



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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