



### 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.

**Funding:** No funding was received for this research and publication.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declared no conflicts of interest.

**Article History:** Received: 02 September 2025. Revised: 05 June 2026. Accepted: 20 June 2026. First published: 28 June 2026.

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**Publisher:** Critical Gender Studies Network (CGSN)

**Citation:** Frigeni, V. (2026). Breaking the Maternal Bronze Figure: Vera Omodeo *Dal latte materno veniamo*. *Critical Gender Studies Journal*. 3(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21659/cgsj.v3n1.02>

## 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.<sup>1</sup> 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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<sup>1</sup> 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.

[https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2024/04/07/news/statua\\_donna\\_allatta\\_vera\\_omodeo\\_commissione\\_milano-422435562/](https://milano.repubblica.it/cronaca/2024/04/07/news/statua_donna_allatta_vera_omodeo_commissione_milano-422435562/)

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