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# **Thinking the Maternal Collectively**

**A Feminist Critique of Equality, Individualism and Universalism**

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submitted for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy of the University of London

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declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is my own, except where explicit reference is made to the work of others.

## abstract

This thesis is an attempt to conceptualise motherhood in a collective, relational way and to examine whether a relational model of motherhood can be transformative for a mother's sense of self—her subjectivity. I attempt the broader social and philosophical work of placing the mother and the work of reproduction within the realm of the concrete and the real, not of the metaphor. I suggest that a model of relational motherhood grounded in 1970s and 1980s Italian and French sexual difference feminism offers us an alternative way to talk about 'community' and maternal subjectivity in order to challenge and ward off the isolation many new mothers and carers experience. Centering primarily on the work of those authors who have engaged with a relational ontology framework as their core sustained interest, I focus on the alliance between Luce Irigaray and Italian sexual difference feminism, in particular the work by feminist political philosopher Adriana Cavarero and the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective. I suggest this work offers a radical example of a critique of equality, individualism and universalism as a solution for women's freedom. I draw on a variety of materials and approaches to support my argument throughout the thesis (including a case study of a mothers' collective, *Il Collettivo Madri*, set up by a group of mothers in Rome, Italy, in the early 1970s, and my collaboration with artists to use coloured thread to explore carers' relationality). I engage with feminist psychoanalysts' and psychotherapists' readings of maternal subjectivity. The concept and practice of relationality links these approaches and engagements, which illustrate the potential of a relational model of motherhood to disrupt law's patriarchal hegemonic default position. Ultimately, I attend to the politics that I argue is inherent in relationality between women who are mothers, and I suggest that mothers' subjectivity has the potential to be transformed by disengaging it from the individualistic view of the subject prevailing in liberal discourses and that motherhood needs to be 'rescued' from the a-political position in which it is often still placed.

## acknowledgements

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## introduction

As the child of a radical feminist mother and left-wing parents I have formative memories of comic strips with strong girls and women in them. I liked the comic strip Peanuts drawn by Charles M. Shultz and the character Lucy Van Pelt was one of my favourites.<sup>1</sup> Lucy was a feminist girl who often stood up to her friends and her brother and claimed her autonomy. In one strip in

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<sup>1</sup> *Mafalda* was another comic strip I loved, my favourite actually. It was written and drawn by Argentinian cartoonist Quino and it ran from 1964 until 1973. Mafalda is a feminist six-year-old girl who is concerned about world problems, politics, women's emancipation and peace. The strip was translated and published in Italy in 1970 and became a feature in progressive left-wing homes.

particular, featured in the Italian left-leaning monthly magazine *Linus*, we see Lucy shouting ‘Io sono mia!,’ which in English would be ‘I belong to myself!’



*Linus*, anno X, numero 1, Milano Libri 1974

Peanuts appeared in Italy in various magazines, including *Linus*, which featured a mix of comic strips, politics, literature, society, mass media and other cultural themes. The comic strip of Lucy shouting ‘I belong to myself’ was a reinterpretation made just for the Italian public. It was a representation of a time when many feminist demonstrations were taking place in Italy, some of which my mother Bertilla, her sisters, and her friends took part in. This phrase was often shouted by women in feminist demonstrations in Italy and around other parts of the world through the 1970s and 1980s.



Photo from an unknown Italian Magazine depicting a woman at a demonstration in Italy around the 1970s.

The cartoon strip with Lucy shouting ‘I belong to myself!’ might be seen as a purely individualistic, liberal feminist statement, but there is more to it than this. I believe it is a thought-provoking strip that, when used by feminists, exemplifies an important step that women were starting to take in the late 1960s and 1970s in order to find themselves. The fact that women and mothers would have had access to the magazine at home, whilst in the domestic space, adds to its significance. The domestic space was seen as private but feminists claimed it was actually of public, political importance. Women, mainly those who identified as feminists, or even before calling themselves as such, were going through an important subjectivising process, in which they were becoming, some for the first

time, themselves.<sup>2</sup> A feminist subjectivity shaped by relationships with other women, not an autonomous subjectivity of the male tradition or the “non-subjectivity” – because constrained by the demands of patriarchy so not “self-chosen” - of many women throughout history.

For feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti as well as for other feminists, and following our comic strip theme, for Lucy, the process of subjectivisation was fundamental. It meant becoming a woman, self-defined through relationships – often with other women – through a new freedom and against a patriarchal history which had confined and framed women in externally dictated, predefined roles.<sup>3</sup> To belong to oneself, for feminists in the 1970s and 1980s, meant to work on an individuation process separately from what it meant to be mothers, daughters, partners or wives. It meant, among other things, learning to put some boundaries between oneself and one’s parents, the children, the family, the partner, to form an identity which was an internal sustaining space for oneself, something that women had historically rarely been able to achieve. Moreover, women believed that only by finding this internal space would they be better able to relate to other people as equal partners in a relationship made up of exchanges between freer persons. The

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<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Braidotti states that ‘the redefinition of the female feminist subject starts with the revaluation of the bodily roots of subjectivity, rejecting any universal, neutral and, consequently, any gender-free understanding of human embodiment.’ Rosi Braidotti, “Becoming Woman: Or Sexual Difference Revisited,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 20, no. 3 (2003): 43–64.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. Also see these other three books by Rosi Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance. A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).; Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoses* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2002). Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Theory*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). To read a genealogy of patriarchal history’s definition and framing of women in and since classical Greek times see Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995).

cartoon strip depicting Lucy is furthermore significant for the focus, and the argument, of my thesis because, following Braidotti's statement above, I suggest that for a mother, having an embodied sense of self and declaring or attempting to declare that 'I belong to myself!' can lead to a more fulfilling experience of motherhood exactly at the moment when a woman's identity changes dramatically and can become enmeshed with that of her baby. Hence Braidotti's quote above – and, less overtly but still present, Lucy's phrase 'Io sono mia!' - is a starting point *of* and *for* the argument of this thesis, from which other aspects of the research will stem.

The image of Lucy shouting 'Io sono mia' and the meaning of this statement are connected to my proposal and argument of *commoning and collectivising care* via the transition from an individualised female subjectivity of an isolated mother who is inside a patriarchal, capitalistic system of the domestic sphere to an inter-subjective, collective model of care and motherhood intended as a network of women/mothers/carers as a kind of anti-patriarchal-family or extended 'family'. For *commoning care* I mean the idea of caring for one's child (or any person one cares for) collectively, sharing the responsibilities, swapping care between carers/mothers to operate a de-individualisation of care. The term leans heavily from the idea and practice of the commons as theorised by feminist Silvia Federici and more specifically on her thinking on the work of reproduction.<sup>4</sup> She says:

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<sup>4</sup> Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero. Homework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2012). See as well Marina Vishmidt, "Permanent Reproductive Crisis: An Interview with Silvia Federici."

The common, quite simply, is a particular way of organising society. It is a particular way of conceiving relations among people and also relations to the means of production, relations to the land, relations to natural abundance, and to the wealth that we produce. The common is reflected in a very classic conception of what communalism is supposed to stand for. It means a society where we have access to natural wealth, the wealth we produce, cooperation, and government from below.<sup>5</sup>

Commoning care leans as well on other theorists and the experiences of Black mothers historically engaged in social reproduction/mother work collectively, what Patricia Hill Collins calls “othermothering”<sup>6</sup> and indigenous communities around the world who still care collectively, and see care as a collective pursuit not an individual one, due to collective living. The passage then is from, a feminist subjectivity which departs from the autonomous subject of the metaphysical abstract objectifying tradition, to an intersubjective model of subjectivity where subjects are viewed as connected and dependant on each other. This new model of subjectivity (at least in the so-called West), that emerged in the late 1960s/70s and as thought of by many feminists, gives me the possibility, and the desire, to think of care as collective. This new feminist subjectivity that has been theorised by feminists

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/permanent-reproductive-crisis-interview-silvia-federici>, Mute, 2013. Silvia Federici, “Feminism and the Politics of the Commons,” in *Uses of a Whirlwind. Movement, Movements, and Contemporary Radical Currents in the United States*, ed. C. Hughes, S. Peace, and K. Van Meter (Oakland, CA: Team Colors 225 Collective, AK Press, 2010). Silvia Federici, *Re-Enchanting the World. Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Silvia Federici, “The Commons Is Upon Us. Principles of Health Autonomy,” in *For Health Autonomy: Horizons of Care Beyond Austerity-Reflections from Greece.*, ed. Carenotes (Common Notions, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> “The different political interpretations attached to motherwork within Black civil society, in particular community othermothering traditions that elevated motherhood as a symbol of power, potentially politicized Black women’s motherwork.” In Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment.* (London, New York: Routledge, 1990). p. 296.

like Rosi Braidotti, Adriana Cavarero, Luce Irigaray and many others enable me to think of a different model of motherhood and care that departs from the traditional parameters of the woman/mother in the family. The political practice of communing care criticises and challenges the idea of the traditional family. These theorists help me to propose a kind of collective model of motherhood/care, or what I call commoning care. This is my contribution to knowledge in which – via the history and experiences of a feminist subjectivity I propose a feminist model of care, a collective one. In this thesis I link a model of feminist subjectivity with a model of feminist motherhood/feminist care.

I used the image of Lucy shouting “Io sono mia” to illustrate a theoretical concept, and a subjective reality, which has been theorised by feminists. An image is often more immediate. We can understand quickly what is meant by a feminist subjectivity by seeing an image of Lucy shouting the statement ‘Io sono mia’. I am not an artist – in the classic sense that I make art often – but, in this thesis, I use images for their immediacy to exemplify some concepts. ‘Io sono mia’ extrapolates women and mothers from the patriarchal family and allowed me to think of a different idea and practice of care (as we will see in Chapter 4 on the Italian mothers’ collective). When, in the feminist demonstrations in the 1970s, women shouted “Io sono mia” it was not only a form of emancipation, it created a different kind of

woman from the one being defined at that time by the constraints of patriarchy.

The overall proposition, and argument of my thesis, is to move away from a model of care based on liberal individualism to a feminist model based on relational ontology. Hence how to move to a model of care that fosters the *commoning of care* as a form of political collective organising that counters the neoliberal forces that tend at individualising care among other aspects of our lives? In other words what interests me is how to think and how to shift from individualised care practices to commoning and collective practices of care? Relationality is the main concept that helps me to construct this argument; hence I propose a model of relationality specific to motherhood and to carers in general and argue that it can help us to rethink in a different way two main points: firstly in relation to existing inequality and its impact on different individuals, and in particular different genders, and secondly it can help us to rethink individualistic models of legal and political subjectivity especially in the case of motherhood and care.

The five central questions of the thesis are: firstly, is a relational and collective model of motherhood and care important for rethinking women's political subjectivity? Secondly, how has the abstract, universalistic and autonomous view of the subject influenced law and is it detrimental to all humans and specifically women, mothers and carers too? Thirdly, does thinking about the meaning of commoning care or a relational model of

motherhood, disrupt the individualistic idea of the subject and can it broadly challenge individualism? Fourthly, can a relational model of motherhood, *commoning care*, ‘protect’ women from the loneliness<sup>7</sup> many experience in the first years of a baby and child’s life? I link this more applied question to the previous three questions because I believe that a more concrete, embodied view of humans is needed to then make a philosophical conceptual case. A solely abstract, philosophical thesis to think on the commoning of care, work of reproduction, collectivity, relationality and to look at mothers’ loneliness and post-natal depression would not suffice.

The way I link the two different registers in my thesis, is to lean my thinking towards those feminist thinkers who worked to de-universalise the subject and think the subject as an embodied subject. The main feminist thinker that helps me communicate between these two registers is Adriana Cavarero as she refrains to use an abstract language when speaking of the subject but prefers to think in terms of ‘embodied uniqueness’ of each of us. By doing this we are ‘forced’ to think of each person with a different and unique face, a singular life story and as Cavarero would say unique voice<sup>8</sup> and overall a unique embodied and concrete materiality of *who* they are which is

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<sup>7</sup> In 2016 research published by the Co-op and the Red Cross identified becoming a new mum as one of six main causes of loneliness. They say ‘New research shows that a staggering 82 per cent of mums under 30 feel lonely some of the time while more than four in 10 (43 per cent) are lonely often or always.’ <https://www.Co-Operative.Coop/Media/News-Releases/Shocking-Extent-of-Loneliness-Faced-by-Young-Mothers-Revealed>, 2018. <https://www.Channel4.Com/News/the-Loneliness-of-Becoming-a-New-Mum>, 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *A Più Voci: Per Una Filosofia Dell’espressione Vocale*. (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2003). Adriana Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

different for each of us. Her work aims to make an intervention at the level of discourse and representation but it is ultimately a concrete and de-universalising discourse too and that is why for me it works in linking it to the roman mothers' collective which were making an intervention at the level of maternal practice and experience that could then be theorised. Exactly because the Italian feminism I am interested in proposes the *practice of doing*<sup>9</sup> and the theory came after the practice<sup>10</sup>, I have been interested in linking philosophical thinking to the work of a group of mothers who got together to share, think and elaborate on what motherhood is. For these reasons, I am comfortable with this and I am interested in mixing these two strands together. And, the fifth and final question is, does engaging in mothering/caring while being supported by other mothers, carers and the community change the subjectivity of a mother/carer?

The remainder of the Introductory chapter is organised in this way: in the first section titled 'on terminology' I explain some of the terms I use in the thesis, what I mean for 'maternal', 'mothering', 'motherhood' and 'subjectivity'. In the second section titled 'the personal is political'<sup>11</sup> and in line

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<sup>9</sup> 'Around 1975, feminist groups devoted to setting up enterprises such as bookstores, libraries, small publishing houses, and meeting places began to be formed. That was how the so called practice of doing among women began. It derived, we said, from the practice of relations between women and was a specific instance of it.' The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*. (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990). p. 81

<sup>10</sup> 'We believe that to write theory is partly to tell about practice, since theoretical reasoning generally refers to things which already have names.' Ibid. p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Carol Hanisch, "www.Carolhanisch.Org/CHwritings/PIP.Html," n.d. She wrote a pamphlet called "The Personal Is Political" in 1969 which was originally published in Notes from the Second Year: women's liberation and was reprinted and passed around in the feminist movement and reached Italy too where it had a wide influence in the Italian feminist movement. Some Italian feminists brought it back when they went to the USA. Hanisch says that this motto and its meaning was thought through the experiences of the feminist

with the feminist motto written in 1969 by the American radical feminist Carol Hanisch I explain the relation between theory and lived experience. In the third section I have written a brief literature review on the main feminist theorists and theorists on motherhood and on the maternal that have influenced my writing. In the fourth section titled ‘methodology’ I trace my interdisciplinary approach in which I use philosophy, psychoanalysis, sociology, a case study of a mothers’ collective founded in the early 1970s in Rome and an artistic practice based exercise to explore collective care. In the fifth and last section titled ‘chapter outline’ I set out how my thesis – and my argument – has developed from one chapter to the next.

### **on terminology**

Concepts and meanings are important to contextualise and frame my position and for making my argument within the discourse I am exploring in this thesis. The most important terms I use in my thesis are concepts like “subject”, “subjectivity”, “work of reproduction”, “thread”, “maternal”, “maternal subjectivity”, “motherhood” and “mothering”. My theoretical contribution is on the realm of care, of *commoning care* a term to describe the act of “transforming care from individual to communal”, maternal studies, relationality, and what is new is the consistent and focused work on the

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groups and was thought collectively by several women in the movement, not just by her. It was theory that came after practice.

importance of relationality and support for carers and the de-individualisation of care, hence the terminology section relates to these themes.

The idea of the “subject” as defined by classical Western philosophical discourses as autonomous, rational, self-sufficient and independent is what stands at a far distance to how I envisage a subject to be. I think of a subject as the “embodied uniqueness” Cavarero talks about which is vulnerable, incarnated, necessarily dependant and exposed to others. Judith Butler who has been inspired by Cavarero’s work, has talked of a dependant, vulnerable and precarious subject.<sup>12</sup> My understanding of what a subject is then of an interdependent, vulnerable being, dependant and exposed to others, an idea in which the metaphysical idea of the subject actually disappears as it’s intended only in reciprocity, that is why it is almost easier to define subjectivity than the subject. The feminist idea of “subjectivity”, one that is shaped and sustained via relationships, is how I intend it to be seen in this thesis. This is different from “the self” or “experience” and the formation of a subjectivity that goes beyond biology through the subject’s immersion in society’s language and rules.

Differently from Anglo-Saxon and French feminism the question of “subjectivity” and “identity” are terms that have not much prevalence in the radical Italian feminist groups of sexual difference and their explicit political

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<sup>12</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*. (London & New York: Verso, 2004). p. 48.

valence.<sup>13</sup> Subjectivity as I envisage it is rooted in Italian feminism, and in the practice of relationality. It is not intended as a self-defining, autonomous subjectivity but in radical Italian feminism ‘there is a preference to speak of a *self* to which the signification is produced in the relational context by which this – signification – is produced.’<sup>14</sup> Hence I am interested in the passage from the notion of the metaphysical autonomous abstract subject of western philosophy to a subject seen as intersubjective – connected to others, as we will see further in the first three chapters. Also, I am critical of Lévinas’ idea of subjectivity for his use of the metaphor of the mother – to signify a face-to-face with the Other<sup>15</sup> – as it stereotypes and naturalises motherhood and even more significantly, erases the mother as a concrete person/subject or “embodied uniqueness” (in her own right) which Cavarero speaks about.<sup>16</sup>

The “work of reproduction” is that unpaid care that maintains future workers or elderly care which is in general and historically being done always by women, migrant women, marginalised and Black women. This conception of unpaid care as that which maintains capitalism has been theorised by feminist Marxists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Leopoldina Fortunato and Selma

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<sup>13</sup> Franco Cavarero, Adriana and Restaino, *Le Filosofie Femministe*. (Torino: Paravia Editore, 1999). p. 142.

<sup>14</sup> Adriana Cavarero says ‘Si preferisce parlare di un *se*’ la cui significazione si produce nel contesto relazionale ed e’ insieme da esso prodotta.’ Ibid. p. 142. My translation.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Maternity, in short, is here the exemplary case of an extreme passivity, in which the entirety of the Lévinasian ethical subject is perfectly reflected, because the face of the other calls it, without any action on its own part, to be “for the other despite itself”.’ Adriana Cavarero, “Coda. Adieu to Levinas,” in *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016), 133–75. p. 153.

<sup>16</sup> Cavarero says that for Lévinas woman is ‘Silent angel of the home, Woman is at the service of an exquisitely virile I that, far from being born of a woman erects itself through enjoyment.’ Ibid. p. 145.

James and Italian feminist Marxist theorist Silvia Federici which I will discuss further in the literature review.

The word ‘thread’ has many connotations, which can be symbolic and tangible it can refer to a storyline, a sewing thread, something that links and connects, a subjective thread and it can represent an umbilical cord too. In my thesis I speak of a ‘thread’ as a symbolic thread.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, I also speak of a concrete, tactile, thick and colourful, fabric ball of thread, which I work with in my research to represent – symbolically and concretely - mothers’ relationality to build and weave webs of support for each other, illustrating my proposition with Berlin-based artist Alex Martinis Roe as we will see in Chapter Five. The most significant meaning I give to the thread, in this thesis, is that it represents relationality and support between mothers and carers: the commoning of care. Moreover, I speak of a ‘maternal thread’ because part of my interest in the maternal threads through both my childhood and adulthood due to the relationship I had with my now late mother. This is the colourful thread I have used to signify relationality:

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<sup>17</sup> Jose’ Saramago in the book *All the Names* uses the metaphor of a thread and umbilical cord for the main character, Senhor José, searching a sea of archives and also he says “are bound to each other by a thread of tears.” Saramago mentions Ariadne’s thread too, which coincidentally I have written about (unpublished). Ariadne uses the thread to save Theseus but he then betrays her. I suggest, from a feminist lens, the importance for women of passing/using the thread in line with feminist genealogies, to people who support us in our desires. So, I ask, what if Ariadne did not use the thread to save Theseus? Jose’ Saramago, *All the Names* (New York: Vintage Classics, 1999). p.



Photo: Sara Paiola

According to Baraitser and Spigel since Adrienne Rich's 1977 important book *Of Woman Born*, 'mothering' has been used largely to signal the realm of maternal experience, and 'motherhood' to refer to the institution.<sup>18</sup> Indeed in her book Rich distinguished:

two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential* relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction – and to children; and the *institution* – which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control.<sup>19</sup>

Rich, for the first time, brought to the fore the material relations between herself and her children, the distinct pleasures and pains that motherhood affords, and the institution of motherhood – how motherhood is regulated

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<sup>18</sup> Lisa Baraitser and Spigel Sigal, "Editorial," *Studies in the Maternal* 1, no. 1 (2009), <https://doi.org/http://doi.org/10.16995/sim.170>.

<sup>19</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. (W. W. Norton & Company, 1995). p. 13.

and framed in a patriarchal society.<sup>20</sup> In this thesis I use these two terms as understood by Rich.

In addition I use the term “mothering” as it is used by Sara Ruddick. In her vision of maternal thinking she advocates a specific embodied form of thinking and decision making that is done on a moment by moment basis by women as feeling-thinking subjects.<sup>21</sup> Ruddick’s concept of maternal thinking has influenced many maternal studies scholars in situating the mother as an embodied and concrete subject. It is this aspect that I find interesting in her work and which translates into my use of the term ‘maternal.’ What I appreciate about her thinking is the concrete and ‘anti-universalist’ lens in which she reads the maternal which is similar, but in different ways, to the Arendtian idea of “uniqueness” and Cavarero’s extension on her thinking adding a feminist layer to the concept of uniqueness which becomes more an “embodied uniqueness.”

British Professor of social work Brid Featherstone argues that in sociological accounts of motherhood what is ‘lost in the process are accounts of maternal subjectivity which can take into account the ways that fantasy, meaning, biography and relational dynamics inform individual women’s position in relation to a variety of discourses concerning motherhood.’<sup>22</sup>

Following Hollway and Featherstone, I decided to use a psychoanalytic and a

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ruddick, Sara, *Maternal Thinking. Towards a Politics of Peace.*

<sup>22</sup> Brid Featherstone, “Introduction: Crisis in the Western Family.,” in *Mothering and Ambivalence.* ed. Wendy Hollway and Brid Featherstone (London: Routledge, 1997), 1–16.

philosophical lens in my thesis too. In conducting research that asks questions about what it means to mother in relative isolation and how the experience of mothering may shift positively if mothers work in collaboration with other mothers, I have at times used a psychoanalytic lens – because a ‘purely’ sociological or post-structuralist account of mothering would be too limited in scope. The psychoanalytic lens allows me to look at unconscious material that women who are mothers may bring in the relationships with other women and mothers. This is unconscious material which originates from their childhood and their relationship with their own mothers. There may be projections, identifications, envy, anger and other feelings transferred from one relationship to the other.

The overall concept of motherhood that I aim to challenge in this thesis is the one that has emerged within the Western concept of the bourgeois, patriarchal nuclear family, which became functional in the formation of a capitalistic society. I still feel it is important to challenge this concept and sociological reality as it is a pervasive ideology in many parts of the world. This ideology is functional to patriarchy and more often than not it is detrimental to women. In addition, the concept of patriarchy that I work around is one of male domination and the rule of the father that has seen women as solely or mainly functional to the family, husband and children and where the woman and the mother are seen as the keepers of morality in society. This varies from country to country but is still very present, both in

progressive and in more traditional societies, as a set of ideas which shape culture, society, law, economy, and religion into being overall more advantageous for men.

I do not have a monolithic idea of patriarchy; I think it varies, but it has in general some fundamental commonalities. Women in all societies resist and disrupt patriarchal culture in different ways. Sadly neoliberalism has taken advantage of some feminist ideas, which have become instrumentalised to the functioning of capitalism.<sup>23</sup> Like other feminists who use an intersectional and sociological approach I see a very tight connection between capitalism, patriarchy and racism.<sup>24</sup> At the same time I appreciate the complexity of individual subjectivities, while also understanding individuals as collectively subject to the pressures and various features of capitalism and neoliberalism. In other words in thinking about subjectivities I understand them, in some ways, in a Foucauldian perspective too, as being subjects who have agency and being subjects of something. But as I said previously in the section *on terminology* my main understanding of subjectivity comes from the theory on intersubjectivity, we are formed in and become through relations.

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<sup>23</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism. From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (London and New York: Verso, 2014).

<sup>24</sup> See these works Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero. Homework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. Ailsa Bjornholt, Margunn and MacKay, ed., *Counting on Marilyn Waring. New Advances in Feminist Economics.*, Second Edition (Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2014). Heidi Hartmann, "Towards a Definition of Patriarchy," in *Oppression, Privilege, and Resistance: Theoretical Perspectives on Racism, Sexism, and Heterosexism.*, ed. Lisa Heldke and Peg O'Connor (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 143–47.

The term and subject that is most difficult to define is the ‘mother.’

This term at times causes tension in the thesis and I have not exactly found a solution on how to define it. I suggest that this difficulty I have with defining ‘the mother’ originates from a similar place as Baraitser and Spigel’s assertion that:

the maternal subject, perhaps more than any subject position, is downright slippery. ‘She’ is one of those ever-present and yet shadowy figures who seem to disappear from various discourses that specifically try to account for her.<sup>25</sup>

The reason for this difficulty, as stated above, is that a mother is not an easily ‘defined’ subject – and I want to keep open this difficulty in ‘defining’ her, so that defining her is not a problem but an integral part of what a mother is. It is exactly because mothers have been labelled and framed for centuries by patriarchy as human beings with specific qualities, duties and expectations that I now think any label needs to be subverted in the name of the freedom of any woman to define her maternal subjectivity for herself. I prefer again to define a mother by the “embodied uniqueness” which Cavarero discusses. This uniqueness is as far as possible from the subject of metaphysics. On a ‘practical’ level the mothers I am talking about ‘can become parents as a result of sexual intercourse, artificial insemination, in vitro fertilisation, adoption, co-habiting or step-parenting.’<sup>26</sup> The mother I speak about is therefore not – or not necessarily – defined by particular biological criteria. Even though I

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<sup>25</sup> Baraitser and Sigal, “Editorial.”

<sup>26</sup> Roszika Parker, *Torn in Two. The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. (London: Virago Press, 1995).

know that the embodied experience of pregnancy, birth, and breastfeeding as many scholars thinking about the mother across disciplines have argued, leaves an important unconscious “sign” in a biological mother and her child which cannot be ignored.

Another important distinction to make is between the subjects of a mother and of a woman. This is because pregnancy, birth, and motherhood always risk ‘sliding’ or ‘falling’ into a conservative paradigm in which the mother’s subjectivity is more often than not attached to and/or collapsed into that of her children. Hence, I suggest the importance of calling mothers women first and foremost, or ‘women who mother.’ In this thesis at times I will use this phrase and at times for convenience I will use mothers only. To me it is important to emphasise this, because I do not want to collapse the identity of a woman into that of a mother. Baraitser notes the importance of this distinction ‘[We need to] repeat the second-wave move to uncouple maternity and femininity...not this time for the sake of the feminine, but for the sake of the maternal.’<sup>27</sup> I believe they are two somehow separate identities, that a woman is a mother but that she retains, or it is important that she retains the identity of a woman separate from her children. Her identity as a woman is of course transformed subjectively by the experience of motherhood – these two identities influence each other once one becomes a mother – but nevertheless remains separate or at least it is important that it is

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<sup>27</sup> Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*. (Routledge, 2008). p. 10.

partially separate. ‘Mother’ as another layer on top of race, age, and class, shaping and shaped by these but not erasing them.

In psychological terms, I think that it is important for women to build a separate identity in which her objects of desire, attention, and ‘passion’ are not ‘only’ her children. This work was fundamental for feminists in the 1960s through to the 1980s to reconfigure their own identities and challenge the stereotypical image of motherhood, as natural destiny, historically attached to women. This is important for mothers and even more so, in a way, for their children. Historically women’s identities have been merged into their identities as mothers at a huge detriment to their own lived experiences as beings separate from their children and from their families.<sup>28</sup> Sociologist Tina Miller states:

I have been conscious of foregrounding the term ‘woman’ when writing about individual experiences around motherhood rather than ‘mother’. This is in an attempt not to lose sight of the women I am writing about, or deny their agency in circumstances where the identity ‘mother’ and its maternal associations can become all consuming, diminishing traces of other identities.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> I was reminded of this by my feminist aunt Francesca Bonato and by her and my mother Bertilla Bonato’s lived experience of motherhood and the importance of cultivating their own experiences and passions separate from us children.

<sup>29</sup> Tina Miller, “Thoughts around the Maternal: A Sociological Viewpoint,” *Studies in the Maternal* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1–3. This theme is an important aspect of the work of second wave Italian feminist writer and activist Lea Melandri, *Amore e Violenza. Il Fattore Molesto Della Civiltà*. (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2011). Lea Melandri, *Love and Violence: The Vexatious Factors of Civilisation* (New York: SUNY Press, 2019). All the rest of her books are sadly not translated into English yet.

It is exactly this tension between avoiding diminishing the traces of other identities and keeping those traces alive and subjectively visible that forms an important aspect of the maternal I am interested in.

There are various reasons why I want to bring mothers, and those who identify as mothers, to the centre of this thesis. Firstly, it is for the reasons Cavarero points out in her latest book, titled *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*:

At the same time that the infant, as the emblem of a unilateral and absolute dependence, often appears at centre stage to exemplify relational ontology, the mother, because of the burdensome self-sacrificing stereotype that is draped over her, is often absent.<sup>30</sup>

Following her thinking my aim in this thesis in contrast to other relational ontologies which often disregard or ‘forget’ to include the ‘mother’, is to do ‘just’ that – to bring mothers and carers to the forefront. I place them at the centre of the thesis, and, as Cavarero has suggested in her work, I critique and challenge the ‘burdensome self-sacrificing stereotype’<sup>31</sup> attached to the maternal. For this reason, and in particular because of the meaning that the maternal carries with it, it is too important to leave it out or to leave it ‘just’ to signify a sacrificial image of motherhood. My aim to bring mothers to the forefront is also for the same reasons Julia Kristeva has aptly summarised: ‘It seems . . . difficult to speak today of maternity without being accused of

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<sup>30</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*. (Stanford : Stanford University Press, 2016), p. 13.

Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinazioni. Critica Della Rettitudine*. (Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2014), p. 24.

<sup>31</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*. p. 13.

normativism, read: of regression.<sup>32</sup> I intend to challenge this thinking that motherhood can be discussed only in certain domains without being seen as regressive because this thinking is linked to what Cavarero is suggesting, that the mother is often not discussed because she carries with her a sacrificial image.

Secondly, I do not want to generalise and diffuse the experiences of mothers to *parenting* in general, specifically because this would dilute and neuter women's maternal work and their experiences of mothering. Therefore, it is the gendered reality of mothering<sup>33</sup> that is the focus and priority of this thesis:

The reality is that caregiving continues to be highly gendered, and while I acknowledge “mothering” occurs in many forms, it is also crucial to acknowledge that it is women who are globally performing the majority of this mothering work.<sup>34</sup>

What is at stake here is a recognition that a whole sector of the economy is invisible and submerged – that of the unpaid care work that happens in the household, which is mainly gendered in the feminine. This is important to focus on as this work is mainly still done by women because capitalism, as Silvia Federici has so aptly argued, depends on the economies of unpaid

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<sup>32</sup> Julia Kristeva cited in Fanny Söderbäck, “Motherhood According to Kristeva. On Time and Matter in Plato and Kristeva,” *PhiloSOPHIA: A Journal of Continental Feminism* 1, no. 1 (2011): 65–87.

<sup>33</sup> Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking. Towards a Politics of Peace.*, p. 206.

<sup>34</sup> Melinda Giles Vendenbeld, Introduction in Melinda Giles Vanderbeld, ed., *Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism.* (Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2014). p. 2.

domestic care work and community care work.<sup>35</sup> Historically within families women, more often than not, have performed more unpaid care and received less care. Care work in general is seen as unskilled because women do it, so overall the skills learned at home go unrecognised and undervalued.

To avoid diffusing the experiences of mothers I think it is important not to universalise the experience of one person to another. I do not believe we can. Universalism renders irrelevant the specificity of each human being in terms of sex, gender, class, race, historical-socio-cultural, and economic reality. I can relate with Cavarero's thinking and I second her statement when she says 'I am of the opinion that universality does not exist.'<sup>36</sup> At the same time, as stated above, most mothering is done globally by women and culturally, societally, symbolically and politically it is highly gendered work. This is with the exception of Northern European countries, where care responsibilities are more equally distributed.

The experiences of a father who is the primary carer of a child may be a bit different to those of a mother. One difference can be if he parents a child who is a boy or a girl.<sup>37</sup> Then there are subjective, identarian differences in a father. How he identifies with his children or not, how he projects his dreams,

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<sup>35</sup> Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero. Homework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. See as well Chiara Saraceno and Wolfgang Keck, "Towards an Integrated Approach for the Analysis of Gender Equity in Policies Supporting Paid Work and Care Responsibilities," *Demographic Research* 25 (2011): 371–405. Bjornholt, Margunn and MacKay, *Counting on Marilyn Waring. New Advances in Feminist Economics*.

<sup>36</sup> Elisabetta Bertolino and Adriana Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero.," *Differences* 19, no. 1 (2008): 128–67, <https://doi.org/DOI.10.1215/10407391-2007-019>, 2008. p. 143.

<sup>37</sup> Veronique Rouyer et al., "Fathers of Girls, Fathers of Boys: Influence of Child's Gender on Fathers' Experience of, Engagement in, and Representations of Paternity," *Swiss Journal of Psychology* 66, no. 4 (2007): 225–33. Jessica Benjamin, "Father and Daughter: Identification with Difference - A Contribution to Gender Heterodoxy," *Psychoanalytic Dialogues* 1, no. 3 (1991): 277–99.

fears and needs – conscious and unconscious - onto his children. My own father, who was, as I said, my primary carer for ten years<sup>38</sup> was praised and admired for being a sole father. A sole mother in the late 1970s and 1980s in Italy did not receive this kind of support. The experiences of fathers, sole fathers and fatherhood require, I believe, focused research on fatherhood and relationality. I recognise as well that some of this discussion will be applicable to non-binary/trans-parents or trans-mothers and that some parents who do care work do not place themselves in the category of ‘mother’ or ‘father.’ It can also be pertinent for any primary carer for a baby or child, but for this thesis I have focused on women who mother, as motherhood is highly gendered and it is gendered as feminine. I use mothers/carers to be more inclusive at times where I feel that this is appropriate.

I do not attach the word woman to sexual orientation but to an ontological feminist world view which has, in a way, re-appropriated the term woman as an embodied experience away from what patriarchy still dictates women to be. As Cavarero says:

The Italian equivalent term for gender, (*genere*), is notoriously so generic (precisely!) that its use is inadvisable in the theoretical field. Also, in Italian feminist theory, speaking of sex ( *sesso*) or sexual difference (*differenza sessuale*) does not imply a mere biological level, but rather a

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<sup>38</sup> Jennifer Walters, *Working with Fathers. From Knowledge to Therapeutic Practice* (Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

mode in which biological, cultural, material, symbolic, morphological, and imaginary elements traverse one another.<sup>39</sup>

To put it more simply, I use the term woman in a strategic way, trying not to lose sight, of women's material work and experiences that, more often than not, still involve a higher percentage of the work of reproduction than men. At the same time I suggest that the mothering experience is universal, in the sense that it 'calls us', *ci chiama*, all humans, to experiences and emotions similar to those that maternal studies scholars Baraitser and Spigel define thus:

The maternal is understood broadly as lived affective and embodied experience, social location and social relation, political and scientific practice, economic and ethical challenge, and as a theoretical question and structural dimension in human relations, politics and ethics.<sup>40</sup>

It is this understanding of the maternal that I am interested in working with.

Moreover, motherhood is still seen in many ways as essential to women's lives in a way that it is not for men. Therefore, the main focus of this thesis is relations between mothers and carers, between those who, the world over, are still mainly 'rocking the cradle'<sup>41</sup> in the first few years of a child's life. Women make up half of the world's population and many of them will go on to experience pregnancy, childbirth and motherhood at some point

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<sup>39</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero." p. 149.

<sup>40</sup> Baraitser and Sigal, "Editorial."

<sup>41</sup> Dorothy Dinnerstein, *Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World* (London: The Women's Press Ltd., 1987).

in their lives. British feminist philosopher Alison Stone states ‘it remains very largely women and not men who are the principal child-carers.’<sup>42</sup>

### **“the personal is political”**

The first time I have heard the motto ‘the personal is political’ was from my feminist mother Bertilla. While I was growing up she recounted – as a form of storytelling – how important the consciousness raising group she went to from 1972 was for her younger self, as a twenty-two year old woman/mother of a two-year-old daughter, namely myself. In effect I was told the story of her discovery of feminism over many years. I was told of these meetings and I was present in many situations where my mother and her friends engaged in deep discussions about themselves ‘loro stesse’, their lives, the relationships they had with each other which raised their consciousness so to speak and consequently brought some changes in their lives (personal, political and professional) this is embodied knowledge to me. What they engaged in was political practice, I did not read it in books, I heard it and witnessed it in person.

Many years later I understood that it was Carol Hanisch<sup>43</sup> who popularised the phrase ‘the personal is political’, or as other feminists then expanded on, what happens in the private (home) is political. Hanisch wrote this slogan in a pamphlet in 1969 while she was part of New York’s radical

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<sup>42</sup> Stone, Alison, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity*. p. 16.

<sup>43</sup> Hanisch, “[www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.Html](http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.Html).”

feminist movement. Hanisch's text is like a report of a consciousness raising meeting, what happened, what was discussed, what was decided, it is not theory, it comes from practice. Broadly speaking, the slogan meant that there is a link between personal experiences and to wider political and social conditions and inequalities. Hanisch is best known for having popularised the phrase but she does not take responsibility for inventing it. This idea was born out of the practice of consciousness raising groups in the United States, which the women adopted from the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.<sup>44</sup> After a meeting held in New York in 1969 Hanisch says that:

One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution.<sup>45</sup>

The slogan 'personal is political' is linked, and it's the key, to the dialogic practice of speaking and listening (which is political) of the consciousness raising groups of women where they met regularly to discuss their problems and concerns as women.<sup>46</sup> Each woman spoke one at a time and then after the choral discussion there was the analysis of what had been discussed, this allowed women to understand that the problems each woman had was not personal only to them but it was part of a systematic problem, hence meeting

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<sup>44</sup> "Consciousness-Raising (C-R) is a tool that the Women's Liberation Movement adopted from the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, where it was known as "telling it like it is" in "<https://Womensliberation.Org/Priorities/Feminist-Consciousness-Raising/>," n.d. cited in Lucia Farinati and Claudia Firth, "Feminism - Speaking and Listening in Feminist Consciousness Raising Groups," in *The Force of Listening* (Berlin: Errant Bodies Press, 2017), 40–55. p. 40.

<sup>45</sup> Hanisch, "[www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.Html](http://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.Html)."

<sup>46</sup> One book which discusses the importance of speaking seen more as narrating is Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood* (New York: Routledge, 2005). And another book by the same author discusses the importance of the voice to represent our uniqueness and embodied singularity Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*.

with other women in these groups Hanisch stated was like doing “political therapy.” Calling it “political therapy” distinguishes it from psychoanalysis or psychotherapy where one – in this case a woman - goes when one is unwell or wishes to unearth some part of oneself that are not clear, instead of seeing it as a structural problem. In other words the problems women had then were not ‘just’ an individual problems, in which one is unwell and seeks therapy. By being a structural, societal problem it was a collective problem and it needed a collective solution or approach. Consciousness raising groups allowed women to see that their problems were the same as others’, and not as an isolated instance. This sharing makes ‘the personal’ political, to do it together is a way to reclaim a space and together there is the possibility to reclaim some rights. It follows that the commoning of care is political too as it is done together, it disrupts the individualised, capitalistic notion of care.

For many feminists consciousness raising groups, where women met to share various concerns – and which initially they thought were personal but soon realised they were collective concerns - were key to the formation of a feminist subjectivity, or what Cavarero calls a subjectivity founded on relationality which becomes intersubjectivity. Relationality understood as politics. This is the key to understand that relationality – as understood in these terms – is political. Some criticized these groups for being “not political” and instead engaged in “personal therapy”.<sup>47</sup> In reality the issues the

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<sup>47</sup> Hanisch, “[Www.Carolhanisch.Org/CHwritings/PIP.Html](http://www.Carolhanisch.Org/CHwritings/PIP.Html).”

women brought to these groups were personal, in the sense that it affected them and their lives personally, but they were political as they symbolised, and they were examples of, the oppression of women perpetuated by, and foundational of a capitalist society. Hence if they did not have universal public childcare for instance it was due to the fact that it was seen as natural for women to care for their children. As Carol Hanisch said in her manifesto ‘individual struggle is *always* limited’.<sup>48</sup> The consciousness raising groups that Carol Hanisch talks about were organised in this way:

in a small group it is possible for us to take turns bringing questions to the meetings (like “Which do you prefer a baby boy or girl or no children? What happens to your relationship if your partner makes more than you, less than you?). Then we go around the room to answer questions from our personal experiences. Everybody talks that way. At the end of the meeting we try to sum up and generalise from what’s been said and make connections. I believe at this point, and maybe for a long time to come, that these analytical sessions are a form of political action.<sup>49</sup>

This resonates with me in a poignant way as I have some typewritten notes of the consciousness raising group meetings my mother Bertilla and other women set up in the early 1970s in the public library of the town I was born in, Castelfranco Veneto, North-East Italy. The notes were given to me by Italian feminist author Lea Melandri<sup>50</sup> after my mother passed away in 2016. Lea wrote the notes when she went to some of these meetings, she had kept

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Lea Melandri is an important reference figure in Italian feminism. She is a writer and journalist. She has written many important books which include Melandri, *Love and Violence: The Vexatious Factors of Civilisation*. And Lea Melandri, *Come Nasce Il Sogno D’Amore*. (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2002).

them all these years in her archive. These notes are written partly in dialect<sup>51</sup> from the Veneto region as many women, including my mother, spoke dialect then and still do. By reading them we perceive the birth of a collective consciousness, by sharing their experiences they could see they were not alone in what they felt. This is why this is “political therapy”, because it happens in collectivity, in relationality with other people. Politics as intended as well by Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero.

### **literature review**

The objective of this review is to review the work of some feminist authors who have been foundational in the way I approached writing this thesis, it's a short genealogy of the main threads of literature that ground and feed into my project. I start by saying that I own an archive of books written by Italian feminists, pamphlets, posters, pictures, typewritten notes of meetings, newspapers cuttings of feminist writers and journalists and feminist magazines among which *Via Dogana*<sup>52</sup> and *Sottosopra*<sup>53</sup> both published by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective. I have inherited this archive by my late mother when she passed away in 2016. Previous to that, several years ago, I had asked my mother and my feminist aunts if they could lend me some of their feminist books to read. Therefore it has been several years now that I have used original archival material to write my thesis. This has a meaning for

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<sup>51</sup> These notes are from a meeting on the 6<sup>th</sup> January 1973.

<sup>52</sup> “[https://www.Libreriadelledonne.It/Categorie\\_publicazioni/Viadogana/](https://www.Libreriadelledonne.It/Categorie_publicazioni/Viadogana/),” n.d.

<sup>53</sup> “[https://www.Libreriadelledonne.It/Categorie\\_publicazioni/Sottosopra/](https://www.Libreriadelledonne.It/Categorie_publicazioni/Sottosopra/),” n.d.

the literature I have used in particular as I have centred my argument around the relationality expounded by Italian feminists, and as well it has meaning in terms of the methodology as my choice of material has been made, in a way, by my history as the daughter of a feminist mother, so because of that this choice can be seen as part of an embodied methodology.

The existing studies on motherhood and the maternal are now many. This was not the case until around 20 years ago. In the last twenty years there has been a rich development of thinking and theorising around motherhood. These works range from psychoanalysis, psychology, sociology, anthropological and philosophical approaches to the maternal. They include as well artistic depictions on motherhood by women artists<sup>54</sup> and representations of motherhood in the realms of drama, cinema and dance. In addition in Chapter Four I review studies on experiences and proposals on collective mothering and the commoning of care.

The authors who have most influenced my thinking on maternal subjectivity are: Baraitser,<sup>55</sup> Stone,<sup>56</sup> Ettinger<sup>57</sup>, Parker<sup>58</sup>, Hollway<sup>59</sup>, Raphael-

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<sup>54</sup> There are many women artists who work around depicting motherhood and the maternal. As they are now too many to name here I list these websites of UK based artists or organisations working on these themes “[Http://Mamsie.Org/Art-Collection/](http://Mamsie.Org/Art-Collection/),” n.d.; “Procreate Project,” n.d., <https://www.procreateproject.com/>; “Birth Rites Collection,” <https://www.birthritescollection.org.uk/>, n.d.; “[Http://Www.Desperateartwives.Co.Uk/](http://Www.Desperateartwives.Co.Uk/),” n.d.; “[Https://Motherswhomake.Org/About](https://Motherswhomake.Org/About/),” n.d. “[Https://Www.Spilmilkgallery.Com/](https://Www.Spilmilkgallery.Com/),” n.d. “[Https://Www.Mothervoices.Org/](https://Www.Mothervoices.Org/),” n.d.

<sup>55</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*.

<sup>56</sup> Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity*.

<sup>57</sup> Bracha Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace. (Theory Out of Bound)*. (University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>58</sup> Rozsika Parker, *Mother Love/Mother Hate. The Power of Maternal Ambivalence*. (New York: BasicBooks, 1995).

<sup>59</sup> Wendy Hollway, “From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity,” *International Journal of Critical Psychology* 2 (2001): 13–38.

Leff<sup>60</sup>, Benjamin<sup>61</sup>. I have written about these authors' thinking in Chapter Five titled 'relational maternal subjectivity'. In addition Cavarero, Luisa Muraro and Lea Melandri of whom I have written more in Chapters One, Two and Three. For Baraitser it is important that mothers are seen as able to display and express a range of emotions that can go from the benevolent to the aggressive towards their children. Only in that way can we keep maternal subjectivity alive and real. For Baraitser maternal subjectivity is one of interruption. A mother is interrupted in her daily tasks to care for a baby or young children. What gets interrupted is the mother's autonomy, the flow of the day, her sense of self. Baraitser suggests that "the interruptions" is probably what makes maternal subjectivity. She contends that 'one of the particularly striking shifts in a mother's kinetic experience is a newfound sense of clumsiness, slowness and delay. Motherhood, I would suggest, has its own kind of *viscosity*'<sup>62</sup> in which a mother's subjectivity is shaped by these experiences among others.

There are many novels too that I read during the years that influenced my thinking on motherhood and the maternal in the way in which they depict a complex figure of the mother, layered by many feelings, by ambivalence, sheer love, hatred too. To name a few of note are Jamaica Kincaid's *Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) a fictionalised book set in Jamaica where a

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<sup>60</sup> Joan Raphael-Leff, "Maternal Subjectivity," *Studies in the Maternal* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1–5.

<sup>61</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988).

<sup>62</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*. p. 128-129.

daughter writes the story of her mother almost like she is her mothers herself. It is an interesting perspective and a complex story of maternal love, ambivalence, abandonment and distance influenced by the history of enslavement. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*<sup>63</sup> (1987) which asks important questions about mother's love and sacrifice for love to kill her daughter to set her free, not to have her enslaved. Sibilla Aleramo's autobiography *Una donna* (1906) had a great impact in Italy on how she describes the plight of women and the way she describes motherhood which was revolutionary for Italian society in 1906. Aleramo's books were read widely during the second wave feminist movement in Italy, they were rediscovered then and given value by women 'by articulating her won pain and relating its origin to women's social position, she made a unique contribution to Italian feminism'.<sup>64</sup>

Some influential writers on motherhood in the USA are Adrienne Rich's book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*<sup>65</sup> (1976) which I have briefly dealt with in the section above. I add that Rich's analysis of motherhood has been very influential to detach the maternal from the naturalised image it had for a long time. Betty Friedan *The Feminine Mystique* (1963); Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*<sup>66</sup> (1970); Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*<sup>67</sup> (1970). These books had a particular influence for me because

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<sup>63</sup> Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. (London: Vintage Classics, 2007).

<sup>64</sup> Ann Caesar, "Italian Feminism and the Novel: Sibilla Aleramo's 'A Woman,'" *Feminist Review* 5 (1980).

<sup>65</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.

<sup>66</sup> Kate Millet, *Sexual Politics* (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

<sup>67</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex. The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003).

my mother used to tell me many times how these books awakened a feminist subjectivity in her and how they changed her life. I have some of these books in Italian in my bookshelves which were the books my mother read in the 1970s. Especially I remember my mother saying how Kate Millet's book was translated in 1971 and published in sections each week in an Italian magazine called *L'Espresso*, and she read it and that was the first time she questioned her position as a woman, the first time she realised she was a woman even. Before it was an unquestionable fact, then it became a reality.

Theorising on motherhood in France are Simone de Beauvoir *Le Deuxième Sexe* 1949; Luce Irigaray; Hélène Cixous; Julia Kristeva. Some of these French authors have been important to me as they were the books my mother, many of her friends and some of my aunts read since the 1970s so I have heard speak about them many times and I leaned towards using some writing of these authors as well for a geographical and linguistic reason. France and Italy are close by and culturally are quite similar. In addition I speak fluent French so I have had a long term inclination towards French speaking authors which I often read in the original.

Important for my understanding of motherhood is the work of French feminist Elisabeth Badinter because of her work around the construction of some myths surrounding motherhood which has made it seen as natural, when she argues it is not. She investigates how on mothers and motherhood was lived and seen in history, especially in France. According to Badinter

motherhood was invented. She gives an account on how historically, since the 1700 c, women who were mothers often did not look after their children, if they were rich they had nannies, if they were middle class they sent their children to be looked after in the countryside by other women and if they were poor they had to work and so their children were looked after by others too. French mothers, she says, did not have much qualms to leave their children to other women to look after. They wanted to be free. She argues that during modern time motherhood has been romanticised. It is an interesting historical research which would be interesting to copy for other countries too to find out how was motherhood lived in history.<sup>68</sup>

Theorising on motherhood in Italy are Luisa Muraro's *L'ordine simbolico della madre*, and Lea Melandri's *Amore e violenza* in this book Lea says that there is an inextricable link between what happens in the home and what is seen as love, (between parents and children, husbands and wives, partners) and violence. Love, often idealised and romanticised needs to be looked at in more depth she argues not left in the shadow.

Several journals have dedicated work on motherhood and the maternal which have been important to my work. The main ones include the UK based

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<sup>68</sup> Elisabeth Badinter, *Mother Love. Myth & Reality* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1981). A note to say that on the other hand I find Badinter's critique of the use of the veil by some French Muslim women as being against the values of the Republic problematic. Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007). p. 85. In a comment by a French Muslim woman (who wears the veil) who said that women's emancipation and Westernization should be separated Badinter disagreed, she said "Rightly so; they are rightly connected to one another." Scott says that "In her comment there is a fascinating slippage from "Westernisation" to the emancipatory values of republican France and from there, tacitly, to modernity. For Badinter, "France" is the highest embodiment of the Western and the modern."

*Studies in the Maternal*<sup>69</sup> and the Canadian based *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative*.<sup>70</sup> In 2014 I did an internship at MamSIE (Mapping Maternal Subjectivity, Identity and Ethics) and the articles in its journal *Studies in the Maternal* had a great influence on me and my thinking. They are too many to name here, some are referenced in the thesis. Mostly I have been influenced by the way in which motherhood, mothers, the maternal was depicted from a variety of angles, all valid and all multifaceted to depict a complex representation of motherhood.

In turning the history I am looking at into scholarship through a PhD project I have engaged with the literature that has been important to me as a student (Baraitser, Stone, Irigaray, Cavarero and other Italian feminist authors). This canon is shaped by the same processes that I am critiquing so that it was less natural or obvious to me to turn to Black feminist scholarship on the maternal, by doing that it might have produced a different discussion – if Joy James was, for example, as central to the project as Baraitser or Cavarero, it would be something different.

Black scholar Joy James calls for a reappraisal of the politics of Western white feminist theory, theory that she names as ‘Womb Theory’, calling for those using it – and I include myself here – to notice within it what she calls the ‘Captive Maternals’. What is excluded in ‘Womb Theory’, James argues, is

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<sup>69</sup> “<https://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/>,” n.d.

<sup>70</sup> “<https://journalofmotherhoodinitiative.org/>,” n.d.

the “Captive Maternal” – ‘those most vulnerable to violence, war, poverty, police, and captivity: those whose very existence enables the possessive empire that claims and dispossess them.’<sup>71</sup> Following Joy James’s invitation I side with her idea to think maternal politics in which the question is to think that those oppressed ‘offer new theories as leverage of freedom.’<sup>72</sup> The work of UK Black scholar Tracey Reynolds on Black mothers is focused too to move Black mothers from the margins to the centre of maternal studies.<sup>73</sup> Even as I have sought to unearth and excavate the lessons of one partially overlooked feminist tradition, the Italian feminist tradition, I participated in the marginalisation of another. Overall I have been interested on Italian feminism, since doing my Master Research where I wrote a dissertation using Italian feminism, to move the Italian feminist experience from the margins (there are a great number of Italian books written by feminists which are not translated in English), but that it has meant that I have not engaged with race as much as I might have.

Other existing studies on motherhood and care are mainly based in relation to the issue of social reproduction and reproductive labour – which is very important and is a point of reference to me – but the issue of

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<sup>71</sup> Joy James, “THE WOMB OF WESTERN THEORY: TRAUMA, TIME THEFT, AND THE CAPTIVE MATERNAL,” *Carveral Notebooks* 12 (2016): 253–96. p. 255. See as well this article for how maternal studies can heed the ‘Captive Maternal’ to see a new form of maternal ethics to emerge: Lisa Baraitser and Sigal Spigel, “Editorial,” *Studies in the Maternal* 13, no. 1 (2020): 1, <https://doi.org/doi:https://doi.org/10.16995/sim.313>.

<sup>72</sup> James, “THE WOMB OF WESTERN THEORY: TRAUMA, TIME THEFT, AND THE CAPTIVE MATERNAL.” p. 286.

<sup>73</sup> Tracey Reynolds, “Studies of the Maternal: Black Mothering 10 Years On,” *Studies in the Maternal* 13, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/https://www.mamsie.bbk.ac.uk/article/id/4314/>.

motherhood as commoning, collective care is a less explored, less developed and a under theorised aspect and approach on care and motherhood. The reason is that care is still feminised and naturalised so there has been less work on commoning as it automatically undermines one of the main assumptions of patriarchy that women are natural mothers. My thesis helps to cover this gap of this less explored themes and approaches relating to motherhood and care. Referring to social reproduction I refer to the work of Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa and her sister Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa. The feminist take on motherhood in the early 1970s has always been connected to the critique of Marx's idea of labour because social reproduction was excluded from the Marxist analysis of capitalism and labour.<sup>74</sup> This was one of the first feminist critiques of Marxism which comes from the work of Italian feminists linked to the Marxist movement, they were Mariarosa Dalla Costa and her sister Giovanna Franca Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici who all came from the tradition of the Italian *operaismo*<sup>75</sup> a grassroots socialist, Marxist approach to labour, they then joined *Lotta Femminista*.<sup>76</sup> *Lotta Femminista* was founded by Mariarosa Dalla Costa – who came from the *Lotta Operaia* movement – and Leopoldina Fortunato.<sup>77</sup> *Lotta Operaia* was a movement connected to factory's workers and it was connected to the

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<sup>74</sup> Mariarosa Dalla Costa, "Introduction to the Archive for Feminist Struggle for Wages for Housework," *Viewpoint Magazine*, 2015.

<sup>75</sup> *Operaismo* was a Marxist Italian workers' organising movement started in 1969.

<sup>76</sup> *Lotta Femminista* was founded in Padova by several women including Leopoldina Fortunato, Mariarosa Dalla Costa.

<sup>77</sup> Leopoldina Fortunati, *L'arcano Delle Riproduzione. Casalinghe, Prostitute, Operai e Capitale* (Venezia: Marsilio Editori, 1981). Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction. Housework, Prostitution, Labour and Capital* (New York: Autonomedia, 1995).

Marxist movement. Mariarosa Dalla Costa wrote about the wages for housework with Selma James in 1973<sup>78</sup> when they met in London.

Another example of the critique of the exploitation linked to the work of reproduction is the Icelandic women's strike on 24<sup>th</sup> October 1975.<sup>79</sup> On that day (for 24 hours) women who participated in the strike (about 90 per cent) did not go to work outside the home and those engaged in the work of reproduction did not cook, look after children or clean the home. They wanted to show how women's work was indispensable for the economy. They wanted to show that when women stop, everything stops as the women of the *Wages for Housework* campaign asserted. The work of reproduction and care was so undervalued – because work done by women - as to be underpaid or not paid at all if the women worked from home.

This thesis will not concentrate so much on the sociological and economical idea of social reproduction but to the issue of care which is connected to social reproduction. It is really a specific aspect, the one of commoning care and this is what I will cover. How, as a community of mothers and/or carers, we support each other, we support the social reproduction, we support a certain economy? How do we do it? We do it by creating and sharing a space, we create commoning and we create that support. This is the reason why this is important for any form of care. This is

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<sup>78</sup> Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press Ltd, 1973).

<sup>79</sup> M. E. Johnson, "Women in Iceland" (Durham, 1984).

why the thread exercise that I developed— which we will see in more detail in Chapter Five – is an exercise in trying to think and organise care as collective. My contribution is not only to address the issue of care that is connected and in the context of the work of reproduction relating to motherhood but commoning care also in other spheres of the work of reproduction broadly.

### **methodology**

In this thesis I am informed by two approaches, theoretical and political practice. Some of this political practice comes from what I have described in the section above titled *the personal is political* which is in some ways part of my methodology too. This kind of feminist political practice is not considered personal experience but embodied and situated knowledge. In relation to theory I have used critical legal feminist studies, feminist philosophy, psychoanalysis and sociology. I have mixed a theoretical and more practical, art based methodology because in this thesis I write theory which is informed by practice. Not only is it informed by political practice but I use an artistic device – the workshop I did in Berlin in 2016 in collaboration with artist Alex Martinis Roe where I used the colourful thread previously discussed in the section on terminology – to show theory. My methodology then in other words is a practice that informs theory and theory that informs practice. My invitation to women to think of care as collective in the workshop I just mentioned - catalysed with the thread exercise in 2016 - further developed

this link between theory and practice. This is how these elements come together.

Using feminist theory/philosophy, feminist critical legal theory, and psychoanalysis make my argument stronger because I lean on theory – which I often see as coming from practice – to expand, verbalise, symbolise the practice of the thread which represents relationality. I am ‘attached’ to materiality, the visual and the concrete and a thread – and its artistic, practical application - adds substance to my thinking. This is my contribution to knowledge, doing an exercise with women/carers to experience, elaborate and think through care and how to make it collective. Furthermore, in my thesis the feminist critical legal theory and the feminist philosophers I used highlight some elements to do with the critique of universality, abstractness, the neuter which helps me bring to bear how care and the work of reproduction escape these generalising strategies which are detrimental for the material, economical, racial, class, unequal condition in which the work of reproduction operates. Using psychoanalysis and some psychology help me elaborate and uncover some of the subjective realities mothers and carers experience while caring which help me show how it is the embodied uniqueness of each person’s maternal experience which is of interest here, not a universal, abstract experience. This is broadly how I use my sources and how they shape my argument of commoning care. These diverse aspects of my thesis help shape my main argument of commoning/collective care in relation to some

of the gaps in literature on collective/commoning care when discussing care and the maternal.

In this thesis I have theorised the commoning of care. In a way which my mother and her working-class friends, who shared childcare between each other<sup>80</sup>, were not able to theorise because they needed to work. This relates to intersectionality in terms of class. The practice of doing between mothers and carers is fundamental. I am a daughter of a working-class feminist mother and she and her friends engaged in what can be called a feminist praxis, we can read this as a way which challenges the dualism between abstract theory and lived experience. Their praxis was to pass (on) the knowledge between women by doing, being together, talking and listening to each other. In a way they theorised a lot but did not write it down, locating it in a ‘scholarship’. The fact that the theory of collective mothering had not been written by these women was because my mother, her friends, and other women had to work and look after their children. There are multiple feminist ways of producing theory and I particularly value those that are grounded in particular embodied experiences, even if these are often excluded from definitions of ‘theory’. In this way, my mother and many others did produce theory and that is also a tradition that I am attempting to follow.

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<sup>80</sup> My mother had me two weeks short of her 20<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1970. She told me that when I was little she had this thought: “Why should I be at home alone with my child when one of my friends who has a child too could come over and we could spend some time together, the children could play and maybe we’d manage to do other things, follow our interests or help each other clean the house or have a nap?” It seems a simple thought, but for a woman just 20 years old who was not yet a feminist it was a somewhat, I believe, revolutionary thought: ‘Why should I look after my daughter alone at home?’ This desire made her start creating occasions to share childcare with some her friends.

In relation to class in Italy we have had a very significant internal migration till the late 1970s. Many men, women, families from the south migrated to the north of Italy (and from the late 1800 till the 1960s, when Italy was very poor, by the millions they migrated to other European countries, to the USA, Canada, South America, Australia and other parts of the world) which was much more industrialised and wealthier. The south of Italy had been historically left poorer, Gramsci wrote about it too.<sup>81</sup> This internal migration was a form of subalternity as many Italians from the south were illiterate and were seen in a very disparaging way by richer people from the North. Many northern Italians were racists towards people from the south. They did the most badly paid jobs and had poorer and precarious life conditions – after moving in the north too - at least till the late 1970s.

*The Milan Womens's Bookstore Collective* has done much work relating to the work of reproduction and in the 1970s and 1980s they were criticised by women from feminist Marxist groups. At some point in the late 1970s Italian Marxist women workers abandoned the consciousness raising groups as they felt that their concerns of class and inequality was not taken in more consideration. So there was a problem of intersectionality between poor, working class women and educated, bourgeois women. This is something Silvia Federici said many times, feminists abandoned the concern of the economical but the economical will always come back as we live in a capitalist

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<sup>81</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*, VIA Folios (New York: Bordighera Press, 2015).

society.<sup>82</sup> My mother went several times to the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective to learn, meet other women, enrich her culture (as I mentioned previously she was forced to leave school at 14 years old) but she found herself more attracted by other strands of feminism because the women of the Milan Bookstore Collective were more involved in philosophical work which my mother was less familiar with. She did not go there to organise the commoning of care or find support for that (apart from the fact that I did not live in Milan with her). What I am trying to say is that the Libreria was not a space of support for women in that sense. Many of the intellectual feminist women of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective were linked to the University of Trento's department of sociology (where my father studied too) which in the 1960s and 1970s was a hot bed for radical ideas. Nevertheless we can say that feminism had expanded all over Italy and in every region there were and still are, in the south too, some womens' libraries and feminist collectives. So the *practice of doing, il fare tra donne*, took hold in many other parts of Italy but initially it was theorised by the women of the Milan Bookstore Collective.

Here we can see that intersectionality in Italy was mainly linked to class for many years and which created a divide, which was cultural and social between the better off, more 'civilised' North and a poorer, uneducated South.

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<sup>82</sup> Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero. Homework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*.

The way I link intersectionality related to class in my thesis is that I know that the class factor has influenced women and mothers for many decades since the inception of the second wave of feminism in Italy. What is also particular about Italy as well is the economic boom of the 1960s which increased quite quickly the economic abilities of many families. Italy was not an industrial society till then, compared for instance to the UK which was an industrial society since the 1700s, Italy was mainly agricultural. Just to give a concrete example relating to my family, my mother and her four sisters and one brother until the late 1950s were helping their parents in the fields to plough their fields. With no cow, it was my granddad that would be the first in line and all his children in front of him to pull the plough). My mother would have been nine in 1959 then and in 1969 she was pregnant with me and discovered feminism in 1971/72 which changed her life. One of her sisters had to leave school at 10 years old to work in tobacco factories to pay the family debts never to study again until her twenties as she had to work and lived with the family until she was thirty. She became a feminist too in her early thirties and she said it was like coming out of a shell. Now she is a documentary maker in her late seventies.

An interesting aspect of Italian feminism and its connection to practice is that in the 1970s the feminist movement worked to establish the *Consultori Familiari* in many parts of Italy, a place where women could go and where there was a female gynaecologist, and a sexual clinic, all run by women for

women. They were open in 1975 and they were similar to family planning centers. The name *famigliari*, linked to family planning, was added by the catholic strand of the group of women who campaigned to create the *consultori famigliari*, the feminist women wanted to call it *Consultori per donne*. It was funded by the Italian equivalent of the NHS, la Sanita' Pubblica. It was a very important space for women created by women.<sup>83</sup>

Going back to the theory I have used in relation to the *Milan Women's Bookstore Collective* does not reflect in some senses the idea of commoning care – they did not write and theorise about it - this is because many women involved in the *Libreria* were middle class and most likely had babysitters, if they had children, so this was not a concrete, practical need they had and they did not think of writing about it. After the experience of the consciousness raising groups the women of the *Libreria* (active till the late 1970s) what became important to them, and the meetings promoted by them at the *Libreria*, was to read books by women writers as they found out that they did not have a language of women's lives in history as they had always read – if they read books (at that time) – books written by men. What became important then was to recount each other's stories, through storytelling. They believed that where there is storytelling, there is sharing, listening and reading. So the women who went to the *Libreria's* meetings went for this reason, they

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<sup>83</sup> The history of the creation of the *Consultori Famigliari* in Italy is very interesting for its links with the feminist movement. This is an aspect of my thesis which I have not elaborated and that would deserve more attention. It would be interesting to look at if in these spaces there were experiences of commoning care.

did not go to discuss, organise or do the commoning of care. The *Libreria* was an intellectual space open to all, women and men. Therefore what I am doing in this thesis is informed by the *Milan Women's Bookstore Collective* idea of doing between women, entrustment, being in groups.

However the Milan bookstore did not apply their theory to motherhood and the commoning of care. This is what I am doing instead, I am applying their theory of doing together in relation to the commoning of care. Instead for the women of the Milan Bookstore Collective the strategy to see women differently is the notion of *Entrustment*, a notion of *Authority*. I like it as an idea, as an intellectual principle but in terms of support, and community work I am not convinced. So why were there not theories of commoning care? I think maybe too much attention was given – internationally too – to the work of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective. The commoning of care is under theorised (at least in relation to Italian feminism). What I am doing in this thesis is that I am rethinking the link to the practice of doing to and to think about and around a different notion of care with new concepts, with a new language and with the desire to transmit the message.

What I am doing in introducing the commoning of care is exactly that. Can we extend the notion of *Entrustment* to other forms of care? Which is not simply to share knowledge about books and literature, but practical support and help in terms of care? The women of the Milan Bookstore

Collective founded a community run library but it is still a library – an intellectual project. The Milan Women’s Bookstore collective did not theorise ‘doing between mothers’ but doing between women/feminists. I am drawing on and developing this thread of feminist thought but I find it lacking in some ways, one of which is the thinking on the work of reproduction, which touches all humans but women in particular and more in particular Black, Brown, Latina and marginalised women.

On the other hand Adriana Cavarero’s theory, and her notion of intersubjectivity, is applicable to any intersection because by focusing on uniqueness, and the fact that we human beings are all different, you allow the notion of relationality in terms of plurality. What Cavarero insists on, politically, is plurality. She is weary of ideas that tend to homogenise and standardises human beings under one all encompassing umbrella. By not basing herself on pluralism, she allows for all intersections to talk to each other. Intersections of gender, race, colour, class, sexual orientation, disability and so on. Cavarero would say and by looking at uniqueness, the fact we are all different in our unique way, Cavarero states that politics is the result of this uniqueness to expose to each other and not to homogenise each other in one, all-encompassing identity idea. When all these intersections are together and because one embraces uniqueness, there is this sense that this is more inclusive as there is less need to create a group framed by identity, we are all together, everybody is embraced in the idea of uniqueness to create a politics

by what we have different and unique in us. It's not an easy project but it is a project that does not perform a manoeuvre of homogenising humans. In homogenising we lose sight of uniqueness and we risk losing sight of humanity. Cavarero and the Milan bookstore collective have in common the notion and interest of sexual difference feminism, however one keystone of the Milan Bookstore collective is the notion of Entrustment which is not so strong in Cavarero. What I take from the Milan bookstore collective is the practice of doing between women, which informs my idea and practice of communing care. I come from the "tradition" of Italian feminism which is very much linked to the practice and not (just) to the theory. As Cavarero says first there is the practice then the theory in Italian feminism.

The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective is not a *Consultorio Familiare*, where women of all social classes can enter and be seen. This is an important aspect of the history of feminism in which women learned to see their bodies and 'own' their bodies themselves. The Milan Bookstore Collective created an interesting, important and fascinating theory, but can we apply the idea of Entrustment to the commoning of care? The idea of Entrustment of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective is more complex than relationality. So the problems that emerged at times in the consciousness raising groups was the mute woman who is not able to speak, does not say anything, "I do not feel privileged", "I do not want to say anything." Consciousness raising was a horizontal space between women but then when they made links with the

macro politics of the political parties there was a problem as the most prominent, more outspoken, often the more educated and intellectual women ‘naturally’ became the feminist ‘stars’. That became a problem because in the consciousness raising groups all women felt recognised or given space but then when the links with macropolitics were made some women emerged more than others so the horizontal nature of their groups was interrupted.

I now have the knowledge, and I am working on this PhD, but I don’t want to lose sight of the link with *the practice of doing, la pratica del fare tra donne*. This is why my practice with the thread is important, it is to be able to transmit a message with the thread. So it is pedagogical too. One does not have to read the thesis to understand what I mean by commoning care, it is understood by the practice of passing the thread to each other. Anyone can understand it. My message of the thread is that we are all connected, we are not autonomous. We depend on each other. So this is not just a narrative or an autoethnography, it shows that we depend on each other and we can be a web of support to each other.

Italian feminism is not like French feminism that had some feminist theorists like H  l  ne Cixous and the two feminist psychoanalysts Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray who started theorising early on in the history of French feminism. Italian feminism from the 1970s and 1980s was different, it is born out of practice, speaking with each other, relating to each other and the practice of autocoscienza, the concept of affidamento (from the Milan

bookstore collective) is born out of the practice created between women. It comes from speaking to each other, reading to each other, basically from communicating. It is theory informed by practice and this is part of my genealogy. Consciousness raising in Italy was different from consciousness raising in the USA and the UK, it developed in the practice of the unconscious which was a transfer of the psychoanalytic setting to the women's groups. I am writing a theoretical thesis (in which I theorise the importance of the commoning of care) and I use concepts that come from practice. One of these concepts that started as a practice is *affidamento*, *entrustment* that I discussed earlier and the way I write the thesis is influenced by my mother and by other women, in particular Maria Silvia Parolin one of her best friends, and some of my aunts. This is a form of embodied knowledge – *entrustment* not only from a feminist mother to a daughter – but as well in the way I shape my thinking.

*Entrustment* as a way of doing research and I adopt it as a theory and practice as I am writing of feminism and that I grew up in a feminist environment surrounded by many feminist women to whom I entrusted myself. I have lived and now live with a feminist archive inherited from my mother and all the letters my mother wrote to me. Her experience and what she said between women, I have many documents of these encounters. This is part of my bibliography, I have read these books and material during the years and they have informed my knowledge and way of thinking. This is embodied

knowledge, not just being inspired by feminist theory in the abstract. This, for me, is embodied knowledge or can be called situated knowledge not autoethnography or personal narrative so this is the way in which personal experiences sit in relation to theory in my thesis.

For embodied knowledge I mean a feminist epistemology based on embodied ways of knowing which has many proponents in feminist theory. In this thesis then I am informed by two main approaches, theory and embodied/situated knowledge (called political practice ‘*pratica politica*’ by some feminists). This is my positionality. Due to my upbringing in the 1970s and 1980s feminist and left-wing movements we can say in some ways that I am the result of that political practice. It was an embodied knowledge while I was growing up and for which many years later I have wanted to find a language for, part of this thesis is about seeking out that language which I did not have as a child to understand what was happening around me and to me. Academic research has the reputation of being impartial but as a feminist I marry the idea and practice – ‘naturally’ - of embodied and situated knowledge as well as the feminist concept of ‘standpoint epistemology’ as theorised by Patricia Hill Collins (knowledge/perspective from within) and others, where there is no separation between my personal experience and how I think and see and read the world.

I am the daughter of a feminist and I speak of/to/for feminists and embodied knowledge is a way of creating knowledge and being critical which

is feminist. Feminism is not ‘just’ a methodology but is a way of thinking too. The personal is not political per se, it is when it is framed within collective structures such as feminist conscience raising groups that it becomes political. My argument and notion of collective and/or relational motherhood is informed by direct experience of collective care and mothering both as a child growing up in a commune and as a mother myself.

As an example of how this practice came before the theory in Italian feminism, the women of the Milan Bookstore Collective first met in consciousness raising groups, then they applied the practice of the unconscious and then the practice of doing between women *fare tra le donne*, - it is from this practice that the Milan Bookstore Collective was opened in 1975 (and it is still open today), it is an example of making between women. Then at the end of the 1980s they wrote the book they are most known by ‘Non credere di avere dei diritti’ so they theorised afterwards. The book was born after the practice of doing. This is a fundamental aspect of Italian feminism.

Personal narrative has been the motivation and inspiration for some parts of my thesis but the social circumstances that created that narrative needs also to be analysed and historicised. How one method compliments another and why one was needed to supplement another to explain my trajectory. In my methodology I want to give value to body to body transmission that I received from my mother, her friends and my aunts. I use

both theory and practice for doing that. Especially in relation to the colourful thread I went back to the practice of being in a room full of women, so in a way I returned to the format of the consciousness raising groups. One can ask, what is the practice of the thread? It is the practice of signifying relationality needed when involved in care. It can be a way to understand how we can practice communing care.

When we have a horizontal meeting it becomes a way of sharing knowledge, a practice. Some practices developed in the 1970s by feminists were forms of direct democracy, and they were developed then. However, we forget that meeting in a circle and speaking is something that, at least in the west, became widespread during the student revolts (even if it often seems those had more men speaking and it was more of a kind of top-down organising) and feminists collectivising. It becomes a way of sharing knowledge, and there is a practice of listening and speaking. And we go back to this practice which is a form of direct democracy and that can be developed into a practice.

My methodology is feminist, where I value personal, embodied experiences, as Kawash describes: ‘a new generation of feminist scholar-mothers schooled in poststructuralist gender theory began to explore the possibilities for expressing their feminist commitments through and in their mothering.’<sup>84</sup> In

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<sup>84</sup> Samira Kawash, “New Directions in Motherhood Studies,” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 4 (2011): 969–1003. p. 972.

addition I have my own raced, gendered, and class positions from which I experience and see the world. I grew up in what is considered, a Marxist perspective, the capitalist West, during the 1970s and 1980s, but while it was in the midst of societal, cultural and political transformations in which ideas of collectivity were embraced and experimented with. Mine was also a working-class family but both of my parents were educated (my mother was not allowed to study any longer at secondary school level after turning 14 years old because she had to work for her family. She went back to study when she was 18 and always had a thirst for knowledge after that). We are a white Italian family and lived in a medium size conservative and predominantly catholic town where I perceived the difference in my alternative upbringing. My parents and their friends embraced collectivism. These are some of the collective experiences I grew up in: my summers were spent wild camping in collective holidays with many children (and their parents or alone looked after by family or family friends) along the coasts of Italy; my father founded an organic food cooperative with others in the early 1970s, one of the first in Italy; I was born in a commune; my mother lived in a self-managed squat in Milan for thirty years and I consider one of my mother's best friends as an aunt/second mum because of the role she had and has had in my life. This upbringing has shaped how I read personal-political-socio-cultural experiences: one in which I value collectivity. This situatedness shapes my perspective and my thesis as this is embodied knowledge and as I

focused on thinking through and about relationality which was a prevalent ‘mood’ of my life while growing up. Hence disrupting the idea of individualism comes from an embodied idea of collectivity. Similarly, this situatedness shapes the thesis as I have sought to politicise the maternal and to think of it collectively.

My methodology relates to the questions I want to answer as I am engaging in a feminist rethinking of community based on concrete, embodied mothers’ and carers’ relationality. I am writing with and about Italian feminism for an Anglophone context. This is a particular way of writing, because I think that the understanding of Italian feminism in and among Anglophone feminists has been historically limited, in part because of partial access to texts and translations.<sup>85</sup> As Teresa de Lauretis stated ‘Italian feminism is not well known in North America. With very few, very recent exceptions, its critical texts are not translated, discussed, or cited by American and other Anglophone feminists.’<sup>86</sup> A very small minority of Italian feminist texts have been translated into English.<sup>87</sup> I think this is linked with the politics

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<sup>85</sup> ‘Now out of print, *Sexual Difference* is a deeply challenging work which never found much of an audience among American feminists—it is virtually missing from the so-called category of women debates of the 1990s.’ Linda M. G. Zerilli, “Feminists Makes Promises: The Milan Collective’s Sexual Difference and the Project of World Building,” in *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 93–124. p. 93. In Italian the title of the book is ‘Libreria delle Donne di Milano, *Non Credere Di Avere Dei Diritti: La Generazione Della Liberta’ Femminile Nell’idea e Nelle Vicende Di Un Gruppo Di Donne* (Turin: Libreria delle Donne, 1987). (Don’t Think You Have Any Rights: The Engendering of Female Freedom in the Thought and Vicissitudes of a Women’s Group) a text collectively written in 1987 by the Libreria delle Donne di Milano (Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective) and published in English under the title *The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*.

<sup>86</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, co-translator of “Sexual Difference” cited in Zerilli, “Feminists Makes Promises: The Milan Collective’s Sexual Difference and the Project of World Building.” p. 212.

<sup>87</sup> Since 2015 I have been part of the Feminist Duration Reading Group who met once a month to read initially Italian feminist texts (the few translated and some translated by the Italian members of the group). Then we read other under-known and under-appreciated feminist texts, movements and struggles from outside the Anglo-American canon. The group has developed a practice of reading out loud, together, one

of translation too,<sup>88</sup> which have consequences for how theory and literature is understood and ‘translated’ into other languages and contexts. Hence some of my statements about Italian feminism may sound strong for lack of a better word but it is because I have been immersed in this reality – via theory, texts and feminist practices– all my life. Therefore, I reflect, and I write politically and linguistically between the two fields of Italian and Anglophone languages, cultures and psycho-socio-political realities.

I am a daughter of the 1970s, as it is by now abundantly clear, and this research is in part a way to try to make sense of those years. Feminist historian Luisa Passerini argued that ‘we can say that the culture of 1968 in the first place had produced biographies and that those are its culture.’<sup>89</sup> In other words, to live through those years was to experience what Passerini calls an “*impennata soggettiva*” a ‘subjective upturn,’<sup>90</sup> a period of significant personal and political struggle. Moreover, Italian feminists stated the vital importance for feminists of *starting from oneself, partire da sé*,<sup>91</sup> as the most relevant starting point for feminist politics and feminist subjectivity. In

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paragraph at a time, with the aim of creating a sense of connection and intimacy during meetings.

“Www.Feministduration.Com,” n.d.

<sup>88</sup> ‘One consequence of globalisation, by whatever definition, would seem to be that translations account for only 2 to 4 per cent of books published in the United States or the United Kingdom. This general proportion is much lower than the percentages often cited for other countries: 15 to 18 per cent for France, 11 to 14 for Germany, some 25 for Italy, 24 to 26 for Spain to bring together reports for years between 1985 and 1992 (Ganne and Minon 1992).’ in Anthony Pym and Grzegorz Chrupala, “The Quantitative Analysis of Translation Flows in the Age of an International Language,” in *Less Translated Languages*, ed. Anderson Branchadell and Lovell Margaret West (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004). p. 27. Hephzibah Anderson, “Why Won’t English Speakers Read Books in Translation?,” 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20140909-why-so-few-books-in-translation>.

<sup>89</sup> Luisa Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation, Italy 1968*. (Hanover, New England: Wesleyan University Press, 1996). Luisa Passerini, *Autoritratto Di Gruppo*. (Milano: Giunti Editori S.p.A., 1988), p. 206

<sup>90</sup> Passerini, *Autobiography of a Generation, Italy 1968*.

<sup>91</sup> Diotima, *La Sapienza Di Partire Da Sé*. (Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1996).

addition, mine is in a way, overall, a Cavarerian method. Adriana Cavarero says that we are all unique beings, and in this thesis by starting from myself I have put my embodied ‘uniqueness’ to the forefront as a starting point in a feminist methodological move.<sup>92</sup> Cavarero is an important interlocutor in this thesis, as will become apparent especially in Chapters One, Two and Three. She is a prominent Italian feminist political philosopher, widely recognised for her work on Plato, feminist theory and philosopher Hannah Arendt. She is a classicist who accesses ancient Greek texts in the original language to analyse and criticise them from a feminist standpoint.

Cavarero’s work on relationality and her reading of Hannah Arendt’s idea of plurality *in its own right*<sup>93</sup> influences my understanding and approach regarding subjectivity and relationality. In her work spanning several decades, she takes Arendt’s concern with restoring plurality to the political and turns it into ‘an ontology of plural uniqueness’ constitutive of each existent. For her, there is no universal subject. Instead, Cavarero proposes an open, more altruistic subject—one inclined towards the other. She reminds us how, from the very start, in having been born into a condition of relational dependence on others, typically the mother, humans are primarily relational. For Cavarero, it is from this primarily materialist, anti-metaphysical, relational ontology that politics should inscribe itself. For instance, when she states: ‘I intend, in fact,

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<sup>92</sup> Cavarero is greatly inspired by Hannah Arendt’s work and she has reworked some of her themes, including the idea of uniqueness, from a feminist lens. I will discuss this more in Chapters 1, 2 and 3.

<sup>93</sup> ‘Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to *the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.*’<sup>93</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, First edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). p.7 [Emphasis mine].

this relationality in material, contextual, local, and current terms. Each of us is practically in relation to those with whom—here and now, in a specific physical space and in a specific definite time—one is exposed.<sup>94</sup> Relationality between mothers for me means a specific, unique mother who relates to another specific unique mother with a voice, a face, a body:

A woman who is here, in flesh and blood, with a face, a name, a story, a voice, whose uniqueness is exposed and shared by others, in the vulnerable context of human, material and transient life.<sup>95</sup>

This concrete relationship which Cavarero talks about and my own understanding of relationality are both rooted in Cavarero's reading of Hannah Arendt's work; this includes Arendt's idea of plurality as stated above. On relationality, my specific question is: what would maternal subjectivity be like if motherhood was lived in a more collective mode?

As I have said, research shows that many women become isolated after they have a child, and several classical psychoanalysts, as I discuss in Chapter Three, have viewed the mother as an isolated figure, considered, on the whole, mainly through an individualistic lens. It is into this discourse that I wish to insert my idea of collective mothering. Baraitser argues that:

In some senses it is barely possible to conceive of maternal subjectivity outside of interruption. The daily breaches in maternal thinking, maternal activity and maternal repose conducted by the infant, toddler

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<sup>94</sup> Elisabetta Bertolino and Adriana Cavarero, 'Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero.' *Differences*, 19, no 1 (2008): p. 162.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

and young child add up to an onslaught on a mother's mental, emotional and social functioning that can be experienced with a nightmarish intensity.<sup>96</sup>

I contend that this experience of motherhood is mainly of mothers mothering often in isolation with little support. Therefore, in my interest in relationality I try to re-think mothers' subjectivities in a more collective way in which mothers are more supported, helped by others, and are able to ask for help. My question emerges in conversation with Baraitser's important and influential conception of maternal subjectivity. I ask, how might the mother experience her subjectivity differently from the experiences Baraitser describes if the maternal were thought collectively?

I think collective mothering is an important paradigm to think through. As some black maternal scholars<sup>97</sup> have stated; for centuries Black mothers have often mothered collectively and their subjectivity is/was shaped in this collective, relational mode more than in the autonomous and individualistic mode of liberal classical philosophy as U.S. black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins suggests in relation to the experiences of black mothers in the US.<sup>98</sup> Hill Collins's work refers importantly to possible differences in relationships to the collective mothering paradigm that might be shaped by factors like race, class and geographic location. She highlighted the practice of 'other

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<sup>96</sup> Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption* (Routledge, 2008). p. 67.

<sup>97</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorising about Motherhood," in *Mothering: Ideology, Experience and Agency*, ed. Evelyn Glen Nakano, Grace Chang, and Linda Forcey Rennie (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 45–66.

<sup>98</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother/Daughter Relationships," *A Scholarly Journal on Black Woman*, 1987. Collins Hill, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorising about Motherhood."

mothering' to describe care system in which black women provide care for children in the community. I understand that motherhood has different connotations in different cultures, so in some cultures, historically and in the present day too, biological mothers were important but less important than in what is called 'the West'; their function was supplemented by other mothers, other women, aunts, uncles, grandparents and friends in the community who became co-mothers to the mother who gave birth.

There are many different traditions of collective mothering I could have drawn from and for this project I have chosen to engage with the literature that comes primarily from the Italian context because as I have previously mentioned, I am writing from my particular situated position in the Italian feminist tradition. In this thesis I have not engaged in a sustained way with the literature on Black motherhood/mothering described in the paragraph above but that, as I said it earlier, it may have offered something different to the thesis. For me it is embodied knowledge and I am writing about this tradition because the commoning of care was less theorised by Italian feminists. Hence, as for me this was a lived, concrete, practical experience of being the subject of collective care while growing up I wanted to understand it better and process the experience and the relevance of this to inform other collective practices which have been already explored. The collective care experience of the Italian context from a feminist perspective had not been explored yet in the English language. In a future project, I may

want to expand by engaging in other collective mothering traditions and literatures, but the scope of this particular project I am grappling with is formative literature from a particular tradition that relates to my own experience.

I acknowledge that the psychoanalytic maternal studies literature has been given in some ways the status of a kind of universal theory and that I had a blind spot in relation to this literature. I have chosen multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to read and discuss the maternal in this thesis as it is a complex and multi-layered life experience which requires, I believe, a wide spectrum or ‘vision’. Probably it was not wide enough as it did not include the collective maternal experiences of other traditions too. For me, a philosophical and metaphorical understanding of motherhood is interesting, but it does not enable us to understand all the complexities of the experience of mothers and carers. This is the reason why I use philosophical, sociological, legal, psychoanalytic and psychological lenses to read the maternal because for me ‘what’s at stake is not a metaphor of the maternal, but rather the real mother as a figure of metonymic symbolisation.’<sup>99</sup>

Reading the maternal with a wider perspective is advantageous for some of the reasons that British feminist psychologist Wendy Hollway articulates. Hollway is not convinced by ‘exclusively sociological accounts of mothering

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<sup>99</sup> Metonymy has the effect of creating vivid and concrete images instead of generalities. Cesare Casarino and Andrea Righi, eds., *Another Mother. Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). p. 50.

be they structural or discursive,<sup>100</sup> nor by post-structuralist accounts of subjectivity in which it seems, that ‘the power is all one-way; as if subjects are malleable material into which childcare manuals, expert knowledge and government policies can be applied to shape our subjectivity.’<sup>101</sup> She follows on by saying that ‘policies, advice and knowledge only effect change in so far as they are pulling in a direction made possible not only by people’s circumstances, but by their desires, identities, commitments, and anxieties.’<sup>102</sup>

### **chapter outline**

To summarise my earlier points, this thesis is an attempt to think motherhood in a collective, relational way and to think how and if a relational model of motherhood can be transformative for a mother’s sense of self, her subjectivity. I suggest that a model of relational motherhood, where care is seen as collectivised and motherhood de-individualised, grounded in 1970s and 1980s Italian and French sexual difference feminism, instead of a model of caregiving based on a liberal and individualistic view of the subject, offers us an alternative way to talk about maternal subjectivity and community and suggests where there could be the possibility to challenge and ward off the isolation many new mothers and carers experience. In other words, what captures and holds my interest in mothers’ relationality is the possibility that it can be a ‘feminist challenge to the androcentrism of the public sphere and the

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<sup>100</sup> Wendy Hollway, “From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity,” *International Journal of Critical Psychology* 2 (2001): 13–38, p. 6.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* p. 6.

constitution of alternative spaces of freedom.’<sup>103</sup> Hence, I am interested in looking at those ‘alternative spaces of freedom’ created by mothers. Overall, in a feminist move, this thesis is an attempt to bring back the maternal, the material and the concrete to theory. The thesis makes use of a diverse range of materials and approaches to make its arguments. It is structured thus: in Chapter 1 titled ‘a feminist critique of equality, individualism and universalisms’ I set out to challenge the liberal idea of equality, individualism, universalism and the abstract subject of law. I demonstrate the limitations of liberal equality and non-relational, individualistic, liberal feminism in this area. I make an argument for these processes as particularly important for understanding the law’s failure in terms of mothers and motherhood. The main question I set out to investigate in this chapter and Chapter 2 is this: is a relational model of motherhood important for rethinking women’s political and legal subjectivity? I offer a critical account of legal equality and the abstract subject of law from a feminist perspective, illustrating how some feminist legal philosophers (Lia Cigarini, Marie Ashe, Martha Fineman and Carol Smart) have imagined a different kind of human, more dependent, relational and concrete. I finally make a claim for the alliance between Irigaray and Italian sexual difference feminism to provide a uniquely enlightening rethinking of that claim and how they can help us move towards a relational model of motherhood.

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<sup>103</sup> Linda M. G. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005), ix.

Chapter 2 titled ‘legal imaginations. women challenge the law’ details the approach towards the law and equality of The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective. I show how the neutral language of classical philosophy is detrimental when used in legal cases. I do so by looking at a series of events that were organised in the 1980s by the Milan Bookstore Women’s Collective where some feminist philosophers looked at the problem of the use of the neuter and the universal in language. I then consider Cavarero’s approach to the law and its relationship with women, mothers, and the maternal. I specifically look at legal cases and show how the law is often not favourable to women in relation to reproduction and autonomy. The two cases I take into consideration are *Evans v Amicus Healthcare Ltd*<sup>104</sup> and *Attorney General v X* [1992] 1 IR 1.<sup>105</sup>

Then the main question I set out to investigate in Chapter 3 is this: does a relational model of motherhood/care disrupt the individualistic idea of the subject? This chapter titled ‘conceptualising mothers’ relationality and the political in women’s relations’, is where I conceptualise relationality and the political in women’s relations. I expound my idea of thinking motherhood in a relational way, one which is rooted in political resistance resting on relationality, as developed by Cavarero and her work on relationality based on concrete, embodied, plural encounters. I briefly look at how Freud, Bowlby and Winnicott considered the mother a solitary figure only devoted to her

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<sup>104</sup> *Natalie Evans v Amicus Healthcare Ltd* (2004).

<sup>105</sup> *Attorney General v X* [1992] 1 IR 1 (n.d.).

child. I show how, instead, mothers can become figures of resistance and freedom by imagining a different way of being mothers that is more collective and less individualised. These first three chapters set out the theoretical foundations for the rest of the thesis (Chapters 4 and 5).

In Chapter 4 titled ‘rome 1970s: the politics and praxis of *Il collettivo madri*’ I focus on a case study centring on collectivity, relationality and feminist politics in a group of Italian feminist mothers. It delves into *Il Collettivo Madri*, a mothers’ collective based in Rome in the 1970s. I discuss how the project came about through their desire to form a collective which would be a base for practical support and elaboration of their experience of motherhood. In addition, I look at a previous collective of some of the same mothers when they formed a group to support birthing mothers. I give an account of some of the achievements of the mothers’ collective. I detail the work of the *Research Centre on Motherhood and Women’s Condition (Il Taccuino D’Oro)* that they founded few years later. In concluding this chapter, I think about the importance of this group to show in practice how mothering can be lived in a more collective and communal manner and be a site of resistance.

Chapter 5 titled ‘relational maternal subjectivity’ is the chapter in which I put into practice some of my ideas of relational motherhood, as discussed in the previous four chapters. I explore postnatal depression in more depth, focusing on one of its causes, which is isolation and individualised care. There

I argue that maternal subjectivity can be transformed by a solid critique of individualism and that it can be reconceptualised via the feminist practice and theory of relationality that I expounded in the previous chapters. I then delve into the art practice, inspired by the main themes of my thesis, which I have devised in collaboration with Berlin-based artist Alex Martinis Roe to represent relationality between mothers and carers through the use of a colourful thread. In 2016 we created a proposition called 'Ritual for the support of mothers', in which mothers/carers pass each other a thread asking for support from another person. The result of this workshop is that a visual, concrete web made of a thread is created. Subsequently I outline how London-based artist Rose Gibbs and I run this workshop at The Women's Art Library at Goldsmiths with a group of mothers and carers. This chapter serves to show how relationality can be represented in practice. This exercise helps to disengage it from a purely abstract concept to make it concrete and visible but symbolic at the same time.

In conclusion I link the threads of each chapter and argue for the destabilising of individualism, for the re-thinking of subjectivity and for a stronger relational maternal/care experience to make up webs of relationships between mothers and carers to ward off isolation and make it a less isolated experience. Overall my aim is a move to politicise and collective care, the commoning care, any care.



# 1

## a feminist critique of equality, individualism and universalism

In this chapter I explore how mothers have been affected by an idea of equality that perpetuates the Man as the representative of humanity, and I critique both liberalism and liberal feminism for having often failed to take into consideration the specificities of what the work of reproduction entails. The central question I set out to explore in this chapter is this: is a relational model of motherhood important for rethinking women's political and legal subjectivity? I carry on exploring this question in Chapter Two too. To do this I make the following points. Firstly, I offer a critical account of liberal equality, liberal feminism, and the abstract subject of law from a feminist perspective. Secondly I make a claim that Irigaray's thinking is helpful to reframe the meaning of equality from a feminist perspective. Thirdly I make a claim for the alliance between Irigaray and Italian feminism to provide a unique rethinking of equality, universality and the problem with neutral language. Fourthly I criticise the limitations of equality or non-relational feminism in this area and I show how the liberal, individualistic and universalistic logic of the law exclude mothers from its world view. All in all

the main claim in this chapter is that these processes of criticising liberalism from a feminist perspective are particularly important for understanding the law's failure in terms of mothers and motherhood.

I have chosen to look at a particular point in history – the mid-1980s – when Irigaray met Italian feminists in Naples. On that occasion Irigaray presented her critique of equality and law to Italian feminists. The presentation is important because this dialogue between feminists related specifically to law and included a critique of equality. Her way of engaging with other women challenged the phallocentrism of traditional institutional politics and created concrete 'alternative spaces of freedom.'<sup>106</sup> I focus specifically on this event to bring to light Irigaray's thought on the law and how she and other feminists consider equality as a flawed notion.

The central problem of this chapter is similar to what feminist legal scholars Ngaire Naffine and Margaret Davis discuss when they say that pregnant women fall outside the legal category of personhood: 'The standard model of the person remains firmly the non-pregnant and indeed impregnable person, the self-proprietor who possesses clear territorial boundaries and pregnant women remain legal curiosities who must somehow be made to fit the model.'<sup>107</sup> That is the reason I am unpacking the liberal ideas of equality, individualism and universalism. Because while discussing maternal

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<sup>106</sup> Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. p. ix.

<sup>107</sup> Ngaire Davies, Margaret, and Naffine, *Are Persons Property? Legal Debates about Property and Personality* (London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, 2001). p. 155.

subjectivity, we are necessarily faced with ideas of personhood and identity that escape the normative liberal idea of what a human being stands for: individualistic, self-sufficient and autonomous. This view of the human does not fit most human beings. Feminists have said they do not fit women, and I, like others, argue that they do not fit what the maternal experience is for most women or carers in general. Joan Raphael-Leff argues:

Addressing ‘*The*’ Mother universalises the particular, neglecting each mother’s unique attributes and personal psycho-histories, including the specific circumstances of this particular conception; her own current internal representations of mothers and mothering, the number of other children in her household, and the age gaps between them, the degree of practical and emotional support available to her, as well as the surrounding matrices of socio- cultural expectations, economic resources and restrictions, provisions of maternity care, grants and leave, and normative considerations of age, sex, education, peers, class, race, ethnicity and so on.<sup>108</sup>

This concept of the particularity and difference of each mother’s experience will accompany my project. Following this significant point, I declare an uneasiness with the term “equality” as expounded by liberalism because the liberal meaning of the subject incorporates and assimilates all differences in it, women included, and for the purpose of this thesis, I believe the ‘specificities’ of mothers are important. That is why it is important to critique the abstract

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<sup>108</sup> Joan Raphael-Leff, “Healthy Maternal Ambivalence,” *Studies in the Maternal* 2, no. 1 (2010): 1–15. p. 3.

liberal legal subject and its individualistic<sup>109</sup> pose, in which mothers fit uncomfortably.

### **liberal feminism**

The political philosophy of liberalism originates from the Enlightenment<sup>110</sup> period as a response to the birth of nation states. Ideas of liberalism are broad but probably the two most unifying aspects are that the individual is paramount – as against the collective – and that the individual has the right to inalienable freedom. John Locke is named as the founder of liberal philosophy with his belief that each man has a natural right to private property, life, and liberty. Behind most of the ideas of liberal philosophy is the concept of the human as essentially individualistic. The idea of individualism, of the autonomous subject who is sufficient to herself and himself originated with Thomas Hobbes in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He was the first modern theorist to formulate the idea of a social contract between citizens (or ‘subjects’) and the State. Hobbes argued that subjects need to obey a sovereign, or an absolute State, or otherwise chaos, the state of nature, will reign. Locke developed Hobbes’ ideas further.<sup>111</sup> One of the main, more recent, exponents of liberalism is John Rawls. His idea of justice demands maximum freedom,

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<sup>109</sup> ‘individualism in reality functions as the immunitary ideologemme through which modern sovereignty implements the protection of life. We should not lose sight of any intermediate passage in this dialectic.’ Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). p. 61. See as well Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995). See in particular Chapters 2 and 3.

<sup>110</sup> Steven Wall, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Liberalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). p. 4.

<sup>111</sup> Of course there are many other historical theorists (Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Stuart Mill and Kant) who developed the liberal ideas that would form the basis for more recent legal theorists like John Rawls, Ronald Dworkin, Francis Fukuyama and Richard Rorty, Robert Nozick, Fuller among others.

equality and “fair equality of opportunity” for all citizens.<sup>112</sup> A social contractarian theorist of justice, Rawls argues that to identify a fair idea of justice we need to rid ourselves of our specificity, for instance gender, race, class, education, and religion.

The ideology of liberal equality stems from liberal philosophy.

Liberalism has been criticised by critical legal scholars and by feminist legal scholars and philosophers. Critical legal scholar Costas Douzinas argues that ‘liberal philosophy, in its attempt to glorify the individual, denies our dependence on the world and, with arrogant self-certainty, artificially erases the traces of otherness and imagines self as identical with itself.’<sup>113</sup> Liberal democracies are founded on an individualistic ontology which still considers individual rights as the paramount of democracy, as opposed to other societies and cultures in other parts of the world where collective rights are important too.<sup>114</sup> The important factor to pay attention to when looking at liberal equality and its narrow legal definitions is the marginal presence of a discourse on differences.

Feminist political theorist Carole Pateman<sup>115</sup> has criticised liberalism as based on the idea of a free chosen social contract between individuals and the State. When the social contract was theorised, what was left aside was the

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<sup>112</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972).

<sup>113</sup> Costas Douzinas, *The End of Human Rights: Critical Legal Thought at the Turn of the Century* (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2000). p. 270-271.

<sup>114</sup> N. David Gellner, “From Group Rights to Individual Rights and Back: Nepalese Struggles over Culture and Equality,” in *Cultures and Rights: Anthropological Perspectives*, ed. Jane K. Cowan, Marie-Benedicte Dembour, and Richard A. Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

<sup>115</sup> Carol Pateman, *The Sexual Contract* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988).

sexual contract. Pateman argues that women have historically not been able to decide freely to which social contract to submit to, if any. The social contract should have been called the social-sexual contract and it is from here that patriarchy has kept exercising power over women. She argues this does not mean women accept their powerless position, they have always resisted, dissented from that position at different levels and creatively. Nevertheless, it is important to analyse the premise of the social contract, which is behind liberalism, and what it meant for women to accept it or partially accept it even if it did not speak of and for them.

Many early proponents of women's rights wrote in the liberal tradition. They were: Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges in eighteenth century, John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor in the nineteenth century and Betty Friedan in the twentieth century. In the UK, liberal feminism stems in conjunction with the birth of liberalism during the Enlightenment period when new and more progressive ideas of human beings and society took hold in writers, intellectuals and artists, philosophers and some politicians.<sup>116</sup> Liberal feminists are committed not just to liberalism but to making liberalism fulfil its potential in relation to gender. They often believe that laws are advantageous for women, and if they struggled to achieve legal recognition and rights any ensuing disadvantage would end. Furthermore, they often do not question the main premise of liberalism which is based on the idea of the

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<sup>116</sup> Karen O'Brien, "Introduction: The Progress of Society," in *Women and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–34.

autonomous, self-sufficient, rational and individualistic subject. Therefore, they do not struggle for structural change in society and patriarchal culture. Their main interest is in women acquiring the same rights as men without questioning the premise on which these rights are gained.

We can say that both liberal feminists and radical feminists of the Irigarayan tradition valued the idea of women belonging to themselves, as Lucy Van Pelt reminds us and as framed in a more elaborate manner by Braidotti as the ‘revaluation of the bodily roots of subjectivity.’<sup>117</sup> Nevertheless they had, I argue, a different understanding of what it meant to belong to oneself. The main difference is that liberal feminists did not particularly question the idea of laws coming from the State in a top down manner, from the State to women. On the other hand, radical feminists did question this. As Italian feminist philosopher Angela Putino argued in relation to laws: ‘After all, we never really took seriously these laws and their claim to be the only ones. We never really believed – and here, to believe means to think that one’s freedom is in step with the laws.’<sup>118</sup> Those women argued that unless there is a change in the subjective experience of women through the political sphere of feminist activism, laws do not give women a way to belonging to oneself, to become self-determined. Like Putino, feminist socio-legal scholar Carol Smart elucidates how women can relate to law in an alternative way or abandon it altogether:

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<sup>117</sup> Braidotti, “Becoming Woman: Or Sexual Difference Revisited.”

<sup>118</sup> Angela Putino, “Jumping,” in *The Lonely Mirror: Italian Perspectives on Feminist Theory*, ed. Sandra Kemp and Paola Bono (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). 227.

Feminist legal scholarship is no longer assuming the stance of a supplicant requesting that the orthodoxy hears the case for women's rights or extends the benefits of objectivity and neutrality to the female legal subject. Rather, feminist work has shown that the foundations on which jurisprudence rests are deeply imbued with a masculine perspective and privilege. Moreover it has become clear that what is required is either a radical transformation or an abandonment of jurisprudence altogether.<sup>119</sup>

It is this radical transformation or an abandonment of the law altogether that I am interested in this thesis, as I will further explore in Chapter 2 on women and the law.

In the next section I will look at the importance of challenging the individualistic approach to law to see how law is ingrained with a universal and abstract idea of the subject that does not take into account difference: and, I argue, mothers' singularities. To begin to understand these limitations, we will first look at some feminist philosophers and feminist legal scholars who have criticised liberal equality and universalism.

### **critical accounts of equality, individualism and universalism**

The main question I explore in this section is how does motherhood and pregnancy disrupt and challenge legal discourse and its notions of personhood and the self? The history of law is a history of individualistic, self-determining and atomistic beings rather than one that offers a different kind of belonging to the self and the other, which is the one I am interested in here.<sup>120</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> Carol Smart, "Feminist Jurisprudence," in *Dangerous Supplements. Resistance and Renewal in Jurisprudence*, ed. Peter Fitzpatrick (London: Pluto Press, 1991). p. 133.

<sup>120</sup> To read other examples of alternative feminist readings of law, see Erika Hunter, Rosemary, McGlynn, Clare and Rackley, ed., *Feminist Judgments. From Theory to Practice*. (Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2010).; Maria Drakopoulou, ed., *Feminist Encounters with Legal Philosophy*. (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013). For

Historically, patriarchal culture subjected women and mothers to a condition that negated or *reduced their power to expand*, or rather, their power to form their identity and subjectivity freely. This can be associated with the fact that women bear children and their reproductive function has placed them in a position in which others speak for them. In other words, the ‘reproductive’ body of women stands for and symbolises what society is afraid of, wants to control and legislate on, it is a catalyst, using Esposito’s phrase, for the overall meaning of the ‘protection of life.’<sup>121</sup>

Therefore, we need to try to evaluate the importance of mothers becoming aware of themselves subjectively, of starting to ‘belong to themselves’, as Lucy van Pelt claims, to follow one’s destiny and desires. We could see this idea of belonging to oneself as an example of possessive individualism, therefore it is important here to ask ourselves: how might I distinguish a relational model of subjectivity from the possessive individualistic model? In relation to carers and mothers, an alternative model of subjectivity is needed. This alternative, relational model of subjectivity will be the theme of Chapters 3 and 5.

So, for the themes of this chapter, how should the language of law be altered to accommodate differences and, in the case of this thesis, mothers’

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the purpose of this thesis see in particular Maria Drakopoulou, “Introduction: Reading Law Reading Women,” in *Feminist Encounters with Legal Philosophy*, ed. Maria Drakopoulou (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 1–8.; Alison Stone, “Hegel on Law, Women and Contract,” in *Feminist Encounters with Legal Philosophy*, ed. Maria Drakopoulou (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2013), 104–22. and Patrick Hanafin, “A Voice beyond the Law: Reading Cavareto Reading Plato,” in *Feminist Encounters with Legal Philosophy*, ed. Maria Drakopoulou (Routledge, 2013), 9–19.

<sup>121</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas. The Protection and Negation of Life*. (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Polity Press, 2011).

different, specific (reproductive, childcare) needs? Individualism, I argue, is a problematic concept for mothers, as once they have a child, in ‘ideal conditions’ they need to be able to think about themselves and about another human being. The liberal feminists that I critique, following Irigaray’s perspective, are those who believe that rights and equality are the most fundamental factors necessary to change society and make women equal to men. Liberal equality is the foundational ideology behind today’s democracies, yet sexual difference feminists argue that within liberal equality women disappear and they become assimilated to the male paradigm. This often happens with the use of the neuter/neutral term Man which supposedly includes women. Man meaning “humankind” in reality expels women from its term and world view, as Wendy Brown states:

If the attributes and activities of citizenship and personhood within liberalism produce, require, and at the same time, disavow their feminized opposites, then the liberal subject emerges as pervasively masculinist not only in its founding exclusions and stratification but in its contemporary discursive life.<sup>122</sup>

Feminists have called this phallo-logocentrism, which is discourse dominated by the male subject. Feminist critical legal scholar Maria Drakopoulou argues:

through the interpretation of established ‘texts’ of Western intellectual traditions feminist scholarship has been able to elucidate their deeper meanings, expose their patriarchal and phallogocentric nature, and come to understand Woman’s oblique, absent or negated relationship with the

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<sup>122</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*. p. 164.

symbolic order as an excluded subject of the very language She Herself speaks.’<sup>123</sup>

This erasure of women from the philosophical discourse, to which Drakopoulou’s alludes, was glorified by various Western classical philosophers.<sup>124</sup>

How then have the legal texts been re-interpreted by feminist legal scholars? One way has been to uncover the neuter used in the language of classical legal texts from which women were absent. Legal scholar Marie Ashe proposes that we need to account for differences. ‘I believe that the fundamental question of difference cannot ultimately be avoided, that it demands confrontation. To abandon the project of speaking meaningfully of “difference” is to abandon the project of speaking meaningfully of “women.”’<sup>125</sup> As I discuss in chapter 3, I maintain that a relational feminist analysis, or relational ontology, can help us in challenging the idea of the human contained in the language of liberal equality, that of the abstract, autonomous subject of Western classical philosophy.<sup>126</sup> This model has been

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<sup>123</sup> Drakopoulou, “Introduction: Reading Law Reading Women.” 1.

<sup>124</sup> For an account on this theme see Adriana Cavarero, *Stateby Bodies: Literature, Philosophy and the Question of Gender* (The University of Michigan Press, 1992). Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance. A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*.

<sup>125</sup> Marie Ashe, “Mind’s Opportunity: Birthing a Poststructuralist Feminist Jurisprudence,” in *Legal Studies as Cultural Studies: A Reader in (Post)Modern Critical Theory*, ed. Jerry D. Leonard (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 85–132., p. 88.

<sup>126</sup> For an interesting approach to the question of the abstract and classical philosophy’s view on women see Marisa Forcina, *Soggette. Corpo, Politica, Filosofia: Percorsi Nella Differenza* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2000).

sustained by the ideology of patriarchy<sup>127</sup> and it hinders and flattens the experiences of women and, I argue, more so of mothers.

As we have seen there is a tight connection between the law and liberalism. Given the overwhelming liberalism of law (and legal scholars), and given that mainstream feminism is also liberal, it becomes evident how thinking about motherhood demonstrates liberalism's inadequacy. Hence a liberal feminist reading of the experience of motherhood and the needs of mothers is often as limited as that of traditional liberalism. That is why we need to substitute it with a relational feminist analysis.

This is so because motherhood and the maternal constantly make us face the utter vulnerability of the human being, hence it challenges and re-challenges (if adequately observed and given the attention it requires) the abstract idea of the human as autonomous and self-sufficient. As Martha Fineman argues, we are "inevitably dependent" at various stages in our lives.<sup>128</sup> The mother can be seen as the epitome of this vulnerability because she can become more vulnerable once she has a baby, who is in turn an utterly vulnerable human being, as I will show in more detail later on. It is because of this vulnerability to which mothers/carers can become more exposed once they have a baby that I suggested in the introduction that relationality between mothers can be helpful in supporting the work of care.

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<sup>127</sup> See Libreria delle Donne di Milano, *Non Credere Di Avere Dei Diritti: La Generazione Della Liberta' Femminile Nell'idea e Nelle Vicende Di Un Gruppo Di Donne*. The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*.

<sup>128</sup> Martha Albertson Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth. A Theory of Dependency*. (New York: The New Press, 2005).

I maintain that maternal subjectivity and relationality between mothers are deeply interlinked, because within an abstract concept of the subject once a woman becomes a mother she can realise several things. Firstly, that her subjectivity is not universal, that her experience can be very different from other mothers and that her experience is very different from a man's, from which, as we have just pointed out, the idea of the subject was derived. Secondly, that her experience of becoming a mother is far from abstract—from being pregnant, to giving birth, to breastfeeding, all these bodily experiences are grounded in an embodied and embedded experience of herself. Thirdly, she comes to realise that she is not autonomous, as the child's vulnerability and needs put the very idea of an autonomous self into question.<sup>129</sup> Not all women will experience all the aspects of motherhood that I discussed above, nor will they experience them in the same way. Trans-mothers, adoptive mothers, surrogate mothers, foster parents and grandparents or carers may experience the same or some of the aspects described above. At the same time some fathers experience the above aspects of the 'maternal' too.

I do not want to generalise, assimilate, or presume that the experiences of any parent can be captured in a universal reference. Moreover, the idea of the universal subject—its abstractness, individualism, and self-sufficient autonomy—contribute, I believe, to causing some women to experience

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<sup>129</sup> 'Given the western focus on autonomous individuality and the tacit message of impossible bodily connectedness and/or psychic fusion, pregnancy and providing sustenance from the juices of her own body in utero and breastfeeding, may seem equally strange to a new mother.' Raphael-Leff, "Healthy Maternal Ambivalence." p. 5.

solitude in their newly changed role as mothers. Postnatal depression, for example, can implode a mother's sense of selfhood,<sup>130</sup> which is challenging and disrupting to a 'mythological' idea of the unity of the self.<sup>131</sup>

Universalism tends to incorporate the female subject either by forcing it towards a male homologation or treating women as the universal minus. As Cavarero explains:

The consequence for woman is that she cannot recognize herself in the thought system and the language of a neutral subject which does not contain her – and indeed excludes her – without accounting for that exclusion. The universal, presuming to hold true for the excluded sex as well, erases the logical space of originary differing, and transfers it to a lower level of consequent differing. Thus woman is the universal man with 'a plus' of feminine gender. We well know how this addition does not empower the universal, but rather disempowers it: in fact the 'plus' is more coherently a 'minus', that is, the neutral-universal man minus the feminine gender which is precisely the real content and the true genesis of this universalization.<sup>132</sup>

Human beings, men and women, are not general nor all the same. Formal equality has, at times and in some contexts, trapped women and mothers between gaining the same rights as men and acting as and desiring similar lives to men.

As Federici argues 'there was a time, in the US at least, when feminists were even afraid to fight for maternity leave, convinced that if we asked for

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p.7 and see Paula Nicolson, *Post-Natal Depression: Psychology, Science and the Transition to Motherhood* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>131</sup> Lisa Baraitser, "Oi Mother, Keep Ye' Hair On! Impossible Transformations of Maternal Subjectivity," *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 7, no. 3 (2006).p. 218

<sup>132</sup> Adriana Cavarero, "Towards a Theory of Sexual Difference," in *The Lonely Mirror: Italian Perspectives on Feminist Theory*, ed. Sandra and Kemp and Paola Bono (London and New York: Routledge, 1993)., p. 193.

‘privileges’ we would not be justified in demanding equal treatment.’<sup>133</sup> In this case we can see how equality *can* assimilate women to men and a male paradigm, even in a major event like giving birth, some feel asking for paid time off would be being privileged. Currently women in the USA have one of the worst deals in the world once they become mothers.<sup>134</sup> In some states, women have only twelve weeks’ maternity leave. This only applies in some instances if they work in companies of over fifty employees, otherwise they do not have enshrined rights to any maternity leave, and ‘Shockingly, 23 per cent of new mothers return to work two weeks after giving birth.’<sup>135</sup>

Some research has highlighted how Black and Latina mothers take even less time off than that, as they are often the main breadwinners, and they often need to get back to work not long after having a baby. The research considers how longer maternity leave has been associated with improved maternal mental and physical health.<sup>136</sup> Black mothers in the US, and the UK, also have disproportionately high rates of mortality in childbirth and in the post-partum months and they have higher rates of post birth complications than their white peers. There are many factors for this (like structural racism in childbirth wards in hospitals and in the post-natal care) but racialised

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<sup>133</sup> Vishmidt, “<https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/permanent-reproductive-crisis-interview-silvia-federici>.”

<sup>134</sup> “*The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993*” (1993). “<https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/103/hr1>,” n.d.

<sup>135</sup> “Expecting Better: A State-by-State Analysis of Laws That Help Expecting and New Parents.,” *National Partnership for Women and Families*, 2016.

<sup>136</sup> J.F. Shepherd-Banigan, M., Bell, “Paid Leave Benefits Among a National Sample of Working Mothers with Infants in the United States.,” *Maternal and Child Health Journal* 18 (2014): 286–95..

distribution of maternity leave may play a part in this too.<sup>137</sup> Women and mothers have fallen in this crevice where their identity—their embodiment and concreteness—have disappeared within the liberal universal abstraction of the legal subject where *she is not*. Feminist socio-legal scholar Carol Smart writes:

feminism has gradually and painstakingly created a fundamental critique of orthodox jurisprudence which insists that all the taken-for-granted assumptions about universality, objectivity and neutrality are swept aside to make room for a completely new conception of law and its underpinnings.<sup>138</sup>

Against abstraction, priority should be given to women’s, and, I argue, to mothers’, specific experiences. Smart considers the words by legal feminist scholar Kathleen Lahey on the dangers of abstraction and the importance of feminist theory being grounded in women’s experiences:

Lahey does not claim that consciousness-raising is a perfect method either; she sees it as a continuing, imperfect struggle. Her main tenet, however, is that consciousness-raising produces feminist theory, but it is only feminist as long as it remains grounded in women’s experience. Theory that is not so grounded but which derives from abstraction, she argues, is dangerous to feminist thinking.<sup>139</sup>

I follow Smart’s analysis of Lahey’s thinking here. At the same time I contend that as feminist historian Joan Wallach Scott has famously argued theory ‘only’ grounded on ‘experience’ can be dangerous. Smart and Wallach Scott

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<sup>137</sup> Propublica did a lengthy investigation on this. See these two articles:

“<https://www.propublica.org/article/how-hospitals-are-failing-black-mothers>,” n.d.

“<https://www.propublica.org/article/how-we-collected-nearly-5-000-stories-of-maternal-harm>,” n.d.

<sup>138</sup> Smart, “Feminist Jurisprudence.” p. 133.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid. p. 143.

are of a similar generation and while from different disciplines they are both interested in women's relationships with the law. Heeding Wallach Scott's warning, in this thesis I make sure that the experience of motherhood does not become 'itself cumulative and homogenizing, providing the common denominator in which class consciousness is built.'<sup>140</sup> Therefore as Wallach Scott suggests I will not get rid of the term 'experience' or stop taking experiences seriously, but I will:

work with it, to analyse its operations and to redefine its meaning. This entails focusing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of "experience" and on the politics of its construction. Experience is always already an interpretation *and* something that needs to be interpreted. What counts as experience is neither self-evident nor straight forward; it is always contested and always therefore political<sup>141</sup>

Smart argues that 'maybe the response should be one of resistance rather than calling for more law – even law based on agreed principles...and if we should ask the question why we would still wish to retain such a reliance on law to tackle the oppression of women.'<sup>142</sup> Indeed there are many feminists who have questioned the validity of the law to liberate women. Drakopoulou argues:

Here, we could opt for a reading of law in terms of sexual difference, and develop ruses and tactics for disturbing the meaning of the legal text to reveal its patriarchal ancestry – the sex/gender system upon which law is founded. This would open a discursive space which allows

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<sup>140</sup> Joan W Scott, "The Evidence of Experience. (Questions of Evidence)," *Critical Inquiry* 17, no. 4 (1991): 773–98. p. 785.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. p. 797.

<sup>142</sup> Smart, "Feminist Jurisprudence." p. 156.

for the process of re-considering the feminist engagement in law, its objectives and its ethical and political validity.<sup>143</sup>

This is a feminist approach to law where a more sceptical view of the law is imagined and proposed, where the law is not the only valid instrument to gain recognition as women. I think this approach is very important and valid. As the previous authors have expounded, for me it is important to take real women's concrete lives, or real-life women<sup>144</sup> as Braidotti calls them, as the point of departure and to move away from abstract legal concepts.

Italian feminist writer Silvia Ballestra says of the woman who is attracted to the idea of equality that she will have 'colonised thoughts and mental structures, she will think of her subjected situation as natural and she will accept it without resistance.'<sup>145</sup> So, the question is when does a subject, a woman's, relationship with the law form and how can it be changed? I posit that it requires a change in subjectivity, a shattering of subjectivity and forming of a new one. It is a revolutionary subjective change. Therefore, as I have argued from the start of this chapter, equality is a flawed notion and it is vital for women and mothers to subvert and modify the language of law, to appropriate it, re-use it, and re-interpret it to avoid its abstractness and make it significant to oneself. If recognition happens when a person is identified with another, can a woman find herself if the other person is a male, white, middle class, educated exemplary of the universal legal subject? I think that

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<sup>143</sup> Maria Drakopoulou, "The Ethics of Care, Female Subjectivity and Feminist Legal Scholarship," *Feminist Legal Studies*, no. 8 (2000): 199–226.

<sup>144</sup> Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects. Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Theory*. p. 94, 121.

<sup>145</sup> Silvia Ballestra, *Contro Le Donne Nei Secoli Dei Secoli* (Milano: Il Saggiatore S.p.A., 2006). p. 81.

through relationality between mothers and through a (psychoanalytically speaking), ‘homosexual identification’<sup>146</sup> with other women a woman can find her similar, and her subjective self can appear in the world. This is important in shaping women’s subjectivity and eventually informing their relationship with the law.

My model of relational motherhood is grounded on interconnections, relationships, inter-dependency, vulnerability—in a word, *affect*, where *a mother feels, therefore she is*. In other words, if we are all made of feelings, not only thoughts, the embodied reality and the feelings of a woman who is a mother are important. What she feels, therefore plays a part in how her subjectivity is informed, formed, shaped, and re-shaped. This is not the model Descartes postulated, one where he thinks, therefore he is. In this Cartesian logic of human affairs, we see that in the paradigm of a positivistic approach to law the rational human being is paramount.

Hence, as we have seen, the subject is modelled according to the male rational Cartesian subject historically by keeping women—and through colonialism and imperialism, colonised people—out of the legal and political process, thus white European men have increased and consolidated their power and control. As we have also seen, the problem with liberal equality is the universal paradigm on which it is built. Cavarero maintains that universalism does not exist. As a consequence, she argues that if rights and

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<sup>146</sup> This may be relational/affective and/or sexual.

law are given to women by the State, women have not gained them, but they have been given *to* them in a top down movement. This means they can be taken away at any time. Similarly, Hanafin argues this top down move to give women rights ‘continues to reside within the space of masculine permission.’<sup>147</sup> The State grants women some laws specific to them when it decides to do so but these rights can be taken away by the State at any time.

### **limitations of liberal feminism: a case for women who are mothers**

Liberal feminism applied to the maternal is exemplified in the work of feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan. She famously <sup>148</sup> argued that women have a different voice when it comes to taking moral and ethical decisions, one that is more interested in relationships and assessing where responsibilities lie. Consequently, she argued, women see moral problems embedded in context. On the other hand, she argued that men make moral and ethical judgements in terms of rules and fairness. This argument would then tie in with an idea that the experience of motherhood is central to feminist ethics. Gilligan’s argument has been refuted extensively in the last thirty years and I add my criticism to the other voices. Her understanding of an ethics of care stands in opposition to mine. Hers seems linked to an essentialised view of women as intrinsically more caring. I think this view is problematic, and it goes against

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<sup>147</sup> Patrick Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007). p. 88.

<sup>148</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development.*, Reissue ed (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990).

any understanding and inclusion of ambivalence within the maternal, so central to the experience of motherhood.<sup>149</sup>

I agree with Cavarero's view on the problematic, unquestioned association of the ethics of care to women and mothers. She states 'this does not lead me to celebrate an ethics of care. On the contrary, it leads me to investigate a negative or even disgusting sense of every ethical discourse that engages with the maternal figure and trusts uncritically in its traditional goodness.'<sup>150</sup> Similarly, Drakopoulou<sup>151</sup> is doubtful of the ethics of care perspective championed by Gilligan. She says that this perspective has filtered into feminist critical legal jurisprudence in trying to make a more caring law, but she argues it is not enough to make law more caring without facing the question of women's subjectivity too. Furthermore she says that adopting a view of a feminist jurisprudence influenced by the ideas of Gilligan on the ethics of care would produce an approach to law which sides with an essentialist view of the innate 'goodness' of women. My view of a more caring law rests not on the association with the 'natural goodness' of women but, as we will see, on Cavarero's idea that a subject inclined towards the other – 'de-erectified' - is a more caring subject – for everyone – not only for women. Therefore, I make use of Cavarero's strategic move to use the stereotype of

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<sup>149</sup> Raphael-Leff, "Healthy Maternal Ambivalence"; Parker, *Torn in Two. The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*; Parker, *Mother Love/Mother Hate. The Power of Maternal Ambivalence*.

<sup>150</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero." p. 148.

<sup>151</sup> Drakopoulou, "The Ethics of Care, Female Subjectivity and Feminist Legal Scholarship."

the caring mother to incline the subject and in this logic I attempt the idea of inclining the law in which it becomes ‘a more attentive and listening’ law.

In addition to the reasons I have described in my introduction for my interest in motherhood and the maternal I am interested in these themes *because* ‘motherhood brings feminist theory closest to its own blind spots.’<sup>152</sup> Matters of reproduction cannot be eliminated when speaking as feminists and of feminism. At the same time when speaking of motherhood it is important to keep in mind why feminists have rightly rejected the natural association of woman with domesticity, motherhood, and the family and to avoid ‘the trap’ of the ethics of care associated with the maternal. I also want to pause, and ponder what motherhood is, for the reason Michelle Boulous Walker states clearly here ‘women are silenced most effectively by their association with maternity.’<sup>153</sup> This happens, according to Boulous Walker, in the way women are excluded from the texts of Western philosophy written by men. She identifies this exclusion in the work of Plato, Marx, Althusser and Freud in particular. She elucidates that ‘the maternal body occupies the site of a radical silence in the text of Western philosophy, psychoanalysis and literature. Read symptomatically, these texts reveal *a masculine imaginary that speaks for the maternal.*’<sup>154</sup> This silence is symptomatic of Western philosophy’s view of women. If Boulous Walker works at unearthing the silencing of women, it is

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<sup>152</sup> Lisa Baraitser, “Communitary Across Time: Responding to Encounters with Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption,” *Studies in Gender and Sexuality* 13, no. 2 (2012): 117–22.

<sup>153</sup> Michelle Boulous Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body. Reading Silence.* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 1.

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* 1.

in a different manner but with the same aim as Cavarero, who states that *when* classical philosophers speak of women, they often use a stereotype, and in a strategic manner Cavarero ‘enjoys’ working on that stereotype.<sup>155</sup> She enjoys overturning them and giving them a different meaning.

As Baraitser and Spigal state, ‘there are growing inequalities for women who mother, and ongoing complexities of the politics of reproduction.’<sup>156</sup> If equality has not yet happened we still need to keep critiquing equality as a feminist panacea. After decades of equal opportunities laws and some (limited) moves by the State to grant more equality to women in different fields, we can see there are still many inequalities. This begs the question, does equality really work? What else could make a more fundamental change in women’s lives?

Wallach Scott offers a poignant critique of liberal equality. The French and British models of equality are different. In France when the census is done sex, gender and ethnicity are not accounted for. Hence citizens are perceived as being all the same, until they are not. On the other hand, in Britain the census is done taking differences of sex, gender, and ethnicity into account. Wallach Scott argues:

French universalism insists that sameness is the basis for equality. To be sure, sameness is an abstraction, a philosophical notion meant to achieve the formal equality of individuals before the law.

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<sup>155</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, “Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero.”

<sup>156</sup> Baraitser and Sigal, “Editorial.”

But historically it has been applied literally: assimilation means the eradication of difference. That is why the French census makes no record of the religion, ethnicity, or national origin of its population; such figures would represent France as fractured and divided, not—as it claims to be—a united, singular entity.<sup>157</sup>

Arguably gender operates as an ‘exceptional’ difference in France which the State does not recognise but, at the same time, incorporates to neutralise. Other types of difference, though, are seemingly incorporated but violently rejected as per the case of ethnicity and religious differences, and the veil in particular. This demonstrates how liberal states – at different levels nationally – account for the specificities, uniqueness – as Arendt would say – of its citizens or not. It is interesting to look at this because even in countries like France – where the idea of equality *égalité* - is very ingrained in the idea of the State, matters are not so clear cut. Precisely as Wallach Scott says sameness is the basis of equality, but its dangerous counter-discourse is negation of differences and an assimilationist paradigm which negates what makes humans who they are. Not a mass of people who are all the same<sup>158</sup> but unique beings with specific personal-cultural-psychological-biographical lives. If in this specificity we then account for the act of being pregnant, giving birth and all that entails, we see that if this is a specific physical, psychological and phenomenological experience that should not be ‘lost’ and diffused in assimilatory discourses, then all the others should not as well.

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<sup>157</sup> Scott, *The Politics of the Veil*, p. 12.

<sup>158</sup> Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984).

In the next section I explore how Italian sexual difference feminism, in particular the political work done by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective<sup>159</sup> in its alliance with and inspired by Irigaray's thought, has contributed to an interesting critique of the universal subject of law. This analysis will help us understand why we need to bring sexual difference into law. In effect the original title in Italian of their book poignantly reminded women 'non credere di avere dei diritti', 'don't think you have any rights' or in other words, 'do not delude yourself that you have any rights.' Or to put it another way, you may have rights, but rights do not automatically give you freedom. Freedom is something different. There is a thinking which destabilises and shakes the foundations of the abstract subject towards what Cavarero calls, following Arendt, a move from the abstract "what" to a particular and embodied "who."<sup>160</sup>

### **questions around equality**

The critique of equality that I find most useful comes from Luce Irigaray. Irigaray<sup>161</sup>, in alliance with Italian sexual difference feminist thinking, in particular that of Cavarero and the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, will

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<sup>159</sup> Libreria delle Donne di Milano, *Non Credere Di Avere Dei Diritti: La Generazione Della Liberta' Femminile Nell'idea e Nelle Vicende Di Un Gruppo Di Donne.*; For a book that evaluates the work of the Milan Bookstore Collective see Chiara Martucci, *Libreria Delle Donne Di Milano. Un Laboratorio Di Pratica Politica.* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2008).

<sup>160</sup> Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression.*

<sup>161</sup> The body of work of Luce Irigaray is mainly focused on a critique of equality. In 1970 Carla Lonzi published a book titled *Carla Lonzi, Sputiamo Su Hegel.* (Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1970). She wrote: 'Women's difference is her millennial absence from history. Let us profit from this difference; for once we have achieved inclusion in society, who is to say how many more centuries will have to pass before we can throw off this new yoke? Equality is what is offered as legal rights to colonized people. And what is imposed on them as culture. It is the principle through which those with hegemonic power continue to control those without.'

help me develop a critique of the myths surrounding equality. These two authors and the Collective's thinking help me make my argument for a more material feminist practice. In other words, what these authors have highlighted is liberal feminism's inability to translate relationality into practice and to envisage what a relational feminism would look like. Italian sexual difference feminism needs to be understood in a specific context. Italian feminism emerged in the 1960s and one of its first inspiring voices was art critic and feminist activist and writer Carla Lonzi.<sup>162</sup> Lonzi was one of the founders of Rivolta Femminile and she wrote foundational books like *La donna clitoridea e la donna vaginale*<sup>163</sup> [The Clitoral Woman and the Vaginal Woman], *Sputiamo su Hegel*<sup>164</sup> [Let's Spit on Hegel]. Many writers, activists and thinkers started writing, opening feminist publishing houses, and feminist bookshops like the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, and research groups like Diotima in Verona. Feminist writers and philosophers Luisa Muraro, Adriana Cavarero, Lea Melandri became important voices among others within the feminist movement. Ideas of sexual difference spread throughout many Italian cities and towns as the main feminist approach. These feminists greatly admired Luce Irigaray and she was an inspiration to all of them. In relation to Italian feminism's approach to sexual difference Cavarero states:

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<sup>162</sup> Maria Luisa Boccia, *L'io in Rivolta. Visso e Pensiero Di Carla Lonzi* (Milano: La Tartaruga, 1990). Giovanna Zapperi, *Carla Lonzi. Un'arte Della Vita* (Roma: Derive/Approdi, 2017).

<sup>163</sup> Carla Lonzi, *La Donna Clitoridea e La Donna Vaginale*. (Roma: Rivolta Femminile, 1971).

<sup>164</sup> Lonzi, *Sputiamo Su Hegel*.

In the Italian context, sexual difference was interpreted as a question of experience not of identity. Emphasis was placed on political, social, and symbolic practices and on the collective dimension of women's experience, expressing the Italian feminist desire to replace traditional political forms with more democratic and fully participatory approaches to political and social activism.<sup>165</sup>

Linda Zerilli makes a similar point about liberalism when considering the work done by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective and how their political interest lay outside the paradigm of equality. She points out:

The Italians are not deaf to the rhetoric of freedom that has been central to the idea of a social contract, but it is not a model of freedom they think worth emulating. Apart from its historical formulation as the freedom of (some) men, it is a freedom constructed as a fantasy of sovereignty. This fantasy, uncritically adopted by many first- and second-wave feminists, has kept feminism tethered to a certain form of the social contract (liberalism), which tends to reduce political freedom to negative liberty and the constitutionally guaranteed rights of the individual.<sup>166</sup>

In this project I use their approach to help me formulate relational motherhood. Does sexual difference theory help to bring a relational feminism into legal thinking? To find that out I consider those thinkers who have taken sexual difference seriously, therefore, as I have pointed out in the introduction, it is Italian sexual difference feminist thought, including

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<sup>165</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero." p. 129.

<sup>166</sup> Linda M. G. Zerilli, "Feminists Makes Promises: The Milan Collective's Sexual Difference and the Project of World Building," in *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 93–124. p. 97.

Cavarero's, that I will be using throughout, together with that of Luce Irigaray.<sup>167</sup>

In the next section, I consider Irigaray's critique of patriarchy and the legal system that is embedded by it. I then focus on the tight relationship between Irigaray's thought and Italian feminists. In particular, I look at a meeting between Irigaray and Italian feminists that happened in the mid-eighties in Naples.

### **italian sexual difference feminism's debt to irigaray's thought**

Irigaray started a dialogue with Italian feminists in the early 1970s when she began making frequent visits to Italy, which she continued to do through the 1980s and early 1990s. She attended and spoke at several conferences, debates, and political meetings where she had a great impact on Italian sexual difference thinking, which then developed independently in Italy, always acknowledging the debt to Irigaray's thinking. This debt to Irigaray resides particularly in relation to her writings in the, in her own words, 'early' and 'middle' phases.<sup>168</sup> Irigaray's books were translated into Italian soon after they came out in France, unlike in the English-speaking world where they were translated and published about ten years after the French publications. In this regard Braidotti points out, 'I think it is important to clarify the extraordinary

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<sup>167</sup> Italian sexual difference feminists and Rosi Braidotti have often acknowledged their debt towards Irigaray's thought, especially her 'early phase' as described by Alison Stone, *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

<sup>168</sup> 'Irigaray herself periodises her work into an 'early phase', criticizing the 'monosexual' character of western culture, a 'middle' phase, creating the conditions for female subjectivity, and a 'later phase', encouraging dialogic relations between the sexes.' in *Ibid.* p. 4.

role played by Luce Irigaray in Italian feminist politics and in Cavarero's own work [...] Irigaray met with instant recognition in Italian culture and especially within the women's movement.<sup>169</sup>

In October 1986, Irigaray was one of the key speakers at a feminist conference in Bologna, where she discussed the need for laws and jurisprudence that take sexual difference into consideration, to challenge those laws that appeared to be neutral but were not, and were often disadvantageous for women.<sup>170</sup> Whitford has commented of Anglophone feminists, 'it is only quite recently that we have become aware of the link between Irigaray and Italian feminism and the remarkable theoretical work being produced in Italy.'<sup>171</sup> In this regard she adds that:

Irigaray theorises that it is a condition of the coming-to-be of sexual difference that we create a female homosexual economy and a maternal genealogy that would provide a counterweight to, and have an effect on, the male monosexual economy that we know as patriarchy. *Women need to learn to love themselves and each other*, she argues in *Ethics of Sexual Difference*. But this love must take a public form, and not be confined to passional relationships at the individual level. The collective accession to symbolization is essential. It is a question of embodying sexual difference through the representation of a different sex and a different genealogy – in language, culture, symbol, religion, social practises, civil and legal status, and so on. It is in Italy that this vision has been taken most seriously and where there have been

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<sup>169</sup> Rosi Braidotti, "Foreward," in *In Spite of Plato* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), p. xiv.

<sup>170</sup> Irigaray has been instrumental in the foundation of the philosophical community Diotima based at Verona University founded by Luisa Muraro and Adriana Cavarero. She established links with politician Livia Turco and the women of P.C.I. (Italian Communist Party) during the Chernobyl nuclear explosion in 1989. In the 1980s she conducted a linguistic research with a group of women in Bologna; conducted seminars at the University of Bologna in 1985 and established links with other women's groups in Parma, Venezia, Napoli and Firenze. In *La Libreria delle Donne*, *Quattro Giovedì e Un Venerdì per La Filosofia*. (Milano: Via Dogana, 1988). p. 3.

<sup>171</sup> Margaret Whitford, "Reading Irigaray in the Nineties.," in *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, ed. Margaret Burke, Carolyn, Schor, Naomi and Withford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). p. 25.

concerted attempts to translate Irigaray's ideas into political practice.<sup>172</sup>

Italian sexual difference feminists became interested in Irigaray's thought for various reasons, but mainly for the following five reasons. Firstly, because her work was centred on female subjectivity and sexuality it gave them a language to speak about themselves, their bodies and their world. Braidotti points out that Irigaray's focus is in the redefinition of female subjectivity. This is, she thinks, her most pressing issue: 'how to make the feminine express the "different difference," a pure difference, released from the hegemonic framework of oppositional, binary thinking within which Western philosophy had confined it.'<sup>173</sup> It is this dislodging from the hegemonic framework which is the most pressing job for white feminists, Black and Latina feminists, and LGBT feminists. Secondly, Irigaray's work problematized the quest for equality between the sexes and Italian feminists were very engaged in this theme too. Thirdly, she analysed classical Western philosophy as a site of patriarchy which has, for millennia, generated power relationships between men and women. This was of interests to Italian feminists as among them there were several women who had studied philosophy at secondary school level and some at university level or were interested in it and to discover the roots of patriarchy in philosophy was very enlightening to them. Fourthly, Italian feminists became interested in Irigaray as she is a psychoanalyst and

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid. p. 25.

<sup>173</sup> Rosi Braidotti, "On Bugs and Women: Irigaray and Deleuze on the Becoming-Woman," in *Engaging with Irigaray. Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, ed. Carolyn Burke, Naomi and Shor, and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994). p. 111.

several groups of Italian feminists were interested in psychoanalysis and developed a feminist psychoanalytic praxis in *the practice of the unconscious*.<sup>174</sup> Fifthly, Italian feminists were interested in delving in and account for the relationship between mothers and daughters. They realised in the early 1970s that they did not want to be like their mothers, who were mostly ‘only’ dedicated to their children, husband, and home. As with Anglophone feminists, this created ‘generational conflicts’ between mothers and daughters. Nevertheless, Italian feminists delved deeper and earlier, we can say, than Anglophone feminists into the ‘mother issue’ and thought through, wrote, and theorised very seriously and poignantly on this theme from early on, creating an interesting and extensive amount of ‘theory on the mother’, sadly most of it not translated into English.<sup>175</sup> In relation to mother-daughter relationships Irigaray says:

the oedipal structure as access to the cultural order is already structured within a single, masculine line of filiation which does not symbolise the woman in relation to her mother. Mother-daughter relationships in patriarchal societies are subordinated to relations between men.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Paola Melchiori, “Psychoanalysis in Early Italian Feminism. The Contributions of the Practice of the Unconscious.,” in *Contemporary Italian Political Philosophy*, ed. Antonio Calcagno (New York: State University of New York Press, 2015), 75–98.

<sup>175</sup> During a presentation *Filming the Absent Mother* Symposium at Birkbeck University on 14.06.2014 (on the biographical film *Un’ora sola ti vorrei* by Alina Marazzi on the theme of motherhood and mental health) Dr. Lesley Caldwell made the point that Italian feminists had done a very important work on the mother-daughter relationship several decades earlier in contrast to other countries, including the UK. She said that feminists in Italy have written several books in the subject since 1970s. See as well Luisa Muraro, “L’Ordine Simbolico Della Madre” (Roma: Riuniti, 1991). Gabriella Buzzatti and Anna Salvo, eds., *Corpo a Corpo. Madre e Figlia Nella Psicoanalisi*. (Roma-Bari: Editori La Terza, 1995). Melandri, *Love and Violence: The Vexatious Factors of Civilisation*.

<sup>176</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous : Toward a Culture of Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1993). p. 9.

According to Irigaray, the mother-daughter relationship has been under-represented in patriarchal societies, making it important that this experience be given words and meaning. Irigaray thinks that a woman's fidelity towards her own thought and her own genealogy is of paramount importance. Relationships between women have a primary position in her philosophy. She insists that it is vital to found an 'ethical order among women that will have at least two dimensions: a vertical one, the genealogical mother-daughter axis, and a horizontal one, the well-known axis of sisterhood.'<sup>177</sup> In this respect Italian feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro says, 'for Irigaray the existence of female genealogies constitutes a necessity of ethical nature.'<sup>178</sup> The final aspect of Irigaray's work that Italian feminists appreciated was her analysis of the question of language. Irigaray sees the importance of excavating all the instances in which language perpetuates patriarchal ideas through its grammatical structure. She argued that the feminine has become the non-masculine, the abstract non-existent reality-neutral. Irigaray sees the neutral as loss of identity, and argues:

Most women's experience tells them, on a cultural level, that they are first and foremost asexual and neuter, apart from when they are subjected to the norms of the sexual arena in the strict sense and to family stereotypes. The difficulties they face in order to enter the between-men cultural world lead almost all of them, including those who call themselves feminists, to renounce their female identity and

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<sup>177</sup> Luisa Muraro, "Female Genealogies," in *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought*, ed. Margaret Burke, Carolyn, Schor, Naomi and Withford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 317–34. p. 323.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.* p. 323.

*relationship with other women*, bringing them to an individual and collective impasse when it comes to communication.<sup>179</sup>

To counteract this impasse, following Irigaray, Braidotti argues:

Feminist solidarity in the sense of the recognition of a relational link, a fundamental connection among women, has also brought out most strongly the relational mode of feminist thinking. Thinking oneself through and with the other, in a positive relationship to the alterity of the other as woman, is the starting point for what Luce Irigaray defines as an alternative form of philosophy, a radically new image of what thinking means.<sup>180</sup>

I maintain that through Irigaray's concept of women's relationality and her subsequent critique of liberal equality, her thinking helps explain and provide an alternative model to the hetero-patriarchal law of Western modernity. In the next part I show how Irigaray's thought can inform us of a different way of thinking the law. We need to understand how Irigaray critiqued equality and universalism in law and we need to inject sexual difference thinking to counteract equality as it is constructed in law.

Irigaray spoke at a feminist conference in Naples in 1986. This speech is an example of an attempt to 'recuperate' women from disappearing from legal discourses. In the subsequent chapter I will look at how Irigaray influenced Cavarero's work in particular. Here I will bring to light the question of sexual difference and its relation to law, and how it needs to be put into legal thinking through Irigaray's work. Through the analysis of

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<sup>179</sup> Luce Irigaray, "The Neglect of Female Genealogies," in *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*. (New York: Routledge, 1993) p. 13.

<sup>180</sup> Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance. A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*. p. 159.

language Irigaray has uncovered the patriarchal bias which has made language an instrument of power. The power inherent in language and its connection to law has historically curtailed women's abilities to draw their own destinies. Irigaray has argued for several decades that 'we need laws that valorise difference. Not all subjects are the same and equal, and it wouldn't be right for them to be so.'<sup>181</sup> The main question is how do we do that? How do we think a law that valorises difference? We can say that law already valorises some differences over others, so a better question would be how do we contest and politicize which differences are valorised and which ones are not?

In this respect Irigaray has pointed out how women should re-appropriate language to be able to use a language that is in line with their feminine subjectivity and embodied reality:

It would be better if women, without ceasing to put sexual difference into words, were more able to situate themselves as *I, I-she / they (je-elle[s])*, to represent themselves as subjects, and to talk to other women. That requires a development in subjectivity and a transformation of the rules of language. To date, women have had to remain *among themselves* not only in order for a plural to be feminine—*elles s'aiment* (they love each other), *elles sont belles* (they are beautiful)—but also for a relationship to the subjectively female world to be possible. This linguistic necessity lays the basis for certain sorts of liberation movements.<sup>182</sup>

Irigaray then argues that it is important for women to put in place a linguistic transformation which will bring about a subjective transformation resulting in an increase in political consciousness. Political transformation is not possible

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<sup>181</sup> Irigaray, *Je, Tu, Nous: Toward a Culture of Difference*. p.14.

<sup>182</sup> Luce Irigaray, "Women's Discourse and Men's Discourse.," in *Je, Tu, Nous: Towards a Culture of Difference*. (New York: Routledge, 1993), 22–30. p. 27.

for Irigaray unless the abstract and disembodied language of law is unmasked. For this reason, her work focuses on bringing to light the embodied reality of men and women. This is an aspect of her thought which Italian sexual difference feminists, as we will see further in Chapters 2 and 3, have developed extensively, and in a theoretical form the philosophy of Cavarero is also centred on this theme.<sup>183</sup>

The aim of this section is to consider the significance of sexual difference to counteract abstractness and the vacuity of liberal equality. How has abstraction undermined and affected mothers? Are women still considered the ‘Other’ to men, as argued by sexual difference feminists? Irigaray is an excellent interlocutor to explore this theme with, due to her work on the abstract language used in Western classical philosophy and its link to the law. Her perspective is vital if we want to engage in an alternative way of thinking about the law, one that rejects the abstract, autonomous, solipsistic individual in favour of one that instead stresses the concreteness of each one of us in our embedded, singular, and embodied existence.<sup>184</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> For a non-exhaustive list of other Italian sexual difference feminist writers and philosophers who have critiqued in different ways the abstract ideas of the subject as being particularly detrimental to women, see the work of: Lonzi, *La Donna Clitoridea e La Donna Vaginale*. in English see this PDF version <http://blogue.nt2.uqam.ca/hit/files/2012/12/Lets-Spit-on-Hegel-Carla-Lonzi.pdf>; Lia Cigarini, *La Politica Del Desiderio*. (Parma: Pratiche Politiche, 1995); Muraro, “L’Ordine Simbolico Della Madre.” Lea Melandri, *L’Infamia Originaria. Facciamola Finita Col Cuore e La Politica*. (Edizioni Erba Voglio, 1977); Lea Melandri, *Le Passioni Del Corpo. La Vicenda Dei Sessi Tra Origine e Storia*. (Bollati Boringhieri, 2011); Angela Putino, *I Corpi Di Mezzo. Biopolitica, Differenza Tra i Sessi e Governo Della Specie*. (Ombre Corte, 2011); Olivia Guaraldo, *Comunita’ e Vulnerabilita’. Per Una Critica Politica Della Violenza*. (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2012); Forcina, *Soggette. Corpo, Politica, Filosofia: Percorsi Nella Differenza*.; Stefania Tarantino, *Aneou Metros. Senza Madre. L’Anima Perduta Dell’Europa: Maria Zambrano e Simone Weil* (La Scuola di Pitagora, 2014).

<sup>184</sup> For an example of a book which looks at law in this way see Rosi Braidotti, Patrick Hanafin, and Claire Colebrook, eds., *Deleuze and Law. Forensic Futures* (Basingtoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

### **luce irigaray: for a sexuete law**

As I said at the start of the chapter questioning equality has been very important in Irigaray's work, she poignantly said about women and equality: 'equal to whom?'<sup>185</sup> Her work has been innovative in understanding law as a problematic paradigm for women. From the late 1960s feminists including Irigaray, engaged in a vast project of interpretations of texts. For Irigaray the law of the father, or phallocentrism, has prevailed in Western culture and infiltrated language, law, and society with a patriarchal discourse where women's realities, their autonomy, disappeared. In relation to women who are mothers Irigaray's argument is valid because reproduction is a matter highly regulated by the law, so it touches women's bodies in a particular way. Once a child is born, legislation with regard to the extent of the maternity leave, maternity pay and the availability of universal childcare has a huge effect on women's lives.<sup>186</sup> So this is why I think it is useful to keep Irigaray's work in mind when thinking through mothers and motherhood.

Before doing that I want to illustrate the particular relevance of Irigaray's sexual difference thinking and to show how for the purpose of this thesis it is even more important to explain the non-coincidence of sexual difference with biological determinism. Motherhood and the association with the biological and the natural have been seen as equivalent in Western culture for thousands of years. Philosopher Alison Stone explains:

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<sup>185</sup> Luce Irigaray, "Equal To Whom?," *Differences* 1, no. 2 (1989): 59–76.

<sup>186</sup> "Https://Pregnantthenscrewed.Com/," n.d.

that Irigaray's conception of sexual difference is non-biological *is* important, to recall, because if she were to collapse sexual difference into biological *sex* difference, then she should have slipped into biological determinism, overlooking the specificity of both social relations and symbolic formations.<sup>187</sup>

According to Stone, who has taken sexual difference seriously and has engaged with it, Irigaray's thinking on sexual difference should not be quickly dismissed:

Fortunately, on closer inspection, Irigaray's mature conception of human sexual difference proves different from her belief in the determining power of biological sex. She generally distinguishes between sexual difference (*la différence sexuelle*) and biological sex difference (*la différence des sexes*). She draws this distinction because, as she repeatedly states, she sees sexual difference as an ontological, not a biological phenomenon.<sup>188</sup>

This is an important point of distinction between sexual difference and sex difference that Italian sexual difference feminists of the seventies and eighties also made. They too, like Irigaray, saw sexual difference as an ontological, not a biological matter. An ontological difference is influenced by an embodied sense of self, but it is not determined by it.

At the conference in Naples, Irigaray<sup>189</sup> discussed the genealogy of the history of the family as thought by Hegel.<sup>190</sup> She said that Hegel assigned 'the

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<sup>187</sup> Stone, *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference*. p. 109.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.* p. 94.

<sup>189</sup> On 13 and 14 June 1986 Irigaray attended a philosophical colloquia titled *Le figure della differenza* at the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici in Napoli, Italy. Irigaray's presentation was titled Luce Irigaray, "L'Universale Come Mediazione: Sulla Necessità Di Un Diritto Sessuato," in '*Le Figure Della Differenza*' (Napoli, 1986) (The Universal as Mediation: on the Necessity of a Sexuate Law). A similar version of Irigaray's talk can be found in French in this book: Luce Irigaray, *Sexes et Parentés*. (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1987) in particular in Luce Irigaray, "La Nécessité de Droits Sexués," in *Sexes et Parentés* (Paris: Les

exclusive banality of the maternal role to women'<sup>191</sup> and that this stereotypical framing of women's 'natural' role as mothers has had long lasting

consequences for how women are still viewed today in Western cultures.

Stone points out that in 'Hegel's account of ancient Greece he analyses how polis and family clash. He emphasises that the two institutions are sexually

divided: only men progress out of the family into political life. He attributes this division, rather vaguely, to the sexes' 'diverse dispositions and

capacities.'<sup>192</sup> Consequently Irigaray shows, through her critique of Hegel, how these diverse 'dispositions and capacities' were detrimental for mothers:

Women are indoctrinated to believe that their *duty* is to preserve life for the other, particularly the child, not for themselves. In past times, and sometimes even today, the woman has to be sacrificed to the child, in childbirth, for example, but more generally in the obligation laid upon her to bear children. The choice of child over mother can be understood as a mandatory sacrifice to the husband's genealogy. No rights protect the woman's life against violence in the home, against unwanted pregnancies. A right that should be guaranteed and protected by society and the State is instead a barely tolerated claim, sometimes partially heeded but always at the mercy of decisions made by specific individuals: this doctor, this judge, this expert will consult their consciences, and decide on a woman's right, within a contest that allows no generalisations. The process has to be started from scratch and pursued in isolation by each woman in turn since there is no legal recourse that is specific to woman.<sup>193</sup>

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Éditions de Minuit, 1987) p. 13 and Luce Irigaray, "L'universel Comme Mediation," in *Sexes et Parentés* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1987). p. 139. The English version of this book with a similar talk is Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogy*. (Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>190</sup> For another discussion on Hegel and women see Alison Stone, "Hegel on Law, Women and Contract.," On Irigaray's reading of Hegel see Katherine Diduck, Alison and O'Donovan, ed., *Feminist Perspectives on Family Law*. (Abingdon and New York: Routledge-Cavendish, 2006). Stone, *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference*. p. 161-192.

<sup>191</sup> Luce Irigaray, "Universale Come Mediazione: Sulla Necessita' Di Un Diritto Sessuato," in *Figure Della Differenza* (Napoli: Istituto di Ricerche Filosofiche Napoli, 1986). p. 4. I hold the original paper from 1986 that was circulated on the day translated into Italian from the French. To find an original leaflet of the colloquia go to "[Http://Donnedinapoli.Coopedalus.Org/2128/Le-Figure-Della-Differenza/](http://Donnedinapoli.Coopedalus.Org/2128/Le-Figure-Della-Differenza/)," n.d.h

<sup>192</sup> Stone, *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference*., p. 167.

<sup>193</sup> Irigaray, "L'Universale Come Mediazione: Sulla Necessità Di Un Diritto Sessuato." p. 4. In Luce Irigaray, *Sexes and Genealogy*. p. 132.

We can see how Irigaray here questions what Hanafin calls ‘masculine permission’<sup>194</sup>, or those rights that are ‘granted’ to women by a patriarchal logic. Showing how we reached this point, Irigaray affirms that once we enter a dualist regime (like the one theorised by Western classical philosophy where the oppositions are between nature and culture) often the result is the sacrifice and exclusion of women. Subsequently, she elucidates, this exclusion resembles a repeated *immolation*. This putting aside (*l'écart*), or indoors (*au secret*), of women, is an ethical guilt (*faute*). The hiding and exclusion of women is counteracted by a preference, typical of patriarchy, towards war and sociality among men.<sup>195</sup>

The effect of all this, Irigaray argues, and what is at stake, is to keep women outside the social contract, outside government, and *separate from each other*. This separation, Irigaray claims, is the foundational point of Western patriarchal culture, which founded and reproduced itself from a negation of the maternal, provoking what Irigaray calls a matricide.<sup>196</sup> In analysing the ancient Greek tragedy of Oresteia, Irigaray states that this myth is at the foundation of the institution of the legal system as a patriarchal legal system which, with the acquittal of matricide, destined the maternal to be undervalued in Western culture.<sup>197</sup> Like Irigaray, Cavarero too defines ‘classical

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<sup>194</sup> Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy*. p. 88.

<sup>195</sup> Irigaray, “Universale Come Mediazione: Sulla Necessita’ Di Un Diritto Sessuato.” p. 4, My translation

<sup>196</sup> Luce Irigaray, “Body against Body: In Relation to the Mother,,” in *Sexes and Genealogy*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993). 7–22.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7-22.

Greece' [as] 'a golden age for the patriarchal order'.<sup>198</sup> In this context we can ask, how then has this 'golden age' informed law? As law has always been a male domain, feminists are trying to disrupt it, re-appropriate it and resist it or make do without law. Following Irigaray, Fineman and Thomadsen Sweet have argued that to deconstruct patriarchal legal texts is a long task but that feminist legal theorists have had 'the grand realisation that law is gendered, that law is a manifestation of power, that law is detrimental to women.'<sup>199</sup>

Genealogy between women is very important in Irigaray's thinking, even though she has given less attention to the specific relationality between women who are mothers. Like Irigaray, I am of the opinion that relationality between women, and for the purpose of this thesis, relationality between mothers, is paramount. Irigaray insists on the importance of relations among women since they have been separated from each other concretely and symbolically by patriarchal culture. To counteract this ancestral separation of women from each other in *Éthique de la Différence Sexuelle* she writes:

A symbolism has to be created among women if love among them is to take place. Right now in fact, such love is possible only among women who are able to talk to each other. Lacking this interval of *exchange*, whether of words or deeds, women's passions work on an animal and vegetal level, in a rather cruel manner. Why on that grounds, does society, does the community, have an interest in maintaining women's silence? In order to perpetuate all the existing norms of the society and the culture which also depend on separating women from each other.<sup>200</sup>

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<sup>198</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. p. 71.

<sup>199</sup> Nancy Albertson Fineman, Martha, and Thomadsen Sweet, ed., *At the Boundaries of Law: Feminism and Legal Theory*. (New York, London: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>200</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de La Différence Sexuelle* (Paris: Edition de Minuit, 1984). p. 89.

As Muraro puts it, ‘I have experienced the power for change of the practice of the genealogical relation.’<sup>201</sup> Following Irigaray’s thought she goes on to say that for her the heart of politics remains the genealogical relation, not ‘the feminism of rights and equality, but the movement that has led us to choose to stay among women, to choose to act in accordance with the judgement of our fellow women, to accept the authority of women, and *to seek the nourishment of female thought for our minds.*’<sup>202</sup> Irigaray elucidates that Oedipus’s guilt, a guilt ‘shared’ by psychoanalysis, is that of forgetting the significance of the mother-daughter relationship and of female genealogy<sup>203</sup>, in their necessity for a constitution of a gender which is lively and ethical. Moreover, in her discussion of the Oresteia, it is in the legal system’s acquittal of the murder of the mother that the other part of Western civilisation’s guilt rests.

Furthermore, Irigaray explains, natural immediacy is almost always sexuate, but it remains un-thought. We can explore an example here: the fact that many women menstruate, but others, including transgender women, some intersex women, and post-menopausal women, do not have periods. Menstruation *is* a sexuate reality (cisgender men do not have periods), but menstruation culturally and socially has for millennia been despised, ignored, and teased. This we can say, is the meaning of Irigaray’s statements above, again menstruation remains un-thought and in what follows we can see why. The problem remains that the immediacy of nature as sexuate falls into the

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<sup>201</sup> Muraro, “Female Genealogies.” p. 330.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid. p. 331.

<sup>203</sup> Elisabeth Young-Bruhl, *Freud on Women*. (London: Vintage, 2002).

‘natural’ paradigm of reproduction and is not elaborated as an embodied view of the subject made of a body and flesh. This applies to postnatal depression too; even if it sometimes occurs in men, it occurs much more frequently in pregnant women (antenatal depression) or after birth or in the months and years to come. Unless this corporal given is thought through, patriarchy becomes the repressive force of gender and, as Irigaray elucidates, it is collapsed into the natural immediacy of generation and reproduction.

Moreover, she discusses how women historically have had to abandon their family, their mother,<sup>204</sup> their genealogy, their home, and their name (when and if they take their husband’s surname) for the husband’s family, his home, and his name. According to Irigaray and Cavarero<sup>205</sup> the Western theoretical tradition has retained, since ancient Greece, a patriarchal vision of woman and, as mentioned earlier, Irigaray’s analysis is that the West is built on a matricide.<sup>206</sup> For Irigaray this also signifies that the child that a woman birthed, that grows inside her, that she nourished in her womb and then at her breasts will have the name of the father’s genealogy. Furthermore, the woman taken away from her ancestors, particularly from her mother, is transported and assigned to the natural immediacy of reproduction which has historically been given more value when it results in a son instead of a daughter. Irigaray

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<sup>204</sup> See as well another of Irigaray’s writing on this matter, Luce Irigaray, “Le Corps-a-Corps Avec La Mere, Montreal, Le 31 Mai 1980,” in *Sexes et Parentes*. (Paris: Les Editions De Minuit, 1987), 19–34. As well, philosopher Chiara Zamboni states ‘In generale la risonanza degli scritti di Irigaray e’ decisamente legata al fatto di aver dato forma, parola e modalita’ al rapporto della donna con la madre.’ “The relevance of Irigaray’s work is precisely linked to the fact that she has given shape, words (parola) and modality to the relationship of woman with her mother.’ In La Libreria delle Donne, *Quattro Giovedì e Un Venerdì per La Filosofia*. p. 25. [my translation].

<sup>205</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*.

<sup>206</sup> Irigaray, “Body against Body: In Relation to the Mother.”

points out that man will remain always a son and at the same time a citizen. In relation to this point, Stone says that Irigaray ‘explains that the fact that men wish to deny the importance of corporality stems from their infantile difficulties in separating from their mothers. [...] These difficulties lead boys to disavow their early intertwinement with their mothers and, at the same time, their corporality.’<sup>207</sup>

Irigaray elucidates that ‘the spirit of the people will always be un-thought (impensé) in the relationship of the citizens with birth, maternity, their gender, their development. *The citizens are separated from their corporal roots as to belonging a gender.*’<sup>208</sup> This unresolved situation, Irigaray considers, remains in the domain of the un-thought (impensé) and it is not processed through; it is carried forward— open and alive – in their relationship with women who are then reduced to the maternal and the domestic. In light of this insight, how do we rewrite rights? According to Stone, in contrast to Hegel’s justification of the confinement of women in the house, Irigaray ‘proposes to identify the mechanism which makes women’s confinement in domesticity necessary to modern society, in a way which will clearly expose its injustice.’<sup>209</sup>

Irigaray relates that this problem – a man reducing women to the maternal – is part of an unconscious ‘move’ he makes because he has not thought through and elaborated upon her gender. Therefore, men pretend to

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<sup>207</sup> Stone, *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference*. p. 171.

<sup>208</sup> Irigaray, “L’Universale Come Mediazione: Sulla Necessità Di Un Diritto Sessuato.” p. 7.

<sup>209</sup> Stone, *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference*. p. 178. In this we can see that Irigaray’s thinking is similar to Silvia Federici’s which sustains that capitalism is able to function thanks to this free labour that women do in the home. Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero. Homework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*.

be the only citizens with full rights. For centuries, Irigaray says, the spirit of the people has been the spirit of men who women have nourished with motherhood, cooking, feeding, *maternage*, the availability of their body and their flesh. Woman on her part is made to submit to a destiny imposed by the father, by her brothers, by her husband, by the king, by civil laws as they are conceived by men and by the State. In this respect philosopher Diane Perpich explains that:

Irigaray's worry is not only that women have not been accorded the status of subjects in the same sense or to the same degree as men (*de facto* exclusion), but more significantly, that the conditions under which (masculine) subjectivity has been produced in Western theoretical discourses have demanded the invisibility of the feminine and feminine desire (symbolic exclusion).<sup>210</sup>

Irigaray argues that this is the reason why in a patriarchal culture woman needs to remain invisible as Woman in society, consigned to a natural destiny, reproducer of bodies. For this same reason woman has spiritualised her body as the female side of the link in the couple. She has perpetuated a natural state without transforming it and without modifying the spirit of the people or departing from her reproductive capacities in the family, the couple, as the place and space of procreation of and between the two genders. In classical

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<sup>210</sup> Diane Perpich, "Subjectivity and Sexual Difference: New Figures of the Feminine in Irigaray and Cavarero," in *Breathing with Luce Irigaray*, ed. Lenart Skof and A. Emily Holmes (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013). p. 168.

philosophy the concrete materiality of the individual is often amputated in his or her sexuate vision and is already abstracted.<sup>211</sup>

Irigaray explains that ‘we need to have laws which include representation, presence, sign(s) of the rights of each sex as different from each other. We need to write rights as visible representations of concrete, alive realities’.<sup>212</sup> Naomi Schor says that when Irigaray talks about feminine specificity her main point is to discredit ‘the possessive fiction of a universal subject’.<sup>213</sup> Irigaray identifies that the ethical responsibilities of women, their participation in and contribution to the order of the family and therefore of the people need to become socially visible in their sexuate singularity. In her interpretation of Hegel, she says that in his thought there is no thinking of human beings as sexuate beings. This is reflected as well in society and the State:

This is expressed, moreover, as the denied and unsaid in the pretence of a universal neutral paradigm. The universal needs to manifest and feed the becoming of human beings, as sexuate beings. As the universal is unfaithful to this micro and macro cosmic concrete reality, it is a duty to think this abstraction.<sup>214</sup>

This abstraction, Irigaray elucidates, is the loss of the sensitive immediacy, from the concrete from which Hegel always wanted to re-depart. The passage

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<sup>211</sup> For a very interesting view on how philosophers Maria Zambrano and Simone Weil have shown the mechanisms of the dominating structure of Western metaphysics in relation to the materiality and the maternal see Stefania Tarantino, *ἀνευ μητρὸς / Aneou Metros. Senza Madre. L’Anima Perduta Dell’Europa: Maria Zambrano e Simone Weil* (La Scuola di Pitagora, 2014).

<sup>212</sup> Irigaray, “Universale Come Mediazione: Sulla Necessita’ Di Un Diritto Sessuato.”

<sup>213</sup> Naomi Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray,” in *Engaging with Irigaray: Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought.*, ed. Carolyn Burke, Naomi Schor, and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 57–78. p. 64.

<sup>214</sup> Irigaray, “Universale Come Mediazione: Sulla Necessita’ Di Un Diritto Sessuato.”

of the subjective into the objective and of the objective into the subjective is interrupted. Irigaray sees Hegel's flight from the concrete in operation in today's laws. I argue that, Irigaray's project since the early 1970s 'gave' women 'permission' to celebrate their bodies for themselves and for other women without the mediation and interference of patriarchal culture. Women's bodies started to have the possibility to become their own, as Lucy van Pelt said, not the 'object' of patriarchal culture. Through Irigaray's thinking the female body stopped serving specific patriarchal functions: sexual, reproductive, and maternal. Irigaray took it upon herself to speak on the female body exactly *because* it was a body that had not been really seen, known, or touched by each individual woman, a body that was not an integral part of women's subjectivity but only external to them so that it served the needs that patriarchy had assigned them. Elisabeth Grosz says of Irigaray's work:

Irigaray strategy is to seek out the blind spots, the points of textual excess that all texts rely on yet disavow. In her understanding, this occurs most commonly where phallogocentric discourses pose the question of femininity, female sexuality and the maternal function.<sup>215</sup>

One of the main strengths of Irigaray's work is her determination for things to be named. In the 1970s she was the first feminist to start naming the objects, relations, feelings, fluids, sensations, voices and needs that arose from women's bodies and lives.<sup>216</sup> She argued for the need for women to have a

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<sup>215</sup> Elisabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions. Three French Feminists*. (Australia: Allen and Unwin, 1989). p. 110.

<sup>216</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

distinct socio-symbolic existence away from the language and patriarchal culture in which they lived.

In this respect Braidotti explains that the feminism of sexual difference ‘argues that women have borne, both materially and symbolically, the costs of the masculine privilege for autonomous self-definition: they have been psychically and symbolically dispossessed of a place from which to speak.’<sup>217</sup> In comparing Simone de Beauvoir and Irigaray, Schor says that for the latter, women’s subjectivity means ‘clearly becoming speaking subjects in their own rights’.<sup>218</sup> And, she adds, Irigaray believes that to speak ‘woman’ is, above all, ‘*not* to speak ‘universal.’<sup>219</sup> Stone suggests that Irigaray is not opposed to equality *per se*:

Nevertheless that Irigaray believes a culture of sexual difference to be necessary for women to achieve a level of self-realisation equivalent to that of men implies that she is less unequivocally opposed to equality than her denunciation of it suggests. Her criticism of equality feminism for denying women comparable self-realisation only makes sense if she retains some commitment to equality, albeit interpreted in a different sense than in conventional egalitarian feminism.<sup>220</sup>

Instead, Stone explains, ‘rather than rejecting equality altogether, [Irigaray] is offering a new interpretation of the respect in which equality is desirable: ‘it is...*in terms of difference* that we should be seeking equivalence and equality of rights.’<sup>221</sup> Therefore, if in following Irigaray we are not to abandon the idea of

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<sup>217</sup> Braidotti, “On Bugs and Women: Irigaray and Deleuze on the Becoming-Woman,” p. 123.

<sup>218</sup> Schor, “This Essentialism Which Is Not One: Coming to Grips with Irigaray.” p. 64.

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.* p. 64.

<sup>220</sup> Stone, *Luce Irigaray and the Philosophy of Sexual Difference*. p. 182.

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.* p. 182.

equality altogether, we may ask ourselves: what might a sexual difference inflected form of equality look like? This will be the theme of Chapter 3.

In this chapter I attempted to move away from the universal subject who inhabits the language and imaginary of liberalism which, I propose, denies the specific embodied realities of women and mothers. We have seen how Irigaray has worked extensively around these terms and proposed an injection of sexual difference into law. I also showed how Italian sexual difference feminism thinking has developed political and theoretical concepts which are useful for a critique of liberal equality. I began to explore how Irigaray, in alliance with Italian feminists, has done important work towards de-universalising the abstract subject of philosophy and law. This alliance of Italian feminists with Irigaray is explored further in Chapters 2 and 3, where I critically engage more specifically with the work of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective. Furthermore, this alliance can show us an alternative way of looking at law, one that considers the singularity, the embodied and embedded experiences of each woman and mother. Following Irigaray, Braidotti, and Italian sexual difference feminism I have argued that women's subjectivity, and in particular mothers' subjectivity (because of the risk of post-natal depression), benefits from being experienced as relational and collective in contrast to the individualistic, autonomous and self-centred pose of Western classical philosophy. More so, if experienced as relational, hence

through concrete relations, I argue mothers have more possibility to ‘take control’ over their subjectivity.

In the next chapter I focus specifically on the law. I consider the UK and the Republic of Ireland and examine two legal cases in particular *Evans v United Kingdom* and *Attorney General v X* [1992]. I recognise that each jurisdiction is different but what is universal is that in all jurisdictions most likely than not, the law affects women differently from men. Often this is particularly true of law that relates to reproduction, and for women’s relationship to the law as actual or potential mothers. In addition to the legal cases, the chapter centres on a series of philosophical debates which took place in the late 1980s at The Milan Collective around the themes of universality, equality and the problem with the *neuter* (the neutral in language) usage in discourse. This section focuses in particular in the presentation of feminist philosopher Wanda Tommasi. I then explore Cavarero’s insights on the law and its origin within the patriarchal language of Greek philosophy and how the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective imagined a different relation for women, with the law or outside the law.

## 2

legal imaginations.<sup>222</sup> women challenge the law

In the previous chapter I discussed the problems with liberalism, equality, individualism, and the abstract subject of law from a feminist perspective. That discussion helps me to carry on looking at the law using a feminist lens. The main question of this chapter is: how has the abstract and universalistic language of classical philosophy influenced law? These other questions follow on from the main one, firstly how and why have feminists criticised this abstract language? Secondly, how have feminists proposed a more concrete use of language which sees human beings as unique and specific, and why is this important for law?

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<sup>222</sup> This first part of the title for this chapter was inspired by the title of a conference I attended at Perugia University (Faculty of Law) in July 2015. “Visioni Del Giuridico/Legal Imaginations. Rileggendo Pasolini. Il Diritto Dopo La Scomparsa Delle Lucciole.” <https://www.scipol.unipg.it/home/eventi/in-collaborazione/410-visioni-del-giuridico-legal-imagination-s>, n.d.

In the first section I critically examine a series of philosophical debates which took place in the late 1980s at the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective. In so doing, I elucidate how Italian feminist philosophers, particularly Wanda Tommasi, addressed the themes of universality, equality, and the problem with the *neuter* usage in philosophical discourse. In the second section I explore Cavarero's insights on the law and its origin within the patriarchal language of Greek philosophy. I further examine how the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective and feminist lawyer Lia Cigarini imagined a different relation for women with the law or outside the law. Finally, in the third section I analyse two legal cases *Evans v United Kingdom and Attorney General v X [1992]* relating to reproduction in the UK and Ireland.

The law is gendered and it affects women in different ways. A feminist law can be responsive to this gender and sexual difference. This is true for areas of law that relate to reproduction and for women's relationship to the law as actual or potential mothers (abortion, fertility treatments, morning after pill, maternity leave and universal childcare or lack of). Women should not be defined and framed by their bodies, or by the fact that they have reproductive capacities. Nevertheless, as feminist legal scholar Ngaire Naffine<sup>223</sup> argues, the law has very particular ideas on how women's reproduction should be regulated, and how their body defines who they are. To negate this fact, to negate this difference, law puts women at a disadvantage. This is particularly

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<sup>223</sup> Ngaire Naffine, "The Body Bag," in *Sexing the Subject of Law*, ed. Ngaire Naffine and R. J. Owens (Sydney: Law Book Company, 1997), 79–93.

the case because the law, as Naffine elaborates, has an inherent problem with bodies that are not male and heterosexual. So what is needed to insert difference into law? To envisage a law that sees the uniqueness of each of us?

The women of The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective challenged and confronted the theme of the law too, because they realised early on that the law affects women's lives and their bodies in the way they are framed, judged, and controlled. In the 1970s and 1980s Italian radical feminists were suspicious as to whether the law could bring freedom to women, moreover they saw the law as an instrument of a patriarchal society, which enables it to keep controlling women, not as an instrument that frees them. The Milan Bookstore Women's Collective was founded in 1975 by a group of women including feminist lawyer and legal theorist Lia Cigarini and feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro. They co-wrote, with the rest of the women's collective, the book *Non credere di avere dei diritti. La generazione della liberta' femminile nelle idee e nelle vicende di un gruppo di donne*. [Don't Think You Have Any Rights: The Engendering of Female Freedom in the Thought and Vicissitudes of a Women's Group].<sup>224</sup> This book exemplifies what a different law looks like, and how relationality between women is often more important than equality, as the collective argued. Cigarini became a lawyer in the 1970s and soon after she became involved with the Milan Collective, where she realised

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<sup>224</sup> Libreria delle Donne di Milano, *Non Credere Di Avere Dei Diritti: La Generazione Della Libertà Femminile Nell'idea e Nelle Vicende Di Un Gruppo Di Donne*. The book was translated few years later as The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*.

the importance of relationships among women. She decided that she had to change the way she practised law, as she understood that to be a feminist lawyer or a feminist judge adds another layer to legal interpretation. She decided that she would only defend women in court, that her time as a feminist lawyer was better spent in defending women who had always been silenced by the law. In an article titled ‘Lo Stupro Simbolico’ ‘The Symbolic Rape’ that appeared in 1979 in the Italian left-wing daily newspaper *Il Manifesto*, Cigarini says:

I think that the law of the codes is the extreme abstraction of the law of the father. In those years our practice worked towards women’s autonomy, symbolic and sexual, and we kept our distance from the law of the father because it is the one that regulates sexuality and symbolic representations of women. I am interested in seeing the relationship woman-law in this perspective, and it is in this sense that I say that *women should not promote laws*.<sup>225</sup>

Cigarini’s argument was one against engagement with the law of the father. Since the symbolic order is still patriarchal, she argues that any engagement with the law would probably leave women unsatisfied and would also co-opt them into the patriarchal system. This is why Cigarini ultimately argued for a suspension of engagement with the law, when possible. In promoting laws as a means of progress, women would often be unsatisfied – at least in the 1970s

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<sup>225</sup> ‘Credo che la legge dei codici costituisca l’estrema astrazione della legge del padre. La nostra pratica in questi anni e’ andata nel senso dell’autonomia delle donne, simbolica e sessuale, prendendo le distanze dalla legge del padre che e’ quella che regola la sessualita’ e la simbolizzazione.’ Lia Cigarini, *Lo Stupro Simbolico*. “il manifesto”, 20 Novembre 1979. This article is included in Cigarini, *La Polit. Del Desiderio*. p. 85. [my translation]

and 1980s – as the State and as a consequence its laws - remained the same, still rooted in a broad patriarchal system.

American radical feminist legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon<sup>226</sup> had a similar approach to law, but I suggest that there is a difference between her approach and that of the women of the Milanese Collective. MacKinnon fights to change laws or make new laws. By contrast, the Milanese Collective, exemplified by Cigarini, put more focus and energy on struggling to change society and challenge patriarchy at a societal and cultural level. They realised that acquiring rights for women had a limited scope.

Unlike liberal feminists, discussed in Chapter 1, the Milanese Collective aimed to challenge and change the patriarchal structure of the State, culture, and society. Their main aim was not to struggle for a ‘mere’ acquisition of rights. They believed, as did Italian radical feminist Carla Lonzi, that ‘equality is what is offered as legal rights to colonised people.’<sup>227</sup> Those feminists saw legal equality as a gain and victory that came from the top down not as something which is acquired by fundamentally changing the premise of the culture that produces that inequality and in turn changing women’s subjectivity.<sup>228</sup> The women of the Milanese Collective dared imagine the law

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<sup>226</sup> Catharine MacKinnon, *Women’s Lives, Men’s Laws* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>227</sup> Lonzi, *Sputiamo Su Hegel*. In English it’s *Let’s Spit on Hegel*.

<sup>228</sup> When I interviewed my mother - in 2007 on her experience in the feminist movement - on the theme of the law and rights she stated: “Rights derive from the State, the law. To have a right means to struggle to obtain it. Rights in themselves do not produce transformation. Rights produce a legal evidence of law, sustain the dignity of personhood, but in themselves do not operate a transformation in a woman as a thinking

differently. They believed that it was the patriarchal structure of society and the State that needed to be fundamentally changed. Their effort to think the law differently in relation to women's lives culminated in their 1987 collective book *Non Credere di Avere dei Diritti*.<sup>229</sup>

One of the authors of the above book, Cigarini defined a term and a feminist practice called *above the law* [*sopra la legge*].<sup>230</sup> Cigarini defines the term *above the law* as a space which is important for women; it is 'the place of symbolic existence, the place of 'authority' that I recognise in other women that recognise me'<sup>231</sup>. Hence she argues, together with the Milanese Collective, that relationality between women is more liberating than acquiring formal legal rights. *Above the law* is a symbolic space for women to occupy. It refers to the idea that it is important for women to question the law, to create a suspension from the law, an anarchist and resistant relationship to the law. It is this space *above the law* that was of interest to radical feminists, and I think it remains an important move for women to define and interpret the law in their own words, appropriate it, and if necessary, reject it. *Above the law* is precisely where the Milanese Collective wanted to be. Cigarini further argues, 'I think that a political movement asks for the support from the formality of the norm

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subject. This can be reached only in the recognition, the relationship, exchange and esteem between women, because in giving value to the other we give value to ourselves and vice versa.'

<sup>229</sup> Libreria delle Donne di Milano, *Non Credere Di Avere Dei Diritti: La Generazione Della Liberta' Femminile Nell'idea e Nelle Vicende Di Un Gruppo Di Donne*. The book was later translated into English as The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*.

<sup>230</sup> Lia Cigarini, "Sopra La Legge," in *La Politica Del Desiderio* (Parma: Nuova Pratiche Editrice, 1995). p. 195–97.

<sup>231</sup> Cigarini, *La Polit. Del Desiderio*. p. 197, [my translation]. See as well, *L'Autorita' Femminile. Incontro Con Lia Cigarini.*, Gruppo B (Edizioni Centro Culturale Virginia Woolf, 1991). Her work has been discussed from a feminist legal perspective by Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy*. p. 94–96.

when it does not have any more political ideas in its head.’<sup>232</sup> Instead, we need to ‘open some voids or gaps in the masculine order of the law. It is female freedom which opens the space of the *above the law* for women and men.’<sup>233</sup> For Cigarini *above the law* (*sopra la legge*) means women engaging in their own relational practice of law.<sup>234</sup>

### **philosophy and the law: quattro giovedì’ e un venerdì’ per la filosofia**<sup>235</sup>

In October 1987 a public philosophical debate took place over five days at The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective. The main speakers were four Italian feminist philosophers (Wanda Tommasi, Chiara Zamboni, Laura Boella, Angela Putino) and the politician, writer and scientist Laura Conti. The four philosophers’ presentations were commented on and critiqued by other women philosophers: Luisa Muraro, Vita Cosentino, Clara Jourdan, Laura Balestrini, and Diana Sartori. These philosophical discussions had important implications for a feminist understanding of the law. I examine them here in order to set the foundation of the problem of language impregnated with universalistic and abstract ideas. This analysis helps me set the stage for my exploration of Cavarero’s work on similar themes in the next section. This debate was one of many intense public debates (on themes as varied as sentiment, history, humour, poetry and fiction), that The Milan Collective held every week for several years.

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<sup>232</sup> Lia Cigarini, “La Pratica Del Processo,” in *La Politica Del Desiderio*. (Parma: Nuova Pratiche Editrice, 1995), 118–26.

<sup>233</sup> Cigarini, *La Polit. Del Desiderio*. p. 232-233.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.* p. 94.

<sup>235</sup> La Libreria delle Donne, *Quattro Giovedì’ e Un Venerdì’ per La Filosofia*.

In these debates, we can see an example of politics in practice, or political praxis. The themes were always oriented towards a critique of patriarchy. The women participating wanted to learn about a genealogy based on women's intellectual work against a culture which had hidden the work of women for millennia. This is an example of how a group of women reflected on what it means to be a woman, and chose to think those subjects from a different point of view. A point of view which starts from oneself and from a woman's experience, in and with the world and people around her; it is called *partire da se'*.

*Partire da se'* is different from an experience that comes from abstract analysis of the world. An abstract view of the world is often encouraged by a patriarchal viewpoint which is derived from an external master narrative. We can see how these debates created political engagement outside the government and the realm of the State and had an effect on women's sense of self. The Milan Collective's book *Sexual Difference*<sup>236</sup> expounded the radical idea that often women lose out when they are granted equal rights with men by the State. As the Italian title of their book (Don't think you have any rights) indicated, women may indeed acquire rights but the story is not so straight forward and simple. They argued that freedom, for women, comes from working on the self collectively with other women. As Cigarini wrote, 'A relational conception of freedom, that is my human story that we do together

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<sup>236</sup> The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*.

with other women, is not aimed at gaining my individual rights but it's a process, a story that I make and develop together with other women.'<sup>237</sup>

Linda Zerilli has highlighted the original work of the Collective, which departs from most other feminist thinking on equality. She says of their work that 'a freedom that, paradoxically, demands no vindication of the rights of woman, no equal rights under the law, but *only a full, political and personal accountability to women*, is as startlingly radical a notion as any that has emerged in Western thought.'<sup>238</sup> That the Milanese Collective and other Italian feminist activists put relationships first is what makes their work revolutionary. What they had realised was that gaining rights on an individual level will never bring about a true change at a cultural, political and societal level.

The public philosophical debates mentioned previously are interesting because these feminist philosophers did not debate abstract philosophical themes. They were not interested in what Cavarero would call the "what" of philosophy, but in the embodied and embedded "who" of the singular and concrete experiences of human beings.

What is interesting about these five days of debates is that a group of women met to think and re-think philosophy to make it their own. In what follows we shall see how these women tried to make of philosophy not a grand external master theory but a concrete reality that changed their lives.

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<sup>237</sup> Cigarini, "La Pratica Del Processo."

<sup>238</sup> Linda M. G. Zerilli, "Feminists Makes Promises: The Milan Collective's Sexual Difference and the Project of World Building,," in *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 93–124. p. 93. [My emphasis].

They made words come alive to give meaning to their own lives, and they reflected on how words often have a *different* meaning for women.

Consequently, they reflected on the themes I discussed at the beginning of this section (universalism, individualism, equality, abstraction, language), with an emphasis on giving a meaning that worked for them. The result of the presentations, debates and discussions that took place in October 1987 was a small booklet titled *quattro giovedì e un venerdì per la filosofia*.<sup>239</sup> For the purpose of my research I am interested in the presentation of philosopher Wanda Tommasi, as we can see the direct influence that Irigaray had on her thinking, and how she tried to elaborate on her ideas and put them into practice. These elaborations, too, all have implications on understandings of the law.

Tommasi's<sup>240</sup> presentation was titled *L'ambizione, l'inciampo, la piu' alta pretesa* [The Ambition, the Stumble, the Highest Claim] and it was commented on by philosopher Luisa Muraro.<sup>241</sup> Tommasi expounded the problems for women with the neuter as a cultural, social and linguistic paradigm which hides the difference between the sexes and renders woman the same as man, assimilated to the male paradigm.

The neuter has direct links to how questions of equality are framed in law. Equality often works within a framework which is based upon the neuter. Men and women can be equal only if the law sees them as the same. The law,

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<sup>239</sup> La Libreria delle Donne, *Quattro Giovedì e Un Venerdì per La Filosofia*.

<sup>240</sup> Wanda Tommasi is an Italian philosopher. She teaches history of philosophy at the University of Verona.

<sup>241</sup> Luisa Muraro is an Italian philosopher. She was the founder, together with other feminists, of the philosophical community Diotima in Verona. She was one of the founders of The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective in 1976. She has written among others Muraro, "L'Ordine Simbolico Della Madre." Luisa Muraro, *The Symbolic Order of the Mother* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2019).

especially positivistic approaches to the law, finds it difficult to extrapolate difference when it thinks it wants to be equal and fair. The law has a one direction view of equality: to reach it, all differences need to be erased. The neuter, Tommasi argued, ‘represents a supposed neutral human being but incorporates in it the male sex – as the signifier of Man. In reality it is Man minus sexual difference, a human being which is mutilated, halved, lacking something – the female sex – that is not able to be in the field of knowledge.’<sup>242</sup> Especially for legal positivists and analytical legal positivists, the law is viewed as objective, abstract, understood straightforwardly as regulations to be followed that are not linked, necessarily, to morality and ethics.<sup>243</sup>

Therefore, Tommasi argued that by neutralising language women become assimilated to a male paradigm, with several drawbacks for women. This is evident in legislation where the idea is that the law is equal, when instead it erases the difference of women. Tommasi continued, saying that she was not referring to a biological essential difference but to the social, culturally different worlds that women come to inhabit and which see them differently. Indeed, sexual difference was never, for the Italians, a matter of identity or identity politics. It was recognising the socio-historical-cultural and

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<sup>242</sup> Wanda Tommasi ‘Un essere umano *meno* l’appartenenza sessuata, un essere mutilato, dimidiato, privato di qualcosa che e’ essenziale – la sessuazione femminile - ma che non riesce a dirsi all’interno del sapere.’ La Libreria delle Donne, *Quattro Giovedì e Un Venerdì per La Filosofia*. p.14 (my translation).

<sup>243</sup> Some of the legal positivists are Jeremy Bentham, John Austin, Hart, Raz.

political structures in which women had lived for millennia. Tommasi explained:

I think that the temptation of the neuter constitutes almost an obligatory passage for all women [. . .]. The profession a woman chooses, the career and knowledge posit themselves as neutral and they seem to contain – *because* of their neutrality and universality – a promise of emancipation.<sup>244</sup>

Tommasi explains that the illusion of the neuter is exactly this: in the moment in which it is women who adhere to it, it becomes a form of compliance.<sup>245</sup>

For men, she explains, the neuter does not pose a problem; it does not mean a cancellation of one's sexual identity, but for women, it does. The neuter is an illusion, moreover, because implicitly and indirectly it contains a marker for sexual difference so even if it is not there explicitly, it is present but it is erased. Besides, when a woman renounces the attraction of the neuter she tries to give a voice to that which the neuter always forgets, sexual difference.

On the other hand, for women, Tommasi continues, the neuter contains the knowledge of how to demean one's sex, of its social and symbolic inferiority, of its inadequacy in the field of science and philosophy.

Faced with the demeaning of one's sex and with a loss of strong and

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<sup>244</sup> Wanda Tommasi 'Credo che la tentazione del neutro costituisca quasi un passaggio obbligato per tutte coloro che pretendono molto per se' in campo professionale o all'interno di un sapere: professione e sapere che si pongono come neutri e che sembrano quindi contenere, proprio in forza della loro neutralita' e universalita', una promessa di emancipazione; una garanzia di riscatto dall'inferiorita' sociale e simbolica che il proprio sesso patisce nel momento in cui si avventura al di fuori dei ruoli femminili tradizionali. L'attrazione del neutro sta nella promessa di emancipazione: la rinuncia all'appartenenza sessuale e la cancellazione della differenza sembrano essere il prezzo da pagare per ottenere competenza e padronanza nella professione e nel sapere.' *La Libreria delle Donne, Quattro Giovedì e Un Venerdì per La Filosofia*. p.13

<sup>245</sup> Lea Melandri is of the same opinion 'Una volta fatta propria la visione maschile del mondo, era inevitabile che la «tentazione del neutro» non risparmiasse neppure le donne.' In Lea Melandri, "Il Vagabondaggio Della Scrittura.," *Il Manifesto, Italian Communist Daily Newspaper*, February 7, 2015.

authoritative female points of reference, two destinies are left to women: one is to choose the traditional role for women, which has been assigned by patriarchy, and the other is to choose the road of the neuter, negating one's belonging to one's sex. According to Tommasi, when a woman chooses the latter:

she can find that she becomes split, lacerated: asexual at the level of knowledge, woman only when in the private sphere. She will reproduce, within herself, in an alternating painful form, often unbearable, the illusion of the choice that is offered to women between womanhood and professional competence.<sup>246</sup>

The neuter is found in law and the idea of equality and it has often negative implications for both. Sadly, once within the universalising language of liberal equality, as I argued in Chapter 1, the neuter does not maintain the promise of emancipation.

Tommasi points out that with all the contradictions, if a woman still chooses the path of the neuter, it is often because she has a strong ambition which she sees as being held back by her belonging to the female sex. In light of that, this sexual identity will be erased at the level of knowledge. This violent gesture of erasure of one's sexual identity – which as Tommasi argues is never fully achieved – is already a rebellious act that a woman can perform to avenge the humiliation that her sex has experienced. Therefore, instead of

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<sup>246</sup> Wanda Tommasi 'Salvo poi, in quest'ultimo caso, ritrovarsi scissa, lacerata: neutro, assediata a livello del sapere, donna solo nel privato; riproducendo così 'dentro di se', nella forma di un'alternanza dolorosa, spesso insostenibile, la scelta illusoria che viene proposta alle donne fra femminilità e competenza professionale.' *La Libreria delle Donne, Quattro Giovedì e Un Venerdì per La Filosofia*. p.13 [my translation]

accepting this humiliation, many women prefer to erase their belonging to a sex.

Tommasi notes that some women realise that they are good at repeating, good at commenting on other thinkers' ideas – what is missing is the ability to speak for oneself, the ability to speak with mastery. Irigaray talks about this in terms of mimesis and hysteria. She discusses how within the patriarchal system, women are destined to mimic, become the hysteric, or stay in silence.<sup>247</sup> Tommasi elucidates that it is important for women to realise that they are repeating what others, mainly men, have thought. Once women realise that, it allows them to name their inadequacy within their field of knowledge. Once this inadequacy is named, a woman realises that she is not alone, that this inadequacy is the lot experienced by many other women. It is the lot of the female sex which often maintains a distance, almost a suspicion, which is a sign of its original distance from the land of the logos (*originaria lontananza dalla patria del logos*). During the 1970s and 1980s for Tommasi and the women of the Milanese Collective and many other feminists to be able 'to exit' (*uscire*) from the neuter is achieved in proximity with other women, in a sexuate space. They and other women practised what is called separatism (being only among women for a period of time and in some situations).

The most important redemption to come out of this discovery for women was the realization, together with other women, that they no longer

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<sup>247</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*.; Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

wished to feel estranged from the fields of knowledge. This brought about a thirst for knowledge of which women were themselves the subjects and they were not simply repeating what others – often men – had thought and written before them. In this context, Tommasi relates:

women started to shape a desire, an unprecedented pretence to be at home in and with language. They wished to be able to move around in the realm of knowledge, like full human beings shaping their own point of view on the world.<sup>248</sup>

This woman wants to put herself at the origin of her speech: she wants to speak as a full human being, without mutilations and renunciations. She refuses the servile and repetitive function of weaving at the margins of the logos, because she wants to put forward a higher demand, a more relevant request. Also, she wishes to develop her own desire – a desire that is not formed by the desire of the other as Irigaray also insists.<sup>249</sup> This request means to be able to formulate a thought that begins from oneself (*un pensiero che parta da se*), like a full human being. This request is a desire to produce a language that takes fully into account the experience and all the signs of the finitude of human beings, first and foremost their sexual difference. Tommasi indicates that for the women who want to escape the neuter it is vital to have a point of reference in other women. Moreover, she adds that in this way women will

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<sup>248</sup> La Libreria delle Donne, *Quattro Giovedì e Un Venerdì per La Filosofia*, p. 14.

<sup>249</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Ce Sexe Qui N'En Est Pas Un* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1977); Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*.

find an adequate measure for themselves, one in which the potency of the female sex is understood, together with its necessary limit:

What women gain from this is a world view marked by sexual difference. Limited, therefore, limited by sexuation, hence because of this, powerful. In this, women will be able to escape the painful alternating in which they often navigate, between an illusion of omnipotence and degradation. This enables women to speak, emit their speech outside the murmur (*far uscire la loro parola*), which is at the margins of the neuter and also from the silence of the what (*il cosa*) that one is unable to say. All this enables women to speak for themselves, and no more just to repeat someone else's thought.<sup>250</sup>

We see in these philosophical debates, which were attended by many women, an attempt to think politics in a different way, to make it relevant to them in a concrete manner and not a distant concept. What we have seen from these presentations is how all these women talked of a debt they owed to Luce Irigaray's thought.<sup>251</sup> Through the work of these women we can clearly see how their political actions made it possible for them to account for themselves and value the importance of relations they had with other women. It was an attempt to think law otherwise, as the Milan Bookstore Collective practice did and Cigarini enacted in her feminist legal practice. In this section, I set the foundations for the next part of the chapter, where I discuss

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<sup>250</sup> Wanda Tommasi 'E' guadagnato così' un punto di vista sul mondo segnato dalla differenza sessuale; limitato dunque, circoscritto dalla sessuazione, ma proprio per questo potente, capace di sottrarre le donne dall'alternanza dolorosa entro cui spesso si muovono, fra illusione di onnipotenza e sentimento di abiezione; capace di far uscire la loro parola dal mormorio ai margini del neutro e, insieme, dal silenzio di ciò che non riesce a dirsi. Per poter non più ripetere, ma Dire in proprio.' In *La Libreria delle Donne, Quattro Giovedì e Un Venerdì per La Filosofia*. p.14. [my translation].

<sup>251</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero." p. 147.

Cavarero's work challenging the individualistic, abstract, and neutral view of the subject.

### **language and the law**

We can see how language is important for Cavarero and how through language the patriarchal order has infiltrated philosophy and subsequently, law. Cavarero writes:

For me, sexual difference is a given of the human condition translated by logocentrism into a hierarchical scheme that prevents one of the two sexes from representing herself outside the stereotypes of the feminine. However, precisely those stereotypes disclose a nucleus of resistance against the very logic and content of the system that has informed them.<sup>252</sup>

Cavarero deliberately uses words in a disrespectful way striking at philosophy's heart; we can see how this has an important role in demystifying power structures. Language is political and the way language is used in law is the expression of relations of power, because power is defined through the way we use language. The other crucial importance of language is in forming and articulating one's desire. If it's the language of the other our desires are shaped externally to us too. Law can be rigid and fixed, and if metaphors are essential to meanings we need to look at instilling law with metaphors, so that words become less rigid and more fluid and flexible. If law is to evolve and incorporate concrete human beings in its paradigm it needs to acquire

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid. p. 147.

metaphorical meanings. Conversely, as legal scholar Robert Cover<sup>253</sup> has famously put it, law deals in life and death. He says that open, playful meanings and metaphors (as some law and literature scholars have conceded) have material, significant consequences in law, unlike in literature. Cavarero too argues that we should play with language, take it less seriously, have fun with it and treat it with less reverence:

Words are not sacred or untouchable, especially in philosophy. Rather it is necessarily to use words with bad intentions (*cattive intenzioni*), situating them in a different context that can overwhelm and recodify them, pushing those terms toward unpredictable meanings. One needs ultimately to use words that are metaphysically compromised – and *ontology* is one of them – to attack the system that produces them and to finally destabilize them. <sup>254</sup>

Language is not fixed and to attack the rigid notion of law can help us to go beyond law, its positivist approach. To be able to go beyond law's positivistic approach I suggest we need 'linguistic filters'<sup>255</sup> so that the law loses its mystified position.

French feminist Hélène Cixous's idea of "écriture féminine" which she first coined in her book *The Laugh of the Medusa* (1975)<sup>256</sup> acts as an example of

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<sup>253</sup> 'Legal interpretation takes place in a field of pain and death. This is true in several senses. Legal interpretative acts signal and occasion the imposition of violence upon others: A judge articulates her understanding of a text, and as a result, somebody loses his freedom, his property, his children even his life. Interpretations in law also constitute justification for violence which has already occurred or which is about to occur. When interpreters have finished their work, they frequently leave behind victims whose lives have been torn apart by these organised, social practices of violence. Neither legal interpretation nor the violence it occasions may be properly understood apart from one another.' in Robert Cover, "Violence and the Word," in *Narrative, Violence and the Law. The Essays of Robert Cover*, ed. Martha Minow, Michael Ryan, and Austin Sarat (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1993), 203–204.

<sup>254</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero." p. 137.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.* p. 141.

<sup>256</sup> Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875–93; Helene Cixous, *Le Rire de La Meduse et Autres Ironies* (Paris: Galilee, 2013).

a language which loses its mystified position, rewrites the body, the affective, the unconscious into language. How do these linguistic filters work to make law lose its mystifying position? Following Cavarero on the critique of *rectitude* and ‘inclining’ the law can help us add a notion of the law that needs to be inclined to singular people’s experiences.<sup>257</sup> The law is about human beings. If it is to be human it needs to absorb within its approach the inclination that challenges the rigidity of seeing human beings as erect, rational, fixed, and homogeneous. This can become a new way of imagining the law, a law which ultimately always deals with life and death and the realities of life, not abstract interpretations of law, as Cover stated.

### **adriana cavarero and the law**

In this section I explore the work of Cavarero, and other Italian sexual difference feminists, who challenge the rigidity and universalising pull of the law as it is constructed in Western thought and theory. Even though Cavarero is a feminist political philosopher, she has approached and worked on questions of law in several of her books and articles. She does this because she argues ‘it is not possible [. . .] to attack the ontology of the individual without taking into account the fact that this attack falls back into the conception of the normative system of the State.’<sup>258</sup> Cavarero creates a space outside the law for women to work towards becoming subjects of the law in

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<sup>257</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*.

<sup>258</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, “Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero.” p. 157.

their own terms, or to attempt to imagine spaces outside of the law altogether (or *above the law* as Cigarini proposed). What Cavarero means by this is that it is important for women to learn that freedom does not come only by achieving legal rights and that unless they learn not to submit to the law 'blindly', women will not learn to become subjects in their own terms. She argues that the symbolic order has filtered in to other forms of language like in legal documents or philosophical treatises.<sup>259</sup> It is the patriarchal symbolic order inherent in legal documents that we are interested in here and the ones women should be often, but not always, suspicious about.

What interests me about Cavarero's work and what I find useful for this chapter and the overall thesis is exactly her analysis on how the patriarchal symbolic order has filtered into classical philosophy and from there into our legal texts. It is alerting us to this ancestral connection that I find inspiring, as it brings light to modern legal reasoning, texts, and cases, and it reminds us to never let our guard down, to keep unearthing the patriarchal power and hegemony inherent in legal texts. The importance of re-reading Greek philosophy and its connection to law from a feminist perspective is fundamental to unearthing the foundations of Western law, which in turn has filtered into other cultures and legislatures through imperialism and colonialism.<sup>260</sup> This has supported a patriarchal legal symbolic

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<sup>259</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. p. 1.

<sup>260</sup> Peter Fitzpatrick, "Imperialism," in *Modernism and the Grounds of Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 146–75.

order and culture which has been complicit in the erasure of maternal power. In contrast to this death-bound philosophy,<sup>261</sup> culture and society, which is suspicious of materiality and the maternal, Arendt's concepts of action, plurality and natality, as interpreted by Cavarero, can bring new 'vitality'<sup>262</sup> to philosophy and help us re-think our relationship with the law.

So what might a rewritten, feminist law look like? I am interested in engaging with Cavarero's work and exploring concrete examples to attempt to answer this question. Cavarero's feminist reading and critique of classical philosophy and the legal position of women within ancient and 'modern' societies allows for a re-claiming of space for women within philosophy and the political realm which comprises the law. She explores 'the philosophy of antiquity which posits itself at the onset of our history, making its mark in the destiny of the so-called "West."<sup>263</sup> Cavarero's 1995 book *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Reading of Ancient Philosophy* delves into these themes. In this book, Cavarero sets herself the task of 'stealing' female figures like Penelope, Diotima, Demeter and the Maidservant from Thrace from ancient myths, repositioning them from a reduced, fractured status within the ancient Greek texts and giving them back a magnified symbolic position:

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<sup>261</sup> Patrick Hanafin, "Voicing Embodiment, Relating Difference: Towards a Relational Legal Subjectivity," *Australian Feminist Law Journal* 29, no. 1 (2008): 77–89. Cavarero, *A Pin' Voci: Per Una Filosofia Dell'espressione Vocale*. p. 200; Cavarero, *Stately Bodies: Literature, Philosophy and the Question of Gender*.

<sup>262</sup> In effect at a conference dedicated solely to Adriana Cavarero's work, she said 'I am first and foremost an activist and then a philosopher.' *Giving Life to Politics: The Work of Adriana Cavarero*. Brighton University, 19-21 June 2017.

<sup>263</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. p. 4.

the figures that I steal already appear anomalous. Stealing figures in this way is therefore a way of working on stereotypes. I am convinced that, in particular, *most feminine stereotypes contain a nucleus of meaning that can be retrieved with a different sense*, which the standard explanation or function of the stereotype tends to hide.<sup>264</sup>

Revealing this *nucleus of meaning* is the key for a reading of the patriarchal language used in law. As Western law's origins are in ancient Greece and ancient Rome, in re-reading the ancient Greek myths Cavarero is shaking the foundation of law too. She says that in the classical Greek texts, female figures like Penelope, Diotima, Demeter and the Maidservant from Thrace are mortified, squeezed between gigantic male figures and lack a space and a voice. The trilogy of Greek tragedies written by Aeschylus *The Oresteia*<sup>265</sup> - which I mentioned in the previous chapter - is paradigmatic of the patriarchal origin of Western legal system. Significantly, Cavarero defines classical Greece as 'a golden age for the patriarchal order.'<sup>266</sup> In this context we can ask, how then has this 'golden age for the patriarchal order' informed law?

Cavarero investigates the possible detrimental connection between ancient myths, philosophy, patriarchy, and law, and the influence of this connection on the assimilation of women to a patriarchal order, the annihilation of their *difference*, and the colonisation of maternal power by men. In this last aspect Cavarero argues that maternal power has been taken from women by a

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<sup>264</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero." p.135. [My emphasis]

<sup>265</sup> Aeschylus, *The Oresteia. Agamemnon, the Libation Bearers, the Eumenides.*, ed. Robert Fagles, 5th ed. (London & New York: Penguin Books, 1984).

<sup>266</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy.* p.71.

patriarchal order whose regulation spans from antiquity through to ‘modern’ times with the invasion and control of women’s bodies by the legal and medical professions. As a result, she argues, this invasion is an erasure of women’s maternal power. The patriarchal order maintains that maternity is a social function and therefore needs to be regulated.

In *In Spite of Plato* Cavarero examines how ancient Greek philosophy was complicit in spreading this ideology of suspicion in relation to the maternal. She states that ‘the earliest philosophers are “chronologically” closer to the great matricidal felony, the erasure of the maternal, to what underlies the universalizing arrogance of the patriarchal order.’<sup>267</sup> Here we see a very important connection between ancient myths, philosophy, patriarchy and law on one hand, and on the other hand women’s assimilation and the annihilation of maternal power. This link is something that needs further exploration and it is essential to continue the re-appropriation of ancient texts from a feminist perspective to allow for a re-reading and a reinterpretation of important historical moments lost to women. These reinterpretations help us to unpack and understand the law and its classical origins.

In reinterpreting and rewriting the destinies of women in Greek myths and tragedies, she generously offers a ‘gift’ to Penelope, Demeter, Diotima and the Maidservant of Thrace – the gift of a life, a new birth and identification with other women. And these figures give Cavarero the gift of another way of

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<sup>267</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

reading these old myths. Together with other Italian sexual difference feminists<sup>268</sup>, she has reiterated that rights do not make women's relationship to law better *per se*. Rights are granted by law in order, in liberal theory, to substantively change lives, but the real transformation needs to happen within the patriarchal symbolic order to bring a concrete substantial change in women's lives. Lawyer Diane Polan too states that 'it is not so much that laws must be changed; it is patriarchy that must be changed.'<sup>269</sup> This point is crucial for our enquiry and as we will soon see Cavarero believes, to a certain extent, in the disengagement of women from the State and its laws. She is interested in relations between women, and it is within those relations that it becomes possible for women's lives to change the most.<sup>270</sup>

According to Cavarero, law is embedded with power and when it reflects the dominant discourse it externalises its power in very damaging ways. She believes that the universalization of the male paradigm annihilates women, therefore she does not approve of a politics that asks women to assimilate to Man's universal standard. Cavarero calls for a *difference* that filters deeply into law; she wants to expand the boundaries and redefine the borders of law. As Cavarero puts it, the 'female invaders' of the patriarchal occupation, feminists, 'put into practice rules that are finally free from the

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<sup>268</sup> The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice.*; Cigarini, *La Polit. Del Desiderio*.

<sup>269</sup> Polan cited in Zillah R. Eisenstein, *The Female Body and the Law* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1988). p. 51.

<sup>270</sup> A parallel can be drawn here with Angela Carter's rewriting of traditional fairy tales for the same reasons as Cavarero, to give a life back to the female characters miswritten by a patriarchal logic, and for foregrounding the maternal and the mother-daughter relationships in the rewrites. See Maria Aristodemou, "Fantasies of Women as Law-Makers: Empowerment or Entrapment in Angela Carter's *Bloody Chambers*," in *Law & Literature. Journeys from Her to Eternity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 156–77.

universalizing claims of abstract totalization.’<sup>271</sup> Only when women oppose the male dominant discourse in law will their perspective be taken into account in law.

Within critical legal studies a feminist re-reading is transformative for law because it can shake its static and rigid setting. Cavarero is able to demonstrate how language and stereotypes used in texts by Ancient Greek philosophers like Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle have been transmitted in European classical philosophical texts and eventually made their way into legal texts, which are imbued with patriarchal bias. Cavarero argues that the concept of *anthropos* – Man – which is singular and masculine, but in reality neutral-universal, made its way into philosophical language where it was used to indicate humankind as a whole. From there it came into common use, and it remains in the language that we still speak.<sup>272</sup> At the same time we can see that in legal texts the law is intrinsically filled with the universal idea of humankind which takes its standard from the masculine and this ‘mould’ is then applied, unsuccessfully, to represent women’s realities. As Cavarero notes ‘woman’ ‘realises that within the male order of knowledge she *really is not*, since there is no woman in the idea of the universal Man. The idea of Man is said to be neutral and universal, without gender, be it masculine or feminine.’<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. p. 86.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.* p. 38.

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.* p. 54.

The abstract notion of Man which represents humankind is detrimental for men too. Men are different from each other and no one, neither men nor women can be ‘contained’ in an abstract objectification of their humanity. If, then, the abstract notion of humanity does not exist, an abstract notion of Woman and Man do not exist either; there exist instead many different women and men in different contexts. American political theorist Zillah Eisenstein argues that universality does not account for differences. She states that neutrality hides power. It is the power that it hides, that is not openly recognised, which makes it unfair.<sup>274</sup>

Sex is an embodied difference even when it is complicated, contested and diversified.<sup>275</sup> Cavarero writes that the fact that there is a corporal morphology, in the ‘signifiers’ masculine and feminine, is a banality. To negate this, to be necessarily postmodern, she thinks is this century’s illness.<sup>276</sup> At times though, as trans and non-binary people can attest, lived gender and genitalia don’t match. Even if we accept the relevance of biological difference, ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as social categories are not reducible to genitalia.

Eisenstein states that “‘Difference’” framed as a duality attempts to make things clear-cut, much as the determinations in a court of law are supposed to be. Subtlety, ambiguity and relatedness are denied, and in the process

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<sup>274</sup> Eisenstein, *The Female Body and the Law*. p. 48.

<sup>275</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, “Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero.” p. 144.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid.* p. 144.

differences become inequalities.<sup>277</sup> Eisenstein's comment may read as a critique of Cavarero's notion of sexual difference, but Cavarero's sexual difference thinking works to spell away the erasure of the maternal and of women. Hence, it is not a move to make things clear cut or to deny ambiguity, but to keep the uniqueness of each woman in the picture as it has been violently evicted or erased from our culture for centuries. Eisenstein explains further:

by pluralizing equality I do not mean to condone the idea of "separate but equal" or that of "separate spheres." To the contrary, I mean to argue that the concept of equality is best reconstructed through a completely pluralized notion of difference(s), one that rejects a politics of inequality and demands a radical egalitarianism.<sup>278</sup>

I think that this 'completely pluralised notion of difference(s)' for which Eisenstein argues is similar to Cavarero's insistence on the uniqueness of each human being. By paying attention to this uniqueness, this 'pluralised notion of difference' the concept of equality can be enriched in a more human, material way.

Cavarero explains how the dominant structure controls women's bodies, while women are still subjected to what Hanafin calls '*patriarchal permission*.'<sup>279</sup> This paradigm is particularly important for understanding rights in relation to abortion, as Hanafin argues. The State and the judiciary maintain the 'privilege' of legislating on matters that concern only women. The State

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<sup>277</sup> Eisenstein, *The Female Body and the Law*. p. 35.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>279</sup> Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy*.

operates in a mode whereby it ‘allows’ certain privileges and freedoms, as long as they are limited to certain timeframes and limits. That is not enough. That is exactly how a patriarchal father figure operates. It allows some freedom as long as one does not overtake the limit set by the authority (a father, the law, the church). That is why I suggest abortion should be decriminalised.

Cavarero’s philosophy works at different levels, one of the most important being in seeing human beings as unique individuals who are, if at all, subjects of law and not objects of law. Women’s individual narratives become history, or better, *her-story*. She pushes the boundaries of individuality and redefines the boundaries of law. In this regard, Hanafin points out that Cavarero’s definition of maternal power is as ‘a right whose norms cannot be arbitrarily negotiated, or compared with other juridical situations.’<sup>280</sup>

Informing law with her philosophy can contribute to the discourse of feminist legal theory, and moreover, it can challenge patriarchal legal theory.

### **colonisation of maternal power**

Cavarero draws attention, to the colonisation of women’s maternal power by patriarchal culture, writing:

The basic coordinates of this symbolic framework are simple: the function of maternity is reproductive, and the function of reproduction is social. Both are made to belong to the realm of human cohabitation, and both are a matter of public interest that can be regulated by laws. This has an even simpler consequence: politically organised society continues to claim that maternal nurturing is to be taken for granted and

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid. p. 43.

will be provided in the form of unpaid household labour and care giving.

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The maternal nurturing (often taken for granted), which Cavarero discusses about, when it becomes the idealisation of the maternal, I argue that, it can become the opposite of the erasure of the maternal: it can become *the blowing up* or *inflating* of the maternal. This is problematic.

Not accounting for differences allows for stereotypical descriptions of women and mothers. The idealisation of the maternal reduces the function of reproduction to its social role. This means not only to be concerned primarily with social, economic (to say it crudely: the more citizens are ‘produced’ the more factories are filled) demographic stability but also to view women as functional to society which in turns idealises the institution of motherhood.<sup>282</sup> While this approach sees women as merely ‘serving’ within society, the control of the reproductive phase of society sees the woman and the foetus as separate entities and the woman’s autonomy over her own body becomes irrelevant. Cavarero argues that the State takes up the role of regulating the birth rates and its production (women’s reproduction) is planned and controlled. Hence even though the meaning of the uterus has changed from being the “little oven” in which the sperm and the ‘the paternal gene was nurtured and cosily leavened; it still looks a lot like it, however.’<sup>283</sup>

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<sup>281</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. p. 73.

<sup>282</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.

<sup>283</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. p. 7.

In a very poignant passage of *In Spite of Plato* Cavarero traces many ethical questions that still appear in the current debate relating to reproduction, in particular laws that regulate abortion. She argues that “the fact that the woman wants to abort is never presented as a question of women’s free choice (to be followed automatically by the medical assistance the woman requires). Instead, abortion is politicized as “a concern of the state.”<sup>284</sup> The legal regulation of abortion offers a useful way to critiquing the inadequacies of liberalism.

In the 1970s another Milanese feminist collective, Via Cherubini 8,<sup>285</sup> advocated for the decriminalisation of abortion, instead of the legalisation of abortion. They wanted to open women only clinics run by women, and demanded that once abortion was decriminalised, women could access abortion in public hospitals when they wanted, on demand.<sup>286</sup> They advocated against the State passing laws on abortion because they considered this a short cut which did not help women achieve self-determination. Sadly this approach did not take hold with the wider feminist movement in Italy.

Cavarero argues women have always tried to choose when to become mothers, even in the patriarchal order in which they live, they subvert its restrictions. It is necessary, she argues, to accept ‘the sovereignty of maternal subjectivity, as witnessed everywhere down through the millennia of chosen

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid. p. 75.

<sup>285</sup> “Collettivo Femminista Di via Cherubini 8,” n.d.

<sup>286</sup> Lia Cigarini, Luisa Muraro, and Daniela Nappi, Antonella Pellegrini, “Noi Sull’aborto Facciamo Un Lavoro Politico Diverso,” *Sottosopra Rosso* (Milano, January 1975). ‘Our political discourse on abortion is different.’

abortions.<sup>287</sup> A similar argument is taken up by Rebecca Schiller, a doula and the director of *Birthrights*, a UK organisation that supports women's choice in childbirth. In her book *All that Matters: Women's Rights in Childbirth* she argues that it is still difficult to understand that the ultimate choice should always be the woman's.<sup>288</sup>

In this respect Cavarero, who is against state regulation and intervention in the realms of birth, love and death, argues that 'the juridification of the lifeworld is only the most evident, tangible aspect of society's invasion of the symbolic order of birth.'<sup>289</sup> It is an invasion which has been nurtured and sustained by metaphysics and ethics, secular and otherwise, down through the millennia. As Patrick Hanafin states, Cavarero's analysis of reproduction 'leads her to conclude that maternal sovereignty should remain beyond legal regulation.'<sup>290</sup> This is a radical statement which is frequently left out of mainstream liberal feminist legal discourses.

Here we see the connection Cavarero makes, between science, medicine, and law and its invasion of women's bodies. She states:

Scientific experimentation has invaded the realm of life (*bios*), bringing the law with it. This raises a question on the limits of such invasiveness. The answer is left to bioethics. Obviously, those who provide answers are "experts", mostly philosophers and theologians. Jurists, however, also lend a hand. This should not be surprising: they have long been

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<sup>287</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. p. 80.

<sup>288</sup> Rebecca Schiller, *All That Matters: Women's Rights in Childbirth*, Kindle Edi (Guardian Shorts, 2015). See as well her article in the *New Statesman* (2 March 2015) Rebecca Schiller, "Why Is It Still Controversial to Say That Women Should Make the Decision about Childbirth?," *The New Statesman*, March 2, 2015. The website of the organisation she co-founded in 2013 is "Www.Birthrights.Org.Uk," n.d.

<sup>289</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. p. 86.

<sup>290</sup> Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy*. p. 46.

familiar with the field of *bios*, having produced the laws on abortion. By now they are “connoisseurs” in good standing, because the limitations imposed by ethics must also be translated into public laws in order to be effective and respected by scientists.<sup>291</sup>

With abortion and reproductive politics, women’s bodies are invaded by the patriarchal legal-scientific order which makes them a site for experimentation, the uterus being disembodied, objectified and rendered ‘a laboratory.’<sup>292</sup>

Unfortunately such an invasion is so embedded in our society that not many women are aware of it; on the contrary, their maternal power has been ‘colonised’ and they too are complicit in this order, with at times problematic consequences: ‘one must ask which symbolic female figure can sustain this desire to be a mother at any price.’<sup>293</sup> With this in mind we see how Cavarero argues that this invasion of the maternal power erases it:

In my view this play on the word “progress” indicates that, if maternal power has been erased *from the start* and reduced to a reproductive function of the womb, then all restrictions on invading *bios* are removed; the symbolic order where living creatures find a secret, protected, maternal home has been cancelled. This is one of the great many meanings of the secret of birth: birth is not what cannot be explained “scientifically”, but the symbolic figure declared inviolable by maternal power.<sup>294</sup>

This colonisation<sup>295</sup> and expropriation of maternal power and the social function given to maternity by the patriarchal order can make some women

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<sup>291</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. p. 86.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.* p. 86.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.* p. 89.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.* p. 87.

<sup>295</sup> This kind of control over maternal power operates differently for different women. Cavarero is mostly focused on women who feel the force of pressure to reproduce and inhabit an idealization of motherhood

think of themselves as ‘the Other’. Cavarero argues that to counterbalance this colonisation of women’s bodies, women can learn what it means to have a sexed thought. The way to discover this ‘sexed thought’, the action of *consciousness-raising* through relations with other women can help in bringing this awareness to the fore from a sense of self that was previously submerged. For this purpose, the use of personal narrative is very important for feminists because in telling ‘unimportant’ personal stories they describe suffering, often caused by unjust laws:

this conception of the unique existent is the contrary of *what* of universal humanism, the disembodied subject of rights. It is the *who* of the unique self—possessed of her own speech, her own narrative, which she relates to another unique existent.<sup>296</sup>

Cavarero notes that ‘by focusing in the category of one’s uniqueness, she disrupts the sacrificial economy of traditional ontology, where one’s uniqueness is only a “superfluous” element, repeatedly negated in favour of generality and abstraction.’<sup>297</sup> It is the intersection between humans as unique, vulnerable and “*inclined*”, from her book *Inclinations*<sup>298</sup>, to others that I find interesting.

In the following section I analyse two legal cases, one which centres on a woman undergoing fertility treatment and one of a fourteen year-old Irish

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for women. In recent decades we can say that this has mostly been directed at middle class white women. At the very same time, Black women and Indigenous women, for instance, have been targeted with other kinds of state powers over reproduction (often, the opposite: sterilization abuse and pressure to cease reproducing).

<sup>296</sup> Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. p. 93.

<sup>297</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, “Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero.” p. 131.

<sup>298</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*.

girl who was raped but nevertheless denied an abortion under the restrictive ban on abortion which was in place in the Republic of Ireland until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2018. Both cases are concrete examples of Cavarero's argument on a patriarchal-legal-scientific order which renders the woman's uterus a disembodied entity.

### **a feminist rewritten law or the discourse on decriminalisation**

*Evans v United Kingdom, Evans v Amicus Healthcare Ltd*<sup>299</sup> are a series of cases, that show the law sometimes does not hear women's voices, and that the insistence on a universal and equal subject of the law loses out on attending to the uniqueness of the individual. The other case I focus on here is *Attorney General v X*. Both cases relate to the reproduction and the politics and institution of motherhood. The *Evans* case relates to the desire of a woman to have her own biological child. Natalie Evans was diagnosed with ovarian cancer and was told by the clinic that treated her that her ovaries would need to be removed. Evans did not have children at the time, but she desired one—she was in effect undergoing fertility treatment with her partner Johnston. The same day that the tumour was discovered the hospital suggested Evans should store some of her fertilised eggs. She and Johnston decided to freeze her fertilised eggs so that they could have the chance to have a child in the future.

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<sup>299</sup> *Evans v Amicus Healthcare Ltd, Hadley v Midland Fertility Services Ltd* [2003]. EWHC 2161 (High Court); *Evans v Amicus Healthcare Ltd and Others* [2004]. EWCA Civ 727 (24 June 2004) (Court of Appeal); *Evans v United Kingdom* [2006]. 1FCR 585 (European Court of Human Rights).

Evans asked the clinic if she could store some of her unfertilised eggs as well, in case she and Johnson were to separate, and she was told by a nurse that it was not a procedure that was available at that clinic. According to Evans, Johnston then reassured her that he would be with her forever and wanted to have children with her, so it was not necessary for her to store her unfertilized eggs: ‘At that juncture Mr Johnston reassured Ms Evans that they were not going to split up. She did not need egg freezing. She should not be negative. He wanted to be the father of her child.’<sup>300</sup> Some years later the relationship between Evans and Johnston broke down, with Johnston refusing to allow Evans to use her fertilised eggs to have a child, the only biological child she could have.<sup>301</sup> Evans decided to take her case to court and she was unsuccessful in the English High Court, in the Court of Appeal and at the European Court of Human Rights and in the Grand Chamber. In all judgements Evans’ claim and perspective were quashed, and the judges agreed with Johnston that he should not be forced to father a child he no longer wanted. The dilemma in the case was not an easy one. The destruction of the fertilised eggs meant Evans had been forbidden to ever have her own biological children while Johnston could still have his own biological children for many years to come. Hanafin argues in relation to the same case:

The question here is an emotive one. Should a woman be enabled to implant embryos fertilised by her former partner when the latter refuses

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<sup>300</sup> Evans v Amicus Healthcare Ltd and Others.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

to consent to the procedure? It would be fair that the right to have a child also includes the right not to have a child.<sup>302</sup>

It seems that the judges did not empathise with Evans's predicament, but instead they sided with Johnston's view of the situation. They did not want to allow Evans to use her fertilised eggs, even when she argued that she felt misled by Johnston who had promised that he loved her and would stay with her forever, causing her to think she did not need to freeze her unfertilised eggs. Eventually Johnston's right to avoid genetic parenthood outweighed her right to have her only genetic children ever. Hanafin argues that in the Evans case the law by being neutral failed to truly see the difference of outcomes for both parties:

This gave credence to a scenario in which the male narrative was seen by the judge as more reliable, notwithstanding the fact that it was Ms Evans' ability to reproduce a genetically related child that was at stake.<sup>303</sup>

There are many legal cases, in most jurisdictions, which demonstrate what Cavarero states, as discussed previously, in relation to a systematic disregard to each human being's uniqueness. This is one of them. I chose this case as it's quite exemplary in this respect in relation to what we are discussing.

This case reflects how women's bodies are still regulated by juridification, which does not take into consideration the uniqueness of that woman, or the particular situation she finds herself in. The law often interferes with life and death in a particularly intrusive way. In this regard

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<sup>302</sup> Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy*. p. 85.

<sup>303</sup> *Ibid.* p. 86.

Hanafin comments of Cavarero that ‘in her analysis of the myth of Demeter, she notes that birth must be won back from the *legal technical gaze of the male*.’<sup>304</sup> In the case of Natalie Evans we can see how the technical gaze of the male or patriarchal legal system disregarded the ‘maternal power’ of Evans and erased it from its discourse. Ms. Evan’s desire was ignored, her only possibility to have a child rendered meaningless. Maybe the court was more attentive to the right of Evans’ partner not to have a child. They were more attentive to her partner non-desire to have a biological child and they respected that.

Following Cavarero then, how can we have a law that is attentive to the singular case of a unique person, in this case, Natalie Evans? Cavarero argues that the law is too rigid and we need a law, I would say, using the title of her latest book, that ‘inclines’ itself to the needs of singular people. As we have seen the origins of relationality, where singular beings look after singular beings, in that uniqueness Arendt talks about, we can ask: how can the law become more ‘caring’ of singular people’s needs, their uniqueness? How can the law, and how the law is practised, become infused with the idea that human beings are interconnected and care for each other at different stages of their lives? Feminist rewriting of judgements is one way in which the law can be interpreted in favour of women.<sup>305</sup> To accommodate a more flexible,

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<sup>304</sup> Cavarero cited in Ibid. p.44.

<sup>305</sup> ‘Gendered harms’ can be described as legal systems which compound and legitimate harms that are experienced disproportionately or solely by women, especially in the sphere of reproduction.’ Hunter, Rosemary, McGlynn, Clare and Rackley, *Feminist Judgments. From Theory to Practice*. p. 370.

humane and caring application of the law<sup>306</sup> it would be necessary for the law to ‘incline’ itself to each singular person’s needs, to exemplify a recognition of each person’s vulnerability. Hanafin has seen the similarity of the term *above the law*, theorised by Cigarini, to what Cavarero terms the *absolute local*.<sup>307</sup> They are both relational spaces, where the relational is a political space, outside of the formalities of state politics and the realm of acquiring rights from the outside. Hanafin says that according to Cavarero:

It is imperative that women recover their own voice. In order for this to occur a new female symbolic space must be created. Cavarero names this space of relational subjectivity the *absolute local*. For her, the *absolute local* is a space that names a taking place of the political [. . .]. The *absolute local* refers not to what those who share this space are, but to *who* they are. This space then is the space of the *who*, the unique individual.<sup>308</sup>

This shows the importance of embodied uniqueness against the generalising universal and assimilatory terms like ‘individual’ and ‘subject’ where a person represents a general idea of who they are, not the *who* of the unique individual proposed by Cavarero.

The next case discussed is *Attorney General v X* [1992] 1 IR 1. This is an Irish case, involving a fourteen years old’s young woman who had been raped. Since this case and many others abortion is now legalised in the Republic of Ireland. The constitutional ban on abortion was removed via the “repeal the

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<sup>306</sup> ‘Everyone cares. Everyone is cared for. Yet caring receives surprisingly little attention from lawyers.’ This, in a different style, is what Jonathan Herring suggests in his book *Caring and the Law* (London: Hart Publishing, 2013). p. 1.

<sup>307</sup> Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy*. p. 94. Discussed in Cavarero, *A Piu’ Voci: Per Una Filosofia Dell’espressione Vocale*. p.223-225.

<sup>308</sup> Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy*. p. 94.

8<sup>th</sup> referendum in May 2018. In the case of *X* in 1992, the law did not allow a simple conclusion of what she desired: an abortion. Article 40.3.3 of the Constitution of Ireland stated that ‘The State acknowledges the right to life of the unborn and, with due regard to the equal right to life of the mother, guarantees in its laws to respect, and, as far as practicable, by its laws to defend and vindicate that right.’ She had to suffer; the law did not have regard for her lived experiences. What mattered was that the law was applied ‘justly’ as far as the legislation in Ireland was concerned. *X*’s parents wanted her to travel to England to access abortion, something that, until May 2018, was legal only in rare cases.

The case is an attempt to impede *X* from travelling to England. In the words of the judge:

Notwithstanding the very fundamental nature of the right to travel and its particular importance in relation to the characteristics of a free society, I would be forced to conclude that if there were a stark conflict between the right of a mother of an unborn child to travel and the right to life of the unborn child, the right to life would necessarily have to take precedence over the right to travel. I therefore conclude that the submission made that the mother of the unborn child had an absolute right to travel which could not be qualified or restricted, even by the vindication or defence of the right to life of the unborn, is not a valid or sustainable submission in law.<sup>309</sup>

We can see here how the law has been applied in an impartial and objective way, without taking in consideration the specificity and uniqueness of this girl.

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<sup>309</sup> *Attorney General v X* [1992] 1 IR 1.

As feminist legal theorist Ruth Fletcher writes ‘Ignoring certain life experiences, which may be unfamiliar to us, is likely to produce a rather partial account of law and life.’<sup>310</sup> Abortion was illegal in the Republic of Ireland, as already mentioned, till May 2018, as per the Eighth Amendment to the Irish Constitution: Article 40.3.3. This article comprised the protection of the life of the unborn<sup>311</sup> and also gives the right to travel<sup>312</sup> and the right to know about services available under other jurisdictions.

As abortion legislation in various parts of the world shows<sup>313</sup>, rights are part of a paradox<sup>314</sup>, they allow some freedom so long as one sticks to the limit inscribed in the law. As I mentioned earlier this is what is called ‘patriarchal permission.’ It seems to be a freedom with conditions, one that treats humans, in this case women, in a very infantile way. The law permits rights and freedom, in this case in relation to reproduction, up to a limit. In the case of X, her family wanted to travel to England to access an abortion for their daughter. She said that she was feeling suicidal due to her unwanted pregnancy and the violence experienced. Before travelling her family asked the Irish Police force if it was possible for a DNA sample of an aborted foetus to be obtained, as the family wanted the man who had raped their daughter to be prosecuted. In hearing that, the police informed the Attorney

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<sup>310</sup> Aoife Enright, Máiréad, McCandless, Julie and O’Donoghue, ed., *Northern/ Irish Feminist Judgments. Judges’ Troubles and the Gendered Politics of Identity*. (Oxford and Portland: Hart Publishing, 2017). p. 380-381

<sup>311</sup> Inserted in 1983 by the Eighth amendment which has now been repealed

<sup>312</sup> Under the thirteenth amendment from 1992 following the X case we are analysing

<sup>313</sup> “<https://Reproductiverights.Org/Worldabortionlaws>,” n.d. Marge Berer, “Abortion Law and Policy Around the World In Search of Decriminalization,” *Health and Human Rights Journal* 19, no. 1 (2017): 13–27.

<sup>314</sup> Patrick Hanafin, “Refusing Disembodiment. Abortion and the Paradox of Reproductive Rights in Contemporary Italy,” *Feminist Theory* 10, no. 2 (2009): 227–44.

General, who sought an injunction under article 40.3.3. The injunction was granted by the High Court in February 1992. Then the Supreme Court appealed the decision and it won with four in favour and one judge dissenting. The judges in favour argued that being suicidal is a great risk to life hence they granted her the possibility to travel. Even though abortion has now been legalised in Ireland, under liberal equality women's reproduction is still controlled by the State. I suggest instead that as a long-term solution, in the Republic of Ireland and everywhere, it would be better to decriminalise abortion. This is to allow for women's bodies to be truly their own, as Lucy van Pelt and feminist women in the 1970s said: our bodies, our choice. As we have seen with the *Attorney General v X* case just discussed, legalisation of abortion can take away full autonomy from women over their bodies because the rules of the law remain in the hands of the legislator. The more patriarchal the State, the more restrictive and cruel the limitations can be.

To find examples of a law 'inclined' to a singular person's needs and not to universal assimilating ideas of the subject, we can look at the work of the Northern/Irish Feminist Judgements,<sup>315</sup> The Feminist Judgements Project in the UK, the Women's Court of Canada (WCC) and feminist lawyers like Cigarini. *Attorney General v X*, has in fact been adjudicated from a feminist perspective by legal feminist academic Ruth Fletcher in *Northern/Irish Feminist*

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<sup>315</sup> Enright, Máiréad, McCandless, Julie and O'Donoghue, *Northern/Irish Feminist Judgments. Judges' Troubles and the Gendered Politics of Identity*. Of the many cases interpreted in this book from a feminist perspective to highlight in relation to abortion are: the *Attorney General v X* as we have already discussed, and *North Western Health Board v HW and CW* (the PKU case) and 3 more cases all from page 369 to page 464.

*Judgements. Judges' Troubles and the Gendered Politics of Identity* (2017). Fletcher reads this case giving attention to the singular and unique needs of Ms X and she decides that Ms X 'has the right to abortion in the Irish health care system on the ground that her pregnancy imposes an impracticable burden on her rightful life.'<sup>316</sup>

This is how Fletcher comes to this decision: first she adopts the principle of impartiality and she notes that objectivity is likely to be adopted better if the limits of judicial knowledge are taken in consideration.<sup>317</sup> Thus, she asserts, to be impartial it is important to take the diversity of human experiences into consideration. Secondly, in exercising her judicial discretion she applied the doctrine of harmonious interpretation. She applied this doctrine to her assessment of the three key aspects of the case, namely, the text, the craft and the evidence.<sup>318</sup> The doctrine of harmonious interpretation in relation to a text says that a one piece of text needs to be coherent with the rest of the text. Fletcher argues that the adoption of the Eighth Amendment in the Irish constitution was a key moment in the 'disruption of the plain meaning of key constitutional terms.'<sup>319</sup> In relation to the principle of evidence she said that one needs to determine if a pregnancy is dangerous for a woman as some pregnancies may be not beneficial for women because they threaten their dignity, health, and well-being. All reasons to allow an abortion. Lastly,

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid. p. 393.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid. p. 380.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid. p. 383.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

in relation to the use of judicial craft and seeing the Constitution as a living document, Fletcher writes ‘when judges are tasked with the job of giving life to law, of caring for its intricacies and deciding what to do with its rough edges, they must tread gently on the people’s dreams.’<sup>320</sup> In her ‘hypothetical’ decision she argues that it was within the realm of Irish law to allow Ms X an abortion and that the State had a duty to support Ms X in an attentive manner which recognized she had become pregnant through rape and that her young age meant she needed added support.<sup>321</sup>

We can see how, like Lia Cigarini’s reframing of her legal practice in the 1970s and 1980s, The Feminist Judgement Project has sought to read the law and legal judgements with a feminist lens ‘Feminist judges will take different facts from the mass of detail *to tell the story in a different way*, to bring about features which others discard, and to explain the features which others find difficult to understand’.<sup>322</sup> This approach can be seen as Cavarerian. It is similar to the inclination Cavarero speaks about and the importance of considering the uniqueness of each human being, the singularity of their experiences against a homogenous approach which leaves out the individuality, the “absolute local”<sup>323</sup> of each of us. What does it mean, then, to tell a story in a *different* way?

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<sup>320</sup> Ibid. p. 385.

<sup>321</sup> Ibid. p. 393.

<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. p. 204.

Another way in which a law ‘inclined’ to people’s uniqueness and singularity becomes a listening law, can be found in the statements of Irish Judge Patricia Smyth at a Symposium titled “Just Improvisation: Enriching child protection law through musical techniques, discourses and pedagogies”. In a poignant statement, which was video recorded, Smyth argued:

As a family judge I think there is huge scope for improvisation, flexibility, creativity to get the right solution to individual families. One of the things that struck me early on since becoming a family judge three years ago was the rule based text book approach of social workers and other professionals brought to the resolution of an infinite variety of family problems. I think as a judge we have huge scope to be creative if we want to do that and if we can see the various ways in which a problem can be looked at differently [...] once we recognise that every child is an individual and every family is different and needs bespoke solutions. In my own experience if people feel they have been listened to, they feel that the judge has understood their point and given it proper consideration even if they lose they can deal with it because they believe they have been listened to. It is a key task for any judge not just to listen but to convey the fact to the person that they have been listened to.<sup>324</sup>

This quote exemplifies how a judge can see that each client has different problems that require ‘bespoke solutions’, as Smyth says. Hence to keep at

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<sup>324</sup> The presentation of Judge P Smyth was transcribed by me from a video recording of the symposium, see <http://translatingimprovisation.com/portfolio/symposium> The symposium was organised by Sara Ramshaw and it was held at the Sonic Arts Research Centre, Queen’s University Belfast on 29-30 May, 2015 as part of “Into the Key of Law: Transposing Musical Improvisation. The Case of Child Protection in Northern Ireland Project.” (Belfast, 2015). The quote of Judge P Smyth is very long, this is the last part of it – I decided to write it all because it is very poignant: ‘I think it is an absolute priority that the vulnerable parents are made to feel that they matter, that they are treated with dignity and respect. I consciously speak directly to parents for example, I do it deliberately and consciously so that they understand. Very often some of the vulnerable people who find their way into the court they have never been listened to by anyone, they have been treated like a piece of dirt by authorities, everywhere all their lives. As a judge I make it a priority that in my court they will not feel like that.’

buy the erect vision that the law has of human beings, as this judge is able to demonstrate, it is important to reiterate that, in Arendtian terms, we are all unique, singular and utterly vulnerable beings. Legal critical scholar Daniel Monk argues that ‘This is achieved within a flexible framework that creates space for and recognises, [. . .] social, cultural, and individual contingencies.’<sup>325</sup> Hence an inclined law, less ego-centric and hegemonic, would be a slow and careful law, as reflected by the judge quoted above, which puts an active, attentive and compassionate listening ear at the service of its clients. This point is often made in relation to sexual violence too. One case in which a victim of sexual violence was not listened to was the case of violinist Frances Andrade who killed herself in January 2013 after being accused of lying in court.<sup>326</sup> The defence lawyer did not listen to her, did not hear the singularity and uniqueness of her experience. It was after the court case that she committed suicide.

The importance of Cavarero for law is her contribution to views on maternity and motherhood and her challenge to reactionary views on women and motherhood. The view that woman *is* her body is very pervasive in many societies, hence women very often end up being boxed up in a one size fits all model of who they should be: a woman, a mother, a wife to someone. In this respect Carol Smart discusses how ‘legal discourse spawns the ‘good

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<sup>325</sup> Daniel Monk in Re G (Children) (Residence: Same-Sex Partner)-Commentary in Hunter, Rosemary, McGlynn, Clare and Rackley, *Feminist Judgments. From Theory to Practice*. p. 101

<sup>326</sup> Peter Walker, “Frances Andrade Killed Herself after Being Accused of Lying, Says Husband,” *The Guardian*, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2013/feb/10/frances-andrade-killed-herself-lying>.

mother/bad mother' dichotomy.<sup>327</sup> Women's opportunity to control their reproductive choice is a vital point, one that needs to be taken seriously in order to bring back maternal power within female control and not leave it as part of the patriarchal hegemonic order which controls them and is external to them.

Reproductive laws affect women's lives, and they should have a say in them because these laws concern their bodies and their identity. The power to decide should be given back to them; the choice should be fully theirs. One case which exemplifies the cruel and 'erect' application of the law is the *Attorney General v X*<sup>328</sup> case. In addition, this case exemplifies what Cavarero argues, as I showed in the previous section, that the patriarchal-legal-scientific order sees the uterus, very problematically, as a disembodied entity. To look at legislation on abortion in Ireland, Northern Ireland, Italy and many other countries is a sobering enterprise. One realises so poignantly that women's bodies are still not fully their own, with consequent ramifications on their subjectivity and lived experience. There are many situations in which it is not only in the most extreme or obvious moments of legal control that control over women's lives and bodies occurs.

A liberal feminist discourse on abortion and women's rights has been the most successful in all countries of the world where abortion is legalised.

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<sup>327</sup> Carol Smart, 'The Woman of Legal Discourse.' (1992) *Social and Legal Studies* 29-44. Cited in Enright, Máiréad, McCandless, Julie and O'Donoghue, *Northern/Irish Feminist Judgments. Judges' Troubles and the Gendered Politics of Identity*. p. 458.

<sup>328</sup> *Attorney General v X* [1992] 1 IR 1.

This has been seen (probably naively) as the best solution; after all, liberal feminism believes in the laws that they think bring equality. Emancipation feminism was an easier discourse to follow—that women want to be equal to men and laws will give us that equality. As women’s bodies, and subjectivities, were mainly and sometimes totally in the hands of a patriarchal understanding of womanhood for many centuries, to think we do not need a legislator to legislate on our bodies was still a big step, sadly, for many women to take. It was a step women were not used to taking freely as their bodies had been controlled and dominated externally by men for thousands of years.

In the decriminalisation of abortion discourse, we can see a ‘new’ freedom that women might have for their bodies and their subjectivities, a body and a subjectivity finally ‘controlled’ internally and intrinsically by each woman, not controlled externally and extrinsically by the legislator and the State. During 2019, statutory restrictions on abortion rights have increased in the USA, where conservatives have pushed for abortion bans in different states, mainly Alabama, Georgia and Texas. A recent example of the denial of women’s freedom has been seen in Alabama, where a ban was proposed by mainly male legislators.<sup>329</sup> If abortion was decriminalised then these instances of trying or succeeding in banning women’s abortion rights would not occur. The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, Irigaray, Cavarero, Cigarini and

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<sup>329</sup> Owen Dyer, “Alabama Law Makes Almost Any Abortion a Crime,” *British Medical Journal* 365 (2019).

many other feminist legal scholars and ordinary women, tried to imagine a different relation, for women, with or 'outside' the law.

In the next chapter, building on my analysis of Irigaray, Cavarero, and Italian sexual difference feminists, I further explore how relationality between mothers and carers is important for challenging the individualistic, universalistic and abstract view of the subject I have been criticising here. In the next chapter, I focus specifically on applying the frameworks I have analysed over the past two chapters to thinking through the relationality between women who are mothers/carers.

### 3

#### conceptualising mothers' relationality and the political in women's relations

Chapter 1 focused on a critique of the liberal subject and the problems with individualism, universalism, liberal equality and the abstract subject of law. I suggested that Irigaray, the Milan Women's Collective and feminist critical lawyers can inject a feminist approach into law. In Chapter 2 I discussed what a different kind of law might look like. The main question for this chapter is: does a relational model of motherhood disrupt the individualistic idea of the subject? Further questions I set out to explore are: how can the liberal subject of law, which is individualistic and abstract, become more relational and concrete? What does relationality mean as an alternative model to that of the individualistic and self-sufficient subject? What is the value of relationality between mothers/carers and what is the 'symbolic placement'<sup>330</sup> of mothers today in the patriarchal symbolic order? How might a different way of seeing

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<sup>330</sup> Sandra Bono, Paola and Kemp, *The Lonely Mirror. Italian Perspectives on Feminist Theory*. (London: Routledge, 1993). p. 13.

the subject include mothers? How can the symbolic order change from one which is patriarchal and frames women in a restricted way, to one which recognises women as subjectively belonging to themselves and not to a patriarchal order which includes them but at the same time continuously excludes them because it does not speak to/of them?

In this chapter I show the importance of relationality by engaging in relational thinking that I find closest to the theory and practice of my research. The theoretical approach of this chapter is based on relational ontology, which takes its inspiration from Hannah Arendt's thought on natality, plurality, and action, and from Cavarero's reading of Arendt. I want to show how Cavarero enters this debate by developing Arendt's thinking on these themes and adding the practice of sexual difference, in particular Irigaray's concept of sexual difference. I go on to look at the figure of the mother, as Cavarero has done widely in her work, and I suggest that the idealised figure of the sacrificial mother, so common in the West and exemplified by the Catholic Madonna, can be reversed and instead become a figure of resistance and freedom. This chapter is an exploration of the political rather than the legal and it lays the foundations for the next chapter on the 1970s mothers' collective in Rome in that it focuses on relationality/carers – and relationality between mothers/women – which was at the core of the Roman collective.

### the theory and praxis of *autocoscienza*, *affidamento* and *partire da sé*<sup>331</sup>

The concepts and praxis I am interested in expounding in this section inform the rest of the chapter and the thesis. They originate mainly from Italian feminist thinkers and activists, the work of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective (*affidamento*, entrustment is a practise ideated at the Milan Collective) and the feminist philosophical community Diotima,<sup>332</sup> based at the University of Verona. Their thinking values the embodied, lived experiences of women. These feminists see an 'embodied theory', (in Italian, *una teoria corporale*), as fundamental for uncovering the historical disappearance of women from philosophical and legal discourses via the abstraction of thought.

Italian sexual difference feminists regard relationality between women as one of their core principles, as something to be practised in the concrete and put into theory afterwards in a lived, concrete experience of thought. As a result, owing to the practices of *autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising/self-knowledge) and *affidamento*<sup>333</sup> (entrustment — which was a practice of mutual recognition between women first articulated by the women of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective involving the symbolic recognition by one

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<sup>331</sup> *Affidamento* means entrustment between women and *partire da sé* means 'to start out from oneself'. Both concepts are explained further in this part of the chapter. Also very important for Italian sexual difference feminists were the practice of *autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising) and *la pratica dell'inconscio* (the practice of the unconscious). The practice of the unconscious originated from the work done by the group led by the French feminist Antoinette Fouque called *Psychanalyse et Politique*. Italian sexual feminists were inspired by this practice and practised it and developed it extensively.

<sup>332</sup> "Http://Www.Diotimafilosofe.It/," n.d.

<sup>333</sup> See Graziella Parati and Rebecca West, eds., *Italian Feminist Theory and Practice. Equality and Sexual Difference*. (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002).; Paola Bono and Sandra Kemp, "Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader" (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1991).

woman of another, similar to a mother-daughter relationship), that women were able to do together, collectively, they understood that their condition was not only a private and personal concern, it was a public concern too.

These practices generated an identity that was more collective than individualistic and worked towards building relational links between women.

Italian sexual difference feminists interpreted the early consciousness-raising practice of American women's liberation by expanding it to include *la pratica dell'inconscio* (the practice of the unconscious) which was inspired by psychoanalysis.<sup>334</sup> Some Milanese feminists adopted this practice, inspired by the French feminist group 'Psychoanalyse et Politique' in short 'Psych et Po'<sup>335</sup> founded by Antoinette Fouque.<sup>336</sup> In this group women used psychoanalytic practice, especially the relationship between analyst and analysand, in the relationships between women. What they were interested in was revealing the unconscious and 'not said' in women's relations, the projections and identifications that can happen between women, which often originate from their relationships with their mothers. In 1972 the women of "Psych et Po" organised two long weekends away in France, inviting many women and feminist groups from other European countries. A group of Italian feminists

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<sup>334</sup> Lea Melandri, *Una Viscerilita' Indicabile: La Pratica Dell'inconscio Nel Movimento Delle Donne Degli Anni Settanta*. (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2000).

<sup>335</sup> Antoinette Fouque, Michele Idels, and Sylvina Boissonnas, *MLF Psychoanalyse et Politique: 1968-2018 50 Ans de Liberation Des Femmes. Volume 1, Les Premieres Annees*. (Paris: Editions des Femmes., 2018).

<sup>336</sup> Antoinette Fouque, *There Are Two Sexes. Essays in Feminology*. (New York: Columbia University Press., 2015).

attended these meetings, and this is how some of the ideas of 'Psych et Po' were then elaborated by Italian feminists, especially those from Milan.<sup>337</sup>

The Milan Women's Collective challenged stereotypical ideas of what it meant to be a woman and they realized that it was patriarchal culture that had consigned them to those defined and restrictive boundaries:

For it [the practice of doing] gathered together women who were not necessarily bound to one another by affection or familiarity, or rallied by succinct slogans, but who were unified instead by a common project, to which each of them was committed for her own reasons, her own desires and abilities, putting them to the test of collective implementation.<sup>338</sup>

For the women of the Milan Bookstore Collective the political is located in one's own life story, and in Cavarero's philosophy it is in the corporal singularity of one's voice, necessarily exposed in reciprocal relations among other human beings, that we can find an ethics and value of relationships inscribed in one's uniqueness. According to Zerilli, the Milan Collective challenged 'the conception of freedom, inherited by the Western tradition, as a phenomenon of the will, a property of the subject, and a means to an end whose name is sovereignty.'<sup>339</sup> In an affirmative move, for The Milan Collective, freedom is instead something quite different:

It is a creative and collective practice of world-building, fundamentally inaugural in character, which establishes irreducibly contingent and politically significant relationships among women as sexed beings who

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<sup>337</sup> Alex Martinis Roe, *To Become Two. Propositions for Feminist Collective Practice*. (Berlin: Archive Books, 2018), p. 41; The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*. p. 46-53.

<sup>338</sup> The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, p. 86.

<sup>339</sup> Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. p. 93.

otherwise have none apart from their place in the masculine economy of exchange.<sup>340</sup>

It is this this kind of collective, creative, and affirmative politics that I am interested in exploring further in the rest of the thesis. We will see this exemplified in Chapter 4 where I discuss the experiences of a mothers' collective in 1970s Rome.

Another interesting praxis was the powerful idea of *partire da sé* [*starting out from oneself*], as I already briefly introduced in Chapter 2. This was a personal and political praxis for women to learn to exercise autonomy and agency in their own decisions and actions. In the practice of starting out from oneself [*partire da sé*] one follows one's needs and one's desire, not in a self-centred and individualistic way but in a way that *makes one's subjectivity coincide with one's life*, where both have a space for becoming. It is a desire that is linked to discovering one's bodily autonomy which is linked to subjectivity. For sexual difference feminists this praxis became vital in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s when they realised that women had seldom ever followed their desires; on the contrary, their life and destiny had been framed and drawn by a patriarchal order.

Following Arendt's thought on political action, Italian feminist philosopher Diana Sartori says that in her experience *starting from oneself* [*partire da sé*] means to start something, or rather, *farsi inizio*, 'to be the starting out of

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid. p. 94.

oneself<sup>341</sup> which has some similarities to the concept of natality put forward by Arendt. The importance of women following their desires is supplemented by the work of Cigarini as we have seen in more detail in Chapter 2. In her book *La Politica del Desiderio*,<sup>342</sup> she shows how sexual difference feminism made it possible for women to follow their desires, to look for and discover a sense of agency, to find what it means for each concrete, embodied woman to be herself, from what Cavarero describes as the abstract *what*, to a particular, unique and embodied *who*.<sup>343</sup> This is the reason why *starting out from oneself* [*partire da sé*] is fundamental here, because it is at the origin of 'having control', 'gaining control over' one's subjectivity. This is not intended in the sense of mastering unity of the self but in the sense of being near oneself, *essere vicina a se stessa*, which is a centring and an individuating never ending process vital for women. This process is maybe even more necessary for mothers when they are constantly interrupted by their infant, toddler or child and their subjectivity is experienced as interrupted as Baraitser writes and as I have noted in the Introduction. What is probably needed then, when this happens, is a subjective move to be near oneself, to be more conscious of oneself, of ones' needs more necessary probably for a mother/a carer because she is more exposed to an experience that risk dispossessing oneself because the

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<sup>341</sup> 'Partire da sé', si potrebbe dire in questo spirito, significa "iniziare" qualcosa, o meglio *farsi inizio*. Non esprimersi ma mettersi in gioco in una realtà, facendola essere e così facendosi essere.' In Diana Sartori, "Nessuno e' l'autore Della Propria Storia: Identità e Azione.," in *La Sapienza Di Partire Da Se'*. ed. Diotima (Napoli: Liguori Editore, 1996), 23–57. p. 55.

<sup>342</sup> Cigarini, *La Polit. Del Desiderio*.

<sup>343</sup> Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. And in the original language Cavarero, *A Piu' Voci: Per Una Filosofia Dell'espressione Vocale*.

baby and child 'interrupts' her subjectivity as Baraitser stated, as I said in the Introduction.

Relationality helps us re-imagine and rethink the question of maternity and motherhood. Furthermore, it helps us to dislodge 'the mother' from the solipsistic, sacrificial and, as Cavarero points out, oblique image that we often still have of her. Classical psychoanalysis from Freud, Winnicott, and Bowlby onwards saw the mother as a solipsistic figure and when she is discussed and theorised, she is often solitary. Women's subjectivity was often equated with maternal subjectivity so a mother was not seen as person with her own identity and subjectivity. For instance, in 1951 Bowlby's contribution to a World Health Organisation Monograph included the advice that mothers should look after their babies '365 days a year 24 hours a day.'<sup>344</sup> We can see how the woman, as person in her own right, did not exist in this scenario, she was only seen in function of her infant as a mother. I am also struck by the enormous task imposed on her, which Bowlby suggests a mother is to do alone. No other person is present in his indications. Feminist psychoanalyst Joan Raphael-Leff states:

Psychoanalysis has long neglected maternal subjectivity. Within psychoanalytic theorising, a mother is usually treated as '*object*' of the baby's desires, or depicted through the 'containing' or 'transformative' *function* that she performs. The mother as a person in her own right has been largely absent, as are the subjective meanings a woman gives to moment to moment lived experience of mothering a young child.'<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>344</sup> Raphael-Leff, "Healthy Maternal Ambivalence." p. 1.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid. p. 1.

Indeed, the mother seems to be an isolated woman who 'only' relates to her baby and is at the 'service' of the baby's growing subjectivity. Furthermore, Joan Raphael-Leff states that "even Winnicott succumbed, resorting to the ordinary mother's devotion to her infant primed by 'Primary Maternal Preoccupation' (1956) as the pathway to normal mothering."<sup>346</sup> His idea was that mothers are engaged in a primary relationship with their baby but as we know, it is not sustaining for an adult to spend all day for many hours alone with a baby without support. I could rephrase the previous paragraph by saying that apart from being engaged in the primary relationship with her baby where there is a level of to and fro communication, a mother is alone, or often alone. These images of mothers that Freud, Winnicott and Bowlby had were often taken from stereotypical ideas of middle class, white mothers who were housewives, whose husbands worked all day out of the home. Experiences of Black mothers and mothers of colour, or collective mothering, or experiences of mothers who worked all day outside the home, were neglected in this image.<sup>347</sup>

In classical psychoanalysis, whenever the mother is discussed, she is conspicuously alone, only relating to her baby and child, and she does not talk to other adults. It is as though she is not part of the adult world. At times, in some writings, the overemphasis on the humanity and centrality of the child can run the risk that the baby and child dehumanises, de-subjectifies the

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>347</sup> Collins Hill, "Shifting the Center: Race, Class and Feminist Theorising about Motherhood."

mother, as the child is both the reason for her separation from the human world and her only connection to it. On the other hand, as discussed in the introduction, feminist psychoanalysts and feminist philosophers have reflected on the importance of a 'separate' or at 'some point separate' maternal subjectivity in the relationship of the mother with the child, and as Everingham states:

The claim that mothers had rights and needs of their own provided a standard by which to assess psychological theories of child development. Feminist writers used this standard to highlight the innumerable ways in which psychological theories and models of child development oppressed women, through their failure to consider the other's set of separate needs and interests.<sup>348</sup>

Feminist writers have given a prime place to the lived experiences and unconscious processes that take place once a woman becomes a mother.<sup>349</sup>

Our task here, as feminists committed to relationality, is to safely transport the woman who is a mother/carer, 'the mother', from the small island where she has historically been placed, to the communality of the world, especially, but not only, to relate to other women/carers, who like her are mothers and look after a vulnerable baby or young child. Specifically when I speak of

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<sup>348</sup> Christine Everingham, *Motherhood and Modernity: An Investigation into the Rational Dimension of Mothering* (New York: Open University Press, 1994). p. 3.

<sup>349</sup> Feminist authors and feminist psychoanalysts have shown a different image of the mother, among them: Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*; Maura Sheehy, *Women, Mothers, Subjects: New Explorations of the Maternal*. (Routledge, 2016); Ann Oakley, *From Here to Maternity: Becoming a Mother*. (Penguin Books, 1981); Raphael-Leff Joan Jozef Perelberg, Rosine, *Female Experience: Three Generations of British Women Psychoanalysts on Work with Women*. (Routledge, 1997); Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender*. (The University of California Press, 1999); Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*. Madelon Sprengnether, *The Spectral Mother: Freud, Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. (Cornell University Press, 1992); Jessica Benjamin, *The Shadow of the Other: Intersubjectivity and Gender in Psychoanalysis*. (Routledge, 1998); Petra Bueskens, ed., *Mothering and Psychoanalysis. Clinical, Sociological and Feminist Perspectives*. (Demeter Press, 2015).

relationality between women who are mothers and carers I speak of a relationality which, as Italian feminist theorist Ida Dominijanni argues, has the potentiality 'to unleash female energies and desires and bring them to the fore in the world' hence it is not 'a relationality which cuts out only reassuring "confined" spaces"<sup>350</sup> for women who are mothers. I contend that a relational model of motherhood has the potentiality to influence maternal subjectivity in a positive way, or at least in a complex way, making it more layered and multifaceted, when women who are mothers "put these desires and energies in circulation in the world." paraphrasing Ida Dominijanni.

### **motherhood as a mode of resistance and freedom**

How do we recuperate motherhood from the sacrificial place into which it has been put? This recuperation can take many forms. I suggest it is crucial to carry on challenging the middle-class bourgeois idea of the family which is also nuclear and heterosexual because, as pointed out earlier, it is into this setting that classical psychoanalysis has 'inserted' the often aloof image of the mother who looks at and relates to her baby, but to 'nothing else.'

Challenging this idea of the nuclear family is already a way of recuperating motherhood as a mode of resistance and freedom, as it allows for re-imagining other ways of being a mother. The most pressing and important aspect of this is for women who are mothers to disentangle themselves from

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<sup>350</sup> 'Da un malinteso senso della pratica della relazione, come se essa servisse a ritagliare spazi rassicuranti invece che sprigionare desiderio e energie femminili e metterli in circolo nel mondo.' p. 34 in the Introduction of Lia Cigarini's book in Ida Dominijanni, "Il Desiderio Di Politica." in *La Politica Del Desiderio*. (Parma: Nuova Pratiche Editrice, 1995), 7–46. [my translation].

the sacrificial, oblation image that they have carried with them, mainly in the West, for centuries. Culturally many women take a lot of the responsibility of mothering, thinking that is what they ought to do, that it is their calling, their nature.

This naturalised image of the mother and of motherhood is often linked to religion particularly the Catholic myth of the Virgin Mary.<sup>351</sup> This myth was explored in Marina Warner's book (1976) *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and The Cult of the Virgin Mary*<sup>352</sup> in which she analysed the link between the idealised feminine and Catholicism. In this respect, Cavarero argues that we need to ponder what the figure of the mother is; we should not turn away from thinking and theorising about her *because* she is an oblation and sacrificial figure hence irrelevant for philosophy. Cavarero states:

At the same time that the infant, as the emblem of a unilateral and absolute dependence, often appears at centre stage to exemplify relational ontology, the mother, because of the burdensome self-sacrificing stereotype that is draped over her, is often absent.<sup>353</sup>

Instead we need to look at 'the mother' and through looking at and thinking about her, I argue, this figure can be revised; she can become a figure of resistance and freedom.

Looking at the figure of the oblation mother there is also a lot of work on expectations placed on mothers (which vary according to class) to be

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<sup>351</sup> My own maternal Catholic grandfather venerated the Virgin Mary, la Madonna. He often used to listen to an Italian Catholic radio station called Radio Maria.

<sup>352</sup> Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary*. (Oxford: OUP, 2016).

<sup>353</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*. p. 13.

responsible for the development of their children – so for instance the resurgence of ‘attachment parenting’ – particularly in vogue with middle-class, educated mothers.<sup>354</sup> There are ongoing debates within this group about the effects on children of their mothers going back to work or remaining home, and it perpetuates a naturalised and idealised view of the mother not dissimilar to the one associated with the Virgin Mary as discussed by Marina Warner.

These views of motherhood have been analysed by Roziska Parker<sup>355</sup> and Jessica Benjamin too, the latter argues that the image of the mother in Western culture is an “all-giving, self-contained haven.”<sup>356</sup> This style of parenting originates from the Anglophone world, following the work of John Bowlby<sup>357</sup> on attachment theory and developed by American paediatrician Dr William Sears and nurse Martha Sears in their book on attachment parenting.<sup>358</sup> These ideas perpetuate an idealised image and role for the mother. As psychologist Helena Vissing writes, ‘the psychological function of the maternal ideal is to block out fear of negative feelings and their destructive power; essentially a defence against ambivalence.’<sup>359</sup> Healthy maternal ambivalence is an important aspect of motherhood, the maternal ideal that

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<sup>354</sup> Linda Rose Ennis, ed., *Intensive Mothering. The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood*. (Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2014).

<sup>355</sup> Parker, *Mother Love/Mother Hate. The Power of Maternal Ambivalence*.

<sup>356</sup> Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*. p. 211.

<sup>357</sup> John Bowlby, *A Secure Base*. (London: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>358</sup> William Sears and Martha Sears, *The Attachment Parenting Book: A Commonsense Guide to Understanding and Nurturing Your Child* (New York City: Little, Brown & Company, 2001).

<sup>359</sup> Helena Vissing, “The Ideal Mother Fantasy and Its Protective Function,” in *Intensive Mothering. The Cultural Contradictions of Modern Motherhood*, ed. Linda Rose Ennis (Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2014), 104–19. p. 104-105

negates this is problematic. Social media use and the internet are making this style of parenting more popular in other parts of the world too. I argue that in an 'insecure' world (climate change, austerity, wars, poverty, and now the Covid-19 pandemic etc.) mothers, and fathers too, may have a conscious and unconscious desire, and feel pressure, to make the life of their children more secure, so attachment parenting responds to those fears and insecurities too.

How do mothers become figures of resistance and freedom? The first step in exploring this aspect of motherhood, for me, comes from the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective. As we have seen they criticised liberal equality and argued that the institutional political system has:

no problem in admitting that women are victims of a wrong, although it then reserves the right to decide according to its own criteria how they will be compensated, so the game may go on forever.<sup>360</sup>

Furthermore, they contended that the State, to 'justify' giving rights to women, needs:

housewives, women with abortion problems, raped women – not flesh and blood women, desiring and judging, but figures of the oppressed female sex and, as such, avatars of everything female.<sup>361</sup>

As the Collective saw it, liberal second-wave feminists worked within this paradigm; their main scope was to fight for women's rights, hence they positioned women as symbolically 'passive' and victimised. In contrast, I

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<sup>360</sup> Libreria delle Donne di Milano, *Non Credere Di Avere Dei Diritti: La Generazione Della Liberta' Femminile Nell'idea e Nelle Vicende Di Un Gruppo Di Donne*. p. 103.

<sup>361</sup> Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy*. p. 41; Libreria delle Donne di Milano, *Non Credere Di Avere Dei Diritti: La Generazione Della Liberta' Femminile Nell'idea e Nelle Vicende Di Un Gruppo Di Donne*. p. 103.

suggest that the Milan Collective sought to reject this victimisation and create a different symbolism for women.

I agree with Cavarero that it is important and interesting that theorists and philosophers keep investigating the figure of the oblativ mother to dislodge her from the sacrificial space in which she has been pigeonholed, keeping in mind, as I just explained, that the way I see mothers is not as passive victims. I do not see the mother as a sacrificial figure but mothers in general in various countries are the ones paying a high price and working harder to combine motherhood with work and thereby keep an independent sense of self. During the 2020/21 Covid-19's world pandemic this has become even more prevalent.<sup>362</sup> As I argued in the Introduction, middle class and upper class families particularly in rich countries all over the world are often able to outsource the care of their children, either via expensive nurseries or via nannies and babysitters. This is an example of neoliberal privatisation and racialised outsourcing of care. This aspect is crucial to understand neoliberal understanding of care and how mothers are placed within this system. We have seen during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic how the economy was declared closed in many countries, sadly what was forgotten was that the unpaid work of reproduction that many women do had not stopped. That has carried on, and as before, but even more evidently, it was

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<sup>362</sup> Andrea O'Reilly and Fiona Joy Green, eds., *Mothers, Mothering and COVID-19. Dispatches from a Pandemic*. (Bradford, Canada: Demeter Press, 2021).

women who took the majority of the burden of care.<sup>363</sup> This is an aspect I am not dealing with in-depth in the thesis, as it requires a focused discussion, but at times I will discuss it briefly.

In the UK, the government offers thirty hours of free childcare for two year olds. Before that how do parents who work cope? In some households one parent gives up work for few years and stays at home with the children. Often where this occurs it is women who stay home, but sometimes men. For instance in the UK 'more than twice as many women, at 29%, than men (14%) have found that returning to work after having a child isn't financially worthwhile, according to research given exclusively to *The Observer* by the National Childbirth Trust.<sup>364</sup> So either a parent stays home or they pay for private nurseries, nannies or au-pairs. In some countries these positions are filled by low paid migrants from poor countries as I mention in the Introduction. The rest of the society will either pay for poor quality nurseries with less trained staff or rely on family to look after their kids. Even though the social situation of mothers is better today than what it was fifty years ago, mothers are still among the worst off, both in rich and poor countries, when

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<sup>363</sup> Kate Power, "The Covid-19 Pandemic Has Increased the Care Burden of Women and Children," *Sustainability: Science, Practice and Policy*, no. Special (2020): 67–73.

<sup>364</sup> Donna Ferguson, "The Want-to-Work Mothers Trapped at Home by Prohibitive Cost of Childcare," *The Guardian*, October 5, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2015/oct/05/childcare-expensive-mothers-want-work-trapped-home>. Accessed 21.09.2018; See as well this article <https://www.theguardian.com/money/2014/jan/23/cost-childcare-barrier-work-mothers-survey>. Accessed 10.01.2016. In relation to Italy see this AHRC funded project called 'La Mamma Italiana: Interrogating a National Stereotype.' "La Mamma Italiana: Interrogating a National Stereotype.," <https://lamammitaliana.wordpress.com/>, n.d. Saraceno and Keck, "Towards an Integrated Approach for the Analysis of Gender Equity in Policies Supporting Paid Work and Care Responsibilities." *Demographic Research*. 25. 371-406.

neoliberal economic policies are implemented and austerity measures are put in place.<sup>365</sup> As Imogen Tyler and Tracey Jensen said in the Special Issue of

*Studies in the Maternal* dedicated to austerity parenting:

In the current radical restructuring of welfare systems, reducing public services, condensed public sector workforces, rising unemployment and so on, emerging evidence finds that it will be mothers that are set to lose out disproportionately as these changes are implemented.<sup>366</sup>

The lived experiences of mothers are often at the mercy of economic cuts in the public sector, therefore this research wants 'to keep an eye on the mother' for this reason too. A 2017 Australian study found that single mothers whose benefits were cut managed their food intake and that 'food had become an expense that could be tightly managed, limited or foregone.'<sup>367</sup> Like many other social groups, mothers are at the mercy of external factors which will affect their lives directly. There are developments of increasing legal and social regulation around women who are pregnant and breastfeeding and their duty and responsibility to their children.<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Dannielle Dolman, Anita, Schwartz-Bechet, Barbara and Joy Davis, ed., *Motherhood in Precarious Times*. (Demeter Press, 2018).; Abigail L. Silva, Dorsía Smith, Malik, Laila , and Palko, ed., *Mothers, Mothering and Globalisation*. (Demeter Press, 2017).; Giles Vanderbeld, *Mothering in the Age of Neoliberalism*.

<sup>366</sup> Tracey Jensen and Imogen Tyler, "Austerity Parenting: New Economies of Parent-Citizenship," *Studies in the Maternal* 4, no. 2 (2012).

<sup>367</sup> Hayley Jane McKenzie and Fiona H Mc Kay, "Food as a Discretionary Item: The Impact of Welfare Payment Changes on Low-Income Single Mother's Food Choices and Strategies," *Journal of Poverty and Social Justice* 25, no. 1 (2017): 35–48.

<sup>368</sup> 'A survey of 20,000 mothers undertaken by Pregnant Then Screwed found that in the UK 46% of women were made redundant during the pandemic because of lack of childcare, 72% have had to work fewer hours because of childcare problems, and calls to a legal helpline for working mothers rose by 450%. The results of these inequalities filter directly to children, with 2.5 million children now living in food insecure households in the UK and 1 in 3 children in poverty. In addition 60% of women using domestic violence services are mothers, and it is now clear that there was a surge in domestic violence worldwide during conditions of lockdown,' in Baraitser and Spigel, "Editorial." see as well "[https://Pregnantthenscrewed.Com/.](https://Pregnantthenscrewed.Com/)"

The way motherhood can be thought and recuperated as a mode of resistance and freedom could be to parent in a more collective form and to defy the capitalistic, private property view of what having a child entails, that a child is 'mine.' There are concrete limitations, societal and cultural pressures that make it difficult to decouple a child from a possessive way of mothering/parenting. It can be challenging to become aware of the need to ask for support while mothering – not only from the State, from childcare provisions, but also organising informal childcare provisions among friends and relatives. I think in this decoupling of motherhood and private property there is the possibility of resistance and freedom for women who are mothers. This will come to the fore in Chapter 4 when I focus on one specific case study of the Mothers' Collective (*Il Collettivo Madri*) founded in Rome in the early 1970s, where the conservative idea of the family and the reactionary concept of motherhood, as we will see, was challenged, re-thought and re-framed. Therefore, in the thesis I move away from a politics over life, a negative biopolitics which rules and excludes the body, towards an affirmative politics of life, put in place by the resistant biopolitical strategies of embodied singularities,<sup>369</sup> to which I submit my suggestion of a relational and embodied model of motherhood.

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<sup>369</sup> As exposed by Italian philosopher Esposito, *Bíos : Biopolitics and Philosophy*. (Minnesota, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008)

### relationality between mothers

What follows is what I consider to be a very stereotypical image of motherhood, which is at the antipode of what motherhood has the potential to be if disengaged from a patriarchal frame. When Israeli artistic director Hofesh Shechter of Hofesh Shechter Dance Company was interviewed a few years ago about his piece *Political Mother*, he was asked, 'So for *Political Mother*, what were your initial ideas?' He replied:

I started to think about neediness, both in our intimate lives and also in our relationships with our country, the sense of belonging, our nationalism. There is something very needy and quite pathetic about us...I was thinking about these emotional ties – with our parents, mother earth, our founding fathers. As I continued to think about this, the idea of connection between something political and something warm and cosy seemed impossible. But also very interesting to me. *The words political and mother...the title made me smile. These two conflicting worlds.* (my italics).<sup>370</sup>

What I am interested in challenging in this thesis is exactly this idea that Hofesh Shechter discusses – that the words political and mother are two conflicting worlds/words. It is telling that these words made him smile, for into this smile we can read a lot of meanings. If these words made him smile, I on the other hand see no conflict at all – on the contrary I see them as linked. Maybe it is exactly the opposite of what Hofesh Schechter argues: *because* the maternal *can* be warm and cosy *it is* political; because it can bring us back, it reminds us of our connection to others, our relational existence,

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<sup>370</sup> Hofesh Shechter interviewed in  
["Http://Www.Hofesh.Co.Uk/Downloads/Political%20Mother%20Education%20Pack.Pdf,"](http://www.hofesh.co.uk/downloads/Political%20Mother%20Education%20Pack.Pdf) n.d.

hence in Arendtian terms it reminds us of our political subjectivity in plurality.<sup>371</sup>

Motherhood, as we have just seen, is often defined as apolitical, its activity consigned, identified, and marginalised inside the space of a home, the private and the insular; mothers are seen as conservative, motherhood idealized and romanticized.<sup>372</sup> In this thesis I want to articulate a potentiality for politics in the relationality between women who are mothers. I am interested in the intersection between motherhood and politics as a site for political resistance and I see the political that links these two terms in a similar way to Italian feminist jurist Lia Cigarini and Italian philosopher and writer Luisa Muraro, who pointed out in 1992 in an article entitled *'Politica e Pratica Politica'*:

A different practice in which all of us women of the movement recognise ourselves, concerns stepping from the political to the unpolitical. That is the reason why we happily find ourselves in places which are political and not political, for example bookshops, collectives, and houses. We mix political occupations with others that don't have this name like holidays, work breaks, love and friendships. We do not say that everything is political but more to the point that *everything can become political*.<sup>373</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> 'Men in the plural, that is, men in so far as they live and move and act in this world, can experience meaningfulness only because they can talk with and make sense to each other and to themselves.' In Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, Second (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). p. 4.

<sup>372</sup> Among others a book that challenges the idealized mother and the stereotypes relating to the maternal body is Jane M. Ussher, *Managing the Monstrous Feminine. Regulating the Reproductive Body*. (Hove, East Sussex: Routledge, 2006). For the silencing of the maternal in philosophy see as well Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body. Reading Silence*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>373</sup> Luisa Cigarini, Lia and Muraro, "Politica e Pratica Politica.," *Critica Marxista*. 3–4 (1992). 'Un'altra pratica in cui tutte noi ci riconosciamo, riguarda il passaggio dal politico al non politico. Perciò noi ci troviamo volentieri in luoghi che sono e non sono politici, come librerie e circoli o case, e mescoliamo le occupazioni politiche con altre che non hanno questo nome, come le vacanze, gli intervalli del lavoro, gli amori, le amicizie. Non diciamo che tutto è politico, ma piuttosto che tutto può diventarlo.' p. 14. [my translation].

Hence I am interested in an enlarged meaning of politics which is not solely confined to the formal politics of states and governments. Specifically, a mother's desire is to be heard as her own unique existent, as a *who* not as a *what* as I pointed out in the Introduction. Further, I propose that for someone who has a child in a nuclear family setting there exists a greater 'risk' of a fusional and symbiotic attachment to one's child. Therefore, to emerge as a *who*, as a woman, alongside being a mother to a child/ren too is fundamental. So, it is vital that my story be heard in its specificity, its uniqueness. I have the feeling that I am heard when 'my'/this story, this life, this relationship with my child/ren can be brought to the fore and acknowledged, then I emerge more as myself, as a woman. Lisa Baraitser notes:

the mothers I have worked with therapeutically over the years have constantly expressed the desire to meet with others to discuss what mothering was like; to share stories, guilts, anxieties, failures and confusions, as well as to try to sort out a way to proceed.<sup>374</sup>

This desire to meet with others is at the root of relationality, for mothers and carers of any kind this need seems more prominent. It is almost as if the tensions, frustrations, joys, tiredness, constant demands of the maternal experience require an outlet, be it sharing childcare more with others, going to psychotherapy to make sense of it all, speak with friends and sometimes even with strangers about how one feels. It reminds me of a saying that 'there is more space outside than inside oneself' which makes talking with others about the tribulations and joys of motherhood so important. It's as if it is too

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<sup>374</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*. 153.

powerful an experience to be contained only within one person that it needs to exit ones' self. I see mothering as having an intrinsic political potentiality, especially if linked to narration, to that need to narrate each other's story, which can be called a political praxis as it brings us to the sociality of the polis. In the private and public domain mothering *is* politics, or, as many feminists have argued, the private and the public need to be merged and not kept separate.<sup>375</sup>

### **cavarero's feminist and arendtian relational ontology**

In the first chapter of *The Human Condition*, titled 'Vita Activa and the Human Condition' Arendt writes: 'Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to *the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world.*'<sup>376</sup> She clearly sets out that the human condition is one of interplay between plurality and uniqueness when a few paragraphs later she states that 'Plurality is the condition of the human action because we are all the same, that is human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives or will live.'<sup>377</sup> It is this connection in her work between action, plurality, politics, vulnerability and the uniqueness of each human being that makes her work remarkable and distinct from that of other

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<sup>375</sup> Italian feminist writer Lea Melandri has repeatedly said that, Melandri, *Love and Violence: The Vexatious Factors of Civilisation*. Melandri, *Come Nasce Il Sogno D'Amore*.; Rozsika Parker, "Why Study the Maternal," *Studies in the Maternal* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1–4. 'I think Maternal Studies involves a profound recognition that the personal is the political, demanding that we trace the relationship between cultural formations, individual experience and the limitations of academic discipline, to allow maternal words – of both pain and pleasure – to be heard and understood.'

<sup>376</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958. p.7. [my italics].

<sup>377</sup> Ibid. p. 8.

philosophers of the time, especially male philosophers. I am primarily interested in Arendt for how her theories have informed Cavarero's work, which in turn shapes my approach to the relationality of mothers. Leaning on Arendt's thought, Cavarero illustrates how 'one's uniqueness, the fact that 'every human being is different from everyone else that has ever lived, lives or will live' is the category of the materiality of the body of everybody's existence."<sup>378</sup> This traditional ontology is constructed through the negation of uniqueness, using abstract categories such as the 'subject' and the 'individual.' Cavarero has pointed out the transformational power of thinking politics and law through the prism of uniqueness rather than universal individuality as I noted in Chapter 2. We now ask ourselves, how can Cavarero's meaning of uniqueness, singularity-corporality of being, influence law? She has observed that:

Individuality is...a repeatable, atomised, serial paradigm. Each individual, in and of himself, is as valid for *one* as he is for any other; he is equal because he is equivalent. Uniqueness, on the other hand, ends up rendering useless both the concept of repetition and the principle of generalization that nourishes the individualist theory. Uniqueness is an absolute difference, which...changes the very notion of politics.<sup>379</sup>

It is vital that the law recognise sexual difference and Cavarero's view of uniqueness can help take sexual difference into consideration without essentializing women. For these reasons, I do not wish to objectify a mother's

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<sup>378</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero." p. 134.

<sup>379</sup> Cavarero cited in Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy*. p. 93.

experience and subjectivity in an abstract notion of her humanity, hence, like

Cavarero I maintain that:

My use of ontology has Hannah Arendt as its specific referent. Like Arendt, I think ontology is not related to human nature, but rather, to the human condition. Our condition is that of corporal, unique, vulnerable human beings, *dependent on one another and reciprocally exposed*. This is precisely the contrary of the position advocated by various ontologies in the philosophical tradition.<sup>380</sup>

Similarly, for what concerns us here, this concreteness, to which Cavarero brings her attention, mirrors psychoanalyst Joan Raphael-Leff's contention about mothers:

Addressing *'The' Mother* universalises the particular, neglecting each mother's unique attributes and personal psycho-histories, including the specific circumstances of this particular conception; her own current internal representations of mothers and mothering, the number of other children in her household, and the age gaps between them, the degree of practical and emotional support available to her, as well as the surrounding matrices of socio-cultural expectations, economic resources and restrictions, provisions of maternity care, grants and leave, and normative considerations of age, sex, education, peers, class, race, ethnicity and so on.<sup>381</sup>

For reasons just outlined, the modern abstract and individualistic concept of the subject is wanting: its solitary and 'erect' position aptly criticized by

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<sup>380</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero." p. 137.

<sup>381</sup> Raphael-Leff, "Healthy Maternal Ambivalence." *Studies in the Maternal*, 2 (1), 2010, "Http://Www.Mamsie.Bbk.Ac.Uk/Documents/Raphael-Leff.Pdf," n.d. p. 3; Jacques Lacan also said 'The woman does not exist.' precisely in this sense of the universal – only as a male fantasy which, I argue, is also that of the mother. If, as Lacan says, the male symbolic order recognises only the phallus, then women, having a vulva and a vagina, are not. Hence the human is universalised as having a phallus. Jacques Lacan, *Seminar XX* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1998). and Jacques Lacan, "The Signification of the Phallus," in *Écrits: A Selection*. (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), 311–22.

Cavarero, as discussed previously, is not enough to explain the nature of the lived experiences of embodied singularity in each of us, and mothers in particular. I suggest mothers in particular *because* the mother, as described by Joan Raphael-Leff above, is engaged in a psychological and physical experience of her subjectivity, or what I would regard as a double call (*doppia chiamata*), or a 'double exposure' or a 'double vulnerability' towards herself and towards 'the call' (*sollecitazione*) on her by the vulnerable infant. This can be linked to Guenther's observation that 'both the child and the woman are in different senses, vulnerable, passive, exposed to the Other.'<sup>382</sup>

According to British psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott, the baby after all does not exist in isolation.<sup>383</sup> The infant (hence the human being) exists in and because of the mother (or any primary carer), because of the relationship with her, so I would say that it is on both sides an active engagement with the other. Therefore, contrary to Guenther, I would not say that the mother and the infant are passive.<sup>384</sup> I do not see vulnerability as something near to passivity – indeed I link vulnerability to exposure - as Arendt and Cavarero argue, but not to passivity per se. Lisa Baraitser, too, would argue that the mother is in a relentless movement, constantly interrupted by her baby, toddler, or child/ren. She writes:

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<sup>382</sup> Lisa Guenther, *The Gift of the Other: Levinas and the Politics of Reproduction*. (Albany: SUNY, 2006). p. 100 .

<sup>383</sup> Donald W. Winnicott, *The Family and the Individual Development*. (London: Tavistock Publications Limited, 1965). p. 15.

<sup>384</sup> Jessica Benjamin too says that the infant is able to interact with others from day one: Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination*. p. 17-18.

I want to explore the notion of the maternal subject as a subject of interruptions; both she who is subjected to *relentless* interruption, and she whom interruption enunciates; a subject, that is, who emerges from the experience of interruption itself. In some senses it is barely possible to conceive of maternal subjectivity outside of interruption.<sup>385</sup>

Between these interruptions a mother experiences there is no passivity, she exists with a constant alertness, a knowing (an embodied knowing as well, which makes the body alert too) that she will be interrupted sooner or later. I would argue that the infant is not passive either as I said above – she is vulnerable, exposed, but not passive. I would call this something like an openness and availability to the other, to the mother or his/her primary carer. Through the relationship and contact with the mother (or another primary carer) and the world, as Winnicott says, the baby comes into being, but it is this interaction *between* mother *and* baby which makes the baby exist, become and emerge as a person. Personhood and subjectivity are 'reached' through relationality.

The absence of this relationality has tragic consequences. We have painfully witnessed through the discoveries of orphanages in Romania in the early 1990s, where babies and children were found in a state of semi-existence both concretely and subjectively. This happened because no one had cared enough for them. In a Cavarerian light no one had inclined towards them. I personally witnessed this in February 1990 when I travelled to Timisoara and

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<sup>385</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*. p. 67. [my emphasis].

volunteered with an Italian GP for the Italian Civil Protection.<sup>386</sup> We entered the orphanage and saw children and babies left neglected in cots. These babies and toddlers did not respond to a smile; they presented severely unusual behaviour for children of two or three years old, such as the inability to walk or smile. There were very few barely smiling faces in a room filled with about twenty children from six months to about three years. These children barely existed as persons, as a person deserves to be. They had not had someone/a 'mother' who mothered them, who brought them to life/into being through love, care, and attention. Concretely and figuratively in their case, they did not have enough people inclining towards them in their cot. I have never forgotten that experience.

The body of the mother, of a birth mother, is a body which is experiencing a real, concrete, embodied and psychological experience of being at times vulnerable and exposed, and 'doubly exposed', as I said previously, because engaged in looking after a small child which, like her, is in turn vulnerable, fragile and exposed and which more than any other mammal is in need of assiduous care to be able to survive:

A baby on the breast forces us to acknowledge the necessary nature of human dependency. We're not all self-defining individuals, forging our own paths and forming only relationships of our own choosing. Our bodies have needs that change over time and these needs make us weak and vulnerable.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> The Italian Civil Protection (Protezione Civile) is the national body in Italy that deals with the prediction, prevention and management of emergency events.

<sup>387</sup> Glosswitch, "Uncomfortable with Mothers Breastfeeding in Public? It Says More About You Than Them," *The Newstatesman*, November 3, 2015.

It is this dependency and vulnerability I am interested to explore further. Cavarero in Arendtian terms, states that in considering the stereotype of maternity, the maternal figure reminds us of the human being as vulnerable, fragile and centred in the relation in which each of our existence is brought to the fore during birth.<sup>388</sup>

In the next section I explore Cavarero's book *Inclinazioni. Critica della Rettitudine*<sup>389</sup> (*Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*). In this book Cavarero interrogates the moral and political significance of the vertical and 'erect' position of the subject of Western classical philosophy and political theory. She suggests that we need to rethink subjectivity in terms of *inclination*. She argues that the 'erect' subject has the tendency to be autonomous, self-sufficient, and individualistic. Instead, she proposes that we try to incline the subject to become more generous, open, and relational. She proposes that by leaning towards the other, we open up the subject to interesting ontological developments. The subject, the mother, the carer, incline themselves to the other who is vulnerable and because he/she is vulnerable. This symbolic and concrete inclination (imagine if the Romanian children found in orphanages in 1989 and early 1990 had someone inclining towards their cots and them,

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<sup>388</sup> "Http://Www.Newstatesman.Com/Politics/Feminism/2015/11/Uncomfortable-Mothers-Breastfeeding-Public-It-Says-More-about-You-Them," n.d.

<sup>388</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero." p. 148.

<sup>389</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinazioni. Critica Della Rettitudine*. Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*.

looking in to their eyes and smile) is what makes us alive, responsive, *in* relation.

### **cavarero: inclinazioni. critica della rettitudine**

In the introduction of *Inclinazioni, Critica della Rettitudine*, Cavarero focuses her attention on the different meanings of the term *inclination*, which she says derives from the Greek word for bed, *kline*, and how it has been used historically. She starts her study by taking into consideration German Jewish philosopher, essayist, and cultural critic Walter Benjamin's *en passant* comment regarding one of Kant's youthful fragments on the concept of *inclination*. Cavarero notes that Benjamin remarked in reading the fragment that a change of perspective in relation to the meaning of this term (*inclination*) would transform it into one of the fundamental concepts of morals.<sup>390</sup>

Starting from this point she then centres her analysis and critique on the philosophical use and meaning of the terms *erect* and *vertical*, with enlightening results. She reminds us that historically philosophy has neglected the term *inclination* and the metaphors attached to it, preferring instead a vertical, erect philosophical worldview. She explores, among others, philosophical texts by Plato, St. Augustine, Hobbes, Kant, Arendt, Benjamin and Canetti, but she also enters into texts about the language of art by Barnett Newman, Leonardo da Vinci and Artemisia Gentileschi; finally, she explores

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<sup>390</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinazioni. Critica Della Rettitudine*. p. 7. Talking of W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, eds. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser with the collaboration of Th. Adorno and G. Scholem, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1974-1999, vol 6, p. 55.

literary works by Virginia Woolf and Marcel Proust. She argues that philosophy has attached some problematic adjectives to the term *inclination*. One of the most common is to refer to someone's character as being of 'good inclination' or 'bad inclination.' Cavarero argues that another use is to link *inclination* to feelings and sentiments and that it is specifically this erotic and emotional inclination towards another person that philosophers have found disquieting. Therefore, classical philosophers, she notes, 'perceive this inclination as a threat to the equilibrium of the subject.'<sup>391</sup> In particular, we can say that they perceive the threat to the rational, autonomous and individualistic subject as exemplified in my discussion in Chapters 1 and 2.

Moreover, Cavarero states:

philosophers fear mainly inclinations that are impetuous and difficult to dominate. They fear *inclinations* in the domain of *eros*, precisely those inclinations that are carnal and lustful. Importantly, what stands out is the specific propensity of women (or more to the point the female nature) to lasciviousness.<sup>392</sup>

With irony Cavarero then adds: 'in the library of the West when we speak of dangerous inclinations, women are always involved.'<sup>393</sup> Furthermore, she suggests, another link is made between what philosophers incessantly say about women's natural maternal instinct and the dangerous inclinations attributed particularly to them, especially the binary Madonna/whore. Citing Proudhon, Tolstoy, Kant and Schopenhauer, she shows how these authors

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid. p. 9. [My translation]

<sup>392</sup> Ibid. p. 10. [My translation]

<sup>393</sup> Ibid. p. 12.

were particularly suspicious of what they called women's dangerous inclinations because they thought that those would stir them away from the natural maternal instinct they attributed to women.

Among the various examples that Cavarero takes from these authors, for the purpose of our analysis here on mothers' dangerous inclinations I want to look at one example Cavarero draws from Kant's thought, here as both Benjamin and Arendt have also drawn attention to it. In the lectures *Some Questions of Moral Philosophy*, reflecting on Kant, Arendt stresses that 'every *inclination* pushes us towards the external, it brings us outside ourselves.'<sup>394</sup> Cavarero says that despite its simplicity this phrase is crucial, as Arendt reminds us that in modern philosophical discourse, 'at the centre of the scene there is an *I* in erect and vertical position.'<sup>395</sup> Philosophers have used this image very frequently. In Italian, it is described as '*uomo retto*' which in English can be translated as a 'righteous man'. The word *retto* derives from the Latin *rectum* which means just, correct, and honest. Cavarero actually specifies that the term 'righteous man' is not really used as a metaphor but it has a very precise literal meaning; she says 'it is a subject that keeps to the verticality of the right axes, which functions as a principle and a norm of his ethical posture.'<sup>396</sup>

From modern times, and particularly since Kant's idea of the rational and autonomous subject, this inclined posture has caused apprehension in

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<sup>394</sup> Hanna Arendt cited in *Ibid.* p. 14.

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*

philosophers. Following Arendt, Cavarero says, 'the drive of the inclination undermines the ego from its internal centre of gravity, hence making it lean externally from itself towards 'objects or people' and it eats into its stability.'<sup>397</sup> For Kant, 'founder' of the idea of the autonomous subject of Western philosophy, this inclination would be horrifying, Cavarero says.

Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, which shows how Swann lost his own self – 'inclined himself too much'— because of his love for Odette, provides Cavarero with a further example. In the realm of love and falling in love it is well known, even more so by non-philosophers, that falling in love is an attack on our ego as we inexorably incline ourselves helplessly towards our lover. This inability to maintain our autonomy, Cavarero says with a certain amount of irony, is in Kantian terms a great misfortune.

Tolstoy, in *Anna Karenina*, equates falling desperately in love, especially as it happens to a mother, Anna, who then leaves her child, remarries, and ultimately commits suicide, with very negative connotations. Cavarero says 'the misogynistic vein that pulsates in Tolstoy's masterpiece wants the fallen woman, more so when she is a mother, to die and she dies in a horrible way.'

<sup>398</sup> For Tolstoy, the real, 'natural' mother is *une couveuse*, as he projects his maternal idealization from the words of the most libertine character in the book who so describes Anna. *Couveuse* is a French word meaning a woman that broods. This word is associated with hens, like 'the mother hen,' in

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid. p.17.

Italian she would be called 'la madre chioccia.'<sup>399</sup> This image, Cavarero states, is highly problematic. Instead of being inclined towards the other, as many biblical images of Mary show her inclining slightly towards Jesus, this *covveuse* mother is totally supine; denied the erect position of Man, this woman is now flattened to the floor.

Cavarero observes of the often inclined posture of mothers towards their children – depicted in art for instance —that this posture, which suggests another inclination, another politics, would be beneficial for all human beings. Her idea of rethinking politics stems from what can be called a stereotype of a mother inclining towards her baby, but here she strategically works on a stereotype. Cavarero adds that the autocratic, autonomous, auto-referential and individualistic subject has been attacked by various critical currents for at least a century; and particularly in the postmodern period these voices aim at its fragmentation. She then adds that:

instead of carrying on fragmenting it, (using Arendt's idea above mentioned), I suggest we could instead try to incline the subject....maybe, following the relational model, we could try to incline it towards the *other*.<sup>400</sup>

This inclination towards the other is Cavarero's departure: to rethink the subject, continuing her long-term work around configuring a relational ontology that escapes the traps of individualist ontology. Cavarero writes that

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<sup>399</sup> The first incubator, developed in France in the 1880s and considered at the time to be the beginning of artificial wombs was called the "couveuse" or "breeding hen." Claire Horn, "The History of the Incubator Makes a Sideshow of Mothering," *Psyche*, June 2020, <https://psyche.co/ideas/the-history-of-the-incubator-makes-a-sideshow-of-mothering>.

<sup>400</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinazioni. Critica Della Rettitudine*. p. 120.

the inclined subject is not the above mentioned image of the hen mother, who is an oblativ, ever-giving mother, nor the erect position of the subject of Kantian philosophy; instead she takes as an example the mother who is inclined towards her baby to rethink our subjectivity. She works with a stereotypical image because as she says, in the stereotype there is a kernel of meaning that can be overturned. This image can be useful for mothers, carers, fathers, and any human. To be exposed, vulnerable, inclined towards others can add to our humanity.

As I stated earlier, vulnerability, or in Butler's terms precariousness,<sup>401</sup> is the human condition. Cavarero argues that the obvious fact that the infant is dependent on the mother or, I add, another primary carer, 'instead of being re-codified, restructured and rethought, often is censored and kept under silence.'<sup>402</sup> That is one of the reasons why Cavarero chooses to interrogate and explore the various biblical images of Mary, mother of Jesus, as Marina Warner has done too from a different angle as I mentioned earlier, to unearth the cultural meanings buried deep in the most stereotypical of maternal images in the West. No proposal of a relational ontology can put this image aside, she contends.

To show why it is vital to include this stereotype in propositions of relational ontology, in her last chapter called *Coda: Adieu to Lévinas*<sup>403</sup> Cavarero turns to Lévinas to rethink his philosophy in beautiful and surprising ways,

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<sup>401</sup> Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*.

<sup>402</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinazioni. Critica Della Rettitudine*. p. 24.

<sup>403</sup> Cavarero, "Coda. Adieu to Levinas."

this time suggesting that his thinking of the 'face to face with the other' needs to include a mother, which Lévinas himself, in following the classical philosophical tradition, did not do. Cavarero argues that the mother has been erased, denigrated, or idealised in the history of the West, hence she calls for *a recuperation of the maternal for the sake of philosophy, for the sake of politics*.<sup>404</sup> Lévinas most likely did not include the maternal because the Classical philosophical tradition has enacted an erasure of the maternal since ancient Greek times. Hence even when exemplifying the relationship with another, Lévinas excludes the most primal relationship all humans have, that we are formed and created within the womb of a woman, and are together with her body for several months and that we are born of a woman. This erasure and the problems attached to it are well explained by Braidotti here:

The subject of the unconscious demands that the subject of philosophy – insofar as the latter claims the prerogative of rationalism – faces his/her incompleteness, recognises the libidinal, bodily roots of intelligence and accepts the partiality of her/his modes of thinking. This realization requires the problematisation of the maternal/feminine site of origin.<sup>405</sup>

Therefore, following Braidotti, classical philosophy, should have developed a form or discourse which included the maternal/material origin of us all.

As we have seen, Cavarero enters into a genealogical investigation of how the thought of certain philosophers – namely Plato, St. Augustine, Hobbes, Kant and Canetti – revolved around the idea of a subject that was

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<sup>404</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinations. A Critique of Rectitude*. p. 140.

<sup>405</sup> Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance. A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy*. p. 35.

morally, and hence physically and symbolically, erect on a vertical axis. Two others offered an alternative vision of the subject; one that was inclined, one that questioned the main focus of Western thought. These were Arendt and Benjamin. It is in this paradigm that I see relationality between mothers/carers, a woman who is a mother, who inclines herself towards another mother, to support each other in recognition of the work that they are doing. When I talk of a mother, I see this term as Cavarero does – a person, a man or woman who is doing mothering work, and moreover, I see ‘the mother as the name of an inclination towards the other.’<sup>406</sup> As I explained in the introduction, I centre my research on women who are mothers, because they are largely the ones still ‘rocking the cradle.’<sup>407</sup>

As Cavarero says, the mother is the prime ethical figure because she must make a decision every day: to care for or to hurt her child and the learning to manage imperfectly and to tolerate the ambivalence inherent in motherhood. Hence as motherhood is not a natural and biological call to care, it instead implies a decision, the taking of a decision; that is what is ethical, Cavarero says, not the end result of her decision. Therefore, I argue that being among other mothers/carers, talking to and with them, help mothers’ decision-making. It can alter the conditions under which the decision is made, making it a different type of decision with differing results.

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<sup>406</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinazioni. Critica Della Rettitudine*. p. 145.

<sup>407</sup> From a book from Dinnerstein, *Rocking of the Cradle and the Ruling of the World*.

The infant is the creature totally oriented towards the other, who has an absolute existential trust of the other, of the mother. The infant *is* defenceless. In this respect Cavarero, and others like Drakopoulou, as I discussed in Chapter 1, abhor the association of any ethical discourse that uncritically associates the maternal figure with an innate natural goodness. In Chapter 1 I specifically link this problematic ethical discourse with the one made by Gilligan. Cavarero says that 'if we limit ourselves to seeing the maternal as synonymous with care we risk missing the ethical importance of the choice between caring and hurting, which is the main component of this inclination.'<sup>408</sup> We also risk assigning to the maternal 'only' the role of a natural, biologically determined destiny towards caring for the vulnerable. That is why maternal ambivalence is an important aspect of motherhood and care.<sup>409</sup> Cavarero explains, instead, where she thinks ethics is and where it is found:

Ethics happens when one finds oneself singularly facing a decision to wound, to care or not to care. I think that the mother *is* an ethical figure. The infant is vulnerable *per antonomasia* as it is absolutely defenceless and the mother finds herself faced with the alternative of caring for or wounding this vulnerable human being (to abandon it, for example). It is well known that mothers have been killing babies since Medea and before her. Medea is an ethical figure, or one could say an unethical figure or the 'ugly face' of the ethical figure.<sup>410</sup>

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<sup>408</sup> Cavarero Adriana, *Inclinazioni. Critica Della Rettitudine*. p. 146.

<sup>409</sup> Raphael-Leff, "Healthy Maternal Ambivalence."

<sup>410</sup> Bertolino and Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero." p. 142.

Similarly to Medea, in *Beloved* (1987), the novel by Toni Morrison,<sup>411</sup> the protagonist Sethe kills her daughter Beloved to save her from slavery. She has to make a decision and the ethical decision in that situation for Sethe is to kill her daughter to save her. For French psychoanalyst Jacques-Alain Miller, Medea is an ethical figure too; he argues that Medea's act of killing her children is 'where the woman takes precedence over the mother. She is not to be emulated but this is an example of what it means to be a woman beyond being a mother.'<sup>412</sup> The problem arises when the 'maternal' is seen 'only' as a natural call for caring and not as a call (*una chiamata*) towards the vulnerable and the defenceless 'rooted in the decision' that Cavarero talks about above. If the maternal is seen only as a 'natural inclination' to care, it obscures the possibility that it contains the ethical call to care or wound (*ferita*) which is typical of the inclination towards the other. It is this call that is ethical, not the answer to this call. Judge Smyth says that women sometimes neglect their children because they have alcohol or drug addiction or/and they are victims of abuse. She says by supporting these mothers to solve these problems first then the women may be better able to care for their children.<sup>413</sup> Obviously that is valid for fathers too.

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<sup>411</sup> Morrison, *Beloved*.

<sup>412</sup> Jacques-Alain Miller, "On Semblances in the Relation Between the Sexes," in *On Sexuation: SIC 3*, ed. Renata Selecl (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 19.

<sup>413</sup> "Into the Key of Law: Transposing Musical Improvisation. The Case of Child Protection in Northern Ireland Project."

Adrienne Rich aptly explores in her 1986 book *Of Woman Born*. *Motherhood as Experience and Institution*,<sup>414</sup> motherhood is framed within a patriarchal model. How can we challenge this patriarchal model and re-imagine motherhood? I suggest that a starting point for the latter is relationality between women who are mothers who are exposed towards each other with an understanding of the vulnerability and creative force intrinsic in motherhood. The vulnerability is not seen as a weak and stereotypically female characteristic because it is experienced *by* women, but in the way that Cavareto tells us, but as a recognition that the human condition is one of vulnerability as Hannah Arendt claims. I argue that it can be more so for a woman once she becomes a mother and looks after a small child who is in turn vulnerable. Hence relationality between women who are mothers can bring about an awareness of the condition of our shared vulnerability.

My interest in relationality between women who are mothers also rests on a concept that I call 'horizontal knowledge sharing between mothers', where knowledge is seen as a common good, not an individualistic acquisition but a feminist practice. Knowledge can be 'distributed' and shared among mothers and carers so 'augmented' knowledge of one's subjectivity, self-consciousness, has the intrinsic potentiality to be shared and to be learned from each other. This concept has an additional meaning in the case of motherhood because practices of maternal care, (giving birth, caring for a

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<sup>414</sup> Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*.

child and breastfeeding) are learned experiences which are acquired by seeing other women or men engaged in the work of care and reproduction.

Acquiring knowledge and sharing it then becomes a political practice. In practical terms it means seeing our parental responsibilities 'detached' from an individualistic concept of the family. Instead we look at friends as a support during the same journey of bringing up children. These shared tasks can be: sharing childcare, looking after each other's children, supporting each other in difficult times, enjoying communal holidays where many children spend time together, cooking for each other when needed and so on, hence opening up and challenging what Herring calls the 'law's obsession with a child only having one mother and one father.'<sup>415</sup>

Following on from this I contend that relationality between women who are mothers/carers is relevant can help to inform us of a different way of being together, which is significant in a liberal society that tends to see human beings as autonomous, individualistic and abstract as I argued in Chapters 1 and 2. All these terms neglect the specific needs and experiences of each singular mother. To further explain why the meaning of relationality is important and how I use it in relation to mothers, we can consider how Butler's *Giving an Account of Oneself*<sup>416</sup> engages with the work of Cavarero.

Butler argues Cavarero's *philosophy* makes this claim:

I am not, as it were, an interior subject, closed up upon myself, solipsistic, posing questions to myself alone. I exist in an important

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<sup>415</sup> Jonathan Herring, *Family Law*, 4th ed. (Harlow: Longman, 2009). p. 339.

<sup>416</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

sense for you, and by virtue of you. If I have lost the conditions of address, if I have no “you” to address, then I have lost “myself”. In her view one can tell an autobiography only to another, and one can reference an “I” only in relation to a “you”: without the “you”, my own story becomes impossible.<sup>417</sup>

Butler points out that ‘in contrast to the Nietzschean view that life is essentially bound up with destruction and suffering, Cavarero argues that we are beings who are, of necessity, *exposed* to one another in our vulnerability and singularity, and that our political situation consists in part in learning how best to handle – and to honour – this constant and necessary exposure.’<sup>418</sup> For the purpose of my research this becomes important because for a woman who is a mother, in relational terms, if she has not a ‘you’ to address, then she has lost herself and without the ‘you’ her own story becomes impossible. Going back to our discussion in Chapters 1 and 2, this begins to show how the law might be situated within this kind of politics and what kinds of demands can be placed on it. How do we move the law from the model discussed and critiqued in the previous chapter? What would a relational legal structure look like?

How can the law account for caring relationships between people when it regulates? How can the law, and how the law is practised, become infused with the idea that we humans are interconnected and care for each other at different stages of our lives? It becomes important here to look at

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<sup>417</sup> Ibid. pp. 30-32.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid. p. 31.

how Cavarero sees the law and how she thinks it affects women. The law can be rigid and fixed, unbending and erect as described by Cavarero in her analysis of the subject of Classical philosophy and as I have analysed in Chapter 1 and 2. The law does not always provide justice and equal outcomes for people. In particular, the law has often been interpreted against women<sup>419</sup> as I have argued in Chapter 2 in the discussion of *Attorney General v X* and *Evans v United Kingdom*. These two cases stand as a few examples among many of circumstances in which the law has been applied in a way that undermines women's autonomy. Another example is how the court process works in disfavour of women is how rape, domestic and gender violence victim are treated in court cases. Often women have not been believed, there are some stereotypes about women and mothers which influence the court and often women have had to tell the story of their ordeal in front of the perpetrator and the courts which is often a very traumatic experience in itself.

As we have seen in Chapter 1 and 2, Cavarero thinks that some laws and regulations further imprison women in a symbolic way within the patriarchal paradigm. To accommodate a more flexible, humane, and caring application of the law, I suggest that we 'incline' the law itself to each singular person's needs in a move inspired by Cavarero's thinking in *Inclinations*, to recognize each person's uniqueness and vulnerability. Following this then we

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<sup>419</sup> Hunter, Rosemary, McGlynn, Clare and Rackley, *Feminist Judgments. From Theory to Practice*.

can think of a more 'caring law'?<sup>420</sup> This ability to recognise the needs of singular, unique people as Arendt and Cavarero would say is similar to the discussions of intersectional feminist approaches I discussed in the introduction. These approaches have made great inroads in accounting for the variety and complexity of women's experiences from different standpoints (as a minimum race, class, gender, and sexuality).

In the next section, I explore how Cavarero's work on storytelling is inherently relational, how narration and the voice make up the fundamental ingredients for a relational ontology which is relevant, I argue, for mothers looking after a vulnerable child. I take into consideration the importance of narration for an embodied understanding of politics, and I focus on Cavarero's important and original reading of Arendt. To be more caring the law needs to listen to others.<sup>421</sup>

### **storytelling, a vital practice for mothers?**

Cavarero's 1997 book *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*, (You that look at me, you that tell my story) published in English in 2007 as *Relating Narratives*.

*Storytelling and Selfhood*, discusses an alternative political subject shaped by relationality between, in Arendtian terms, unique existents. This book, as the title makes clear, centres on narration. Cavarero argues that narration is a

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<sup>420</sup> 'Everyone cares. Everyone is cared for. Yet caring receives surprisingly little attention from lawyers.' Herring, *Caring and the Law*. p. 1.

<sup>421</sup> 'justice is not just about increased accessibility to legal advice and/or judicial decision-making. It also requires that individual cases are listened to with the depth, attentiveness and creativity that the singularity of the situation demands.' Sara Ramshaw, "Rainbow Family: Machine Listening, Improvisation and Access to Justice in International Family Law," in *He Routledge Handbook of International Law and the Humanities*, ed. Shane Chalmers and Sundhya Pahuja (Leicester: Routledge, 2021). p.

better means to tell someone's life story, better than philosophy can ever be. Discussing narration helps put forward my idea on relationality and how talking with others is important. According to her and to Arendt, philosophy is able to tell *what* one person is but not *who* she is, but 'unlike philosophy, which for millennia has persisted in capturing the universal in the trap of definition, narration reveals the finite and its fragile uniqueness, and sings its glory.'<sup>422</sup> Cavarero compares philosophy and narration and finds that narration is better at exemplifying the uniqueness of each person's life. In this account of the link between narration and selfhood, Cavarero investigates the characteristics that make our lives unique.

Similarly to philosophy the language of law can be abstract, based on universalistic world views and definitions as I analysed via Cavarero's work in Chapters 1 and 2. Her work interlinks narration and philosophy and it offers an alternative concept of subjectivity which refuses the logic of the postmodernist fragmented subject. The Italian feminist political philosopher Olivia Guaraldo says, 'in times of postmodern fragmentation and proliferation of identities Cavarero vigorously affirms that identity is not multiple but one, besides, if the Subject is dead it might not be the same for our own, real, sense of uniqueness'.<sup>423</sup> The critique that Cavarero makes of philosophy I suggest can also be made of law and it can help develop an understanding of a

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<sup>422</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. p. 3.

<sup>423</sup> Olivia Guaraldo, "Adriana Cavarero's Storytelling and Selfhood Book Review.," *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought*. 2 (1998).

law which is more attentive to our own uniqueness and the narrative of our life.

Furthermore, I am interested in exploring the place of narration in a mother/carer's life, in her sense of self, her subjectivity and identity. I am interested in how the ability to process and tell one's difficulties or joys to someone else, especially with regard to caring for a baby, a child, or children, can help one have a better experience of it, or at least to feel heard. There is a saying in various languages, 'better out than in' which can refer to a variety of things including emotions as many psychotherapists can attest.

Cavarero has linked narration, as conceived by Arendt, with the Italian feminist practice of self-consciousness-raising groups or '*gruppi di autocoscienza*.' These were established in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s in many different cities where groups of women met to talk about their lives, their relationships, their sexuality, their families, and many other topics that they needed to share with other women. This for me is a starting point for arguing the importance of mothers telling each other their life stories, because one of the most socially, culturally, psychologically charged experiences, that of being a parent and a mother, needs stories to elaborate its difficulties, joys, significance, and frustrations. I maintain that for a mother, talking and relating to another mother is being engaged in politics. Cavarero argues, 'the reciprocal narration

of consciousness-raising groups is one scene in which the self is constitutively exposed to the other – an exposure that makes this a political scene.<sup>424</sup>

How can we tell our story to another person? How can the other person tell our story, or to use a psychoanalytic Winnicottian image, how can the other person 'hold' my story?<sup>425</sup> As discussed earlier, Winnicott described the holding environment as the ability of the "good enough parent" to provide the baby both with safe physical holding and the capacity to hold and tolerate the child's emotions and frustrations.<sup>426</sup> Consequently, he argued that psychotherapy provides a holding environment for the patient's emotions. What would that mean in relation to this particular analysis?

My idea of using a Winnicottian image for mothers 'holding' another mother's story is a metaphor for a woman who is a mother providing the safe and holding environment for another woman to be able to tell her story and be heard. This allows for the person listening to the story to create a listening 'space' for the feelings of another mother. Or it allows for women to mirror, *speculum* (using the title of Irigaray's noted book<sup>427</sup>) each other's experiences and feelings into the experiences of someone else. This mirroring is an important aspect of our ability to be, our ability to remain human and to see our difficulties as something common that others experience too. Without this mirroring I sink into myself, no one can help me come out of the hole

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<sup>424</sup> Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*. p. ?

<sup>425</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *The Child, The Family and The Outside World*, New Ed (London: Penguin, 2000). p. 17 and p. 44 and 86–7 and p. 194.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid. p. 173.

<sup>427</sup> Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

that has been created in myself by my difficult emotions. Mirroring can be similar to inclination. Inclining oneself towards another or mirroring oneself in another's experience. Both speak of reciprocity, of what it means to live in relation with others.

What do I mean by holding a story? I mean emotionally, when you have shared part of your life with someone, your difficulties and challenges or beautiful intimate moments and discoveries, the other person holds on (to) the story for you. This knowledge that someone you trust can tolerate your story makes it easier for you to go about your daily life. It may make it possible to share and expose one's vulnerability within a relationship based on trust, love, affection, and pleasure in spending time together. I think this is what women may discover once aware of patriarchal constraints and they search for a space for themselves, shaped by their own desires.

This is precisely what happened in the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s consciousness-raising groups. It has to be said that conversely, telling your story to another woman might also be met with envy and jealousy. This is where the idea of *disparity*, can be helpful. Bringing class, education differences to the fore can help in opening up discussions on inequality, access and privilege, which can help in realising that some of the disadvantages one has experienced are at times a product of external forces: capitalism, a patriarchal family, access to education and so on. As the women of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, stated, 'from being objects of

exchange, as they were in the male world, women can and must become subjects of exchange.<sup>428</sup> Irigaray argues that jealousy mainly stems from women competing in a patriarchal society for men's attention and in addition, she says that our culture does not have many representations of women's affection for each other, women's relation to each other. As I argued in the first chapter, and as Irigaray argues, there are not enough positive representations in art, literature, and cinema of mother-daughter relationships, in our culture a mother always carries a son.<sup>429</sup> This lack of representation was much more acute in the 1960s/1970s, making this a challenge that consciousness-raising groups had to confront. As described in the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective book *Sexual difference* in 1972, the French women organised two international feminist meetings, one of which lasted a whole week, at la Tranche (Vandee) under the auspices of the MLF (Mouvement de Liberation des Femmes), and a five-day meeting which was organised entirely by Politique et Psychoanalyse. Several Italian women participated in these meetings and were greatly impressed by the force of the French women's ideas and practice:

Some of the Italians understood that there was strength well worth appropriating in this ability to act politically without idealizing women and their relationships, and they tried to find a way to learn what the French had to teach them.<sup>430</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*. p. 122.

<sup>429</sup> Luce Irigaray, "Une Chance de Vivre.," in *Sexes and Parentes*. (Paris: Minuit, 1987), 203–7. In contemporary times this has changed as there are many women artists who have represented less stereotypical images of motherhood and mothers. See "[Http://Mamsie.Org/Art-Collection/.](http://Mamsie.Org/Art-Collection/)"

<sup>430</sup> The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*. p. 50.

As I have previously argued, it is important that women and their relationships are not idealized. Sadly, the feminine does at times fall into idealisation, as Cavarero and others have explored. This is often due to the need of patriarchal cultures to reject and deny the fact that women may – rightly so – not match the ideal. In idealisation there is less space left for the integration of ambivalence.

For my work on relationality between women who are mothers, my main interest in the political practice of the Milan Bookstore Collective rests upon two things that the Collective discovered through their practical and theoretical work on relationality. The first two, discussed in Chapter 1, are the practice of *autocoscienza* (consciousness-raising/self-knowledge) and *affidamento* (*entrustment*) of one woman to another to learn from such self-knowledge and circulate it into the world. Secondly, and importantly in this context, is the realization that women are different, mothers are different, and we should not hide this difference in the homogenising idea of 'sisterhood'. Hence the practice of *disparità* is very significant for my understanding of relationality. This realisation came about after a few years of feminist politics. The Milan Collective reflected on the theme of differences between women. They called it *disparità*. It was a practice that they felt was needed to bring to the fore, discuss and realise real and concrete difference between women (in education, class and race) and bring them out in the open, not let them simmer in the unconscious. Disparity between women was recognised.

They focused on this theme after they realised that among women there was the 'risk' of perpetuating mother-daughter relationships or a symbiotic relationship, which they saw too in some of the idealization within the feminist movement of the term and the practice of sisterhood which was practised in the USA. For the women of the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, relationality was not about sisterhood, hence it was important to delve into the differences among each other to keep this 'risk' at bay:

Unique to the Italians is their discovery that differences among women are meaningless unless there is some way to relate them to each other, to evaluate them or judge them. Not *wanting* to acknowledge differences is, on their account, a problem of not *knowing how* to acknowledge them. Learning how will require developing the political ability to relate and judge differences among women, which in turn requires another political skill: the feminist symbolization of sexual difference.<sup>431</sup>

*Disparity*, for the Milan Bookstore Collective, was to discover and acknowledge that women were not all the same, that women envied each other for something they did not have or know (class and education differences were acknowledged). Hence differences between women were not flattened through a neutral idea of equality, but acknowledged.<sup>432</sup> Potential conflict and difference were taken into consideration, even seen as positive, it was a politics that tried to work with these differences. It included differences and made facing differences a process within their politics.

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid. p. 92.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid. p. 108-113.

Therefore, in my idea of relationality between women I am careful not to make it into an idealistic politics, as I am aware of the problems of doing so. I work with this in mind – that women may be in conflict with each other or hate each other. As stated in Chapter 2, Italian feminists often used psychoanalysis in their approach and thinking.<sup>433</sup>

Another interesting feminist practice Italian feminists engaged in, especially the women of the Milan Bookstore Collective and those connected with their work, was the practice of *l'autorita' femminile*,<sup>434</sup> female authority. *Female authority*, as intended by Italian feminists, is different from power or a link to authoritarianism. It is an authority that I recognise in another woman (who maybe has specific personal or professional skills) who in turn acknowledges it and puts this authority in circulation for others to learn from her, to support a change, and awareness. Often it is an exchange between two people. It is precisely because Western culture has mostly excluded difference and tends to value sameness that *disparity* and *female authority* are important feminist praxes. Because they value difference, problematize it, and do not run away from it or try to homogenize the discourse.

For Arendt and Cavarero too, narration is political, first of all *because* it is relational.<sup>435</sup> This exposure to another to which Cavarero refers is embodied and is made up of the affective, corporal and sensual vicinity between two

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<sup>433</sup> Melchiori, "Psychoanalysis in Early Italian Feminism. The Contributions of the Practice of the Unconscious."

<sup>434</sup> *L'Autorita' Femminile. Incontro Con Lia Cigarini.*

<sup>435</sup> Paul A. Kottman, "Translator's Introduction," in *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood.* (New York: Routledge, 2005), vii–xxxii. p. x.

people, two bodies. This vicinity and relationality was experienced in the Italian feminist movement by the '*gruppi di autocoscienza*', the consciousness-raising groups, and later, when the analytical setting of the unconscious was transferred to women's groups and the practice of the *unconscious*<sup>436</sup> took place. In chapter five of Cavarero's 2001 book *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti*<sup>437</sup> she recounts the story of two women who tell each other their life story and what happens when one woman writes the story of the other woman and gives it back to her. Cavarero makes us witness to a true and very personal story of two friends in Milan, a story which is told in the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective's *Non Credere di Avere dei Diritti* (Don't Think You Have Any Rights).

She starts the chapter thus: 'We are in the 1970s, and the protagonists are two friends with assonant names: Emilia and Amalia. They attend, in Milan, '*la scuola delle 150 ore*.'<sup>438</sup> Amalia is the more 'talented' one; she is able to express herself better both vocally and in writing. Emilia lacks these abilities. While at the '*scuola delle 150 ore*' they exchange various writing exercises but Emilia is unable to express her life story in writing, so she keeps talking about

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<sup>436</sup> Melchiori, "Psychoanalysis in Early Italian Feminism. The Contributions of the Practice of the Unconscious."

<sup>437</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Tu Che Mi Guardi, Tu Che Mi Racconti. Filosofia Della Narrazione*. (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2001). Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*.

<sup>438</sup> 'Le scuole' delle 150 ore', 'the 150-hour schools,' were schools founded by the Italian Left in the 1970s, whose purpose was to provide supplementary education in the arts and sciences for workers or housewives who lacked higher education – workers were allowed to take 150 hours, paid, out of their work year in order to attend these schools.' Cavarero, *Tu Che Mi Guardi, Tu Che Mi Racconti. Filosofia Della Narrazione*. p. 65, quoted from The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*. pp.102-7. Feminist writer and activist Lea Melandri was one of the coordinators and teachers of the 'Scuola delle 150 ore' in Via Gabbro in Milan. The experience is as well the theme of a documentary by Adriana Monti, *Scuola Senza Fine* (Italy, 1983). which is as well told in the book edited by Maria Bruno, Giuliana and Nadotti, *Off Screen: Women & Film in Italy*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1988). pp. 80-2.

it. Amalia, on the other hand, is able to write her own life story and one day she gives it to Emilia to read 'When I let her read what I had written, especially when I was talking about my hometown, about the farmers and in particular about my life, she cried,'<sup>439</sup> Amalia says. Consequently, Amalia decides to write the story of Emilia's life (because by now she knows it by heart) and gives it to her to keep. After Emilia read what her friend had written about her life, 'she always carried it in her handbag and read it again and again, overcome by emotions.'<sup>440</sup> Cavarero says:

Amalia and Emilia are two friends. The first writes the story of the second because Emilia has continually recounted her story, in the most disorganised way, showing her friend her stubborn desire for narration. The gift of the written story is precisely Amalia's response to this desire. Now Emilia can carry the text of her story with her and re-read it continuously – moved every time by her own identity, made tangible by the tale.<sup>441</sup>

In this we see the importance of having someone to tell one's story – the political practice of relational biographical storytelling to which Cavarero brings her attention. We can see how Amalia managed to give Emilia an experience of her own subjectivity – of *who* she was – with the support of a trusted friend who told her story. Some feminists – including my mother Bertilla Bonato – have said that what was revolutionary about the feminist movement of the 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s and was witnessed by women

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<sup>439</sup> Cavarero, *Tu Che Mi Guardi, Tu Che Mi Racconti. Filosofia Della Narrazione*. p. 55 quote from The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*.

<sup>440</sup> Cavarero, *Tu Che Mi Guardi, Tu Che Mi Racconti. Filosofia Della Narrazione*. p. 55.

<sup>441</sup> *Ibid.* p. 56.

themselves and by the outside society was the extraordinary fact of *the birth of a (new) subjectivity*. In this, we see how the practice of *affidamento* is exemplified through the relationship between Amalia and Emilia, and we can say that they expose their singularity to each other and engage in politics in a similar way to that described by Cavarero:

the scene of narration, of telling each other life-stories, takes on the character of political action. Moreover, through such a suspension between discourse and life, it becomes possible to imagine a relational politics that is attentive to *who* one is, rather than to *what* one is. For within the context of telling someone the story of his/her life, within the scene of a narrative relation, the focus is shifted from the generalizable qualities of those involved, to the unique existents with whom the tale corresponds.<sup>442</sup>

Suppose someone does not have anyone to tell their story? More precisely, in the context we are reflecting here, suppose a woman who is a mother does not have anyone to tell her story? Suppose she has no one to describe her experience of motherhood, the changes that bringing up a child provoke in her? What does it mean for these mothers to talk? The ability to tell one's story to another person, to another woman or to another mother/carer is a vital skill for mothers, as it can make the experience of motherhood maybe a little easier and/because less solipsistic. More importantly it makes mothers realise that their experience is not unique, that motherhood is challenging, especially if experienced in isolation. The experience of motherhood can be

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<sup>442</sup> Kottman, "Translator's Introduction." p. xxiii.

singular and shared too because every mother is different, and every baby is different, and their relationships is unique.

In this chapter I have suggested that in mothers' relation lies a potentiality for politics. I have challenged the idea of motherhood as functional to the nuclear family and suggested that instead it can be recuperated as a mode of resistance. It is not that motherhood gives freedom *per se* but, if a mother can find alternative modes of care and get support from other carers, then she could feel less isolated and involved in a shared experience. This can give freedom to a carer. As well, I have suggested the importance of connecting care with storytelling adding to that ability to share one's story of disquiet, distress, joy, relief, confusion, exhaustion can help a carer feel freer because by being heard part of the feelings of isolation and managing the time and the tasks of what care implies can be shared. My friend novelist Amanthi Harris has led a storytelling making workshops for new parents and parents to be.<sup>443</sup> The aim was to make a story about oneself in this specific time of change and share old tales of transition. Motherhood being a poignant transition<sup>444</sup> is particularly open to be told as a story.<sup>445</sup>

The themes of relationality and politics explored here are the foundational ideas of the whole thesis and they help me ground the next

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<sup>443</sup> "[Http://Amanthiharris.Com/New-Ace-Funded-Workshops-for-Adults-with-My-Project-Storyhug/](http://Amanthiharris.Com/New-Ace-Funded-Workshops-for-Adults-with-My-Project-Storyhug/)," n.d.

<sup>444</sup> Many women find mothering a shocking experience in terms of the extremity of feelings it provokes, and the profound changes it seems to prompt in identity, relationship and sense of self. Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*. [Backcover]

<sup>445</sup> This delightful novella by my friend Amanthi tells the story of a woman nearing the due date and wondering the kind of mother she will be. Amanthi Harris, *Lantern Evening* (Norwich: Gatehouse Press, 2017).

chapter which gives a concrete example of these ideas. It focuses on a 1970s Roman mothers' collective, and shows it is possible to create an alternative way of living and experiencing motherhood, one which is collective.

## 4

rome 1970s: the politics and praxis of *Il collettivo madri*

In the spring of 2019 I was on holiday in Italy – near Rome – and I met with Silvana Pisa, one of the members of the 1970s Roman mothers’ collective, *Il collettivo madri*, which I discuss in this chapter.<sup>446</sup> I have known Silvana since I was a child as she is a dear long-term friend of my maternal aunt Francesca, who was also a member of the mothers’ collective. When I met Silvana she was writing a book, which was published in March 2020. The title is *Il Gioco dei vestiti. Passione, politica e altre storie del ‘68*<sup>447</sup> [The Game of Clothes. Passion, Politics and other Stories from 1968]. On that occasion she gave me the draft of the book, which is what informs this chapter. The book is partially

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<sup>446</sup> For an exhaustive list of 1970s and 1980s feminist groups and collectives in Rome and Lazio, the region where Rome is in, see this website: “[Http://Www.Herstory.It/Category/Gruppi/Gruppi-Anni-70](http://www.herstory.it/category/gruppi/gruppi-anni-70),” n.d.

<sup>447</sup> The book has just been published in March 2020. Silvana Pisa, *Il Gioco Dei Vestiti. Passione, Politica e Altre Storie Del ‘68*. (bordeaux ebooks, 2020). *Il gioco dei vestiti* (Clothes swaps) refers to the fact that many women in the 1970s started exchanging clothes between each other. It was a very usual practice.

autobiographical, of her experiences in the political feminist movements in Italy in the 1970s and afterwards when she became an MP in the Italian Parliament. Silvana recounts some of the experiences in the feminist movement, which brought about in her, and other women, the consciousness to be able to say (as we saw in the Introduction) ‘Io, sono mia!’. When Silvana gave me her draft the book was provisionally titled *Dall’Io al Noi* [From the I to the We], and this is still the name of one of the chapters. This is an important concept and experience for feminists of that period as they realised that the ability to shape one’s subjectivity, which is meaningful and rooted in one’s experience, happened mainly within feminist groups. The relationship with other feminists, the many dialogues they engaged in, helped women understand better who they were and so from a feeling of belonging to oneself they realised that the subjective *I* had meaning because they were part of a wider *We*, a collective becoming. They built what can be called an ethic of relationships which became a force, a life-long imprint and *modus vivendi*. In previous decades and centuries women’s identity was defined, framed, and forced by what can be called a patriarchal male code. In relation to the maternal the dictated patriarchal code was particularly restrictive for women. We can say that the main two achievements of the women of the Mother’s Collective were in building relationships between women and in challenging the patriarchal framing of ‘la mamma.’<sup>448</sup> In this chapter and the next (the last

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<sup>448</sup> Penelope Morris and Perry Willson, eds., *La Mamma: Interrogating a National Stereotype*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

one) one too I propose to mainly think through these two questions: firstly, can a relational model of motherhood protect women from the loneliness<sup>449</sup> many experience in the first few months and first years of a baby and child's life? Secondly, how does a move away from a model of care based on liberal individualism to a feminist model based on relational ontology that fosters the *commoning of care* as political collective organising modes looks like? The way I reply to these question in this Chapter is by showing how a group of Italian feminist women created a collective to elaborate in what it meant to be mothers – and feminists (as this was not obvious in the early 1970s in Italy – and how they could engage in collective way to be mothers and look after their children. In delving in the mothers' collective I present one example in which mothers were supported by a caring community of carers and how by feeling supported, heard and seen they were able to have a more fulfilling experience of motherhood and their subjectivity was experience less as lacking, a void but more a fulfilling experience. Further in the chapter then I show other examples of mothers' collective across the world and how they engaged in collective care.

Pisa, now in her early seventies, has had a varied life filled with many interests and passions: she has been a primary school teacher and a writer, and

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<sup>449</sup> In 2016 research published by the Co-op and the Red Cross identified becoming a new mum as one of six main causes of loneliness. They say 'New research shows that a staggering 82 per cent of mums under 30 feel lonely some of the time while more than four in 10 (43 per cent) are lonely often or always.' <https://www.co-operative.coop/media/news-releases/shocking-extent-of-loneliness-faced-by-young-mothers-revealed>, 2018. <https://www.channel4.com/news/the-loneliness-of-becoming-a-new-mum>, 2016.

has been active in politics all her life. She eventually became an MP for the Democratici di Sinistra<sup>450</sup> party during the mid-2000s.

Pisa's book starts from her experience as a volunteer at the Gorizia mental hospital in 1968 under the direction of Franco Basaglia.<sup>451</sup> It was Basaglia who promoted the closure of psychiatric hospitals in Italy which culminated in the very progressive Law 180, Italian Mental Health Act 1978, also called the Basaglia Law.<sup>452</sup> This law exemplified progressive approaches to psychiatry and has been a guide in this field in many parts of the world, especially in South America and continental Europe. Its implementation came about by the societal changes expressed in the profound critique of authority which permeated the reform movements in Italy in the 1970s<sup>453</sup>. In Italy these reforms led to the introduction of the divorce law in 1970, the inclusion of workers' rights in the progressive Statuto dei Lavoratori, legge n. 300, introduced in 1970 and finally the abortion law<sup>454</sup>, introduced in 1978. In 1977 the law n. 517 was introduced, "Norme sulla valutazione degli alunni e sull'abolizione degli esami di riparazione nonché altre norme di modifica dell'ordinamento scolastico." This law made some significant changes in the

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<sup>450</sup> *Democratici di Sinistra* (DS) was an Italian political party that lasted from 1998 till 2007 linked to ideas of left-centre and to ideals of social democracy. Many members of the party originated from the long standing Italian Communist Party which was the biggest communist party in Europe, founded in 1921 until it collapsed in 1991. From its ashes the *Partito Democratico della Sinistra* (PDS) and *Rifondazione Comunista* were founded.

<sup>451</sup> John Foot, *The Man Who Closed The Asylums: Franco Basaglia And The Revolution In Mental Health Care.*, First Edit (New York and London: Verso Books, 2015). Franco Basaglia, "Problems of Law and Psychiatry: The Italian Experience.," *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry* 3 (1980): 17–37.

<sup>452</sup> This law is now called: Law n. 180, "Accertamenti e Trattamenti Sanitari Volontari e Obbligatori." (1978).

<sup>453</sup> For a detailed analysis of reproductive politics in Italy within the larger political reforms brought about by the feminist movement and the progressive movements who challenged authoritarianism see Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy.*

<sup>454</sup> Legge n. 194, "Norme per La Tutela Sociale Della Maternità e Sull'interruzione Volontaria Della Gravidanza" (1978).

education system and it pertained to a very progressive pedagogical idea, regarding the integration of disabled children in primary schools and middle schools (from 6 to 14 years old) in the same classroom with other children. Schools for special educational needs and for differently able children were abolished.

Silvana's experience in a psychiatric hospital shaped her and was the start of her political formation. She says 'taking part in that experience separates my "before" and my "after" in an irreversible way.'<sup>455</sup> The 'before' for Silvana was her upbringing in her traditional family, which she despised, her conflicted relationship with her mother and studying for a degree in law that she had not chosen. At one point she decided to leave all this behind, leave her hometown of Bologna, and become a volunteer at the mental hospital where Basaglia was the director. Her life took a turn from then on; she became politically active and a feminist, and life was never the same. And this is the "after", Silvana's after – and many other women, in which I am interested in this chapter.

This chapter centres on the mothers' collective, *Il collettivo madri*, founded in Rome in 1976 by a group of women who were mothers. The main questions of this chapter are these: firstly, women who are mothers are very often seen as apolitical, how did *Il collettivo madri* challenge accepted, patriarchal, and conservative views of motherhood? And secondly, how did

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<sup>455</sup> Pisa, *Il Gioco Dei Vestiti. Passione, Politica e Altre Storie Del '68*.

their collective work support them as mothers in practice? How did being together make it easier to understand what the maternal meant? Lastly, how did being among mothers, exploring their experiences as mothers and women, aid them to gain a better understanding of their subjectivity? To answer these questions, I have chosen to bring to the fore the voices of the mothers of the collective and other feminists cited here. Therefore, I quote them ‘heavily’, for the specific feminist methodological purpose of bringing their words out and putting them into print in the desire to show my debt to them, to acknowledge the work that these feminists did. This was a method also used by the collective when they put together their book in 1979.<sup>456</sup>

The women of the collective and the wider Italian feminist movement were at the crossroad of critiques of the labour market, capitalism, woman’s role in society. They were part of the anti-authoritarian movement in Italy which led to the many important reforms as outlined previously. In the spirit of the wider feminist movement they decided to form a collective to share their experiences of motherhood, with the aim of creating a supportive community for themselves and their children. This is similar to the “communities of care” Silvia Federici talks about.<sup>457</sup> In her broader work she argues that it is important to break down the divide between the personal and the political to give value to the work of reproduction. To be able to do so it

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<sup>456</sup> Angela Cattaneo and Silvana Pisa, *L’Altra Mamma. La Maternita’ Nel Movimento Delle Donne. Fantasie, Desideri, Domande e Inquietudini*. (Roma: Savelli Editori, 1979).

<sup>457</sup> Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero. Homework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle*. p.12

is important to understand that the work of reproduction is not only a personal, private matter but a collective one. The women of the collective often exchanged childcare between them, so much that their adult children now often say that they are like brothers and sisters.



Photo from the book: *L'altra mamma*. Some children and a mother from *Il collettivo madri*  
Photographer: Gabriella Mercandini.

In creating the collective, the Roman mothers I am discussing here understood well that the maternal is not only a personal and private matter. By building webs of relationships and support between each other they started to break down the barriers between the personal and the political.

In what follows I focus on the political experience of *Il collettivo madri* and how their collective experience was partly a critique of individualism, or in other words, of an isolated way to experience motherhood. The mothers of the collective collaborated outside the political institutions; nevertheless they engaged in a daily political practice among themselves. The significance of

this, as much now as then, was undeniably that *the personal is political*. This political statement was first used by second wave American feminists in the late 1960s, its aim being to highlight that personal, private experiences, mainly but not only of women, are connected to wider social, economic, and political structures. It was also a challenge to the patriarchal monolithic understanding of the nuclear family.

This chapter engages in a case study to demonstrate that alternative modes of living motherhood have existed before and are still possible. In this chapter and the next I use photos to illustrate some points and to bring a visual element to this PhD, which serves to anchor the abstract to the concrete. Some of the photos show the mothers of the collective with their children. The other reason I use photos in this thesis is that it is part of my theoretical and political methodology. I am criticising the universal and abstract nature of philosophical language and law. I want instead to bring in an element of grounding in reality so as to show that *these* were the mothers I am talking about in this chapter. By doing this I represent the ‘uniqueness’ Cavarero, via Arendt, talks about. It is a way to step away from the metaphor of ‘the mother’ and to ground her in materiality, in the here and now. In doing so I am attempting to de-universalise and render concrete the universal and abstract idea of the subject, so prevalent in law and legal discourses, which I have criticised in the previous three chapters. These were not just

‘some’ women, a generalised category of mothers, but this specific group of women, with names like Rossella, Francesca, Anna, Silvana and so on:



Photo from the book: *L'altra mamma*. Some women, including Silvana Pisa, of Il collettivo madri.  
Photographer: Gabriella Mercandini.

This was the experience of this group of women and, as Italian photographer Tano D'Amico says, I am interested in showing the images of mothers who lived through those changing times because:

When society starts to criticise a regime, a state of things, the first thing to change is the image. The image as it is present in the changing times of our lives. Image as that indispensable and precious emanation of that invisible, uncatchable and uncontrollable matter from which affective and love relationships and feelings come from. And, what are the political movements if not this?<sup>458</sup>

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<sup>458</sup> ‘Quando si mette in discussione un regime, uno stato di cose, la prima a cambiare e’ l’immagine. L’immagine cosi’ presente nei cambiamenti della nostra vita. L’immagine emanazione preziosa e indispensabile di quella materia invisibile, imprevedibile, incontrollabile, da cui nascono affetti, amori, sentimenti. E cosa sono I movimenti se non questo?’ Tano D’Amico, *Anime e Memoria. Il Legame Imperdibile Tra Storia e Fotografia*. (Roma: Postcard Edizioni, 2013). [My translation]

Indeed, showing the pictures depicting the mothers of the collective brings to the fore who these mothers were; it gives them a face, an identity. This is not a group of abstract mothers in a parenting manual or ‘the mother’ of psychology, psychotherapy or child development books, but a concrete, unique group of women that came together to try to make sense of their experience of motherhood.

From the early 1970s, the Italian feminist movement distanced itself from any link to the maternal and motherhood. Investigating maternal identity was a challenge because it was historically linked to a forced identity decided by a patriarchal culture. What feminists privileged at the start of the movement were instances of freedom, even from motherhood, linked to themes of autonomy and self-determination (the struggle for the legalisation of abortion and a free sexuality). In addition, in those early years many feminists wanted to distance themselves from their own mothers, because many of them lived and embodied a very traditional domesticity and had dedicated their lives to the family. Italian feminist historian Anna Bravo aptly describes those mothers as ‘incomparably loving, servant and owner of her children often in tears but always on her feet holding the family together...’<sup>459</sup> Their feminist daughters wanted to get as far away as possible from the image of their own mothers, who in many cases had had many children between the

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<sup>459</sup> Anna Bravo cited in Morris and Willson, *La Mamma: Interrogating a National Stereotype*. p. 2.

years 1920s till 1960s. These mothers often did not have a life of their own separate from their husbands, children, and the home.

In contrast, the women of *Il collettivo madri* were going against the grain of the wider feminist movement from the start, as they were already mothers. The denigration of motherhood was so strong in the Italian feminist movement that *Il collettivo madri* almost felt they had to emerge from hiding as they would not be approved by the rest of the feminist movement. By founding a group by and for mothers *Il collettivo madri* gave a voice to feminist mothers within the Roman feminist movement:

*Il collettivo madri* tries to gain a space in a reality that in a sense does not account for the need of a space to study the realities of women who are mothers. Inside the feminist movement in Italy in the early 1970s, the main themes debated were the themes of abortion and sexuality. The theme of motherhood/maternity was a research/reflection which was neglected because it is a theme which is charged with traditional significance. *Il collettivo madri* had some difficulties bringing this theme out into the open and engaging other feminists in a collective debate on these themes which historically had always been lived as a private experience.<sup>460</sup>

Hence we see how the collective challenged the traditional image of motherhood and challenged too the ideological image of what a feminist ought to be. Silvana Pisa poignantly points out:

I perceived this sensation of *motherhood-ghetto* even within the feminist movement, it felt like having chosen to be a mother meant not having it very clear in our minds what the profound meaning of the “true”

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<sup>460</sup> Cattaneo and Pisa, *L'Altra Mamma. La Maternità Nel Movimento Delle Donne. Fantasie, Desideri, Domande e Inquietudini*. [My translation]

women's liberation was, or a scarce consciousness of my condition as a woman; being a mother meant, not being "feminist enough".<sup>461</sup>

Here we see that, from the foundation of the mothers' collective, the women involved felt tensions within the wider feminist movement. They did not feel recognised and valued as feminists *and* mothers. I argue that at times when societies are changing rapidly the rejection of past practices is a needed push towards critique, innovation, and change. The Italian feminist movement is not immune to this, and for a valid reason. In effect, after a few years the wider feminist movement, on the whole, understood that the "objective" to understand the needs of feminist mothers was the 'recomposition': the ability to hold together liberation, self-determination, and therefore a free choice of motherhood. Because they understood that it is not by mutilating a side of oneself, the desire for children, that one becomes a free woman. But it is in collectively facing up to the contradictions and the ambivalence of motherhood. Once women become more aware of their reasons and consciousness, then different perspectives can be united, even though it is still the case that in some situations feminism still struggles with motherhood and, we can say that, in some cases motherhood still struggles with feminism. I think this is linked still with a difficulty of holding different identities together.

Let's now see how the collective took shape. It was founded in Rome in 1976. Some of the mothers involved in the collective had been part of *Il collettivo sul parto* (The Birth Collective) from 1973 till 1976. Then *Il collettivo*

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<sup>461</sup> Pisa, *Il Gioco Dei Vestiti. Passione, Politica e Altre Storie Del '68*. [my translation].

*madri* formally lasted from 1976 until 1982 – though the same group of mothers still meet weekly today in 2021 – so in a way it was never dissolved. In 1979 *Il collettivo madri* transformed into The Motherhood and Women’s Condition Study and Research Group called *Il taccuino d’oro*.<sup>462</sup> In the next three parts of this chapter I focus chronologically on the different phases of the three groups. I chose to do a chronological account of the experiences of these groups because strategically I think it is important in this case to account for what happened before the creation of *Il collettivo madri* and afterwards too. It is valuable to focus on the consciousness-raising of this group of women who made it necessary at some point in their lives to become conscious of some of their needs when they gave birth and when they became mothers.

Further on in the process of their individuation and consciousness-raising, we can see how these women felt the need to elaborate and think through their experience of motherhood in a more theoretical manner with the creation of the research centre. For instance, they became conscious of the need to create a birth support group when they realised that the medical profession had taken over this experience that belongs to women, and they realised that they wanted to be more in contact with their bodies. This demonstrates that for feminists in the 1970s consciousness-raising was not only a change in perspective in relation to what it meant to be a woman in

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<sup>462</sup> *Il Taccuino D’Oro*, Il Gruppo di studi e di ricerca sulla maternità e sulla condizione femminile.

society and aiming to become equal and free, but it was as well a form of consciousness-raising which touched on their embodied self. They realised that women's consciousness happens if there is knowledge and consciousness about, and a relationship with and understanding of, one's body and sexuality. That they created the research centre afterwards is indicative of their desire to think through and theorise on the maternal. In other words, they desired to unite their embodied experience of sexuality, birth, and motherhood with some level of thought, abstraction, and elaboration, hence to unite *being* (embodied) and *language*:

Our research, enquiry, and reflections on the theme of motherhood is aimed at unveiling that tradition, around the maternal, that has been kept hidden and that belongs to the birth of the world. In the dialectic between the irregular and the regular, between accepting oneself and refusing oneself, the woman who becomes mother becomes again an unknown to herself where she searches for herself and her own face.<sup>463</sup>

These women wished to experience motherhood in a collective way, similar to the way they were living the feminist movement as a collective experience.

Pisa writes:

The late sixties taught many women the practice of the collective, of togetherness. From the early 70s many Italian women started meeting up together, it was a practice inspired by American feminism. Being among women is the discovery of a great pleasure. Talking with each other and exposing each other creates connections, closeness and affection between us. Conflicts were present – different roles among women,

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<sup>463</sup> Cattaneo and Pisa, *L'Altra Mamma. La Maternita' Nel Movimento Delle Donne. Fantasie, Desideri, Domande e Inquietudini*. [My translation]

power struggles and group dynamics were hard to manage – but these were conflicts among women for women.<sup>464</sup>

Many women started meeting up in small groups of six to eight people and they started practising consciousness raising, discussing and sharing among themselves. At times tentatively, they spoke of how they felt, how they lived as women in a society which did not respect them, their sexuality, how their childhood was often lived in very patriarchal families, and so on, no subject was forbidden. This practice then spread to the wider group of feminists in the quarters and cities and then nationally. Moreover, from the early seventies these women's internal subjective identity started to change; they started to become more aware of a sense of self, when they were able to say or attempt to say 'I belong to myself' as I have discussed in the Introduction to the thesis.

Some of the women of *Il Collettivo Madri* already knew each other before starting the collective and were close friends, while some did not. Some women were working-class, some middle-class, some educated and some not and some studying at the time with small children. They were all Italians at first and then a Spanish woman joined their group. Some women originally came from the North of Italy and some from the South of Italy, some were born in Rome. Of those women who knew each other some were part of the Roman small consciousness-raising groups and many were political militants of left-wing groups. Many were teachers and many were active in the Cgil

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<sup>464</sup> Pisa, *Il Gioco Dei Vestiti. Passione, Politica e Altre Storie Del '68*. [My translation]

Scuola (Italian General Confederation of Labour union, teachers' section). Some women belonged to the left-wing teachers' collective, which used to meet at the Sapienza University of Rome in classroom IV of the Chemistry department. Some women knew each other from the feminist teachers' collective of via dei Gracchi and others from the feminist collective of Centocelle. Others knew each other as they were part of *Lotta Continua*, a far left extra parliamentary organisation, of which Toni Negri was one of the main ideologists, active from 1969 until 1976. One woman was part of *Avanguardia Operaia*, another far left communist organisation active from 1968-1978. She was part of the feminist collective *Appio Tuscolano*. Some women of the collective met on holiday and others lived next to each other.

### **il collettivo sul parto – 1973-1976**

*Il collettivo sul parto* (the birth collective) was founded in Rome in 1973 as a group with the aim of supporting women's health, giving counter-information on birth practices, and supporting women who wanted to give birth at home. In 1976 the women that were part of it joined the mothers' collective, *Il collettivo madri*. Among the women of this collective, who included Silvana Pisa, there were some doctors and obstetricians who later supported some of the women of the mothers' collective in giving birth to their children. In *The Birth Collective*, *Il collettivo parto*, some of the women started analysing and critiquing the material and psychological conditions in which they gave birth. They had a desire to recuperate a conscious position in the experience of giving birth,

an experience which they saw instead as heavily medicalised and extrinsically controlled by others. Pisa says:

We told each other about our birth experiences which were often traumatic and violent and very rarely a positive experience. We realised how we had been forced to experience the useless and often sadistic rituals of the medical profession (the shaving of our vaginas, the enemas, the catheter, the jumping on our bellies, the indiscriminate anaesthesia, the insults, the sarcasm and often the vulgarity).<sup>465</sup>

During their discussions, explorations and research around their birth experiences the women of the group realised that when relating with the medical institution they delegated everything to the hospital and to the gynaecologist, even though they then realised that the institution was never (at least in the 1970s and before that) on the side of the woman's desires and needs, or physical and mental health. They realised how often women experience their birth as a terrible violence, like a trauma, which was avoided at times, only by preventing her from experiencing birth at all by giving her drugs to make her sleep:

We shared among each other that institutions isolate and separate us to have more power over us. We discussed that often the obstetricians, even if women, had lost their "original" autonomous, "maternal" role (midwife) to please the male medical professionals involved in births. They seemed to be jealous of the creative act that birth is, which they will never be able to do. It seemed to us that the male doctors wanted to take away the role of protagonist to her birth from the woman to make her a passive object docile to their "science." We understood that, as the physiology of this event does not require, in general, the help of the male medical professionals, they tend to render it

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<sup>465</sup> Ibid. [My translation]

pathological with interventions which justify his presence (the caesarean, oxytocin, anaesthesia).<sup>466</sup>

Overall the result of their sharing and dialogues was the realisation that it was important to know as much as they could learn about their bodies and birth so that they were able to defend themselves better within the hospitalised birth. This led to a better ‘appropriation’ of one’s body and the *Birth collective* supported women in being active protagonists of their birth experience. It was the personal and collective work of feminists to learn to belong more to themselves and as Lucy van Pelt proclaimed as we saw in the Introduction. It led as well to the creation of different approaches to birth, like home birth, which was the common practice of many of the collective’s mothers in the previous decades, as it was practice. One association influenced by women’s desire to birth in a different way, is the *Associazione Nazionale Culturale Ostetriche Parto a Domicilio e Casa Maternita*<sup>467</sup> which was founded in 1981. Today it coordinates all the different home birth centres, *Casa Maternita*’ in Italy where women can decide to give birth in a home like situation, in hospitals’ birthing centres. They support home births too. The Italian public health care system, *Servizio sanitario nazionale*, fully subsidizes home births in four Italian regions and offers a partial reimbursement in six other regions.

Another way in which feminists reshaped how birth was viewed was the institution of ‘natural’ birth wards or birth centres within hospitals. These

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid. [My translation]

<sup>467</sup> “[Http://Www.Nascereacasa.It/](http://www.nascereacasa.it/),” n.d. (National Cultural Association Obstetricians Home Birth and Maternity Home)

options allowed women to be more involved and be protagonists of their own birth more than spectators. Feminists understood that patriarchal culture kept them far away from knowing their bodies, sexuality, and birth. Moreover, they realised that pregnancy and birth had always been considered a function of the social reproduction of children within nationalistic discourses, not as something that was assumed to be part of women's physiological, psychological, and subjective experience. Historically women's bodies and reproduction have been overtaken by patriarchy for the benefits of the State, hence the importance of legal frames to that overtaking as I explained in Chapter 2. As Adrienne Rich famously said, the women of the collective realised that there are:

two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the *potential* relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction – and to children; and the *institution* – which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control.<sup>468</sup>

This was a revolutionary realisation, which had an impact on women's sense of self and their relationship with birth and with their children. As a result of those years of analysis and sharing with each other they wanted to overturn this millenarian story and build a new common sense about pregnancy, birth and motherhood. In 1978 they decided to translate and edit, for the first time in Italy, an American book focusing on birth which supported women to re-

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<sup>468</sup> Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. (W. W. Norton & Company, 1995). p. 13. Original emphases.

appropriate birth. It was called *The Birth Book*<sup>469</sup> by midwife Raven Lang whose title in translation was *Riprendiamoci il parto! Esperienze alternative di parto: resoconti, testimonianze, immagini*.<sup>470</sup> The translation became popular in Italy at the time and was reprinted in three editions. In the second and third edition some women of *Il collettivo sul parto* added to the book their own experience of giving birth. One member of the group made a radio programme about *The Birth Book* and some members of the group translated, from the American edition, a prenatal yoga book. Pisa wrote a book with information, suggestions, and pictures about breastfeeding, making sure not to make women who did not manage to breastfeed feel guilty. All these discussions, elaborations, the making of radio programmes, the translation and publishing of books on birth, yoga for pregnancy and breastfeeding, were a powerful act of recuperation of the maternal experiences which had been taken away from women by an over-medicalised view of birth and an expropriation of women's bodies as the carriers of babies without an identity and a subjectivity of their own.

### **il collettivo madri – 1976-1982**

As discussed above, a group of feminist women who were mothers, some already friends, some not, created a mother's collective, *Il collettivo madri*. Apart from belonging to this group, these women were active politically in various

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<sup>469</sup> Raven Lang, *Birth Book*, Edition reprint (Santa Cruz, CA: Dynamic Press, 2010).

<sup>470</sup> Raven Lang, *Riprendiamoci Il Parto! Esperienze Alternative Di Parto: Resoconti, Testimonianze, Immagini*, Second (Roma: Savelli, 1978). The English translation of the title is: *Let us Recapture Birth! Alternative Experiences of Giving Birth, Testimonies and Images*.

other areas. They participated in many demonstrations in the streets and squares of Rome during those years of protest and demand for change in Italian society. One of these demands was the legalisation of abortion and divorce. In the Autumn of 1976 the broad national feminist movement decided not to propose a “feminist” abortion law. The choice was made for various reasons: as a refusal to deal with institutions, which women felt were hostile and extraneous; and in recognition of the difficulty of seeing the richness of women’s ideas and experiences reduced to a law. Moreover, the difficulty of facing complex issues – for instance abortion after the 22nd week of pregnancy – which would have forced them to agree to rules and objectives that did not reflect their diverse experiences. The wider Roman feminist movement had neglected, in their collective action, a very important analysis – their analysis, consciousness-raising – around the theme of reproduction and motherhood, which was such an important issue for women and often not openly discussed in the feminist collectives. Because of the interventions of collectives such as *Il collettivo madri* the theme eventually became more widely discussed and analysed. Silvana notes:

The experience of the political militancy post 1968, which was common to many of us, had tended to negate the maternal condition of existence confining it to a private experience not yet politicised, of which to be ashamed. It was seen as a small bourgeois experience which would take away time and work needed for the revolution. Motherhood was seen as a kind of impairment tolerated as a weakness which was reproached by male left wing “comrades”. It was seen as something to discount at least

with the exclusion and marginalisation from the left wing political groups.<sup>471</sup>

As we can see mothers were excluded, both from left wing groups for being less free to engage in the ‘revolution’ and from within the feminist movement, as they were considered less feminist because they had children.

Pisa explains that when she participated in feminist meetings and was asked to explain what motivated her choice to have children, she always felt defensive and would explain her desire to have a child as being linked to her need for creativity, which a child can fulfil, her need for affective links to others, her need for security. At one point in the mid-70s she wanted to share her experiences of motherhood with other women who were mothers too, and she felt the need to recompose herself in a way, so that she could exist as a woman and a mother in the eyes of other women, not ‘just’ as a woman. Then she heard that *Il collettivo madri* had been formed by a group of feminist mothers. It had taken shape not long before in Anna’s house, and she could see herself in this group. Silvana started to share her experience of motherhood with the rest of the collective. From this point onward she began to relate with other feminist mothers like herself. More importantly, the collective was where she learned how to live the experience of motherhood as a feminist mother.

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<sup>471</sup> Pisa, *Il Gioco Dei Vestiti. Passione, Politica e Altre Storie Del '68*. [My translation]

The women of the collective had dinner together every week on the same day, in one of their houses, where they used to confront parts of their identity as mothers and as women. This process involved allowing what has always been seen as an intimate and private experience to “getting outside”<sup>472</sup> as they used to say then, which meant doing politics in a similar way to the much-used second wave feminist slogan “the personal is political”. The women of the collective worked on trying to understand the meaning of their identities as women and as mothers. For them it was important, or rather, vital, that they managed to keep an identity separate from their own children. This in practice meant having a job, interests and relationships, especially with other women, outside the home. We can say that these two identities of woman and mother are related to each other in many ways and they can influence and weave into each other, so there is probably no sharp separation between them. Nevertheless, feminist women of those years felt a strong need to form a different identity, if not an internal space at least a physical space, separate from that of mother. I think this was felt so strongly because their own mothers’ identities as women in their own right was often non-existent, or existent but unable to flourish. I think that their relational model of politics enabled this because the collective space allowed them to be seen and recognised as other than a mother. It was a space for themselves which they created and valued. Indeed, in that space they spoke of their children and how

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<sup>472</sup> They used to say “uscendo all’esterno”

they lived motherhood, but not only of these things. The lesson that they left us is that once becoming a mother or a carer not to forget oneself, one's needs, and one's desires.

In December 1978 the women of the collective organised a first national conference in Rome on the theme of motherhood and the maternal, *Convegno nazionale sulla maternità* which was held at La Casa delle donne, “al Governo Vecchio” (at the time occupied by the Roman feminist women). They decided to organise this conference as an attempt to address the separateness of their experience as mothers in the feminist movement and to share their experiences and interrogations around the maternal, hence to challenge the fact that, as Michelle Boulous Walker says, ‘women are silenced most effectively by their association with maternity.’<sup>473</sup>

As a result of the women's personal and collective experience in the collective and at the conference, Silvana Pisa and Angela Cattaneo (also a member of the collective) decided to collect their reflections and elaborations on motherhood in a book titled *L'altra mamma*.<sup>474</sup> The questions the women of the collective were interested in were the same as those of the conference, explained this way in the book:

Why, women in our reality, decide to have children? How much of ourselves and what do we put into this decision? If it is true that historically motherhood has been a forced identity which if not would

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<sup>473</sup> Walker, *Philosophy and the Maternal Body*. *Reading Silence*.

<sup>474</sup> Cattaneo and Pisa, *L'Altra Mamma. La Maternità Nel Movimento Delle Donne. Fantasie, Desideri, Domande e Inquietudini*.

have meant being marginalised from society? So now, is it enough that women refuse motherhood to build a free identity? The antithesis “mother or free woman” is a description that we reject. For us it is true that motherhood is a contradictory and ambivalent choice, firstly with ourselves, our children and their fathers.<sup>475</sup>

These are some of the questions that the women explored, and together with other feminists around the world, this may have been the first time in history that so many women questioned motherhood at this level. This was an important subjective investigation which brought more awareness to women about themselves and their desires. Reading this archival material, what emerges clearly and openly and refreshingly is the contradiction and ambivalence women felt about their desire to have a child or not. The consciousness-raising of these women seems tightly linked with their sense of self and meaning. They seem to ask, what does it mean to live a meaningful life for myself as a woman? What is my innermost desire? Finding satisfaction through work or having a child? Can I combine having a child and work? What emerges is the confusion caused by what being a woman meant in those years. What transpires clearly is that without consciousness and knowledge of their bodies there is no liberation, in other words a ‘fuller’ more embodied feminist consciousness happens if women also become more conscious of their bodies. This is linked to more awareness of sexuality and a better ability to decide to have a child or not and, eventually, a more conscious way to give birth:

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<sup>475</sup> Pisa, *Il Gioco Dei Vestiti. Passione, Politica e Altre Storie Del '68*. [My translation]

In the individuation of motherhood as free choice there is a big difference in relation to the other way to see motherhood which is present in our institutions and society which ignores, mortifies, sacrifices women in her entirety as a person and hence in her specificity. In a free choice of becoming a mother we feel a great drive to renew structures, values and methods, hence to rethink our own development as women in a new way.<sup>476</sup>

Women were asking many questions about their being in the world, their human condition as women in Italy in the 1970s. Indeed, some of the feelings felt by women were confusion, rage, disappointment. They seem very conscious that they do not want the child to satisfy their need for love and affection, that a child does not guarantee affection for mothers, when they find it hard to find it somewhere else. In other words, they did not want to get personal satisfaction through a life dedicated only to their children, like their mothers had often done, and more incisively they did not want to have a personal subjective satisfaction from their children. Conversely, some women realised that even without having a child they did not feel satisfied with their lives. One woman says:

..if I do a review of the things that I have done up to now in my life, I realise that even if without having had children, I am not that realised. My identity is not fully there, even if I have all the time at my disposal without a child that castrates me (*senza figlio che mi castra*). I feel a lack of creativity and it becomes less and less every day in this missed realisation of motherhood.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>476</sup> Giglia Tedesco cited in *Il taccuino d'oro, Maria, Medea e Le Altre. Il Materno Nelle Parole Delle Donne: Rassegna Stampa*. (Roma: Ierici, 1982), p. XI

<sup>477</sup> "...Se faccio un bilancio delle cose fatte fino a ora mi rendo conto che pur non avendo figli, tutte queste realizzazioni io non le ho. La mia identità non c'è pur avendoci tutto il tempo a disposizione, senza figlio che mi castra. Sento che la mia creatività cala, si abbassa di giorno in giorno in questa mancata realizzazione." (anonymous woman that attended the Conference on Motherhood, December 1978, Rome,

We can see that even women who did not have children had an ambivalent relationship with the maternal, partially they thought children castrate and partially that their own lack of creativity might be due to the missed realisation of motherhood. This is significant as it shows maternal ambivalence in relation to a mother who has children and in relation a woman who does not have children who may be content or ambivalent with her decision. It is possibly in this seeming contradiction that we find one of the most important meanings of motherhood: that there somehow a loss and a gain in both, in having children and not having children.

At the collective, women met regularly with and without children to escape the isolation of their own home. For three summers (from 1978 till 1980) the mothers of the collective and their children went on holiday together to the seaside on the Italian coast south of Rome:



Photo from the book: *L'altra mamma*. Children and mothers from Il collettivo madri.  
Photographer: Gabriella Mercandini.

The aim of these holidays, which started partly as a tacit bet, was to see if ‘after a lot of talking during our meetings, [. . .] it works when we are all together with the children?’<sup>478</sup> They wanted to spend these days together to see how it was to move “from theory to praxis” in a big group of mothers and children:

We tried to implement some rules during these holidays but it turned out to be harder than we thought. We imposed one rule on the collective holiday – after failing to impose more – ‘kids should not eat between lunch and dinner apart from one snack’, but this meant that we were forced in the end to spread jam on bread all day long for everyone as the kids were hungry more often. Our children were the children of the antiauthoritarian dream, right? Our dream for that holiday had been to sit on comfy chairs and spend the afternoons away from the heat relaxing, reading and discussing together but it all became very tiring. Our children ‘enslaved’ us, *our time was continually interrupted*. Our spaces were invaded by the children and their needs, in the end the maternal destiny of these days was very similar to the absolutely traditional one.

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<sup>478</sup> ‘Alla base una tacita scommessa: dopo tanti discorsi, durante le nostre riunioni perche’ non vedere come funziona tutte insieme con i figli? Come dire teoria e prassi.’ Pisa, *Il Gioco Dei Vestiti. Passione, Politica e Altre Storie Del '68*. p. [My translation]

On top of that none of us could stand any criticism of our children and we all found deep down that the children of the other women in the group were all a bit spoiled and badly behaved.<sup>479</sup>

The mothers felt enslaved, invaded, and interrupted<sup>480</sup> by their children. They found out that they were fragile and vulnerable and, after three years the holidays together as a collective ended. What they discovered was that the children could separate them, which was ‘heresy’ for a mothers’ collective. What came to the fore were the difficulties of relating with other women, the ambivalence and the reality of what a group of mothers together could or could not achieve. This was definitely not an idealised ‘matriarchal’ community of mothers. What they seemed to have longed for during those holidays, was that space for themselves we discussed previously.

This is interesting for our discussion on how mothers can help and support each other. It is a useful reminder that relationships between mothers should not be idealised, but that we should not abandon swapping childcare, supporting each other, spending time together, or giving each other free time just because these relationships might be challenging. These women did not live together but they spent a lot of time together, and went on holiday together trying to figure out a different way to live the experience of

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<sup>479</sup> ‘Tentativi disattesi di regole e turni...per il resto la violazione di una singola regola che ci siamo date (non si mangia fuori pasto) ci costringe a spalmare pane e marmellata a tutti I per tutto il giorno. E poi I nostril figli non sono I figli del sogno antiautoritario? E cosi? I bambini ci schiavizzano. Mentre per noi, che ci sognavamo sedute nelle comode poltrone di vimini del giardino a leggere insieme e a discutere, e’ una faticaccia. Tempi continuamente interrotti e spazi invasi: destino materno assolutamente tradizionale. Nessuna di noi riesce a sopportare osservazioni sui propri figli, ognuna trova che, in fondo, i figli delle altre siano viziosi e un po’ maleducati.’ Ibid. [My translation]

<sup>480</sup> The theme of interruption and its relation to maternal subjectivity has been explored by Lisa Baraitser in Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*.

motherhood. This pursuit of a more open and shared experience of motherhood is similar to the one feminist scholar Lynne Segal describes in relation to Britain:

The majority of the hundreds of women I encountered politically in the 1970s, who were mostly in their twenties and early thirties, lived in some form of shared housing. With or without men, collective living was viewed by many feminists as not just a more economical arrangement than settling down either alone or within the traditional family unit, but one which could encourage more open, supportive and creatively shared forms of companionship, domesticity, childcare, political work and community engagement.<sup>481</sup>

We can see a parallel between British women and Italian women during that time. As Hazel Frizell argues about the feminist movement in the UK, there was a desire to collectivise. She states ‘the isolation felt by many women who were housebound with young children was a factor in the formation of art groups and feminist groups in order to break the isolation and raise consciousness of the changes in society needed to alleviate all aspects of female oppression and discrimination.’<sup>482</sup> One thing to note is that unlike in the British experience described by Segal, Italian feminists seemed to be more ambivalent in relation to motherhood and the maternal. Probably one reason for this is the deeper interrogation that Italian women posed on the maternal and the lived politics of motherhood. These were different in the two countries because the socio-cultural, economic, and political differences

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<sup>481</sup> Lynne Segal, *Making Trouble: Life and Politics*. (London: Serpent’s Tails, 2007), p. 75.

<sup>482</sup> Hazel Elizabeth Frizell, “Representations of Specific Concerns of the Woman’s Liberation Movement in British Feminist Art 1970-1978” (Kingston University, 2009). p. 54.

between Italy and Britain in the 1970s were quite marked. In relation to universal suffrage, women in Britain had achieved more freedoms by this time on the whole. Some British women were granted the right to vote in 1918, and this was extended to all women over 21 years of age in 1928.<sup>483</sup> In Italy women got the vote only in 1948. For both Italian and British feminists there was a desire to challenge conservative ideas of the family and both were quite 'successful' if we look at the progress they made against outdated ideas of the family which existed before the 1970s. In this respect, Segal says of feminists of those years: 'We placed the subject of nurseries, shared parenting, working time, children's health requirements, play space, schooling, mothers' housing needs, anything else we could think of in relation to women and children, on political agendas. Above all, we undermined the stigma of single motherhood and illegitimacy.'<sup>484</sup>

### **la cooperativa Il taccuino d'oro<sup>485</sup> - 1982**

The co-operative *Il taccuino d'oro* was created in 1982 from the transformation and merging of *Il collettivo madri*. Some of the women had been part of the mothers' collective and some had not. In this transformation of the group we can see women's desire to further understand their experience of motherhood and bring a level of analysis and research to their experiences and thoughts. In

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<sup>483</sup> Race and class status would have been a factor in terms of whether British women were experiencing greater relative freedom.

<sup>484</sup> Segal, *Making Trouble: Life and Politics*. p. 86.

<sup>485</sup> The co-operative *Il taccuino d'oro*, *Centro di ricerca e studio sulla maternità e la condizione femminile*. (Research and study group around the maternal and women's condition) was based in Rome. Its members were: Valeria Barchiesi, my maternal aunty Francesca Bonato, Pinella De Riu, Silvana Pisa, Patrizia Regazzoni, Rosa Romero, Anna Rita Sciortino, Rosalba Spagnoletti and Gabriella Spigarelli.

Rome in those years there were many opportunities for feminist women to attend free courses often held at the *Casa internazionale delle donne*. The “Virginia Woolf cultural centre” was a feminist centre where courses of interest to feminists were held. The main aim of the various courses that the mothers of the collective decided to take part in was to create a feminist space for discussions, study, and in-depth collective research on some subjects that interested them. One of these courses, held in 1980, was a *Dialogue with Mothers* with the psychoanalyst Maria Grazia Minetti. They participated in fourteen sessions with her, in which the idea was to start from concrete cases of specific conflicts and situations in which mothers had found themselves in their relationship with their children, with the aim of elaborating on them together.

Another course that the mothers organised in 1980, called “Analysis that ends and analysis that never ends” was held by psychoanalyst Gabriella Ripa di Meana. The subjects that the women of the mothers’ collective found interesting and compelling were the ones relating to psychoanalysis because ‘they give space to desires, projections, narcissism and ambivalence.’<sup>486</sup> As I said in the Introduction, Italian feminists were very interested and invested in psychoanalysis for various reasons, including the fact that Irigaray, who as I explained in the first three chapters, had a great influence on Italian feminists, was herself a psychoanalyst.

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<sup>486</sup> Pisa, *Il Gioco Dei Vestiti. Passione, Politica e Altre Storie Del '68*. [My translation]

In 1981 the collective participated in various courses, one titled *Maternal ambivalence* held by feminist writer and activist Alessandra Bocchetti, which all the women at the collective found especially interesting, while they also prepared the exhibition *Maria, Medea e le altre* which touched on the theme of maternal ambivalence. In the same year they participated in a literature course, held by feminist, communist journalist and politician Rossana Rossanda, *Motherhood as pretext*, and then they followed up the course with author Nadia Fusini analysing jealousy in *The kidnapping of Lola Von Stein* by Marguerite Duras. They also took a history course with Anna Rossi Doria titled *The absent maternal* and a course on psychoanalysis held by feminist psychoanalyst Manuela Fraire with Sandra Begnoni discussing Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia*. These courses represented the possibility for mothers and non-mothers to understand better the experience of motherhood and the maternal.

### **maria, medea e le altre. il materno nelle parole delle donne**<sup>487</sup>

The collective's two main imperatives and principles were: 'making/doing together'<sup>488</sup> and 'confront the external world.'<sup>489</sup> This meant concretely doing things together as women, organising events, collaborating, and being active in feminist politics. In other words, it meant taking their politics outside, to participate in demonstrations, or just going out as women together at night,

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<sup>487</sup> Il taccuino d'oro, *Maria, Medea e Le Altre. Il Materno Nelle Parole Delle Donne: Rassegna Stampa*.

<sup>488</sup> "Creare/fare insieme." p.

<sup>489</sup> "Confrontarsi con l'esterno." p.

everything to make them feel that they were recognised in the external world.<sup>490</sup> It is this active relational space from which politics emerge that I am interested in this thesis.

In 1981 the collective decided to ask the Roman municipality to open a public women's library. Sadly, their proposal was not successful, but one of the councillors they spoke to asked if they wanted to organise an event around motherhood on International Women's Day on the 8<sup>th</sup> March of the following year. The women were excited by this offer and collectively decided to focus the event on the ambivalences inherent in motherhood, specifically how maternal ambivalence has been depicted by traditional iconography in history, in cinema and in written documents such as newspapers and magazines. In 1982 the women of the co-operative *Il taccuino d'oro* organised an exhibition where they exhibited photos of paintings and films representing birth and motherhood throughout history:

Now that the collective has become a co-operative for research, their aim is to expound their research to all women, to share their reflections on these problems and on the ambivalence and contradictions that the role of motherhood historically carries with it. This is the meaning of this exhibition.<sup>491</sup>

The exhibition went well, and for the following autumn the women decided to publish a book which they titled *Maria, Medea e le altre. Il materno nelle parole*

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<sup>490</sup> One of my maternal aunts told me several times how as a young woman living in Rome in the early 1970s she forced herself to go out, travel, interact with people to get out from the shyness that came about from her conservative upbringing. Once she became a feminist she had to work a lot to counter that upbringing and to get out of her shell she forced herself to take actions that were not 'natural' to her.

<sup>491</sup> Anna Pizzo, *Il Manifesto*. (Communist daily national newspaper, March 1982), cited in *Il taccuino d'oro, Maria, Medea e Le Altre. Il Materno Nelle Parole Delle Donne: Rassegna Stampa*. p. 233. [my translation]

*delle donne: rassegna stampa.* The book included pictures of the exhibition on the cover and inside there were articles around the theme of motherhood and the maternal, written from 1972 to 1982, which appeared in Italian daily newspapers and magazines. The articles were written by, among others, Luce Irigaray, Adrienne Rich, Luciana Castellina, Rossana Rossanda, Chiara Saraceno, Ida Dominijanni, and Julia Kristeva. As Silvana Ada Scalchi said about the women's writing on motherhood chosen for the book:

The maternal passes through all women's life, those who are mothers and those who are not. It is inscribed in the body and the imaginary of women, both if they choose to become mothers and if they choose not to be mothers. The significance of giving value to what has been written and said by women in the last 10 years – the same period which saw the growth of the feminist movement and the struggle to legalise abortion in Italy – recognises the importance for women to consider themselves as protagonists of their life and society.<sup>492</sup>

In this statement we can see that these feminist women were better able to elaborate and reflect on the choice of becoming a mother or not. This is something of a privilege, as many women did not have this choice then and nor do they have it now. It shows how consciousness-raising can bring about a better understanding of oneself and one's desires; I would say this is one of feminism's main achievements. It also shows, in light of previous discussions, that reproduction is a somatic reality for both being a woman and being a mother. This is not because having a womb inherently links someone to motherhood and reproduction, but because the womb exists and we cannot

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<sup>492</sup> Silvana Ada Scalchi cited in *Ibid.* p. Xi [my translation]

think it away. There is a deeper level of conscious and unconscious material linked to it. Below we see a picture from the 1970s Roman feminist movement, in which a woman holds a placard saying ‘motherhood as a free choice not an imposed chain’:



Photo from the book: *L'altra mamma*. Some mothers of Il collettivo madri at a demonstration in Rome in the 1970s. Photographer: Gabriella Mercandini.

In this image and in these words too we see the deep reflection this group of women engaged in; they recognised that the maternal is not a theme confined only to women who choose to be mothers, but it is also ‘inscribed’ in women who do not choose to be mothers. There are many reasons for this, one of which is the conscious and unconscious desire for a child or not. As this anonymous woman who participated at the 1978 Roman motherhood conference explicated ‘this desire of a child is not a real and true desire, it’s a

phantasm.<sup>493</sup> In other words it's often not something that can be brushed off quickly, or it leaves some 'residues' in the psyche and the body which can re-emerge at one point or another in a woman's life.

Nowadays all the members of the 'original' mothers' collective are in their late sixties or early-mid-seventies. They still meet once a week and, Pisa says that after all those years this is where they are at:

Together we have travelled a long road. The journey of the collective has lasted many years. The pictures are the witness of some goals. We have weaved our personal histories together, experienced some distance, individual crisis, common happiness, intransigencies and tolerance. We still meet every Wednesday in our homes to have dinner all together, 'la cena delle donne'. We share common and private projects, reading lists we are passionate about and regressive *pettegolezzi* tittle-tattle, curious looks on the world and disappointments. We are not a monolith: our personal stories and political choices, which often in feminist activism coincided, today are often far from each other. But for now, our boat is quite stable, and the storm left behind, thanks to the affection that links us all. We still hope to remain friends for many years to come and to sail away to our different destinies. Is it too much or too little?<sup>494</sup>

As a summary of their collective experience, this reflects how they have built separate identities, indeed from the *I* to the *We* but also from the *We* to the *I*.

There is a return of meaning from the collective to the personal and subjective, what feminist politics has realised, and still realises, for many women worldwide.

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<sup>493</sup> Cattaneo and Pisa, *L'Altra Mamma. La Maternità Nel Movimento Delle Donne. Fantasie, Desideri, Domande e Inquietudini*. p. 19. [my translation].

<sup>494</sup> Pisa, *Il Gioco Dei Vestiti. Passione, Politica e Altre Storie Del '68*. [My translation] p. 9.

During those different phases of the collective the women were active politically in external struggles challenging the Italian state and its culture, and these struggles brought various advances – legal and cultural – for women in the 1970s and 1980s<sup>495</sup> which had political implications and consequently affected the personal too. What followed was a move from the personal to the political, from the political back to the personal. The contribution they made to social change was to denaturalize mothering, to bring motherhood into the streets and into public spaces with the aim of challenging the patriarchal idea of the nuclear family. Most importantly, this group of mothers learned to define their experience in their own words, words which originated from an embodied experience of their lives as women and words which gave authority to their own subjective experience, (*partire da se'*).

If we were to trace the origin of a subjectivity which can be processed and 'acquired' through one's intrinsic motivations and not externally dictated by the constraints that patriarchy has placed on women, we can say that the women of the *Il collettivo madri* were working towards 'belonging to themselves.' This was what many women were shouting at demonstrations from the late 1960s onwards, and what the character from the comic strip "Peanuts," Lucy, was shouting too. We can say that these Roman women who were mothers are an example of a group of women who worked or attempted to work, paraphrasing Braidotti, to achieve a subjectivity which

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<sup>495</sup> Hanafin, *Conceiving Life. Reproductive Politics and the Law in Contemporary Italy*.

they ‘gained control over.’<sup>496</sup> They did so via seeking an embodied relationship and connection with their bodies, their sexuality, the birth experience, and finding a space for themselves. Finding a better relationship with those was, and is, connected with boundaries and consent. They did so collectively, and because of the collective, immersed in the relational *modus vivendi* I discussed previously.

### **other examples of mothers’ collectives around the world**

Around the world there have been various experiences of relationality between mothers, where mothers have initiated and organised ways to share spaces collectively. Historically Black mothers have often mothered collectively as other women in the community or other relatives took on the role of *othermothers* as Patricia Hill Collins discusses.<sup>497</sup> In this section I am interested in tracing few other experiences of collective care (there is not enough room to explore this theme extensively here).<sup>498</sup> Exploring the commoning of care demonstrates this is often a common need mothers have; secondly because it shows how the Roman *Mothers’ collective* was part of a worldwide movement of women who questioned motherhood and wanted to change its discourse; and thirdly because it is important to give credit and

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<sup>496</sup> Rosi Braidotti, “On Bugs and Women: Irigaray and Deleuze on the Becoming-Woman.” in *Engaging with Irigaray. Feminist Philosophy and Modern European Thought.*, ed. Carolyn Burke, Naomi and Shor, and Margaret Whitford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 111–40, p. 118. Braidotti has made the same point in Braidotti Rosi, “Envy; or, With My Brains and Your Looks,” in *Men in Feminism*, ed. Jardine Alice and Smith Paul (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), 233–41; and Braidotti, *Patterns of Dissonance. A Study of Women in Contemporary Philosophy.*

<sup>497</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment.*

<sup>498</sup> I am interested in exploring commoning care more extensively and how it is practiced in different societies.

visibility to collectives of mothers to show how they organised to share the responsibility and the experience of caring for a child. The different collectives I discuss below illustrate how mothers in different countries and contexts have often felt the need to connect to each other to ease the work of caring for their children. They do it for many reasons, practical, emotional, and maybe out of a desire to share the joys and sorrows of bringing up children with other mothers. These examples illustrate some kind of universality of a need, a push, a desire, an almost at times drive to, or an attempt to – mothering together. Of the many human activities that can be done alone or together this seems to resist becoming a solitary enterprise, if it does it is often not a very pleasant one.

In 1974, in the same years in which the Roman collective was active, a group of mainly socialist-feminist women, based in London in the UK, founded a collective called the *Hackney Flashers*.<sup>499</sup> The women were active in the creative sector as photographers, cartoonists, and writers. The first project they worked on was *Women and Work*,<sup>500</sup> and their aim was to use photography to record the working conditions of women in Hackney across a variety of occupations from clerical work to manufacturing work. The unpaid work of reproductive labour was not included in this exhibition. The importance of this became more apparent in the second exhibition which centred on childcare as a provision that was needed for women to be able to

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<sup>499</sup> “<https://Hackneyflashers.Com/History/>,” n.d.

<sup>500</sup> “<https://Hackneyflashers.Com/Women-and-Work-1975/>,” n.d.

work outside of the home and follow other interests. While working on this project the gap between the need for childcare and the actual provisions in the borough became the subject of their next project *Who's Holding the Baby?*<sup>501</sup> This was another photography exhibition which showed state-funded childcare provisions and private ones. During World War II national childcare provisions had been provided so that women could work, but they had since been cut. After the war the state did not need women to work for its benefit, so they took away help with childcare.

The group of mothers best known worldwide for collectively organising together, for a common need, is the *Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* in Buenos Aires, Argentina. They organised to demand knowledge of what had happened to their sons and daughters who disappeared during the Argentinian dictatorship (1976-1983). Not knowing where one's child is an unimaginable grief and the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo managed to transform their grief into action.<sup>502</sup> According to Italian Argentinian feminist author Ludmila Bazzoni, for these mothers:

to take to the square and start a collective path means starting a new life in a public context. That second birth allows them to establish a relational dimension in which to expound their own *who*, but mainly to make space for what «has not been thought before».<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>501</sup> "<https://Hackneyflashers.Com/Whos-Holding-the-Baby-1978/>," n.d.

<sup>502</sup> Sally Webb Thornton, "Grief Transformed: The Mothers of the Plaza the Mayo," *OMEGA: Journal of Death and Dying* 41, no. 4 (2000): 279–89.

<sup>503</sup> 'Scendere in piazza e intraprendere un percorso collettivo significa cominciare una nuova vita in un contesto pubblico. E quella seconda nascita consente loro di istituire una dimensione relazionale in cui esporre il proprio *chi*, ma soprattutto di fare spazio a quanto «non é ancora pensato».' in Ludmila Bazzoni, *La Vida Venciendo A La Muerte. Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Filosofia e Politica*. (Verona: L'Iguana editrice, 2013). P. ? [My translation].

The *who* Bazzoni talks about is the uniqueness of each human being, as Arendt considers. It's the *who* that appears when the universalistic subject, the *what*, is dismantled. I have discussed this theme in Chapter 2, where I explored Cavarero's interpretation of Arendt's idea of uniqueness and its relevance. The significance of this is that it shows how the mothers of Plaza de Mayo organised collectively and how the collective action empowered them to seek justice. Collectively they were strong and able to challenge the dictatorship, exemplifying at its 'extreme' the maternal resilience Baraitser talks about.<sup>504</sup>

In the UK, mothers have come together to create spaces to look after children, to collectivize the need for childcare and build supportive communities.<sup>505</sup> There are various contemporary groups where mothers meet with other mothers – either by themselves or with their children – and get organised. One example is *The First Neighbourhood Co-operative Nursery*, founded in the late 1970s in Walthamstow, London by a small group of mothers. It was a parent-led childcare project which remained open till the early 1990s. In recent years its history has inspired the project  *Holding the Baby*.<sup>506</sup> This project is an oral history of parenting and childcare, a podcast series and a travelling, sound-based exhibition. The producers of the project asked people from London's East End to tell stories about the care they received as children or

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<sup>504</sup> Lisa Baraitser, "Mother Courage: Reflection on Maternal Resilience," *British Journal of Psychotherapy* 23, no. 2 (2007): 171–88.

<sup>505</sup> See the work of the Pirate Care Collective too, especially 'Planning a pirate kindergarten.' "<https://Syllabus.Pirate.Care/Session/Howtobuildapiratekindergarteninyourneighbourhood/>," n.d.

<sup>506</sup> "[www.Holdingthebaby.Org](http://www.Holdingthebaby.Org)," n.d.

the care they provided as childcare workers, parents, and carers. Its inspiration was the parent-led nursery mentioned above.

Other parent-led nurseries in the UK started by mothers include the *Pavillion Pre School*<sup>507</sup> in Liverpool, founded in 1969 by six mothers, and still open today. Another example of mothers getting organised to share childcare and facilitate working outside the home without the prohibitive costs of private childcare is *Childspace*<sup>508</sup> in Lambeth in London. This is a cooperative nursery established in 1990 and managed by parents (mostly mothers) and a nursery teacher. Parents have a rota and each day one parent works alongside the teacher. By doing so, they keep costs down. Similarly, a nursery called *Grasshoppers in the Park*<sup>509</sup> in Hackney in London also engages parents as volunteers to reduce costs. These cooperatives are an example of mothers organising as a collective to address one of the most pressing problems they face as parents, namely, the cost of care. Problematically it is often mainly mothers volunteering in this parent-led projects and this shows still how childcare is still seen and perceived as a feminised occupation. It is linked to the practice in most countries for women to still be the ones doing the majority of childcare as I discussed in the Introduction.

Another important and interesting experience of collective action is the one of the mothers of the Focus E15.<sup>510</sup> In September 2013, 29 young

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<sup>507</sup> “Pavillion Pre School,” n.d., <http://pavilionpreschool.org.uk/our-history/>.

<sup>508</sup> “[Http://Www.Childspacenursery.Org/Home,](http://www.childspacenursery.org/home/)” n.d.

<sup>509</sup> “[Https://Www.Grasshoppersinthepark.Co.Uk/,](https://www.grasshoppersinthepark.co.uk/)” n.d.

<sup>510</sup> “Focus E15,” n.d., <https://focuse15.org/about/>.

mothers who lived in in a homeless hostel, Focus E15 in the borough of Newham in East London started a campaign to resist eviction. The council had cut funding for the hostel and the mothers had been served eviction notices saying that they would be re-housed outside London as far as Manchester, Birmingham, and Hastings. The mothers did not want to move away from where they lived together and where some of them had families and communities. In response to the eviction notice they collectively organised and occupied empty social housing to resist being evicted. In doing so they challenged repressive neoliberal laws. Since then most mothers have been re-housed in rented private accommodations in the borough and outside the borough.

Another collective initiated by women in London in 2016, is The Mother House<sup>511</sup> at the IKLECTIK Art Lab, where a group of artists who were mothers could use studio space to do their art work and also take their children along. Mothers worked – or tried to – with their children alongside, and at times there was a child minder available to engage with the children. The model is a creative and radical solution to a lack of provision for supporting the professional development and well-being of emerging artists during pregnancy and motherhood. The Mother House is an offshoot of the Procreate Project<sup>512</sup> which was founded by Dyana Gravina in 2013. The Procreate Project is an arts organisation supporting the development of

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<sup>511</sup> “The Mother House,” n.d., <https://www.motherhousestudios.com/>.

<sup>512</sup> “Procreate Project.”

contemporary artists who are also mothers, working across art-forms. The Procreate Project is a place of representation, knowledge, publication, artistic production, and experimentation of mothers who are artists.

Two other UK groups involving artists who are mothers are the *Desperate Artwives*<sup>513</sup> and the *Mothers who Make*.<sup>514</sup> The first is a collective of feminist artists who are mothers, set up in 2010 by artist Amy Digham, whose practice interrogates their experience of being mothers and partners/wives and questions social expectations and values which frame this role. The group get involved in different projects, including *Takeovers*, which are public spontaneous happenings in galleries and public spaces in and around events and buildings in performative and interruptive actions of public art. Their aim is to show what the work of reproduction looks like. It is partially similar to the aim of the mothers' collective many decades before during their exhibition in Rome for which they wanted to show the different experiences of motherhood, one of which was birth. It was the first time that pictures of women giving birth would have been shown in public in Italy, and they were asked to remove them. Many years have passed but the aim of the *Desperate Artwives* is the same: making the work of reproduction visible. Another project they work on is a podcast called *Woman up*.<sup>515</sup> It is devised by the collective in collaboration with the Women's Art Gallery at Goldsmith's College and artist Susan Merrick. They interview women artists, academics, midwives, writers,

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<sup>513</sup> “[Http://Www.Desperateartwives.Co.Uk/](http://www.Desperateartwives.Co.Uk/).”

<sup>514</sup> “[Https://Motherswhomake.Org/About](https://Motherswhomake.Org/About).”

<sup>515</sup> “[Http://Www.Desperateartwives.Co.Uk/Woman-up-Podcast-Series-2/](http://www.Desperateartwives.Co.Uk/Woman-up-Podcast-Series-2/),” n.d.

carers and so on about their lived experiences as women and mothers, and their achievements and inspirations. As in the *Takeover* project, in this project their aim is to make women's experiences visible, audible, and important.

*Mothers who Make* was founded in London in 2014 from an idea by theatre maker Matilda Leyser. Their mission statement reads:

We are a peer-support network but we believe that simply by our presence and our practices within the cultural landscape we can help to effect change. We have a vision of a world in which instead of women 'dropping out' to have children, their experiences and insights as mothers might be 'picked up' and fed into their field of work. Through our presence we hope to contribute to the wider conversation about caring roles and care as a force within the arts sector.<sup>516</sup>

It is an initiative aimed at supporting mothers who are artists – professional or not – writers, actors, painters, dancers, any kind of maker and any kind of mother, as their website says. On the idea behind the initiative Leyser says:

The initiative grew from Matilda's sense of there being experiences and challenges specific to being both a mother and an artist. She noticed many parallels between the two roles: both are concerned with creativity and play, both require stamina, patience, sensitivity, both keep her up at night. At the same time she was struck by the strength of the cultural assumption that the two were incompatible, that she must compromise on either her creative work or on her mothering. She wanted to challenge this. She put out an invitation to mother-artists, across art forms, to join a peer support group to which they could also bring their children of any age. The response has been extraordinary.<sup>517</sup>

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<sup>516</sup> "<https://Motherswhomake.Org/Mission>," n.d.

<sup>517</sup> "<https://Motherswhomake.Org/About>."

The idea has spread rapidly across the UK and many new groups started in many regions. Currently there are thirteen peer-support groups regularly meeting at major arts venues, new groups are starting, and there is also growing interest internationally. These examples of collective organizing are important demonstrations of the need and desire for commoning care and they show how relationality and the maternal are often interlinked, interdependent and sometimes a necessary resource and strategy for managing the newness, stuff and interruptions<sup>518</sup> children often bring to a mothers' life in the first few years.

In this chapter I discussed the origin and work of *Il collettivo madri*. I showed how life and politics were intertwined for these mothers who challenged the practice of individualised care. Subsequently I considered other groups of mothers who came together to change and resist the status quo of solitary motherhood. These examples demonstrate how establishing relationships between mothers is often helpful and can make it easier to process the meaning of the maternal experience and the practical need for childcare. In addition they show mothers who challenge hetero patriarchal definitions of motherhood and it shows how mothers can often become figures of resistance when they work together. The Milan Collective writes 'the *entrustment* of one woman to another is the stuff of political struggle.'<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>518</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*. p. ?

<sup>519</sup> The Milan Women's Bookstore Collective, *Sexual Difference: A Theory of Social-Symbolic Practice*, p. 31.

This chapter then has been a kind of springboard for the next as I have showed how collective mothering can work in reality using a case study. In the next chapter instead I consider how mothering in isolation is one of the main causes of postnatal depression. Consequently I further argue for a more relational and collective approach to motherhood, as I have showed in this chapter, can support women to feel less isolated. In addition, I look at an art practice-based work that I created with two artists, using a thick and wide colourful thread, to explore the meaning of relationality in a more practical, enacted, and playful way.

# 5

## relational maternal subjectivity

In concluding her article ‘Maternal Subjectivity’ (2009), on how nuclear individualistic modern parenting practises at times negatively affect ‘westernised’ women, British psychoanalyst Joan Raphael-Leff states ‘in my view, it is this rich seedbed of subjective experience that awaits closer mapping by today’s researchers.’<sup>520</sup> This thesis and this last chapter in particular, is my attempt at investigating ‘mothers’ rich seedbed of subjective

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<sup>520</sup> Raphael-Leff, “Maternal Subjectivity.” p. 5.

experience'. In the previous four chapters I have suggested that the work of reproduction is more challenging in individualistic, neoliberal, and capitalist societies where often mothers mother in relative isolation at different stages of their children's life. I have suggested that we need to keep challenging this idea of the subject. I have discussed the ideas of feminist writers and activists who argue that women are still doing a majority of the care work of babies and children (and not to speak of elderly relatives and disabled or special needs children who are very often looked after women for the majority of the time) and work what is often called the 'double shift' or 'second shift'.<sup>521</sup> It's the work done by women in the work place and then the work of reproduction which often falls on their shoulders, when they arrive back at home. I have shown how the abstract and universalistic idea of the subject is detrimental to women and mothers in legal cases. I then discussed how the political can be found in women's relations, and how relationality can help us foster a better way to care. I then showed how a group of Italian women in the 1970s in Italy founded a mothers' collective and how they viewed care as something to engage in groups rather than alone.

The main questions of this chapter are this: the first is the same as the one in chapter 4 as I carry on the investigation in ascertaining if a relational

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<sup>521</sup> The second shift is a term coined in 1989 by Arlie Hochschild. This definition has been criticised as being a middle class definition of the double shift and centering on the experiences of heterosexual white women. It disregards the marginalised women who have done unpaid, undervalued work for centuries. See Carla D. Brailey and Brittany C. Slatton, "Women, Work, and Inequality in the U.S. : Revising the Second Shift," *Journal of Sociology and Social Work* 7, no. 1 (2019): 29–35, <https://doi.org/10.15640/jssw.v7n1a4>.

model of motherhood protect women from the loneliness<sup>522</sup> many experience in the first few months and first years of a baby and child's life? That is why in this chapter I look at research into post-natal depression and trace how loneliness is one of the causes of depression in new mothers/primary carers. The research I look at in this chapter is in the realm of psychoanalysis and sociology so it is a different register than in the first three chapters which are philosophical, conceptual and legal and the fourth which is a case study. I link the level of this question to the previous two because I believe that a more concrete, embodied view of humans is needed to then make a philosophical conceptual case. A solely abstract, philosophical thesis to look at mothers' loneliness and post-natal depression would not suffice. The way I link the two different registers is to lean my thinking to those feminist thinkers who worked to de-universalise the subject and think the subject as an embodied subject. The feminist thinker that helps me communicate between these two registers is Adriana Cavarero as she refrains to use an abstract language when speaking of the subject but prefers to think the uniqueness of each of us. By doing this we are 'forced' to think of each person with a face, a life story, a biography, a set of feelings and embodied concrete materiality of who they are.

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<sup>522</sup> In 2016 research published by the Co-op and the Red Cross identified becoming a new mum as one of six main causes of loneliness. They say 'New research shows that a staggering 82 per cent of mums under 30 feel lonely some of the time while more than four in 10 (43 per cent) are lonely often or always.' <https://www.co-operative.coop/media/news-releases/shocking-extent-of-loneliness-faced-by-young-mothers-revealed>, 2018. <https://www.channel4.com/news/the-loneliness-of-becoming-a-new-mum>, 2016.

Secondly, does engaging in mothering/caring while being supported by other mothers, carers and the community change the subjectivity of a mother/carer?

Some sub questions of this chapter are: firstly, how does maternal subjectivity change if lived in different conditions – not in isolation but together with the support of other people, especially other mothers? Secondly, how do we foster, and maintain, an understanding that a connection between women who do the same challenging work of reproduction is important? In this chapter I bring the ideas of the previous four chapters to bear. The chapter is divided into four main themes: the first theme centres on postnatal depression. I investigate how many new mothers suffer from postnatal depression in a still unequal society, despite the often-heard rhetoric of equality, because they are still the majority doing care work. My analysis of postnatal depression focuses on one of its causes, the isolation Raphael-Leff discusses above, and it considers the significance of mothers' relationships with each other as helpful to counteract isolation as Mauthner states here:

Although partners might be understanding and caring, it might be that what mothers want and need at this particular moment in their lives are relationships with other mothers, and other depressed mothers, who have a much deeper and personal understanding of their experiences. Consequently, it is important that future research bear in mind that a mother's partnership cannot necessarily satisfy all her emotional needs,

and consider *the significance of mothers' relationships with each other to their feelings of psychological and emotional well-being*.<sup>523</sup>

I too believe that more feminist readings of postnatal depression which look at mothers' relationality with other mothers, is necessary. I go further than Mauthner, though, to suggest that social contacts between mothers will engender a different kind of subjectivity in women. Meeting up with other mothers, I suggest, is not 'just' functional to ward off postnatal depression and foster emotional well-being, but it is an important aspect of women's lives and sense of self, identity and subjectivity.

The second theme of this chapter is maternal subjectivity. I analyse how feminist scholars, psychologists, and psychoanalysts have looked at, interpreted, and thought maternal subjectivity via both their theoretical work and some clinical work. The third theme of the chapter focuses on relational maternal subjectivity where I suggest, as in previous chapters but from a different lens, that we need to dislodge maternal subjectivity from an individualistic lens to counteract the individualistic capitalist forces at play that see caring as an individualistic activity. By counteracting this view, we can aid mothers in understanding that any carer needs support so that they do not find themselves alone and depressed without at times knowing why. It is a small quest, maybe, but it is close to my heart. It pains me to hear of mothers being very depressed when they have a small child or baby. I find it unfair that

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<sup>523</sup> Natasha S Mauthner, "POSTNATAL DEPRESSION The Significance of Social Contacts Between Mothers," *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 18, 1995. p. 321. [My emphasis]

women the world over are left to deal with this emotional situation alone. It is time that we made it clearer that it is not natural to mother alone. My hope, maybe a little idealistic I admit, is that one day the numbers of mothers left behind, feeling lonely decreases and other collective mothering (caring) strategies are envisaged.

The fourth theme focuses on an art exercise – to enact with others – that I co-created with Alex Martinis-Roe, a Berlin-based feminist artist, where I used a colourful thick fabric thread to symbolise relationality can make us think of what it means to care in a collective manner based on solidarity.

### **being constantly attentive and attuned**

Concerning mothering and motherhood in this thesis I am interested in considering if relationality between mothers and carers, experiencing motherhood more collectively than in isolation, can help reveal a maternal subjectivity – paraphrasing what Lucy van Pelt says in the vignette in the Introduction, one that ‘belongs’ to each woman and is always in process, always becoming and is a creative, learned social experience. This view of maternal subjectivity also plays a role in how legal rights can be thought of in this context. Women’s subjectivity is connected to legal rights. How women’s subjectivity is approached, thought about, and valued or not valued in law is important to reflect upon as we are born into law. In contrast to a collective view of motherhood, if mothering work is done in isolation, less relationally let’s say, it can be difficult and damaging to the

person who cares and it can have an effect on the infant and young child who is cared for. In this respect British psychoanalyst Joan Raphael-Leff says:

I want to stress that all primary carers of whatever sex and age find parenting difficult, especially in societies-in-transition such as our own, where extended families are dispersed and child rearing traditions eroded. Being constantly attentive and attuned to the needs of someone else for whom one has total responsibility at all times is a daunting task.<sup>524</sup>

It is this being constantly attentive and attuned that is an exhausting and daunting task when done alone without support. This is because we do not exist in isolation; we are ontologically related and, more importantly, I infer that humans were not ‘meant’ to mother/care alone, but together with others.

What then is the weight and what are the subjective and psychological ‘consequences’ of mothering alone in modern, capitalist and generally individualistic societies? This is the main question and kernel of my thesis; this is what has kept me awake at night, what has kept coming back to rekindle my drive to think of alternative modes of mothering. In this question, I have attempted never to lose sight of the millions of women who mother the world over, who, more often than not, probably

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<sup>524</sup> Raphael-Leff, “Healthy Maternal Ambivalence.” p. 7. See as well Carolina del Olmo, *¿Dónde Está Mi Tribu? Maternidad y Crianza En Una Sociedad Individualista* (Madrid: Clave Intelectual, 2013).

mother alone for many hours a day.<sup>525</sup> On the other hand, I have tried not to forget the socio-cultural and political realities of each woman's life. I do not advocate for an idealised and romanticised community of mothers who get together with an idea of a matriarchal past, but instead a 'community' of mothers and carers who get together for support and solidarity *to common* care. At the same time I believe, as Stone notes, that even if the social condition of mothers were improved, motherhood could not become an entirely unproblematic experience:

At times in feminist work on mothering [...] there is an implicit suggestion that given different social conditions – better childcare provisions; the transformation of our workplaces and public spheres to accommodate mothering, child-caring and care more generally; full sharing of childcare between the sexes – mothering could become an entirely unproblematic experience. I agree that mothering could become significantly less problematic, but I am not convinced that it could ever be entirely so. ...The sorrowful side of mothering is no doubt more or less pronounced for different women, and for some it may be negligible; yet *it remains* structural to maternity.<sup>526</sup>

While I agree with Stone's assertion, nevertheless mine is a suggestion – that relationality between mothers and carers can help in mothering work, that it can become a little easier if, and when, mothers and carers of dependent children can relate to each other and support each other while doing the same job.

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<sup>525</sup> 'Care is an arduous temporal practice'. in Lisa Baraitser, *Enduring Time* (London & New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017).

<sup>526</sup> Stone, *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity*. p. 165. [my emphasis].

In the UK, around one in five women experience postnatal depression, according to the mental health charity Mind. Lack of support is considered, among others to be one of the risk factors in developing postnatal depression.<sup>527</sup> Maternal mental health problems both during pregnancy and after giving birth or after adoption are often overlooked and under reported. Pregnancy and childbirth are life changing experiences that women go through where they frequently become extremely isolated after giving birth. Women who are mothers often get caught in a never-ending cycle of poverty and child rearing, both in the UK and across the globe, affecting their mental health and their ability to function; therefore I am interested in how relationality with other mothers and carers can prevent this from happening and make the mothering experience a little bit easier. Moreover, ‘the mother’ I am looking at, and the interest I have in the maternal, is similar to that described by sociologist Tina Miller:

I have much more particularly couched my work in a space called ‘maternal subjectivities’ which for me as a feminist sociologist locates the focus in individual experiences in particular structural conditions and gendered circumstances which are classed and ‘raced’ – and lived in particular historical moments. A focus which has illuminated the ways in which in every culture childbirth and motherhood are culturally inscribed and socially produced (Jordan 1993).<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>527</sup> “<https://www.Mind.Org.Uk/Information-Support/Types-of-Mental-Health-Problems/Postnatal-Depression-and-Perinatal-Mental-Health/>,” n.d. Accessed on 06.01.2020. As stated in the document other risk factors in postnatal depression are: previous experiences of mental health problems, biological causes, difficult childhood experiences, experience of abuse, low self-esteem, stressful living experiences, major life events.

<sup>528</sup> Miller, Tina “Thoughts around the Maternal: A Sociological Viewpoint,” *Studies in the Maternal* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1–3.

Hence the mother I am interested in looking at is a particular mother at a particular moment, and, for me, what is universal or at least extremely common and socially normalised of her experience, is the possibility that once she becomes a mother, she *may* find herself alone and isolated. I recognise that the differences in women's lives will affect the specificities and quality of this isolation; no two mothering experiences will be the same. Therefore, because of this possibility that a mother may find herself in an 'isolated condition', she represents a 'universal mother'.

My main preoccupation in this thesis, as I stated at the start, is that once women become mothers, more often than not, they go through an internal subjective change which has many different layers of reference: how one was mothered, how one is able to ask to be supported by others (or not) once she has birthed a baby. This subjective change happens to all mothers at different levels and to varying degrees, but I suggest this change can take a more dramatic turn if a woman is isolated and does not have much support around her. This experience is common, particularly in the Western world, and elements of it are likely to be increasingly shared by women living in capitalist neoliberal societies, even if there are subjective and substantial material differences to do with the intersection between race, class, and culture that vary some of the applicability of the analysis here.

### on postnatal depression

As I said in the Introduction to the thesis, according to a 2016 research by the Co-op and the Red Cross, mothers' isolation during the first year of their baby's life is among one of the six main causes of loneliness in the UK.<sup>529</sup> The way I start to answer the questions I asked above is by first looking at isolation, at one of the causes of postnatal depression.<sup>530</sup> The reason we need to reconceptualise maternal subjectivity through feminist relational theory and practice is that an individualistic view of the subject is not enough to describe maternal subjectivity. As we have seen, isolation is one the causes of postnatal depression. We might say that postnatal depression is a symptom of the alienation of mothering work, especially present in capitalist, neoliberal societies where often mothers end up mothering alone or with little support. Becoming a mother is a big transition, being pregnant, giving birth, and becoming responsible for another human being is a significant undertaking within one's embodied and psychological sense of self. Professor of Childhood and Youth Studies Rachel Thomson, and Mary Jane Kehily, Lucy Hadfield, and Sue Sharpe, worked on a research project analysing how this transition happens.<sup>531</sup> Their findings were made into a book.<sup>532</sup> Thomson and

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<sup>529</sup> "<https://www.co-operative.coop/media/news-releases/shocking-extent-of-loneliness-faced-by-young-mothers-revealed>."

<sup>530</sup> Patricia Leahy-Warren, McCarthy Geraldine, and Corcoran Paul, "First-Time Mothers: Social Support, Maternal Parental Self-Efficacy and Postnatal Depression," *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 2011, 1–10 ; In this article lack of social support was identified as one of the causes of ante-natal and postnatal depression Bronwyn Leigh and Jeannette Milgrom, "Risk Factors for Antenatal Depression and Post Natal Depression and Parenting Stress," *BMC Psychiatry* 8, no. 24 (2008).

<sup>531</sup> Rachel Thomson et al., "[Http://Modernmothers.Org/](http://Modernmothers.Org/)," n.d. Another study that have looked at the transition to motherhood and identity is this Lucy Bailey, "Refracted Selves? A Study of Changes in Self-Identity in the Transition to Motherhood," *Sociology* 33, no. 2 (1999): 335–52.

<sup>532</sup> Rachel Thomson et al., *Making Modern Mothers* (Bristol: The Policy Press, 2011).

her colleagues interviewed sixty expectant first time mothers from the ages of fifteen to forty-eight – all diverse in relation to social class, ethnicity, gender, living situation, work status, and proximity to family support. They followed twelve families till their child turned four years old. They found that ‘the transition to motherhood in the contemporary era is an arena where socioeconomic differences between women are defined, compounded and inflated through the creation of distinct cultures of child rearing.’<sup>533</sup> They analysed how these new mothers’ identities changed and they found that there were various variables dependent on age, work status, class, race, and support network. The overall finding was that the women’s identities changed within themselves and that people perceived them in a different way since becoming mothers, both at work and in the wider society. The expectations and realities of motherhood were discussed too.<sup>534</sup> Especially at work, women were often asked to do fewer important tasks and took up fewer executive decision-making positions once coming back from maternity leave. This took time to adjust to and it was not seen as a good experience associated with motherhood.

The amount of support new mothers receive is an important aspect of how motherhood is experienced. In the UK only 2% of fathers take SPL

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<sup>533</sup> Ibid.

<sup>534</sup> Rebecca McErlean and Valsamma Eapen, “Post Natal Depression: When Reality Does Not Match Expectations,” in *Perinatal Depression*, ed. Maria Graciela Rojas Castillo (Rijeka, Croatia: InTech, 2011), 55–80.

(Statutory Parental Leave)<sup>535</sup> leaving mothers with a higher burden of childcare in the first few years of a child's life before they start school. Psychoanalyst Joan Raphael-Leff elucidates that lack of support in the West often leaves new mothers isolated:

One consequence of post-industrial urbanisation is that due to social stratification, geographical mobility, breakdown of extended families and changing social mores, *'westernised' women often mother in isolation*. Alone, having lost both intergenerational support and traditional community network, a new mother is at risk of being overpowered by the impossible expectations and emotional forces inherent in the childbearing/rearing situation.<sup>536</sup>

For Raphael-Leff mothering in isolation does not really work, or it “works” at the cost of heightening mothers' infantile emotions, splitting, denigration, and idealisation which render her vulnerable.<sup>537</sup> These bring about different feelings about how mothers experience motherhood. Some of these heightened feelings can bring about postnatal depression.

Psychiatrist Ian Brockington gives a medical and psychological perspective of maternal mental health. He argues that the psychopathology of the postpartum period in mothers can take many different forms. In his comprehensive book *Motherhood and Mental Health*<sup>538</sup> (1996), he identified twenty forms of postnatal depression which go from maternity blues to

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<sup>535</sup> “‘It Was Seen as Weird’: Why Are so Few Men Taking Shared Parental Leave?” *The Guardian*, October 5, 2019, <https://doi.org/https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/oct/05/shared-parental-leave-seen-as-weird-paternity-leave-in-decline>.

<sup>536</sup> Joan Raphael-Leff, “Maternal Subjectivity,” *Studies in the Maternal* 1, no. 1 (2009): 1–5.

<sup>537</sup> *Ibid.* p.

<sup>538</sup> Ian Brockington, *Motherhood and Mental Health*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

puerperal psychosis. Some of these are: idiopathic confusional states;<sup>539</sup> stupor;<sup>540</sup> eclampsia;<sup>541</sup> ‘maternity blues’;<sup>542</sup> post-traumatic stress disorder;<sup>543</sup> anxiety which can take many forms;<sup>544</sup> obsessional disorders from infanticide to sexual abuse;<sup>545</sup> and depression<sup>546</sup> which includes postnatal depression. In this chapter I only consider maternity blues and postpartum depression. As we have seen above, childbirth and the transition to motherhood is a big change for women. It is a period of subjective and inter-subjective changes.

Brockington writes:

Childbirth is a complex event, packed with somatic and psychological incident. It is a period of rapid biological, social and emotional transition. It is a social and psychological crisis requiring intrapsychic adaptation and interpersonal reorganisation, especially after the first child. There is physical discomfort, and there may be loss of employment, financial pressures, changes in the social network, decreased recreation, confinement in the house, and boredom. Marriage and other relationships may come under strain. It would not be surprising if such a challenge provoked a wide variety of psychiatric disorders.’<sup>547</sup>

Many changes occur which can bring about a period of heightened emotions.

According to Brockington, some women report how they feel to their GP,

but many times they do not. He says, ‘many more mothers become depressed

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<sup>539</sup> Ibid. p. 139-141.

<sup>540</sup> Ibid. p. 141.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid. p. 141-145.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid. p. 147-153.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid. p. 153-154.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid. p. 157-162.

<sup>545</sup> Ibid. p. 162-165.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid. p. 165-187.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid. p. 138.

than ever make their way to their family doctor's surgery.<sup>548</sup> He carries on by saying that:

The reasons for the failure to seek help are not fully understood. One can guess that some recover early, others do not realise they are ill, and a third group are ashamed, or apprehensive about the effect of confessing their symptoms. These mothers suffer in silence because of public ignorance about depression, taboos about psychiatric illness and fears of losing their baby.<sup>549</sup>

Women live with postnatal depression sometimes for months without understanding fully what they are going through, possibly as well for a still quite pervading stereotypical idea (and unconscious embodied historical idea too) that mothers are 'naturally caring.'<sup>550</sup> According to a National Childbirth Trust survey, even when new mothers manage to go to their six-week postnatal check-up at their GP – which often is done at the same time as their baby's check-ups – there is not enough time to discuss their feelings at length. Sarah McMullen, NCT's Head of Knowledge says 'Many new mums don't find it easy to admit they are struggling, so it is impossible to make them feel comfortable enough to discuss their concerns in less than three minutes.'<sup>551</sup>

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<sup>548</sup> Ibid. p. 174.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid. p. 174.

<sup>550</sup> Elisabeth Badinter argues that mother love has been invented and that historically French women were more than happy to leave their children to be looked after by other women while they worked or they socialised. Badinter, *Mother Love. Myth & Reality*.

<sup>551</sup> "New Mothers' Mental Health Problems Going Undetected, Says Charity," <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2019/sep/05/gps-are-ignoring-new-mothers-mental-health-says-parenting-charity>, n.d.

To reflect on and try to make sense of the transition to motherhood and how a baby and mother relate in 2015 I decided to take a two year course on *Infant and Child Observation* at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust in London, where I observed a five week old baby once a week until he/she was two years old. This course has informed some sections of my thesis. I am not a psychotherapist or a psychoanalyst so my interest in maternal subjectivity is mainly from a feminist perspective, my experience of being mothered and being a mother and I am informed by psychoanalysis by many years of a personal interest in it and by undergoing personal therapy myself. I purposely took this course to learn to become an observer and to think through an infant's growing subjectivity in relation with others. In addition, as I am interested in relational ontology, I wanted to observe and think through what goes on between a mother and a baby.

Maternal mental health is often seen from a medical perspective and the biggest 'side effect' of postnatal depression is often seen as the effect it has on children's well-being,<sup>552</sup> what is called adverse child outcomes. The mother is seen as the one who needs to get better for the benefit of her children. Accordingly, some studies have looked at fathers' postnatal depression too, from the same perspective: the effect on the children.<sup>553</sup> Even

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<sup>552</sup> Peter J Cooper and Lynne Murray, "Post Natal Depression," *British Medical Journal* 316, no. 1884 (1998), <https://doi.org/doi:https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.316.7148.1884>. Peter J. Murray, Lynne Murray and Cooper, ed., *Postpartum Depression and Child Development*. (London: The Guildford Press, 1997). Lynne Murray et al., "Association of Persistent and Severe Post Natal Depression with Child Outcomes," *JAMA Psychiatry* 75, no. 3 (2018): 247–53.

<sup>553</sup> Paul Ramchandani et al., "Paternal Depression in the Postnatal Period and Child Development: A Prospective Population Study," *Lancet*, 2005, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(05\)66778-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(05)66778-5).

if children's well-being is a very important point of view, and one which I am interested in too, it is not the focus of my thesis. Instead I look at postnatal depression as something which can be detrimental to mothers' subjective experience. Feminists have read postnatal depression from a psychosocial perspective. I am interested in looking at 'maternal blues' and postnatal depression from a feminist perspective because I argue that if a mother is depressed it is detrimental to her own experience of motherhood and her sense of self. As I stated before my focus in this thesis is a feminist view of motherhood, in which I care for mothers to have a relatively satisfying experience of motherhood. My approach on this matter is that if a mother is relatively content, as a consequence things will be better for her children, but I do not want to see the mother solely as a function of her children. I propose that the importance of new mothers having a relatively satisfying experience of motherhood is important for women's subjectivity and their internal world is important as a 'theme' per se.

### **on maternal subjectivity**

In this section I focus on Hollway's understanding of maternal subjectivity from her 2001 article 'From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity.'<sup>554</sup> Hollway is a British feminist psychologist and she is useful for my discussion because she has done a study of the meaning of intersubjectivity between a mother and a baby. Because I am interested in relational ontology, I posit that it is

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<sup>554</sup> Hollway, "From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity."

through relationships that we can read maternal subjectivity, and it is for this reason that Hollway's work connects to that of Cavarero and others I have turned to throughout the previous chapters. It is those authors who have made this connection that I find most useful for my idea of relational maternal subjectivity. I argue that we cannot read maternal subjectivity via an individualistic lens because mothers' subjectivity is too enmeshed with their experiences of how they were mothered by their own mothers/fathers/carers. Hollway argues that, if to be a mother you need a child, and it is via a child that one becomes a mother, so it is via the intersubjective exchange between mother and child and the world around them that the mother's experience is shaped. Focusing her work on feminist psychology, she describes maternal subjectivity as that which 'emphasises unconscious intersubjectivity,' hence, that which accounts for mothers' unconscious lived experiences while relating to their baby and child. Hollway reinstated the mother as subject with a set of concepts which are intersubjective. She then adds that even though the child is a central figure in her article, which may alarm some feminists, she thinks maternal subjectivity can be accounted for when it is seen as (an) intersubjectivity between the mother-child relationship. To understand what is going on for a mother, we need to challenge the idea of the bounded rational subject of the Enlightenment, as I have attempted to do in this dissertation.

Hollway argues that much of classical psychoanalysis (exemplified by the work of Klein, Bion and Winnicott), sees the mother as the 'empty

category into which children's needs can be placed.<sup>555</sup> At the same time Hollway has read these works from a feminist perspective and she inserts the mother's own needs, desires, wishes and reality firmly into the picture. Interestingly she argues that historically within much of feminism mothers' and children's needs and interests were set up in opposition.<sup>556</sup> But it is not very useful to set them against each other, Hollway argues that, as the mother does not exist without her baby, a mother's subjectivity is shaped by that relationship also. Notwithstanding that a woman is a mother, she often desires some space for herself in which to feel at home in herself, in a room of her own, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf (1929).<sup>557</sup> Importantly, along with other feminists, Hollway says that 'feminist psychoanalysis has gone further and argued that children need that their mothers be subjects in their own right'<sup>558</sup> therefore it is in this framework that I understand the subjectivity of women who mother. Irigaray<sup>559</sup> and Kristeva<sup>560</sup> stated the importance of a mothers' subjectivity which is independent. Hollway states: 'mothers are not 'just' mothers'<sup>561</sup> and argues that:

psychoanalysis and psychology, by looking at mothers through the prism of the child's needs, have been compromised by representing women who are mothers as being entirely the objects of their children developmental needs. This blindness to women's outer and inner lives

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<sup>555</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>556</sup> Ibid. p. 5.

<sup>557</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York: Vintage Classics, 2018).

<sup>558</sup> Hollway, "From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity," p. 2.

<sup>559</sup> Irigaray, "Body against Body: In Relation to the Mother."

<sup>560</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Stabat Mater," in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 1991), 160–86.

<sup>561</sup> Hollway, "From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity." 8.

echoes the narcissistic blindness of a young child to its mother as anything other as an extension of its demands.<sup>562</sup>

The focus in my research is on the importance of a mother being a woman too. Hollway focuses on the same, and poses a fundamental question for women and feminists (mothers and non): ‘how [does] being a mother coexist [...] with these other parts?’<sup>563</sup> Hollway states that in analysing how maternal subjectivity is constituted we must explore ‘concepts of maternal ambivalence, containment, recognition and maternal development – all ways of understanding the specific workings and effects of specific unconscious intersubjective dynamics.’<sup>564</sup> She adds that she favours a version of subjectivity that includes the issue of coherence or integration.<sup>565</sup>

Hollway expands on the idea of maternal subjectivity first proposed by Sara Ruddick<sup>566</sup>, who argued that some realities of maternal work reproduce universal requirements on mothers. What Hollway adds is the unconscious emotional work of mothers. She states that within a model of intersubjectivity, it’s important to accept the powerful effects of children’s emotions on maternal subjectivity.<sup>567</sup> In relation to maternal ambivalence Hollway suggests that like all people, mothers use splitting to protect themselves against anxiety, hence she says ‘contrary to cultural constructions

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<sup>562</sup> Ibid. p. 8, 9.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid. p. 2.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid. p. 9.

<sup>566</sup> Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking. Towards a Politics of Peace*.

<sup>567</sup> Hollway, “From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity.” p.10.

about maternal love, mothers too are not immune from the splitting of love and hate in their relations with their children.<sup>568</sup>

Rozsika Parker's<sup>569</sup> study of maternal ambivalence is important for my understanding of the difficulties posed by mothering in isolation and the splitting Hollway discusses above. Parker argues that in the contemporary landscape of the motherhood experience there is what she calls the 'happiness imperative.'<sup>570</sup> It is this idea that a parent needs to show always the good, cheerful side to their children. I argue that being alone in charge of children can exacerbate feelings of hate at a level in which it is hard to integrate these feelings with a wider variety of feelings. Parker, too, argues that it is hard for mothers to acknowledge feelings of ambivalence or hate towards their children. The fear of hating children in some mothers produces what in psychoanalysis is described as "split off." Instead of acknowledging hate and integrating it in the variety of feelings one has for a child, it is hidden away and split off from the idea we have of ourselves. For Parker what is important is to incorporate hate with love. This helps mothers to think about what their child needs in a realistic way. When the maternal is linked always and solely to love, because maternal love is seen as natural, mothers who are not always loving towards their children, like most mothers are at time, are regarded as bad mothers. This idealised image of the mother serves as a shared defence

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<sup>568</sup> Ibid. p.13.

<sup>569</sup> Parker, *Torn in Two. The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. Parker, *Mother Love/Mother Hate. The Power of Maternal Ambivalence*.

<sup>570</sup> Parker, *Torn in Two. The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. p.

for all of us against the maternal hatred, which we cannot bear to acknowledge consciously. By assigning the label of the bad mother to other/mothers we ‘cleansed’ our psyche of the fear of having been/being hateful towards our children.

According to Parker, Hollway, Raphael-Leff, and Baraitser the concept of maternal ambivalence can help a mother’s mixed feelings towards her infant (and later on towards her older toddler and child) to be better integrated. This helps in her understanding that babies need imperfection from their mothers, not perfection. Psychoanalysis and feminist psychoanalysis, according to Hollway, has given a different importance to the infant’s relation to the mother because of the infant’s relationship with her body, hence fathers and other primary carers signify differently for infants and children.<sup>571</sup> Hollway writes that Frosh’s<sup>572</sup> query as to how fathers would signify to children if they were the sole primary carer or if they had equal shared responsibility from the start is a challenging question for psychoanalysis.<sup>573</sup> Similarly it is the reason why I argue, in this research, that I cannot put fathers and mothers in the same frame and focus on a neutral term like ‘parents’ only, this would efface all the affective realities of mothers and equally of fathers.<sup>574</sup> In this light Hollway says ‘the initial dependency on

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<sup>571</sup> Hollway, “From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity.” p. 16.

<sup>572</sup> Stephen Frosh, “Fathers’ Ambivalence Too,” in *Mothering and Ambivalence*, ed. W Hollway and B Featherstone (London: Routledge, 1997), 37–53.

<sup>573</sup> Hollway, “From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity.” p. 16.

<sup>574</sup> Notwithstanding that some parents who adopt would have a different relationship with their children depending on many factors and non-binary parents who are primary carers too. I still think the way we were

the biological mother's body provokes unconscious fantasies in which the mother is a powerful and dangerous figure.<sup>575</sup> It would be interesting to explore this aspect in the light of the relationship of a surrogate child with his 'adoptive' parents and what remains of the surrogate mother's body in the infant and child's fantasy. Problematically, for Hollway, even in writing of feminist writers the fantasy of the ideal mother still persists; Chodorow and Contratto<sup>576</sup> state that 'if current limitations on mothers were eliminated mothers would know naturally how to be good.'<sup>577</sup> This is problematic in that it implies that there is something natural in women allowing them to be good mothers, which put it in this way, would reinforce patriarchal dogma. I think this is far from the truth and that in reality, women and mothers are not naturally good mothers, but if supported and in the absence of "current limitations"<sup>578</sup> they might find mothering a bit easier. This would be because their mental health would be protected, not because a natural propensity for mothering would emerge.

Classical Freudian psychoanalysis saw the mother as an object of the baby's needs. By contrast the feminist psychoanalysts I mentioned above and many others have acknowledged the importance of the mother as a woman in

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parented would filter into the way we parent our children and some conscious or unconscious 'gender' sign would probably remain.

<sup>575</sup> Hollway, "From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity." p. 16, 17.

<sup>576</sup> Nancy Chodorow and Susan Contratto, "The Fantasy of the Perfect Mother," in *Rethinking the Family: Some Feminist Questions*, ed. Barrie Thorne and Marilyn Yalom, Second rev (Northeastern University Press, 1993).

<sup>577</sup> Hollway, "From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity." p.17.

<sup>578</sup> Joan Raphael-Leff, *Psychological Processes of Childbearing*. (Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes Ltd, 1990).

her own right. This has been an important achievement for feminism. For Winnicott too it was important that the mother be differentiated from her child. According to Hollway, Rozsika Parker<sup>579</sup> introduced the idea of maternal development to challenge the idea that mothers are a static object of their children's wishes and to shift the focus on concentrating on child development and to seeing the mother as a subject too and to be able to start to theorise about her.<sup>580</sup> For Hollway the mother changes too in the face of the infant and child's development. They both change, hence the mother's development is a subjective development while she recognises the infant's changing development, all influenced by the ability of not to integrate the ambivalence she feels towards the children.

It would be interesting, Hollway argues, to see if once the gender of parenting is less important this will have an effect on how the baby fantasises about the omnipotent mother, and if she will lose some of her power and presence within the baby's fantasies. Hollway says that we can extend to everyone the intersubjective capacity that enables a person to bear the demands of others in the service of their moral development, but this does not mean that we should belittle the emotional work mothers often do.<sup>581</sup> Finally she says the kind of enabling which would be helpful in caring for others looks almost like a transitory suspension of desires 'which draws on

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<sup>579</sup> Parker, *Torn in Two. The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*.

<sup>580</sup> Hollway, "From Motherhood to Maternal Subjectivity." p. 27.

<sup>581</sup> *Ibid.* p. 31.

subjective resources far removed from the phallogentric subject.<sup>582</sup> I posit that the capacity to care can be developed by everyone, including fathers obviously, even though at times fathers may find it hard to identify with a helpless and demanding baby due to historical conditions of masculinities. This challenges the idea of a mother as an autonomous subject in her own right but proposes the creation of the mother's subjectivity happening through intersubjective exchanges. I too have challenged the idea of an autonomous, self-sufficient subject throughout this thesis through my argument that this view of the subject harms everyone, particularly mothers and carers.

### **for a relational view on postnatal depression**

Different perspectives on the causes and experiences of postnatal depression and maternity blues in women are revealed depending upon whether one analyses these experiences through the lens of biomedicine or through the lens of psychology. Valerie Thurtle<sup>583</sup> argues that to explain the complex theme of postnatal mental health it is important to add a sociological lens to this theme. The most comprehensive way to understand postnatal depression and its effect on mothers is through a holistic and multidisciplinary approach. Brockington suggests various mechanisms to support a mother with postnatal depression, including psychotherapy:

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<sup>582</sup> Ibid. p. 31

<sup>583</sup> Valerie Thurtle, "Post-Natal Depression: The Relevance of Sociological Approaches.," *JAN, The Journal of Advanced Nursing* 22, no. 3 (1995): 416–24.

There will be an opportunity to explain that these experiences are widespread, though too often faced in loneliness and silence by mothers, who do not know that they are common, understandable and remediable. *It is an enormous relief to mothers to hear that others have, with help, been able to overcome them.*<sup>584</sup>

In this passage we see that when a new mother goes to therapy, she may be relieved to learn that other women experience similar difficulties. As a psychiatrist Brockington also advocates the use of drugs to cure postnatal depression to which I suspend my judgement or reflection for lack of knowledge in this matter. Nevertheless, as we have seen above, he recognises the importance for mothers to realise that maternity blues and postnatal depression are shared experiences many new mothers go through. This realisation, he says, brings ‘an enormous relief.’<sup>585</sup>

This was something feminists had discovered from the 1960s onwards, beginning with Betty Friedan’s (1963) very popular book *The Feminine Mystique*, in which she gave an account of many American wives and mothers who found the loneliness of married life and having children often excruciating. After reading Friedan’s book, many women, both in the States and abroad (in Italy it was published in 1975), understood that other women felt the same as them: motherhood was challenging. This was a liberating realisation. Prior to this point women often experienced those feelings in isolation within the parameter of patriarchy and without a common language.

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<sup>584</sup> Brockington, *Motherhood and Mental Health*. p. 178. [my emphasis]

<sup>585</sup> *Ibid.* p. 178.

There is a sense of solidarity in knowing one person is not alone in experiencing those feelings and is listened to by others. Brockington writes, ‘it is well to bear in mind that most people receive ‘psychotherapy’ from friends, their own mother, or their spouse... The need for professional counselling arises, to some extent, *because* many do not have understanding friends and relatives.’<sup>586</sup> Therefore, we see the importance of having understanding people around, and according to Brockington, ‘Lack of social support is another well-known association of depression, and one would expect this to be important in recently delivered mothers.’<sup>587</sup> He carries on by arguing that ‘social support, however, is complex and difficult to objectify; there are many variables to be considered, including the number of confidantes, the frequency and form of contact, and the type of support provided—emotional support, guidance or socialisation.’<sup>588</sup>

Looking at isolation after giving birth we can see it is a universal phenomenon, that can happen in many different cultures so it is not exclusive to Western culture, even if probably more prominent.<sup>589</sup> The importance of having supportive friends and relatives around extends, as Brockington argues, even to helping a pregnant woman to understand and grapple with her pregnancy.<sup>590</sup> There are some cases in which a woman alone does not realise

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<sup>586</sup> Ibid. p. 178.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid. p. 183.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid. p. 187.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid.

she is pregnant because there is no one to mirror her, to tell her, to see her in short.

I suggest that motherhood is a learned experience and the more one is mothering alone and in isolation the more challenging it is. I sustain the importance of women spending time together and seeing each other breastfeed or bottle feed, changing nappies, asking for suggestions, talking about how one feels – the tiredness, the frustration of the non-stop nature of mothering – or sharing the powerful experience of hearing the story of another mother’s birth. Tyler and Baraitser have argued that:

Outside the important work of a small number of artists who opened up childbirth as a viable artistic subject during feminism’s second wave, and the medical, health and instructional contexts that have allowed, and yet simultaneously ‘confined’ its visualisation, childbirth has until recently remained ‘the great unseen’ of European culture.<sup>591</sup>

Why is the experience of motherhood/birth/breastfeeding so hidden? What is there to hide? It is still the case that these experiences are often going unrepresented, but in recent years birth has been more visible via social media platforms in which mothers ask for suggestions about birth plans. There are now also many Youtube channels which portray the whole process of birth and explain matters relating to motherhood and babies. (I discuss maternal subjectivity in this thesis as deeply embedded, linked, and dependant on relationality.)

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<sup>591</sup> Imogen Tyler and Lisa Baraitser, “Private View, Public Birth: Making Feminist Sense of the New Visual Culture of Childbirth,” *Studies in the Maternal* 5, no. 2 (2013): 1–27. p. 1.

As we will see in the next part and as we have seen in the previous chapters, the core of my research is relationality between mothers for the reasons Italian sexual difference feminists Lia Cigarini and Luisa Muraro explain here:

our political practice is based on the dual relationship of exchange based on trust – relationship which is marginal in a capitalistic society – which forms the mediation to allow for women’s freedom.<sup>592</sup>

I’ll now briefly account for the link between relationality and motherhood and why I think it is important before looking at relationality in particular in the next part. Within sexual difference feminist theory, there are several books that take relationality between women very seriously but there are not many books about the specificity of the relationality between women once they become mothers.<sup>593</sup>

I see the political not as separate from life in governments and its apparatuses, but as part of life. As Cigarini and Muraro say ‘it is not our interest to separate politics from culture, love, work. We would not like a politics separate in this way, and we would not be able to practice it.’ I see

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<sup>592</sup> ‘La nostra pratica politica che fa della relazione duale di scambio basato sulla fiducia – relazione marginale in una società capitalista – la mediatrice della libertà femminile.’ in Cigarini, Lia and Muraro, “Politica e Pratica Politica.” p. 16. [my translation].

<sup>593</sup> One book that talks about this is based on the experiences of a Mothers’ Collective in Rome during the mid-1970s (Collettivo Madri), the book is based on theory and interviews to mothers and it was written by two members of the collective, Angela Cattaneo and Silvana Pisa with the contribution of the other mothers too, Cattaneo and Pisa, *L’Altra Mamma. La Maternità Nel Movimento Delle Donne. Fantasie, Desideri, Domande e Inquietudini*.

relationality and relationality between mothers or carers as political, then, because care and the work of reproduction is political.

If, as Cavarero says, as I said in Chapter Three instead of fragmenting the subject, we would instead *incline* the subject (in a similar way to ‘the mother’ in the stereotypical ideal of the oblation mother), we can see how by inclining her towards her baby the mother is supported/aided in this inclination/in this mothering work, if she inclines herself towards another/towards another ‘mother’. In this ‘double inclination’, her vulnerability is somehow halved. She is not the solipsistic subject who mothers in isolation, closed up in this self-sufficient idea of herself, instead in this ‘double inclination’ she finds that mothering together with/another/‘mother’ instead of fragmenting herself (what can we call postnatal depression if not a fragmentation of the subject/self?...) she may be better able to ‘add’ to her subjectivity/to ‘augment’ her mothering ‘capacity’, to learn to mother from and with another m/other. Hence in a way we have a different subjectivity. Italian feminist political philosopher Olivia Guaraldo argues that

What politics and ethics should take into account is the way in which relationality contributes to shape a notion of subjectivity, which is linked, from birth, to the indispensable presence of another human being.<sup>594</sup>

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<sup>594</sup> Olivia Guaraldo, “Thinkers That Matter. On the Thought of Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero,” *About Gender, International Journal on Gender Studies*. 1, no. 1 (2012). p. 92-117. p. 110.

This ‘different’ subjectivity, I suggest, is the result of relationality between mothers and carers. Following Cavarero’s thinking in the previous chapters relationality aids us to shape our idea of our own selfhood and subjectivity. If this primal relationality which happens from birth, is then reactivated in other stages of life, more importantly when we are most vulnerable, then we carry on being part of the world by virtue of a relation. The ‘otherworldly’ and depressive state of postnatal depression can then remain at bay, allowing us a ‘unified’, more content, more *within the world* subjectivity.

### **on relational maternal subjectivity**

Motherhood elicits in women complex feelings and, by relating to other women who are mothers too, women may be able to process those feelings and hopefully to externalise them and verbalise them. This processing and elaborating of feelings is vital and can help ward off postnatal depression. As we have seen in Chapter 4, the mothers’ collective found that the sharing of personal experiences of birth and motherhood made them less difficult to deal with. Finding out that other mothers can feel the same: sad, frustrated, lost, in love, elated, excited, exhausted, makes one’s story more valid, real, and concrete. In suggesting the benefits of mothering happening in collaboration, solidarity with other mothers and carers, I am aware of sentiments of jealousy among women, hatred, and projections of our relationships with our mothers onto other women in which we can take the role of the mother or daughter.

As I discussed in Chapter 3 what I call the mother's 'double vulnerability' towards herself, her changing subjectivity and her infant's vulnerability can add something to how we view, account for, and theorise mothers' subjectivity. Understanding this can help us understand the mother not as the all giving and constantly responsive depositary to her infant's needs but as someone in a dynamic relationship, a human who encounters another (each with different realities, the adult as an adult but nevertheless vulnerable, as Arendt says, vulnerability is the human condition). I suggest that we start looking at the relationship between an infant and its mother (or other primary carer) as one between two vulnerable human beings, both with different sets of powers and roles. Perhaps in this light we can account for and keep present the subjectivity of the mother as the one who responds or tries to respond attentively to her infant's needs, but who is at the same time, having her own desires and wishes because she is *utterly human*, not an idealised figure as she has been historically and culturally framed for centuries. In addition, I argue that if we saw mothers' subjectivity as based on relationality then relational subjectivity comes into play, where mothers can benefit from relationships with other carers so that the 'weight' of caring for a child does not fall only on them, but the mother is supported and recognised (in her maternal work) by others. I argue she would experience an utterly different subjectivity if supported in her mothering. This I argue can work as 'protection' against

postnatal depression. It is our failure to see women as part of society and part of politics which has often condemned mothers to mother alone.

I read Baraitser's book *Maternal Encounters* when I was pregnant of my child between 2009/10 and while being very excited about the imminent birth but already knowing quite well that motherhood was not going to be just rosy. I realised even more while reading it how motherhood was going to be delightful and challenging (too). At the same time as realising this further, I began to think about relationality and how motherhood could be different if thought in a relational way. Baraitser states that maternal subjectivity can be described as that which we fail to precisely describe:

Perhaps we might say that the process of attempting, and perhaps inevitably failing to catch hold of the mercurial mental and emotional currents prompted by maternity is one way to understand what we may call maternal subjectivity.<sup>595</sup>

It is this '*failing* to catch hold of the mercurial mental and emotional currents prompted by maternity' that I am interested in bringing into the political sphere of the maternal. Subjectivities can (only) be seen as relational, and this is even more so true of maternal subjectivity *because* unless it is relational and supported by others – grandmothers and grandfathers, relatives, other mothers, fathers, friends, own siblings - *it fails to be a subjectivity* but becomes a minus, a lack, a need of, a cry for, a unilateral pursuit, a physical and mind-

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<sup>595</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*. p. 2.

wrecking activity that can bring about postnatal depression. I suggest that, *unless shared*, motherhood *is* debilitating – and if done in a nuclear household, capitalist, neo-liberal context it can be at the cost of the mother and (children’s well-being). In addition, if motherhood is a fragmentation of the self as Kristeva says of pregnancy, then only in sharing the experience of motherhood can we see an emerging of a maternal subjectivity which can feel, even if just slightly unifying and centered.

For me maternal subjectivity and relationality between mothers are deeply interlinked, because within an abstract concept of the subject, once a woman becomes a mother she can realise several things. Firstly, she realises that her subjectivity is not universal, that her experience can be very different from that of other mothers and that her experience is very different from a man from whom the idea of the subject was derived.<sup>596</sup> Secondly, she understands that her experience of becoming a mother is far from abstract. Being pregnant, giving birth, breastfeeding, all these bodily experiences are grounded in an embodied and embedded experience of herself. Thirdly, she comes to realise that she is not autonomous as the child’s vulnerability and needs puts the very idea of an autonomous self into question as Joan Raphael-Leff has argued.<sup>597</sup>

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<sup>596</sup> For a historical genealogy of this assimilation to women to the male paradigm see Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato. A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*. and Luce Irigaray’s work

<sup>597</sup> ‘Given the western focus on autonomous individuality and the tacit message of impossible bodily connectedness and/or psychic fusion, pregnancy and providing sustenance from the juices of her own body in utero and breastfeeding, may seem equally strange to a new mother.’ in Raphael-Leff, “Healthy Maternal Ambivalence.” p. 5.

The idea of the universal subject, its abstractness, individualism and autonomy can be some of the reasons, I believe, why some women experience solitude in their new changed role as mothers, and why they may go through postnatal depression, experiences which are challenging and disrupting to a ‘mythological’ idea of the unity of the self.<sup>598</sup> I suggest that it is this mundane reality of the work of reproduction which has the greatest effect on women’s subjectivity once they become mothers. It is the everyday repetitive side of the work of care, which when done in isolation in a post-industrial, neoliberal, capitalistic, and mostly individualistic society, can impinge mostly on our sense of self and more so for mothers and carers.

As previously discussed, there is still a quite widespread idea that motherhood is natural to women, hence, if a mother becomes depressed after having a baby, some perceive her as an “unnatural” mother. As Parker argues all feelings in motherhood are valid and, she proposes, ambivalence is part and parcel of having a baby. It is the avoidance of acknowledging that mothers can be ambivalent about their babies which is the problem. Mothers at times may feel guilty about having those difficult and ambivalent feelings towards their babies and are not able to integrate love and hate towards them. But as Parker says ‘it is the troubling co-existence of love and hate that propels a mother into thinking about what goes on between herself and her child.’<sup>599</sup> Hence it is this ability to ‘incline’ oneself materially, physically but

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<sup>598</sup> Baraitser, “Oi Mother, Keep Ye’ Hair On! Impossible Transformations of Maternal Subjectivity.” p. 218

<sup>599</sup> Parker, *Torn in Two. The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence*. p. 9.

symbolically too towards another, towards a vulnerable baby, which is important here, but it is the ability to recognise that sometimes one cannot incline oneself towards a baby that is more important. Going back to Cavarero, this is the crux of the matter, for her it is not that the mother naturally inclines herself towards her baby. On the contrary it is because mothers have often inclined themselves towards their babies – that it has become a stereotype dictated by a patriarchal order that destined women that way – that we can rethink subjectivity for all. It is exactly by using this stereotype that we can rethink, the subject as constructed in the Western thought, in a more empathic and dependent way.

Natasha S. Mauthner argues that sometimes feminist researchers have focused too much on the social isolation of mothers<sup>600</sup> and that many mothers have more social contacts than we think. I agree with Mauthner's suggestions, but simultaneously, I do believe that in capitalist societies like, for instance the UK, many mothers find themselves alone with a baby for many hours a day as Raphael-Leff<sup>601</sup> has argued, and as I stated previously. Many studies have mostly taken for granted that a new mother in a nuclear setting would be caring alone for her baby for most of the time. When assessing maternal mental health it is important to see the mother relationally as someone whose subjectivity is shaped by relationships with others and by living *in* the world, in the *polis*. Someone who needs other people around her to care, support and

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<sup>600</sup> Mauthner, "POSTNATAL DEPRESSION The Significance of Social Contacts Between Mothers." 313.

<sup>601</sup> Raphael-Leff, "Healthy Maternal Ambivalence."

sustain her and who can offer the same. Mauthner carried out an enlightening qualitative study of postnatal depression from a feminist perspective.<sup>602</sup> Her doctoral research<sup>603</sup> looked at why and how some women feel depressed following a birth. She found out that ‘for the specific group of women that took part in my study, their encounters with other mothers with young children were critical to their feelings of emotional and psychological well-being.’<sup>604</sup> This is similar to what Brockington reported too, as I said in the first section of the chapter. Mauthner argues for the importance of a relational lens to look at the subject.<sup>605</sup> Her method is based mainly on the work she has done with Carol Gilligan and her colleagues. My lens pulls away from Gilligan’s analysis of the naturally caring nature of women. But I think Mauthner has taken some ideas of Gilligan and applied them in her analysis very skilfully, without ever falling into the idea that because one is a woman one can care more effectively. My take on relationality is different from Mauthner though as it centres mainly on Italian feminism and on those who have worked on relational ontology. But her insights are valuable for my analysis. I am returning now to explore more in-depth postnatal depression in

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<sup>602</sup> Mauthner, “POSTNATAL DEPRESSION The Significance of Social Contacts Between Mothers.” Natasha Mauthner S., “‘It’s a Woman Cry for Help’: A Relational Perspective on Post Natal Depression.” *Feminism & Psychology*. SAGE 8, no. 3 (1998): 325–55. Natasha Mauthner S., *The Darkest Days of My Life. Stories of Post Partum Depression* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

<sup>603</sup> S Natasha Mauthner, “Postnatal Depression: A Relational Perspective.” (University of Cambridge, 1994).

<sup>604</sup> Mauthner, “POSTNATAL DEPRESSION The Significance of Social Contacts Between Mothers.” p. 311. This is similar to what Baraitser stated too, as I stated in Chapter 3, that in her clinical work she found that many mothers reflected on how talking with other mothers really helped them to find a ‘way to proceed.’ Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*. p. 153.

<sup>605</sup> Mauthner S., “‘It’s a Woman Cry for Help’: A Relational Perspective on Post Natal Depression.” 335.

the light of critiquing individualism from a feminist perspective and arguing for a relational view of maternal subjectivity.

In her study on postnatal depression, Mauthser argued that ‘recovery and change’ began:

through talking to, and finding that their experiences resonated with another mother [. . .] partly because these relationships allowed and enabled them to openly question, if not resist, the ideal of motherhood they had struggled to fulfil.<sup>606</sup>

Those mothers perceived that their experiences resonated with another mother. It is this resonating which is the key to understand the importance of relationality for new mothers. In Chapter 3, I discussed the importance of storytelling and listening, both are linked to what resonates in one’s life experience. What is needed for an experience to resonate with another is the openness to *listen* to their *story*.

Therefore, Mauthner’s conclusion has been my starting point in the sense that I share her argument but then I look further at how these relationships among mothers can be fostered and strengthened with the aim of a less isolated, and hopefully a more satisfying experience of motherhood. I posit these potentially fulfilling relationships with other mothers – some may bring about conflicts as an important aspect of relationships - and carers with the possibility that the experience of motherhood could be less isolating and individualised for mothers, hence hopefully more self-satisfying not in an

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<sup>606</sup> Ibid. p. 346.

‘imperative way’, but experienced as a work that can possibly be done in solidarity with others and not as a solipsistic activity. In viewing it this way I argue women may avoid being swamped by feelings of guilt that the maternal ideal produces.

In the Introduction, I suggested that my thinking is at the intersection of Baraitser’s ideas on maternal subjectivity as a subjectivity which is interrupted and that motherhood has a kind of viscosity due to the slowness it fosters by having to deal with ‘stuff’ which can include the pram, the baby food, the baby changing bag, an older sibling, herself:

She is encumbered, not by the physical presence of a child who needs holding, carrying, who walks a quarter of her speed, who pulls on her legs, by the multiplicity of relationships negotiated with child, environment and stuff.<sup>607</sup>

This being encumbered is a familiar feeling for many mothers. I have specific memories of it. Baraitser traces the journey of a mother, herself, from her home to her mother’s home. The hundreds of tasks it takes to get ready, to bring a buggy down from the third floor, to bring the older child downstairs, to hold the baby and the buggy and so on ‘she manoeuvres the older child out of the front door holding the baby. She must persuade the older child who is just walking to wait alone while she carries the baby and the buggy

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<sup>607</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*. p. 130.

downstairs, where she plans to deposit the baby, leaving it unattended while she walks back up to pick up the older child and carry him down.’<sup>608</sup>

I propose something else. What about the mother saying ‘no this is not working for me’, I will go and call my neighbour and ask for help with the pram while I and the kids go down the stairs.’ The maternal subjectivity proposed by Baraitser represents a mother alone in the city, the epitome of the idea of the subject as individual, solipsistic, who manages care in what we can call a neoliberal stance. The reality is that maternal subjectivity is more often than not like or very similar to the one described by Baraitser, but my questions are these: What if a mother is more supported in her care work, would she feel so interrupted? Would more support help mothers experience motherhood in a less burdensome way? Both concretely in the way she deals with the ‘maternal stuff’<sup>609</sup> Baraitser talks about, and her baby, and in her subjectivity? Would her subjectivity be the same? My suggestion is that it would be different. It would be less solipsistic and ‘interrupted’, and it may give more space to mothers, both physical, temporal (few free hours a days for oneself) and internal.

### **a thread, a maternal thread**

This section is a case study of mothers’ relationality. It is one example of an exercise that can be done, in different situation and with an array of people, to think through what it means to support each other as carers. I discuss a

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<sup>608</sup> Ibid. p. 148.

<sup>609</sup> Ibid. pp. 122-150.

live art intervention (or Proposition) I worked on with Berlin based artist Alex Martinis Roe<sup>610</sup> which we called “Ritual for the Support of Mothers.”<sup>611</sup> In addition, I discuss the workshop I led at the Women’s Art Library at Goldsmiths in London in collaboration with London based artist Rose Gibbs, based on the Proposition I created with Martinis Roe. In both workshops I used a thick, colourful thread (pictures below) to symbolise webs of relationships; at the same time, in a practical exercise a group of women, some of whom were mothers/carers while others were not, created a real web, passing the thread from one person to another.

What an art practice adds to my research is the concretisation of the critique of universalism, through Cavarero’s work on this theme which I discussed in various ways in Chapters 1, 2 and 3. I explained in the previous chapter that I have taken a decision to use some images. I can reach a greater and wider theoretical and conceptual depth with a practice that uses the artistic and visual than from a purely verbal, theoretical PhD. A further reason for my interest in using images is that in the feminist theory I use, which disrupts the universalistic and the abstract idea of the subject, images bring a concreteness and specificity that sometimes theory alone does not. Hence, I want to bring images to render the symbolic concrete and make it touchable (the colourful thread) and visible with the senses. This chapter is linked with the previous chapters in which I disrupted the idea of the universal,

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<sup>610</sup> Alex Martinis Roe “Www.Alexmartinisroe.Com,” n.d.

<sup>611</sup> This proposition is now part of this book Martinis Roe, *To Become Two. Propositions for Feminist Collective Practice*.

individualistic, abstract subject of classical Western philosophy through the example I provide of human beings who are concrete in their uniqueness. I suggest legal theorists and practitioners would benefit from seeing the uniqueness in each human being, dispensing with the abstractness of subjects as understood in Classical philosophy. In these two workshops I used images to render the symbolic meaning of relationality concrete and make it touchable (the colourful thread) and visible. In other words, I attempted to show how motherhood is a concrete, everyday reality and how we can politicise it by making it a collective work. I wanted to bring this reality and concreteness alive in my thesis.

The main question I try to answer in this section is this: how do I render the theoretical concrete? My interest in doing this is to bring the theoretical 'down' to a concrete level, working with women using images and a thick fabric thread. I can theorise about relationality between women, but a thread symbolises it better and brings it to a conscious and affective level that a purely written text cannot convey. This section, and the practice of the thread, is the visual representation of what the mothers' collective I discussed in the previous chapter engaged in for many years. They built a web of relationships, exchanges, dialogues, and practical support which was positive and helpful but difficult as well; it exemplifies the complexity of human relationships. I do not see an idealised group there, but a collective who

brought out the ‘good and the bad’ which lies in any group of people working together.

This section, then, is informed by relationality between mothers so I am indebted<sup>612</sup> to women that came before me who understood the importance of women’s relationality and of mothers helping each other when engaged in reproductive work. As I explained in the introduction this idea, and the practice of maternal relationality, comes from the lived experience of my own mother, Bertilla Bonato. What follows is the theoretical background to the ideas that were later translated into the group exercise in the Proposition I worked on with Alex, ‘A Ritual for the Support of Mothers and Carers’ and the workshop I held at Goldsmiths in London. This short theoretical background to the Proposition is based on this PhD research but it is worth, for the sake of clarity, representing here in a shorter version before introducing and showing some pictures of the actual exercise.

In the West the family has been historically constructed within the paradigm of a bourgeois society; it is mainly a nuclear, heterosexual, two-parent family. It is conceived within a liberal, capitalistic, individualistic frame and within a broader meaning of private property, owing a home, and ‘having a wife/husband’, e.g. ‘my wife’, ‘my husband’, ‘my daughter’, ‘my son’ etc. I want to open up this way of seeing the family as private property by looking

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<sup>612</sup> As Cavarero says she is indebted to Irigaray and Hannah Arendt (in Elisabetta interview), I feel in debt to feminist women who came before me because I understand that they have done significant work in liberating themselves from patriarchy and as a consequence they secured my liberation in which I was born and grew up in.

at a child as part of society, with more than one mother/one father. You can start by viewing your very close friends as ‘second’ mothers/carers to your children, and this can open up your relationship with a child to the perspective that children are part of and the responsibility of the whole community of human beings. This is true too for the elderly and those at the most vulnerable times in their lives. It is here that I locate the importance of relationships between women who are mothers. They can support each other and be a referent to a child, like a “second mother”. A child is part of the world and not our own in a strict sense. We all (all human beings, men or women) mother in many different ways and situations – on the bus, at work, when we prepare each other a coffee, etc. The ‘maternal’ can be seen broadly in terms of care – caring for an old friend or elderly parent with the intrinsic understanding that all humans are vulnerable. Legal theorist Jonathan Herring argues that ‘we are all vulnerable and rely on others to provide for our needs. To divide society up into those providing care and those needing care disguises the vulnerability that we all face.’<sup>613</sup>

I met Berlin-based artist Alex Martinis Roe in London in December 2015 at The Showroom<sup>614</sup> art space where she was to run a two-day workshop in which I took part. Alex’s workshop was part of a programme called *Vai*

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<sup>613</sup> Herring, *Caring and the Law*. p. 4.

<sup>614</sup> The Showroom is a contemporary art space focused on collaborative approaches to cultural production within its locality and beyond. 63, Penfold Street. London NW8 8PQ “[Http://Www.Theshowroom.Org](http://www.theshowroom.org),” n.d.

*Pure, Now You Can Go*<sup>615</sup>, inspired by the work of the Italian radical feminist Carla Lonzi,<sup>616</sup> previously mentioned in Chapter 3. *Vai Pure* was a programme of events considering feminist thinking, art, and activism, taking place across The Showroom, The ICA, Space Studios and Raven Row. Alex Martinis Roe's workshop focused on trans-generational collective politics and it was a chance to experiment practically with some Italian feminist collective practices as a way to continue inventing and imagining new ones. Participants undertook a series of exercises based on collective political practices developed by the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective from the 1970s to today.

A few months later, in May 2016, Alex Martinis Roe invited me and twenty-one other feminists from around Europe to a large house in the countryside outside Berlin to collaborate with her on a live art intervention (Proposition) as part of her feature length film *Our Future Network* which is itself part of Alex's *To Become Two*<sup>617</sup> project. We spent four days together and tried out a series of what Alex termed "Propositions for feminist collective practice" that she had developed in collaboration with each of us contributors in the months leading up to the meeting. Alex had read the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective's *Non Credere di Avere dei Diritti (Don't You Think You Have any Rights)* several years before while she was studying in Australia. It had

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<sup>615</sup> Now You Can Go "Http://Nowyoucango.Tumblr.Com/About," n.d.

<sup>616</sup> Carla Lonzi was a feminist art critic and writer. She was one of the main founders of Rivolta Femminile (Female Revolt) in 1970 an important Roman feminist collective which influenced many other Italian feminist groups. She wrote several books among which: Lonzi, *Sputiamo Su Hegel*. Lonzi, *La Donna Clitoridea e La Donna Vaginale*.

<sup>617</sup> "Http://Alexmartinisroe.Com/To-Become-Two," n.d.

a lasting effect on her; it is her favourite book, she says, and has inspired much of her recent artistic practice.

Alex contacted me a few months before the meeting in Berlin to ask me to devise a proposal based on my PhD thesis. She asked me to consider how I could make the main ideas of my PhD concrete and visual and translate them into an ‘artistic practice.’ We spoke on Skype and while we were speaking, I suddenly came up with the idea of expressing relationality between mothers and carers by using some beautiful, long, thick, colourful fabric thread that I had at home and making a group exercise out of it. The thread was to become a symbolic but concrete exercise in relationality; passing the thread around to each other represents, and expresses, the need for humans to establish relationships and ask for help from each other when we are most vulnerable. The thread itself represents relationality; it is a concrete representation that we are not born alone in this world, but that we exist *because* of relationships.

As I explained in the introduction to this thesis, relationality between mothers is something I have actually practiced and experienced, not only within a theoretical frame but in the affective, practical, and concrete reality of my relationships with other mothers, fathers and carers since the summer of 2010 when my son was born. When Alex asked me to create an artistic, concrete, ‘filmable’ Proposition lasting about two hours, I thought about the support needed by mothers and the webs of relationships, and

the thread came to my mind very quickly. Thus, the practice-based exercise was born!

I have anchored my ideas and theoretical suggestions to reality with the thread and with concrete human beings, not abstract subjects. It is exactly this anchoring which I find interesting in theoretical research and I see my thread exercise as a form of “performed scholarship” such as cultural theorist Lorna Dwight Conquergood discusses, a scholarship which “interrogates and decentres, without discarding, the text” as a way of acknowledging what “gets lost and muted in texts.”<sup>618</sup> In doing these practical exercises, my desire is *to merge theory and practice*. Conquergood has argued for this in her work and, in the context I am discussing here, I think Italian feminists have achieved it with ‘the practice of doing’ I discussed in the Introduction. In other words, I wish to render the theoretical political, linked to action which, as Arendt would argue, is the meaning of politics.<sup>619</sup> Or, as Cavarero puts it, ‘I am first and foremost an activist then a theoretician.’<sup>620</sup>

One way to bring the theoretical ‘down’ to the level of the concrete, practical and the political is to foreground the work of sociologists Les Back and Nina Wakeford, who have both tried to revive sociology from being a very still and methodologically stuck discipline. While they come

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<sup>618</sup> Lorna Dwight Conquergood, *Cultural Struggles: Performance, Ethnography, Praxis.*, ed. E. Patrick Johnson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).

<sup>619</sup> Arendt, *Hum. Cond.* p. 1958.

<sup>620</sup> “Giving Life to Politics: The Work of Adriana Cavarero.” accessed January 27, 2020, <http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/research/cappe/calendar/cavarero>. Conference Brighton, UK 19-21 June 2017. Key note speakers were: Adriana Cavarero, Judith Butler and Bonnie Honig.

from a sociology background and Cavarero is a philosopher, their work ‘revives’ sociology using similar strategies to Cavarero’s work to bring life to politics. Wakeford’s work focuses on visual sociology.<sup>621</sup> Back’s work calls for a sociology that is livelier and more sensuous and is committed to finding different ways of sociological writing and representation:

Through using multi-modality researchers develop a different kind of attentiveness to the embodied social world in motion. Not being limited to what people say explicitly enables us to train a kind of attentiveness to tacit forms of coexistence.<sup>622</sup>

Furthermore, he argues for the advantages of a live sociology:

One that is able to attend to the fleeting, distributed, multiple and sensory aspects of sociality through research techniques that are mobile, sensuous and operate from multiple vantage points. If researchers enact reality rather than simply reflect it, there is an opportunity to create sociological forms of representation that are more knowing and innovative than their antecedents.<sup>623</sup>

These are the reasons why in these two live art exercises I have been interested in bringing people, in their own uniqueness, together to enact relationality in an affective, emotive, and sensorial way. Going back to Cavarero, she notes that Arendt said it is important to avoid rendering human beings superfluous, but to see them in their uniqueness.<sup>624</sup> Seeing them as superfluous is very dangerous as we have seen in history (Hannah

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<sup>621</sup> Nina Wakeford and Celia Lury, eds., *Inventive Methods: The Happening of the Social*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013).

<sup>622</sup> Les Back, “Live Sociology: Social Research and Its Futures,” in *Live Methods*, ed. Les Back and Nirmal Puwar (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2012), 18–39. p. 29.

<sup>623</sup> *Ibid.* p. 7.

<sup>624</sup> ‘Arendt says that when one dissolves human beings in discourses in general, human beings, as such, become superfluous.’ Cavarero in Bertolino and Cavarero, “Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero.” p. 156.

Arendt talks about the holocaust as the result of seeing humans as superfluous and indistinct) and we still see in humanitarian crisis. To avoid that, to me, also means to working together, to act, to meet, to relate, to exchange with others as our unique selves in relation to other unique selves ‘we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.’<sup>625</sup>

### **berlin, a ritual for the support of mothers and carers**

This Proposition had two aims. The first was to challenge the well-entrenched historical view of motherhood as a natural destiny for women, hence ‘easy’. The second was to acknowledge that mothers may find it hard to ask for help when they are struggling with a new-born baby (and their other children), if they have more than one, exactly due to the idea that caring is ‘natural’ for women. In this exercise, a network of supportive relationships was created when each person asked for help from another mother/carer and the thread was passed around. This support network was expressed as a web of colourful thread and it was hoped that this web would have a positive impact on the mothers’/carers’ daily lives by enabling them to imagine a communal way of caring.

My proposal with Alex Martinis Roe was made up of two exercises; the first was to open up a discussion around our reproductive desires, or/and lack of desire. The importance of this discussion among women is often made to

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<sup>625</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 1958. p. 8.

seem irrelevant by ideas on neutrality, equality, and universality. To really understand women's desire or non-desire to have children, I feel it is important to have an open dialogue around these themes.

I devised and read the following questions to the group in Berlin in May 2016. The aim of the questions was to prompt the discussion on desiring a child or not and the ambivalence surrounding this decision (this was recorded only as a sound recording):

- Would someone like to talk about their desire for a child?
- Would someone like to talk about their non-desire to have a child, for now or for ever?
- Would someone like to talk about their desire for a child but the difficulties (past/present) of conceiving a child?
- Would someone like to talk about their past desire for a child and their coming to terms with not being able to have a child and being happy now with not having a child?
- Would someone like to talk about their experience of having a child?
- Would someone like to talk about their past desire to have a child and their new-found 'passion'/desire for something else which makes the desire for a child less present or not present at all?
- Would someone like to talk about regretting having had a child?
- Would someone like to discuss their (or partner's) inability to conceive and the deciding to adopt a child?

What follows now is the second exercise, called the fabric thread web of relationships 'exercise', "a Ritual for the Support of Mothers and Carers":

- We create a list of 'things' that women who become mothers need help with: 1, 2, 3, etc.
- We all sit on the floor or on chairs in a circle and we imagine having a baby (or looking after an elderly person) and being on maternity leave and spending a lot of time alone as your partner works, or if you parent alone as you are a single parent what do you need? What could make your life easier while looking after a baby? A short discussion about a problem and how you work it out: for example, you struggle with breastfeeding, you are alone at home, your baby cries, you are still in your pyjamas and you eventually want to go out.
- Have a recording of a baby crying in the background before we do this exercise. Ask women to close their eyes and think/feel what the sound of a baby crying makes us feel. Babies crying can elicit strong emotions in people that can re-waken ways in which we were cared for as babies ourselves. Some people are better able to accept, or tolerate more 'easily', a baby's cries, while others want to stop the crying very quickly as they are not able to tolerate and be present to the baby's distress.

Most times it is a mix of the two, at times one is more patient and able to tolerate, other times much less so.<sup>626</sup>

- Then imagine being alone with a baby crying/tending to his/her needs and your needs for a long time (changing nappies, dressing/undressing baby several times a day/breastfeeding or bottle feeding/getting baby to sleep/ in the meantime tending to your needs, taking a shower/getting dressed/making yourself a coffee/lunch/dinner, trying to get out/maybe bringing a buggy down the stairs/then the baby, a bag, etc.).
- We are now going to pass this thread around in a random way and while we do that, we say what we think we would need to ease this work of mothering. It would be good to think specifically of what we would see as important/vital elements in making a web of relationships between other mothers, specifically a kind of support network, communal practice of childcare (two or more women in someone's home, looking after their children together with the specific intent of working on what interests them during this time or one woman looking after her child and a friend's child and then reverse while the other mother naps/goes out for a coffee/works for few hours). Can you come to see me once a week for 1 hour? I take a shower, and take a bit of time off and you tend to the baby? Here below is the visual result of

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<sup>626</sup> Aletha J Solter, *Tears and Tantrum. What to Do When Babies and Children Cry* (Goleta: CA: Shining Star Press, 1998).

the Berlin workshop based around my work that became a concrete, visual and artistic practice while I collaborated with Alex Martinis Roe which then became a film:



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of the proposition “A Ritual for the Support of Mothers,” developed with Sara Paiola, 2016.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of the proposition “A Ritual for the Support of Mothers,” developed with Sara Paiola, 2016.



Alex Martinis Roe, *Our Future Network*, film still of the proposition “A Ritual for the Support of Mothers,” developed with Sara Paiola, 2016.

What do notions of ‘webs’ represent? What is it precisely that the physical thread does in enacting and representing these webs? Why then do I use a physical thread to represent webs of relationships? I think that to enact a collective activity between mothers and carers by being physically present in a space with the aid of a physical thread is a good way to allow carers some reflection together.

### **london, let’s talk about motherhood**

On a cold, rainy Sunday afternoon on 15<sup>th</sup> January 2017 I made my way to The Women’s Art Library at Goldsmiths University in South London to meet artist Rose Gibbs. We worked on a workshop together which was devised around my PhD work. There were six attendees – all parents, five women who were mothers and one man who was a father, as well as Rose and I who are both parents. The workshop was devised a little differently from the

Proposition I did with Alex Martinis Roe. First, unlike the original workshop in Berlin in which there were only two mothers among the women who attended, in the workshop in London we were all parents, hence we could work on the concrete realities that this role presented us with every day, not the ‘virtual’ imaginary of what it would mean to mother a child alone in a flat day in and day out, or care for an elderly person or parent or disabled person or a child or adult with special needs and differently able. In this workshop all the examples were concrete reality for all of us.

During the workshop I gave people five minutes to introduce each other through an icebreaker exercise. One person guides another person from the back, putting a hand on their shoulder if they are happy with it. Then they swap and the other person closes their eyes and they let themselves be guided. Then they stop and each person talks for five minutes to the other person about themselves and then each person introduces the other person to the whole group.

I then talked about myself and why I wanted friends and aunties about when I had my son. I asked all my aunties to come and help me when my son was one month old. My starting point for challenging care in isolation and asking for support was that I did not like the fact that in the UK there are a lot of private nurseries, feeding into capitalism and into a capitalistic idea of care. The most vulnerable and non-economically productive in society, children, and elderly people, will go into care – childcare and elderly people’s

homes. Notwithstanding that some care homes are lovely and some elderly people are very happy in care homes as they can be very sociable places. I explained that my grandparents were looked after at home by one of my aunts and an uncle and another had a private live-in carers paid for by all the siblings and the pension they receive. I also discussed briefly Silvia Federici and the 'Wages for Housework' movement.

I asked the participants to draw or write about a time when they felt vulnerable and were caring for their baby or someone else and what they would have needed. I asked them to write or draw this need they felt for support. I gave them fifteen minutes to think about these themes: How do you represent this need for support, to not care alone and in isolation? Do you ask your partner, a friend, another family member to do this care work together with you or do you find it difficult to ask for a shared partnership in the case of care work? Are you able to express your desires to your partner, and what you need for yourself? What are our assumptions of our partners? Before this exercise started, I told everybody that if at any point they found this exercise uncomfortable they could step out of the workshop. I had created a small 'peaceful corner' with some pillows, a little plant, a few books, the Samaritans phone number if they needed to speak with someone and some water. After the exercise finished, I asked each participant if they wanted to discuss what they had written or drawn with the person next to them. I gave them ten minutes to discuss this together and then we had a

general conversation about what we had said to each other and how to ask for help. This conversation was facilitated by the exercise in which we passed the colourful thread around as shown here:



Goldsmiths The Women's Art Library. Photo: Sara Paiola

While we passed the thread around, I asked them to think about whether it is hard to ask for help when mothering and caring, and how we can learn to ask for help. The exercise consisted in literally asking each other for help in some 'virtual' or already experienced scenarios.



Goldsmiths The Women's Art Library. Photo: Sara Paiola



Goldsmiths The Women's Art Library. Photo: Sara Paiola

These live art interventions, what Martinis Roe calls 'Propositions', represent the potential for seeing other mothers and carers as allies. They challenge

what it means for new mothers to care for a vulnerable infant in a capitalist and increasingly individualised society. They are visual, symbolic, and concrete representations of relationality, which I'd like to call the 'art' of 1970s and 1980s feminist women. It was/is the art of building webs of relationships, exchanges, dialogues, and practical support for each other. It was this desire for friendship, support and solidarity that spurred me 'outside' when I had my son. My proposition with the thread is an example of collaboratively thinking through maternal subjectivity, disrupting its individualised paradigm, which was valuable for the people who participated (some mothers, a father, and several non-mothers). It has been an impressionistic and creative way to explore maternal subjectivity collectively. The results of the exercises were qualitative, they brought about awareness, sharing, communality, thinking otherwise, thinking of building webs of support to escape isolation. The art projects show how relationality can be enacted in a physical, touchable form within a group of people. They add to the idea that I have explored in the thesis that concreteness is an important medium to explore the embodied realities of carers and what they need.

In addition, in the first part of this chapter, I focused on postnatal depression and maternal subjectivity and how it can be re-thought as relational maternal subjectivity. I suggested that it is helpful for mothers to relate to other mothers and carers to be able to keep mother-child over-

identification at bay, which is one of the reasons why motherhood in isolation can be more difficult.

## conclusion

The substantive work of this thesis began through a focused reading of feminist authors whose work revolves around relational ontology, which challenges and criticises equality, individualism and universalism. I centred my readings on 1970s and 1980s feminist theorists, mainly the historical alliance between Irigaray and Italian feminists<sup>627</sup>, from the sexual difference theory standpoint. Through these readings of authors (Cavarero, Arendt, Federici, Irigaray) who take relational ontology as the departure point of their

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<sup>627</sup> See Chapter 1 “a feminist critique of equality, individualism and universalism.”

understanding of the human I proposed that a different kind of vision is necessary, especially when humans are involved in caring roles. In this thesis I have argued that a critique of individualism (individualism as propounded by classical liberal theorists<sup>628</sup> and ‘popularised’ by the logic of free market neoliberalism), is necessary, and key, in the context of care and motherhood. In other words when one is in a caring position toward a dependant and vulnerable human being - a baby, a young child/ren, an elderly person in need of care, an otherwise able person or child/adult with special additional needs – the autonomous and self-referential subject of classical western philosophy is wanting.

The five central questions I asked in this thesis, and how I have addressed them, are these: The first question was whether a relational and collective model of motherhood and care is important for rethinking women’s political subjectivity? By looking at the work of Italian and French feminists in Chapters One, Two and Three I have argued that indeed by using a relational paradigm and a collective model of care we can fundamentally rethink women’s political subjectivity, which is a subjectivity thought of as fundamentally relational, carved and created via relationships, firstly from our first relationships from when we are born and secondly a feminist model or relationality seen as political via the thinking of Hannah Arendt and Adriana Cavarero on politics. One tension in relation to this question was that I did

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<sup>628</sup> See Chapter 1 for a discussion on classical liberal theorists.

not fully resolve the tensions within the term ‘subject’. I will address this in a section below. Secondly, I asked, how did the abstract, universalistic and autonomous view of the subject influence law and is it detrimental to all humans and women, mothers and carers too? I have addressed this question in Chapter Two in particular by discussing the work of the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective, Italian feminist philosopher Wanda Tommasi, feminist lawyer Lia Cigarini, feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero who all state that the universalistic view of the subject is problematic for women and for all. Thirdly, I asked if re-thinking the model of care from an individualised one, to one that is collective and puts care in the realms of the commons (a relational model of motherhood/care) disrupts the individualistic idea of the subject, and broadly challenges individualism and the politics of care? This is the prime question and interest in my thesis and I addressed it by showing how care can be political by applying feminist ideas of collectivity and Arendtian thinking on action and plurality, particularly as developed and expanded by adding a feminist perspective by Cavarero. Fourthly, I asked if a relational model of motherhood, the commoning of care, ‘protect’ women from the loneliness<sup>629</sup> many experience in the first years of a baby and child’s life? And, the fifth and last question is, does engaging in mothering/caring while being supported by other mothers, carers and the community change the

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<sup>629</sup> In 2016 research published by the Co-op and the Red Cross identified becoming a new mum as one of six main causes of loneliness. They say ‘New research shows that a staggering 82 per cent of mums under 30 feel lonely some of the time while more than four in 10 (43 per cent) are lonely often or always.’ <https://www.co-operative.coop/media/news-releases/shocking-extent-of-loneliness-faced-by-young-mothers-revealed>, 2018. See also <https://www.channel4.com/news/the-loneliness-of-becoming-a-new-mum>, 2016.

subjectivity of a mother/carer? Or, to put it in other words, how would a mother/carer's subjectivity be different if they had a circle of support around them? Would she have a different subjectivity then if she mothered mainly alone for long hours day in and day out? I have addressed these last two questions in Chapter Four by looking at a mothers's collective based in Rome in the 1970s in which a group of mothers shared the experiences of motherhood together for many years, from meeting every week to create a space for themselves, to supporting women give birth in a more informed manner, to create a research centre on motherhood and to go on holiday with their children for several summers until they discovered that they preferred to meet without the children present which was ironic in many ways and very telling. To answer the above questions in Chapter Five I then looked at the studies that showed how one of the causes of post-natal depression is isolation and lack of support. As I have outlined in the literature reviewed in Chapter Five on maternity blues and postnatal depression, mothers are often not able to carry on mothering alone without it impacting on their mental health, sense of satisfaction, and sense of meaning. These studies were mainly from the Red Cross and the Co-op and from Natasha Mauthner and psychiatrist Ian Brockington. I concluded that, if mothering was with more

support carers/mothers' subjectivity would be different in many ways<sup>630</sup> and less marked by 'primary maternal persecution.'<sup>631</sup>

I will draw my conclusions by following five points of discussion which have emerged through this research and its aim is to be a reflective exercise to point to some of the tensions that emerged within the thesis: Irigaray and Cavarero on law; subjectivity 'versus' uniqueness; intersectionality. I then focus on a section on why the commoning of care is important and the listening law. After these points of discussion the next section is titled 'contribution to knowledge and future research' and the last section is the 'epilogue/conclusions.

### **irigaray and cavarero**

I have explored the work of Irigaray in different sections of the thesis (especially in Chapters One, Two and Three) as she is a foundational theorist in what I discussed, especially her critique of equality and universalism. In addition many of the feminist authors I have explored are informed by Irigaray's thoughts in profound ways. Nevertheless I have not made specific use of her work and perspective in Chapter Two titled 'legal imaginations' on the critique of the law and where I looked at two particular cases. The reason is that, even though I know Irigaray's critique of the law is extensive and she

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<sup>630</sup> Specifically how different mothers/carers subjectivity would be if mothering collectively was not the scope of my research. However, it may be the theme of future research.

<sup>631</sup> Raphael-Leff, *Psychological Processes of Childbearing*, p. 315.

suggests ideas on how the law could change to achieve more justice for women, it was not this aspect I was interested in exploring as I think it is an already widely used feminist lens to read the law critically.<sup>632</sup> Instead, I decided to use the work of Cavarero to show how her thinking on “uniqueness” can bring about a different perspective to lawyers and judges, one which is more emphatic.

### **subjectivity**

One theme that I did not manage to fully resolve in the thesis was the tensions within the term ‘subject’. I think one reason is that I centred my analysis on maternal and carers’ subjectivity so there was this other specific subjectivity which would emerge when one is a carer which is not ‘just’ a subjectivity, but is an intersubjectivity. Hence my analysis was clouded by reflecting and focusing more on maternal subjectivity than the term ‘subject’. The other reason is that in Cavarero’s philosophy she refrains from calling people ‘subjects’ as for her it is an abstract manner in which to describe humans, therefore I was more centred on the Cavarerian idea of ‘uniqueness’ to define subjectivity, as that which distinguishes each of us in very specific ways, the *who* which Hannah Arendt talks about ‘the fact that, while acting and speaking, people expose who they are; they make their appearance in the

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<sup>632</sup> There are many feminist critical legal scholars who have used Irigaray in their work because of her critique of equality and the law. This is a concise list: Nicola Lacey, *Unspeakable Subjects. Feminist Essays in Legal and Social Theory* (Oxford: Hart, 1998). Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*. Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction and the Law*. (New York, London: Routledge, 1991). Albertson Fineman, Martha, and Thomadsen Sweet, *At the Boundaries of Law: Feminism and Legal Theory*. Eisenstein, *The Female Body and the Law*. Drakopoulou, “The Ethics of Care, Female Subjectivity and Feminist Legal Scholarship.”

human world and thus reveal actively and politically their unique personal identity'.<sup>633</sup>

Thus, I too personally have in the thesis used very little the term 'subject'. In her philosophy and in Italian sexual difference feminism 'feminine subjectivity as expressed in relations among women, relations that were not mediated by men, which in turn generated a specifically ontological approach to feminist thought.'<sup>634</sup> Hence, for me a 'subject' is the *who* that Cavareo talks about 'when I speak of the ontology of uniqueness, I intend precisely and above all a contrast with traditional ontology, which is constructed through the negation of uniqueness with abstract and universal categories such as the subject (or the *anthropos*, the individual and so on).'<sup>635</sup> Therefore, when I speak of uniqueness this is what I mean, it is what others describe as a 'subject' but in Cavareo's terms it's a *who* and by adding a relational feminist lens, from the Italian perspective, it's a *who* who relates to other unique *whos*. This is how subjectivities are formed and they are intrinsically relational so exist only via relationships as I mentioned in the Introduction in the section on subjectivity. I am thus unable to describe a 'subject' fully as for me it brings me back to a metaphysical abstract being, produced by classical philosophy which is what I have criticised, via a Cavareo's lens, in different sections of this thesis, especially in Chapters One,

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<sup>633</sup> Bertolino and Cavareo, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavareo." p. 130.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid. p. 129

<sup>635</sup> Ibid. p. 137.

Two and Three. What I think work in my use of subject and subjectivity is that following a Cavarerian thesis that using the term subjectivity objectify and universalises human being, people, persons I have made a case for using embodied uniqueness to signify our humanity. It is a move which I think would benefits many philosophers which still use the term subject at large.

### **intersectionality**

In relation to the limitations of adopting more fully an intersectional perspective I acknowledge that there were limitations in the feminist organising in Italy (because of the socio-cultural, economic political reality of Italy in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s) and I wonder if my thesis has replicated these limitations by not asking some questions. The theme of intersectionality related to care and motherhood, more specifically how the intersection of race, class, gender, sex and sexual orientation impact on different models and approaches to care was not fully explored and resolved in my thesis. As I explained in the Introduction, in turning to history I am looking at scholarship through a PhD project and I have engaged with the literature that has been important to me as a student, nevertheless there is perhaps something lost in not engaging strongly with the traditions of communing and collective motherhood from black feminism.

On the question of intersectionality in Italy at least till the mid/late-1980s as there was not much migration from other countries to Italy till

then<sup>636</sup> - so in relation to the literature and case studies I have brought into the thesis including the mothers collective in Rome in the early 1970s refer mainly to class and not to race. As I said in the introduction the way Italians and their institutions – especially in the centre and northern part of the country – treated Italians from the south was racist. The role of Italian feminist women from the south in the movement could have been an important aspect to look at in this thesis which may be a theme of future research.

Since the early 1990s Italy has seen a very important increase in the employment of women in the care industries, especially women from Eastern European countries, South America, Africa and South-East Asian countries, who are employed mainly in peoples' homes to look after elderly Italian people or children.<sup>637</sup> These carers are called *badanti* in Italy and they are employed with flexible, temporary contracts which makes them very precarious.

As I said in the Introduction Italy had an important internal migration (from the poorer south to the more affluent and industrial north of Italy) in the 1960s and 1970s and the women who moved from the south to the north were influenced by the feminist movement. Antonio Gramsci had written of the “Questione Meridionale” in the 1920s of the problems of how southern Italy had remained economically underdeveloped (almost at feudal levels) as

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<sup>636</sup> Michele Colucci, *Storia Dell'immigrazione Straniera in Italia. Dal 1945 a Oggi* (Roma: Carocci Editore, 2018).

<sup>637</sup> Cristina Morini, “The Feminization of Labour in Cognitive Capitalism,” *Feminist Review* 87, no. 1 (2007): 40–59.

several successive governments had adopted a politics of privileging the economic growth of northern Italy.<sup>638</sup>

In addition, in relation to intersectionality, even though in the thesis I have acknowledged the importance of it, I focused on other aspects. In relation to the matter of care and the work of reproduction it is an essential view of analysis. A focused analysis on this research, which is an unexplored body of research in my thesis, is for instance the edited book by Bhattacharya, *Tithi Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (2017)<sup>639</sup> which focuses on the way in which reproductive labour is, as Federici has asserted in the 1970s, a means for capitalism to drive the accumulation ideology. The anti-capitalist, anti-racist and feminist perspective helps to forge an intersectional reading of the work of reproduction. Using more of this approach in my thesis would have added perspectives of marginalised, migrants, Black, Brown and Latina mothers who carry a lot of the work of reproduction not done by white, middle or upper class women.

In addition, as stated in the Introduction Joy James' work on the "Captive Maternals"<sup>640</sup> made me reflect about my own theoretical blind spots. James says that the 'Captive Maternals can be either biological females or those feminised into caretaking and consumption.'<sup>641</sup> The way in which

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<sup>638</sup> Gramsci, *The Southern Question*.

<sup>639</sup> Tithi Bhattacharya, ed., *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

<sup>640</sup> Joy James, "THE WOMB OF WESTERN THEORY: TRAUMA, TIME THEFT, AND THE CAPTIVE MATERNAL."

<sup>641</sup> Ibid.

James's work has been useful for me to think through is because I understood her call to reappraise Western feminist theory what she calls 'Womb Theory', as Baraitser and Sigal states 'Womb theory therefore fails to adequately theorize violence against the reproductive labour of Captive Maternals – labour that produces wealth and stabilizes culture.' Therefore that is why maternal studies need to pay attention to the work of Joy James to distance itself from a theory which is still violent in its exclusions of the realities of Black, Brown, minority and migrant mothers.<sup>642</sup> In addition Tracey Reynolds has called for a 'need of a critical analysis of maternal studies – now more than ever – to contextualise and understand black mothers' lived experiences in contemporary Britain.'<sup>643</sup>

The work of James, Reynolds and Hill Collins on Black mothers would have enriched the analysis of my thesis in the way in which I would have utilised a lens to include more experiences of marginalised mothers and I would have sought to include maternal subjectivity of Black mothers who need to contend with bringing up their children in a discriminatory society. I would have probably read the feminist theorists I have used in a perspective called upon by Joy James to unearth the 'Captive Maternals' in their theory.

### **commoning care**

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<sup>642</sup> See as well the work of Tracey Reynolds on Black mothers in the UK. Tracey Reynolds and Umut Erel, eds., *Migrant Mothers' Creative Challenges to Racialised Citizenship* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2019). Tracey Reynolds, *Caribbean Mothers. Identity and Experience in the UK* (London: Tufnell Press, 2005).

<sup>643</sup> Reynolds, "Studies of the Maternal: Black Mothering 10 Years On."

An interest, and life experience, in commoning and collectivity influenced my view that mothering with more support engenders positive outcomes for carers and mothers' subjectivities and identities. My embodied life experience comes from Italian feminism and the strong collective practices that they engendered therefore, as I said in the Introduction, I did not explore the collective mothering practices of other societies, cultures and realities enough. I could have, though, still drawn from this literature without offering different case studies. According to Reynolds it was Patricia Hill Collins<sup>644</sup> who 'first highlighted the practice of 'other mothering' to demonstrate a system of care through which black women provide care for children in the community.' Reynolds adds that 'Pivotal to black mothers' community engagement is their kin-work - black women's operating as teachers, community volunteers and health care workers - within their local neighbourhoods and community organisations.'<sup>645</sup>

Cognisant of these important collective mothering practises that come from the Black community has made me reformulate that commoning of care is an important political proposition and that care should be seen as shared and not a lonely individualised experience. Mothering alone with not enough support can bring about feelings of isolation, loneliness, distress, and of being 'interrupted.'<sup>646</sup> The many demands on her newly forming identity as a carer looking after a vulnerable being will be too centred on how she feels, hence

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<sup>644</sup> Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*.

<sup>645</sup> Reynolds, "Studies of the Maternal: Black Mothering 10 Years On."

<sup>646</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*.

leading to a heightened sense of oneself which can be difficult. Granted the maternal experience can be creative too, or ‘generative’ as Baraitser states<sup>647</sup> and I embrace that, but at the same time a constant ‘interrupted’ experience of the maternal seems, in part, still partially sacrificial and I suggest we need to dislodge the mother from that ablative figure as Cavarero would say.

Relationality between carers can do that.

When mothering takes place with the support of other people/carers, a new mother could have time to let go, forget about herself, rest, sleep, eat properly and she can have more energy for the new baby and young child/ren. She would be able to meet other new parents and carers, share each other’s experiences, joys, difficulties, frustrations. She may be less “self-centred” in terms of experiencing strong feelings which put the pressure on oneself, and I suggest her new identity can be shaped to a higher extent by relating to others, not only by giving to a vulnerable baby. I suggest, as already stated previously in few sections of this thesis, that she would have a different subjectivity, hopefully less solipsistic and maybe at times more joyful.<sup>648</sup> This different subjectivity is political. In this thesis I have applied the notion of the political from Arendt, and as developed by Cavarero, within the context of motherhood and care. In Arendtian terms only by being together, in action as she says, can we say that we create meaning, politics on earth. So I reclaim commoning of care as a political action, “being together” intended as political.

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<sup>647</sup> Ibid. p. 7. Baraitser speaks of the generative in motherhood, importantly without celebrating or idealising motherhood.

<sup>648</sup> Lynne Segal, *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy* (London & New York: Verso, 2017).

This is not a small thing, but it affects who we are in the world. Mothering with other carers who do the same work and can support a mother and carer can bring about a sense of self which feels connected to others. Mothers and carers can feel a sense of meaning, that they matter and they are part of the world.

My view of mother-to-mother relationships includes feelings of love, hate, affection, jealousy, anger, frustration and aggression and to include all the range of feelings a mother can feel. As the Milan Women's Bookstore Collective argued, as I said in Chapter Three, the relationship between women should start from *disparity* not sisterhood. Once *disparity* among each other is acknowledged then feelings of love and hate could be better integrated and not split off or denied. As we have seen in Chapters One and Two, liberalism conceives of human beings in an abstract way which cannot account for the particularities of each person's uniqueness and specific history and experience. The first step in this critique came from Irigaray's work. My analysis attempted to offer an alternative model of motherhood based on an embodied and relational reading of law and politics which Cavarero and other Italian feminist theorists have not done yet. I posited that it is important to rethink political community and its relevance for strategies of resistance, specifically in relation to the meaning of motherhood and care. I suggested that motherhood and care can be thought of and recuperated as a mode of resistance and freedom.

## listening law

The other question I explored in this thesis was how can the law be more attentive to women's and mothers/carers uniqueness? A 'listening law' as I discussed in Chapter Three could help with this. The most important striking difference is that how the law operates can often adopt a universalistic view of humans. Instead a law (and legal profession) that cares for each's client outcome can adopt a 'listening' perspective as I explained in more detail in Chapter Two, especially in the case of the Irish Judge Patricia Smyth who makes a point in listening to her clients carefully and at length. A law that listens to the uniqueness of our own stories. Stories can be told through writing and by using bodily expression such as in dance, drama, and music, and storytelling, which uses the voice. Some stories are told without the use of the voice, for instance sign language, used in deaf communities. This last aspect of storytelling has been explored elsewhere.<sup>649</sup> The voice and listening are, at most times, interlinked. In addition to the vocal and the verbal, telling stories has a whole layer of meaning which is affective, embodied, corporeal, and made up of gestures. Taking some lessons from storytelling, the voice, and what Cavarero tell us about it, makes me think about what would a 'listening law' look/sound like? A listening law can be a more caring law because it is a law that can be silent, with time to pause and listen to others.

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<sup>649</sup> Donna Jo Sutton-Spence, Rachel Napoli, "Anthropomorphism in Sign Languages: A Look at Poetry and Storytelling with a Focus on British Sign Language," *Sign Language Studies* 10, no. 4 (2010): 442–75. ; Elisabeth Winston, ed., *Storytelling and Conversation: Discourse in Deaf Communities*. (Washington D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 1999).

Caring law as intended in Cavarerian terms as she suggests in her book *Inclinations*, that to be inclined – towards others - benefit all humans. So instead of idealising and saying that a feminist ethics brings about a more caring law, which I am not, I suggest that by being more inclined to others, as Cavareiro says, we can all reach a better ability to listen. A law that retrieves and that back-tracks and maybe eventually disappears. All in all, maybe a ‘listening law’ demonstrates less of a need for the law. Perhaps this ‘retrieving’ law is similar to what Drakopolou asserts that a feminist project of law could be one where we keep unearthing the patriarchal roots of law and ‘open a discursive space which allows for the process of re-considering the feminist engagement in law, its objectives and its ethical and political validity’.<sup>650</sup> In this thesis I have attempted to do that.

A listening law could have some of the characteristics described by Jocelyn Downie and Jennifer Llewellyn, one where the ‘focus is on the dynamics, characteristics of relationship that need to be supported and encouraged in order to foster human flourishing’.<sup>651</sup> In relation to law they give the example of Canada as a country where abortion is decriminalised. They say it exemplifies a step towards a relational law on reproduction. A further step would be ensuring that all women had a positive protection to allow them to access abortion (for instance ensuring that they could easily

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<sup>650</sup> Drakopolou, “The Ethics of Care, Female Subjectivity and Feminist Legal Scholarship.” p. 221.

<sup>651</sup> Jocelyn Downie and J. Jennifer Llewellyn, *Being Relational: Reflections on Relational Theory and Health Law*, ed. Jocelyn Downie and J. Jennifer Llewellyn (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2012). p. 6.

find a clinic where they felt safe, they could choose between different methods of abortion etc.)

What does it mean for women and mothers to be listened to during a court case for instance? To have the singularity of their own voice tell their own story, their own life experiences, different from anyone else's life? Cavarero has explored the significance of the voice,<sup>652</sup> she argues that the philosophical tradition does not only ignore the uniqueness of the voice:

but it also ignores uniqueness as such, in whatever mode it manifests itself. The unrepeatable singularity of each human being, the embodied uniqueness that distinguishes each one from every other is, for the universalizing taste of philosophy, a superfluity.<sup>653</sup>

Furthermore, she argues that the inaugural move of metaphysics, rests in a double gesture in which, speech is separated from speakers and is designated to find its home in thought.<sup>654</sup>

The uniqueness to which Cavarero refers to is a kind of lived unique existence of one unique person, which seems to me well exemplified by James Joyce's narration of Leopold Bloom's very ordinary day as told in his novel *Ulysses* (1904). As Cavarero says, narration and poetry are better able than philosophy to speak of uniqueness, to bring the concrete and materiality of

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<sup>652</sup> Cavarero, *A Pin' Voci: Per Una Filosofia Dell'espressione Vocale*. Cavarero, *For More than One Voice: Toward a Philosophy of Vocal Expression*. Cavarero is not the only philosopher to engage with the voice. For Lacan the voice was one of the *objects a*, an object of desire. For a Lacanian perspective on the significance of the voice see Slavoj Žižek, Renata and Žižek, ed., *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects*. (London: Duke University Press, 1996). Cavarero and Lacan adopt different philosophical methods in analysing the voice.

<sup>653</sup> Cavarero, *A Pin' Voci: Per Una Filosofia Dell'espressione Vocale*. p. 9.

<sup>654</sup> *Ibid.* p. 9.

human beings to the fore.<sup>655</sup> For example in Joyce's *Ulysses* the narration of Leopold Bloom's day is the story of that man, not the story of any man; it is far from abstract, as we are told of all his bodily sensations, what his bodily needs are,<sup>656</sup> his interactions and thoughts. The concreteness of his body, the descriptions of his movements and actions in detail makes the reading slow because Leopold Bloom's day is told at a slow, detailed pace: 'men had killed and maimed one another's bodies in the name of abstract virtues, so Joyce resolved to write a materialist 'epic of the body', with a minute account of its functions and frustrations.'<sup>657</sup>

On the other hand the erasure of the uniqueness of each person's voice from the philosophical tradition reflects the erasure of difference from the same tradition. In law, listening to the singularity of the voice of each person takes on a further meaning: 'telling the story differently includes paying close attention to the persons involved, often giving voice to women who have

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<sup>655</sup> "This explains why I often make use of literary or poetic texts, using them *against* philosophy. It is well known, in fact, that poetic and narrative language is less rigid, more open and polysemous than the language of philosophy. In relation to language in its general sense, I am convinced that the position shared by many contemporary French thinkers and their followers, which reduces everything to language and negates the meaning of the extralinguistic, is curiously in tune with Plato's thought. In other words, in the past few decades, we have seen the emergence of a neo-totalitarian conception of language. This position seems nested in metaphysical foundations rather than being a subversive and demystifying novelty. In this sense, from Parmenides to Derrida, through different styles and contexts, things have not changed very much. In contrast, like the maidservant from Thrace, I believe in facts, bodies and material givens. One's uniqueness or, to quote Hannah Arendt, the fact that every human being is different from "everyone else that ever lived, lives or will live" is precisely a material given. The language of philosophy, which proceeds through abstract categories, seeks to make this insignificant or even insignificant. The language of literature, which narrates stories of singular lives, instead confers meaning on this materiality." Bertolino and Cavarero, "Beyond Ontology and Sexual Difference: An Interview with Italian Feminist Philosopher Adriana Cavarero." p. 134.

<sup>656</sup> 'He describes his character pissing and shitting in order to show that here is a man thoroughly free of *abstract* pretensions.' Declan Kiberd, "Introduction," in James Joyce, *Ulysses* (London: Penguin Books, 1992). p. xvi. [my italics in the quote].

<sup>657</sup> Ibid. p. ix, x.

been silenced, or at least side lined.’<sup>658</sup> Indeed, I posit that, specifically in the case of women, and mothers, listening to their voice is of great importance when, for centuries, their voices were not heard. Alison Young has assessed how women’s stories in rape trials often go unheard:

the defence demolition of the victim’s narrative and its replacement with their counter-narrative occurs through the proposition of detailed elements of the narrative sequence, to which [...] the victim usually replies ‘No’ or ‘I disagree’ or ‘No, that didn’t happen’. The victim’s response is, however, rendered immaterial in the most fundamental sense.<sup>659</sup>

Young elucidates that in these cases very often women’s voices are silenced and their ‘no’ goes unheard.<sup>660</sup> And moreover, she argues; ‘Closing its dirty ears, law is deaf to the accusations of rape, and silences woman, replacing her tongue with the pathos of wordless song, inarticulated sound, non-language, the pain of alterity’.<sup>661</sup>

*The Feminist Judgements Project* in England, re-interpreted a number of case law judgements featuring women. They have shown that women’s experiences are often not heard or are misinterpreted. In their interpretative work they set out to write alternative feminist judgments. The participants in the project engaged in a practical, ‘real world’ exercise of judgement-writing

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<sup>658</sup> Hunter, Rosemary, McGlynn, Clare and Rackley, *Feminist Judgments. From Theory to Practice*. p. 36.

<sup>659</sup> Alison Young, “‘The Waste Land of the Law, the Wordless Song of the Rape Victim.’” *Melbourne University Law Review* 22, no. n. 2 (1998): 442–65. p. 463.

<sup>660</sup> *Ibid.* p. 464.

<sup>661</sup> *Ibid.* p. 465.

that gave a voice back to women that went unheard in the real judgment.<sup>662</sup> As Baroness Hale remarks ‘an important project of feminist jurisprudence has been to explode the myth of the disinterested, disengaged, and distant judge.’<sup>663</sup>

### **further thoughts on relationality**

Cavarero argues that language without voice is apolitical as it does not include the embodied reality of our existence, hence it remains abstract, and it represents the *what* of someone not the *who*. It comes as an obvious consequence that the narration, the telling of a story, is done by a voice. What is this voice? What does it represent? For Cavarero it is the embodied reality of the uniqueness of our singular lives, where the voice is distinctly different in each person. From early on, the baby can distinguish the mother’s voice and they learn language while in the womb too.<sup>664</sup> I am therefore interested in the extent to which mothers are able to use their own voice to tell their stories and to vocalise their inner experiences, and the effect it has on them. Can their story be uttered, come out of their bodies, their throat? What happens if they are not able to talk, if they do not have anyone to tell their story to? As

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<sup>662</sup> Hunter, Rosemary, McGlynn, Clare and Rackley, *Feminist Judgments. From Theory to Practice*. (unable to check page number due to Covid-19)

<sup>663</sup> Ibid. p. 31 quoted from Rt Hon. The Baroness Hale of Richmond PC FBA, “A Minority Opinion?,” in *Maccabaeian Lecture in Jurisprudence* (London: 154 Proceedings of The British Academy, 2008), 319–36. p. 319–320.

<sup>664</sup> “Before it is even born, the infant has started to learn its mother’s tongue, particularly the vowels and the metric of the language.” Hugo Lagercrantz, “Foreward,” in *Early Vocal Contact and Preterm Infant Brain Development. Bridging the Gaps Between Research and Practice*, ed. Manuela Filippa, Pierre Kuhn, and Bjorn Westrup (Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2017), v–vii.

we have seen in Chapter Five the inability to share the difficulties of caring for a young child or multiple children can bring on post-natal depression.<sup>665</sup>

As feminists found out in the 1960s and 1970s, relationality is mirroring each other, finding one's experiences reflected – though in different ways – in someone else's experiences. It seems to me that in the case of motherhood – 'mothering work', people caring for others, people attending to the vulnerability of another human being – if they cannot tell the story of their experience of tending to the other, their own vulnerability, the other's vulnerability, the utter neediness of the other person, the effort to care well and sometimes failing, feeling frustrated or needing support, brings about a 'double exposure.' Being exposed to our own and the other's vulnerability which I explored in Chapter Two can lead to a kind of *closure* of subjectivity, or of *too much subjectivity* or a rawness which can be hard to manage. This is because it can bring about an overwhelmingly subjective experience with dire consequences for the concept of the subject that we hold.

As we have seen in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, consciousness-raising groups were important spaces for women where they could share their problems and ask questions. Lucia Farinati and Claudia Firth argue that

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<sup>665</sup> Two days before submitting my thesis coincidentally I met the mother of the baby I had been observing for my Infant and Young Child Observation course between 2016 to 2018. We stopped and had a little catch up. She revealed to me – unprompted – that when I was going to observe her baby she had post-natal depression and she said "It really helped that you came to see me every week. I wanted to say thank you." She said she had gone to counselling and she said these words "I was keeping all my feelings inside and I tried to make it work. It was so hard with no family around. I eventually decided to speak with a counsellor. I don't know why I found it hard to speak about it. It helped a lot to speak with the counsellor. Just to say that I had postnatal depression helped." While she was telling me this she cried, it was an emotional moment. This random meeting really struck me as in a few words she basically told me how mothering in isolation was very hard for her, which is what I have been discussing in this thesis. I never spoke about my thesis with her.

‘Consciousness-raising groups were therefore places for women to start to be able to name a problem that they did not have the language for before.’<sup>666</sup> It is this fact of not having the language to name a problem, a feeling, a sensation that has been revolutionary with feminism, it gave women words, a language to speak, to express one’s feelings, one’s condition. The key to achieve this is relationality, that mutual ability to speak and be heard and listened to. This listening and talking space becomes a political space of exchanges. I maintain that motherhood can be constructed as a resistance and freedom. This happens, I think, not because a woman *is* a mother, but because *having become* a mother makes it possible for her to forge her own creative path, which can bring her closer to herself. Becoming a mother can make a subjective shift which brings one’s heightened attention to personal needs and societal pressures and mothers can make a stand.

There are various social media groups active in the UK where mothers air their worries, concerns, and difficulties without (for the most part) being judged. The amount of women posting how difficult motherhood is staggering, often there are innumerable posts similar to this one:

Ok mums! I’m a mum that’s really struggling today! I’m a Mum that puts in 100% everyday but doesn’t feel enough! I’m a mum that worries everyday of being good enough for my daughter! I’m a Mum that writes a list of things to do and panics if it’s not completed by the end of the day. I’m a mum that’s struggling to be a mum today! I’m a mum with mental health!!<sup>667</sup>

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<sup>666</sup> Farinati and Firth, “Feminism - Speaking and Listening in Feminist Consciousness Raising Groups.”

<sup>667</sup> “<https://the-motherload.co.uk/>,” n.d. and “The Motherload”, Solidarity in Motherhood Facebook group page, September 2019.

In the Introduction I discussed a 2016 research published by the Co-op and the Red Cross that identified becoming a new mother as one of six main causes of loneliness. The Facebook posts of struggling mothers are heart-breaking, mothers with little support, lonely mothers:

Anyone else have NO friends? I see these ladies with a circle of support during these mummy years and I think to myself 'where's mine?' I have suffered with depression on and off for years since having my babies 14, 9, 6 and I wonder sometimes am I just feeling sorry for myself? I had a little cleaning business before all this Covid madness and now I only have 1 customer left out of 15. I thought of those customers as friends (bit sad I know) as I'm only their cleaner but I finally felt like I was a somebody! Not just mummy or wife to the iPhone hugging male in my house and now I'm scared that it's all gone.<sup>668</sup>

This woman received hundreds of comments from other mothers showing solidarity and many said they felt the same; they did not have any friends either. Some mothers said where they were from and those who lived quite close to each other decided to meet up when the Covid-19 emergency was over. There is solidarity, support, advice on all sorts of questions (including on domestic and gender violence) and some posts are funny too. In this group, mothers share the funny side of motherhood, not only the difficulty and the misery, they know they are all in the same boat.

I have completed this thesis during the Covid-19 pandemic and I have witnessed, and experienced (even if my child has turned 11 in 2021 so he is

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<sup>668</sup> Ibid. Facebook post from April 2020

more independent) more than ever how mothering/caring in isolation is challenging. These last few months of lockdown have been an example of the worst scenario of what I have been trying to demonstrate in this thesis: that mothering/caring in isolation is not natural, not human, not okay.<sup>669</sup> During these last few months mothers have been looking after one or more children, day in and day out, sometimes with very little support from their partners. Many mothers have worked full time from home, looked after children and home educating them at the same time. One mother, exhausted by ‘too much mothering’, claimed “I don’t want to mum anymore. I want to dad.”<sup>670</sup> We are in 2020 and still the realities that mothers face are hard, hence as Kristeva suggested in 1977, we still need to *listen carefully* to mothers:

There might doubtless be a way to approach the dark area that motherhood constitutes for women; one needs to listen more carefully than ever, to what mothers are saying, through their economic difficulties and.....through their discomforts, insomnias, joys, angers, desires, pains and pleasure.<sup>671</sup>

Certain aspects of many mothers’ lives have become better since 1977, when Kristeva wrote the above phrase, but many difficulties have remained the same. Loneliness has probably increased for mothers since 1977 when Kristeva was writing the above, and it brings about some difficult feelings to manage while being alone with a child. Parker has noted that:

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<sup>669</sup> Andrea O’Reilly, “‘Trying to Function in the Unfunctionable’: Mothers and COVID-19,” *Journal of the Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement* 11, no. 1 (2020).

<sup>670</sup> “<https://the-motherload.co.uk/>.” Facebook post from February 2020

<sup>671</sup> Julia Kristeva, “Stabat Mater,” in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. Toril Moi (Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 1991), 160–186., p. 179.

Socially, mothers of young children are frequently (often constantly) isolated from other adults. This induces an intense intimacy in which both mothers and children become the focus of each other's needs and desires. Mutual projective and introjective processes lead both mother and child to experience something of each other's feelings. The baby or child projects her or his rage and frustration into the mother where it marries up with her own infantile feelings of anger and need.<sup>672</sup>

This is why mothering in isolation is hard. It highlights and bring to the fore some very difficult feelings for mothers. During the pandemic, and with tragic consequence, it has highlighted even more than ever the connection between capitalism, patriarchy, and racism. Who has been doing the 'dirty' work during the pandemic? Many women, and many Black and minority women. In the UK, and in many other countries, in the last few months there have been many emergency statutes to redirect public funds in other areas of our lives, yet there have not been any emergency statutes to protect pregnant people from going to work in unsafe places. Or, to support mothers who are taking on teaching from home while also caring for their children. Or, for those who care in isolation.

### **recommendations and future research**

Firstly, I suggest that future research on maternal subjectivity keeps in consideration that mothering in isolation is not ideal and "natural" for a mother and a carer. I suggest that we do not take it for granted that motherhood must be hard. I suggest that this fact remains the pivotal

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<sup>672</sup> Parker, *Torn in Two. The Experience of Maternal Ambivalence.*, p. 206-207.

knowledge for future policies and for assessing mothers' needs and difficulties and that it serves as a lever to implement more support which is geared towards reducing maternal isolation and creating webs of supportive relationships.

Secondly, other areas relating to relationality that can be explored/I could have explored further are: jealousy and competition between mothers/carers; differences in mothering which can bring up tensions; different personalities, lifestyles and core beliefs that mean it will not automatically be the case that two or more mothers and carers would become friends and support each other; the effect of class, race, sexuality and education in mothers' relationships; unconscious feelings, identification and projections about other women and how this effects the ability to genuinely relate.

Thirdly, while writing this thesis I have touched on ideas of deconstruction and how it may not be a very apt method to adopt when thinking of maternal subjectivity. This is another area I could have explored further and that I am interested in exploring in the future. What does deconstructing subjectivity mean for maternal subjectivity? Or, how can deconstruction be useful for maternal subjectivity? Or, is it useful up to a certain point, as more attention and care must be taken when thinking of deconstructing maternal subjectivity? Not because maternal subjectivity is

necessarily more “delicate” but because it can be more varied and complex and made up of different factors than other subjectivities.

Fourthly, I would like to explore intersectionality in relation to motherhood and care in more depth and I would like to use the work of Joy James as a frame of reference to uncover better the blind spots she discusses in relation to the work of western feminist theorists rendering Black mothers captives. Another aspect I would like to delve into is the work of Tracey Reynolds on Black mothers in the UK. Broadly, in relation to these two themes, I would like to explore the link of psychoanalysis with studies on motherhood, the maternal and child development and the fact that traditionally psychoanalysis has been a white, European, and Jewish tradition discipline and how this has affected the exclusion of Black and marginalised motherhood from its discourse.

Lastly another theme I would like to consider for future research are the realities of migrant women (moving to Italy from other countries) in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s at the height of the feminist movement. In particular the women of the Somali, Libyan, Ethiopian and Eritrean communities in Italy (the four main countries that Italy colonised) and find out the women from these communities that were part of the feminist movement and their

stories.<sup>673</sup> And if they were not part of the movement what prevented them from joining it?

### **concluding remarks**

In the process of writing this thesis and in concluding it, I have come to realise that the thread I have been discussing signifies more than relationality between carers/women/mothers. It also signifies, as I said at the start, a thread that I have had with my feminist mother and the maternal all my life as I recounted in the Introduction. Ever since my mother moved away, I have been ‘preoccupied with the maternal’—reversing in a way the Winnicottian term ‘primary maternal preoccupation’<sup>674</sup>, which enables mothers to care for their children. Indeed, I have become preoccupied with my mother not being physically there. We never stop being daughters while our mothers are alive. We never completely stop being daughters once our mothers pass away. And a mother who loses her child never completely stops being a mother because their child is not alive.<sup>675</sup> My mother’s reflection upon motherhood a long time ago, spurred her to enquire, to ask questions about herself and her place in

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<sup>673</sup> Elvira Banotti was an Italian-Eritrean writer and journalist who was part of the early 1970s’ roman feminist group called *Rivolta Femminile* which she founded with feminist art critic Carla Lonzi and artist Carla Accardi, see Elvira Banotti, *Una Ragazza Speciale* (Latina: Ortica Editrice, 2011). There were a few other known women of dual Italian-Eritrean heritage (often their fathers were Italian and their mothers Eritrean) in the Italian feminist movement. They were the children of Italian men who lived in Eritrea while it was occupied by the Italian colonial Empire of East Africa (1880s till 1941). These Italian men lived there and worked for Italian companies and some met Eritrean women and had children with them. Then these families often moved back to Italy once Britain conquered the Italian occupied territories in 1941 or in the remaining consequent years. Another Eritrean-Italian woman was the music producer Lara Saint Paul see Cecilia Brioni and Simone Brioni, “Transnational ‘Italian’ Stardom: Lara Saint Paul and the Performativity of Race,” *Italian Studies* 73, no. 4 (2018): 351–64.

<sup>674</sup> I am using the Winnicottian image of ‘Maternal preoccupation’ in the reverse way. I appropriate it. D.W. Winnicott, “Primary Maternal Preoccupation,” in *Collected Papers through Paediatrics to Psychoanalysis* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1958), 300–305..

<sup>675</sup> ‘He is not dead to me’ in Denise Riley, *Time Lived, without Its Flow* (London: Capsule Editions, 2012). p. 36.

the world as a woman and a mother. Her courage to detach herself from the idea of the ‘naturally’ good mother, to dare, to challenge conventions had allowed us to have a very profound, complex, at times difficult, and beautiful relationship for which I am grateful. She has allowed me to know her as my mother and as the woman she was.

My mother’s collective outlook, her subjectivity, thinking, life experiences (she always lived collectively till the last ten years of her life when she lived with her partner) have inspired me and changed the way I experienced motherhood and myself. I have appreciated first-hand how collectivism and mutual aid can benefit mothers and carers. But it is fair to say that in the most difficult moments, while bringing up my son, I too experienced some of the “viscosity” and “interruptions” to my sense of self of which Baraitser talks about.<sup>676</sup>

The thread now brings me back to the start, not because I see a beginning and a definite end in this maternal thread, this maternal story, but because I see a web-like shape made of life stories, subjectivities, inter-subjectivities and relationships. This is a web made of a thread where vulnerability, dependency, and the need for support are acknowledged. A web where the fantasy of individualism is uncovered and where to care in isolation is seen as unfit for mothers, for fathers, for carers, for humans. This is a web

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<sup>676</sup> Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters. The Ethics of Interruption*.

where caring is seen as a collective practice<sup>677</sup>, not as an isolated private matter. Finally, as a web has no beginning or end, it seems almost inappropriate to append a conclusion to this thesis, other than the realization that one of the reasons I have written on the maternal, on motherhood, was probably in order also to elaborate and process the relationship with my own mother:

woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies-for the same reasons, by the same law-with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement.<sup>678</sup>

Hence, if I have written on the maternal, on mothers it was, perhaps, to keep my mother symbolically with me. I partially remember how difficult it was for my nine-year-old-self to see her leave all those years ago.

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<sup>677</sup> This book that has just been published in August 2020 proposes to put care at the centre of politics and society. The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso Books, 2020).

<sup>678</sup> Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa." p. 1.

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