



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 legitimating 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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