrumentalization when displayed in the Italian Senate between May and July 2024. Strikingly, the very features that once made it controversial were reframed to support an essentialist and conservative vision of womanhood. Senate President Ignazio La Russa praised the statue as a universal tribute to maternal sacrifice, stating: “I believe that women sometimes have fewer opportunities than men, so I think it’s important to focus on this issue. However, when it comes to motherhood being their responsibility ... there’s little that can be done. Nature has decided so” (Cerimonia di presentazione, 2024). His words echoed a biologically deterministic view that casts motherhood as an inescapable destiny, positioning female identity as fundamentally tied to reproduction. This reframing exemplifies what might be termed “monumental washing” (Lunardon & Piazzi, 2023), a process by which public artworks are co-opted to symbolically affirm gendered ideals, without engaging the material conditions necessary to support women’s autonomy, equality, or reproductive justice. The bipartisan resonance of such rhetoric, including among progressives, further reveals how narratives of maternity often transcend political divisions, serving as a symbolic resource for cultural consensus. Yet this consensus is not neutral; it tends to

flatten the lived complexities of maternal subjectivity into abstract moral ideals, detaching the maternal body from questions of labor, choice, and power. Mayor Giuseppe Sala's subsequent proposal to relocate the statue to the Mangiagalli Clinic reinforced this medicalized framing of maternity, again shifting the representation of motherhood away from civic space and into institutional containment. The statue's final relocation to Piazza Tommaseo, a historically and culturally significant square, offers a partial reversal. The site, known for its magnolia-lined gardens and tributes to literary and artistic figures such as soprano Renata Tebaldi, situates the sculpture within a cultural-heritage context rather than a clinical or spiritual one. This setting invites a broader reading of the statue not merely as a biological or private image, but as part of a larger aesthetic and symbolic conversation about gender, care, and visibility in the urban landscape (Bernacchia, 2024).

The shifting interpretations of *Dal latte materno veniamo* reflect deeper feminist tensions surrounding the meaning and politics of maternal representation. Is breastfeeding merely a biological function, or is it also a socially and symbolically charged act? Does its visibility in public spaces affirm maternal labor and challenge its historical marginalization, or does it risk reaffirming traditional gender norms? These questions lie at the core of feminist debates on motherhood and embodiment. While some feminists view breastfeeding as empowering, even subversive, in a cultural context that often privileges bottle-feeding and marginalizes maternal bodies, others critique the promotion of breastfeeding as part of an intensive parenting ideology that imposes rigid expectations on women. As Lee (2018) argues, the rhetoric of choice in infant feeding is deeply shaped by moral judgments and risk discourses that constrain women's autonomy. Like motherhood more broadly, breastfeeding is a contested terrain, at once a site of pleasure and constraint, empowerment and surveillance.

Significantly, the statue resists reductive classification within conventional monumental typologies. Realized in bronze and finished with a greenish verdigris patina, the work portrays a life-sized female figure – 156 cm in height, hollow, and weighing 134 kg – engaged in the act of breastfeeding. The figure is partially draped, with a composition that emphasizes emotional expressivity and embodied presence. By centering an intimate moment of maternal care, Omodeo's sculpture departs from the aesthetic conventions of traditional monumentality, which often favor abstraction, idealization, and heroic detachment. Instead, the work foregrounds affective relationality and corporeal specificity, asserting the maternal body as a legitimate and complex subject of civic visibility. Rather than idealizing motherhood as a static virtue, it renders the maternal body as a living, situated presence. In this regard, it aligns with what art historian Chadwick (2020) has called the "un-monument," a form that disrupts the grandeur and fixity of traditional statuary, replacing it with vulnerability, ambiguity, and affective depth. The use of bronze, a material historically reserved for heroes, warriors, and statesmen, further subverts gendered expectations. Omodeo reclaims the medium to dignify maternal experience, not through heroism but through presence. Her choice to depict the maternal body in the nude was not an act of sexualization, but a deliberate gesture of visual honesty, that aligns with feminist demands for bodily autonomy and visibility (Liss, 2009). By stripping away the symbolic and cultural veils that so often mediate representations of motherhood, the statue invites viewers to confront the maternal body in its full presence and complexity. In this sense, it echoes what Cohen Shabot (2015) calls the "porous maternal body" (p. 156), a body that is radically open, relational,

and exposed, challenging dominant ideals of bounded, autonomous subjecthood. This representation resonates with feminist interpretations of breastfeeding as a practice that disrupts entrenched binaries, between public and private, self and other, mind and body, male and female. As Lee (2018) notes, breastfeeding unsettles the dominant model of Western subjectivity, revealing the need to “think subjectivity otherwise” (p. 9). Here, the maternal body emerges not as an object to be managed or concealed, but as a philosophical and political subject, capable of reframing how we understand embodiment, agency, and spatial belonging.

In *Dal latte materno veniamo*, the maternal figure embodies this paradox. She is both nurturing and unapologetically embodied, both universalized and particularized. As Nuvoli (2024) has noted, the evocation of maternal milk positions the mother as both physical source and symbolic foundation; this is a gesture that can empower but also constrain, depending on the lens applied. Indeed, the multiplicity of responses the statue has generated illustrates its interpretive openness. It neither neatly confirms nor completely resists patriarchal ideologies; rather, it disavows and troubles them. It occupies a liminal space between reverence and rejection, idealization and politicization. That ambiguity, far from being a weakness, constitutes its strength. *Dal latte materno veniamo* is therefore not a monument in the traditional sense, but a site of inquiry. It invites viewers not only to contemplate the meaning of motherhood in the public realm, but also to ask who defines that meaning, and to what ends. Rather than delivering a clear message, it generates a field of tensions, between tradition and subversion, biology and culture, universality and specificity. In doing so, it challenges the very premise of monumentalization, opening space for feminist re-imaginings of what can – and should – be made visible in the city.

5. Conclusion: Beyond the Maternal Monument, Towards a Feminist Politics of Visibility

The case of *Dal latte materno veniamo* exemplifies the contested terrain of maternal visibility within contemporary commemorative culture. Far from a neutral artistic gesture, the statue has functioned as a discursive flashpoint, exposing the ideological tensions embedded in representations of womanhood and care. Its initial rejection by municipal authorities, followed by its symbolic rehabilitation in institutional settings such as the Italian Senate, underscores how maternal embodiment continues to oscillate between celebration and regulation. As Young (1990) reminds us, even public gestures that appear to “include” women often reinscribe their association with the private, naturalized sphere, rather than acknowledging them as political agents with historical specificity.

From the vantage point of feminist urban theory, the critical question is not merely whether the statue renders women visible, but how that visibility is structured, interpreted, and contained. As Kern (2020) and Wallace (2023) argue, feminist interventions in public space must not only address representational deficits but also interrogate the spatial logics that render certain bodies legible only within narrowly prescribed symbolic frames. Omodeo’s sculpture, while offering rare visibility to maternal labor, risks reinforcing a biologically essentialist conception of femininity if read solely through a traditional monumental lens. Indeed, as Rancière (2004) contends, inclusion within the dominant “distribution of the sensible” often functions less as rupture than as assimilation, permitting presence only under terms that leave hegemonic orders undisturbed.

Yet *Dal latte materno veniamo* resists such closure. Its power lies not in its subject matter alone, but in the friction it generates, between form and content, public expectation and corporeal intimacy, reverence and discomfort. As Buller (2019) notes, representations of maternity often occupy an “in-between” space, both idealized and censored, both welcome and suspect. Omodeo’s work stages this ambivalence with deliberate precision: its classical aesthetic invites traditional readings, while its embodied subject – the act of breastfeeding – challenges conventions of propriety and spatial belonging. In doing so, the statue resists binary categorization as either a feminist triumph or a patriarchal relic; rather, it performs what Irigaray (1985) and Shabot (2015) describe as a negotiation with ambiguity, exposing the affective and political complexities of maternal embodiment in the public sphere.

Crucially, *Dal latte materno veniamo* should not be viewed as a self-contained intervention, but as part of a broader visual and symbolic ecology that must grapple with intersectional dimensions of care, gender, and space.¹ The statue opens a fissure in dominant representational regimes, but the transformative potential it holds depends on whether such moments can be scaled into sustained reconfigurations of civic meaning. This requires expanding the commemorative imagination: embracing maternal figures not merely as icons of biological reproduction or moral virtue, but as agents of relational, political, and historical significance, including queer, trans, racialized, and otherwise marginalized forms of care.

Ultimately, the statue’s significance lies not in its resolution of these tensions, but in its capacity to make them visible. It functions less as a monument in the traditional sense and more as a provocation, a site of contested visibility that invites critical reflection on who counts as a subject of public memory. In this way, *Dal latte materno veniamo* participates in a feminist politics of spatial representation: one that foregrounds embodiment, embraces contradiction, and reclaims care not as private sentiment but as an inherently political mode of being-in-the-world. Only through such a lens can public art move beyond symbolic inclusion toward genuine civic transformation.

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¹ In this regard, examples such as Kage’s mural “Equality”, which appeared in Rimini in 2023 and which depicts a transgender man breastfeeding, offer an important counterpoint. It refuses the essentialism often associated with maternal imagery and instead foregrounds parenthood as a spectrum of lived, embodied experiences (Telò, 2024). This kind of intervention shifts public discourse from idealization to plurality, from representation to participation. They challenge us to imagine what a truly feminist commemorative culture might look like, not one that simply adds women to the pantheon of public memory, but one that transforms the very grammar of visibility.

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Research article

Deconstructing Motherhood and Maternal-Daughter Tensions in Dacia Mariani's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of motherhood and the mother-daughter relationship in Dacia Mariani's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*. The study finds that the novel challenges traditional notions of maternal identity within the framework of Italian patriarchal culture. Set in eighteenth-century Sicily, the narrative follows Marianna, a deaf and mute noblewoman who, through writing and introspection, gradually reclaims her autonomy and redefines her maternal legacy. While her mother embodies a conventional model of womanhood, constrained by societal expectations and silent complicity in patriarchal norms, Marianna's detachment from her marks the beginning of a journey toward self-determination. Mariani raises crucial questions about maternal inheritance, female autonomy, and the possibility of disrupting oppressive structures across generations. The novel speaks to contemporary debates on gender, motherhood, and women's agency by exposing the historical roots of patriarchal systems that continue to impact female experience.

Keywords: motherhood, mother-daughter relationship, Italian patriarchy, maternal identity.

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1. Introduction

Motherhood has long occupied a central place in feminist thought, particularly in debates concerning its representation, institutionalization, and lived experience. In the Italian literary tradition, maternal figures have often been constructed through normative, idealized images—models that emphasize devotion, self-sacrifice, and silence. These representations, while deeply embedded in cultural discourse, frequently fail to capture the complex, ambivalent, and often painful experiences of mothering (Benedetti, 2007, p. 4).

This paper engages with *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* (*The silent duchess*) (1990), a historical novel by Dacia Maraini, one of the most influential contemporary Italian writers and a prominent voice in Italian feminism. Throughout her literary career, Maraini has consistently addressed issues of gender inequality, violence, female autonomy, sexuality, and motherhood, examining the ways in which patriarchal structures shape women's lives across different historical periods. Although set in eighteenth-century Sicily, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* speaks directly to concerns that remained central to Italian feminist debates in the twentieth century and continue to resonate today, including women's agency, the transmission of gender roles, and the possibility of resisting patriarchal norms.

The novel follows the life of Marianna, a young aristocratic woman rendered mute after a traumatic childhood experience. As Marianna evolves from a silenced daughter to a reflective and autonomous mother, Maraini exposes the intergenerational transmission of patriarchal maternal norms while simultaneously imagining alternative forms of female affiliation and maternal inheritance. In this respect, the novel anticipates many of the questions later articulated by feminist thinkers such as Rich, and Irigaray, Muraro concerning motherhood, female subjectivity, and maternal genealogy.

Through a close reading of the text, this article examines how Maraini deconstructs traditional ideals of motherhood and reimagines the mother-daughter relationship as a site of both conflict and transformation. The following section outlines the theoretical framework that underpins this analysis. Drawing on the feminist theories of Rich, Muraro, and Irigaray, it explores how the novel formulates alternative models of female subjectivity, symbolic transmission, and intergenerational continuity. By tracing the historical roots of patriarchal structures, Maraini's narrative offers insights that remain relevant to contemporary discussions of motherhood and women's autonomy in Italian society.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on key contributions from feminist theory to examine how *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucria* reimagines motherhood beyond normative patriarchal structures. Feminist scholars have long challenged essentialist understandings of motherhood, emphasizing its social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions rather than treating it as a natural or universal condition (Rich, 1976; Ruddick, 1989). Within this tradition, motherhood emerges not as a fixed identity but as a contested site where power, subjectivity, and gender relations are negotiated.

A foundational contribution to this debate is Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), which distinguishes between motherhood as an institution and

motherhood as lived experience. According to Rich, the institution of motherhood functions as a patriarchal structure that disciplines women into roles of self-sacrifice, obedience, and reproductive obligation (1976, p. 166). By contrast, mothering as an experience possesses the potential to become a source of creativity, agency, and affective power when freed from social coercion. Rich's distinction is particularly useful for understanding Marianna's trajectory, since her struggle is not directed against motherhood itself but against the social structures that reduce women to passive maternal functions.

While Rich focuses primarily on motherhood as a social institution, Luisa Muraro approaches the maternal from a different perspective. In *L'ordine simbolico della madre* (*The symbolic order of mother*) (1991). Muraro shifts attention from the mother as a social institution to the symbolic significance of the mother-daughter relationship. Writing within the tradition of Italian sexual difference feminism, Muraro argues that the maternal relation constitutes the original site through which language, meaning, and subjectivity are transmitted. As she states, "dalla madre noi riceviamo la vita e la parola, insieme (from the mother we receive life and language together)" (2006, p. 150). Unlike the paternal symbolic order, which is grounded in law and authority of the father (patriarchy) (Muraro, trans. Novello, p. 26), the maternal symbolic order is based on reciprocity, mediation, and recognition. Significantly, Muraro's perspective is daughter-centred: rather than examining motherhood primarily from the mother's point of view, she explores how female subjectivity emerges through a renewed symbolic relationship with the mother.

Muraro's reflections resonate closely with the work of Luce Irigaray, whose writings on sexual difference, female genealogy, and mother-daughter relations similarly challenge the erasure of maternal subjectivity within patriarchal culture. Writing in dialogue with both French psychoanalysis and European feminist thought, Irigaray argues that Western symbolic systems have historically deprived women of a female lineage by obscuring the significance of the mother-daughter bond. For this reason, she advocates the recovery of maternal genealogy as a necessary condition for female subjectivity and autonomy (1993, pp. 125-149). As a result, women often struggle to establish an autonomous sense of self because they lack symbolic models of female continuity and reciprocity.

For Irigaray, the transformation of the mother-daughter relationship is therefore a crucial political and cultural task. Rather than reproducing hierarchical models based on authority and dependence, she advocates relationships grounded in reciprocity, mutual recognition, and respect for difference. In *Sexes and Genealogies*, she argues that women must learn to establish woman-to-woman relationships that allow both mothers and daughters to exist as autonomous subjects rather than as extensions of one another (1991, p. 50). This critique of maternal omnipotence and her call for reciprocal female relations exercised a significant influence on debates within European and Italian second-wave feminism, particularly among theorists concerned with sexual difference and female symbolic authority.

Although Muraro and the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective developed a specifically Italian feminist framework, their reflections on female genealogy and symbolic mediation share important points of convergence with Irigaray's thought. Both reject universalist models of subjectivity based on masculine norms and seek to reclaim the maternal relation as a source of female meaning and authority. Within the context of Maraini's novel, Irigaray's emphasis on

reciprocity offers an important lens through which to interpret Marianna's evolving relationship with Giuseppa and her gradual rejection of controlling forms of motherhood.

Taken together, Rich, Irigaray, and Muraro offer complementary perspectives on motherhood. Rich exposes the institutional mechanisms through which motherhood is regulated by patriarchal power; Irigaray highlights the importance of female genealogy and intergenerational continuity; and Muraro reclaims the maternal relation as a symbolic source of language and meaning. These perspectives are particularly relevant to Dacia Maraini's feminist project, which repeatedly explores the relationship between female autonomy, maternal inheritance, and patriarchal authority. Although Maraini was not directly associated with the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, her literary work shares with Italian second-wave feminism a sustained concern with female autonomy, patriarchal power, and the possibility of constructing alternative female genealogies. As critics such as Sharon Wood (1995) and Joann Cannon (1999) have observed, Maraini's fiction consistently interrogates the ways women negotiate inherited roles while seeking alternative forms of self-definition. Read through this theoretical lens, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* emerges not only as a critique of patriarchal motherhood but also as an exploration of maternal transformation, female genealogy, and the possibility of reimagining the mother-daughter relationship.

3. Textual Analysis: Narrative Context and Main Characters

La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa is set in eighteenth-century Sicily and follows the life of Marianna, a young noblewoman rendered mute after a traumatic childhood experience. As the narrative unfolds, the reader gradually learns that Marianna's muteness is the consequence of a rape committed by her maternal uncle, who later becomes her husband—a violence not only tolerated but effectively sanctioned by her family. Marianna's silence thus functions both as a personal trauma and as a powerful metaphor for the exclusion of women from speech, authority, and self-determination within patriarchal culture.

The novel is situated within the highly hierarchical world of the Sicilian aristocracy, governed by rigid codes of honor, inheritance, and family obligation. Women are expected to serve primarily as wives, mothers, and transmitters of social prestige, with few outlets for personal agency or intellectual development. Yet Maraini's reconstruction of eighteenth-century Sicily is not merely historical. By exposing the mechanisms through which patriarchal power regulates women's bodies, desires, and destinies, the novel invites reflection on structures that continue to shape gender relations in contemporary society, albeit in different forms.

Despite being married at a young age and bearing several children, Marianna gradually carves out a space for autonomy through reading, writing, and silent observation. Her intellectual development unfolds through letters, notebooks, and moments of introspection, transforming silence from a condition of oppression into a source of critical awareness. Through this process, Marianna evolves from an object of patriarchal control into a subject capable of interpreting and reshaping her own experience.

The novel also constructs a complex female genealogy spanning three generations: Marianna's mother, Maria; Marianna herself; and her daughters, particularly Manina and Giuseppa. Each

woman embodies a different response to motherhood, desire, and social constraint, revealing both continuity and rupture within maternal transmission. In this sense, the mother-daughter relationship becomes one of the central structures through which the novel explores the reproduction—and potential transformation—of patriarchal values.

By focusing on Marianna's evolving position within this genealogical and symbolic structure, Maraini reimagines maternal inheritance not as a fixed legacy but as a dynamic process of negotiation, resistance, and change. The novel therefore provides a particularly rich site for examining how motherhood can function simultaneously as a mechanism of social reproduction and as a potential source of female agency.

4. Motherhood as Sacrifice: Marianna and Manina

In *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*, motherhood is not represented as fulfillment or self-realization but as a site of sacrifice, bodily discipline, and the gradual erosion of female subjectivity. Through the parallel experiences of Marianna and her daughter Manina, Maraini exposes the extent to which maternal expectations demand the renunciation of women's creative aspirations, transforming motherhood into a mechanism through which patriarchal values are reproduced across generations.

Marianna's experience exemplifies this dynamic. Before becoming a mother, she displays a genuine passion for painting, a form of artistic expression that allows her to engage imaginatively with the world around her. Yet this creative impulse disappears following the birth of her first child. As the narrator observes: "Peccato avere perso la pratica dei colori. Ma è successo senza una ragione, alla nascita della prima figlia (What a pity she has lost the skill of using colours; it left her for no obvious reason when her first child was born)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 110; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 101). Critics have interpreted this loss differently. Irene Marchegiani Jones associates it primarily with the oppressive conditions of Marianna's marriage, whereas Cristina Siggers Manson argues that Maraini deliberately links the interruption of creativity to motherhood itself rather than to matrimony. The novel appears to support the latter interpretation, since artistic expression vanishes not at the moment of marriage but with the assumption of maternal responsibilities.

Adrienne Rich's critique of essentialist notions of motherhood provides a useful framework for understanding this process. As she argues, "Motherhood is earned, first through an intense physical and psychic rite of passage—pregnancy and childbirth—then through learning to nurture, which does not come by instinct" (1995, p. 12). Marianna's maternal identity is therefore not presented as natural or inevitable, but as something laboriously acquired through bodily sacrifice and emotional discipline. The relationship between motherhood and self-renunciation becomes even more explicit in the narrator's description of Marianna's maternal experience: "Nella maternità ha messo la sua carne, i suoi sensi, adeguandoli, piegandoli, limitandoli (She has put into motherhood both her flesh and her feelings, adapting them, restricting them, renouncing them)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 87; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 80). The accumulation of verbs — *adeguare*, *piegare*, *limitare* (*adapt*, *restrict*, *renounce*) — emphasises a process of continual adjustment through which bodily desires and personal ambitions are subordinated to maternal

duty. Motherhood thus appears not as an innate fulfilment but as a socially regulated practice requiring the systematic restriction of the self.

A similar pattern emerges in the life of Marianna's daughter Manina. As a young woman, Manina takes pleasure in music and regularly performs for guests at the family home. Following the death of a child and two subsequent miscarriages, however, she too relinquishes music. As Maraini writes:

Dopo la morte del secondogenito e i due aborti che erano seguiti, i Chiarandà avevano smesso di ricevere. Solo la domenica qualche volta invitavano i parenti a pranzo e poi Manina veniva spinta quasi con la forza al clavicembalo (After the death of their second child and the two miscarriages that followed it, the Chiarandas had ceased entertaining. Only on Sundays did they sometimes ask relations to dinner and then Manina would play the harpsichord with great energy). [...]

In seguito ha rinunciato del tutto. Ora al clavicembalo siede la figlia Giacinta di sette anni, accompagnata dal maestro ticinese che batte il tempo sul coperchio con una bacchetta di legno di ulivo (Later she gave up music altogether. Now her seven-year-old daughter Giacinta sits at the harpsichord beside a music teacher from Switzerland, who beats time on the lid with a baton made from olive wood) (Maraini, 1990, pp. 143-144; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, pp. 129-130).

The image of her daughter Giacinta replacing her at the instrument under the instruction of a male teacher only reinforces the intergenerational transfer of loss, where daughters inherit both a social role and the remnants of a sacrificed desire. Nevertheless, Manina appears to accept her maternal role with a mixture of irony and resignation. Describing her own body, she remarks: "Il mio corpo è una sala d'aspetto: c'è sempre qualche infante che entra o che esce (My body is a waiting-room, there is always an infant coming in or going out)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 140; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 127). The metaphor of the waiting room evokes a body permanently available to reproduction, defined less by personal desire than by its reproductive function. Motherhood here becomes an institutional occupation of the female body rather than an autonomous expression of identity.

This contradiction is sharply echoed in Adrienne Rich's observation that: "If we could look into (mothers') fantasies—their daydreams and imaginary experiences—we would see the embodiment of rage, of tragedy, of the overcharged energy of love, of inventive desperation... the machinery of institutional violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood" (1995, p. 128).

Maraini stages precisely this wrenching. Both Marianna and Manina love their children, yet their maternal experiences are inseparable from sacrifice, exhaustion, and the suppression of creative potential. Their lives reveal how patriarchal motherhood transforms love into obligation and self-giving into self-erasure.

The section therefore represents the first stage in Marianna's transformation. By exposing the costs of institutional motherhood, Maraini not only critiques the sacrificial model imposed on women in eighteenth-century Sicily but also anticipates later feminist reflections on the ways reproductive and domestic labour continue to shape women's lives. The maternal gaze that emerges from these pages is undoubtedly loving, yet it is also marked by loss—a love that struggles to preserve space for female creativity and selfhood.

5. Marianna's Mother: Complicity and Silence

Marianna's mother, Maria, embodies a silenced and socially constrained model of maternity typical of patriarchal aristocratic culture. Her presence in the novel is marked by resignation and emotional withdrawal, a condition that critics such as Joann Cannon describe as a form of predetermined social scripting, where female agency is reduced to passivity and domestic inertia (1995, p. 138). Within this framework, Maria's apparent inactivity is not merely psychological withdrawal but a culturally produced condition that reflects what Adrienne Rich defines as the "institution of motherhood", a system that regulates women's roles through ideals of devotion, obedience, and silence.

This institutional logic becomes most visible in the episode following Marianna's rape, where Maria urges her daughter to return to her husband, thus reproducing rather than challenging the violent structures that govern female existence. This maternal refusal underscores the lack of female solidarity within patriarchal norms and exemplifies what Rich described as institutional "violence wrenching at the experience of motherhood" (1995, p. 280). In this sense, Maria does not function as a protective presence but as a mediator of patriarchal law, revealing the extent to which motherhood, within this system, can become complicit in the reproduction of violence.

The complexity of this maternal figure is initially perceived by Marianna as rejection. In her early years, she defines herself in opposition to her mother, declaring: "non diventerò mai come lei, si dice, mai, neanche morta (I shall never be like her, she says to herself. Never. Not even when I am dead)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 8; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 10). This resistance recalls Carl Jung's discussion of the daughter's reaction to the maternal archetype, whereby the daughter constructs her identity through negative identification with the mother. Yet feminist theorists have argued that such opposition is not merely psychological but deeply shaped by patriarchal culture. Adrienne Rich describes this dynamic as *matrophobia*, "the fear not of one's mother or of motherhood but of becoming one's mother" (1995, p. 235). Marianna's rejection of Maria reflects precisely this anxiety: what she fears is not her mother herself, but the prospect of inheriting a life marked by silence, passivity, and submission. Her declaration therefore reveals the effects of a patriarchal symbolic order that positions mothers and daughters as antagonists rather than allies, encouraging daughters to seek autonomy through separation from the maternal figure.

Marianna's initial rejection of her mother is further reinforced by her strong emotional attachment to her father. His death, unlike that of her mother, causes her profound sorrow and highlights the emotional distance that continues to characterize her relationship with Maria. Only later in life does Marianna begin to understand the conditions that led her mother to surrender her agency. She realizes, with empathy, that Maria had chosen to "farsi morta per non dover morire (become lifeless so that she would never have to die)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 28; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 27), a survival strategy emblematic of generations of women subjected to patriarchal rule. What Marianna initially interprets as weakness gradually emerges as a form of adaptation to a social system that offered women few alternatives.

The breach in the mother-daughter bond, particularly evident in the aftermath of Marianna's rape, has been interpreted by Giuseppa Santagostino through the lens of the myth of Demeter and

Persephone. Just as Demeter is unable to prevent the abduction of her daughter, so too is Maria powerless—or unwilling—to intervene. Santagostino observes: “Come nel mito, la madre è assente o incapace di intervenire; madre e figlia non sono più in presenza l’una dall’altra, sono in due territori linguistici diversi (As in the myth, the mother is absent or unable to intervene; mother and daughter are no longer in each other’s presence—they exist in two different linguistic territories)” (1996, p. 412). This fracture lies at the core of the novel and signals a broken maternal bond shattered by patriarchal violence.

However, as Adrienne Rich reminds us, the Demeter–Persephone myth should not be read simply as a narrative of separation or maternal failure, but as a symbolic structure shaped by patriarchal history. The separation between Demeter and Kore is “an unwilling one”; it is neither grounded in the daughter’s rebellion nor in the mother’s rejection. Rather, it reveals the fragility and historical suppression of the mother–daughter cathexis, already endangered even before recorded history (1995, p. 240). In Rich’s reading, the myth preserves traces of a pre-patriarchal symbolic order in which maternal power and female continuity were more fully recognized, even though this order has been largely erased or transformed. Read through this perspective, Maria and Marianna’s separation is not simply a personal or psychological rupture but the effect of a broader symbolic disruption of female genealogy. The novel thus resonates with Rich’s insight that both mothers and daughters, across history, have longed for a maternal relation capable of resisting violence and restoring continuity. Yet within patriarchal structures, this desire is repeatedly interrupted, producing a recurring pattern of loss, misrecognition, and silence.

Maraini’s novel thus reconstructs a genealogy of female silence, one that is constantly threatened by patriarchal violence and erasure. As Luce Irigaray argues in *Sexes and Genealogies*, “patriarchal domination, where and when men arrogate the power of the mother to themselves. It also allows them to destroy the genealogy of the mother and to recruit women, one by one, into male genealogy” (Muraro, trans. Novello, p. 42). In Marianna’s story, generations of women attempt—often in vain—to resist this appropriation. The narrative does not idealize the mother but situates her within a historical and symbolic order that limits her agency. It is only through the act of recognition and narrative re-elaboration that Marianna begins to reconstruct a different maternal legacy—one no longer rooted in silence, but in understanding, continuity, and transformation.

6. Marianna as Mother: Continuity and Break

Although Marianna’s relationship with her mother is marked by silence, disappointment, and emotional distance, Maria’s death initiates a process of retrospective understanding. Only after losing her mother does Marianna begin to reconstruct her as a woman rather than merely as a failed maternal figure. What emerges is not reconciliation in the conventional sense, but a more complex recognition of the conditions that shaped Maria’s resignation.

This recognition is mediated through the rediscovery of the maternal body. As Sharon Wood notes, “Marianna’s recollection of her own mother similarly focuses not on actions or words but on physical presence” (1993, p. 231). After Maria’s death, Marianna recalls details that had previously escaped her attention:

Della signora madre le appaiono nel dormiveglia dei particolari a cui non ha mai fatto

attenzione, come se la vedesse per la prima volta: i due piedi gonfi e bianchi che ciondolavano dal bordo del letto, i due alluci come funghi porcini che muoveva come se dovesse suonare una immaginaria spinetta con i piedi. La bocca dalle labbra carnose che apriva neghittosamente per ricevere il cucchiaino pieno di brodo (she is haunted by memories of her mother, to which she has never before paid much attention, as if she were seeing her for the first time: how she used to dangle her white swollen feet from the side of the bed, her big toes like two puff-balls, twitching as if she were playing an imaginary spinet with her feet. Her mouth with its full red lips that parted listlessly to imbibe a spoonful of broth (Maraini, 1990, p. 28; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 53).

Rather than recalling words or maternal guidance, Marianna remembers gestures, bodily traces, and sensory impressions. This scene evokes what Adrienne Rich identifies as “the longing for and possibility of connection between mother and daughter – a connection founded on physical sensation” (1995, p. 231). Yet this retrospective reconciliation does not erase the legacy of absence and resignation left by the mother. Marianna remains determined not to reproduce her mother’s passivity, having vowed from childhood: “non diventerò mai come lei (I shall never be like her)” (Maraini, 1990, p. 8; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 10).

Ironically, it is precisely Marianna’s condition—her muteness and disability—that enables her to fulfill that promise. Silenced by trauma, she is also partially released from social expectations imposed upon women of her class. As Sumeli Weinberg observes, if muteness symbolizes the hollowing of the self, it also liberates her from the shame of a role imposed by social determinism (1995, p. 182). Deprived of speech, Marianna she develops alternative forms of knowledge through introspection, reading, and writing. Her disability therefore becomes a paradoxical source of subjectivity, enabling her to question inherited models of womanhood and motherhood.

Marianna’s experience of motherhood is therefore marked by a persistent tension between rejection and repetition. While she consciously refuses the passive model embodied by Maria, she remains deeply shaped by the patriarchal structures that governed her own upbringing. Her maternal identity develops through a series of negotiations, failures, and partial victories that reveal both the possibilities and the limits of maternal transformation within patriarchal society. The death of her son Signoretto intensifies this awareness. At the same time, Marianna becomes increasingly conscious of the premature separation from two of her daughters: Manina, married at the age of twelve, and Felice, sent to a convent at eleven, and both disappear from her daily life before a meaningful maternal bond can fully develop. Although such arrangements were common among Sicilian aristocratic families, Marianna experiences them as painful losses. She attempts to oppose these decisions, particularly in Manina’s case, but ultimately finds herself unable to challenge the combined force of family authority and social convention. Reflecting on Manina’s marriage, she admits: “Con Manina, dopo le prime battaglie, ha lasciato correre, per stanchezza, per noia, perchissà, per viltà (With Manina, after the first battle, she had let it go, through exhaustion, boredom, through cowardice)” (Maraini, 1990, p. 86; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 80). Marianna does not possess Demeter’s mythical power to retrieve her daughter from the underworld of patriarchal institutions. Yet unlike Maria, she experiences this inability not as indifference but as failure, revealing an emerging maternal consciousness that questions rather than simply reproduces inherited norms.

This transformation becomes most evident in her relationship with Giuseppa. More than any of her other daughters, Giuseppa mirrors Marianna's rebellious temperament and desire for self-determination. Their relationship repeatedly echoes Marianna's own frustrated appeals to her mother. As a young girl, Marianna had protested against her arranged marriage by writing: "Non mi marito (I will not get married)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 30; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 29). Years later, Giuseppa similarly turns to her mother for support when faced with a marriage she does not want: "Io non lo voglio lo zio, signora madre, diteglielo voi (I don't want my uncle. Mother, you tell him for me)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 117). Although Marianna's intervention cannot completely alter patriarchal structures, her response differs fundamentally from that of her own mother. Rather than dismissing her daughter's desires, she listens to them. By silently supporting her daughter, Marianna rewrites the scene of maternal betrayal and helps Giuseppa avoid a preordained marital fate.

As she listens to her daughter complain about her marriage, Marianna notices how much they resemble one another—both in appearance and temperament: "Marianna intravede la sua testa riflessa nello specchio dietro la scrivania, accanto a quella figlia e si trova così somigliante a lei, quasi fossero sorelle (Marianna catches a glimpse of her head reflected next to that of her daughter in the mirror behind the writing-bureau, and realises that they are so alike that it is almost as if they were sisters)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 167; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 151). To consider her daughter as a sister rather than a child reveals Marianna's capacity to transcend the conventional hierarchy that previously structured their relationship.

The decisive turning point occurs years later, when Giuseppa confesses her love for her cousin despite being married. Initially, Marianna is tempted to forbid the relationship, reproducing the same prohibitive logic that has governed her own life. Yet she immediately recognizes the violence implicit in such an act:

«Devi troncare, Giuseppa, il cugino Olivo è sposato e non puoi scrivergli.»

[...]

«Ma io gli voglio bene.»

Marianna fa per scrivere un altro divieto ma si trattiene.

Come suona arrogante la sua interdizione: stroncare, recidere, tagliare... con un brivido ripensa alle mani del cappuccino che penetrano nelle carni del signor marito zio per strappare via le viscere, pulire, scarnificare, raschiare, conservare. Chi vuole conservare usa sempre coltelli finissimi. Anche lei, da madre apprensiva, ora è lì pronta ad amputare i sentimenti di sua figlia.

Giuseppa non ha neanche ventisette anni. [...] Perché non indulgere ai suoi desideri anche se sono proibiti?

('You must break it off, Giuseppa. Cousin Olivo is married and you shouldn't be writing to him.'

[...]

'But I love him.'

Marianna is about to write another prohibition but she restrains herself.

How arrogant her refusal sounds: to break off, chop off, cut off... With a shiver she thinks of the hands of the Capuchin friars cutting into uncle husband to rip out his guts, to clean, to strip off the flesh, to scrape, to preserve. Those who want to preserve always use sharp knives. How apprehensive a mother she is, all out to amputate the feelings of her daughter.

Giuseppa is only twenty-seven. From her young body arise tender odours of hair damp with sweat, of skin reddened by the sun. Why not give in to her desires, even if they are forbidden?) (Maraini, 1990, p. 167; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 151)

Reflecting on her on the language of prohibition, she imagines herself metaphorically "amputating" her daughter's feelings, just as patriarchal authority has attempted to amputate her own desires.

However, rather than repeat the error of encouraging her daughter to remain in a safe yet unhappy institutionalized relationship, Marianna adopts a different position: a skepticism toward rigid correctness. After a moment of hesitation, she changes her tone and tells Giuseppa: "Scrivi pure la tua lettera, non ti guarderò... (Write your letter by all means, I shall not be watching you.)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 168; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 151). This seemingly simple gesture represents one of the most significant moments in the novel. Marianna does not decide for her daughter; nor does she withdraw into passive silence. Rather, she creates a space in which Giuseppa can exercise her own agency. In doing so, she breaks with both patriarchal authority and maternal possessiveness.

The scene resonates strongly with Luce Irigaray's call to move beyond maternal omnipotence and toward a reciprocal relationship between women. As Irigaray affirms:

In a sense we need to say goodbye to maternal omnipotence (the last refuge) and establish a woman-to-woman relationship of reciprocity with our mothers, in which they might possibly also feel themselves to be our daughters. In a word, liberate ourselves along with our mothers. That is an indispensable precondition for our emancipation from the authority of fathers. In our societies, the mother/daughter, daughter/mother relationship constitutes a highly explosive nucleus. Thinking it, and changing it, is equivalent to shaking the foundations of the patriarchal order (1992, p. 50).

Marianna's refusal to control Giuseppa's desires embodies precisely this shift. For the first time in the novel, motherhood is no longer defined by sacrifice, obedience, or authority, but by recognition.

Marianna's maternal journey therefore remains incomplete and often contradictory. She cannot entirely escape the structures that have shaped her life, nor can she fully protect her daughters from them. Yet she succeeds in transforming the meaning of maternal inheritance. Unlike Maria, who transmitted silence and resignation, Marianna gradually learns to transmit trust, autonomy, and the possibility of choice. Through Giuseppa, the novel imagines a maternal relationship no longer based on repetition but on transformation, preparing the ground for the symbolic reconfiguration of motherhood that will emerge more fully through Marianna's writing.

7. Writing and the Symbolic Order

Throughout *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa*, writing functions as a transformative practice that enables Marianna to move from imposed silence to symbolic agency. Initially emerging as a pragmatic necessity due to her muteness, writing gradually becomes a space of self-reflection, and narrative reconstruction, through which Marianna reinterprets her past, reconfigures her position within the maternal and familial order.

This practice operates simultaneously on three interconnected levels: as memory, allowing Marianna to reconstruct and reinterpret lived experience; as resistance, challenging the silencing imposed on her body and voice; and as transmission, through which she seeks to communicate with her daughters in a symbolic language charged with meaning and affection. However, this maternal transmission remains partial and uneven, as only Giuseppa engages fully with this written mode of relation, while Manina and Felice largely refuse it, revealing fragility of maternal continuity across generations.

Within this framework, Marianna's writing gestures toward the construction of what Luisa Muraro defines as a maternal symbolic order, one that contrasts with the patriarchal order that has historically excluded women from meaning-making and cultural transmission. As Luisa Muraro writes, "La madre è, universalmente, il nome della relazione che è condizione di vita umana. [...] E cioè che dalla madre noi riceviamo la vita e la parola, insieme, e che l'ordine simbolico lo fa non il potere né la legge, ma la lingua (The mother is, universally, the name of the relationship that is the condition of human life. [...] That is, from the mother we receive both life and language, and the symbolic order is shaped not by power or law, but by language itself)" (Muraro, 2006, p. 150). In this sense, symbolic authority is not located in institutional power but in the originary relation through which language and life are transmitted. Muraro's reflection on symbolic authority highlights a major disruption in the feminine lineage: "She taught us to speak and she answered for language and its ability to say what it is. [...] But the mother loses her authority in our adult lives, and this, I think, is the cause of the symbolic incompetence" (Muraro, trans. Novello, p. 32).

Marianna's writing can therefore be read as an attempt to re-activate this symbolic relation beyond its rupture: a form of maternal inscription that does not reproduce inherited discourse but re-articulates it through experience. This reconfiguration is reinforced by Ida Dominijanni's discussion of Luisa Muraro's thought. Reflecting on the symbolic significance of the mother-daughter relationship after patriarchy, Dominijanni suggests that female subjectivity may be renewed not through resentment towards the mother, but through a form of symbolic gratitude capable of reconnecting women to a female genealogy and opening new possibilities for articulating experience (Muraro, 2006, p. 150). Marianna's genealogical reconstruction thus shifts from a logic of inheritance as submission to one of difference and transformation.

This symbolic tension between transmission and rupture is further illuminated through the contrast between Marianna and her own mother. While Marianna seeks to re-appropriate language through writing, her mother remains fully inscribed within the patriarchal symbolic order. She persuades her daughter to accept an arranged marriage with the words: "tu hai il dovere di accettare lu zitu che ti indichiamo perché ti vogliamo bene... (your duty is to accept the bridegroom we have found for you because we love you)" (Maraini, 1990, p. 33; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 29). And when Marianna, after suffering violence from her uncle, the husband, returns home,

the mother reproaches her harshly, invoking traditional proverbs such as “*Cu si marita p’amuri sempri campa ‘n duluri* (Marry for love and end up in pain)” (Maraini, 1990, p. 33; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 31). As Muraro argues, she “ends up saying what others have said or would say, finding support in what they want to say” (trans. Novello, p. 28), such expressions function not as individual speech but as the reiteration of a collective linguistic order, in which the mother becomes a vehicle of transmitted norms rather than a subject of enunciation.

Against this background, Marianna’s writing operates as a rupture: it does not simply reproduce inherited meanings but intervenes in them, transforming silence into articulation. In this sense, her practice resonates with Adrienne Rich’s distinction between motherhood as institution and motherhood as lived experience, where the latter is not a fixed identity but a relational and historical process: “Motherhood, in the sense of an intense, reciprocal relationship with a particular child ... is one part of female process; it is not an identity for all time” (1995, pp. 36-37). Writing thus becomes not only a means of survival, but a political act and symbolic act through which Marianna reclaims the maternal line as a site of agency rather than subordination.

By committing herself to writing, Marianna breaks with a pre-scripted destiny and reclaims subjectivity not as an object of patriarchal narration, but as a speaking and interpreting subject. This act initiates a re-foundation of maternal lineage grounded not in obedience or sacrifice, but in memory, relational autonomy, and symbolic re-signification.

8. The Final Gesture: Leaving

Marianna’s decision to embark on a journey across Italy represents both the narrative and symbolic culmination of her transformation: from a passive victim of patriarchal structures to an active subject capable of determining her own future. Her departure is neither an abandonment of maternal responsibility nor a rejection of family bonds. Rather, it constitutes an act of emancipation—for herself and for her daughters. By reclaiming the right to move, to choose, and to inhabit the world on her own terms, Marianna disrupts the traditional association between motherhood and self-sacrifice.

Her son Mariano—the only remaining male heir of the family—confronts her with restrained hostility: “*E chi baderà alle figlie?* (And who will take care of your daughters?)” (Maraini, 1990, p. 246; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 217). Marianna’s response is brief and resolute: “*Baderanno a sé stesse. Sono grandi* (They are perfectly capable of looking after themselves. They are grown-up)” (Maraini, 1990, p. 246; trans. Kitto and Spottiswood, p. 217). This exchange encapsulates the ideological shift at the heart of the novel. Whereas Mariano reproduces the patriarchal assumption that women require supervision and protection, Marianna recognizes her daughters as autonomous subjects capable of directing their own lives. Motherhood is thus redefined not as perpetual guardianship but as the capacity to foster independence.

As Adrienne Rich argues that mothers transmit to their daughters not only values and expectations but also a sense of what forms of freedom are possible. A mother who struggles to create a more livable and autonomous life offers her daughter a model of resistance and self-determination (1995, p. 247). Marianna’s final decision can be read precisely in these terms. By choosing her own

freedom, she leaves her daughters an inheritance different from the one she received: not resignation, silence, and obedience, but the possibility of choice.

Although none of her daughters becomes a revolutionary figure, each negotiates her own relationship with social expectations in different ways. More importantly, they grow up with the example of a mother who eventually refuses to remain confined within the role assigned to her. Her struggle creates a symbolic space in which alternative forms of female subjectivity become imaginable.

In this sense, Marianna's departure does not mark a break with motherhood but its transformation. Rather than controlling her daughters' futures, she entrusts them with the responsibility of shaping their own. The final gesture of leaving becomes an act of maternal care grounded not in sacrifice or possession, but in trust, distance, and freedom. Through this ending, Maraini offers a vision of motherhood that remains deeply relevant to contemporary debates on female autonomy and intergenerational inheritance.

9. Conclusion

Dacia Maraini's *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* offers a complex and multi-generational reflection on the possibilities and limits of motherhood within a patriarchal society. Through the figure of Marianna, the novel traces a gradual yet decisive process of transformation: from silence to writing, from submission to agency, and from the repetition of inherited models to a conscious attempt to reconfigure them. Marianna's search for self-determination is inseparable from her rethinking of motherhood, which ultimately becomes a site not of sacrifice but of negotiation, responsibility, and freedom.

Read through the lens of feminist theory, the novel illustrates Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as an institution and mothering as lived experience. While the institutional structures surrounding Marianna demand obedience, self-denial, and submission, her personal experience as a mother gradually opens the possibility of a different maternal practice, grounded in recognition rather than control. At the same time, Luisa Muraro's reflections on the symbolic order of the mother illuminate Marianna's attempt to reconstruct a female genealogy through writing, memory, and the transmission of meaning. The dialogue between Maraini's narrative and these feminist frameworks reveals how motherhood can function simultaneously as a mechanism of oppression and as a potential source of female subjectivity.

The novel's significance extends beyond its eighteenth-century setting. Although situated in a distant historical context, *La lunga vita di Marianna Ucrìa* continues to speak to contemporary debates concerning women's autonomy, gendered expectations, maternal identity, and intergenerational inheritance. Maraini's feminism does not propose an idealized image of motherhood; rather, it exposes its contradictions and explores the possibility of transforming maternal relationships without denying their complexity.

Ultimately, Marianna's final departure represents more than an individual act of liberation. It symbolizes the interruption of a cycle of silence and resignation that has shaped generations of women. By choosing autonomy without renouncing maternal attachment, Marianna leaves her daughters a legacy not of obedience, but of possibility. In this sense, the novel imagines a form

of female genealogy founded not on repetition, but on transformation—a vision that remains profoundly relevant to contemporary feminist thought.

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Research Article

Alter-a Mater: The Evoking Figure of M-otherness: Feminine/Feminist Landscapes through Rosi Braidotti's Vision

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Abstract

This article offers an interdisciplinary cartography of contemporary feminist philosophy with Rosi Braidotti's thought as a central reference, while proposing an original figure—*Alter-a Mater*—to address a persistent gap: feminist theory still lacks a concept that holds together motherhood & maternal spheres, alterity and otherness, as well as a posthuman inter-connected *zoé* perspective. Building on Braidotti's bio-centred feminism and nomadic reasoning, I differentiate *Alter-a Mater* as a conceptual but mostly *agentive figure* that signifies the maternal as a threshold space. Through the critical device of *Alter-a*, multiple passages across identities, languages, species, and technologies become thinkable and practicable within arts and academic literature, emerging forms of reasoning, and socio-political design. My proposal converses with scholars such as Luisa Muraro, Adriana Cavarero, Julia Kristeva, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Derrida. Methodologically, *Alter-a Mater* reframes the female-feminine corps made by multi-positional natures. In my paper, they structurally transform and translate loss and vulnerability (trauma, repression, instrumentalisation of the maternal) into affirmative politics, pursuing those settings in which alliance-building across human and more-than-human assemblages. Conceptually, *Alter-a Mater* is rich in plural life yet narrowed by the *maternal* approach as the primitive relational infrastructure. Politically, *Alter-a Mater* foregrounds *collective futurity* by conjugating the maternal into a situated praxis of thresholding. In this lively archive, the critical travelling encounters several *becoming-other* patterns: for the *nexus-infans*, *Alter-a* imagines co-creative languages, based on care, love, and bodily thinking.

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Ana Mendieta. *Birth (Gunpowder Works)*. 1981. Gelatin silver print.

In a new form of “corporeal materialism”, the body is seen as an interface, a threshold, a field of intersection of material and symbolic forces; it is a construction that transforms and capitalises on energies of a heterogeneous and discontinuous nature. The body is not an essence and therefore not an anatomical destiny: it is one’s primary location in the world; one’s primary situation in reality. [...] The embodied nature of subjectivity is *posited* to allow for the radical subversion of culture.¹

Starting from oneself is thus a renewal—within the biographical and historical context—of the movement of entering the world.

In this way, the practice of starting from oneself counters alienation. [...] to start from oneself and lose oneself in exteriority [...] such a practice thus restores to us the sense of birth [...]².

The woman’s body can change shape in pregnancy and childbearing; it is therefore capable of defeating the notion of fixed bodily form.³

¹ Braidotti, R., (1991). *Patterns of Dissonance. A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*, 1991, Routledge, London, p. 219.

² Here, rephrasing is mine. See Muraro, L., (1996). “Partire da sé e non farsi trovare,” in Annarosa Buttarelli, Diotima autori, *La sapienza di partire da sé*, Liguori, Napoli, 1996, p. 14.

³ Braidotti, R. (1994). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994; 2nd ed. 2011), p. 225.

1. Introduction

This article advances *Alter-a Mater* as a methodological post-feminist figure issued from a deep charting across several women thinkers' works, landscapes, and images. Distinguished from a full zoé-centered nomadism, *Alter-a Mater* theorizes *mothering* as a threshold praxis, aiming to transform the language-structuralist passages into a cross-crossing device which explores, valorizes and illuminates women's bodies, technologies and politics, birthing and writings. Dialoguing with Muraro, Cavarero, Kristeva, Arendt, Derrida, Butler, I here reframe female/feminine, extensively queer subjectivities, through a multi-positional and structurally transformative exchange among a theoretical and reflective pluriverse. My analysis also surrounds vulnerability, which reveals the starting point for empowering female contemporary subjectivities with conceptual, intimate, creative, and psychological tools. They can be practical and semiotic tools endorsing *affirmative* and *sustainable ethics* for nexus collectivities. By grounding a micro-epistemic action, I softly engineered a replicable method that skills a process of mapping the multiple textual constellations that feature our lived and situated ecosystems.

2. Who's, what is, why *Alter-a Mater*?

I am carried along by the intuition, mostly a working conviction, that creating critical characters who stand for allegorical devices and grafting textual geographies allows one to conjoin philosophical categories with interpretative experiences. In the present work, I will use the tool of the *figure*, understood in a Dantean key, to make my reflection function, which conveys literary, political, and ethical workflows. I aim to propose a methodological pathway that inscribes itself within both a discursive tradition and a hybridization of textuality. Meanwhile, I will highlight a more imaginative and evocative system of analyses in which the allegorical figure of *Alter-A Mater* processes and questions an interdisciplinary literature.

Alter-a character, a true avatar of the intellectual journey, embodies the exploration of the double-bind process of thinking and writing about, and from, the self. At the same time, it reaches an exterior dimension that becomes quickly dialectical, and therefore performative, by putting on stage a full agency of the writer. In fact, this kind of intellectual tracking requires a full activation of the body, of a living mind that both accompanies, in a more wondering way, the construction of new reasoning worlds. Within thoughtful architectures and habitats of relations, it will be thus possible to handle desiring textual bodies and put on stage their corpora for rescuing the physical thickness of writings, images, ideas, speeches, memories from a neutral analytical abstraction.

Also, I would like to state clearly the exploratory criticism engaged by the *Alter-a Mater* figure, by tracing her origins, carved into lexicography and cultural meanings. While I was composing this paper, what takes shape in its becoming is the result of an endogenous translation, expressed through the formula *Alter-a Mater: the evoking figure of M-otherness*. Retracing the sources of Italian, my mother tongue, its reconstitution via some Latin traces led me to English, one of my formative languages. Being impelled by the fragmentation of languages, I considered how the plurisemiosis enclosed in the concept of alterity converts the translational moments into a true reflecting practice, rooted in Deconstructive theoretical issues (to which we shall return later).

Indeed, I developed my *survey* by closely grappling with selected sections of Braidotti's seminal work, during which the metaphorical expression of *Alter-a Mater* has coiled around the word *Mother*. It detached from its inner alterity to recompose its own lemma by conjoining and disjoining at once, from the semantic core of *otherness*. I propose, then, to dive into the *Alter-a Mater* formula to usher into the heart of Braidotti's inquiry into the maternal figure, thereby encapsulating a return to the Latin sources of Western significations that my paper intends to challenge. From here, the critical path engaged by the *Alter-a Mater* allegory woven through *verba* for endorsing a double movement of emptying, and possible re-signification, of the mother and maternity semantics.

Here is the starting point from which I will proceed, in embodying one of the earliest feminist lessons and bringing to the surface *how* and *whence* our hypothesis arose. I fitted the philosopher Luisa Muraro's method, which is both shareable and fruitful, because it implants the time of negotiation between writer(s) and reader(s) into an objectifying epistemology. It resets the act of laying oneself bare, blank and open—as a completely new page—to others' scripts and graving. This transitional flux between (at least) two components—whether in literature or in bodily exchanges—initiates a performative posture of embracing the notion of vulnerability, which I regard as inherent to the many evolutions that self-thought explores during a lifetime. To take on the speculative thought implies a critical risk because it draws upon a true praxis, enacted by those people who constantly think and live through a *self-changing* belief. To move, to mutate, and evolve agrees with venture-filled meanings, as well as foreign skills and trades, that do not engage subjectivity in the middle of relationships, but at their boundaries. I grasp, and following translate, a brilliant excerpt of Muraro's essay *Partire da sé e non farsi trovare*:

La pratica di partire da sé è una decostruzione dell'io e del mondo ed ogni movimento di decostruzione... mette a repentaglio il senso della realtà e la possibilità di un senso alternativo. Ma la pratica di partire da sé porta al disfarsi del soggetto senza disfarlo in una miriade di istanze scoordinate: mi disfa nelle relazioni che mi fanno essere quella che sono e diventare quella che desidero, senza che io possa mai accamparmi al centro di questo essere e diventare [...] La pratica di partire da sé [...] è molto ma molto [...] rischiosa. E più feconda, più felice, perché mi fa cadere nella necessità della riconoscenza e nel primato della relazione. [The practice of starting from oneself is a deconstruction of self and world, and every deconstructive movement jeopardizes the sense of reality and the very possibility of an alternative meaning. Yet starting from oneself undoes the subject without scattering it into a myriad of uncoordinated claims: it undoes me in the relations that make me who I am and enable me to become who I desire to be, without my ever installing myself at the center of that being and becoming [...] This practice is highly—indeed exceedingly—risky. And all the more generative, all the more joyful, because it casts me into the necessity of gratitude and the primacy of relation. (Translation is mine).⁴

In the milieu of contemporary philosophical criticism and literature, the habitus of *partire da sé* (starting from her/his self) matches with a textual and radical spoliation, to wit, a transformative shifting towards the outer space. In this way, among the multiplicity of subjects, throughout the

⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

flux of things and data, we can stipulate a more democratic and interactive dimension among uprisings of acknowledgment. In fact, we can be brought—as in my case—to the plurality of translational perspectives which lies in the way diverse components are captured and assembled within a system of interdependencies. Potentially, they may act as an integrated whole, with forces that, instead of neutralizing one another, flow in the same direction and mutually reinforce.⁵ I briefly evoke the theories on *l'acteur-réseau*⁶ while rediscovering in the knot of form and content (in reference to Umberto Eco) the funtative ontology as a technical loan of translation. From language to language, from *sema* to *sema*, the tyro figure of *Alter-a Mater* merges into Braidotti's intellectual flow and simultaneously touches upon the edges of Muraro's practical mindset to which I am scientifically grateful.

3. *Alter-a Mater* and Semiotics: From pre-verbal to mothering canvas. Being critical by texts.

Performer of critical thinking that intertwines the semiotic structures of language, *Alter-a Mater* functions in my reflection as a laboratory of consciousness. *Alter-a* critically operates within Braidotti's charting across all the corporealities of the feminine-s, as well as her engagement with those theoretical corpora (often prompting a feminine view) that query and queer otherness. Amid puzzling members, matters, and wording, *Alter-a* plans to bring into light uncharted consciousness of the maternal body. If this study traces the interplay between a fleshy experience, semantics, and textual pictures, *Alter-a Mater* is effectively a methodological proposal that incarnates a multifaceted filiation, exploiting the feminine organs of writing to reconvert historical suffering and unconsciousness into strength, and the extracted resources into renewed symbolic patterns and likely blank pages. *Alter-a* figure identifies Braidotti's theoretical and formal alternatives that counter the institution of the logos and its governance under the phallic law. Indeed, the hermeneutics of incorporating other texts, which display alongside estranging and "inspiring" one's own narrating identity, succeeds in merging alterity into the boundless network of the matrix-mother semiotics, namely cultural heritage, human yet dominantly Western.

Braidotti reads a lot of Julia Kristeva, a literary theorist and psychoanalyst who has worked across femininity's boundaries as sources of (textual) new lymph. For instance, she fancies the *Sémiothique*, a time-space typically framed during the first steps of maternal interaction. It is an interplaying uniqueness that deploys semiotic interconnections among subjects who can generate behaviors, phrasing, refusals, distances, commitments, promises, reciprocities, and new understandings. By taking inspiration from Kristeva's sources, in this environment, the symbolic and the semiotic are two dialectical and inseparable modalities of every enunciation, a double register of meaning and utterance. It engages the subjective speaker in a symbolic cradle where he/she needs to identify and separate from his/her own images, textual objects, and linguistic frames for both joining and abjecting, finally crafting their own semantic outputs newly and

⁵ Comparing Boumhaouad, H. (2017). "Pratiques info-communicationnelles des usagers des dispositifs numériques: Théorie de l'acteur-réseau" *Les Cahiers du numérique*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2017, pp. 137-166.

⁶ The *acteur-réseau* theory has been developed during Eighties by a research group working at *Centre de sociologie de l'innovation de Mines ParisTech*. Among the researchers, we also count Bruno Latour.

combinatorily, to bring about new interactions with the other-and the other-than-me, the other-in-me. So, the balance between creation and expelling, othering and caring is marked by the process of *mise en abîme*, the estrangement of everything that hosts subjective members, fluids, wastes, the inherent monstrous and self-stranger. Especially during the primary processes towards sense and language acquisition, physiological and psychic energies, pulsions, already passions and desires, are released by the mother and the baby who articulate a non-expressive totality. In this peculiar interactive world, composed of drives and states, the threshold of language organizes the semiotic moments in relation to, but also in excess of, the symbolic, which can slip, at each instant, into unnameable occurrences and happenings. Then, between every subject and every text, the *Sémiothique* (The Semiotic) sets an irreducible alterity that *Alter-a Mater* marks as a critical strength, a means for re-activating the primary, visceral experience with the other-than-self, simply the outer. Because during echolalia communication the otherness expands through bodily energies, unconscious processes, and mothering rhythms, the symbolic order is permanently converted into genuine explorations of happenings, by undertaking relationality and innovating intersectional positions. Thus, for Kristeva, alterity is not external to the materials that subjects can signify, but the very condition of their possibility, ensuring that significance occupies heterogeneous, erratic, and broad lands for (not)human renewal. My critical avatar *Alter-a Mater* dives into this restructuring web and interprets a long take for playing semiotic endeavors (I have just mentioned). By acting-in-action, the hierarchical system of dependency between the newborns and all kinds of mothers, *Alter-a* processes the Semiotic script to withdraw the *genotext* (Kristeva, 1974) differently about motherhood/mothering from the bio-power invisibility undergone across History. Kristeva's *semanalysis* allows *Alter-a* to bring back the body into languages, and both inscribe and valorize the logic of significance in the mother's corps, matter, and senses, which go through and embrace the variety of languages.

If during the semiotic shooting *Alter-a* encounters and faces subjectivities in process, it is by refocusing on the value of vulnerable signs and highlighting them in the fields of political resilience as well as in the preverbal, *geno-textual* outer skeletons. My goal is to concretely address the tension that occurs between the self-body and reality while sampling how the performative maternal voices, and their ensuing critical releases, foster the gesture of survival initiated by those bodies who give life by sharing it. If "the mother" is the reset point, a kind of multilayered ground zero, all human interactions with(in) our nature-culture ecosystem can only be perceived, endorsed, and embodied as intertwined, multilingual, nude steps toward thresholds of common memories, arts and tales, political figurations, and intellectual archives.

Therefore, by listening to Braidotti's critical *playlist*, the current study has been developed properly as a feminist act of ticking off hierarchical and secularized layers of discourse in pursuit of exposing the dynamism that pushes alterity into performance. *Alter-a Mater* would represent a sign-system fruition, a nude chart, starting from the hyper-figuration of the *cut*, of separation between affective corps and nexus of philosophical readings, psychoanalytic perspectives, gender studies, and *feminist waves*. So, when we inquire into the alterity sphere, we observe how the binding of subject-identity to the mother (or better, to what/who generates and cares through cutting, expanding, dividing, creating fissures within its own body) is foundational to the appearing of corporeal entities as well as to their implicit human positional agency. From the womb that becomes a sounding board for external resonances, this organic instrument through which the

first contact with what is world—simply with what is other—takes place, the vital entity is immediately skillful. The first external competence of breathing stipulates a venue in the communicative and deciphering life system.⁷ Reaching the other(s) who are outside, the nascent presence becomes an *acting agent*, propulsive toward history, by reactivating his/her/its immanence into the widespread semiotic network.⁸ These *actors* (thus conceived) build networks that combine communicational technique and sociality, whose components take shape through and during the actors' logical processing and carnal e-motions. Many currents of cognitivism have introduced research on the self-narrative temporalization, which begins with the first elocutions of infants. These voicings are labeled *holophrases*, whereby monosyntagms associated with echolalia and labial sonorities are articulated into innate narrative structures. Babies formulate proper narratemes, as arising micro-stories that will be concealed inside single words and evolve in elocutionary performances. In this way, the *I-tongue* gains access to the signifying interludes and gaps that inter-occur among limbs, while shaping the spheres of *subjectivity* and *intersubjectivity* interaction.

Surrounding a set of pre-grammatical affective movements, as observed by Freud and Mélanie Klein, within the native promise for gist, the parent/nurturer and the newborn plasm, imagine, settle the neo-subject-language in the polis, by codifying the future world with formulas charged with *touches* and *morceaux organo-logiques*.⁹ From syntagmatic axes and preludes to syntax, the self-speaking arises, precisely thanks to the *transfer* of care, facilitating access to language and to the reciprocity of loving, which both are necessary for joining the social space, namely all performance, and keep on surviving. I propose that this specific act of performing mutual needs, desires, unknown paces, means to reconstitute the politics to the flux of relations, interactions, maieutic across concrete realms, matter interfaces, as well as textual dynamics through individuals' life-endurance cartographies. The mother figures indeed, such as plural perspective directions, as frontiers between the irreducible plenitude of each singular living being and the world from which this singularity emerges and takes shape: a world that is already there, that precedes it¹⁰ by performing the zoological experience of surviving together. By enacting a network that intertwines affects, significations, organoids, and *techné*, the mother-boundaries enable the polyphony of what exists. But the mother landscape is plotted fully by the newborn, and they both graph and signify, play simply, the given-ness of being multiple and bearers. From birth onward, by populating the *outside-of*, we all become distinct, unique, exceptional tongues that move (into) reality not as mere instruments, but as meaningful communicating organs, upon which depend

⁷ Comparing Negri, R., Dolto, C., Busnel, M.C., Daffos, F., Lecanuet, J.P., (1997). *Que savent les fœtus*, érès éditions, Toulouse, 1997, pp. 7-15. « La naissance n'est qu'un épiphénomène dans une existence déjà bien remplie, et elle ne marque pas (hormis pour la fonction respiratoire) un saut brutal d'acquisition et de compétences. ».

⁸ Comparing Boumhaouad, H. (2017).

⁹ See Kristeva, J. (2016). "La linguistique, l'universel, et le 'pauvre linguiste'," in Irène Fenoglio, I., Coquet, J.C., Kristeva, J., Malamoud, C., and Quignard, P. *Autour de Émile Benveniste: sur l'écriture*, Seuil, 2016, <http://www.kristeva.fr/autour-d-emile-benveniste.html>. By reading a famous Émile Benveniste's structural lesson on Aristotle, Kristeva explains that language has been considered a principle inherent to the subject-player of *organon*, a truly instrument as an *organism of signification*.

¹⁰ See Cavarero, A. (1990). *Nonostante Platone. Figure femminili nella filosofia antica*, Editori Riuniti, Roma, 1990, p. 120.

both the quality of life and the strictu sensu development of saying, then being part of civilization, cultural mapping.

Therefore, the *external* that inhabits bodies —the multiple space of living-speaking, and later of the dual legacy between narration and reading—found and sowed therein the human *bios* as a “natural” animality. At the beginning, there is a concrete relation of meanings in perpetual becoming. Between life entities and language ones, the birth of new organic matter takes place, and puts the nominating action on. A multiplicity of sounds, feelings, events, sensorial issues beat the spaces of difference and follow the intervals between signs. The splitting of bodies and signals reproduces an *unlimited semiosis* addressed to energetic interpreters who provoke (even passively) a change of habits and codes exactly because they *read* things. Transgressing significations from the mental to the practical context, communicative *agents* always determine a different behavior from the expected use. The human way to stay and act in the world matches the pragmatic aspect hosted through the responding movements to a given sign. It becomes itself a new sign, a *representamen* of the common law that *reads and sees* the preceding sign by initiating further processes of semiosis (Eco, 1979).¹¹

I need to underline how the semiotic parenthesis I engaged focuses on the more structuralist aspects that characterize Braidotti concerning the omni-query around language. Nevertheless, we do not encounter in her work an affiliation with purely structuralist doctrines. We certainly grasp Braidotti’s capacity to let the universe-language and the universe-life interpenetrate, anchoring in the statement that one can never set aside language, but opposing the epistemics in classical semiotics, for which signs define themselves *only* in relation to one another, in a self-referentiality that becomes stifling.¹²

4. Across language(s); Touching Braidotti’s and more: Reaching others’ lands

Similarly, *Alter-a Mater* finds a good path in following the borders that join and divide linguistics from performative presences. *Alter-a & I*(we) proceed by investigating this querying point and coupling it with feminist’s bulks and approaches which give legitimacy to typical feminine thematics, such as domestic tasks or affective and biological angles, by empowering them through philosophy, theoretical frames, and finally valuable policies. Through *Alter-a’s* perspective, the fragility, the permeability, the skinny echoing of bodies, for instance, the baby and the mother ones as primary prototypes in a vulnerable and sensitive constellation, encounter the supremacy of a logically organized *I* at a turning point, an epochal shift. The meeting between the dominant discourses and the feminine opening to history is definitively transmuted both into a revelation and a revolutionary road to cross. While the idea of a prevailing subject wishes to execute sovereignty upon all living beings and environments, all bodies reveal, on the contrary, unexpected comprehension of what can be valuable: they incorporate a contemporary enigma,

¹¹ Eco, U. (1979). *The Role of the Reader Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1979, pp. 194-198.

¹² See Braidotti, R. (2014). Interviste/4. *Oltre la nostalgia. Per un’etica postumana affermativa. Intervista a Rosi Braidotti di Libera Pisano* in Lo Sguardo - rivista di filosofia - N. 15, 2014 (II) - La “Differenza Italiana”. p. 46.

such as a philosophy of the body-clue, of the *lived and living body*. This thinking, wishing, perceiving the body's materiality and skills is, in *Alter-a's* surroundings, nothing but an incarnated query, which goes further than the strictly gendered idea of women. The female and feminine bodies of the now can and need to undergo their physical and intimate textures, their being always in situation, freeing the epistemic strength of each *female, and feminized, experiences of embodiment* (Camille Froidevaux-Metterie, 2013).¹³

Here, *Alter-a Mater* is an agentive allegory sketching a dashboard to analyze how the biopowers continue to eclipse the true and subjective conditions that women-ized entities (social, natural, political, affective) continue to experience throughout many forms of alienation and extraction. *Alter-a* explores manifold ways of being-in-the-world following the example of the female corporeality but refusing its confinement to maternity alone. *Alter-a's* gesture illustrates how it is critically fertile to think subjectivity from the lived intensity of the female and feminine galaxies, mostly by mirroring gendered hierarchies and productive frameworks. On the contrary, because the horizons of biology—maternal or otherwise— are actually mutating, hybridized passages, openings toward queerness, political fluidity, and new modes of togetherness arise in daily life as well as in textual production. Knotted into the prohibit *text-ure* of life, the inborn alterity of philosophy finds Braidotti's screenplay about the reciprocity that entangles subjects and objects one by one, each in turn: from the human to the stone, within the terrestrial through the creaturely forces¹⁴. Because all creatures, as non-natural devices, permanently modify crafting ecosystems in which they exist, the fragmentation of all sorts of matter, even semiotic ones, follows the molecular system of materials. Humans alike, perform specifically their implication into reality, whereby lasting interaction with texts, all sorts of textuality, possible sexuality, and gender identification.

All the more so, as described earlier, Braidotti conveys contemporary feminine practices which valorize and retain the un-reveled spaciousness of textual desiring bodies. Under Braidotti's lenses, the organic writings overlap with the existence of life-bodies as a moving narrativity; the body and biographical account emerge as the primary tools humans use for investigating both the relation to knowledge and the constitution of subjectivity. The latter, in discovering itself, conjugates the patterns and plots that are agreed upon in the communities' history, reframing in-progress cultural circles and staying with others by dialogues, dissonances and reciprocity, in a hoped-for learning & teaching reciprocal nurturing. To notice the interweaving of its own historical existence throughout a *telling anthropology*,¹⁵ every single life is a true narrator. His/her/its singular dialectics verify, set out, and assign the cosmos steady re-generating as a perennial experience, shared by the *vivant*, by every living (and non-living) being. In this landscape, which the feminist companion Adriana Cavarero describes as cosmological, narrative modes and motifs, especially when autobiographical,¹⁶ come over. As privileged tracks for accessing the multi-dimensional affects and sensations, they interweave with *cogito*, plots, and senses, true

¹³ See Froidevaux-Metterie, C. (2013). Réinvention du féminin. *Le Débat*, 174(2), 95-113. Also comparing Froidevaux-Metterie, C. (2021). *Un corps à soi*. Seuil, Paris.

¹⁴ See Luisetti, F. (2023). *Essere pietra: Ecologia di un mondo minerale*, Venezia, wetlands.

¹⁵ See Heintz, M., Rivoal, I. (2014). *Ethnographies à contre-temps*. *Ethnologie française*, 44(3), 389-397.

¹⁶ See Pecere, P. (2023) *Incontro a Roma Tre con Adriana Cavarero* (June 2023). Web Reference: <https://youtu.be/OaHo2OWryPE?si=ZS4xl7oMK77zIKzS>

imaginaries and utopias. I have long nourished myself with many of Cavarero's adventures across philosophical and literary texts, and I learnt a lot from her essay *Corpo in figure*. Here, she details how the metaphor of the woman-nurturer, a kind of mother-receptacle of all that comes into being, things that are visible and wholly perceptible to the senses (Cavarero, 1995, 2024),¹⁷ overlaps with the idea of *Chôra*, which tradition outlined as a space, a *locus*, as the *amplitude* of possible meanings and forms. As a blank board, the *Chôra* carries an implicit potential for subversion and, with its foundational ambiguity, grasps the space-time inside the matter that partakes in shaping. If the *Chôra* interprets a sort of uterus displacement at once, and inward, she deploys a kind of invisible and formless, which receives all things (Daoust, 2023).¹⁸ Haunted beyond the boundaries of both politics and self-narration, the *Chôra*¹⁹ transforms into organic and sensitive aporias by reworking the arbitrary character of the amorphous and giving light to the miraculous birthing. Cavarero writes:

Corporeality, as the amorphic site of the mother, is something irreducible that the logos excludes from its domain but whose existence is forced to postulate. At the same time, it is something In which the logos itself generates its copies and hence also those (ultimately) sexed bodies that inhabit the world [...] the logos seems to fight against a material body that simply "appears" before it. This is done through a game of forced exclusion and of spurious discursive reappropriation. In this metaphorical battle, however, it is the male who takes possession of generative power at every turn, from the first scene to the last.²⁰

Thus, from Plato's *Timaeus*—the book that questions the origin of the universe, the sensible nature and the formation of the soul in the world, while probing scientific and mathematical knowledge to weave an anthropological model grounded in the specularity between human morality and divine design—the violent patriarchal monopoly which has been characterizing the millenary history of humanity (Recchia Luciani, 2018)²¹ graved within the *logos*, that has made itself the sole legitimate *demiurge*, a figuration of the feminine, and by extension of the maternal, marking it by contradictory and various valences. Restarting from the removal of a natural memory inscribed into the world acquiescence, feminist mappings move toward a hermeneutics of contrast that, in the plural of shapes and lives, plays affectivity of bodies for featuring how we all *become* creatures in relation. Through a countercurrent *passage* of the latent and the repressed, or rather, of a *discursivité autre*, Bradoitti, Cavarero, and *the others*, intend to re-signify literatures and languages. Cavarero's centers on semiotics that circles the maternal category of generating. It

¹⁷ See also Cavarero, A. (1995). *Corpo in figure. Filosofia e politica della corporeità*, Castelvechi-Lit edizioni, Roma 2024, pp. 95-100.

¹⁸ Comparing Daoust, V. (2023). *Femme-Chôra : exclue ou exclusive ? Limites de la critique butlérienne de Luce Irigaray* in *Recherches féministes*, volume 36, n° 2, 2023, pp. 149–164.

¹⁹ See also Crevier Goulet, S.A. (2024). « La chora sémiotique, un concept pour l'avenir ? ». Julia Kristeva, *Révolte et reliance*, Hermann, 2024. p.161-170.

²⁰ Cavarero, A., (2002). *Stately Bodies: Literature, Philosophy, and the Question of Gender* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002), trans. De Lucca R., Shemek, D., p. 85.

²¹ Recchia Luciani, F. (2018). « Passato, presente e futuro del FESTIVAL DELLE DONNE E DEI SAPERI DI GENERE. Fenomenologia di un femminismo desiderante », in CATALOGO_Festival delle donne e saperi di genere, edizioni_2012-2018, Eliotecnica Meridionale, Bari, 2018, p. 12.

constitutes a crucial node also in Braidotti's navigations and in a beautiful 2014 interview, she states that we can react prolifically to the structural impasses of Western language by creating and sounding through our viscera, the uncharted melodies and zones of:

sistemi linguistici più espressivi e meno mediati dalla semiotica europea, anche codici primitivi, come i tatuaggi, i messaggi, i gesti, la bio-semiotica [...] Ci occorre una semiosi molto più radicale che tenga conto dei sistemi di significazione non umani: dagli animali alle tecnologie, sistemi che si autoriproducono e che producono senso e significato, ma assolutamente non in un sistema semiotico classico [...] Io sono con Glissant sulla creolizzazione dei linguaggi e quindi sulla grande libertà del rapporto con il significante maestro, tramite processi d'ibridazione che mettono in gioco attori non umani, siano essi animali, terrestri o tecnologici. Una politica del posizionamento non può prescindere quindi dal linguaggio, ma neanche dal corpo, inteso come un'intersezione tra biologico, simbolico e sociale. [more expressive language systems, less mediated by European semiotics—including so-called 'primitive' codes such as tattoos, messages/signs, gestures, and biosemiotics. [...]] We need a far more radical semiosis that takes account of nonhuman systems of signification, from animals to technologies—systems that self-reproduce and generate sense and meaning, though not within a classical semiotic system. [...] I side with Glissant on the creolization of languages and thus on a greater freedom in our relation to the master signifier, through hybridization processes that bring nonhuman actors into play, whether animal, terrestrial, or technological. A politics of location cannot, therefore, dispense with language—nor with the body, understood as an intersection of the biological, the symbolic, and the social].²²

The threads of the intersection proposed by Braidotti, by acts and forms that attack the motionless realm of the masculine mind, venture us into the concept of proximity announced by Cavarero in several of her works, including *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (Polity Press, 1995) and *Surging Democracy: Notes on Hannah Arendt's Political Thought* (Stanford University Press, 2021). Being-in-proximity constitutes a political materialism experience, mostly when mediated by the voice, which generates a hyperbole of troubling-knowing oneself who needs to stay *au diapason* of the other's body, sounds, grammars. Vocality then assumes a tangible presence that is measurable during the symbiosis of listening and transmitting. Semantics, world-visions, varieties of timbre, intimate and distinctive, unfold in a resonance between vocal corps, body-matters, and migrate from me-to-you, from the others to one another. While connecting and separating subjects through orality, the *episteme of proximity* praises the phatic happening of bodies-birth. In this sense, vocality does not represent a medium for attaining, touching, brushing against, or contemplating (even with the awareness of a residual intelligibility) an ideal of *logos*, an origin of life. In the voices that circulate among human relations, proximity constitutes the brute experience of touching-close the body of the other. The metaphoric landscape pinned out by the category of proximity reveals the alterity of being polyphonic, and all-bound at the same time, reaches a political and valorizing returning to maternity, to birthing, and translates the ever-new relation of living in common by forecasting a society to constantly rebuild, re-compose. In this context, among overlays of musicality, of the

²² Braidotti, R. (2014), p. 47. (Translation is mine).

resounding, shattering, and colliding of anatomies and organisms, the force of the *returning and reminding narration* calls for a different, fairer interpretation of the Penelope character. That Western woman who makes of the *gymnastics of narrative weaving* the original device for practicing a female philosophy that can offer itself as an analytical tool for opening up the whole human species' capabilities. Whereby the intellectual and material appropriation of things becomes a concrete epistemic event, a revelation of the world, according to Cavarero and Braidotti, we need personal plots and stories to provide relational and affective bodies of a tangible knowledge which at once proliferate and graph the reality around. From vital necessities and desires to intellectual and pragmatic ones, the deep identitarian meaning and purpose are reconducted to the unity and the unicity of incarnated histories, telling. The narrative tool is crucial for self-understanding, because identity, as

self comes to desire the tale of his or her own life-story from the mouth (or pen) of another. The Narration of a life-story, therefore, offers an alternative sense to politics, not only because it deals with unique persons, but because it illustrates the *interaction* of unique people.²³

5. Musas of *birthing*. Mothers of *happening* through history

By reflecting upon the *narrative self* means to think, feel, and perform autobiography, Alter-a and I have needed to keep in mind (as Ulysses did, re-animating the Odyssey play again) that we exist amid the *re-fabulating* developed by others both about the world and our own story. Within the heart of desirous intertwining among living beings, hyperbolically, the cosmos is because of the words, embodied and enchanted by a Muse telling others' lives.²⁴ Muse is a stranger voice, a device of alterity, a figure of estrangement that reminds to the self-speaking how each voice, each memory is made up of plural identities at the same time. Similarly, *Alter-a Mater* breathes critical understandings, and integrates the allegorical power of the muse for inspiring (as in ancient tradition) new words, discourses, and directions for plots and destinies, forecasting history whereby the intrigue of human travelling, which, from body to politics, looks for the profound sense, the last limit of being-in-life, for it, inside it.

By accompanying the awareness that we all embody the unicity of a subject that embraces history and stories, the *narrative identity* (*identité narrative*, such as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur's concept indicating a true category of practice, which we borrow here) acts organically and projects itself along a path constellated by its own duration. In search of the integrity of one's origin, narrative identities move within a temporal structure fitting with a dynamic identity model, issued from the poetic shaping, rooted in a narrative spread.²⁵ The other who generates us, both displays and tells us the *ipseity* of our body. At once, in this affabulatory optic, the symbolic mothers, who

²³ Cavarero, A. (2000). *Relating Narratives : Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Kottman P. A., (Routledge, 2000) p. X.

²⁴ See Cassin, B. (2024). *L'Odysée au Louvre, Un roman graphique*, Flammarion, Paris, 2024.

²⁵ Comparing Bragantini, A. (2013). *Identité personnelle et narration chez Paul Ricoeur et Hannah Arendt*, LO SGUARDO, Rivista di Filosofia, N.12, 2013 (II) - *Paul Ricoeur: Intersezioni*, p. 135.

are at least more than one for each individual,²⁶ gather the singular nativity within the collective network. Aggregating us around the event of one's own and others' birth, re-composing the structures of storytelling through practices of listening and caring, we are intrinsically inclined, exposed to the quest for our self-identity. The dichotomy *Même-Autre* (the Same-the Other) is indeed displaced by tale reconfigurations of the newly occurred self who speaks and listens, turns and integrates the corporeal, telling presence of the mother, along a self's and other's memorising hybridisation.

Such metamorphosis occurs both during the generative time and the storytelling workshop, inaugurating communication as a survival settlement for the species. In the meantime, the *utterance*, that *tiers-temps* (third temporal dimension) inhabited by transmissive vocality raises the question for a common responsibility and asks for the *who* capable to do/not to do, to perform, to assume his/her/its agency, authorship and take the courage to transmit the others' story (as Hannah Arendt emphatically stated, mostly in her work *Between past and future*, edited in 1961). A profound observer of this German-Jewish philosopher, it is Kristeva herself who develops a passionate volume on three genius women—among them Arendt, together with Melanie Klein and Colette. Kristeva selected these women precisely for having interrogated the tradition of philosophy very freshly. So as to say, towards Arendt's perspective, the *event of living* engraves the miracle of birthing and synchronically highlights the fragility of human affairs by rediscovering therein political spaces, as surprising as ancestral. We follow Kristeva's passage about Arendt's pioneering look at the *mutualism* between natality and politics.

A total experience of the fact of birth necessarily includes being born, giving life, acquiescing to the uniqueness of each birth, being reborn continually into the life of the mind, a mind that is because it begins anew in the plurality of others and in that condition alone can act as a living thought that surpasses all other activity [...] As for a political action that would be the equivalent of a birth and would offer shelter for our strangeness, Hannah Arendt... invites us to think about and live it in the present... but always but always with forgiveness and promise [...]²⁷

According to Kristeva, Arendt's critical force, applied to the contemporary scene, consists in a thoroughly modern revoking of the Judeo-Christian cultural bond to the love of life. With her original reading and view of the Western capital plot in which birthing, mothering and humanity are just "one thing", she liberates the life-happening from the religious *passion*. Christ's embodiment, consubstantial and specular to the loving and suffering that Madonna experiences

²⁶ It is worth stressing that the political figure of the *embodied mother* mirrors and ultimately goes past that of the symbolic mother, in the sense described by journalist Ida Dominijanni. She affirms that the symbolic imaginary raises an allegorical level and finally found a new feminine. This notion implies that differences and mediations among women allow to extract all the feminine bodies from the universal category of an ideal woman. Then, if we place in all women's authority, as also in each singularity of them, the care for a plural wishes society, it is because those women-figures incarnate dynamic sets for exchanges and losses, unspeakable territories and closeness, compromises and brave deeds. Dominijanni keeps on saying that symbolical mother's authority is truly a common (wel)fare to which all we can draw on for achieving a free social (self)condition and freeing it through a mobile structure of the standardized gender roles. See Dominijanni, I. (1995). *Il desiderio di politica* in Lia Cigarini, *La politica del desiderio*, Pratiche editrice, Parma, 1995, pp. 16-17.

²⁷ Kristeva, J. (2001). *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative* (F. Collins, Trans.). University of Toronto Press., pp. 88-89.

through her body & mind *haecceity*, reawakens properly over history because it returns to the original union between the newborn and the generative mother-icon. Arendt conjoins the natural contingency of “the beginning” with the desiring freedom of individuals to love, to think, to exercise judgment upon events, to build political consortium and forgiveness. As suggested by Kristeva, Arendt’s way of observing the realm of intellectual and emotional things, words, and social upbringings is a legacy to be shared among all kinds of feminine expressions and extensively among humans. From philosophers to workers, from artists to politicians, all women become actresses who may redesign the common perspectives that can arise from rethinking maternity. Arendt’s outlook is illuminating because she succeeds in bringing the classical tradition into dialogue with the technological condition as experienced by individuals during late modernity, while offering a zooming vision of motherhood, both generative and symbolic, and so truly revolutionary. She associated it with the primordial act of coming-to-life, which finds scope and form in the original *narratio* of each *new event*.

If Rosi Braidotti does not develop a precise study on Arendt’s work, she nevertheless gathers some of its “pearls” within other feminine writings, notably those of Cavarero and Kristeva, whom I referred to across the current study. Besides, it is fruitful to trace here some of Arendt’s concepts, as we bear witness to a void, a tangible absence of them in feminist theories. At the core of this lack, I place *Alter-a* figure which aims to cover this hiatus by stating how critical and keen can be a *divergences, departures, offsets, gaps* system of thinking. Through it, unveiled and unsaid topics share with alterity the virtues of a seminal principle that lets bias and discarding themes surface and re-play, re-puzzle taxonomy while re-classifying hierarchies of knowledge and urgent present-day aspects.

Actually, Arendt’s distancing from feminist movements since the 1960s is a paradigmatic case deserving of further investigation.²⁸ That I tried to develop by using Braidotti’s lenses. Working with her framework, I surface Arendtian insights and advance fresh interpretations of her thought, aligning them with the feminist theoretical and practical horizons she delineated, always by connecting with others’ texts and political stances. Specifically, the narrative activities overlap with the spaces of political performances and the positional status of people who (can) become true transformers of the present, of society. The comparison between the two philosophers offers fertile ground for my journey, during which I trace how it can be textually forceful and experimental, and how it prompts reflection by surfacing a *beginning-the-new* source. Arendt qualifies the intrinsic signification of agency as the process of starting and welcoming the fresh action, choice, and behaviour. They (may) happen by crossing both a kinetic matrix and a processual ecology filled with plural subjects who ground connective, storying dimensionality and enact the powers that sustain and animate a *cosmological agency*.

According to the woman thinker, the plurality of the human condition arises *in progress*. Hence, through a permanent reframing of discourses, the agents’ issues become fulfilled ones. Arendt describes the active space-time continuum by employing the image of the network. The web diagrams underscore the complex weave that belongs to human relations, which map out the

²⁸ Comparing Nicolini, O. (2009). *Per una lettura femminista di Hannah Arendt. Ventaglio delle donne*, in *Incontro con la filosofia africana*, Rivista semestrale di Filosofia, N. 6, 2009, B@belonline/print, Mimesis, Roma, pp. 197-210.

symbiosis between *entities* and *existents*. Even unconsciously, in these symbiotic intertwinings, men and women create a foundational ecosystem by regenerating the sense of matter and power.

6. Towards a pluri-connected *Zoé*

Similarly, Braidotti dynamises the concept of *zoé* through the allegory of a reticular monism, treading upon a Spinozist ontology that imagines living energies and their relations within a superstructure that animates living matter by organising interlinked systems. The philosopher's critique is omniscopic: human and nonhuman, vegetal and bacterial entities displace boundaries while fragmenting and connecting species, aside from traditional temporal schemas in the light of a zoetic cogito.²⁹

In Braidotti's perspective, the primordial attribute and function of *zoé* is to redistribute the hierarchy between the categories of *bios* and of death. Within both the material events of beginning and the organic natality of both hard and soft sensible & visible. *Zoé* synthesizes the living privilege of human and non-human matter; it unsettles not only the limits between humans and animals, plants and vegetal life, physical and environmental elements, but also dislocates temporal frameworks. The universes that *travel* inside and across our perceptions and communication with life-filled contexts represent for Braidotti a wandering materialist vitalism that is relational, affective, embodied, and situated. This movement organises a multi-code system among a variety of energies, forces, vectors of all matter: from the high-tech and virtual ones to the rough needs of cities, workers, and youth's communicative media. Energetic, acting, linguistic, fleshy strings unfold into multiple relations with the others: human and non-human, technological and fabricated, textual and discursive. We face a truly radical materialism. No ontological idealism is at play in Braidotti's all-body, all-matter feminism, in which the perspectives of "location," of being positioned in the world and in the human-technological network, produce a form of universal consciousness. Including artificialities, Braidotti gives the material world the role of an interplay between feminine entities and a chance for forecasting. That is the responsibility of realizing and affirming themselves as "great epistemic authority to the lived experience of the writing/speaking *I*."

Based on thinking and creating figurations, in her *Posthuman Feminism* (2022), Braidotti intersects *physis* with the transitive virtues of storytelling, melted with the arendtian mind-bending of "thinking by yourself". Writing and recounting from one's own position allow women, and people in general, to elucidate and spread out the multiple desires which can disseminate as social as creative projects within today's feminisms, for tomorrow.

Because posthuman feminism and critical theory require workable figurations [...] Figurations dramatize the specific cartographic line they pursue in their quest for alternative modes of knowledge production. Thinking is about creativity and enlivenment. It is less a matter of representing others, or speaking on their behalf, than about joining in

²⁹ Comparing Braidotti R. (2014), pp. 44-50.

the collective construction of affirmative ways of knowing. This is crucial to the posthuman feminist project of turning thought into an instrument of creation of the new.³⁰

As Braidotti proposes, we can require staging new figurative practices and performances, by touching the real, affecting poetry and theatre, connecting with aggregative circuits, social associations, and organisms, thus traversing all sexualities. These modes and stances, as intimate as political, engage the ethical values for constructing inclusion, where the *otherness* is the constitutive element of *bios*. Under the skin and organs, the multi-task feminine language stores the alternative models for a virtual, transformative, techno-artificial vocality within the political millennium to come, to draft collectively. From the passage above, we find the crisscrossing coherence of Braidotti's parabola. She asserts:

Metamorphic creatures are uncomfortable 'body-doubles' or simulacra that simultaneously attract and repel, comfort and unsettle: they are objects of adoration and aberration that play upon the deeper structures of our sense of identity. One is reminded of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath who saw in their mirrors monsters emerging from the depth of their inner selves. Difference is often experienced as negative by women and LGBT's themselves and represented in their cultural production in terms of aberration or monstrosity.³¹

Thus, within Braidotti's footsteps, we interpret the intersection of *self-signals* as forms of resistance and alternative imaginations, as concrete and affective spaces for relationality, and again as precious pieces for composing a renewed idea of transmission and natality, alterity and narrating monstrosity, diversity. These elements bring Arendt and Braidotti together when it comes to responding to the compels of their present. They suggest how revolutionary and resilient it may be to adopt and put into action a critical and reflective dialogue with oneself, yet in constant appeal to others. This aptitude calls for a shared responsibility that understands thinking, loving, and living beings as fragments interconnected, as integral parts of, and for, the terrestrial ecosystem. Such a materialist looks upon events, both personal and collective, enabling us to observe the real as a semantical and seminal constellation which equips the *self* with the capacity to distinguish which ethics to embody, how to react against hierarchical authorities or conformism. Precisely at the height of the socio-political vicissitudes of the twentieth century, the keen female observer Arendt anticipates the crucial aspect linked to the *critical thought*. She has been a pioneer in underlining how the actions of single men and women unfold within a set of preexisting acts and discourses. Indeed, individuals must play History by re-acting the external environment under the awareness of a polyhedral *dynamis* with others who naturally deflect and reshape our inflections. In a few words, the embryonic action deposited in the *zoé* of each undergoes many modifications once it reaches the time of *bios*. Initiated by individuals, thus fully implicated in the productive process, it is the human condition of being-able-to-act that casts a retrospective gaze upon the fragmentary and unachieved status of actions, restoring in turn the presence of a fundamental living unity. Namely, and restarting from Braidotti, the weaving of the

³⁰ Braidotti, R. (2022). *Posthuman Feminism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2022, p. 213.

³¹ Braidotti, R. (2000). "Chapter 8 Teratologies". *Deleuze and Feminist Theory*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000, pp. 156-172.

interconnections that underlie the stories and choices of each person offers in each new act a story to be told, a bearer of patterns of resilience.

If the pre-constitutive network of relations nurtures conflicts and handlings upon the primary intentions of the *agent*, at the same time, the semiotic *web of others*, of the narrative forces, becomes the "medium" that gathers individuals together. Through the participative and multi-agent interplay, all the *vivant* keeps transforming into crafts, and translating the fruitful self & others' narration into a passage for grasping our location amid bio-powers, as well as our feelings, emotions, thoughts. Such *human crafting* elaborates and brings forth (whether consciously or not) narrated bodies and stories which both imply the agentive and processual act of reciting as "the first result of men's acting into history" (Arendt, 1961). In some way, the macro history of humanity and the micro plots of each individual, as Arendt argues, intertwine continually, because once men and women apply and set up deeds, rules, battles within the human realm, "history becomes a process", as well as "nature is a process". (Arendt, 1961, p. 62).³²

If narrating the other is indeed a practice, then the frame of the *polis* and of its ethical and sustainable citizenship is assembled in listening and in close dialogue with all living matter. It displays itself in a *cave* of possible pluriverses which need to be depicted and brought into play of the common. In her *Between Past and Future*, Arendt states:

Human action, like all strict political phenomena, is bound up with human plurality, which is one of the fundamental conditions of human life insofar as it rests on the fact of natality, through which the human world is constantly invaded by strangers, newcomers whose actions and reactions cannot be foreseen by those who are already there and are going to leave in a short while.³³

Thus, the phatic and transmissive moment, included *de facto* within the kinetics of birth, is realized as a dialectical interaction among unique subjectivities. Through the others' memories, words, and point of view, the relational *mother-matrix* propagates in the original emblem of being-two. Thereby, the human species reaches reality by fulfilling the event of birth with a bio-molecular tale. Passing through a double-bind observation, subjects become empowered containers of "otherness" from which different existences cohabit and articulate themselves in communication. Self and others' fabulation restitutes us to the terrestrial happening where every element intertwines within the flow of a lively image showing a patchwork of narrated stories. Such a mindset inscribes the experience of becoming-subjectivity within a feminist and feminine perspective. From a *pensée-corps* (as the French novelist Jeanne Hyvrard wrote), the appearing-constituting of the *I* through the other-than-my-self guarantees the most archaic moment in nature, and the most primitive in the collectivity: the survival of the human species in the Polis, in tribes, in caravans, in pluriversal civilizations.

Nevertheless, the extraordinary alien who arrives in life is not *the elected* at all, but just an ordinary being. A kind stranger who reminds us how humans need to be outside of their own locus to survive through others' presence. Similarly, the mother-language is the *presence* that engages the

³² Arendt, H. (1961), *Between Past and Future*, Penguin Books, London, (1977-2006).

³³ Ibid. p. 61.

phantasmatic other that constitutes my subjectivity, my being-speaking, my being-inclined-to the alterity. Life, as in Arendt's and as in Braidotti's perspective, does not abide by the mere zoo-centric survival of the species-*logos*, but roots itself in passion, in affections, and in love for everyone, anyone, as the most common being. This anyone governs me, rendering me to the other life corps and organism's complexity, as to the diversity into the unicum fusing *zoé* and *bios*. Here Kristeva is back again to remind us how powerfully feminine traces carve through theory for designing shared *Amur Mundi* futures. At the same time, the braiding of female reliefs *informs* existence, its visions and landscapes, through vulnerable surroundings, lauding anyone's voice. Looking at Arendt's dimensionality of *what* tends to be a matrix of political actions, the love for *anyone*—just as fragile as I am—is the radical reason permitting me/you/others to *be* in this world. I *am* because of *your* love, as it could be a woman-mother's action of birthing. However, as Arendt suggests, the miracle of love needs to be devoid of any metaphysics or abstraction and constantly reintroduced in the circles of earth's multi-species cosmos, also "disseminated among human plurality... in the infinite temporality of mankind's narratives" (Kristeva, 2001, p. 58). Because if one's/anyone's life is fully a single occurrence, at the same time it is the simplest event among infinite *meanings* of plural lives. Kristeva underlines how feminine experiencing at twice the plurality and uniqueness of nativity, contributes intrinsically to sketch out a new way of perceiving freedom and political chances.

Thus femininity is seen as being not only a given from our first origins, but also a difference that is intrinsic to the action which we know to be, for Arendt, the very essence of the political: femininity does not confine itself to the body as serf, but indeed constitutes the plurality of the world, a plurality in which it participates.³⁴

The woman-mother who reinvents, in every era, the historical not-finitude plurality within the human, draws from the hearth vitality the essence of being in a mutual *reliance*. At this juncture, among linguistics, passions, and members, our analyses coagulate into the path where the *Alter-a Mater* mapped some layers of Braidotti's thought. There, the references weave a framework with other visions while jamming the emergence of critical feminine landscapes. Indeed, our cartography of Braidotti follows circular routes for uncovering the myriad places in which the maternal figure is able to dwell, to dream, to stream.

7. Difference Feminism: Converging and questioning the outspread of feminine politics, literature, and critics

The variety of feminist waves and canons during the last fifty years is the most illuminating and revolutionary historical feature characterizing female and feminine achievements, as well as their main boosts, research innovations, and exploratory paths. Considering this aspect, in this paragraph I go deeper into Braidotti's cartography (which I have engaged with up to now) in order to add a micro-scale perspective of her exchanges with the beliefs of sexual difference. In her Italian essay *Madri, Mostri, Macchine*, 2021 (which is quite dissimilar in content from its specular English version, *Mother, Monsters, and Machines*), Braidotti clarifies her engaged, fair-play critique

³⁴ Kristeva, J. (2001), *Hannah Arendt: Life is a Narrative*, p. 70.

of the thinkers of difference feminism. She highlights the *systemic care* they have shown towards the maternal body since the Sixties, from which a surge of *sexuate knowledge* on corporeality—sparked by feminism—crashed against the humanistic knowledge and its masculine language structuralism.

Braidotti frames the contradictory, hyperbolic aspects that arose within all the women's movements—and particularly within the knowledge of sexual difference—not as composing a post-feminist stance that might appear as a fixed, ultimate arrival. Rather, she sees them as embracing a progressive dismantling of the *architectures* that sustain principles of mind-universality, and of corporeal and psychic unity, both structuring global sociality upon the liberal myth of the modern subject. Also, these female critics facilitated perceiving the alienating contemporary structures as a multi-layered web in which it will be always doable to rescue discursive patterns, cultural resources, and symbolic heritages.

In a crucial passage of her analysis (that I partially reframe),³⁵ Braidotti develops her reading of the school of *difference feminism* and makes it clear how the paradox of a *sexuated knowledge* requires to be revalued, re-mapped within an epistemic and political import. Effectively, it chiefly brought into focus the variety of differences operating on manifold registers and community levels. Thanks to the *different school*, the body became not only a battlefield but the newly printed trace of a woman's becoming-subject. Tangible, organically inspired bodies revealed then as possible staging for feminine politics and knowledges, tracking themselves into the historical signs of a social and symbolic subversion (still underway). By an act of willing, those women deconstruct and re-signify a further becoming-woman, finding within it a methodology in process: an ongoing readjustment toward empathy as the most promising way of embracing alterity and intersectional diversity. Women from diverse backgrounds confront the ethical and practical tasks of differentiating resources, perspectives, gestures, and movements that give rise to a collective, multicolored community of life. This brings to light, and continues to perform, embodied acknowledgments as machines of desire, as new choices, as other histories to incarnate.

It is not by chance that in a double-track interview between Braidotti and Judith Butler (1994, *Feminism by Any Other Name*) around Monique Wittig's cutting-edge poetics, the dialogue becomes fervent, precisely upon the formal breakthroughs which both irrigated and dissected the *sexual difference thinking*. From Braidotti's perspective:

[...] we need to valorize sexual difference as aiming at the symbolic empowerment of the feminine understood as "the other of the other": as a political project [...] whereas [...] everything I am saying rests on a de-essentialized, complex, and multi-layered understanding of the female subject. Woman is a complex entity which, as Kristeva puts it, pertains both to the longer, linear time of history and to a deeper, more discontinuous sense of time: this is the time of cyclical transformation, of counter-genealogies, of becoming and resistance [...]³⁶

³⁵ See Braidotti, R. (2021). *Madri, mostri e macchine*, Castelvechi, Roma, 2021, p. 5.

³⁶ Braidotti, R. in Butler, J. (1994). "Feminism by Any Other Name." *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2-3, Summer-Fall 1994, pp. 2761.

Braidotti situates the intellectual achievements, the consultative and aggregative practices, the emancipation of the manifesting body, and finally the searches within literature, as a female ground-breaking fruit. The *Difference Feminism* has known how to situate itself as different, as a class-in-struggle, in opposition to each kind of power because it embraces the force of plural narratives, languages, devices. It delineates how to exist within allied bodies by aggregating the experience of individual lives into a temporal dimension that rewrites history and its cycles. In like manner, through its re-signifying the maternal polyphony of alterities and metamorphoses, the very valuable analytic practice proposed by *Alter-a Mater*, keeps its foundation on deconstructive modeling for dissecting texts and critically re-play with(in) them a startling scenario. Consistently *Alter-a* picks up the pace of deconstructive methods, by evoking the frolic between *zoé* forces and textualities, and inviting our reflection to an acting-in-common. Deconstruction, conceived and initiated by the philosopher Jacques Derrida, has thus led many *vagues*—including (post)feminist and (post)structuralist currents—to conceive and start the deposition of metaphysical thought. These critical waves have been aiming to install, within the multiple *feminine-S* populating the decolonial era, a discursive alterity which women can functionally enact. Among these voices, we find Braidotti, who prompts how the metaphysical tradition cannot be circumvented by escaping Western codifying alliances of meanings and power. She then *cyphers* Derrida's proposals to re-semanticize and harbor subjectivities within fresh textualities and prompts for releasing interpretations which disclose thanks to other, odd and troubling *utterances*. Whereby this flow, Braidotti gathers within Derridean research the promise of invisible, in-audible spaces assigned to performance & agency which stays, intrinsically, in the sharable, vital link among linguistic subjects. This space reflects, throughout Derrida's formula of *DifférAnce*, an alphabetic ploy that re-fabricates within graphs an archetypal passage to the archeology of western signs and significant mechanism. This *A*, which stands as the un-nominated shifting among meanings and letters, indicates the original distance between form and intentions, comprehension and signals. It intensely overwhelms the relation among languages and tongues which, in the prism of feminine deconstructive affiliation, manifest as a concrete *calling to come*. In addressing this calling, we can recognize that writing and poetry emerge from processes of assemblage, dissolution, and reconstruction. They stage an experience of the self that realizes while dis-incorporating and integrating its *pieces*, covering learning-stages for acquiring new materials, being aware in progress, yet situated within reality, as the bio-changing *heart* of the maternal-*you*, keeping the bond with the first *alterity-you* and sampling the heterogeneity of affective dwells.

By entrusting and delivering oneself into the other-different from us, into the other *mother-tongue*, the language (which) belongs to the other, coming from the other, as the coming of the other (here I translate from Derrida's quote: "la langue (qui) est à l'autre, venue de l'autre, la venue de l'autre,"³⁷) situates a laboratory of loving relations, all the more intimate the more social and political they are. Mirroring the motherhood challenge in the factual and pluri-connected presence of the newborn corresponds to a fulfilment-to-build only by feeling and tuning the interval between corps, a thick profound tear *between you-and-I*, a carnal *DifférAnce* among different organics that is crucial for each communication, life pursuit. It distances the birthing

³⁷ Derrida, J. (1996). *Le monolinguisme de l'autre, ou, la protèse de l'autre*, Galilée, 1996, Paris, pp. 126-127.

entities from each other while it places the mother in a condition of vulnerability and alterity, as Kristeva formulates.³⁸ The bodies involved in the maternal multisensory action perform biocentric consciousnesses and touch at the dark stage of the original fragmentation of meanings and metaphysics. In traversing the awareness of being detached, the need for a systemic belonging gains access to a cognitive frontier towards survival. These jumps open and release the self's display onto the carnality of a single lively body that splits and chops, disjoins by looking to another corps-to-come. Thereby participating, beastly, within a wide, multiple, extending reality, each individual, through the in-borning ordeal of mothering, partakes in and helps to enact the plurality of worlds, both human and non-human. In this process, the subjects become auroral: they engage the cosmic and originary dimension of an *infinite flesh*, and a desiring that sharpens the wisdom of absence while enclosing organs of reception.³⁹

Within the lived maternal experience, at the dawn of language, the *other* who speaks inaugurates the deciphering of signification through the legacy, the bond with others. The potency of this bond implies a responsibility which, for both Derrida and Braidotti, is conserved within the other-than-my-self, as a proficiency that renders me available to receive the aporia generated by the wound, the hiatus between *Logos* and bodies⁴⁰. Meanwhile, if we remain within the perimeters of *Sexual Difference*, by giving maternity the chance to nominate things differently from secular worldviews, it's because here we still find and benefit from an ethical response that looks for a renewed coexistence among species and diverse genders. Here fastens Braidotti's imagery, which depicts how hybridized *agency* allows the de-territorialization of socio-identitarian normativity, making of the *self-tongue* a constitutively multi-language, therefore politically active, and activatable too. In her cult-book *Patterns of Dissonance. A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*, Braidotti pays homage to Derrida's work of excavations undertaken upon the origins of Western language in pursuit of a re-signifying cartography that maps the *avenir* among living beings.

Derrida posits the originary deferral of philosophical subject in relation to the process of signification, of meaning production [...] The philosophical text is in fact governed by the codes of 'onto-theological' language, which give Western thought its distinct character: the illusion of presence, of a fixed point, of a synthezizing whole which takes the place of the subject. This logocentric discourse plays a normative function in philosophy. The solution that Derrida proposes to this endemic disease of philosophy is the eventual possibility of 'unveiling' within the texts, the traces of their adherence to and therefore complicity with this onto-theological mode, that is the signifying code of philosophy par excellence.⁴¹

Braidotti follows Derrida's proposals and curbs the man-subject as the horrific symbol of the *I* that asserts and observes the world from above, through a logocentric violence, neutralizing the

³⁸ See Kristeva, J. (2003). *Le génie féminin. Hannah Arendt, (tome I)*, p. 47.

³⁹ Comparing Muraro, L. (2011). *Non é da tutti. L'indicibile fortuna di nascere donna*, Carocci, Roma, 2011, p. 40.

⁴⁰ See Derrida, J. (1967). *L'écriture et la différence*, Seuil, Paris, 1967 ; see also Jacques Derrida, *Le Toucher, Jean-Luc Nancy*. Éditions Galilée, 2000.

⁴¹ Braidotti, R., (1991). *Patterns of Dissonance. A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*, pp. 98-99.

feminine multiplicities that exist within it by manipulating their horizons and potential activisms from many cultural and environmental roots. Within Braidotti's system, atomized in modern subjectivity, abstracted from relational and material needs, anchored in the Cartesian logic of a rational Eurocentric male, this "Western Man" becomes one of the pivots endorsing a transition towards the Posthumanist current.

We read from the chapter *Posthuman Feminist Theory* in which Braidotti attunes her speech to the post-human fluxes.

The "death of Man" announced by Foucault (1970) formalized and epistemological and moral crisis that went beyond binary oppositions, cutting across different poles of the political spectrum. Poststructuralist theorists called for insubordination from received humanist ideals. They targeted the humanistic arrogance of continuing to place Man at the center of world history, and more specifically, the implicit assumption that what is "human" about humanity is connected to a sovereign ideal of "reason" as Enlightenment based rationality and science-driven progress.⁴²

8. The modern neutral *Self*: Walking through Deconstruction to Monstrosity. Who's wounding, who's wounded?

Disseminated across numerous fields of study, the strategies that arose with Deconstruction and, subsequently, within Poststructuralism (as mentioned earlier), seem to assimilate some of Braidotti's patterns, mostly when they conjoin with the force of a *language-thought-body* that functions as a brainstorming device. This engages methodologies that endorse a cogitating and composing performativity working on concomitance, collision, assonances, and discordances as the healthy mirror of alternative political and social models. Through them, *feminine identities* (including all kinds of sexual stances or positions, natural gendered belongings, or just intellectual and emotional aggregation) can design habitats and let arise communities around disparate critical textualities. The core of a circling ecosystem synthesizes the strength of theoretical identities, showcasing the *birth-happening* of thinking anew.

Life that happens within the body, within the *life of the mind* (here evoking Arendt's inspiring traces once more), the thread linking the multifaceted figures of mothers and the geographies of maternity, thus appears to traverse history and roam those *lands* which inherit from collective experiences of being born, of being-born-from, and of cultures within the human who thinks, who crafts the world. As the philosopher Walter Benjamin notes, across generations, the temporal planes intersect with divergent souvenirs, creating shocks in the perspectives on power, sometimes dismantling communities or offering new publishing acknowledgments on collective togetherness, futural *milieux*. Because perception of temporal sheets is part of self-biological evolution since everyone's birth, another approach to space-time dimensions can change the course of events and reading, confronting, and dealing with violence and domination differently. Here, Braidotti's project about the female, feminists' fruition and growth, and by hyperbole on the

⁴² Braidotti, R., (2015). *Posthuman Feminist Theory*, in *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory*, Lisa Disch (ed.), Mary Hawkesworth (ed.), 2015, Oxford University Press, Oxford, p. 678.

mother-subjects, responds to the radical mutations of our present. Thus, Braidotti sustains all feminine incorporations dancing with the already post-new millennium; her vision circles around the historical changes of the human entity while redrafting them within a fragmentary approach to cultures. In this tableau, the unexplored territories of the maternal, of corporeality, necessitate and promote the equilibria and relations among powers.

Braidotti aims to cherish how during the long journey toward affirming feminine subjectivity in twentieth-century philosophy, *womanly thought* often found grounds and compelling escape routes in approaches and echoes from Deconstruction (though not exclusively there). Thus, deconstructive tools, even if featuring different pathways and roots, allowed the *sexual difference* groups to showcase the monstrous aspect of positing the neuter-masculine as the paradigm of an ahistorical modern subject. Among these perspectives, Adriana Cavarero (briefly mentioned earlier) has contributed to revealing the *signs* of the presumed authenticity of the modern-*I*, as much linguistic as productive of knowledge, and thus epistemic, fully dominant over all other species, other genders. The universal masculine of tradition stands as the univocal subject of discourse: a male subject who *posits* himself as universal... along this path, man traces the arc of the Same, finding and recognising himself as the particular instance of his own universalisation (here rephrasing Cavarero, 1985).⁴³ Cavarero's operation identifies in the *I-Logos* the neutralizing indifference toward any form of sexualization of writing and thinking, any embodiment of life-mind, of granular affectivities as well as textu(r)al, tactile, haptic, vibrating forces, gravitational resiliencies and poetics. In her essay *Towards a Theory of Sexual Difference*, she develops the idea that, at the core of Western language and logics, there is a foundational violence and a resulting unbridgeable alienation borne by women.

Man recognizes himself fully in the neutral universal without the need for any addition, precisely because of that monstrosity which makes a neutral and a male cohabit in the universe man [...] the self-identification of the gendered man with universal-neutral man has its possibility precisely in that finiteness of the masculine gender which is adopted as universal. [...] in this universal (in the subject, in the *I* of philosophy) man [...] recognizes himself, he speaks himself, he thinks himself, he represents himself. The monstrosity of that universal which is at the same time neutral and male does not disturb him since it comes from the logical 'generosity' of finiteness which takes on the burden of holding true for the other sex as well.⁴⁴

Cavarero's postulate is an inspiring movement which sets us critically *trembling*.⁴⁵ She compels us to face how European civilization, entwined with a white, gendered tradition, expanded its purview

⁴³ See Cavarero, A. (1985). *Towards a theory of sexual difference*, in *The Lonely Mirror: Italian Perspectives on Feminist Theory*, Routledge, 1993, pp. 189-221.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 193-194.

⁴⁵ Comparing, Delahaie, F. (2023). *Créations participatives en espaces urbains : entre dérive et ancrage aux vibrations esthétiques du vivant*. « Fédérer Langues, Altérités, Marginalités, Médias, Éthique, (1) ». Fiona Delahaie is an eco-semiotics scholar here explaining how it can be fruitful to push a critical outlook upon the living spaces, as neighbours or common trails, by activating a positive tension within our bodies. The trembling moves lead to perceive things through a constitutive organic vibrancy that makes us living—and, in turn, creative. See also, Touam Bona, D. (2021), *Sagesse des lianes*, Le Kremlin Bicêtre, Post-Éditions, 2021.

until it claimed the whole field of the existent. The universality of the I-man's worldview relies on the category of the neutral male not only to distinguish *the feminine*—which has to barely signify the *other sex*— but mostly for constructing a taxonomy of Nature and the hierarchies of civil society, its relations of power. Her analysis strongly echoes Braidotti's reasoning while she dissects the Man-body and its *Logos*. We read:

Anti-humanism constitutes the core of the feminist critiques of « Man » as the alleged « measure of things » for being androcentric, exclusionary, hierarchical and Eurocentric. The dominant norm of the subject – the former « Man » of classical Humanism – was positioned at the pinnacle of hierarchical scale that rewarded the ideal of zero-degree of difference. This norm is used to justify the deployment of rational epistemic and social violence that marks « others » whose social and symbolic existence is unprotected.⁴⁶

Cavarero and Braidotti, in a porous shaping, not only subvert and dismantle the secularization of power ruling the act of speaking and naming things but also unmask the monstrosity performed by the modern rational animal. This *type*, yet so familiar, contained the logic of voracity and extraction upon Nature and species, minoritarian people, and territories. Similarly, both thinkers shift monstrosity—an excluding and discriminatory attribute—from the woman-sign to the man-sign, lifting the woman-body from its subordinate nature. Meanwhile, women's body-minds reveal themselves reborn from the iconicity that for centuries has been characterising them as a vulnus exposed to the horrorism of the Other, that colonising and logocentric masculine which ascribes to the feminine the marks and wounds of *trouble*. Also in the previously evoked volume *Mother, Monster, and Machines*, Braidotti reiterates how being *other-than*, that is, the "different par excellence", overlaps with monstrous features, subjected to marginalization, to powerlessness and violence. Again, the Mother-monstrosity has been exposed to social judgment and invisibility, to the conflicts and bio-powers exploitation upon all these bodies (that) *matter* but do not conform to the normativity of binarism and its codes.

Braidotti states:

[...] through her identification with the feminine, she is monstrous by displacement: a sign of the between areas, of the indefinite, the ambiguous, the mixed woman/mother is subjected to a constant process of metaphorization as "other-than". In the binary structure of the logocentric system, "woman", as the eternal pole of opposition, the "other", can be assigned to the most varied and often contradictory terms. The only constant remains her "becoming metaphor" call mom whether of the sacred or the profane, of heaven or hell, of life or death. "Woman" is that which is assigned and has no power of self-definition. "Woman" is the anomaly that confirms the positivity of the norm.⁴⁷

The purpose of the mother-monster figure, associated with the machine and extensively with technological presences, is in *speculum* with the Western history of culture. By disguising the category of the other-than-self as well as the ideal of the opposite that serves the accords of

⁴⁶ Braidotti, R. (2015). *Posthuman Feminist Theory*, p. 677.

⁴⁷ Braidotti, R. *Mothers, Monsters, and Machines* in Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, Columbia University Press, 1997, pp. 59–79; p. 66–67.

gender, this maternal and monstrous machinery inscribes physicality into logic and into grammar, into organic and biotic productivity, producing a figuration out of norms instead. Coded through etymologies, within the binary system governing the links between thought and affects, our avatar, the *Mater Alter-a*, springs from the vivisection of Braidotti's corpus and reclaims its own bending, its particular inflection in the transit of syntaxes, into a critical translational monstrosity.

Under this lens, the mother generative body—what Muraro calls the embodied and extraordinary experience of existence—becomes, symbolically, a site for inborn events, weaving languages and love into cognitive structures. The monstrosity of "Woman" is overturned into a *querying* fluidity, embracing a unicum of heterogeneous singularities, races, origins, sexes. They branch out across all the dispositions of imaginative and social temporalities and through Braidotti's setting acquire a re-lightning empowerment. They allow us to plan and re-design the animality inherent to humans and re-cast our anthropological memory throughout *other-codifying* significations. Drifting into liminal zones animated by *queering* materials, the rigid play of opposites gives way and encounters the affective and political practices of domination, of violent conflicts. What matters most—especially here, where methods, contents, plots and filial heritages converge—is the dialogue between Braidotti and Cavarero. Their exchange traces a webbing and unpredictable genealogy, while opening theoretical junctures and shifting. From them come pioneering corpora that unmask the habits of reasoning, where sexual difference represents an amphora of rehearsals: an epistemology of mothers as the first legitimate subjects, transforming biopower into possibility, action, and lively *engagement*. As the French philosopher Judith Revel cleverly suggests, because power is not a coherent entity but historically a shaping and conditioned system of relations, it requires acute observations on the complex workings and social assemblages where practices, knowledge, and institutions intersect. Consequently, any genealogy of power is inseparable from a history of subjectivity.⁴⁸

Surfing upon the "fictional chat" among female thinkers and interweaving their productions, we constate how the subordinate measure which has been marking feminine discourses and postures also characterizes the dominant perception/perspective on mothers and women. According to the philosophers I have called up here, the tradition of logos fixed and signified the being-female through the function of the negative-other. The category of the feminine, named since Plato as the Mother, is placed vis-à-vis of that universal man taken as the originary, from whom it is distinguished solely by negative attributes. The feminine is formless, unrepresentable compared to the *father-logos*, that omnivore engine which locks the eternal forms of the cosmos, and holder of monolithic axioms.

Braidotti and Cavarero, with other feminists, lay the critical foundations against the supposed truth of the one-masculine and, at the core of the postmodern, bring to light the fragmentary nature of the contemporary subject. In this fracture, they uncover its generative force—the opening of possibilities, above all for feminism, toward a critical and politically engaged method rooted in intellectual nomadism. Concretely, as Braidotti explains in her French essay *Les sujets nomades*

⁴⁸ Comparing Revel, J. (2003). « Devenir-femme de la politique ». *Multitudes*, 2003/2 no 12, 2003. p.125-133; pp. 128-129. She argues that the late revolution in the paradigm of *labor* has dismantled modern industrial categories, shifting the problem from simply *what is to be done* to how new subverting forces can self-organize in non-hierarchical ways and deploy strategies of resistance.

féministes comme figure des multitudes (2003), nomadism is an insightful jamming that, from the women's movement to decolonial studies, unfolds the notion of rhizome. It proliferates along with a keen approach toward the whole of origins and births. As the Creole decolonial poet-thinker Édouard Glissant prompts, "the notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root » (Glissant, 1997).⁴⁹ Braidotti refers frequently to Glissant also to make visible, and let speak, the multiple critical journeys that feminine aggregations have been tracing along the reticular poetics of relation. In this matrix, every identity expands only *in relation* to the others, and women's bodies, increasingly grafted by technological means, encompass them inside the shifting tides of procreation and production. Within the present, women channel the rhizomatic branching of the maternal, which stirs key questions about the multiplicity enlivening all feminine subjects. Indeed, the actual *sujet-femme* plays a *plural-we* who, in turn, both reactivates and deconstructs the one-subject images beyond the postures of European white feminism.

The *I-We* of women interacts with differentiated positions and conditions of life, riding the impulses of a *Politics of Location*. Thus, the polyphonic feminine identities, as a nomadism circulating amidst the ruins of Eurocentric postulates, confront the desire for a sort of differentiated and monstered universality (as Cavarero states), for a humanism mutation and hybridity, as Braidotti declares. According to the two philosophers, such biotic humanity, such *bios* that is mindful of the non-separation between *nature&culture*, survives within our species and lets the pluralities of the feminine decompose the theme of the unity of a subject that posits, imagines, and represents itself as One, as the Center.

A true contemporary gaze encloses, indeed, a feminism which is *located* by many feminisms that interrogate themselves by interrogating other socio-identitarian movements. Today, feminine forces seek within situated points and nodes of women's realities which frontiers of geopolitics can be run for expanding a nomadic thinking. As proposed also by great minds such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak or Françoise Vergès⁵⁰ the nomadism is a culture of resisting displacement that arises from the bottom, from the underside of unearthing conditions. In tandem, Braidotti states that nomadic thinking offers insightful keys for evaluating the most current biopower relations and their effects on knowledge, learning, and community structures. Also, and it is a key point of my reflection, she intersects the fruitful *knitting* between feminisms and (post)structuralist philosophies by contributing, within the linguistic and semiotic edges, to dismantle the logocentric system⁵¹ and create, conversely, desiring cartographies of the present that can valorise the complexities of the feminist subjects. For Braidotti, nowadays women are the opposite signs of the specular masculine-Other no more. They *signify* a quantitative plurality and a qualitative multiplicity—who have already found alternative and productive systems of significance and auto-

⁴⁹ Glissant, É., *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, p. 11.

⁵⁰ See Cago, V., Montanaro, M., (2023). *Les Théories Féministes voyageuses. Internationalisme et coalitions depuis les luttes latino-américaines*, Éditions Divergences, Paris, 2023.

⁵¹ See Braidotti, R., (1994). *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, pp. 92-98.

representation.⁵² From a variety of perspectives, and with highly heterogeneous forms of engagement and heritage, they no longer (or ever less) recognize themselves within discursive and symbolic orders which are tied to the masculine prototype of self-foundation. *Les femmes* perform, on the actual stages of politics and intellectual mindset, an embodied multiplicity—an intricate, sometimes contradictory whole—the subjects of a real mutation, of a singular and collective metamorphosis. Monsters who taught us that normality is merely “monstrosity’s zero degree” (here I rephrased Braidotti, 2003).⁵³ To conclude, Braidotti called the political project engaged by *Sexual Difference*, “the virtual feminine of sexual difference feminism”: it assumes a politics of materialism by processing, through the strength of virtual utopias, imaginaries to signify anew, the multi-scale feminine corporeal realities.

9. Affirming to be *vulnerable*: A key gesture towards contemporary Ethics

If the political distancing from Western hegemonies unites the feminisms of our world and lets them go against the clues of a Europe as the world’s centre, the notions of alterity—especially within maternal and corporeal dynamics—continue to multiply the questions on being-women, on being-mothers. By integrating into the sociality of the feminine the horizons of responsible interdependence and relationality, feminine subjects, and all their companions, even by grappling with diverse consciousnesses and origins,⁵⁴ can fulfil and liberate the negative attributes attached broadly to the notion of *dysmorphia*, and infuse a pluriversal criterion that can foster *reciprocity* between:

[...] two moral (gender) perspectives... that answer to two different visions of the self, both equally legitimate and necessary: one emphasizes separation and autonomy, the other attachment and connection. Evoking the metaphorical images of ‘hierarchy’ and ‘network’, Carol Gilligan proposes the complementarity between the two universes. She repeatedly insists [...] on the need—above all psychologically—for their reciprocal integration by the two sexes, while pointing out the intrinsic shortcomings of any unilateral view of moral development [...]⁵⁵

To recognize in the constitutive fragilities and exposures of the subject, the common value of an inter-dependency among individuals and entities, feminists eclectically open up the upcoming, tribal circuit around the deposition of modern individualism. Inscribed in the terminal parabola of a sovereign subject, it has obscured that ontological condition of need and vulnerability that is common to all forms of life. In secularised forms, the autoregulated-male archetype reflected the denial of all-living *ab ovo* reciprocity. On the contrary, as the woman intellectual Elena Pulcini

⁵² Comparing Braidotti, R. (2003). « Les sujets nomades féministes des multitudes ». *Multitudes*, 2003/2 no 12, 2003. p.27-38 ; pp. 32-33.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ See also Vergès, F. (2019). *Un féminisme décolonial*, La fabrique éditions, Paris, 2019, pp. 41-43

⁵⁵ Here translation is mine. See Pulcini, E. (2017). La cura è un dono? in Genevieve Vaughan, *Le radici materne dell'economia del dono*, VandA.epublishing, Milano 2017, pp. 4-9. See also, Pulcini, E. (2021). Giving Care. *Mauss international*, No 1(1), 90-105.

claims, one is rescued and fulfilled within life, for permanently being bound to other lives and exposed to, and for, toward other destinies.

The passage above indeed quotes feminist intellectual Elena Pulcini, who develops a perspective on the communitarian and ethical logics of care, drawing near to Braidotti and embracing relationality and the inter-symbiosis of life. She recognises them as ethical pillars for gearing fresh identitarian and political groundworks. Within this network, the fragilities and exposures of the contemporary subject— embedded in exchanges and reciprocities among individuals and entities—reveal the sediments of modern individualism. Thanks to feminism, the self-made individual is now tracing the final arc of its sovereignty, which has obscured the ontological condition of need and vulnerability.

Indeed, Braidotti emphasises the immanence of the living subject in its radical embodied ipseity and the desiring and productive force released by its sexuated nature. She thus observes how sexual difference —mostly in the European intellectual panorama— has been entrusted to mothers and the maternal, the task of deactivating the perverse logic irradiated by the dominant subject. Disarming its excluding and polarising power, potential caring agents, actors, and *performers* can build and move joyfully through a pluriversal dimension in which care toward every element of life surpasses—even in its contradictions—the masculine-feminine dichotomy. As Braidotti proposes, we need to continue to put into check the Man, because it constitutes through what it excludes and disqualifies, and not through what it authorises and valorises. The others are merely constitutive and productive. On the contrary, post-human errancy carries alterity in the subjects who start a process of deterritorialization. Twisting in this dance of differences, the sexed or feminised other, the other in ethnic or racialised terms, as well as the other in nature or from an ecological pole, do not *signify* anymore. This doubling of the subject within discursive practices entails both a reactive and critical side and migrates to an active/positive significance (here rephrasing Braidotti, 2003). Besides, she emphasises how women, for decades, have been concretely experiencing how to re-craft several *mapping oceanic methodologies*. Whereby this in-progress mobility of mind and body, all living settings can be reconfigured as interactional habitats, among classes and ethnicities, hierarchies and sexes, finally, among biodiversity.

Since cartographies' methods allow for embracing situated knowledges, to find out power relations within figurations and imagery, the feminine expected horizons come into view for punctuating identitarian paths that are writing (about) themselves and planting the seeds for a posthuman multiplicity of becoming.⁵⁶ Perhaps Braidotti foresees a utopian reality, yet one that is precisely politically needed to dream. Since they are "to be allowed to happen", the anti-humanist and post-feminist universes will encompass discourses and alliances capable of nourishing and replanning the fields of knowledge. Here is the land of disclosing practices of life and of education, as operational alternatives to the dominant cultural, sexual, and economic models. Therefore, our philosopher identifies in women the emergence and the safeguarding of an *affirmative ethics*, which she describes as "a process, and not a product." Through it, they handle reflections on living together, on coexisting and surviving as a species.

⁵⁶ See Braidotti R., (2016). "Posthuman Critical Theory," in *Critical Posthumanism and Planetary Futures*, ed. Debashish Banerji and Makarand R. Paranjape, New Delhi: Springer India, 2016, pp. 13-32.

In her Italian volume *Materialismo radicale. Itinerari etici per cyborg e cattive ragazze*, Braidotti shares a curated selection of previous essays and describes her proposal for an *Ethics of affirmation*. She surfs the new millennium dashboard, and reframes body and emotional perceptions as the double-bind for a nomadic agency, a whole earthly change. She explains how affirmative ethics praxis lies upon a radical transformation of negative feelings. Once we make habits of interpreting the relational bindings by objectifying and depersonalising painful affects, all striking behaviours can be overcome. This dynamic would stimulate *energetic forms* of self-liberation which overlap virtuous proceedings towards *the* future-oriented collective. Meanwhile, it is necessary to acquire and query, to incarnate a nomadic thought & sensitivity which will be able to translate loss into resourceful becoming, and multi-access alliances. Trying to rephrase Braidotti's words, "affirmative ethics restores movement to emotion and action to activism, bringing with it changes, processes, and becoming". (L'etica affermativa restituisce il movimento all'emozione e l'azione all'attivismo, portando con sé cambiamenti, processi e divenire, Braidotti, 2019).⁵⁷

Affirming oneself is an ethics⁵⁸ and it leads to change our self by transcending the ego and its self-referential units. Coming back to the categories of birth and life, we perceive them as they are concrete engines for bursting forth pluri-located consciousnesses and mutating bodies. From these multi-situated corps, a fruitful dissemination can spread across all regions of *relationality*, linking to that womanly *other-than*. Affirmative ethics runs through marginalised figures and collections by pursuing another system of archiving. Women's images coming from the *feminine* pluriverse recompose and predict various cognitive dimensions, ready to store the narrated memory of the mother-organicity. Because its historical and dialectical existence has never been universal, nor indexable by fixed categories, it imposes on research pluri-femininity, and motherhood as well, into treasuring devices that we need to plunder.

At the core of this despoiling move, the maternal organics stay as key pieces of *somathèques*.⁵⁹ These constitute cultural living archives made of political strings, which the philosopher Paul Beatriz Preciado invents for expanding the traditional notion of the body. Even by trailing *somathèques'* lines and legs, it will be profitable to gather the singular stories of *maternal plurality* that occur through bio-narrative textualities. Each unique experience comes to light in identities in translation and *in transition*, while the events of life join a *maternal thinking* that exposes us to alterity. Our *Mater Alter-a* gets off again from the backstage of our critical reading and plays within the active body, the memory of birthing. It's wholly of origins' nature, as well as its creatures' features,⁶⁰ reminds us of the value of inter-dependency and plural-connectivity amidst not only human environments, but mostly across all organisms' ecosystems. In conjugating the *affirmative*

⁵⁷ See Braidotti, R., (2019). *Materialismo radicale Itinerari etici per cyborg e cattive ragazze*. Traduzione e cura di Angela Balzano, Meltemi, Milano, 2019, p. 103.

⁵⁸ About Braidotti's book *Materialismo radicale*, see Vecchi, R. 2019). *Una politica affermativa capace di leggere e decifrare la realtà, Il manifesto*, Ottobre 2019. Web Reference : <https://ilmanifesto.it/una-politica-affermativa-capace-di-leggere-e-decifare-la-realta>.

⁵⁹ See Grino, C., Preciado, B. P. (2012). "Beatriz Preciado," *Inter* no 112 (automne 2012), pp. 23-29.

⁶⁰ See Pulcini, E., (2008). « Assujetties au don. Réflexions sur le don et le sujet féminin ». *La société vue du don* Manuel de sociologie anti-utilitariste appliquée, La Découverte, 2008. p.229-242.

ethics inside a non-unitarian and rhizomic identity, Braidotti looks into Pulcini's proposal for a full-humanity care and discovers the epistemic and maieutic motor of vitalism. It brings inside the generative power of living beings, a disclosing notion of *zoé* for which self-identities are certainly very special words-engines, but among myriads of becoming, of metamorphosing. (Braidotti, 2019).

This ethical scenario sets up a mapping in which we find out the peculiarity of human need entangled in the intrinsic, natural symbiosis with self-diversity. Humans reveal here as political bodily archives in which they recognise and activate their vulnerable and exposed property as a skilling-connecting gift for zoetic and bios-*outers*, possible *uterus*. Thus, the subjects can acquire the capacity of caring while becoming genuine creators in the circle of a listening-narrative exercise. The *I* who narrates and is narrated, by reconning "in turn, as needing the same care, and driven by... a passion for the Other" (Pulcini, 2017; translation is mine), reincorporates its own uniqueness. The alterity flowing through passions and resonating in the relation-between-lives, extends to the maternal and fully entwines within emotional boards and psyche,

Opened to maieutic chances, the feminine subjects entangle a spreading iconography and, as Pulcini suggests, awaken an ethical power that embraces the Self into vulnerability, by forging again unfolded voices for a more equitable, ideally universal care, as proposed by the thinker Joan Tronto. Recomposing the interactions among feminine thoughts, Cavarero and Braidotti meet once again around Pulcini's circuits and cross the *sister of care*. Circles. By rethinking gender and the post-human, the feminist sisters' bodies excavate within the emerging identities that reclaim for becoming other-S' future-S. Here, once more, from the contributions of sexual difference—*firmly squared within a humanist gender binary model*—Cavarero and Braidotti seal their common commitment to better focus on posthumanism's self-contradictions.⁶¹ The roads they walk carry on restructuring human landscapes, assuming the mistakes of Man's omnivorous species over the other ones, used and perceived as subalterns.

Braidotti often emphasises how the next generations' communities might be founded upon the "perversion" of the binary logic, to foster a solidarity among non-living and humans, genders and species, communications and technologies. Indeed, in Braidotti's galaxy, at the threshold of frontiers, "biotic and abiotic spectrum... bacteria and animal... geological structures and technology *coexist*" (Braidotti, 2013)⁶² knotted into the multi-limbs of *zoé*. Immersed in a present yet to be imagined, Braidotti fuses the composite diversity of feminism, which she considers a prelude, within the Modern age, to progressive identitarian revolutions, metamorphosis. Against colonization and the extensive cultivation of socio-political singularities, of earth territories, of the passions of the *feminines*, and of feminisms, illuminates Braidotti's *thinking-together*. Her creole and telluric co-fabricating (to say it again with Glissant) moulds the mother-materiality to deconstruct biological destinies ascribed to genders, and to decipher their social and attributive character instead.

⁶¹ See Leake E., (2015). Cavarero, Braidotti, and the Feminist Foundations of the Posthuman, in *La camera blu. Rivista di studi di genere*, 2015, pp. 48-49.

⁶² Braidotti, R. (2013). *The Posthuman* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2013), p. 60.

Braidotti calls for dialectical actions at the edge of gender turns, within hybrid zones of sexualities, to create groups, constituting a class, endorsing movements and critical-communitarian groups. Here, human and technological bodies converge, and the feminine and maternal bodies stand as nodes of political, transformative monstrosity. The scholar Sophie Del Fa describes Braidotti's engaged strategies for an affirmative ethics with the following formulas :

La subjectivité posthumaniste n'est pas un humanisme, mais une pratique (praxis) et un projet politique [...] l'émergence de ce « nouveau » sujet reconfiguré [...] comme une nouvelle forme de vie et comme un devenir-autre (terme... deleuzien). En effet, le posthumanisme pose la question de ce que « nous » pouvons devenir ; sa réponse : nous sommes capables de devenir une multitude de personnes disparues (minoritaires), un devenir-monde-ensemble qui glorifie les différences (de sexe, de genre, de matière) et qui produit un monde alternatif et une Nouvelle Terre. En somme, les sujets posthumains, en tant qu'assemblage zootechnique sont politiques et établissent des alliances pour résister [...] [Posthuman subjectivity is not a humanism but a practice (praxis) and a political project [...] the emergence of this 'new' reconfigured subject [...] as a new form of life and as a becoming-other (in Deleuze's sense). Indeed, posthumanism poses the question of what 'we' can become; its answer: we are capable of becoming a multitude of minoritarian 'disappeared' persons, a becoming-world-together that celebrates differences (of sex, gender, and matter) and produces an alternative world and a New Earth. In sum, posthuman subjects, as zoe-technical assemblages, are political and forge alliances in order to resist.]⁶³

Braidotti foresees an ethical constellation we can explore by suppressing negative passions and fulfilling with increasing solutions for new lives and rebirthing. New relational, caring, vulnerable, and inclined subjects thus perform learning exchanges, legacies, and testimonies, narratologies that rewrite culture, reinvent it, and co-create minds and energies of resistance to dominant rules. Within the assemblages of feminist knowledges, Braidotti champions a pioneering spirit and a utopian logic that reveals what the anthropocentric Logos has hidden, de-vocalising the female thinking voices. On the contrary, alliances of "sirene" can come to the surface for unsettling powers, reaffirming the vitalism that disrupts the off-silence of feminine tales. They can regain their power, using the disturbing, the oddity, and the otherness by allowing each unique sonority to signify and map the world, its archipelagos, forces, and vulnerabilities.

Braidotti renders a sirenic vocality expressing polyhedral femininities with whom she has, over time, woven a "primate" companionship, a "becoming animal," intersecting the function of a founding mother-alterity. Thus, the scenario Braidotti dedicates to the generative mother appears as a wounded, shaped by struggle, melancholy of the human species, and at once the paradigm of rhizomic methods and mutants. Through the *affections* of the Deleuzian lineage, feminine lyrics and papers err within history to narrate their being-present, weave their threads, feed wolves, dismantle genders, and nourish utopian maternities. By recognising these fleshy and soundly textualities, Braidotti sings the *jouissance* of inhabiting the earth, both in desire and in trauma,

⁶³ Del Fa, S. (2020). « *Rosi Braidotti, Posthuman Knowledge, Polity Press, Cambridge & Medford, 2019* ». Sociétés, 2020/4 n° 150, 2020. p.151-156. (Translation is mine).

while aggregating in the *common* (to which I associate a remarkable study by Judith Revel)⁶⁴ a transformative power. Braidotti's figures reconstruct submerged *agora*, between urbanisms and Tribes, creolization and stellar journeys, navigating within a Babel universe with the words of care, of repair, of decolonial mindsets. To this effect, we once again rediscover the chiasms between Braidotti's projects and Kristeva's intentions, clearly inclined toward transformative ethics, perfectly inscribed within feminine urgencies.

Le féminin comme l'éthique demandent à être abordés avec précaution et délicatesse, tant les stigmates de la métaphysique et de la politique les alourdissent et les déforment [...] le féminin m'apparaît aujourd'hui, dans mon expérience clinique et dans la percée sociopolitique des femmes dans le monde, comme un constituant aussi radical qu'incernable de nos identités psychosexuelles [...] Elles, voire le féminin, évalue les capacités de se métamorphoser, qui sont inhérentes aux identités, actions et intentions [...] Entre puissance et limite, l'évaluation éthique prend comme modèle le corps, avec ses aptitudes aux affects, et leur puissance d'affecter d'autres corps ou bien celle d'être affecté par eux. [Both the feminine and ethics require to be approached with care and delicacy, insofar as the marks of metaphysics and politics weigh them down and distort them. Today, in my clinical experience and in the sociopolitical breakthrough of women worldwide, the feminine appears as a crucial component of our psychosexual identities, that is radical and elusive. Women—or indeed the feminine—assess the competencies for multiple that inhere in identities, actions, and intensions. [...] Between potency and limit, ethical evaluation takes *the body* as its model, with its capacities for affects and their power to affect other bodies—or, conversely, to be affected by them].⁶⁵

Attuned to Kristeva's passage, we trace Braidotti's tracks and meet our *Alter-a Mater* who incarnates a micropolitical ethics, gathering hybridity, queer bodies, nomadic thought, reproductive labour, and the subtle resistances against biopower, centring the mothering—zoé in the midst of decolonial strategies, and unsettling the vertical Western thought. From Braidotti to the *escrivência* of Conceição Evaristo, poetic practice is a truly *Artivism* "a form of writing born from daily life, memories, and life experiences of the authors themselves. It seeks to reveal and disturb the *unfair sleep* of oppressors." (Evaristo, 2015; rephrasing is mine).⁶⁶ Yet the feminine, as the body of "thousands tiny desires" (Braidotti, 2021), is a *pluriverse* and a *pluriversal system of thinking* from which such a *mother* aims to become a progenitor of the latest critical lineages. This mothering ancestor pursues the millenary abuses inflicted not only on women—mothers, daughters, female lives—but on entire cultural imaginaries, scarred by archaic fears and biopolitical practices of erasure, extermination, violence and discrimination against all minorities.

⁶⁴ See Revel, J. (2019). « III. Commun : essai de cartographie ». *L'alternative du commun*, Hermann, 2019. pp.61-73.

⁶⁵ Kristeva, J. (2025). *Le féminin transformatif. Entretien avec Julia Kristeva*, Propos recueillis par Patricia Boyer Latour in *Études. Revue de culture contemporaine*, Dossier Féminisme, mars 2025, pp. 45-46. (Translation is mine).

⁶⁶ See, Evaristo C. (2015) in Mezzanotti, G. ; Håndlykken-Luz ; Å ; Ben Achour, M. ; Shange, S. ; Aricapa, LMG ; Nduta Miring'u, C. 2025. "Why Do You Fear My Way So Much?" Artivism as a path toward pluriversality in Human Rights Education: our *escrivência*. *Journal of Human Rights Practice*, Oxford Academic.

10. The Post-feminism Argonauts: Braidotti's travelling & cosmogony

In the *Oxford Handbook of Feminist Theory* anthology, among other essays, Braidotti opens thus:

The political passions and innovative epistemologies of feminist movements, however, were never indexed solely on the interests of women, but rather contained explicit blueprints for the improvement of the human condition as a whole. In so doing, women's movements renewed the shared understanding of the basic unit of reference for our common humanity. This made them humanist at an almost visceral level, positing women's liberation as human liberation. That intrinsic connection to humanism, however, was never without critical distance.⁶⁷

The passage is selected from a compendium of feminist instances with the posthuman, which Braidotti outlines through an unsacred pilgrimage towards the virtual consciousnesses of the current era. At the dawn of hyperconnected communities, Braidotti addresses all those *netizens whose possible landing on the borders* would convert into an all-encompassing futurity. The whole of humanity is summoned to participate in Braidotti's ground-breaking project, remembering the blueprints inscribed within the twentieth-century histories and battles of women. Braidotti signals and lets herself be spoken through an urging *embodied positioning*. Even during the 2024 conference at Utrecht University, entitled *Posthumanism, Materialism, Affirmation: Feminist Perspectives*, Braidotti shows her desiring project to "become a good ancestor" by running between posthumanism and Indigenous philosophy, promoting speaking freshly about politics of location, a politics of immanence. She reminds the auditorium that she pursues "a radical form of materialism feminism" that offers "clear coordinates as do race and ethnicity studies and race theories" which are truly "relational and effective... in the midst of several networks and webs of connection." (Braidotti, 2024).⁶⁸

Braidotti indeed shares her passions and her intent to migrate into the role of the ancestor and confer upon feminine and feminist knowledge the empirical figure of a threshold, while still exploring body-materialist philosophies. Braidotti invites us to traverse them to find the affirmative coordinates for being implicated, inside and outside the academy, incorporating disciplines and *pluriversal politics*, finally making ourselves *corporeal practices of ethical relations* within many resonances and echoes. In fact, the voices of others resonate in Braidotti's argonaut thought; she sails as a mythical navigator searching uncertain seas of meaning and memory, probing living archives and layers of intellectual and sensory otherness, togetherness. Part of a crew and a network, the Argonaut-Braidotti is a body & mind in voyage, exposed to the net-worlds and compelled by the context of theories of race, ethnicity, and situated identity. The mythic image of the argonaut turns into a powerful device incarnating high-tech, postcolonial, diasporic, queer, mestizo subjects whose testimonials sustain Braidotti's claims in her quite recent essay *Posthuman Feminism* (2021). In turn, she focuses upon the meta-critical forms that organize its flows, and which present themselves as rhythms to follow for a co-interpretative creation. I quote directly from one of her speeches about her work:

⁶⁷ Braidotti, R. (2015). *Posthuman Feminist Theory*, p. 673.

⁶⁸ Comparing Braidotti R. in *Rosi Braidotti: Posthumanism, Materialism, Affirmation: Feminist Perspectives*, May 2024, Utrecht. Web Reference: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=etMbLbmEPKw>

A reader said to me that the way to read this book is by making a playlist through the music [...] and I think my favorite way of reading the book is, you know, (to) follow the music through it: from Beyonce to Gaga to Vanderson and Bowie. There's a soundtrack in the book that I disseminated across the text [...]⁶⁹

A playlist narrating the effort undertaken by Braidotti to build genealogies in somewhere other than *logos*, to connect to cycles of generations, to reveal the immense variety and tenacity of queer and trans-feminist mindness. Braidotti insists upon the terrestrial multiplicity of women's movements, the difference of globes and perspectives, the metamorphic innovation of the human within creatures and the feminine figurations. Concerned with an impoverishment, a banalization, even a boycott of the narratives that accompany minoritarian theories, Braidotti exhorts us to employ unsuspected allegories by engaging a poietic memory which can deploy a re-birthing and re-starting temporality. From the Sanskrit *kred*, we can invest in the reciprocal incarnations dwelling a mutual intimate touching, an anthropological need to believe in others, in humanity. (Kristeva, 2024; rephrasing is mine).⁷⁰

Here resurfaces Kristeva's blending of linguistics and psychoanalysis traces, which intersects Braidotti's postmodern issues again, yet is most driven by a dialogical force within the *women's transformative power*. Kristeva's essay *Prélude à une éthique du féminin* casts her enduring meditation on the feminine—especially the maternal faces—along intertextual borders that weave politics, therapy, and a *poetic care*. It is described as a tool for drawing out an extended and often silenced *collective trouble*. Kristeva speaks about her clinical experience in which she associates feminine identity with a lifelong, structurally transformative process, with many stages to traverse, a plurality of facets to confront. Embracing this complexity enables working through repression, violence, and harassment, yielding a multiform maturity for putting into place renewed ethical policy. In today's chaotic and menacing social and political context worldwide, Kristeva deposits in women's awareness the primary engine for an anthropological change. In its countless planes, the feminine thought-in-the-body is already able to manifest the fruitful skills issued from an *agentivité éthique*. It reclaims and redefines spaces of shared communitarian life, precisely for women. Alongside, the mother-desires reach the *concreteness of history* and join the multi-dimensionality of women, condensed within their own becoming. *Nous, les femmes* achieve themselves transmuting in-between reliance and erotism and overseeing sensitive geographies to narrate again, to craft relations. Indeed, Kristeva's women are actresses and performers of being-divergence as well as non-mutual recognition. Exercising re-founded dialectics of empathy and hospitality, they sediment their body-telling into micro and (possibly) macro alliances. Kristeva believes that women can make of their self-matter a board of experimentations and incubators of lives, *bio-cores* resisting those acts and discourses alienated from masculine biopower, as such a cycle-producer of bio-violence. Symmetrically, as we have seen, Braidotti's ideas are strongly fixed in a radical materialist imagery which is populated by the multi-species entities of our millennium,

⁶⁹ Braidotti, R. (2022). *Posthuman Feminism Book. Launch with Rosi Braidotti*. Polity Press, 16th March 2022. https://youtu.be/JTbMzf_e2t0?si=i6fa4Khsi3ABnI7N

⁷⁰ See Kristeva, J. (2024). *Pour une éthique du féminin*, Fayard, Paris, 2024.

showcasing the multi-layered and multi-located inputs that come from the rhizomatic politics of women. She writes in her *Posthuman Feminism*:

All feminist politics is body politics. But, to paraphrase Deleuze (1988), a body can be anything: animal, or vegetable; it can be a body of sounds, a linguistic corpus, a mind or an idea... a social body, a line of code, a DNA sequence, or a collectivity. They are all modulations on the same, vital, matter [...] materialist feminist is a precursor of the posthumanism turn, because it redefined the body as a materially embedded heterogenous assembly and not only as a social constructed entity [...] ⁷¹

Braidotti probes the vitality of matter, sitting in council with the feminine, envisioning not transcendence but a co-building disseminated by grafted bodies, entangled in the techno-zoé, from organisms' cells to species' genetic code. Braidotti dislocates the figures connected to a conventional notion of the body and showcases how "the embodied feminism self, far from being a unitary point of epistemological verification of lived species, turns into a crowd of human and non-human housemates" (Braidotti, 2022), ⁷² and extensively all the *Alter mothers*. Braidotti, then, ironises upon the systematised discrimination against social and gender categories, subverting the dominators' point of view while entrusting minorities of every non-nature, category, sexual difference, culture, with the task of:

[...] (To) Provide an accountable location for embodied subjects within the post-human convergence and its zoé/geo/techno-mediated potentialities. Women, LGBTQ+ people, anti-racist and other alternatives forces, with their historically 'leaky bodies'... are ideally paced to reassert the powers, prerogatives and pleasure and the postman flesh. ⁷³

Braidotti and Kristeva look like responding to one another, in unspoken agreement with Butler when she affirms that:

As much as we must insist on there being material conditions for public assembly and public speech, we have also to ask how it is that assembly and speech reconfigure the materiality of public space, and produce, or reproduce, the public character of that material environment [...] bodies in their plurality lay claim to the public, find and produce the public through seizing and reconfiguring the matter of material environments; at the same time, those material environments are part of the action, and they themselves act when they become the support for action. ⁷⁴

From the thinkers' trio-cluster standpoint, we regraft strategies and inspirations of contact among consciousnesses. In a skin-to-skin with a desiring, then, repairing models which *stay with the trouble*, we are called to envision and assemble, to perform and give spaces to a community of

⁷¹ Braidotti, R. (2022). *Posthuman Feminism*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2022, p. 140.

⁷² Ibid., p. 141.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Butler, J. (2015), *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, 2015, p. 71.

borders along which heteroclit forms of politics can emerge by questioning the streets to occupy for re-writing history and public rules, co-living.⁷⁵

11. Conclusions: Opening for the *nexus-infans*

To conclude—and to remain immersed in this playful society where embodied feminine performers enact the transformative ethics we've travelled—I echo the scholar Recchia-Luciani, who at the *Festival delle Donne e dei Saperi di Genere* (2012) celebrates feminism's leap among academia, citizenship, arts, and cultures. In her manifesto-essay, she also recalls the epistemic revolution that feminism accomplished over the last decades, sealed in the non-return toward a sublimation of corporeality and its functions, its abilities. A conquest that I consider a secure landing for a praxis embodying a fair nexus between feminine knowledges and productive bound-together bodies' dysphoria. Marching and finally setting themselves free from the phallogocentric foundation of Western thought, the polyphonic women enact a corporeal subjectivity which luminously transforms intellect's faculties through the matter-mother shaping. It nourishes corollaries of tools for developing political opportunities, lodging a decolonising and desirous time that invokes the *OpoPONax* imaginary, as sketched in Daring Wittig's novel. The lesbian writer marks and dreams, upon the horizon, "the coming of a tide of little girls that comes over you and overwhelms you (...), a tide of children". (Translation is mine).⁷⁶

It is precisely such future imaginaries, such teratological corporeality, that can entrust younger generations with planting a new self-recognition in the powerful seeds of critical *otherness*-devices. They can be sustained through opening a question upon the invisible status of the *infans* in our societies, research, and projects. By mirroring the marginal(ised) appendix of a category already appended to the dominant—*infants* and children, as maternal and minoritarian identities, have been reduced to mutism or phantasmagoria in philosophy and intellectual discourse for centuries. This is the reason animating the *Alter-a Mater* figure, which critically embodies and indicates a *query* we should co-construct in assembly and alliances, towards a journey for a hiatus that needs to be re-covered, re-signified. Perhaps step by step, retracing and privileging an *out-of-codes* relation, between generating and nascent bodies, where the im-maternal humanity sits besides all of *physis* and reawakens alterity and queering utopias: otherness *ab origine*, separating the "body-mine" to create the world anew. Because writing, poetry, and artistic landscapes have been the compass all over my paper, I will conclude by quoting Adrienne Rich, whose language has inspired a feminine consciousness, by breathing a feminine utterance for all (our, earthly, worldly) daughters, for the *Musas* of the future.

[...] whatever the individual mother's love and strength, the child in us, the small female who grew up in a male-controlled world, still feels, at moments, wildly unmothered. When

⁷⁵ See Julien, P. (2023). « *Se faire marginal de l'intérieur* ». *Intervalles et contretemps dans la production de l'événement*, in *Penser l'événement*, sous la direction de Hugo Dumoulin, Judith Revel, Jean-Baptiste Vuillerod, CNRS éditions, Paris, 2023, p. 62.

⁷⁶ See Duras, M. (1964). *Mon OpoPONax*. *Postface* in Monique Wittig, M. (1964). *L'OpoPONax*, Les Éditions de minuit, Paris, 1964-2018.

we can confront and unravel this paradox, this contradiction, face to the utmost in ourselves the groping passion of that little girl lost, we can begin to transmute it, and the blind anger and bitterness that have repetitiously erupted among women trying to build a movement together can be alchemized. Before sisterhood, there was the knowledge—transitory, fragmented, perhaps, but original and crucial—of mother-and-daughterhood.⁷⁷

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Research article

Sounding Motherhood: Celebrity Voices and Podcasting in Italy

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Abstract

This article examines the role of podcasting in reconfiguring the discursive and cultural meanings of motherhood in contemporary Italy amid demographic decline, state pronatalism, and conservative gender politics. Drawing on Adrienne Rich's distinction between motherhood as institution and mothering as lived practice, Andrea O'Reilly's matricentric feminism, Adriana Cavarero's philosophy of vocal relationality, and Sara Ahmed's theory of affective orientation, it introduces the concept of "sounding motherhood" to explain how podcasts make audible maternal experiences marginalized by dominant discourse. Through an analysis of the celebrity-hosted podcasts *Mama non Mama* (2021) and *Morgana, La madre* (2023–2024), the article identifies reactive and reconstructive vocal strategies that challenge normative constructions of motherhood. It argues that while podcasting expands the possibilities for maternal self-representation, the visibility and legitimacy of maternal voices remain conditioned by celebrity, platform infrastructures, and cultural power.

Keywords: podcasting, motherhood, mothering, sounding motherhood, matricentric feminism, vocal relationality, celebrity culture, Italy, Giorgia Meloni, maternal subjectivity.

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1. Introduction

This article examines podcasting's role in shifting the discursive, social, and cultural norms of motherhood in contemporary Italian society. Italy's reproductive landscape is marked by competing forces: state pronatalism addressing declining birth rates, entrenched cultural prescriptions of maternal roles and challenges to these institutional and cultural constraints. These tensions have intensified under Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's government (2022–present), whose synthesis of populist radical right, anti-gender, and Catholic discourses — what Prearo (2019) characterizes as “neo-Catholicism” and Indelicato and Lopes (2024) analyze as “reproductive racism” — treats reproduction as patriotic duty while systematically targeting LGBTQ+ families and those who reproduce outside heteronormative partnerships, making Italy an especially revealing case for examining how alternative maternal voices negotiate legitimacy within hostile discursive terrain.¹

Throughout this article, “motherhood” refers to the patriarchal institution that is male-defined and controlled — as Adrienne Rich (1976) first argued and Andrea O'Reilly (2016; 2021) later developed within matricentric feminism — while “mothering” refers to the lived practice of caregiving. O'Reilly (2016; 2021) positions mothering explicitly as a verb divested of biology — a practice rather than an identity — extending to anyone who takes up caregiving as a central part of their life, regardless of gender, biological relation, or family form. It is within this contested landscape, where the distinction between motherhood as institution and mothering as lived practice carries concrete political stakes, that the article's central question takes shape: what happens to maternal discourse when it is mediated through celebrity voices? Whose experiences become audible, under what conditions and whose remain structurally inaudible even within podcasting's alternative spaces?

To address this question, I introduce the concept of “sounding motherhood” — an analytical framework that names the institution in order to interrogate it, asking what becomes audible when podcasting's sonic affordances are turned against the very structures that have defined and controlled maternal experience. Drawing on Adriana Cavarero's philosophy of vocal relationality, Rich's distinction between motherhood as institution and mothering as lived experience, O'Reilly's matricentric feminism as the political framework that names the mother as a distinct subject of oppression and empowerment, and Sara Ahmed's theory of affective orientation, I argue that maternal podcasts mobilize voice's sonic materiality to make audible the “excess” of maternal experience that institutional discourse works to silence — the affects, embodiments, and relationalities that overflow institutional motherhood's prescribed boundaries: rage alongside tenderness, ambivalence coexisting with love, chosen bonds challenging biological primacy, refusal existing alongside acceptance. Where patriarchal structures have historically constrained

¹ Meloni's government has pursued this agenda through a series of concrete policy measures: restricting local authorities from registering the children of same-sex couples born abroad or through surrogacy (2023), pursuing criminal charges against Italian citizens who access surrogacy abroad under a law extending extraterritorial jurisdiction (2024), and framing demographic decline as a national emergency requiring state intervention into reproductive choices. These measures translate ideological positions on reproduction, family, and national identity into legal and administrative instruments that determine whose reproductive choices are recognized by the state and whose are criminalized or rendered invisible.

maternal expression through the suppression of voice's sonic materiality, relational capacity, and affective dimensions, podcasting creates what I term "acoustic safety": discursive spaces where maternal voices can move beyond institutional motherhood's prescribed roles.

Within this framework, this study identifies two distinct vocal strategies. A "reactive vocal strategy" describes podcasts that respond to institutional constraints by creating spaces where non-normative maternal positions can be articulated without shame. A "reconstructive vocal strategy" describes podcasts that fundamentally reimagine the categories through which maternal subjectivity is understood and vocalized, generating entirely new maternal ontologies. By analyzing two celebrity-mediated podcasts — *Mama non Mama* (2021)² and *Morgana, La madre* ("Morgana, The Mother," 2023–24) — this research interrogates how podcasting's sonic affordances interact with pre-existing structures of visibility and institutional credibility to shape which maternal narratives gain public legitimacy and under what conditions maternal voices can challenge Italy's demographic anxieties and institutional silencing. The analysis attends equally to what these podcasts make audible and to what they cannot: acoustic safety, this study argues, is never a neutral space but one shaped by celebrity, platform access, and economic structures that determine, before any voice is raised, whose maternal experience is legible as worthy of circulation.

2. Podcasting Motherhood

Within Italy's contested landscape, podcasting has emerged as a medium offering both opportunities and limitations for reconfiguring maternal discourse. By circumventing institutional gatekeeping that has historically restricted those who mother — and those who refuse, resist, or reimagine mothering — from accessing public discourse, podcasting provides technological accessibility and alternative modes of cultural production. Its sonic medium creates distinct possibilities for voice and narrative through intimate, portable, on-demand engagement (Berry, 2016), representing a new phase of aural culture that creates intimate sonic spaces for niche communities (Llinares, Fox, & Berry, 2018). This intimacy operates through affective mechanisms that shape listener-creator relationships. Drawing on Sara Ahmed's concept of affective economies, Copeland (2018) argues that the amplified voice in podcasting creates possibilities for deep affective experience, as emotions accumulate and circulate through voice-driven soundwork, generating "sticky" surfaces where affect bonds listener and creator. Recent scholarship demonstrates that such intimacy is actively constructed through specific techniques rather than inherent to the medium (Euritt, 2023).

While recent scholarship on Italian podcasting has examined postcolonial and other marginalized voices (Fabbri & Romeo, 2023; Finozzi, 2023; Ardizzoni, 2025), maternal voices remain underexplored. Existing research on Italian maternal digital discourse documents parallel

² The title *Mama non Mama* exploits the phonetic identity, in spoken Italian, of *mama* as noun ("mother") and *non mama* as negated verb ("does not love"), invoking simultaneously the non-normative maternal figure, the maternal ambivalence the podcast sets out to voice, and the childhood game of pulling petals from a flower — *mi ama, non mi ama* ("he/she/they love/s me, he/she/they love/s me not") — which here turns the question of love back onto the mother herself.

exclusion processes. D'Amelio's (2024) analysis shows how maternal performances become sites of "constant negotiation" between authentic experience and idealized representation within social media's commercial structures. Cersosimo and Landolfi's (2024) study reveals how institutional medical discourse systematically silences the embodied experiences of those who give birth until they find voice through digital storytelling networks. This study extends these conversations by bringing a sonic lens to the question of which maternal narratives gain public legitimacy and under what conditions.

Understanding which maternal narratives achieve legitimacy requires acknowledging how Italian maternal discourse is structured by intersecting systems of race, class, citizenship, and region. As Hawthorne (2022) notes, Italy's *jus sanguinis* citizenship law produces a racialized hierarchy in which national belonging is inherited through blood rather than place of birth, rendering reproductive identity a key site where racialized boundaries of citizenship are enforced: birth becomes a racialized event, the same biological act producing a citizen or a foreigner depending entirely on how the state classifies the person who gives birth. Class intersects with race as sharp regional economic disparities mean that maternal "choice" operates differentially across the country, with structural constraints determining whose reproductive decisions are legible as choices at all. Within podcasting's democratizing potential, then, a critical question persists: when we speak of "sounding motherhood," whose voices achieve audibility and whose remain structurally inaudible even within the medium's alternative spaces? The two podcasts examined here, neither of which speaks from the margins of Italy's reproductive landscape, illuminate one segment of this landscape while leaving a more fundamental question open: whether "sounding motherhood" can ever fully escape the structures of privilege that make certain voices audible in the first place, a question this analysis returns to in its conclusion.

The Italian podcast landscape features diverse maternal perspectives navigating between normative frameworks and feminist critique, ranging from mainstream celebrity parenting content (*Mamma Dilettante* – Mum in Training) to explicitly feminist productions (*L'Orchestra della Mamma* – The mom's hour), professional guidance programs (*Il Salotto delle Mamme* – The moms' living room), interrogations of obstetric violence (*Mamme a Nudo* – Moms Exposed), and humor-based shows (*SOS Mamma*, *Le Ansiose*, *Motherwood*) that reframe maternal isolation through ironic solidarity. Among these diverse productions, two celebrity podcasts distinguish themselves through their explicit theoretical engagement with motherhood as a contested institutional framework: *Mama non Mama* (2021) and *Morgana, La madre* (2023–2024). While both leverage celebrity voices to challenge institutional motherhood, they represent fundamentally different vocal strategies. *Mama non Mama*, produced by Corriere della Sera and hosted by journalists Barbara Stefanelli and Alessandra Coppola, exemplifies a reactive vocal strategy: creating acoustic spaces for non-normative maternal voices within existing discursive boundaries and mobilizing celebrity testimony to legitimize alternative maternal positions. In contrast, *Morgana*, created by the late novelist, playwright and radio personality Michela Murgia and cultural critic Chiara Tagliaferri, exemplifies a reconstructive vocal strategy: reimagining the categories through which maternal subjectivity is understood, experienced, and vocalized.

That both podcasts depend on celebrity voices to make these interventions audible is not incidental but structurally revealing. In the Italian context, where pronatalist rhetoric frames reproductive choices as patriotic duty, the maternal positions most threatening to institutional

discourse — ambivalence, childfree fulfillment, non-biological mothering — seem to require the greatest cultural authority to become speakable at all. This celebrity dependence exposes how legitimation operates in maternal discourse and, crucially, how race, class, and cultural capital determine whose maternal narratives circulate and whose are systematically excluded.

3. From Vocal Ontology to Affective Redistribution

Adriana Cavarero's philosophy of vocal relationality provides crucial insight into podcasting's capacity to articulate maternal subjectivity within Italy's contested cultural landscape. Though not developed with digital media in mind, Cavarero's framework illuminates how voice functions as a site of both constraint and possibility for maternal expression. In *For More Than One Voice* (2005), Cavarero establishes that voice reveals the uniqueness of each speaking being in ways that transcend linguistic content, a phenomenon she terms "vocal ontology," a form of being-with-others grounded in acoustic rather than visual or textual encounter. This vocal ontology encompasses dimensions frequently suppressed in patriarchal discourse: voice's corporeal sonority, its capacity to convoke encounters and generate relationality, and its affective dimensions that overflow rational semantic content

Cavarero's interpretation of the Ovidian account of Echo offers a powerful metaphor for understanding the silencing of those who mother under patriarchal structures. Echo's punishment — to speak only in reactive fragments rather than through autonomous expression — serves as a paradigm for the historical linguistic condition of all those whose voices institutional discourse reduces to mere reverberation: those who mother, those who refuse to mother, those who mother outside heteronormative structures, and those whose reproductive choices place them outside the boundaries of institutional recognition altogether. Echo provides sonic substance to semantic content that does not organize itself according to her intentions; she is sonic reverberation, a voice without Logos. Yet within these sonic reverberations lies transformative potential: while Echo cannot control semantic meaning, her sonic material, once released, can be recontextualized within altered acoustic contexts, generating meanings Echo did not intend but her voice nevertheless enables. Extending this insight to digital media, maternal podcasting can overcome Echo's constraint by achieving what she could not: the convergence of sonic materiality with self-determined semantic content within acoustic space. Where Echo remains divided from her own meaning-making, those who mother — regardless of gender, biological relation, or family form — can use podcasting to unite embodied vocal presence with intentional semantic organization, articulating meanings through voice rather than despite it. This convergence becomes particularly salient in Italy, where institutional maternal narratives retain considerable authority and where podcasting's conversational format enables all those navigating Italy's reproductive landscape to reclaim the vocal autonomy Echo was denied.

This vocal autonomy, however, operates within structures that Rich's and O'Reilly's frameworks help identify. Rich's (1976) foundational distinction between motherhood as a patriarchal institution and mothering as a lived practice establishes the conceptual ground on which subsequent maternal feminist theory has been built. O'Reilly's matricentric feminism (2016; 2nd ed. 2021) sharpens this distinction on two levels: first, by arguing that the category of mother is analytically distinct from the category of woman, and that mothers are oppressed under patriarchy

both as women and as mothers along axes that are irreducible to one another; and second, by positioning mothering explicitly as a verb divested of biology — a practice rather than an identity — extending to anyone who takes up caregiving as a central part of their life, regardless of gender, biological relation, or family form. What matricentric feminism thereby produces is a distinct political subject — the mother as a site of both structural constraint and potential agency — whose vocal complexity institutional motherhood systematically works to suppress. It is precisely this subject's audibility that podcasting, at its most radical, can restore.

Sara Ahmed's work on emotional economies (2004) illuminates the affective dimensions through which these structures operate and provides the basis for what this analysis terms "affective redistribution." Ahmed demonstrates how emotions function not as individual psychological states but as cultural practices that circulate between bodies and signs, attaching some feelings to certain objects while detaching others. In the context of motherhood, institutional frameworks concentrate positive affects around normative maternal figures while assigning negative affects to those who deviate from prescribed scripts. Affective redistribution describes how maternal podcasting intervenes in this economy: by recirculating emotional attachments within maternal discourse, these platforms can reframe maternal panic as justified response to systemic failures, allowing shame to migrate from those who mother to the institutions that obscure its causes, and allowing validation to shift from reproductive paths to autonomous choices.

These theoretical frameworks operate synergistically, each addressing a distinct dimension of maternal vocal constraint. Cavarero identifies *what* is suppressed, voice's sonic materiality, relational capacity, and affective dimensions. Rich and O'Reilly reveals *why* this suppression serves institutional motherhood, by constraining maternal expression to sustain patriarchal interests. Ahmed explains *how* suppression operates, through emotional economies that attach specific affects to normative figures while stigmatizing deviation. The question then becomes: can maternal podcasting overcome Echo's constraint, generating autonomous speech where sonic materiality and semantic meaning converge, or must it remain reactive? The analysis that follows examines *Mama non Mama* and *Morgana, La madre* as representing fundamentally different answers: one that expands the boundaries of maternal speech within existing frameworks, and one that attempts to generate an entirely new maternal ontology.

4. *Mama non Mama*: Reactive Vocal Strategy

Mama non Mama exemplifies reactive vocal strategy as it navigates the intersection of institutional media power and resistant maternal vocalization. As a podcast employing celebrity guests to engage foundational questions about what motherhood is, it illuminates how maternal discourse achieves public audibility through celebrity cultural authority, revealing both the possibilities and constraints of this legitimation structure. The seven-episode limited series explicitly frames itself as responding to Italy's demographic crisis by reactivating dialogue about motherhood, and its episodes systematically demonstrate how reactive strategy articulates "mothering as lived experience" — the complex, contradictory realities that exceed institutional motherhood's idealized narratives — through a consistent mechanism this analysis terms "affective redistribution": the recirculation of emotional attachments within maternal discourse, detaching

shame from non-normative figures and reattaching validation to experiences institutional motherhood renders illegitimate.

Actress, singer, and television host Lodovica Comello's (episode 1) testimony about panic attacks during breastfeeding and postpartum disorientation names experiences that institutional discourse codes as shameful individual failure. By pairing her testimony with psychoanalyst Silvia Vegetti Finzi's clinical validation, the episode performs affective redistribution: shame detaches from the one experiencing panic and reattaches to institutional structures that systematically conceal postpartum psychological crisis. This reframing allows listeners to recognize their confusion as rational response to structural silence rather than personal inadequacy, a crucial intervention that validates maternal ambivalence as legitimate experience. Olympic fencer Elisa Di Francisca's episode (episode 2) similarly articulates mothering as lived experience by foregrounding athletic embodiment as maternal practice. Her insistence that Olympic competition and mothering coexist without conflict challenges institutional motherhood's coding of maternal bodies as gentle, passive, or diminished by childbearing. What Cavarero identifies as voice's corporeal sonority — the vocal emission as material resonance of the body — manifests here as Di Francisca refuses suppression of maternal strength, ambition, and competitive drive.

Singer Carmen Consoli's episode (episode 3) and the pairing of bank CEO Elena Goitini with television host Maria De Filippi (episode 4) expose how Italian law silences maternal voices through legal exclusion and linguistic hierarchies. Italy's Law 40/2004 restricts assisted reproduction to heterosexual couples, rendering single women's maternal desires unspeakable within national territory. Consoli's forced expatriation to London to access reproductive technologies becomes an acoustic act, relocating to find space where her maternal voice can be legally articulated. Yet Italian authorities initially refused to recognize her sole legal parentage, requiring her to adopt her own biological child, revealing the limits of individual vocal resistance against state-enforced silencing. The Goitini/De Filippi episode reveals linguistic silencing: the qualifier "adoptive" marks certain maternal voices as derivative to biological motherhood. When Goitini describes connecting with her son Marco before legal adoption was finalized, taking biscuits with holes, placing them on her finger, seeing him look up with a smile, she articulates mothering as lived experience. De Filippi's insistence that the qualifier "adoptive" is a useless specification refuses the linguistic hierarchy, rendering her maternal voice as repetition of "authentic" biological maternity. Both episodes reveal reactive strategies' limitations, challenging how those parenting alone or through adoption are heard while maintaining the centrality of legally recognized parenthood and state recognition.

Film director Susanna Nicchiarelli and virologist Ilaria Capua's episodes (episodes 5 and 6) expand the temporal and categorical dimensions of maternal discourse while remaining within recognizable frameworks. Nicchiarelli equates creative and procreative generativity, directly challenging what Rich identifies as institutional motherhood's reduction of female generativity to biological reproduction. When she describes navigating between her children and her film projects, she rejects the conventional framing that positions them as competing demands requiring sacrifice, instead articulating a practice of mothering in which creating and procreating flow into one another, each enriching rather than diminishing the other. Capua articulates maternal subjectivity as evolving across developmental stages, particularly the transition to adolescence. She rejects institutional motherhood's static definition of maternal identity, insisting

that mothering transforms continuously in relation to the child's changing needs and autonomy. Her description of mothering as a journey that concludes at the threshold of the child's autonomy challenges institutional motherhood's assumption of permanent duty, positioning the maternal voice as preparing for its own eventual silence through the child's achievement of an independent voice.

The series concludes with journalist Lilli Gruber's episode (episode 7), which represents the most expansive inclusion of reactive strategy. Gruber's articulation of complete fulfillment without biological children challenges institutional silencing at its foundation: she calls for an understanding of expanded notions of motherhood that encompass care, mentorship, and relationality beyond reproduction. By voicing satisfaction without biological children, she reclaims the category of complete womanhood from patriarchal scripts that equate femininity with reproduction. Her narrative — describing professional achievement, intellectual fulfillment, relational richness — refuses to position childlessness as a lack or loss requiring compensation, instead articulating it as chosen abundance. For childfree listeners navigating pronatalist pressure, particularly in contemporary Italy where declining birth rates are framed as women's failure of patriotic duty, Gruber's testimony can provide crucial validation.

Mama non Mama successfully performs affective redistribution, detaching shame from non-normative figures — the confused, the athletic, the single, the adoptive, the creative, the childfree — and reattaching validation to experiences institutional motherhood renders illegitimate. Yet the structure through which this redistribution operates is itself worth analyzing. Each episode pairs celebrity testimony with expert validation: psychoanalyst Silvia Vegetti Finzi framing Comello's panic, academic Alessandra Chiricosta legitimizing Di Francisca's athletic embodiment, legal expert Carlo Rimini providing juridical analysis for Consoli's critique, psychotherapist Stefania Andreoli contextualizing Capua's maternal evolution. This structure replicates, at the level of discourse, Echo's fundamental condition: the non-normative maternal voice gains meaning not through autonomous expression but only once it has been recontextualized within institutional acoustic space — the psychoanalyst, the legal expert, the academic providing the semantic framework within which the celebrity's sonic material can signify. This pairing reveals a gatekeeping logic embedded within the podcast's emancipatory project: non-normative maternal experience achieves legitimacy not on its own terms but only once it has been translated into the language of institutional authority. The panic of the confused requires a psychoanalyst to become a structural critique rather than a personal failing; the reproductive desire of the single requires a legal expert to become a rights violation rather than an individual grievance. Affective redistribution occurs, but it occurs within a framework that simultaneously confirms institutional discourse as the measure of what counts as legitimate maternal experience — a confirmation that reactive strategy, by definition, cannot escape. Drawing on O'Reilly's matricentric framework, this is precisely how the oppression of those who mother reproduces itself: by requiring them to seek legitimacy from institutions organized around interests other than their own, the podcast inadvertently reinstates the very structure matricentric feminism identifies as foundational to maternal constraint — the displacement of the knowledge, experience, and authority of those who mother by frameworks that were never built with their position in mind.

This gatekeeping logic extends beyond the expert-celebrity structure into the demographic composition of the podcast itself, revealing how the same institutional authority that validates

non-normative experience also determines who gets to have experience worth validating. The podcast's eight guests share significant demographic similarities: all are white and all occupy middle- to upper-class professional positions. Their class positions enable the "choices" they discuss: Consoli could afford assisted reproduction abroad; Goitini navigated adoption bureaucracy with legal resources; Nicchiarelli employs domestic help enabling simultaneous creative and caregiving work. The voices absent from the podcast — those navigating mothering under conditions of migration, economic precarity, or undocumented status — are absent not incidentally but structurally: these are precisely the experiences that celebrity testimony and expert legitimation cannot translate into acceptable public discourse, because they exceed the parameters of what institutional authority is willing to recognize as variation within the norm. The podcast's exclusive availability through *Corriere della Sera* subscriptions and Audible further structures access along class lines, ensuring "acoustic safety" remains accessible primarily to those with the economic and cultural capital to afford it. Reactive strategy's value lies precisely in what it can do within these constraints: it offers "affective redistribution" to those navigating the contradictions of institutional motherhood without demanding that they imagine entirely new ontologies. This work carries real force in contemporary Italy, where voicing maternal ambivalence constitutes resistance to a state that frames reproductive duty as patriotic obligation. But the limits of that force are the limits of the institutional framework within which it operates: reactive strategy can redistribute affects within existing categories, but it cannot reconstruct the categories themselves, nor challenge the intersecting systems of race, class, citizenship, and region that determine, before any voice is raised, whose experience is legible as worthy of redistribution. It is precisely this reconstruction of categories that *Morgana* undertakes.

5. *Morgana*: Reconstructive Vocal Strategy

Michela Murgia and Chiara Tagliaferri's ³ *Morgana* demonstrates an alternative approach through what this analysis terms reconstructive vocal strategy. Rather than creating "acoustic spaces" for non-normative voices within existing discursive boundaries, *Morgana* pursues a more radical project: transforming the acoustic space itself into a site for reimagining the categories through which maternal subjectivity is understood, experienced, and vocalized. While reactive strategy articulates alternative maternal positions within recognizable frameworks, reconstructive strategy generates maternal ontologies that exist entirely outside patriarchal reference. This distinction represents different epistemological commitments about what maternal voice can accomplish and under what conditions maternal counter-discourse can achieve genuine autonomy.

³ Tagliaferri is co-author with Michela Murgia of the three *Morgana* volumes published by Mondadori (2019, 2021, 2024). Her *Arkansas. Storia di mia figlia* (Mondadori, 2025) recounts her seven-year journey to become a parent through gestational surrogacy in the United States, a practice prohibited in Italy and, since October 2024, criminalized as a "universal offense" under the Meloni government. Tagliaferri's daughter Lula was born in Arkansas in February 2024, eight months before gestational surrogacy was declared a universal crime in Italy. That Tagliaferri could pursue this path at all — navigating fertility clinics, an American agency, and years of international travel — underscores the class and economic privilege structuring reproductive choice in Italy.

Originating as a podcast on Storielibere.fm in 2019, the *Morgana* project evolved into a multi-volume editorial series published by Mondadori: *Morgana. Storie di ragazze che tua madre non approverebbe* (2019), *Morgana. L'uomo ricco sono io* (2021), and *Morgana. Il corpo della madre* (2024). The podcast comprises 54 episodes organized across four thematic seasons that progressively build toward a radical reconceptualization of maternal discourse. Episodes 1–24, “Storie di ragazze che tua madre non approverebbe,” focus on women living outside canonical norms, described as “controcorrente, strane, pericolose, esagerate, stronze” (countercurrent, strange, dangerous, excessive, bitches). Episodes 25–34, “L'uomo ricco sono io,” profile women who achieved economic autonomy without marrying wealthy men. Episodes 35–44, “Il corpo,” explore women who transformed their bodies into primary means of self-expression. The project culminates in episodes 45–54, “La madre,” bringing maternal embodiment into confrontation with what Rich identifies as the institution of motherhood, excavating experiences of mothering that exist not merely beyond normative scripts but against the very grammar through which maternal discourse operates. As the series description states: “Un viaggio in cui le autrici scoperciano un mondo liberante mostrando alternative, tutte diverse, nel quale nessuna è una madre migliore o peggiore delle altre” (a journey in which the authors uncover a liberating world showing alternatives, all different, in which no one is a better or worse mother than the others).

The material conditions of the podcast’s production embody this principle of collective maternal voice. Murgia’s voice appears only in the first two episodes of *La madre*, concluding with Maria di Nazareth. Her absence signals the progression of the illness that would end her life in August 2023, yet Tagliaferri’s continuation of the project — completing all ten episodes of the maternal season — instantiates the very principle *Morgana* advances: that maternal legacy circulates through collective rather than individual enunciation, through relational transmission rather than proprietary voice. In Cavarero’s terms, this is the moment where maternal voice escapes Echo’s constraint entirely: where voice continues to generate meaning beyond the originating body, speaking autonomously rather than merely reverberating institutional categories.

The first episode of “La madre,” *Le madri della casa*, on ballroom House Mothers from New York’s LGBTQ+ community demonstrates *Morgana’s* reconstructive approach most explicitly. These figures, predominantly trans women and gay men who create chosen families within ballroom culture, mentoring younger queer people often facing rejection from biological families, exist entirely outside categories structuring both institutional motherhood and reactive strategy expanded but still recognizable maternal positions. Where reactive strategy challenges how those who adopt are heard within institutional maternal discourse, House Mothers operate in a different register entirely. Murgia and Tagliaferri enact an alternative grammar of care grounded in radical relationality. House Mothers’ maternal labor includes housing young people facing homelessness, teaching performance skills and ballroom culture, providing emotional support and identity affirmation, and creating community structures where queer people can survive and flourish. This mothering is genuine caregiving sustaining life, transmitting culture, and generating new forms of caring relation. By positioning House Mothers as fundamentally maternal without qualification or equivalence to biological motherhood, the episode creates maternal ontologies outside existing binaries, a reconstructive strategy of generating new categories rather than expanding old ones.

The episode on Maria di Nazareth (episode 46) demonstrates *Morgana's* reconstructive methodology by refusing to treat Mary as the idealized maternal figure institutional Christianity constructs. Instead of the virgin mother whose impossible purity sets unattainable standards, Murgia and Tagliaferri read Mary as a young woman navigating unexpected pregnancy under patriarchal constraint, recovering her as a figure who articulates mothering as lived experience in Rich's and O'Reilly's sense: confusion, fear, material vulnerability, and the necessity of creating support networks to survive reproductive crisis. Where reactive strategy contests linguistic modifiers while remaining within recognizable mothering frameworks, *Morgana* reconstructs the very category of sacred motherhood, rendering Mary audible not as institutional icon but as a young woman whose experience emerges through the material conditions of her mothering.⁴

Episodes profiling Sylvia Plath (episode 50), the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo (episode 54), and photographer Eve Arnold (episode 51) refuse the shame/pride binary structuring conventional maternal discourse. Where reactive strategy performs affective redistribution, detaching shame from non-normative figures and reattaching validation to their experiences, *Morgana* refuses this affective economy entirely. The podcast presents Plath's suicide as evidence of the impossibility of sustaining creative work, mothering, and survival simultaneously under conditions of abandonment and psychological collapse. The Mothers' activism emerges as maternal rage transforming motherhood into a political weapon against fascism. Arnold's profile positions her obsession with births as epistemological foundation rather than pathology. By positioning these figures within the same maternal genealogy, the podcast enacts Cavarero's vocal ontology: maternal voice speaking its own unique meanings rather than echoing institutional categories. Plath's writing under impossible conditions, the Mothers' transformation of public space through embodied protest, Arnold's documentary practice making maternal loss the lens through which to witness the world — each represents a distinct mode of maternal voice refusing management, consolation, or redemption, demonstrating that maternal voice must encompass the full spectrum of human response to impossible situations.

The episode on Louisa May Alcott (episode 52) extends this reconstruction historically, refusing the equivalence between creative and procreative generativity that reactive strategy maintains. Alcott, who never married or bore children, is presented as fundamentally maternal through her writing, particularly *Little Women*, which has mothered generations of readers, and through her intensive caregiving relationships with her sisters and parents. Rather than positioning Alcott as "like a mother" or possessing "maternal qualities" — formulations that redistribute maternal validation while preserving biological reproduction as definitional — Tagliaferri and Murgia frame Alcott simply as maternal, requiring no qualifier, no equivalence, no affective redistribution to legitimate her maternal subjectivity within existing discourse.

Episode 48, dedicated to Michela Murgia and aired after her death, most radically embodies the podcast's commitment to chosen mothering over blood relations and its refusal of affective

⁴ Murgia's engagement with the figure of the Virgin Mary in the podcast episode is not incidental but draws on a sustained prior analysis. In *Ave Mary: E la chiesa inventò la donna* (Ave Mary: and the church invented woman) (2011), Murgia examines how the Church remains a decisive factor in constructing the image of women in Italy, arguing that Catholic formation continues to legitimate the patriarchal hierarchy even in contexts apparently distant from religious influence.

redistribution's logic. The episode profiles Murgia's deliberate construction of what she defined as her queer family, chosen relationships grounded in commitment and care rather than biological connection. By including Murgia within the maternal genealogy of "La madre," Tagliaferri performs an act of both memorial and theoretical completion: positioning Murgia's chosen family as fundamentally maternal without qualification, without redistributing maternal affects from biological to chosen families as equivalent alternatives. Rather, the episode generates an autonomous maternal ontology where chosen bonds speak their own meanings entirely outside the biological/non-biological binary. This enacts what Rich and O'Reilly describe as mothering as practice (relational, transferable) rather than motherhood as institution (biological, fixed), articulating maternal voice that exists beyond the very grammar through which institutional motherhood operates.

Episodes on Carrie Fisher (episode 53) and Janet Lee Bouvier (episode 47) demonstrate how *Morgana* refuses the redemptive narratives structuring both institutional maternal discourse and the affective redistribution reactive interventions perform. Fisher's struggles with addiction, her complicated relationship with her daughter, her fierce protection of her mother Debbie Reynolds alongside her public criticism of Hollywood's demands on women — none resolve into coherent narrative of maternal success or failure, refusing the shame-to-pride transformation that affective redistribution enables. Murgia and Tagliaferri present Fisher as maternal in her fierce mentorship of younger women in Hollywood and her refusal to perform sanitized maternal devotion, while allowing this maternal presence to coexist unresolved with addiction, instability, and the impossibility of conventional maternal performance, demonstrating that maternal voice can encompass contradiction without requiring affective management to render that contradiction legible or acceptable. Murgia and Tagliaferri position Bouvier neither as a villain nor a victim, presenting her raising of Jackie Kennedy as a form of maternal labor that taught her daughter to navigate patriarchy without redemptive framing or affective resolution, channeling her own ambitions through her daughter and maintaining emotional distance and strategic calculation. These episodes insist that maternal subjectivity can encompass irresolvable contradictions and survival strategies aligning with neither institutional idealization nor progressive feminist validation, generating maternal discourse that speaks outside the shame/pride binary entirely.

Perhaps the most controversial inclusion, the episode on Ulrike Meinhof (episode 49) demonstrates *Morgana's* commitment to reconstructing maternal categories even when that reconstruction proves deeply uncomfortable, pushing beyond where affective redistribution can reach. Meinhof abandoned her twin daughters to pursue armed revolutionary struggle with the Red Army Faction, a choice institutional maternal discourse can only code as monstrous rejection of maternal duty and reactive strategy cannot recuperate through affective redistribution, as there exists no framework within feminist discourse for redistributing validation to those who abandon existing children. Where reactive strategy's most radical inclusion (Gruber's childfree position) articulates satisfaction without biological children, Meinhof presents a fundamentally different challenge: not refusal of mothering but abandonment of existing children for revolutionary commitment, a position that shatters both patriarchal frameworks (maternal duty as sacred) and some feminist frameworks (maternal choice as empowerment). This inclusion pushes reconstructive strategy to its limits, asking whether maternal voice can encompass choices that

violate both institutional and progressive frameworks, generating maternal discourse that exists entirely outside the affective economies through which motherhood typically becomes speakable.

Morgana's reconstructive achievements operate within material and epistemological constraints that structure whose maternal voices can be recuperated from historical silence.⁵ The near-total absence of African, Asian, Indigenous, or non-white European maternal figures, with Black and Latinx ballroom House Mothers (episode 45) representing the only significant inclusion of non-white maternal experiences, reveals that even autonomous maternal discourse operates within racialized epistemological boundaries. The podcast reveals how alternative genealogies, however expansive in ambition, remain epistemologically anchored in white European and American frameworks. This is a different register of Echo's constraint: reconstructive genealogies can only reverberate within already-audible traditions, leaving inaudible the very voices whose historical position made the method necessary.

Similarly, while *Morgana* includes some working-class figures, most profiled achieved economic security and cultural visibility through cultural production (writing, art, activism) granting access to historical memory. The podcast excludes caregiving experiences of precarious and marginalized workers whose mothering occurs outside cultural production. Their absence is not a gap to be filled but a structural condition: biographical recovery depends on prior cultural visibility, and the caregiving most distant from institutional motherhood's norms remains unrecoverable through reconstructive methods that depend on existing historical narratives.

Morgana's evolution from independent podcast to commercial publication illustrates another material bind. The project moved from Storielibere.fm, funded by corporate sponsors⁶ including Buddybank, Lavazza, Valentino, and VeraLab, to Mondadori's mainstream three-volume series (2019, 2021, 2024) tracing a trajectory in which autonomous voices generating new meanings require institutional translation to achieve sustained cultural impact, risking domestication through the very circulation that enables broader reach. While institutional integration expanded *Morgana's* audience beyond niche communities, it simultaneously subjected the project to market logics that potentially constrain which maternal voices and which reconstructive possibilities prove commercially viable. These constraints are not failures but conditions of possibility for reconstructive strategy's particular intervention: *Morgana* creates acoustic safety for maternal ontologies that refuse contemporary celebrity culture's legitimation structures and affective redistribution logic, a vital practice in contemporary Italy where institutional motherhood is mobilized for nationalist demographic purposes. Yet even this acoustic safety cannot escape the intersecting systems of race, class, and cultural capital determining whose maternal experiences can be recuperated from historical silence and whose voices remain beyond reach.

⁵ As O'Reilly and Green argue in their introduction to *The Mother Wave* (2024), for Black and Indigenous mothers the words "mother" and "mothering" carry a radical political intent that cannot be dissolved into the language of parenting, and the racialized mother's situation is not an instance to be added to a general theory of motherhood but a site from which the field learns something about maternal practice as such.

⁶ Buddybank sponsored the seasons "L'uomo ricco sono io" and "Il corpo"; Lavazza, Valentino, and VeraLab sponsored "La madre."

6. Conclusion

Mama non Mama and *Morgana* reveal a fundamental tension: their capacity to circulate maternal experiences that exceed patriarchal definitions depends on the very structures of celebrity and institutional authority they seek to contest. "Sounding motherhood" as an analytical framework illuminates how these podcasts construct "acoustic safety" for maternal voices beyond prescribed roles — yet these spaces remain bounded by material conditions that determine whose experiences achieve circulation. The distinction between reactive and reconstructive vocal strategies discloses fundamentally different relationships to Echo's constraint, and to the affective economies Ahmed identifies as structuring whose experiences achieve legitimacy. Reactive strategy — like Echo, repeating sound within altered acoustic contexts — performs affective redistribution within existing frameworks: detaching shame from non-normative maternal figures and reattaching validation to experiences institutional motherhood renders illegitimate, without reconstructing the affective economy itself. Yet this redistribution operates within strict limits: the affects it recirculates remain bounded by the demographic and economic conditions that determine who can access the acoustic space in which redistribution occurs. *Mama non Mama* redistributes affect among those who already possess the cultural capital for their experiences to be recognized as worthy of redistribution. Reconstructive strategy, by contrast, refuses this logic entirely, generating autonomous maternal ontologies outside patriarchal reference and refusing inherited affective economies rather than working within them. Yet even *Morgana* cannot escape the racialized and class-based epistemologies that determine whose affects are recoverable from historical silence in the first place.

Ultimately, this analysis suggests that while celebrity mediation can challenge normative maternal scripts, it simultaneously reproduces exclusions based on race, class, and cultural capital. The question is not whether podcasting enables maternal narratives to reclaim agency over reproductive choices. It is, rather, whose maternal voices "sounding motherhood" can make audible — and under what conditions. Like Echo, who could provide sonic substance but not autonomous meaning, these podcasts demonstrate that maternal voice continues to operate within structures that constrain the convergence of sonic materiality and semantic intention. "Sounding motherhood" thus emerges not as resolution but as ongoing negotiation: one that compels feminist media practices to confront, repeatedly and without comfort, the material conditions that determine which voices can ultimately be heard.

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Research article

Stealing Callisto: Reclaiming Maternal Mythologies in the Work of Grossi Maglioni

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Abstract

This article examines Grossi Maglioni's *Beast Mother* project (2015–ongoing) as a feminist reappropriation of classical maternal mythology. Through a comparative reading of *Beast Mother* and Titian's *Diana and Callisto* (1556–59), based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, it argues that the Italian artist duo reclaims Callisto's punitive transformation into a bear as a site of maternal agency, collective strength and resistance. Drawing on feminist theories of motherhood, monstrosity and the maternal symbolic, the article "steals" Callisto from patriarchal myth in order to expose the structures that have historically cast pregnant and maternal bodies as shameful, vulnerable or monstrous. It focuses on three interconnected strands of Grossi Maglioni's practice: *Gesti di relazione*, which re-enacts gestures of judgement and submission embedded in Western visual culture; *Beast Mother*, which transforms maternal monstrosity into a feral and generative counter-mythology; and *Occupazioni*, which brings care labour into public space as artistic and political action. By placing Renaissance mythological painting in dialogue with contemporary feminist art, the article reconceptualizes motherhood not as private burden or biological destiny, but as a collective, creative and transformative practice.

Keywords: Callisto; maternal mythology; feminist art; motherhood; monstrosity; care labour; contemporary Italian art; Ovid; Titian.

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1. Introduction

‘La mitologia che sottende il patriarcato non è cambiata.’
(The mythological framework underlying patriarchy has remained unchanged.)¹
(Luce Irigaray, 2007, p. 22)

This article examines the reappropriation of classical maternal iconography in the work of the Italian artist duo Grossi Maglioni (Francesca Grossi and Vera Maglioni, 1982, Rome), whose interdisciplinary practice spans performance, installation, and participatory art, with particular attention to their multi-year project *Beast Mother* (2015–ongoing).² Through a comparative reading of *Beast Mother* and Titian’s *Diana and Callisto* (1556–59), based on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, I argue that Grossi Maglioni subvert dominant patriarchal narratives of motherhood by reclaiming the figure of the monstrous mother as a site of agency, collective strength and feminist resistance.

At the centre of both Ovid’s myth and Titian’s rendering lies a paradox fundamental to feminist theorisations of motherhood: the maternal body as simultaneously powerful and powerless. On one hand, motherhood is constructed as a source of social recognition and authority; on the other, it is historically framed as a condition of vulnerability, marginalisation and monstrosity. The myth of Callisto makes visible this ambivalence: her maternal transformation becomes the instrument of her exclusion, but also the reason of her immortality. Grossi Maglioni respond to this power/powerlessness nexus not by resolving it, but by inhabiting it, transforming the figure of the *Beast Mother* into a site of ethical complexity, creative possibility and emancipation.

This reading is grounded in feminist theories that have re-evaluated the maternal beyond its traditional containment within patriarchal structures. While earlier critiques focused on the institution of motherhood as a mechanism of women’s subjugation, more recent thinkers have shifted attention to its potential for self-discovery beyond the male symbolic order.³

Drawing on this maternal turn, I approach Grossi Maglioni’s work as a feminist counter-mythology in which maternal monstrosity becomes a revelatory form. Following Jude Ellison Sady Doyle’s account of the monstrous feminine (2021), we understand monstrosity not as an inherent female quality, but as a patriarchal designation imposed on women who exceed or resist normative forms of femininity. In this sense, the monstrous – much like the feral explored in Andrea O’Reilly and Casey O’Reilly-Conlin’s collection of essays on unruly women (2025) – functions as a critical lens through which the constraints of gendered identity become visible. The fear such monstrous or feral figures provoke exposes the boundaries of acceptable womanhood and reveals the cultural mechanisms through which female bodies and desires are regulated. Maternal monstrosity, through its resistance to domestication and its drift into a feral state that blurs the boundaries between animal and human, plant and mineral, thus emerges as a mode of existence that resists erasure, challenges the authority of the patriarchal gaze, and reclaims visibility.

Following Adriana Cavarero’s methodology, I will rely on contemporary feminist scholarship to “steal” the figure of Callisto from its original context of origin, and use the void created by the theft to reveal the patriarchal structure that keeps mothers captive (Cavarero 1990). In so doing, this article joins in recent

¹ Translation by the author.

² Grossi Maglioni (2023) has recently published the most significant outcomes of the *Beast Mother*. The book offers the artists’ analysis of their own artistic journey and three scholarly contributions by external scholars and art critiques.

³ Veronica Frigeni (2025) published a concise introduction to the history of feminism approaches to motherhood in Anglo-American academic thought, offering to the Italian public an overview of recent developments in scholarship that underline the revolutionary power of mothering as social change.

investigations on mothering in Ovidian works. Notably, Simona Martorana's recent publication (2024) has shown how motherhood, as told through Ovid's voice in the *Heroides*, can become an opportunity for the Ovidian heroines to formulate a subversive discourse and generate a sense of self that lies beyond male symbolic order.

Beast Mother unfolds through a series of exhibitions, installations and participatory workshops across Europe. This article will focus on three ongoing lines of investigation in Grossi Maglioni's work, *Gesti di relazione* (Relationship Gestures), *Beast Mother* and *Occupazioni* (Occupations), and is structured in four sections. The first section examines Titian's *Diana and Callisto* in relation to Ovid's myth, focusing on the visual construction of Callisto's pregnancy, exposure and expulsion, and on the patriarchal moral frameworks that shaped Renaissance readings of her story. The second section turns to *Gesti di relazione* (Relationship Gestures), showing how Grossi Maglioni re-enact and reframe gestures of judgment, submission and care in order to reveal the persistence of gendered power relations within Western visual culture. The third section focuses on *Beast Mother*, reading the figure of the monstrous mother as a feminist counter-mythology that transforms Callisto's punitive metamorphosis into a collective, feral and generative mode of becoming. The final section analyses *Occupazioni* (Occupations), where the maternal body and the labour of care are brought into public space, challenging the isolation of motherhood and reclaiming mothering as an artistic, political and communal practice.

2. Titian's Diana and Callisto and the Ovidian myth

In 1554, Titian promised King Philip II of Spain two paintings featuring female nudes (Panofsky, 1969, pp. 154–63). Between 1556 and 1559, he completed *Diana and Callisto* and *Diana and Actaeon*, which he then dispatched to the Spanish court. These works are part of a larger series of seven mythological paintings commissioned by Philip II: *Danaë*, *Venus and Adonis*, *Perseus e Andromeda*, *Diana and Callisto* and *Diana and Actaeon*, *The Rape of Europa*, and *The Death of Actaeon*. Collectively, they are referred to as "poesie" (poems), a term Titian himself used to describe them (Dalla Costa, 2020, p. 197). All seven are inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which in the Renaissance, especially through vernacular translations, became a primary source of inspiration for visual artists all around Europe.⁴

Among the seven mythological paintings, *Diana and Callisto* and *Diana and Actaeon* serve as perfect conceptual and compositional counterparts. Identical in format, size, and theme, they were, according to art historian Erwin Panofsky (1969, pp. 154–63), designed to be contemplated together. Likely hung side-by-side, they offer to the spectator erotic nudes captured in dynamic motions. Both works are dominated by the imposing presence of Diana, who embodies the severe Goddess of Chastity, imposing discipline and judgment.

According to Hettie Judah's groundbreaking investigation of motherhood in the art, *Diana and Callisto* is arguably the earliest extant depiction of a naked pregnant woman in Western art (Judah, 2024, p. 52). In Ovid's account, Callisto was a nymph devoted to the Goddess Diana.⁵ As such she was bound to a vote of chastity. She spent her life in wilderness, engaged in hunting alongside Diana's female followers. Jupiter found Callisto alone and tired after a hunt and was immediately captivated by her beauty. To approach her, he assumes Diana's appearances and rapes her. After the assault, Callisto, too ashamed to confess the

⁴ In recent years, medieval and early modern scholars alike have recognised the impossibility of fully understanding Ovid's reception without considering the vernacular cultures of Europe (Hexter 2002):

416). For a study of the vernacular translations in text and illustrations of the *Metamorphoses* in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, I refer you to my co-edited volume (Pellissa Prades & Balzi, 2020).

⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, II. 416–530.

assault, conceals her pregnancy and reunites with the other nymphs. One day, as her entourage stops to bath in a stream, Callisto is forcibly undressed by the other nymphs. Once exposed, Diana exiles her. For Callisto, pregnancy initiates a series of violent transformations. Juno, Jupiter's wife, punishes Callisto for her beauty by transforming her into a she-bear. Years later, her son, Arcas, unaware of her identity, nearly kills her during a hunt. At the last moment, Jupiter intervenes, transforming both mother and child into constellations to prevent matricide.

3. Gesti di relazione (Relationship Gestures)

Titian's iconographic choices in his painting *Diana and Callisto* stand out as remarkably original compared to earlier representations of the same myth. A rich collection of such visual depictions can be found in *Iconos*, a digital archive featuring approximately 200 myths from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and around 8,000 illustrations spanning from antiquity to the eighteenth century.⁶ According to *Iconos*, Titian's interpretation is unprecedented.⁷ Earlier artworks primarily focused on Jupiter's seduction of Callisto, Juno's punishment of her, or her desperate flight after being transformed into a bear. In contrast, Titian introduces a unique severity in Diana's demeanour. Her commanding gesture, particularly the pointing finger, was, according to Panofsky (1969, p. 160), inspired by Roman reliefs. However, the true innovation lies in the harshness of the undressing scene: never had Callisto been depicted falling to the ground, naked and exposed.

Titian constructs a stark visual opposition between Diana and Callisto. A fountain placed at the centre of the composition divides the scene both spatially and thematically. On the right, Diana stands tall and imperious, pointing in judgment toward Callisto, who appears on the left side of the painting. Callisto is depicted as physically and metaphorically fallen: collapsed on the ground, closing in on herself in shame. This bodily contrast reflects a deeper relational dynamic: one figure commands, the other submits. The surrounding nymphs, arranged around the two central figures, are the most complex and delicate part of the composition (Wivel, 2020, p. 163). Their interwoven gazes invite the viewer to share in the emotional weight of the unfolding banishment.

Titian's iconographic innovations echo in the nineteenth-century painting of *Diana and Callisto* by Pietro Paoletti (1801–1847), a central focus in Grossi Maglioni's recent project: the short film *Gesti di relazione: la ballata* (Relationship Gestures: the ballad), presented on June 18 at AlbumArte in Rome (Grossi Maglioni, 2025a).

The film is set in the Casino Nobile of Villa Torlonia, Rome. This neoclassical villa, renovated between 1802 and 1806 by the Torlonia family, features an abundance of paintings, frescoes, sculptures and reliefs by prominent nineteenth-century artists (Campitelli, 1997). The Casino was designed as a temple to Western culture, celebrating myth, epic, poets, and conquest. In the twentieth century, it gained darker significance as Mussolini's residence in Rome (1925–1943), thus becoming a symbol of fascist power (Agati, 2007).

The *Diana and Callisto* painting featured in the film is in a space inspired by Renaissance "Stufe" (heated rooms). It was part of a cycle of five mythological paintings by Paoletti, who, between 1835 and 1842, worked on the decoration of the Casino Nobile under a commission entrusted to him by Duke Alessandro Torlonia (Maraghini Garrone, 2014). The series includes *Leda and the Swan*, *Pan and Syrinx*, *The Birth of Venus*, *The Rape of Europa*, and *Diana and Callisto*. Like Titian's composition, Paoletti's painting spatially divides the

⁶ Claudia Cieri Via and others, 'Iconos' at < <http://www.iconos.it/> > [accessed 28 July 2025]. Another similar projects is *The Ovidius Pictus* project, which gathers all the illustrations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (in Latin and in vernacular books) printed between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries.

⁷ See the page dedicated to Titian's *Diana and Callisto* authored by Anna Cola, in 'Iconos', < <http://www.iconos.it/le-metamorfosi-di-ovidio/libro-ii/giove-callisto-diana/immagini/28-callisto/> >.

scene: Diana appears on the right, seated triumphantly on a rock, while Callisto is on the left, defeated. They are spatially divided by a tree. Diana's finger points in judgment; Callisto crouches in shame, arms crossed over her pregnant belly, gaze cast downward. Only one nymph assists in undressing her. Paoletti's *Diana and Callisto* captivated Grossi Maglioni and became central to their exploration of relational gestures.

According to the artists, their project on gestural dynamics began during a crisis in their long-standing collaboration (Grossi Maglioni, 2025b). They recognized that their creative partnership had become imbalanced, marked by power asymmetries and emotional strain. This realization sparked a process of introspection, where they examined how bodily gestures encode dynamics of control, dominance and vulnerability. They scrutinized their interactions, pored over family photo albums to trace gestural patterns, and then turned outward, to culture and architecture, examining how the Casino Nobile, as a monument to Western ideals, reflects and reinforces such dynamics. The resulting film, *Gesti di relazione: la ballata*, is the product of this multilayered inquiry.

The film follows Grossi Maglioni as they walk hand-in-hand through the Villa's ornate rooms. The rhythm of their heels echoes in the empty corridors. These scenes are interspersed with close-up shots of the villa's mythological paintings. At one point, we see them standing before Paoletti's *Diana and Callisto*. They initially face the camera directly, then assume the painting's poses: one standing, finger pointed; the other crouching in self-protection. Grossi Maglioni argue (2025b) that to fully grasp the meaning of gestures in art, one must engage with them in relation, with another person. Re-enacting these poses together reveals their political weight. This act of doubling, the twin gaze of the two artists, becomes central to their artistic practice.

Peering beneath the grandeur of the Casino Nobile, Grossi Maglioni uncover a troubling thread: the foundational myths celebrated here are often narratives of violence against women. *Diana and Callisto*, *Leda and the Swan*, *Pan and Syrinx*, *The Rape of Europa*: all recount sexual assaults. These tales revolve around domination and the erasure of female agency, often culminating in divine offspring. The underlying message is not about love and desire, but about reproductive control, about neutralizing female autonomy. Even the last one of Paoletti's paintings in the heated room, the myth of Venus's birth, reinforces this anxiety: the goddess emerges from foam produced by the severed genitals of Uranus: a male-only conception that bypasses female participation altogether.

Within this context, *Diana and Callisto* no longer reads as a conflict between two women. Cavarero (1990, p. 18) has pointed out how myths are an emanation of a male symbolic order. The protagonists of ancient mythology are never neutral but project a worldview that reflects and sustains male dominance. Diana, despite her feminine form, is an agent of this order: a female figure shaped by and complicit in male authority. In Titian's and then Paoletti's painting, she enforces chastity not to protect female autonomy, but to uphold patriarchal discipline. Grossi Maglioni, by mimicking Diana and Callisto's gestures, draw attention to the patriarchal symbolic order from which these myths emanate.

According to Grossi Maglioni (2025b), the goal is to look at art with a critical eye. Classical art is so steeped into violence and domination that we have become blind to it. We too often stop to contemplate and praise the beauty of a painting or a statue, without questioning the value system from which it emerged. If we look at Titian's *Diana and Callisto*, for example, it has long been argued that its composition was so original that it was born, as Panofsky (1969, p. 160) has stated, almost *ex nihilo*, from nothing. A closer examination that dares to question the status of the male artist as the solitary "genius", shows that Titian's composition has its roots in medieval misogynistic readings of the *Metamorphoses*.

Carlo Ginzburg (2000, pp. 133–57) has demonstrated that Titian accessed Ovid's *Metamorphoses* through a vernacular translation written by Niccolò degli Agostini (d. c. 1526) and first printed in 1522.⁸ Agostini's

⁸ In the field of Ovid's reception in the Italian vernacular in the Middle Ages, Bodo Guthmüller's *Ovidio metamorphoseos vulgare* remains a fundamental reference point. This study, first published in 1981, follows the changing styles and

translation was far from a faithful rendering of the Latin text. He translated in verse a fourteenth-century vernacular translation of the *Metamorphoses*, which was itself an adaptation of a Latin *Expositio* to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* written by the Italian University master Giovanni del Virgilio (Guthmüller 2008, pp. 119–25). Therefore, Titian read Ovid through its medieval tradition, which was steeped in moralism and misogyny. We read in the commentary accompanying Agostini's translation:

La Allegoria di Calisto & Arcade convertiti in orsi è historia onde sappiamo Giove esser stato figliuolo di Saturno re di Crete, & fu innamorato di una detta Calisto vergine, la quale co suoi ingegni sì la coruppe Onde dice Ovidio che la fu fatta orsa, questo non importa altro se non che la donna che datta a corruttione è fatta sì come orsa, la quale per Philosophi è affigurata & appropriata alla corruttione. Calisto s'ingravidò di Giove & fece uno figliuolo chiamato Arcade, imperoché fu nodrito in Arcadia & di quindici anni gli fu detto che era figliuolo di una meretrice. (Agostini, 1547, fol. Ci r.)

(The Allegory of Callisto and Arcas transformed into bears is a story from which we learn that Jupiter was the son of Saturn, king of Crete, and that he fell in love with a certain virgin named Callisto. Through his cunning, he corrupted her. Thus, Ovid says she was turned into a bear—but this means nothing other than that a woman who has fallen into corruption is made like a bear, which, according to the philosophers, is the figure and symbol of corruption. Callisto became pregnant by Jupiter and gave birth to a son named Arcas, so called because he was raised in Arcadia. At the age of fifteen, he was told that he was the son of a prostitute.)⁹

In the commentary, Callisto is portrayed not as a victim but as corrupt, even labelled a prostitute. Compassion is absent, and there is no condemnation of the abuser. Reading this source, we can see a connection with Titian's innovation of Callisto's exposition and undressing. The violence of the painting reflecting the brutality of the commentary. By placing myth in dialogue with memory and personal history, Grossi Maglioni help us dig deeper into the history of art and suggest the endurance of gestures of power. Gestures of power that then become engrained in our daily repertoire of relational gestures.

The final scene of Grossi Maglioni's film features a nineteenth-century quadrille, a historic social group dance. When they shoot the scene, the actors danced without music, only guided by the metronome's beat. During the film presentation (Grossi Maglioni, 2025b), the actors reported entering a trance-like state, the repetitive rhythm of the metronome suggesting a timeless continuum. This haunting performance underscores the core message of the project: gestures of power, domination, and resistance echo across generations. They are transmitted through culture, reinforced by aesthetics, and remain woven into the fabric of our lives.

4. Beast Mother

The woodcut illustrations accompanying Agostini's *Metamorfosi* often encapsulate multiple episodes of a myth in a single woodcut (Huber-Rebenich et al., 2014, pp. 73–81). Titian was familiar with Agostini's vernacular translation and drew inspiration from its iconography (Ginzburg, 2000, pp. 133–57). However, Titian adopted a distinctly different visual approach: rather than condensing the entirety of a myth into a unified composition, he isolated and elevated a single, emotionally charged moment, Callisto's exposure and exile, as the focal point of the narrative.

fortunes of the translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* from 1333 to 1561, and his emphasis rests on the influence and afterlife of medieval translations and Ovidian readings in the Renaissance. For the list of reprints and details of publication of Agostini's translation see Balzi (2020, p. 264) and Guthmüller (2008, pp. 302–10).

⁹ Translation by the author.

The figure of Diana as the Goddess of Chastity also reinforces the thematic parallel with *Diana and Actaeon*, the twin painting designed for Philip II. In both works, Titian visualises the moment in which the female body becomes visible to others, and is immediately subjected to surveillance and judgement.

Though the immediate aftermath of Callisto's exile does not occupy the foreground in *Diana and Callisto*, it is discreetly embedded within the painting's background. Alessandro Rossi (2021, pp. 46–52) has argued that these elements function not as mere embellishments but as narrative continuations. In the upper left quadrant, above the nymphs undressing Callisto, a bolt of lightning signifies Jupiter's divine presence (Rossi, 2021, p. 51). Just above it, two luminous streaks of light frame a small female figure, whom Rossi identifies as Juno (2021, p. 52). Further to the left, beyond the treetops, a bear's silhouette is faintly discernible. Thus, the painting subtly anticipates the myth's subsequent developments, depicting Juno (the punisher), Jupiter (the saviour), and Callisto herself, who is foreshadowed in her ultimate celestial form as Ursa Major, the Great Bear, known from the asterism of its main seven stars, which has been called The Big Dipper or The Wagon.

The most significant metamorphosis, however, is hidden in plain sight. Callisto, surrounded by three nymphs, collapses to the ground. One nymph supports her fall; another holds her raised arm, reaching towards the sky. Between these limbs, what initially appears to be a soft veil escapes Callisto's hand. On closer inspection, Rossi (2021, pp. 45–46) has revealed that the folds of this veil subtly trace the contours of a bear. Once perceived, this hidden detail transforms the painting's meaning. Callisto's wide-eyed, terrified gaze, once read as directed toward some distant void, now appears to be fixed on the looming form of her imminent transformations. The soft veil becomes a premonition, a double allusion to her terrestrial metamorphosis into a bear and her celestial ascent as a constellation.

The veil materialises one of the enduring paradoxes of motherhood in Western culture: the power/powerlessness paradox.¹⁰ On one hand, motherhood has historically offered women a form of social legitimacy and moral authority. On the other hand, as Adrienne Rich (2021) has famously argued, motherhood has long been instrumentalized to restrict women's autonomy, anchoring them biologically to care and thereby excluding them from political and public life.

Through the veil, Callisto glimpses a version of herself immortalized among the stars by Jupiter, rewarded for bearing his child. However, the same bear-shaped veil is a symbol of her ties with the cycles of nature, to a realm historically considered inferior to the immortal, disembodied ideals upheld by patriarchy. Greek philosophy privileged the incorporeal and immaterial as places of truth and contributed to building a society on the idea of the human being as male (Cavarero, 1990, pp. 66–68). Since the symbolic order in which we live is male-centred, all women are off-centered, different. They are, according to Braidotti (2002: 61), at the threshold between what is human and what is not human: animals, plants, minerals, the divine. Titian's bear-shaped veil underscores the association of motherhood with all that lies beneath the symbolic order, beyond the human. It speaks for the monstrosity of women, which has its roots in sex and in the possibility to procreate (Sady Doyle, 2021, p. 16). This intersection of monstrosity and maternity forms the conceptual core of Grossi Maglioni's *Beast Mother* project.

Grossi Maglioni's first formal exploration of the *Beast Mother* theme began in 2015 during a residency in Cosenza. Francesca Grossi, having recently given birth, attended the residency with her newborn. As Vera Maglioni recalls, the lack of child-friendly accommodations and the vulnerability of Grossi and her infant heightened her own sense of protective urgency:

¹⁰ Mairéad McAuley (2016) has focused on a selection of Roman literary texts from the Augustan to the Flavian period to explore the nexus power/powerlessness in the maternal, showing the importance of Ancient Rome for the consolidation of this paradox in Western culture.

La situazione di emergenza mi spingeva verso una condizione di protezione istintiva, irrefrenabile, mi sentivo come un'orsa che deve proteggere i cuccioli e Francesca e Bianca in quel momento rappresentavano la fragilità di cui mi dovevo occupare.

(Grossi Maglioni 2023: 56)

(The emergency of the situation pushed me into an instinctive, uncontrollable state of protection, I felt like a she-bear guarding her cubs. At that moment, Francesca and Bianca embodied a fragile life I had to defend.)¹¹

Here, the myth of Callisto reemerges in its zoomorphic dimension. Yet, in Grossi Maglioni's reimagining, the transformation into a bear does not happen to the mother but to the friend: a shift that queers traditional narratives of motherhood. Their *Beast Mother* is from its inception not a biological inevitability but a form of care that involves a broader community. It is, as Laura Bissel (2025) has argued in her essay on Rachel Yoder's novel *Nightbitch* (2021), an escape from gender normativity and an outlet towards a new form of creativity and generativity.



Figure 1: Grossi Maglioni, *Beast Mother*, 2022. Workshop, Fondazione smART, Roma. Ph. Mirai Pulvirenti. Courtesy Grossi Maglioni.

Since that initial experience, Grossi Maglioni have continued their investigation into motherhood and monstrosity. In 2022, they held two workshops under the *Beast Mother* theme. At Fondazione smART in

¹¹ Translation by the author.

Rome, mothers and children co-created monstrous costumes, imagining frightening traits for maternal figures (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 83). Later, at the bookshop Libreria Postrufazio in Bari, another workshop invited mothers to embody their maternal relationships through monstrous garments and performative poses in a staged photoshoot (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 111). That same year, at <rotor> Centre for Contemporary Art in Graz, they led The Childbirth Positions workshop, inviting participants to explore both experienced and desired birthing postures (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 103). The traced outlines of these experiments—figures with multiple limbs and heads—depicted mothers as fertile, multi-formed beings: embodied, expressive and unruly.

These practices, as Francesca Grossi has explained (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 60), aim to reclaim the term “monster.” Rather than a label of exclusion, monstrosity becomes a tool of feminist critique. Monsters, as deviations from normativity, disrupt the symbolic order and hold the potential to expose patriarchal contradictions. Grossi Maglioni draw inspiration from Octavia E. Butler’s *Xenogenesis* trilogy, where hybrid reproduction between human and non-human forms reveals the generative potential of difference (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 62). It is through this lens that Grossi Maglioni began the collective writing of a new myth that is born outside of the male symbolic order: *Occupazioni: The Perpetual Dialogue*.

In this reimagined myth, the *Beast Mother* is not cursed but simply is. Her transformation is neither inflicted by others nor chosen for redemption, it is part of her everyday existence:

Nativity

The story begins at night

The Cave

Far away, near a cave, live a woman and a child

Clouds

Outside the cave, enchanting and threatening clouds loom. Their transparency is such that they capture and alter the eyes, which look through them in defiance

Beast Mother

From within the clouds, the gazes watch the woman transform herself into an unrecognisable beast. Her shape and form become a mystery

(Grossi Maglioni, 2021)

By normalizing her monstrosity, Grossi Maglioni subvert the punitive logic of Callisto’s myth. They strip male authority from the narrative and reclaim metamorphosis as a site of magic empowerment.

The myth also revisits the theme of matricide foundational to Western thought. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Callisto is separated from her son, Arcas, who nearly kills her, unaware of her identity. Jupiter saves them by making them stars, erasing their mortality in favour of symbolic immortality. This act silences the complexity of our fraught engagement with the maternal, with our origin and life on earth. As Irigaray (2007, p. 21) and Cavarero (1990, p. 51) note, Western philosophy has long erased birth in its quest to overcome death.

Grossi Maglioni resist this. In their myth, mother and child are sources of terror and magic power. The child, like Arcas, is scared by the monstrous incarnation of the mother. Their meeting point is not in tragedy, however, but rather in negotiation:

The observing child

The child creature, fearing its own metamorphosis and frightened by the vision of the beast, flees in terror

The magical body

Left completely alone in the desert of nothingness, the child wanders in search of its mother, whom it no longer recognises. It walks and walks, and at every step a tree appears, at every footprint a bush, at every glance a stone or spring of gushing water. The desert flourishes under the weight of the creature's body

The desert of nothingness, the landscape

What used to be a desert has become a canyon, a riverbed, a large stone wall. Seized by fatigue, the creature makes a nest out of a hollow rock, arranging trees and bushes for shelter and protection. From a crevice it glimpses the tents of an encampment in the distance

The feast

It hears, amidst the indistinct chatter, a familiar voice. The creature follows the voice to a tent larger than the others: inside, its mother is preparing for the feast that is about to begin. It turns to her, serenely

The cave and the feast are spaces for ongoing conversation—symbolic of relation, not separation. The creature, like Arcas, is armed, but in this version, it poses more danger to itself than to its mother. The crisis in the maternal bond translating into the failure to care for the world and ourselves.

The split child

As the days and nights pass, the creature grows, but so do strong, conflicting urges, until one morning it splits into two people

The forest of sights

Afraid of itself, the creature runs away into the forest, eventually losing its way. The fear is so great that it begins to build defensive weapons: a guillotine, a boomerang, an arrow, and a pitchfork

The gaze and the weapon

Advancing through the forest, it meets its double, armed in the same way. Eyes meet eyes and they become one with their weapons: neither wants to surrender, as if the union of their gaze holds up the entire universe

A tent for perpetual dialogue

A moment of distraction ends the battle. Just outside the forest, voices attract the creature like a magic flute. Upon reaching an open field, it sees a crowd of people sewing various pieces of cloth together. "What are you doing?" it asks. "We are building a tent for perpetual dialogue"

This myth favours transformation over stasis. Instead of Jupiter's immortal stillness, Grossi Maglioni imagine a world of constant change: embodied, connected, ecological.

Their vision reclaims Callisto from the male symbolic order and suggests a way to steal her away from Titian's painting. Read through the lens of the new mythology created by Grossi Maglioni, we might be able to see that Callisto's terrified gaze, frozen in Titian's canvas, is not fear of becoming a bear or a star. It is fear of being fixed, of being cut off from transformation. She, who thrived among women in the wilderness, reassured in the mutual knowledge of their changing bodies, now petrified in eternal stillness. Perhaps she never feared the bear that she saw in the veil. Perhaps she feared the end of change, the end of the world that the experience of her body led her into.

Grossi Maglioni, together with singer-songwriter Eva Geist, composed the lullaby *Il Carro* (the chariot) (Grossi Maglioni, 2023, p. 66). Again, Grossi Maglioni's path entwines with Callisto's, who was transformed

by Jupiter into the asterism known as the Chariot. The lullaby serves as a perfect alternative ending to Callisto's myth:

A terra le stelle emergono viola
 poi cadranno in mare e saranno lacrime
 le lacrime sbocciano
 domani saran fuoco [...]
 ora io non piango più
 non sono più sola

(Stars emerge violet from the earth / then fall into the sea and become tears / the tears bloom / tomorrow they'll be fire [...] now I don't cry anymore / I'm no longer alone)

Even stars, the lullaby suggests, are not eternal. They fall, change and transform. Everything exists within a cycle of becoming: a perpetual dialogue. Callisto, a solitary chariot in the sky, is stolen from her immortality and reconducted into a queer, expansive and porous becoming. She is forever crossing animal and human boundaries, rooted in materiality, never the same, never alone. Grossi Maglioni, with their theft offer a possibility to pull maternity back into nature, not above or beyond it. They decolonize our imaginary from the iconography of the Virgin Mary, who is forever fixed and surrounded by stars while she presses the head of a snake, and replace it with a mother figure that is allied with the power of the earth (Pinto, 2023, p. 41).



Figure 1: Grossi Maglioni, *Torta di terra*, 2022. Ph. Mirai Pulvirenti. Courtesy Grossi Maglioni.

5. Occupazioni (Occupations)

Grossi Maglioni's lullaby ends with the word *sola* (alone). Solitude defines Callisto's condition in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, as it too often marks the experience of motherhood in Western societies (Jones, 2024, pp. 149–51). Raped by Jupiter and then rejected by her companions and protector, Diana, Callisto is ultimately transformed into a bear. Ovid explains that Juno chose this form to isolate her from human contact and rob

her of speech, so she could not express her pain or share her sorrow. This loneliness also resonates in Titian's painting, which subtly expresses another enduring paradox of motherhood.

Pregnancy is visibly marked on the body, as seen in Callisto's public exposure and expulsion. Yet, the violence that causes it remains hidden. In Titian's canvas, the rape itself is omitted, as it is omitted from the commentary that he had access to. This paradox extends beyond the image: although child-rearing is of public concern, the labour of care remains largely invisible, relegated to the private space of the home. Jacqueline Rose (2018) has written on this contradiction: how motherhood is simultaneously hyper-visible and erased.

At the core of Grossi Maglioni's work is a desire to challenge and subvert this paradox. Their project *Occupazioni: Natività* (2015)—the first formal iteration of the *Beast Mother* series—puts the intimate fragility of domestic life on public display. During a residency in Cosenza, in a glass and wooden house, the artists assembled a makeshift tent, its structure held together by a shopping trolley. Inside, a mattress lay on the floor where Francesca Grossi and her newborn daughter sat. Reinterpreting the Christian Nativity, Grossi Maglioni replaced painted depictions with lived experience: the mother and child were fully visible through the glass, inviting the public to witness the labour of care.

This early version of *Occupazioni*, a series they would revisit in later years, reframed the Nativity from a feminist perspective (Ventrella, 2023, pp. 24–25). Unlike traditional representations created by male artists, this “nativity” was embodied and staged by women, making space for a parallel between biological and artistic creation. Creation here is not simply symbolic or aesthetic; it is both physical and lived.

On March 8th, 2019—International Women's Day—Grossi Maglioni deepened this parallel between biological and artistic labour through the installation *Occupazioni: Natività 2019*. For this performance, the artists breastfed their children on a Roman sidewalk beneath a tent painted in collaboration with artists Sara Basta, Maria Pia Picozza, and Guendalina Salini. Interwoven across the fabric was the phrase: *SIAMO DELLE MOSTRE*, a wordplay on the double meaning of *mostre* as both “exhibits” and “monsters.”



Figure 2: Grossi Maglioni. *Occupazioni: Natività*, 2019. Temporary public installation, Rome; tent created in collaboration with the artists Sara Basta, Mariapia Picozza, and Guendalina Salini. Photograph by Mirai Pulvirenti. Courtesy of Grossi Maglioni.

This public installation radically reimagined the Nativity scene. Instead of the traditional mother-and-child dyad, here were multiple women co-caring for children—a plural, collective act of mothering. Grossi Maglioni's vision resists biological determinism. Care, they suggest, is not limited to birth mothers but belongs to all who choose to share in its labour. The phrase sewn into the tent underscores this dual meaning: they are both the object of display (mostre as exhibits) and monstrous others (mostre as monsters). They are mothers as artists, and artists as mothers.

Irigaray (2007, p. 29) has pointed out that the problem with how motherhood is viewed in Western culture is its reduction to biological reproduction. But mothering, she has argued, should extend beyond childbirth: to books, crafts, relationships, art. Only by expanding the possibilities of female creativity can women feel fulfilled outside the narrow frame of reproduction. Grossi Maglioni build on Irigaray's insight. For them, art and care are both acts of mothering. They hold the same generative power: they live under the same tent.

At the same time, the sentence on the tent is not only empowering, it is also ironic and accusatory. "We are the real exhibits/monsters" points to the way mothers, especially artist-mothers, are made hyper-visible when they step into public space, while also being denied structural support. The mother, alone in the city with her child, is terrifying because she claims a space that traditionally excludes her. She demands to be seen, and in doing so, destabilizes the patriarchal city that depends on the invisibility of maternal labour.

Grossi Maglioni are the "real exhibits" because they are at risk of marginalization and extinction. In a society that offers no meaningful welfare or protections for women artists, particularly mothers, they are forced to choose between art and care. In such a context, generative labour becomes mutually exclusive: one must choose either motherhood or artistic practice. Grossi Maglioni's installation exposes this injustice, making visible the social failure to support mothers in the arts.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, this theme took on new urgency. Grossi Maglioni, along with other artist-mothers, authored an open letter denouncing the precarious working conditions of women in their position (Basta Grossi Maglioni, 2020). They demanded structural protections, recognition and support. That letter became the seed for a broader movement, the creation of a collective: The Glorious Mothers. This group now organizes annual residencies for mothers and children, creating spaces where maternal experience is honoured, shared and transformed into artistic practice.

Through *Occupazioni*, Grossi Maglioni turn personal pain into creative power. They become activists and respond to what Andrea O'Reilly has called 'empowered mothering' (2024). By transforming solitude into solidarity, Grossi Maglioni make mothering public, collective, and artistic. They suggest that it is not a private matter but a potential site of social and political transformation.

6. Conclusion

Through the *Beast Mother* project, Grossi Maglioni open a radical space for reimagining the maternal, not as a fixed biological role but as a generative, performative and political force. From Ovid's Callisto to Titian's omitted violences, from the solitary mother on public display to the communal tent on a Roman sidewalk, the works confront the paradoxes of motherhood: power and powerlessness, hypervisibility and erasure, reverence and neglect, the divine and the monstrous.

Starting from the fraught inheritance of the first painting of a naked pregnant woman in Western art, this article has shown how Grossi Maglioni dissect the lingering mythic, religious and artistic tropes that have long shaped the figure of the mother—passive, suffering, silent—and offer, instead, a model of maternity that is plural, active and self-determined. In doing so, this article reveals how mothering, like artmaking, is a powerful form of production that exceeds the boundaries of the domestic and the feminine.

By bringing care work into public space, Grossi Maglioni challenge the rigid divisions between public and private, political and intimate. In her Neapolitan Novels, Elena Ferrante has written about the porousness between home and city, where the violence and injustice of the streets translates on the bodies of women and children (De Rogatis, 2018, pp. 86-87; Rose, 2018, p. 175). Grossi Maglioni seem to build on this intuition and use the tent, repeatedly used as both symbol and structure, to cross private and public spaces. The tent becomes a site of resistance, of visibility and of collective empowerment. It shelters not just mothers and children but a new feminist imaginary: one in which the maternal is neither self-sacrificing nor solitary.

In reclaiming motherhood as a lived, creative and political practice, Grossi Maglioni confront the exclusions embedded in both art history and contemporary cultural production. Their work demands political change in Italy by asking for new systems of support, new languages of recognition, and a revaluation of care as a foundation for artistic and social life alike.

In the figure of the *Beast Mother*, they give us a potent metaphor: not a monstrous distortion of femininity, but a fierce embodiment of care's subversive power. Not a mother as defined by tradition, but a mother who insists on her place in the city, in the artwork, and in the world.

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Marta Balzi holds a PhD in Italian Studies from the University of Bristol. Her doctoral research examined vernacular translations of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* in Renaissance Italy. She is the editor of *Ovid in the Vernacular: Translations of the Metamorphoses in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Medium Aevum, 2021). In 2021, she received a research grant from the British School at Rome to further investigate Ovid's Renaissance reception. After a period of maternity leave, she is now an independent scholar. Her writing has appeared in publications including *InGenere* and *Il Post*, and she is the author of the weekly newsletter *Mothers Monsters Myths*. Drawing on classical reception and feminist theory, her research explores the intersections of myth, gender, motherhood, and maternal embodiment across historical and contemporary contexts.



Deep Talk

A Conversation with María Reyes Ferrer

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Motherhood, both as lived experience and as symbolic construct, cuts across contemporary literary texts, often in tension with the normative models imposed by patriarchal discourse. In recent decades, the maternal has re-emerged as a site of critical inquiry in feminist theory, literary criticism, and cultural studies, interrogated not only for its ideological weight, but also for its potential to articulate alternative forms of subjectivity, embodiment, and relationality. Contemporary literature offers a privileged space in which to explore these complexities: it stages motherhood in its contradictions, ambivalences, and political charge, shedding light on how it is shaped by intersecting forces such as gender,

class, race, sexuality, and migration. After all, as Olivia Heal observes (2019) “maternal writing is fundamentally a political act” (p. 120).

In this conversation, we explore some of the central issues currently shaping the debate on the representation of the maternal in Italian literature. We speak with **María Reyes Ferrer**, professor at the Universidad de Murcia and a scholar of contemporary Italian literature and gender studies, who has long investigated the intersections between writing, subjectivity, and motherhood. Her work contributes to a growing body of research that reclaims the maternal not only as a thematic presence, but as a mode of thinking, narrating, and resisting –offering new tools to rethink the literary canon, feminist genealogies, and the politics of care and reproduction.

More information: <https://portalinvestigacion.um.es/investigadores/331319/detalle?lang=en>

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1. Representations and (In)visibility of the Maternal

VF: Let's begin with a broad question: how are representations of motherhood currently configured in contemporary Italian literature, in light of the social, cultural, and political transformations that have affected the maternal? In what ways does literary writing become a space for negotiating – or contesting – gender norms? And further, which images of the mother dominate today's Italian literary landscape, and which ones remain absent or have been erased? What do these representations (or omissions) tell us about the regimes of (in)visibility that govern the maternal body in Italian culture?

MR: From my point of view, motherhood, understood as a dynamic experience shaped by social, economic, and cultural contexts, is portrayed in contemporary Italian literature from a critical perspective that challenges the traditional archetype of the devoted and perfect mother. This figure, still dominant in the Italian cultural imagination, is confronted by current narratives that reveal the ambivalence and inner conflict many women experience in relation to the maternal role and the institution of motherhood, as well as the difficulties increasingly faced by women in conceiving. Rather than idealizing motherhood or positioning the mother as a passive object of narration, contemporary literature – and I would argue, contemporary cinema as well – gives voice to numerous silenced subjectivities. These voices demystify the idea of a natural maternal instinct in women and show how maternal identity is constructed through a tension between individual desire, social expectations, and the lack of structural support.

This new configuration, which began to take shape especially from the second half of the 20th century thanks to feminist thought, allows for the visibility of a plural, imperfect, and ultimately deeply human experience of motherhood. These new representations of motherhood entail significant transformations in literary production, which becomes a critical tool capable of exploring the light and shadow surrounding the maternal experience through subjective, first-person narratives. This paradigm shift encourages the adoption of particularly meaningful literary forms, such as autofiction or the confessional genre, which allow for the narration of personal, sometimes painful or traumatic experiences, while also reclaiming motherhood – traditionally relegated to the domestic and private sphere – as a political issue.

By sharing common experiences, often hidden or silenced, this literature not only makes visible the complexity of maternal experience, but also actively contributes to its redefinition from a critical and collective perspective. For this reason, in my opinion, depictions of devoted mothers, aligned with the traditional “good mother” prototype, no longer predominate in Italian literature. In contemporary literature, maternal figures have been humanized: they are portrayed with their contradictions, their own agency, and, above all, the real difficulties they face. In fact, experiences that were long rendered invisible, as they threatened the idealized image of motherhood, are increasingly being brought to light: the struggle to conceive, maternal ambivalence, and the experience of abortion are now themes openly addressed by many Italian women writers in their novels.

However, from my perspective, a certain silence still persists in Italian literature around stories of mothers who express regret following motherhood. Such narratives would directly challenge the idealization of unconditional maternal love. There is also a noticeable lack of explicit

representation of the physiological processes related to motherhood. In this regard, the representations – or, in many cases, the striking absences – of the maternal body in contemporary Italian literature reveal the persistence of a visibility regime strongly influenced by what I would dare to call a “sacralization” of motherhood. Although the maternal body has historically been established as a central cultural symbol, associated with ideals of purity, self-sacrifice, and fertility, its more concrete, physical, and sensory dimensions continue to be relegated to the domain of the unspoken or the marginal.

In this sense, the physiological traces of motherhood – the bodily changes a woman undergoes, their effects on sexual pleasure, childbirth and its consequences, or even breastfeeding – rarely find a space for explicit representation in literature. Breastfeeding, for instance, though socially accepted in abstract terms as an act of care and nourishment, continues to be subject to symbolic and normative repression when practiced in public spaces, where it is expected to occur discreetly, almost clandestinely. Furthermore, there is an expectation projected onto breastfeeding that it should bring satisfaction and fulfillment to the mother, ignoring the fact that, in many cases, it can also be experienced as traumatic, laden with pain, exhaustion, and in conflict with normative ideals of happy motherhood.

These omissions reveal a cultural apparatus that continues to shape the boundaries of what can be represented when it comes to the maternal body. But they also reveal the limits of what a woman dares to tell – for modesty, fear of misunderstanding, or social judgment – and the impact such a narrative may have on its readers. The expectation of how a narrative will be received, shaped by a culture that still considers certain experiences inappropriate or excessive, can act as an additional filter, restricting not only public discourse but also intimate writing itself. I believe there is, in general, a resistance to represent the maternal body in its materiality, and this is something that, as Andrea O'Reilly (2024) argues, academic feminism – and I would add, literature – must confront when addressing the subject of motherhood.

2. The Maternal and Intersectionality

VF: In recent theoretical debates, it has been emphasized that “in literature as in life, motherhood is constructed intersectionally: gender, class, race, nationality, sexuality, and age all impact upon how motherhood can be done, as do migrant experiences” (Henriksson, Williams, & Fahlgren, 2023, p. 2). In light of this perspective, how does contemporary Italian literature engage with an intersectional understanding of the maternal? Do current narratives succeed in portraying the plurality of maternal experiences beyond the white, bourgeois, heteronormative model? And how do they interact with new configurations of motherhood – queer, non-biological, surrogate, migrant – as well as with contemporary feminist struggles for reproductive justice? Would you consider literature a privileged space for thinking through the polymorphic politics of the maternal?

MR: I'll begin with the last question: yes, absolutely. Literature, particularly matrifocal literature (Daly and Reddy, 1991), constitutes a privileged space for politicizing motherhood, as it enables the reclamation of narrative and restores, through the text, the maternal to its plural and political dimension. As Elizabeth Podnieks observes, literature is a space of “textual liberation” (2020, p.

176) in which Italian women writers explore, question, and openly engage with motherhood and how it is shaped by power structures, norms, and cultural discourses. Unlike more normative discourses, literature offers a flexible framework in which authors can problematize motherhood not merely as a biological fact, but as a social construction traversed by multiple intersectional axes.

In my view, contemporary Italian literature articulates, starting from subjectivity and lived experience, a critique of the social, cultural, and symbolic structures that have historically defined the maternal, unmasking myths and idealizations surrounding the figure of the mother. I think of novels such as *Cose che non si raccontano* (*Things That Are Not Told*) by Antonella Lattanzi, *Cattiva* (*Bad*) by Rossella Milone, *La figlia sbagliata* by Raffaella Romagnolo (*The Wrong Daughter*), *I giorni dell'abbandono* (*The Days of Abandonment*) by Elena Ferrante, *La scordanza* (*The Forgetfulness*) by Dora Albanese, to name a few, and I see how all these texts demystify motherhood, revealing ambivalences, inner conflicts, and structural tensions that permeate maternal experience and that have traditionally been silenced by normative discourse.

However, although these authors do incorporate issues of, especially, class and age, and also race and gender in narrating maternal experience, the opposite is not always true: many works centered on these other dimensions do not necessarily address motherhood. In other words, literature focused on the maternal has always tended to explore intersectionality, precisely because the experience of motherhood inevitably exposes the tensions and inequalities that women face in their multiple social identities. In this sense, I believe contemporary Italian literature includes a rich and valuable corpus of migrant women writers. Now, although I do not consider myself a specialist in this field, my perception is that this literature tends to focus more on issues such as identity, exile, memory, or uprooting, rather than on the maternal experience as a central axis. I would say that, although motherhood is present in these works, it appears tangentially and rarely occupies the center of the text – or at least it has not yet been read from this perspective – and perhaps this is precisely where the most interesting aspect lies: in how we (do not) see and (do not) read other forms of motherhood. It would certainly be enriching to integrate this perspective into the analysis, as it would allow us to expand our understanding of the multiple forms of maternity. But I insist: matrifocal literature, precisely due to the intersectional nature of motherhood, embraces numerous social and political dimensions.

Following the reasoning around the openness to multiple dimensions of analysis, it is undeniable that contemporary literary narratives have made significant progress in representing a plurality of maternal experiences that depart from the traditional white, bourgeois, and heteronormative model. We are now witnessing the emergence of stories about non-biological motherhood *La memoria impossibile* (*The Impossible Memory*) by Emilia Marasco, *Io mi fido di te. Storia dei miei figli nati dal cuore* (*I Trust You. The Story of My Children Born from the Heart*) by Luciana Littizzetto, *Bambini di ferro* (*Iron Children*) by Viola Di Grado, to name a few – of biological but non-genetic motherhood – as in the generative journeys described by Maria Rosa Cutrufelli in *L'isola delle madri* (*The Island of Mothers*) or by Chiara Laudani in *Per non scomparire* (*To Not Disappear*) – alongside all the recent narratives about medically assisted procreation. These texts not only broaden the maternal imaginary but also make it more complex and politicize it in new directions, showing alternative ways of being mothers. Nevertheless, within this increasingly broad

spectrum of narratives about motherhood, I believe there are still missing voices, stories that, for example, recount the experience of homosexual motherhood or, as already mentioned, racialized motherhood. Reflecting on this question, however, led me to ask myself two things:

1) In relation to what Andrea O'Reilly defines as "queering motherhood," it is common to present queer motherhood as an innovative, contemporary practice, or as something foreign to Western cultural frameworks. However, if we look toward the Mediterranean tradition – and particularly the Italian context – we can observe that certain forms of motherhood now identified as queer were already present in the past. Literature, in particular, bears witness to models of collective motherhood, especially in Southern Italy, where women wove networks of care with neighbors, the figure of the *comare* (godmother), grandmothers, and other female figures who shared the responsibility of raising children in a kind of communal and shared motherhood. In these contexts, motherhood did not end with the mother–child relationship, but unfolded in a plural and intergenerational dimension rooted in forms of daily solidarity.

It was within these "extended families" that not only caregiving practices were transmitted, but also material and symbolic knowledge: knowledge of childbirth and the body, natural remedies, emotional languages, relational codes, and forms of female authority that escaped institutional control. The *comare*, the grandmother, the neighbor are not merely auxiliary figures, but vital nodes in a network that redefines motherhood as a relational and political practice, removing it from isolation and idealization. Moreover, there were maternal experiences that defied normative age boundaries: women became mothers both at 18 and at 40, perhaps for different reasons, but without being penalized by ageist logics. Perhaps, instead of projecting alternative maternal forms solely into the future, we should critically question the historical process that led to the erasure or delegitimization of these communal and plural practices from our past.

2) Regarding the expression "going beyond the white, bourgeois, and heteronormative model," while it is essential for deconstructing the notion of a singular maternal experience, I worry that it may create the mistaken impression that structural difficulties have already been overcome and can thus be left behind. This is not to deny the importance of giving visibility to non-normative forms of motherhood, on the contrary, this is a necessary and vital step. But I believe that these representations must coexist with the need to make visible the trap of normative motherhood: the one presented as a choice, as desirable, but which in fact merely reproduces patriarchal logics that assign women a role of subordination. A trap which, under the guise of free choice, conceals a structural imposition deeply rooted in the patriarchal symbolic order. Because even when motherhood is lived with desire, awareness, and outside of the heterosexual framework, the gender mandate that defines women based on their reproductive capacity and caregiving availability continues to operate. We must not forget that women – all women – are still today subject to structural violence simply for being women, and that such violence reproduces itself even in contexts where greater autonomy appears to have been achieved.

Making visible racialized, queer, or homosexual motherhood is fundamental, but it is not enough unless we radically question the hegemonic model of motherhood: the one that still functions as a universal measure, albeit masked by seemingly more inclusive forms. To think that expanding the representational spectrum equals solving the problem is to ignore that many structures of oppression remain intact, and that the apparent freedom of a few women does not equate to real

collective liberation. Motherhood, as an institution regulated by patriarchy, cannot be liberating until the material, symbolic, and emotional conditions that uphold it are overturned. This is why I consider literature, an exemplary space for narrating the complexity of experience, an indispensable tool for reflecting on the political nature of the maternal. I welcome the fact that it opens the field to new forms of motherhood, but politicizing motherhood today cannot be reduced merely to amplifying voices: we must interrogate the structures that determine who can be a mother, how discourses on motherhood are transformed, and at what cost. Expanding the imaginary without questioning the patriarchal framework that sustains it risks generating a false perception of progress, while many women continue to suffer violence simply because they are women. Literature must not only represent, but also disrupt, question, and denaturalize the conditions that continue to subordinate women through motherhood.

3. Genealogies and Counter-Narratives: Matrilinearity and the Maternal Voice

VF: From a feminist genealogical perspective, can we trace connections between maternal narratives written by Italian women in the twentieth century and those emerging today? In your view, is there a “subterranean tradition” or counter-narrative of motherhood that crosses generations and resists dominant paradigms? In their 2010 collection *Textual Mothers/Maternal Texts*, Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O’Reilly describe a shift from “daughter-centric” narratives to “matrilineal” and “matrifocal” texts, highlighting the increasing centrality of the maternal voice in post-1990s literature. Do you see a similar development in the Italian context? How are contemporary Italian women writers working to re-inscribe the mother as a speaking subject, and motherhood as a personal, political, and creative narrative?

MR: I believe it is indeed possible to trace lines of continuity between the maternal narratives of 20th-century Italian women writers and those of today. There undoubtedly exists a dissident and submerged narrative that has crossed generations and managed to resist, in various forms, the dominant canon. Although 20th-century writings more frequently focused on the maternal figure from the daughters’ perspective, even then an impulse to break away from familial and social impositions could be glimpsed. Those writers – writing as daughters –began to question motherhood, the maternal figure, and to confront their own subjective fractures in relation to that legacy.

I’m thinking of those authors who, as early as the beginning of the 20th century, approached motherhood without embellishment, such as Sibilla Aleramo – “an isolated and revolutionary voice” (Sambuco, 2014, p. 45) –or Annie Vivanti, and of those who followed, like Fausta Cialente, Elsa Morante, Natalia Ginzburg, Fabrizia Ramondino, or Anna Maria Ortese, among others, who – drawing on their experience as mothers or daughters –understood that motherhood is a central aspect of women’s lives and must be addressed beyond the domestic sphere. These 20th-century writers challenged, from their respective positions, family structures, the obligation of marital destiny, or domestic confinement, and in doing so, they became points of reference for the future. Their writing, though not always explicitly feminist, already operated as a form of symbolic insubordination. Because the very fact that a woman wrote – and wrote about herself, her world,

and other women – was enough to inaugurate a genealogy. In that inaugural disobedience, I see the seed of today's matrifocal writings.

Many contemporary writers have had to seek out those predecessors – marginalized or made invisible – in order to restore them to their rightful place in literary history. In them, they have found a symbolic and vital point of reference, from which a literary genealogy has emerged that recognizes those authors as intellectual "mothers," bearers of a legacy. This act of rediscovery has highlighted the urgent need to reclaim the maternal figure, both in its real dimension and in its symbolic power, as a foundation for the transmission of women's lives. By recovering the legacy of their foremothers and speaking from their own maternal experiences, these writers are, in a sense, the "Icaruses of the 20th century": women who, thanks to the wings inherited from those who came before them, have been able to take flight, to leave behind the gravitational pull of the private sphere as the only possible space, and to occupy the public space from which they now write their maternity.

That flight was neither solitary nor spontaneous: it was made possible because others, before them, had shown that there was a life beyond submission, that it was possible to speak in one's own voice. These writers continue that thread of dissidence, amplify it, and bring it into the present. The critique, in the 20th century, of the maternal model through the daughter's gaze paved the way, in the 21st century, for writings that, from within the maternal experience, seek to redefine it without idealization; this trajectory, both emotional and political, solidifies a literary genealogy capable of sustaining a continuous critique of the institution of motherhood and of imagining ways of being mothers beyond traditional models.

4. Poetics of the Maternal

VF: From a formal perspective, what stylistic, structural, or linguistic choices characterize today's writing of the maternal? Can we identify a "poetics of the maternal" that subverts patriarchal narrative codes or proposes a reworking of maternal experience in embodied, affective, or relational terms?

MR: Yes, I do believe it is possible to speak of a poetics of the maternal, insofar as motherhood – and, more generally, the maternal as a critical category – activates new forms of writing, new ways of representing subjectivity, the body and female experience, destabilizing traditional narrative codes. Motherhood, as suggested by Lisa Baraitser (2018), is not only written as content, but is assumed as an epistemological and literary framework, as a critical lens through which to rethink the very possibilities of writing and authorship. The maternal, when written, is not configured solely as a theme, but as a practice that overflows and subverts inherited genres, that places the body and the bond with the other at the center of discourse, and that requires new linguistic and structural forms to be narrated.

Italian women authors who write about the maternal tend to use hybrid genres – diaries, autofiction, narrative essays, letters – that allow for exploration of the intersection between the intimate and the public, between personal experience and aesthetic elaboration. This responds to the need to find narrative forms adequate to narrate an experience that is neither closed nor obeys a causal progression more typical of the literary canon. Motherhood, by its very nature, tends to

express itself through fragmentary, porous and open narrative forms. Fragmentariness responds to the impossibility of sustained temporal continuity: I think of the rhythms of care and the needs of the other – in particular the child – or also of the experience of those narrating the paths of medically assisted procreation, which seem to shatter any attempt at unitary narration. The porous refers to the dissolution of boundaries between self and other, since motherhood is constituted as an intersubjective experience in which maternal identity is built in constant negotiation with the body, desire, the presence/absence of the child and the context. Openness, finally, signals the impossibility of closure of the maternal experience, which does not find a clear ending, but remains a practice in continuous transformation, with effects that extend over time. These characteristics impose modes of writing that move away from causal logic and the linear narrative model and instead orient toward more flexible formats, capable of opening up to other structures, other temporalities and other voices.

In this perspective, Italian matrifocal literature is fully inscribed within this poetics of the maternal. Contemporary Italian women authors propose a radical exploration of the maternal as experience, as dissidence and as a form of knowledge. Writers such as Giorgia Surina, Anna Giurickovic Dato, Michela Marzano, Simona Sparaco, Gaia Manzini, among many others, work on the formal possibilities of this poetics: they narrate from exhausted bodies, from ambivalent bonds, from that uncomfortable position that is the maternal without myths and without veils, breaking the taboos tied to motherhood. The maternity they describe does not appear as consecration, but as conflict, as a place from which to observe the world with a lucidity born of fragility, of desire, of care and of loss. Writing from the maternal implies assuming a subjectivity that is never unitary, because it is always given in relation to the other – to the child or even to society – and to one's lived experience. This narrative decentering generates a writing that unsettles, interrogates and claims a legitimate space from which to think not only the self, but also the shared experience of motherhood, since motherhood, as a cultural construction, crosses all women, mothers and non-mothers alike, and deeply questions society.

Moreover, and in connection with the genealogy of women writers, this poetics is not an exclusively contemporary phenomenon. Already in twentieth-century Italian literature we find significant precedents that started from the concrete experience of women. Writers such as Elsa Morante, Natalia Ginzburg, Alba De Céspedes, Francesca Sanvitale or Laudomia Bonanni, to name a few, addressed in their works, with intimate language, an introspective, sensorial and affective style, themes such as motherhood, marriage, infidelity or domestic oppression, disarticulating the classical forms of narrative starting from subjectivity. Although many of these twentieth-century authors did not center their works exclusively on motherhood, it appeared intertwined with other dimensions of female experience, addressed as an experience situated within power structures. That form of writing already pointed to a poetics of the maternal understood as resistance, as a place of questioning and as a possibility for transformation. In this tradition, language plays a central role: far from being sentimental or minor – as has often been claimed from a patriarchal perspective – the prose of these authors was, and still is, alive, affective, at times experimental, endowed with a lexicon capable of anticipating the times and that allows for thinking of a maternal aesthetics not bound to inherited forms.

5. Maternal Writing and Feminisms

VF: To what extent do contemporary literary representations of motherhood engage with the agendas of Italian and international feminisms? What convergences, tensions, or divergences emerge between maternal writing and feminist practices – particularly with regard to the body, desire, reproductive labor, and subjectivity?

MR: Literary narratives of motherhood maintain a rich and complex relationship with the various currents of feminism. In many cases, these narratives function as textual forms through which to engage with – but also to question – the theoretical frameworks of feminism, especially concerning the subject, the body, practices of care, and new forms of reproduction. On the one hand, I believe there is a clear convergence in the shared effort to depatriarchalize the maternal experience, that is, to free it from the traditional imaginary that associates it with sacrifice, renunciation, and unconditional love. Contemporary women writers portray the maternal as a situated, corporeal, ambivalent experience, marked by the tension between desire and duty, between self and other. In line with Adrienne Rich's (1984) reflections and her theory of the "politics of location," Italian writers speak of motherhood and locate themselves in their own bodies, as material reality, also describing where that experience has led them and how it has been codified in the context in which they live, often very distant from their actual experience.

However, some strands of feminism have shown a certain reluctance to place motherhood at the center of reflection, associating it with a reproduction of the traditional order to be overcome. In contrast, many Italian authors have chosen to critically reclaim the maternal experience, asserting its epistemological and narrative value. In their texts, motherhood does not appear as a mere biological function nor as an essentialist trap, but as a complex, plural, and contradictory experience. In a time dominated by liberal and neoliberal models based on individualism, abstract rationality, and the independence of the subject, these authors write from the body and propose an ethics of care and a politics of interdependence that are profoundly countercultural and feminist. The maternal paradigm that emerges from matrifocal literature can be read as an emblem of a new humanism based on interdependence, reciprocity, and the recognition of vulnerability and human strength. This paradigm challenges both the Western philosophical tradition, which has historically denied the body and the feminine, and certain currents of feminism that have marginalized the maternal experience in the name of an emancipation understood exclusively as individual autonomy.

These voices call for a critical rereading that assumes motherhood as a place of knowledge, agency, and resistance. Reappropriating motherhood, as these writers do, does not mean re-naturalizing its forms nor uncritically accepting the gender mandates that have historically accompanied it, but rather freeing its processes from the symbolic and practical colonization to which they have been subjected. This entails rejecting the imposition of educational models disconnected from the maternal body and desire, and the systematic denial of care in the name of progress or a misunderstood idea of equality. In opposition to some feminist currents that promote absolute autonomy of women as an emancipatory ideal, these authors remind us that human life, of both women and men, is woven with ties, mutual needs, and dependencies that should not be hidden but politically recognized and valued. Ultimately, the texts suggest that the

problem is not motherhood itself, but a socioeconomic and cultural system that turns its back on the education and care of children.

6. The Maternal Between Local and Global

VF: Finally, turning to a transnational perspective: how would you position Italian maternal writing in relation to literature from other cultural or geographic contexts, whether European or beyond? Are there specific traits, genealogies, or urgencies that distinguish the Italian approach?

MR: From a transnational perspective, Italian maternal writing displays distinctive traits that, in my opinion, place it in a unique position within the contemporary literary landscape. Unlike other contexts, in Italy – where the cultural and religious weight placed on the maternal figure must be considered – there is a particularly intense and lucid literary production surrounding themes such as infertility and medically assisted reproduction techniques. This is, without a doubt, one of the aspects that has most captured my attention as a researcher and clearly distinguishes Italian literature from others, such as Spanish literature. As a Spaniard, I live in a country with one of the most permissive laws in Europe regarding assisted reproduction, and one of the leaders in these practices, with a high number of women undergoing procedures that involve numerous physical and psychological difficulties due to the constraints inherent in such processes. However, there are very few literary accounts that deeply and critically explore this experience.

And this is precisely what surprises and moves me in contemporary Italian literature: the way in which many women writers have broken the taboo of infertility and share with readers not only their personal experience, but also their critiques of the difficulties arising from the implementation of the well-known Law 40. They do so through an honest and often searing writing style that is unafraid to show the physical, emotional, and existential impact of treatments, as well as the contradictions that the desire for motherhood can generate in a country where the maternal figure has historically been exalted as an ideal of femininity. The rawness of these testimonies, as well as the openness toward what is unprecedented, failed, or unfinished, make Italian literature a particularly fertile laboratory for thinking about motherhood in its full contemporary complexity and for reflecting on the key issues in the current debate regarding assisted reproduction and its limits.

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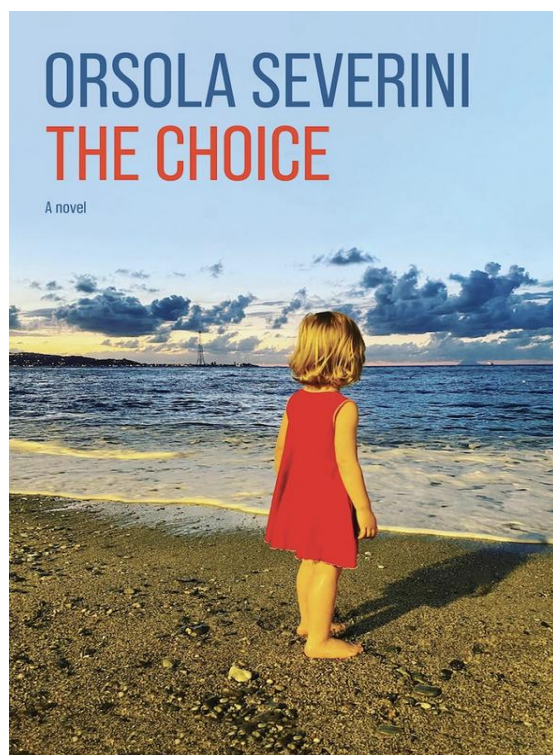
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Book Review & Interview

The Choice (2025) and a Conversation with Orsola Severini

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My son will be at daycare for another four hours- enough time, I thought, to read the first half of Orsola Severini's *The Choice*. I sat down, hesitant at first, expecting another clinical account of motherhood. In the first chapters, Severini's prose verges on the clinical, but beneath it an emotional current pulse. I couldn't stop reading. The micro-gestures between Orsola and Marco, her partner, the unspoken negotiations, the everyday monotony, and the medical jargon you have never heard before mirrored my own experience of becoming a mother. The safe space that Orsola was creating for me within her chapters was deeply vulnerable, relatable, and at times acted as a form of care for my emotions. She resisted simplification and moved between emotions in the most realistic way a mother does. Motherhood, I've learned, is a deep experience, one that defies any singular script or preconceived sense or understanding. It was within the pages of this book that I realized that this is the power of motherhood, not its weakness.

Like most women, much of what I experienced during my pregnancy was endured in silence. The first three months of pregnancy are marked by secrecy, that "just in case" period. Reading *The Choice* brought me back to that moment before my own 20-week anatomy scan, or in the Italian context, the nuchal translucency ultrasound. It's strange, even cruel, that we are told to announce a pregnancy before this scan, the very one that could demand an impossible decision about your body, your baby, your family. I've always found that contradiction absurd, as if silence were protection. But *The Choice* made me realize how these contradictions are structural or, more specifically, as Veronica Frigeni mentions in the preface, vitapolitical: "a biopolitical framework that does not empower women but entraps them within an imagined natural order, where motherhood is idealized and reproductive choices are policed" (Severini, 2025, 5). Severini writes within this tension, showing how nonsense can become the only sense that society allows. This cultural practice, intended as caution, becomes one of many invisible burdens women carry. It's here that *The Choice* resonates most powerfully: in the agency Severini reclaims, not only for herself but for all women. She is inviting us to rethink the maternal not as a fixed identity but as an ethical and temporal condition, one marked by negotiation, interruption, and endurance.

In this sense, Severini's text aligns with Adriana Cavarero's notion of the *inclined subject*, a figure defined not by autonomy but by relational exposure and care (Cavarero, 2016). The maternal body, for Cavarero, reveals an ethics of inclination, of being turned toward another. Severini enacts this inclination through form: her narrative bends repeatedly toward her children and her father, refusing the linearity of self-contained subjecthood. Even in her most painful moments, her thoughts remain tethered to others, already in debt to care before caring for herself. Severini moves back and forth between the past (her father) and the present (her pregnancy and loss). At first, these chapters may feel disjointed, but through the lens of scholar Lisa Baraitser, the chapters read as temporal returns, constitutive loops of maternal time rather than digressions. Baraitser examines the relationship between reproductive and non-reproductive time, asking how maternal time might be rethought through repetition, suspension, and forms of time that refuse to flow (Baraitser, 2014). Applied to Severini's writing, her father's memories resurface at moments of crisis, not as simple repetition but as shifting rhythmic pulses that sustain her when time and she herself seem to collapse. For me, they became brief reprieves from the present, a slipping, so to speak, in and out of the narrative like consciousness under anesthesia. The recollections work as a way for her, a way to survive these intrusive moments that she is being forced to face alone.

These oscillations are not nostalgic but anchoring; they let her endure when there is no time left in which to wait it out.

As I finished *The Choice*, I thought of Anne Carson's Lecture on *The History of Skywriting*, where she remarks that "being the sky requires a fair amount of just hanging there" (Louisiana Channel, 2019). Severini's memoir feels like that kind of suspension—maintained in time rather than driven by it, a record of care that endures through returns and interruptions. Within this rhythm, *The Choice* exposes the limits of the neoliberal fantasy of "choice," revealing endurance as a site of both constraint and resistance. It shows how the maternal body becomes a surface where biopolitical forces are inscribed and continually rewritten (Baraitser, 2014), and how subjectivity inclines toward others as a temporal as much as an ethical condition (Cavarero, 2016). And still, beneath governance and discourse, one image persists: a heart forming within your own, beating inside your body before it walks the world—the pulse of maternal time.

A Conversation with Orsola Severini

JC: Lisa Baraitser writes that "repetition is linked with the radicality of care." Your book often returns to gestures of care—feeding, touching, waiting, watching. Do you see these repetitions as a form of resistance or as evidence of the exhaustion care can produce?

OS: If I understand the question correctly, I would say that in moments of shock and emotional rupture, we often experience a kind of split within ourselves. That was certainly true for me. On one hand, I had to appeal to my rational side (to decide to terminate the pregnancy, knowing it was the most loving and necessary choice). On the other hand, I was still gripped by instinct: I spoke to the baby, I caressed my belly (automatically, almost unconsciously) because I felt the need to protect him. These gestures are deeply embedded in us, and they can be comforting, grounding (in the book, my mother cares for me mostly through those gestures and by taking care of children for me), while my father manages to communicate, for example, when we cook together.

But care can also become a trap. Especially in the early stages of motherhood, these repetitive gestures (feeding, soothing, enduring) can isolate women, imprison them in routines that generate exhaustion or even distress. So yes, repetition can be radical, but it can also be ambivalent. It holds both resistance and risk.

JC: The book exposes how "choice" in motherhood is never fully autonomous, always entangled with institutions, medicine, and culture. How do you understand choice now, after having lived through and written about it? Has anything changed in the Italian system?

OS: When I found myself in that situation, I was completely unprepared. I had no idea how difficult it would be to access a therapeutic abortion in Italy. I thought the decision would be dramatic only because I was ending a much-wanted pregnancy, and it was. But it also felt, at the time, like the only logical thing to do to minimize suffering for everyone involved, starting with the unborn child. It was, for me, a choice rooted in love.

What I didn't realize then, and what I came to understand through living it and writing about it, is that this decision or "choice" is, in fact, deeply political. Especially the act of speaking about it

publicly. That, for me, is the choice I most fiercely claim: the decision to break the silence around an act of love that thousands of women in Italy are forced to endure in secrecy and shame.

Unfortunately, the situation in Italy has not improved. Even though abortion has been legal since 1978, around 80% of public healthcare providers refuse to perform abortions, citing conscience objections. So, while the law exists on paper, access is increasingly denied in practice, especially in the South of the country.

JC: You capture the isolation of early pregnancy—the “just in case” silence. Why do you think secrecy still dominates the early months of gestation? Did writing this book feel like translating it or breaking that silence?

OS: I lived the early stages of my pregnancies with enormous stress: constantly afraid that my body might betray me, that I wouldn’t be “able” to hold onto the baby. There’s a latent sense of guilt (like in many aspects of women’s lives) that underlies this fear, as if any complication might be your fault. And when that guilt is combined with secrecy, it creates a profoundly delicate and solitary phase in a woman’s life.

That silence is so deeply ingrained that we’re told not to share the news too early, as if grief should be hidden, and we would have the right to grieve the loss of such a loss (there is no ritual in our society for that). I really wanted to translate it into something that could be shared. I wanted to give voice to that fragile, invisible time, and to the many women who live it in fear and solitude, because nobody had told about it before, and everything about motherhood felt so performative.

JC: Your prose moves between clinical description and lyrical intimacy. Was that duality intentional? How did you navigate the tension between medical language and personal embodiment?

OS: Yes, that duality was absolutely intentional and, for me, necessary. I wanted the reader to feel both the coldness of the medical system and the raw, intimate reality of the individual experiencing it. Medical language can be distancing, even dehumanizing, but it also has a crucial function: it is precise, non-judgmental, and allows us to describe what happens to the female body in situations that are often shrouded in silence or shame.

I believe that when the female body is not sexualized, we know very little about it (especially in terms of physical processes like miscarriage, therapeutic abortion, postpartum recovery, and breastfeeding). I think narratives (and things are thankfully starting to change) must also focus on this dimension, and we cannot reduce these experiences to moral or ethical debates alone, because doing so shifts the focus away from the actual problem: the body and how the body connects to the psychological, the social, or the religious spheres.

In addition, I tried to use the duality of language to mirror the duality of the book’s structure. On one side, there is the political dimension (what happens to a woman, any woman, who seeks therapeutic abortion in Italy, the systemic obstacles, the institutional silence, etc.). On the other hand, there is the personal dimension, because trauma is never abstract. We each process it through the lens of our own history. In my case, that meant confronting an unresolved relationship with my father, an eccentric doctor who had fought for abortion rights in the 1970s but was absent when I needed him most.

JC: Your decision to write *The Choice* transforms an intensely private experience into a public act of reflection and care. How did you navigate that threshold between the private and the shared, between what to protect and what to make visible?

OS: I wrote *The Choice* in a state of urgency. I often say that I “vomited” the story onto my computer because I needed to speak, and yet I couldn’t find the space to do so. Everyone around me told me to move on, to focus on my “beautiful family”, as if that child wasn’t a part of it. That silence was unbearable. Writing became the only place where I could acknowledge him, where I could say: he existed, and I am his mother.

At first, I didn’t think it would become a book. But then I realized that what had happened to me had happened to many others, and yet I wasn’t hearing those stories. Finding a publisher was difficult. Some suggested I remove the entire section about abortion and focus only on my father, which felt both paradoxical and ironic. Eventually, I found a courageous publisher who asked if I wanted to change my name and references to preserve anonymity. But if I was going to tell my story, I had to go all the way. Otherwise, I would be contradicting the very intention behind the book, to break the silence, not to mask it. Of course, I changed the names of others involved, out of respect for their privacy. But the story is mine, and I claim it fully.

JC: Much of *The Choice* is grounded in Rome and Italian social norms. How do you think your story might have unfolded differently within another cultural or legal system—say, in Canada or Northern Europe?

OS: I’m quite certain that, practically speaking, things would have been easier. In countries like Canada or parts of Northern Europe, I likely would have encountered fewer institutional obstacles, more consistent medical support, and perhaps less stigma, and the whole process might have been smoother, more humane. But on a personal level, I believe the emotional experience (the grief, the ambivalence, the inner conflict) would have been very similar. Because those dimensions are not only shaped by external systems, but also by our histories, our relationships, our sense of self.

At the same time, I’m genuinely curious to hear how women in other countries live these experiences. I hope the book can open a space for dialogue across borders. While the Italian situation is particularly dramatic, the right for women to control their bodies is under threat throughout the West. The U.S. Supreme Court’s decision a few years ago is a stark reminder of how fragile these rights are. That’s why I believe it’s essential for women to connect beyond national boundaries; in a globalized and interconnected world, reproductive justice must also be a global conversation.

JC: Was there a certain way that you felt like you had to grieve the loss of your baby differently from the loss of your father? When people die, the ceremony is so important for those still living - it gives closure. It seems like a lot of families don’t get that sort of same closure with the death of their unborn babies. I think most of this has to do with the fact that a lot of these “miscarriages” or “therapeutic” abortions still happen in silence. What is your take on this?

OS: You’re absolutely right. When my father died, there was a funeral, a gathering, food, and stories. There was “*il consolo*” (a Southern Italian tradition of bringing comfort through presence and nourishment). But when I lost my baby, there was nothing. No ritual, no recognition. Just

silence or urges to change the subject. That absence was devastating. Writing became my ritual. It was how I mourned, how I made sense of the loss, how I created a space for memory. I believe we need new rituals, ones that honor these invisible griefs and allow families to process them with dignity, and women sharing their experiences could be a very good one.

JC: Now that *The Choice* is out in the world, has your relationship to the story changed? Do you still feel inside its temporality, or has time finally begun to move differently?

OS: Time has shifted, but the story still lives in me. Publishing the book allowed me to place the experience outside of myself: to give it form, voice, and distance. But I still carry it. I always will. That child existed. I am his mother. And that bond doesn't dissolve with time. What has changed is that now, when I speak about it, I feel less alone.

One of the most unexpected outcomes was how my father (who had been a real, complex presence in my life) became a character. That's a strange experience. I'm not always sure where memory ends and narrative begins, or how much of him I'm remembering versus how much I'm reimagining through storytelling.

JC: Have you ever considered sharing the letter you wrote to your mother?

OS: My mother is an extremely private person. In the first version of the manuscript, I had written more about but she asked me to remove those parts, and I had to respect that. What remains in the book is essential and true, but carefully measured. As for the letter my father wrote to her, she never let me read it. So yes, we're two curious women wondering what it contains.

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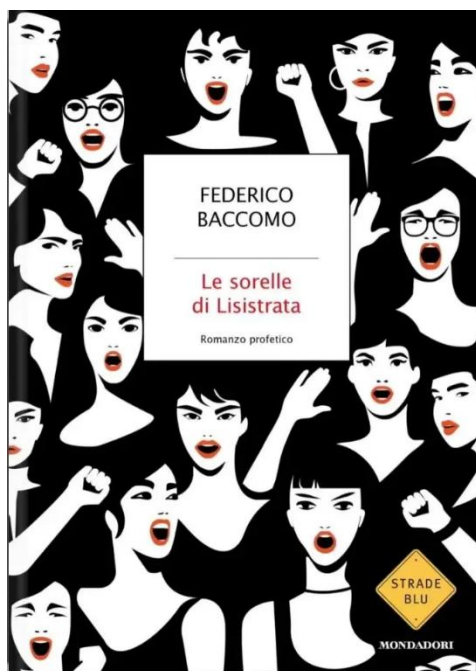
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Book Review & Interview

Le sorelle di Lisistrata (2025) and a Conversation with Federico Baccomo

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In a special issue devoted to representations of motherhood, it may seem paradoxical to include the review of a novel that centers on the defense of the freedom not to become a mother. Yet it is precisely in this refusal that some of the most urgent, complex, and politically charged questions about motherhood today are revealed. What if the right to become a mother meant nothing without the freedom not to? In contemporary Italy, where motherhood is increasingly framed by state-driven narratives as “women’s best choice” (Frigeni, 2024), and mobilized as a site of moral surveillance, nationalist nostalgia, and political control, this question is far from abstract. It is urgent, material, and deeply contested.

Feminist and reproductive justice thinkers have long insisted on the crucial distinction between motherhood and mothering (Rich, 1976). Motherhood denotes an institutionalized set of norms and expectations imposed on women by the state, religion, and heteronormative family structures. Mothering, by contrast, is an embodied, relational practice: flexible, self-determined, and potentially subversive. Within the reproductive justice framework developed by Black feminist scholars and activists, especially the SisterSong collective, reproductive freedom entails more than the binary of pro-choice or pro-life: it encompasses the right to have children, the right not to have children, and the right to raise children in conditions of dignity and safety (Ross & Solinger, 2017). Seen in this light, abortion is not an isolated or morally exceptional act, but part of a broader political demand for autonomy, justice, and care. Defending the right to abortion is not in contradiction with mothering; on the contrary, it is what makes chosen, meaningful mothering possible (Frigeni, 2025).

Over the past thirty years, Italian politics has increasingly operated under what Hanafin (2007) describes as a regime of “vitapolitics,” a mode of governance not aimed at empowerment, but rather at confining women within a constructed “natural” order that privileges pro-natalist, pro-family agendas. Within this framework, abortion is tolerated only as an exception, not affirmed as a right. Although the passing of Law 194 in 1978 represented a landmark achievement, many Italian feminists have long critiqued its limitations. The law emerged from a fraught compromise among diverse actors – feminist movements, leftist parties, and the Catholic Church – and, crucially, it failed to spark the deeper cultural transformation around gender, sexuality, and bodily autonomy that many had hoped for. As a result, legal access to abortion has coexisted with enduring stigma, moral judgment, and institutional resistance. This is why contemporary feminist campaigns often insist on going “much more than 194” (Frigeni, 2025), calling for a reproductive justice approach that can address the broader intersection of legal, social, and cultural forces shaping women’s reproductive lives. In the Italian context, material obstacles to reproductive care are entangled with dominant discourses that frame motherhood as a woman’s natural destiny and abortion as an inherently violent, traumatic act, thus reinforcing a biopolitical system in which female bodies are governed through moralization rather than freedom.

To resist paternalistically imposed motherhood, then, is to create space for reproductive agency in all its forms. And it is precisely this space that *Le sorelle di Lisistrata* (*Lysistrata’s Sisters*), Federico Baccomo’s bold and unsettling novel, seeks to imagine and defend. Set in a disturbingly plausible near-future Italy, the novel begins with a moment of political manipulation: Piergiuliano Berton, the newly appointed Minister for the Family in a right-wing government, publicly recounts the heartbreak of a long-past abortion experience: an anecdote that later proves to be a fabrication. Yet its emotional weight is enough to ignite media frenzy and prepare public opinion for what

soon follows: the repeal of Law 194 and the approval of the “Law of the Good Life,” which criminalizes abortion in all forms, at any stage, and for any reason. Enter Gaia Zavattini: 27 years old, newly elected in the ranks of a weakened center-left coalition, and a scholar of classical antiquity. Shocked by the new law and disillusioned by the inertia of traditional political channels, Gaia impulsively posts a reference to Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* on Instagram, suggesting that women today, like their ancient Greek counterparts, might use a sex strike to resist patriarchal violence. The idea, half-serious and half-desperate, catches fire. Under the viral hashtag #lesorelledilisistrata (#lysistratassistes), women across the country begin to share their stories, frustrations, and support, transforming Gaia’s isolated protest into a national movement.

Bacomo’s novel deftly combines speculative fiction and biting political satire with contemporary themes, making it both timely and prophetic. At its core, the novel interrogates the weaponization of pro-life and pro-family rhetoric, a central axis of current far-right discourse, not as neutral values, but as tools for dismantling women’s autonomy (D’Elia & Serughetti, 2021). The new legislation is portrayed not only as a regression in women’s rights, but as an outright reconfiguration of “reproductive citizenship” (Shaw, 2022), wherein the value of female bodies is strictly determined by their maternal potential. The novel also explores the layered dynamics of contemporary feminist activism, online and offline (Salvatori, 2023). Gaia’s accidental leadership illustrates the unpredictability of digital resistance, where a post can spark collective mobilization as easily as it can provoke backlash, trolling, and character assassination. As the novel progresses, Gaia becomes the target of relentless public scrutiny and a process of systematic stigmatization and “monsterization” (Compagna & Steinhart, 2020), which speaks to abortion as a still “societal taboo” in today’s Italy and to the (non)reproductive body as the implosion of a system of order and rightness (p. x). Cast as the archetype of the “unruly woman” and reduced to what O’Reilly-Collin and O’Reilly (2025) have termed a “feral body,” she is vilified in increasingly violent and gendered ways. This demonization reaches its peak when she is scapegoated for the deaths of several women during a street protest, an event she neither incited nor controlled. Her credibility is dismantled, her intentions distorted, and her femininity subjected to constant surveillance and correction. Through this portrayal, Bacomo incisively captures the ways in which contemporary feminist dissent is often reframed as a “war of the sexes” (McRobbie, 2009), a depoliticizing narrative that turns structural critique into personal antagonism, and erases the political stakes of reproductive resistance. The sex strike, in this context, becomes a deliberately provocative feminist tactic, not merely a symbol of sexual power, but a refusal of the very terms on which heteronormative, patriarchal intimacy is built.

Stylistically, *Le sorelle di Lisistrata* positions itself as a “prophetic” novel, although not in the sense of a distant, dystopian fantasy, but as an unsettlingly plausible extrapolation of contemporary Italy. Bacomo appropriates the conventions of speculative fiction not to escape the political present, but to expose its underlying logics and trajectories. His narrative traces the slow erosion of reproductive rights, the convergence of authoritarian populism and religious conservatism, and the affective manipulation of trauma in public discourse. In this sense, the novel functions both as speculative fiction, defined by Oziewicz (2017) as fiction that departs from “consensus reality” to mirror the present through its logical, if alarming, consequences, and as part of the longer feminist dystopian tradition (Norledge, 2022), which uses imagined futures to critique gendered power structures. Yet Bacomo’s work also departs from this lineage: rather than constructing a radically

unfamiliar dystopia, *Le sorelle di Lisistrata* operates as a form of counterfactual realism, a speculative scenario that remains deeply tethered to the affective climate and political logics of contemporary Italy. What makes the novel particularly powerful is its capacity to expose, resist, and imagine alternatives to what Micciché (2025) has termed “patriarchal realism”: the narrative regime through which gendered oppression is rendered natural, inevitable, and thus unquestionable. Drawing inspiration from Fisher’s (2009) notion of “capitalist realism” – the idea that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism – Micciché suggests that patriarchal realism functions similarly, conditioning our perception of gender norms as immutable facts rather than socio-political constructs. Baccomo’s novel unsettles this narrative closure, insisting instead on the possibility of rupture, refusal, and reinvention. Nonetheless, these very cracks in the system, while gesturing toward alternative futures, also expose bodies and lives to renewed forms of risk. In *Le sorelle di Lisistrata*, resistance is neither safe nor romanticized: it entails a politics of exposure, where stepping outside the normative frame – whether through dissent, solidarity, or refusal – often invites surveillance, backlash, and violence. The novel thus confronts us with a double bind: it illuminates the urgent need for alternative imaginaries, while refusing to conceal the material cost of sustaining them.

This is why I argue that, in a world increasingly governed through biopolitical regimes, where power is exercised through the regulation of life itself, Baccomo’s novel turns to what Foucault, in a rare note, described (2017) as “biopoetics”: a mode of resisting normalization through aesthetico-ethical self-fashioning. To move beyond biopolitics, Foucault argues, the regime of truth that underpins it must be exposed, its contingency made visible, its fractures situated within both individual subjects and the knowledge-power matrices that govern them. In this regard, *Le sorelle di Lisistrata* opens up a “future anterior” horizon (Higgins & Leps, 2022), which is less a prediction than a provocation: what might we yet become if we refuse the present’s reproductive imperatives? The novel, then, functions as a “heterotopias” in the Foucauldian sense (1986), not merely a fictional setting, but a counter-site that reveals the artifice of dominant norms around gender, family, and political agency. Through three interwoven processes, “disposition, distraction, and dislocation” (Higgins & Leps, 2022), Baccomo disorients the reader to create critical distance. It disposes us to transpose: by staging a familiar-yet-altered Italy where abortion has been criminalized, it forces us to reconsider the precariousness of reproductive rights in our own reality. It distracts in the etymological sense of pulling away, allowing for transactions between disparate systems of meaning: classical mythology, feminist genealogy, social media activism, mass media and the machinery of the state. And it dislocates, exposing the constructedness of so-called truths, such as the sanctity of family, the inevitability of motherhood, the neutrality of law. This is not merely narrative dislocation, but ontological: the novel enacts biopoetics as a way of imagining and inhabiting alternative forms of life.

Gaia Zavattini, the novel’s protagonist, enacts this counter-practice through a form of “parrhesia,” which is Foucault’s term (1983) for courageous, risk-laden truth-telling. Her initial social media post is neither strategic nor calculated; it is an impassioned, unfiltered response that catalyzes collective resistance. Gaia’s speech defies institutional decorum; it is direct, affective, and politically dangerous. Her trajectory, from idealistic scholar to activist to victim of state and sexual violence, illustrates the cost of parrhesia in a system that disciplines women not only through law but through the moralized expectations of maternal sacrifice. Her rape and subsequent pregnancy

signal the violent backlash against women who transgress the normative reproductive script. Yet Gaia's ultimate withdrawal from public life, even after the law is repealed, should not be misread as defeat. Rather, it affirms her refusal to be co-opted, whether as a symbol of resistance or a martyr of the cause. In choosing exile over appropriation, Gaia asserts a quieter but no less radical form of agency: the refusal to play the role assigned by power, even when that role is one of triumphant dissent. It is precisely this refusal that embodies the ethical force of parrhesia, not as heroic display, but as the insistence on truth-telling at the price of belonging.

Similarly, the sex strike at the heart of *Le sorelle di Lisistrata* can be understood not merely as a symbolic gesture of protest, but as a collective act of parrhesia, of truth-telling through embodied refusal. Foucault emphasizes that the decisive trait of the parrhesiast lies not in birth, class, or rhetorical mastery, but in the coherence between one's speech and one's way of life. In this sense, Gaia and the women who join her do not simply speak against the "Law of the Good Life"; they perform their dissent through the radical interruption of the intimate and reproductive labor the state assumes to be theirs. The strike functions as a materialization of "logos-bios" alignment (Higgins & Leps, 2022): the women's bodies become the medium through which truth is articulated, not just stated. In withholding sexual and emotional availability, they render visible the invisible infrastructures of power that condition women's social roles under the guise of naturalized femininity. This embodied refusal does not require institutional authority to be legible as political; rather, it draws its force precisely from the ethical risk of standing apart from what is expected, proper, or safe. In Foucauldian terms, this form of protest is parrhesiastic because it exposes the vulnerable body to scrutiny and retaliation, while remaining faithful to a truth that exceeds personal interest. The strike thus becomes a site of truth-practice, where speech, risk, and life converge into a shared act of political becoming.

In this light, *Le sorelle di Lisistrata* contributes meaningfully to contemporary feminist and reproductive justice debates by insisting that the right not to mother is inseparable from the ability to mother freely and meaningfully. The novel does not position abortion as a tragic exception to maternal desire, but as part of a wider continuum of reproductive agency. By foregrounding the affective, bodily, and political dimensions of refusal, Baccomo's novel helps reframe reproductive rights not as narrow legal entitlements, but as relational, embodied, and ethically fraught forms of world-making. In doing so, it challenges readers to recognize reproductive freedom as not just a private choice, but a public, collective stake, a terrain where the intersectional struggle for justice, dignity, and alternative futures is continuously unfolding.

A Conversation with Federico Baccomo

In light of the preceding discussion, I had the opportunity to speak with Federico Baccomo, whose novel *Le sorelle di Lisistrata* offers a bold and unsettling fictional intervention into the ongoing discourse on reproductive politics in Italy. The following questions aim to explore how Baccomo understands the political stakes of his work, its mythopoetic dimensions, and its engagement with the epistemic and affective landscape of the present.

1. **VF:** Your novel unfolds as a narrative work that, while fictional, deeply engages with the socio-political anxieties of contemporary Italy, touching on issues such as gender, reproductive

rights, and the often porous boundaries of political and institutional power. As Foucault (1977) observed, a book cannot be reduced to the subjective truth of its author; rather, it constitutes a fiction that reflects the broader epistemic configuration of its era. To what extent do you see *Le sorelle di Lisistrata* as shaped by the “regimes of truth” of our present, particularly in relation to the restriction of reproductive citizenship, the politicization of women’s bodies, and the sexualization and punishment of dissent? Do you view the novel as a potential “epistemological document” of the present, or rather as a speculative narrative aimed at destabilizing the now through projection into the future? Finally, what role does your own authorial positionality play in this tension between chronicling and foretelling?

FB: Before answering such a complex question, I need to preface my response by clarifying what novels are to me, at least at the moment they are conceived. They are stories. Nothing more, nothing less. They are not reflections, nor philosophical elaborations, nor vehicles for a message. They are – if I may simplify – a character who wants something and, in order to obtain it, must overcome a series of obstacles. Odysseus wants to return home despite the will of the gods. Edmond Dantès wants revenge against a long list of enemies. Renzo and Lucia want to get married in spite of the opposition of a powerful tyrant. Novels are born from these narrative sparks with which writers attempt to kindle a fire, that is, to develop a compelling plot (whatever meaning we wish to assign to “compelling”: a Patricia Highsmith thriller can be as compelling as a Virginia Woolf novel). The plot – a word that nowadays seems to frighten a good percentage of writers, as if it were a stain from which literature must cleanse itself but doesn’t know how – is the foundation of a good book. It answers the question: What is this novel about? Then, at a later stage, during the writing process, something more begins to emerge from the pages, something that some call “the theme.” The theme, indeed, is a reflection, a philosophical elaboration, a message. It answers a different question: What is this novel really about? This is a discovery made by the reader while reading, but it is also a discovery made by the writer while writing. Conversely, if a writer were to sit down with a preconceived doctrine – for example, “the rich are all bad” – and tried to disguise it within a story, not only would the novel be suffocated by a theme that blocks any free development of thought (that very freedom which makes thought fertile), but we would be faced with a servile novel, incapable of revealing anything new about the world, and thus, an empty one. These are the so-called thesis novels, to which even the most brilliant writers have sometimes succumbed (I’m thinking of an exceptional author such as George Orwell and his *Animal Farm*).

Having made this long (and perhaps pedantic) preamble, I can say that *Le sorelle di Lisistrata* was born simply from the encounter of two ideas. One stolen from reality: what would happen if Italy, following the American example after the overturning of the *Roe vs. Wade* decision, were to ban abortion? And another borrowed from imagination: what would happen if, in protest against this ban, a woman were to follow Aristophanes’ *Lysistrata* and call for a sex strike? The meeting of these two ideas seemed to me narratively explosive: here was a novel I would have liked to read and/or write.

At that point, it became a question of deciding the narrative perspective: who would tell such a story? Perhaps the protagonist? Perhaps an omniscient narrator? I wrestled with this for quite some time, and eventually found what seemed to me the most fitting perspective: that of a reporter. What if I wrote the novel as if it were a long, cold piece of reportage? The option

made sense on several levels: first, it lent the story a certain degree of realism; second, it allowed me to adopt a stripped-down, journalistic style, giving me the chance to play with the quirks and distortions of that language; but above all – and here we finally reach the answer to your question – it allowed me to hide. I could make the author disappear from a novel that, on almost every page, demands that one take sides, that one express a moral and ethical judgement. In this sense, the novel tries to be a faithful mirror of our time, seeking to construct a story as plausible as possible, starting from its premise (the two ideas above), and developing it through a rigorous chain of narrative cause and effect until its final explosion. Thus – at least it seems to me – the balance and tension you refer to between (to use perhaps overly simple words) reality and fiction are not so much erased (which would be impossible) as somehow circumvented, at least formally, allowing me, the author, to step aside. Not to evade my responsibilities, but to allow the novel to live on its own, without being crushed or nullified by my own positions.

2. **VF:** Giorgio Agamben (2009) defines the “contemporary” as “that relationship with time that adheres to it, through a disjunction and an anachronism” (p. 41); at the same time he observes how, the contemporary is not one who merely inhabits their time, but also and mostly one who turns toward its darkness, not to lament, but to perceive the light that struggles to reach us. Your novel imagines a future Italy in which reproductive rights are dismantled, dissent is criminalized, and political storytelling becomes a tool of manipulation. In this sense, the novel embodies Agamben’s idea of the contemporary by illuminating the obscurities of the present through prophetic realism. But following his formulation, I would also ask: where do you locate the flickers of light in this darkness? Are there forms of resistance, care, or solidarity in the novel that point toward alternative futures – even if fragile, fragmented, or unresolved?

FB: I have always rejected that somewhat snobbish idea of literature that insists it must shock, unsettle, or disturb. Life itself already throws plenty of punches; I have no wish to join in the existential bullying with my stories. For this reason, I believe that it is not, perhaps, necessary, but certainly desirable, for a novel, even the darkest, cruellest, most merciless one, to contain at least a seed of light. Or better still: several seeds of light. In *Le sorelle di Lisistrata*, darkness reigns from the very first pages. And it is a darkness destined to grow ever denser, at times unbearable; it often seems impossible to glimpse even a glimmer. Yet I have the feeling that, by the end of the book, however angry, or even furious, the reader might feel, they do not come away despairing. And I believe this is thanks to her, Gaia, the protagonist.

Gaia is a resilient woman, one who does not give up; a young woman who, despite her sense of inadequacy, keeps her protest alive. From the moment she steps onto the page, Gaia carries within her a sense of hope, not so much that everything could be different, but that everything must be different. She is the light, mine and the novel’s: the affirmation of a will that, despite everything, refuses to bend. What comforts me is that Gaia does not seem to me merely a narrative device. I continue to see voices and wills like hers around me, and even though at times – and increasingly often – they appear to be in the minority, or worse, powerless, they remain alive. Often, far more alive than those who speak only of darkness.

3. **VF:** Your novel does more than reference Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*; it reanimates the myth as a feminist and strategic resource within a contemporary media ecology. Gaia's invocation of the sex strike becomes a viral, affective force that transforms private trauma into public action, blurring parody, tragedy, and revolt. In this sense, the novel uses myth not as nostalgic return, but as what Chiara Bottici (2021) might call a "mythopoetic" tool: a way to imagine otherwise, perform dissent, and reframe dominant narratives. As Bottici writes, "Myths are self-fulfilling prophecies: they do not wait for reality to prove their truth—they build it. [...] A myth must constantly reinvent itself to remain alive, responding to ever-changing conditions of meaning" (p. 3). How do you understand the role of *Lysistrata* in your novel? Do you see Gaia and the women who follow her as mythmakers in their own right, creators of a counter-myth capable of disrupting dominant narratives of nationhood, morality, and motherhood?

FB: Writing a novel is a journey that spills beyond the pages. It involves studying, delving deeper, investigating: sometimes, to write a single line, one may have to go through hundreds of pages, or films, or conversations. During this journey, one of the discoveries I made was that my protagonist was not inventing anything new. The so-called "Lysistratic non-action" (that is, the sex strike first imagined by Aristophanes in *Lysistrata*) is a form of non-violent protest that women, at different times and in different contexts, have repeatedly turned to throughout history. I discovered that the myth had become reality, and that my story, without my even realising it, drew its strength not so much from the imagination of the Greek playwright as from its embodiment in the real protests of women who had actually done it. Indeed, to truly do it – to reinvent the myth in response to one's own time and aspirations – is the best way to ensure that once upon a time may last forever after. Gaia and her sisters, in fiction, try to do just that: not only by attempting to dismantle dominant narratives, but above all by making themselves the protagonists of the narrative, to the point where they can no longer be ignored. In Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, the protagonist's strength lay precisely here: not merely in having proposed a sex strike, but in having made it impossible to ignore her words, her protests, her demands.

4. **VF:** The novel vividly illustrates how collective fear and manufactured emotion can solidify into what has been described as a "pyramid of hate" (Faloppa & Gheno, 2021) – a process through which everyday microaggressions rest upon, and contribute to, deep-rooted structures of systemic violence. In *Le sorelle di Lysistrata*, hate operates not only as a visceral emotion, but also as a rhetorical tool and a political technology: it is cultivated by media narratives, weaponized by institutions, and normalized within public discourse. Following Ahmed's analysis (2004), hate can be understood as a cultural and affective mechanism that aligns subjects against imagined threats, producing boundaries between those who belong and those who must be expelled. How did you conceptualize the role of hatred in constructing this fictional world? In your view, is hate merely a byproduct of authoritarian populism, or does it function as its true affective engine? And crucially, do you consider this hatred to be gendered – both in the way it is directed and in how it is legitimized? Does the novel suggest that women – particularly those who resist normative roles—become symbolic targets of a broader cultural anxiety around social change? How do you see the interplay between fear, misogyny, and the desire for moral control operating within your narrative?

FB: Hatred is one of the main driving forces of the novel, because unfortunately it seems to have become one of the main driving forces of society – especially today’s media society. It is a hatred that manifests itself in numerous forms: there is the polarisation that social media and the speed of expression have imposed on us – “You’re either with us or against us!” – leaving no room for nuance, for reflection; there is the habit of hatred, born from the ease with which we can now resort to insult without any consequence (the notorious “keyboard warriors”); there is the hatred that is stimulated by algorithms, which benefit from exposing us to content we disagree with, since our attention – driven by anger – is far more easily awakened by what infuriates us than by what we agree with; there is hatred used as a tool of delegitimation: anyone who expresses an opinion contrary to mine is an “hater”, and must be treated as such; and many other forms of hatred could be identified. Thus hatred becomes the nerve of a system that feeds on it and does nothing but fuel it further. And who are the main victims? Precisely those who choose to step outside the norm. In this sense, women – especially those who assert themselves beyond a rooted and obsolete vision – are the natural targets of a large segment of society (composed of both men and, unfortunately, also women) which – particularly on sexual matters (in the broadest sense) – feels not so much challenged as outright victimised by what it perceives as a profound lack of respect: how dare you question the established order?! Thus fear – because ultimately these people are often frightened (dangerous, but frightened) – turns into an anxiety to restore the lost order, with all the violent consequences this may entail. There is a rather stark passage in the novel, in which Gaia suffers the worst kind of violence as a form of punishment, and I believe that the criminals who commit that violence are neither ironic nor looking for a pretext: no, they genuinely believe themselves to be invested with that mission. The most terrible kind of hatred: ideological hatred, which absolves itself.

5. **VF:** *Le sorelle di Lisistrata* presents a media ecosystem where emotional manipulation, spectacle, and strategic framing play a central role in shaping public perception and institutional power. From the Minister’s fabricated abortion story to the viral spread of Gaia’s protest, the novel highlights how media not only mediate political reality but actively construct it. In conceptualizing this dimension, to what extent were you influenced by theories of media effects which argue that media shape not only what we think about, but how we interpret and value it? More specifically, how do you see the role of media in reinforcing cultural scripts around gender and motherhood in Italy? And what possibilities, if any, do you see for media to foster counter-narratives that resist consensus and open space for reproductive dissent?

FB: The media – especially social media, in the worst version of a series of algorithms owned by a handful of ultra-millionaires who, outside any form of regulation, decide the topic of the day, promoting what they think should be promoted and concealing what they think should be hidden – are our modern Scheherazade: they tell the stories, and we are captivated. But Scheherazade – the original one – not only declared her fiction, she also had a noble purpose: to save women like herself, victims of the hatred (there it is again) of a deranged ruler. What is the purpose of today’s media? First and foremost, to enrich investors. But not only that. It has now become clear that controlling public opinion is among their principal objectives. For this reason – in a novel that speaks of entire peoples in mobilisation – it was impossible to detach the narrative from something as apparently unliterary as the media. Specifically, gender

and motherhood are arenas on which the future of politics and society is now being played out (these are issues that move people more than economic crises, environmental crises, even war). Allowing the narration of such sensitive matters to be outsourced to those aforementioned multimillionaires, who possess the power to control (and censor) whatever does not fit within their personal agenda, represents a dangerous frontier, one in which no one – in the few expressive spaces they may manage to carve out (as Gaia does in the novel) – stands any real chance of winning. The only solution I can see is to regulate those spaces, removing them from the self-governance of private entities: in short, there can be no Zuckerberg, no Musk, who holds the freedom and the power to decide who may speak, about what, when, and how – even if that means killing whatever algorithm drives the delivery of content.

6. **VF:** In one of the most emotionally charged scenes of the novel, Gaia stands before Parliament and utters six words – “I’m pregnant. I don’t want to keep it” (p. 109) – that the narrator describes not only as personal declarations, but as questions that the Italian public feels compelled to answer. These statements, though uttered in the first person, are received as collective provocations. You write: “All that remained of her was the deafening uproar of those six words. I’m pregnant. I don’t want to keep it. Two statements that were also a question that Italians felt compelled to answer. Forced to answer. How else could they go on?” (p. 142). The novel powerfully stages the way personal reproductive experiences are transformed into public moral battlegrounds. How did you envision this scene, in which a survivor’s trauma is not met with empathy or care, but becomes a national referendum on motherhood, agency, and belonging? Do you see this moment as a commentary on how Italy’s cultural and political discourse routinely appropriates women’s bodies as symbols for broader ideological conflicts?

FB: More than a critique, it is an accusation. Democracy – that famous lesser evil – is not a goddess to whom everything must be sacrificed. There are aspects of life that must be removed from the decision of the majority. Let’s make a hypothesis: tomorrow the country wakes up and decides to establish a lottery in which, once a year, someone is chosen by lot to be stoned to death (the idea, of course, comes from Shirley Jackson). Is that legitimate? According to the most rigidly democratic logic, if that is what the majority wants, the answer is: yes. Yet we all feel, instinctively, that it is an aberration. So why is it that, when it comes to deciding over a woman’s body, the issue is elevated to a political question – as though this ennobled the debate – when in fact it concerns an invasion that should be removed precisely from that debate? In this sense, the scene in the book becomes a question not only for the Italian people within the novel, but also for the reader outside it.

7. **VF:** *Le sorelle di Lisistrata* engages directly with some of the most urgent debates of our time: on reproductive rights, gendered violence, and the politicization of women’s bodies. Yet it does so not through didacticism, but through a complex and emotionally charged narrative form.

What do you hope the novel contributes to these ongoing conversations, not only in terms of its thematic content, but also through its formal, ethical, and political approach to storytelling? Why do you think this kind of narrative intervention is needed now, in this particular historical moment? What role can fiction play in unsettling dominant discourses, making visible what is often silenced, or offering new affective and imaginative vocabularies for resistance?

In short, how do you see your work positioning itself, artistically and politically, within the broader cultural struggle over meaning, resistance, and agency?

FB: I am very cautious about assigning a social mission to literature: my fear is that a tool for analysis, investigation, and discovery might become a tool for propaganda (even when the ideas being promoted are worthy ones). I am convinced that the usefulness – political or social – of a novel is a marvellous side effect, which occurs when the author tells a story that engages honestly and intelligently with the present. When that happens, something precious takes place: the reader has the chance to travel through imagination into worlds that broaden their vision of reality, and in this sense they are able to amplify that quality so central to the act of reading: empathy. It is in this sense that a good book can – if I may use an overused phrase – “change the reader’s life”, just as a journey, a conversation, a love affair, or indeed any experience that widens our perspective can. For this reason, it is not wrong to speak of agency in relation to books: we approach them seeking comfort, pleasure, entertainment (for these are, for the most part, the driving forces behind reading), and we part from them having gained a new awareness, one that is capable of guiding our actions.

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Review and Translation

Poetry That Bites: Stefania Antonelli's Fragments of a Maternal Becoming

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Review and Translation

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"Motherhood is the last frontier of female writing": this bold claim opens Alice Braun's recent study on maternal authorship, framing motherhood not as a topic among others, but as a profound challenge to traditional understandings of selfhood and literary creation (p. 2). In the last two decades, as Braun (2025) observes, literature, particularly life writing and poetry, has seen a significant rise in narratives that center the maternal not only as a theme but as a form and process. These texts not only portray mothers; they attempt to become maternal in their very structure: fragmentary, interrupted, relational. Motherhood meaningfully destabilizes the liberal ideal of the self-contained individual. The maternal self is defined through relation: fluid, incomplete, and shaped by others' needs. This relational identity often clashes with dominant models of artistic authorship that prize detachment, autonomy, and control. It's in this tension that maternal writing gains its force: it becomes a space where the "impossible subject" of the mother can begin to speak in her own terms (Braun, 2025). Rather than presenting a coherent narrative arc, many of these texts – memoirs, journals, hybrid essays, poems – embrace fragmentation, repetition, and interruption as structural principles, reflecting the lived realities of care and constraint.

As Braun (2025) observes, when women become mothers, their relationship to time and space is fundamentally altered, along with their place in the world and their connections to others (p. 133). Maternal life introduces temporal ruptures, emotional intensities, and shifting priorities that complicate linear or unified narratives. In this sense, writing motherhood often demands new forms: discontinuous, intimate, and hybrid. Poetry becomes a privileged space for this exploration: a genre that accommodates fragmentation, brevity, and embodied rhythms. Philosopher Lisa Baraitser (2008) offers a powerful account of how maternity disrupts conventional narrative logic. She describes the maternal subject as "a subject of interruption" (p. 74), whose time is perpetually fractured by the child's needs. This disruption challenges the very conditions of literary production, particularly for mother-writers, who must contend with a genre, a narrative, that presupposes continuity. For Baraitser, "motherhood lends itself to anecdote rather than the grand narrative of 'mother-writing' due to the constant attack on narrative that the child performs" (p. 15). Writing becomes an act negotiated in the interstices of care, shaped by delay, pause, and return.

Literary critic Sarah Blackwood (2018) expands this reflection by suggesting that motherhood should be considered not merely a subject, but a genre, a material practice that shapes writing itself. In this view, motherhood is not something a writer chooses to address or not, but an embodied condition that restructures writing from within. As she puts it, writers such as Maggie Nelson and Jenny Offill exemplify how the formal fragmentation of their texts mirrors the discontinuous rhythms of maternal time: "motherhood is nothing but a collection of short bursts of focus set inside the oceanic nothingness of time passing." The genre of motherhood, then, is marked by narrative interruption, temporal compression, and structural openness.

In life writing, this formal innovation aligns with a feminist shift from daughter-centric narratives to matrifocal ones. Elizabeth Podnieks and Andrea O'Reilly (2010) argue that contemporary maternal texts work to reclaim the mother's voice and subjectivity. These writings reject idealized or culturally imposed images of the selfless, ever-giving mother in favor of honest, at times ambivalent, representations of care, exhaustion, and resistance. As Podnieks and O'Reilly explain, such matrifocal texts allow women to resist the symbolic erasure of motherhood and gain narrative control over their lived realities (p. 7). In this process, they seek to tear off what Susan Maushart (1999) has famously called "the mask of motherhood."

Taken together, these perspectives invite us to think of maternal poetry, and specifically of Stefania Antonelli's poems, not as a niche category, but as a vibrant and evolving form of life writing that grapples with the constraints and affordances of mothering as both experience and practice. Her poetry does not reflect on motherhood from a distance; it is written *within* it, amid fatigue, love, repetition, rupture, and intimacy. It is poetry shaped by time "borrowed" from care work, marked by the laboring maternal body and the unfinished rhythms of daily life. In this sense, maternal writing is not only personal and political: it is formally radical. This fragmentary poetics is central to the work of Italian poet Antonelli, who begins from the premise that "the fragment is the form of experience itself... as if only through the fragment could the chaotic truth of motherhood be told." For Antonelli, poetry does not speak *about* motherhood from a distance, but emerges *within* it, rooted in the everyday fatigue of the body that nurses, yields, gets dirty and cleans, resists. From this deeply embodied and immersive position, her maternal poetics disrupt conventional notions of voice, authorship, and form.

A second defining feature of Antonelli's work is her marked use of corporeal language, through which the maternal body is not deployed as metaphor, but asserted as a site of lived tension, affect, and subjectivity. This aligns with Julia Kristeva's reflections in *Stabat Mater* (1985), where motherhood is framed as an ambivalent space, suspended between the symbolic and the semiotic, between cultural construction and visceral materiality. In resonance with this framework, Antonelli rejects sentimentalized, symbolic, or abstract portrayals of maternity, opting instead for a sophisticated realism that foregrounds the raw physical and psychic textures of mothering. Her verses evoke skin, blood, fatigue, and touch to construct a maternal subjectivity that actively contests binary oppositions such as mind/body, reason/emotion, and purity/abjection. In this way, Antonelli's poetic self-inquiry into – and through – the transition to motherhood articulates a persistent "dialectic between embodied autonomy versus embodied disempowerment" (Bennett & Koelsh, 2022, p. 740), which becomes a defining narrative thread across her collection.

Moreover, in many of Antonelli's poems, the act of writing itself becomes a central theme, foregrounded not only as a form of emotional catharsis in the context of postpartum depression, but as a vital, embodied practice through which a new maternal subjectivity is constituted. Writing is not merely therapeutic; it is ontological. It functions as a "transcorporeal" medium (Alaimo, 2010), enabling the porous movement, the intricacy and the interconnectedness between the self, her daughters, her emerging maternal identity, and the surrounding non-human world. Through language, the postpartum subject negotiates her reconfigured relationship to time, embodiment, and domestic space. Poetry, in this context, becomes both the record and the enactment of a shifting being-in-the-world. It is through the rhythms, silences, and tactile textures of language that the maternal self comes into relation with others and with herself anew. The necessity to write, insistently thematized in the poetry, thus marks more than a psychological need: it becomes a mode of relational dwelling, a way of inhabiting the everyday from within a fractured yet fertile subject-position. Language is not outside the body, but deeply imbricated in its transformation; the poetic form becomes a site of transcorporeal intimacy and emergence.

Following these interpretive contextualizations, three poems from Antonelli's 2025 collection *Attenti che morde – Poesie sul diventare madre* (*Careful, It Bites – Poems on Becoming a Mother*) are presented. These poems offer a vivid and compelling glimpse into the lived and written reality of becoming a mother, characterized by its raw, fragmented, intimate, corporeal, and politically resonant nature.

Bone

Noted:

cumin stench all through the house
(it's the Thai rice I burned in the pan)
dirty hair clumped in strands
crumbs nesting in the corners
cream-slick fingers
at the center of the screen
and then: the compost bag spilling over
as does my urge
to scrub myself
with turpentine, kerosene
and bleach
until nothing remains of me
but a single bone
translucent
tinged with pine
laundry hung and lemon
— but:
it clings to me
the smell of milk
diapers and sweat.
it's a sign that screams #postpartum
BEWARE: it bites.

Breast

10:27

Note

Quickly open the note on the phone

write without spaces without punctuation breast still out of the
stretched tank top from all the times you latch her on

and she leaves saliva like glue stick like the back of an envelope

to be sealed with a swipe of tongue. I write or rather type

a poem climbing stairs, and with the other hand

I hold your bald head your round skull the ears

crumpled against me period.

Place

I wake and wonder: where am I?

I'm in the place

where mothers dwell.

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Representation of
Motherhood and
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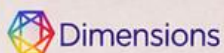
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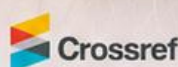


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