

## Narratives of Displacement: The Challenges of Motherhood and Mothering in semi-fictional works by Laura Pariani, Mary Melfi, and Donatella Di Pierantonio

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### ABSTRACT

This article analyses the representation of the impact of migration on family dynamics in three autobiographical works: Laura Pariani's *Il piatto dell'angelo* (2013), Mary Melfi's *Italy Revisited. Conversations with my Mother* (2009), and Antonella Di Pietrantonio's *Mia madre è un fiume* (2011). All three authors were directly or indirectly affected by the wave of emigration that took place in Italy between the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Pariani extends her observations to the present by focusing also on those South American women who are currently moving to Italy to work as carers for old people, often leaving their families behind. Motherhood and mothering are central themes in all three books. These works problematise the patriarchal notion of motherhood and highlight the need to move towards alternative concepts of motherhood that do not imply the subordination of women. Additionally, this article offers a reflection on the role that creative writing can play in challenging some of the most engrained stereotypes, such as those of the good mother versus the bad mother, partially related to our Christian tradition. Building on Podnieks and O'Reilly's notion of "maternal texts" (1-2), this article argues that through fiction women are less inhibited in exploring the thornier aspects of motherhood as a social construction than they seem to be in everyday life.

### INTRODUCTION

By looking at the representation of the impact of migration on family dynamics in the novel *Il piatto dell'angelo* (2013) by the Milanese writer Laura Pariani, the memoir *Italy Revisited: Conversations with my Mother* (2009) by the Italian-Canadian author Mary Melfi, and *Mia madre è un fiume* (2011) by Antonella Di Pietrantonio, one of Abruzzo's recently discovered literary talents, this article problematises the patriarchal notion of motherhood as, rather than empowering women, it can contribute to their subordination. As our three case studies reveal, paradoxically, in our Western societies that are heavily influenced by Christian traditions, "motherhood is connected both to specific transgression and to specific salvation" (Grenholm xvii), and although motherhood is still often "equated with the meaning of life for women [...], it is assigned a subordinate position in relation to the Heavenly father as well as in relation to earthly fathers" (xvii). Migration, through the shock of dislocation, functions as a litmus test in revealing how women, and particularly mothers, often find themselves in a vulnerable position. Unable to rely on their immediate circle of family and friends for help, due to language or economic barriers,

migrant mothers are frequently denied access to any kind of institutional support in the new country and, as a result, can feel doubly exposed. However, an increased awareness of their lack of agency can also have a positive effect. It can spur women to take control of their lives and shed old prejudices. This becomes particularly visible, as in the case of the narrator's mother in Melfi's memoir, when the customs of the new place are more open to the role that women can play outside the family unit: "My life started in l'America. I got my bearings here. I like this country, nobody has ever said a derogatory word against me because I was Italian" (35). Recent sociological studies have shown that migrant mothers, despite "being the keepers of an imagined national identity [...] also question and possibly revise the models imported from the homeland" (Giorgio 2015, 54).<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this is not a straightforward process and the journey of self-discovery is not always successful. In this context, fictional mothers, in the sense of "textual mothers", can play a vital role in offering "alternative practices and visions for mothers in the present and in the future" (Podnieks and O'Reilly 2). As Podnieks and O'Reilly explain, women who "produce auto/biography, fiction and poetry about mothering, moth-

erhood and being a mother” create “maternal texts” that can function as precious tools in revealing how traditional conceptions of maternal roles can be accepted, reconciled, resisted or ultimately challenged (1). In other words, through fiction, women are less inhibited in exploring the thornier and darker aspects of motherhood as a social construction than they are in everyday life. This is why the case studies selected for this article are all fictional works.

## MIGRATION AND THE TRAUMA OF DISPLACEMENT<sup>2</sup>

All three texts deal with the huge wave of emigration that affected Italy during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (*Piatto dell'angelo* 15-16), when millions of people left their native country for “la Merica” (*Italy Revisited* 255), a mythical land of prosperity where, allegedly, there were no landlords and the land belonged to those who were willing to work it (*Piatto dell'angelo* 17).<sup>3</sup> Di Pietrantonio’s book, however, deals also with the 1950s phenomenon of seasonal migration from rural Southern Italy to the factories of Germany and Switzerland, or to the North of Italy for the grape harvest. As the narrator of *Mia madre è un fiume* points out: “quasi in tutte le case i maschi giovani, ancora celibi o sposati con prole, emigravano. Con il patriarca restava il primogenito, che mandava avanti i lavori agricoli e allevava i bambini dei fratelli andati [...]. Tornavano prima di Natale e ripartivano a febbraio” (69-70) [almost in every single household, young bachelors or married young men with children migrated. The eldest son would stay behind with the patriarch to work the land and raise the children of those brothers who had left [...]. They were back by Christmas and left again in February]. If men went abroad, some women, at the end of the summer, were hired by the large winemakers of Veneto. Agencies would send their “recruiters” to the South where they knew that the need for extra money to send children to school and buy winter clothes would persuade women to take on an additional job (*Mia madre* 129-30). Seasonal migration, however, was not just a southern phenomenon. Pariani’s text shows us that towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, peasants from Piedmont and Lombardy started to cross the Atlantic in the autumn to reach their destination at Christmas, just in time for the harvest season in the Southern hemisphere (*Piatto dell'angelo* 38). This kind of lifestyle became known as “hacer la golondrina”, Pariani tells us, or “fare la rondine. Una definizione delicata per una vita infernale, sbalottata tra due emisferi, due lingue, due mentalità” (38) [be a swallow. A tactful definition for a hellish life, torn between two hemispheres, two languages, two ways of thinking].<sup>4</sup>

Finally, Pariani’s text draws interesting comparisons between the experiences of Italian migrants to South America in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and those of 21<sup>st</sup> century South American women who move to Italy in search of a better future.<sup>5</sup> In all cases, migration is perceived as traumatic as the loss of contact with one’s origins (Perassi 102) has dramatic consequences for family relationships. The sense of displacement experienced by migrants can be as strong as that of Alzheimer’s patients, as Di Pietrantonio’s book shows. Migration, like Alzheimer’s disease, disrupts the domestic order,

nothing makes sense any more, and communication is often impossible, due to language barriers, or the sense of shame preventing migrants/patients from expressing their anxieties, fears, sense of marginalization, and, in some cases, loss of dignity (*Mia madre* 55 and 65). In all three texts, words like “mourning”, “betrayal”, “abandonment”, “wound”, or “civil war” are frequently used to describe the impact of migration on the individual (*Piatto dell'angelo*, *Mia madre* 72, *Italy Revisited* 257), and Pariani repeatedly points out the inadequacy of language in expressing the sense of loss caused by migration. The protagonist of *Il piatto dell'angelo*, for instance, keen to understand the pain her grandfather must have gone through when he moved to South America, leaving a wife and a daughter behind, compares it to the sorrow of those South American women who, having moved to Italy, are consumed by the physical strain of their jobs as carers, and by a mixture of nostalgia and guilt for having abandoned their families and their countries. What strikes her is that in both cases: “il loro dolore non ha nome” (121) [their suffering has no name]. Similarly, when, as an old woman, the narrator of Pariani’s book is reminded of the long transatlantic journey from Italy to Argentina that at the age of fifteen she embarked on together with her mother, she is forced to confess her inability to deal with the trauma of departure. The sight of her mother crying had left her speechless: “E tu piangi madre [...]. Però io quel mattino di quasi cinquant’anni fa [...] non avevo parole per consolarti” (124) [and you cry, mother [...]. Yet, that morning, nearly fifty years ago, I had no words to comfort you]. The use of the present tense in the first part of the passage suggests the unresolved nature of that traumatic experience. The sense of disorientation and frustration at the inadequacy of language in voicing strong emotions described by Pariani’s protagonist is similar to the powerlessness experienced by Esperina’s husband in *Mia madre è un fiume* when he is confronted with the degenerative nature of the Alzheimer disease that is turning the woman he loves into a stranger whose gestures lack an apparent logic: “ogni tanto lui scatta, libera le urla di dentro. Apre alla disperazione che non sa nominare” (74) [from time to time he explodes, he screams inside. He gives vent to a despair for which he has no name].

And if migration is traumatic for those who depart, it can be even more tragic for those left behind. As Pariani tells us, “chi parte perde, chi resta perde tondo” (p. 122) [those who leave lose, those who stay lose on all fronts]. As we shall later see, this is a very important notion when trying to understand the impact of migration on family dynamics. However, before analysing this theme in greater detail we must consider another common feature of the three case studies that will shed light on the challenges of mothering and motherhood when families relocate to another country.

All three texts represent a daughter’s belated homage to her mother, after a lifetime of battles and tensions. The protagonist of *Mia madre è un fiume*, for instance, is keen to remind her ailing mother of the endless clashes that marked their relationship as she was growing up: “Ti ricordi com’ero disordinata da ragazza? No, quando ero piccola no, ma poi litigavamo appena entravi nella mia stanza. Ci siamo fatte la guerra per quello. Io non sopportavo intrusioni nel mio

territorio e tu non mi perdonavi il caos. [...] Hai chiesto l'intervento della zia Clarice per farmi desistere dalle rappresaglie [...]". (53-54) [Do you remember how messy I was when I was young? No, not when I was little, but later we would argue as soon as you walked into my room. We had a war over this. I could not stand your intrusions into my territory and you could not tolerate the mess. [...] You asked for Aunt Clarice's intervention to persuade me to stop retaliating]. Pariani and Melfi, instead, blame young people's tendency to dismiss on principle older generations as the source of their narrators' problematic relationship with their mothers. In Melfi's memoir, it is the mother who points out how her daughter used to resort to the excuse of their age gap to disregard any advice coming from the mother: "Cara, in your mind, I will always be old. Even when we first came to Canada, I was only thirty-one years old but you already saw me as being over the hill" (229). Similarly, in *Il piatto dell'angelo* the protagonist, who regrets having realized too late how many things she had in common with her mother, concludes that the age gap between the two of them, and her lack of experience must have contributed to their inability to communicate: "Spesso mi sono domandata perché ti rivolgevo a me, che in fondo ero solo una ragazzina. Ora lo so: perché io e te siamo sempre state uguali. [...] Ma a quel tempo non lo capivo: c'era un abisso tra di noi dovuto alla mia età e alla nostre diverse esperienze di madre" (*PdA* 136) [I have often wondered why you were talking to me as, after all, I was only a young girl. Now I know: you and I have always been alike. [...] Back then I did not understand: there was a gulf between us due to my age and our different experience as mothers].

Although all three texts explore the mother-daughter relationship from the daughter's perspective, unlike child-centred psychoanalytical discourses, they do not try to trap the mother in a subordinate position. On the contrary, they represent an attempt to establish a relational model of interaction based on mutual recognition between mother and daughter, as proposed by Jessica Benjamin (in Giorgio 2002, 26).

### GOOD MOTHERS VERSUS BAD MOTHERS: CHALLENGING THE STEREOTYPES

These texts also advocate the need to move beyond the traditional stereotypes of the good mother symbolized by the Virgin Mary versus the bad mother symbolized by Eve. In a recent book on the legacy of the mother in contemporary Western culture, the psychologist Massimo Recalcati reminds us that according to Lacan, the traditional split between mother (Mary) and woman (Eve) can only lead to pathological manifestations of mothering, namely the oppressive, cannibalistic mother or the neglectful mother who can only transmit a negative legacy to her offspring (57-62). Recalcati argues that in our patriarchal societies the figure of the mother has been reduced to her nurturing function, what he calls 'la madre del seno' [breast-mother], that is the mother who satisfies the needs of the child, to the detriment of another important maternal function, namely the ability of turning 'il seno' [the breast] into 'segno' [sign]. In Lacanian

terms, becoming a "madre del segno" refers to the mother's ability to donate her absence, that is to say the ability to make a child feel loved and unique whilst at the same time helping the child accept that he/she does not represent the entire maternal universe. Mother and child are two separate entities; the baby's birth created an absence/a lack in her heart, but this absence represents the true meaning of generation, that is the possibility to make life start afresh (47-56). If a mother is unable to strike a balance between presence and absence, the mental health of the child will be affected in a negative way, and, as our three case studies demonstrate, these negative patterns repeat themselves across generations. Since self-sacrifice is still portrayed as a maternal virtue, there is no room for failure in our conception of motherhood. Unfortunately, as Grenholm points out, failing is part of being human, so such an unrealistic expectation can have devastating effects on mothers (48).

In all three books, the protagonists' mothers, traumatized by the disintegration of the family unit due to migration, or the migration of one or more family members, had been unable to establish a healthy relationship with their children, in particular their daughters who, as a result, ended up feeling trapped in a legacy of mourning, loss, resentment, or unspeakable sorrow: "Devo scrivere di te, madre? [...] Io però da te, quando te ne sei andata per sempre, ho ricevuto solo questa vecchia storia ingarbugliata di dolori e ranacori" (*Piatto dell'angelo* 9) [Ought I write about you, mother? [...] Yet, all I got from you, when you passed away, was this old, muddled story full of pain and resentment]. The three books can be seen as an attempt to break the mothers' culture of silence and unspeakable trauma, and reconstruct a relationship based on mutual recognition, even if, as in the case of Pariani's narrator, sometimes it is too late: "io me ne sono andata di casa presto madre, tu sei morta presto: non abbiamo avuto molto tempo per capirci" (113) [I left home early, mother, you died young: we did not have much time to understand each other].<sup>6</sup> Shared experiences and shared time are essential in order to create a relationship based on mutual respect and appreciation because, as Melfi suggests, "the Gospel according to Mother and Child has no beginning and no end; it takes forever to read and has errors" (50). This is also why the narrator of *Mia madre è un fiume* resents her mother's mental illness and is afraid of not having the opportunity to show a sign of gratitude to her mother, to "straighten out/raddrizzare" what from the start had been a very problematic relationship: "il nostro amore è andato storto da subito. Era troppo educata al sacrificio per permettersi il piacere di stare con la sua creatura. [...] Lei mi amava ma aveva altro da fare" (25) [our love was twisted from the start. Her sense of self-sacrifice was so ingrained that she could not allow herself the pleasure of staying with her child. [...] She loved me, but she had other things to do]. The child grew up feeling neglected and suffering from a permanent desire for the mother, which then turned into a fear of bodily contacts: 'il cronico desiderio di mamma si è disperso e cambiato nel suo contrario. Il rifiuto – la paura – della prossimità dei corpi. [...] Guardo alle nostre spalle il giardino di sentieri che si biforcano. Le posso solo affabulare la sua vita' (28) [the chronic longing for my mum disappeared, turning



into its opposite. The rejection – the fear of bodily proximity [...]. I look behind our shoulders at all the paths that branch off. I can only tell her the story of her life]. Soon after we discover that Esperina (the narrator's mother) as a child had been sexually abused by her father, an event that her daughter uses in order to justify Esperina's harsh mothering style: "ho cercato un nesso tra quell'amore molesto e la mezza madre che poi è stata. Le sono mancate per me attenzioni, tenerezze, contatto. Le sue mani erano d'ossa, mi arrivavano scarne e perpendicolari [...]" (37) [I tried to find a connection between that inappropriate love and the half-mother she later became. She did not give me enough attention, affection, or contact. Her hands were made of bone; they would reach me, gaunt and perpendicular].

The reference to the mother's hands is particularly interesting because hands are central to our notion of motherhood. As Recalcati explains in his book significantly entitled *Le mani della madre* [The Mother's Hands], the hands symbolize the idea of the mother as she who embraces a new life by providing that necessary support without which this life would be meaningless and cease to exist (23-24). Not surprisingly, as a child, the protagonist of *Mia madre è un fiume* used to be afraid of dying. She would often imagine her own death and her mother's reaction at the news of the loss of her child, regularly concluding: "mia madre non aveva mani per tenermi unita, mentre andavo in pezzi, non sentiva il crepitio, ignara del mondo dentro di me" (150) [my mother's hands could not hold me together as I was crumbling to pieces, she did not hear the crackling, unaware of the world inside me]. What is more, the mother's hands embody non-verbal language, the kind of language that constitutes the first form of communication between mother and child, the first language the mother uses to convey her love for her baby (Recalcati 22-23). This is why when the onset of Alzheimer's disease leads to a role reversal in the mother-daughter relationship, the daughter expresses her frustration and her fear to lose her mother by avoiding physical contact: "ometto l'amore, le mani. La cura di cui ha più bisogno lascio che le manchi. Le somministro la sua storia e ogni dodici ore la memantina idrocloruro da dieci milligrammi, compresse divisibili, con la modesta speranza che rallenti la degenerazione dei neuroni" (68) [I omit love, my hands. I deprive her of the treatment she needs the most. I administer her story to her and, every twelve hours, ten milligrams of memantine hydrochloride in tablets that can be split in half, in the vague hope that it might delay the neurons' degeneration].

Despite all the tensions and resentment, however, the protagonist of *Mia madre è un fiume* is determined to "save" her mother (37) and to see things through her mother's eyes (55). Although the act of reconstructing her mother's life through story telling may seem a small gesture to a daughter who spent most of her life blaming the mother for all her failures and shortcomings (173), it is actually an important one. It signifies the acknowledgement of the essential role of the mother in relation to the daughter's identity. The mother becomes a bearer of meaning or, to use Recalcati's terminology, she who saves us from non-sense. The "madre seno" [breast mother] finally becomes the "madre segno" [sign mother]. Above all, however, Di Pietrantonio's

book and the other two case studies help us challenge the traditional notion of bad mother. In *Il piatto dell'angelo*, for instance, through the family history we discover that the protagonist's mother, in dealing with her daughter, had simply reproduced the mothering model that she had inherited from her own mother. Giovanna (the protagonist's grandmother) had found herself alone with a child barely a year after getting married, as Cesare, her husband, went abroad to escape Fascist persecution. What should have been a short absence, a short silence, lasted years. As a result, the young and beautiful Giovanna, who had been enjoying her life as a wife and a mother, found herself deprived of the possibility of being a woman, as the absence of her husband meant that she had to focus exclusively on her child: "intanto la bambina – che eri tu madre – attaccata al seno della Giovanna beveva il latte nero dell'angoscia" (51) [meanwhile the child – that is you, mother – latched to Giovanna's breast was feeding on the sour milk of distress]. Heart-broken, Giovanna aged prematurely as the words love, promise and future implicit in her wedding vows turned into "assenza, delusione, sconfitta" (51) [absence, disappointment, defeat].<sup>7</sup>

Giovanna's and her mother's stories, and their sacrifices are similar to those of the South American women who migrate to Italy to provide their children with a better future, but like Giovanna, consider themselves bad mothers who can only nourish their children with sour milk, "come nel quadro di Segantini, *Le cattive madri*, in cui è raffigurata una donna appesa ad un ramo spinoso, quasi fosse un frutto che sprizza veleno, su uno sfondo gelato. Eppure Lita, Gladys, Raymunda e le altre non sono le madri snaturate di cui abbondano le favole" (*Piatto dell'angelo* 121-22) [as in Segantini's painting, *Bad Mothers*, which depicts a woman hanging from a thorny branch, as if she were a fruit oozing out poison, against a frozen background. Yet, Lita, Gladys, Raymunda and the others are not the evil mothers that are so common in fairy tales]. As regards Giovanni Segantini's 1894 masterpiece *Le cattive madri*, it is worth noting that what makes this painting particularly disturbing is the head of a new-born baby trying to latch to the woman's right breast. The woman/mother, instead of embracing the new life, turns away, in an attempt to free herself from the bodily contact. Segantini, who had lost his mother when he was very young, seems to give vent to a revenge fantasy in this work. As noted by various critics (Stutzer 1999; Moeslein-Teising and Thomson Salo 2013; Abraham 2012), the painting is very sensual, almost erotic, and represents a clear condemnation of those women who favoured womanhood over motherhood. It could also be argued that *Le cattive madri* is an expression of the universal appeal of the myth of the bad mother. The painting, in fact, was inspired by "an Indian Poem, *Pangiavahli*, introduced into Europe by the German philosopher Schopenhauer and translated into Italian by Puccini's librettist Luigi Illica (Dalle Vacche121).

Challenging this culture of blame that traps women in a subordinate position is very hard, particularly in the context of migration. The story of Lita and her daughter Carmen Rosa in *Il piatto dell'angelo* is paradigmatic in this context. Lita is the typical example of a South American woman who from her native Bolivia moves to Milan to work as a *badante*

[carer for old people], hoping that one day she will have earned enough money to go back to Bolivia, buy a house, and provide a comfortable life for her family (21). Lita's decision to travel to Italy with her friend Gladys in search of fortune meant that she had to leave her two daughters behind, to be looked after by their grandmother and occasionally an uncle. Whilst Alicia, the youngest, adapted more quickly to the new reality, Carmen Rosa perceived her mother's departure as a form of neglect and betrayal. Despite Lita's attempts at showing her affection for her daughters by regularly sending money and presents back home, the lack of communication and of shared experiences meant that she did not really know her children. Unaware that her eldest teenage daughter was significantly overweight, was suffering from alopecia nervosa, and had given birth to a premature baby (who is frequently accused of sucking all of her mother's vital energy) (130), Lita kept sending Carmen Rosa makeup and sexy clothes, far too small her daughter's size and unsuitable for her life style: "Carmen Rosa tiene con disagio il suo pacchetto tra le mani senza osare aprirlo. [...] Dentro ci sono una scatola di prodotti di bellezza e un paio di pantaloni attillati, lucicanti [...]. L'adolescente ha un gesto spazientito, la bocca le trema, pare che stia per piangere. Volta la testa dall'altra parte" (47) [Carmen Rosa holds her parcel in her hands, feeling awkward, and does not dare open it [...] Inside there are a box of beauty products and a pair of tight and shiny trousers [...]. The adolescent shows signs of impatience, her mouth quivers, it looks as if she is about to cry. She turns her head to the other side]. Needless to say, these "mistakes" had devastating effects not only on the relationship between Lita and Carmen Rosa but also on Carmen Rosa's attitudes towards mothering. Scared and unable to feel in control of her own life, Carmen Rosa becomes obsessed with controlling those of her younger sister Alicia and of her baby daughter Diana. Carmen Rosa has a morbid attachment to her daughter; she repeatedly defines her as her own property, thus confirming Miller's theory, according to which "defects in parents' own childhood are what makes them view their children as extensions of themselves rather than separate individuals" (in Grenholm 138). Carmen Rosa also fantasizes about placing Diana back in the womb (*Piatto dell'angelo* 95-96, 126-27) where she could protect her more efficiently from the glances of strangers, because, as her grandma told her, "gli occhi di algunas personas pueden rovinare la vita dei bambini..." (96) [the eyes of algunas personas can ruin the life of a child]. Through this fantasy, Carmen Rosa is expressing her fears about her own self-preservation. If letting go of children is unnatural for any human being, as it implies recognizing one's own mortality and limitations (Grenholm 168), it is even more so for a teenage girl whose future was rather precarious even before becoming a mother.

Apart from the contingent situations of distance and lack of communication that often characterize the migrants' experience, another obstacle to a healthy mother-daughter relationship is the fact that in patriarchal societies, as Melfi tells us, the mother is not a real person but a product of the child's imagination. The child expects great things from its "omnipotent" mother but in so doing contributes to obliteration of the mother as a human being (Grenholm 46-48). In such cas-

es the experience of migration can function as a magnifying glass in revealing the gap between the real mother and the imagined one. Despite her obvious determination to produce an accurate reconstruction of her mother's life in Italy, as indicated by the use of the recorder, the narrator's prejudices, preconceived ideas, and tendency towards abstraction are often an obstacle. When reprimanded by her mother for her lack of knowledge and lack of practical skills, the narrator of Melfi's book is forced to admit her ignorance: "you can't even put on an apron", my mother tells me. "How can you tell my story?" I can't, I admit. A mother is not a person; she is a figment of her child's imagination." (43). One of the reasons why migration can function as a magnifying glass in this context is because, despite all the suffering, migration can also have positive connotations of hope and empowerment, particularly for women who discover that they do not always need to conform to the norms of patriarchy and are less willing to let themselves be reduced to "breast-mothers" forever willing to satisfy their children's demands. This is exactly what happened to the narrator's mother in Melfi's book: not only did migration represent the chance to escape poverty but she also found a voice: "we didn't speak up until we came to l'America. In *la terra vecchia*, we did not dare go against our parents' wishes" (83). Similarly, in *Il piatto dell'angelo*, the narrator's mother, at the age of forty, tired of waiting for her father to come home and of seeing her mother live the life of a widow, decided to move to Argentina. She embarked on the transatlantic journey with her fifteen-year old girl in order to go and look for Cesare (her father) and start a new life, despite the criticism of her local community who could not accept that a woman would take control of her own destiny: "tutti dissero che era una decisione bizzarra. Dove si era mai visto che una donna abbandonata alzasse la testa?" (123) [everyone said it was a bizarre decision. It was unheard of for an abandoned woman to stick up for herself]. Once they settled in Buenos Aires, her daughter was forced to realize that motherhood was only one aspect of her mother's life: "Poi, una volta arrivata in America, ti ho vista non solo come madre [...]. Eri un'altra: una persona che sperava di poter ricominciare daccapo e durante quei giorni persino lo dichiarava apertamente" (125) [Then, once we arrived in America, you were different: a person who knew that she could start afresh and during those days would even declare it openly].

What is clear from the analysis of our case studies is that children's fantasies about the ideal mother coincide with the patriarchal notion of the self-effacing being, always ready to comfort and put her child first. Such a fantasy often lasts into adulthood as this declaration by Melfi's narrator demonstrates: "my ideal mother would tell me, "Sweet child of mine, don't you worry, with age comes wisdom. Wrinkles are a small price to pay for self empowerment [...]". My real mother says, "You think you are old. Wait till you get to be my age!" (45). Here, however, the daughter's tendency towards abstraction is not due to a disregard for the real mother, quite the opposite. It is part of her desire to publicly acknowledge the importance of the maternal legacy not just for herself as an individual but for society in general. This is why she often tries to persuade her mother that Italy was

a matriarchal society. The fact that the book is written as a dialogue with the mother and the frequent (even if inaccurate) references to matriarchy (83; 141) as a model of society “organized without domination” (Tazi-Preve 73), symbolize the will to establish a mother-daughter relationship based on mutual recognition and shared experience, and to contribute to anti-authoritarian discourses that, as Tazi-Preve points out, “assume the self-determination and independence of women” (73).

### MATRILINEAL HERITAGE: FOOD AS TRANS-MEMORY<sup>8</sup>

Interestingly, in all three case studies, food represents an important vehicle that facilitates the development of such a relationship. Melfi’s book is peppered with recipes that the narrator’s mother is keen to pass to future generations. Initially reluctant to deal with food in her *Little Big Book of Memories*, towards the end the daughter is ready to accept that there is a lot more to food than just its nourishing function: “books offer information, but recipes handed from one generation to another, bring a certain guarantee. (If your mom could do them, so can you)” (332). Furthermore, the book’s concluding paragraph is entirely devoted to the kitchen as a place where miracles take place and there are no family secrets: “you can seek solace in a church or in a man’s embrace, but when you are in the kitchen, your search stops. You don’t need special attention. It has been given to you – your survival assured, your body reaffirmed, reappraised, you can relax and seize the day. What a delight!” (332). What is interesting about this passage is that it seems to confirm Braidotti’s call for new forms of subjectivity based on affectivity and relations, rather than isolation (19; 149).<sup>9</sup> The title of Pariani’s text, *Il piatto dell’angelo*, is also significant in this context. It refers to the tradition of placing an additional plate on the table during family celebrations in honour of those who were absent so that they could be welcomed back into the family, should they unexpectedly come home. As the protagonist of Melfi’s text initially rejected her mother’s recipes, the narrator of Pariani’s novel at first dismissed “il piatto dell’angelo” [the angel’s plate] as a constant reminder of the absence of a loved one, of the wound inflicted by migration that trapped the individual in a culture of mourning. At the end of the book, however, she compares her book to a “piatto dell’angelo”, suddenly aware of the importance of keeping the past alive in our memories, particularly when it comes to the people we loved: “Ieri è oggi, lontano è vicino, epperciò adesso mi chino su di te per un abbraccio. Oggi che la tua voce di tanto in tanto è la mia [.]. Oggi che ho scritto queste pagine per giocare con il tempo, come se preparassi un piatto dell’angelo per te, madre” (137) [Yesterday is today, far away is close by, this is why I lean over you for an embrace. Now that from time to time your voice is mine [...]. Now that I have written these pages to play with time, as if I were preparing an angel’s plate for you, mother]. In *Mia madre è un fiume* food is equally important but, due to the onset of the mental illness, it is the daughter who teaches the mother to cook simple dishes and how to use the produce of their vegetable garden, thus transferring back to the moth-

er the kind of skills and knowledge that she had acquired from her in the first instance: “Comunque le zucchine ti sono rimaste. Cuciniamole ora. Una volta sbucciate le privo dei semi e le taglio a fettina sottili, tu hai già spezzato i pomodori che versiamo sulla cipolla soffritta nell’olio. Mettici il basilico. [...] Dopo lui aggiungerà mezzo peperoncino e una manciata di sale nel suo piatto. Sempre eccessivo” (18) [Anyway, you still have some courgettes. Let’s cook them now. Once I have peeled them I remove the seeds and cut them into thin slices, you have already chopped the tomatoes and we pour them onto the onion which we shallow fried in oil. Put some basil. [...]. He will then add half a chilly and a handful of salt to his plate. Always excessive]. The reference to the father is important as it represents an attempt to re-establish a kind of complicity between mother and daughter which is also confirmed by the use of “cuciniamole” [lets cook them] at the beginning of this passage. The first person plural imperative conveys the daughter’s desire to keep sharing experiences with her mother, despite the progressive deterioration of her mental health.

### CONCLUSION: VOICING THE MOTHER THROUGH STORY TELLING

To conclude, in all three books the process of moving towards a relational model of interaction between mothers and daughter is not an easy one, not only because of the traumatic background of their protagonists, but because of the social conditioning women are exposed to since childhood. What matters, however, is to keep trying, like the narrator of *Mia madre è un fiume* who, at the end of book, having finished telling the story of her mother’s life, is ready to start again: “Vuoi che ti racconti tutto dal principio, adesso. Comincio subito, mi trovo quei per questo. Tu sei Esperina Viola, mia madre. Come una viola sei nata il 25 marzo 1942 [...]” (176) [You want me to tell you everything all over again, now. Of course, this is what I am here for. You are Esperina Viola, my mother. Like a violet you were born on 25 November 1942 [...] All three case studies, to return to Podnieks and O’Reilly’s metaphor, can be described as maternal texts not just in terms of content (they all try to give the mother a voice), but also in the way they are written. They all have a circular structure. and circular time is often associated with matriarchy (Rowland 173). Mary Melfi’s memoir is particularly interesting from this point of view as it is divided into six sections according to the key dates in the holy week: Palm Sunday, Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday, Easter Sunday, plus Easter Monday. According to Christian traditions, Palm Sunday celebrates the last week of Jesus’s life, but, significantly, Melfi’s book does not end with Christ’s resurrection on Easter Sunday. The author, instead, chooses to include Easter Monday, a festival of pagan origin that is not related to the bible. Easter Monday is also known as Renewal Monday, and is often celebrated with Easter egg hunts, with eggs being an ancient symbol of a new life. It could be argued that through the reference to Easter Monday, Melfi is stressing the need to move beyond the Christian tradition that is responsible for a notion of motherhood that keeps women in a subordinate position. It is no coincidence



that whilst the first chapter of the book is entitled “The Voice of God”, the last one is simply called “Biscotti”. The use of the Italian term instead of the English “biscuits” is also significant as it represents the narrator’s homage to her mother’s cooking, and a full acknowledgement of the importance of matrilineal traditions. In an analysis of two novels by the Mexican American author Sandra Cisneros, Rita Bode argues that “Cisneros’s fiction celebrates how daughters move from listening to their mothers’ stories to communicating their stories as narrators of these novels, giving voice to the past and articulating the promises of the future” (Podnieks and O’Reilly 22). The same could be said of Melfi’s book and of our other two case studies. Such stories are vital if we want to move beyond the constraints of patriarchy in our understanding of motherhood and mothering.

### (ENDNOTES)

- 1 Similarly, Samers and Collyer (2016) argue that if on the one hand migrants need to be able to express their ‘original’ identities, on the other, many “also wish to adopt at least some of the cultural, political and social practices of the majority of citizens in the country of immigration” (19).
- 2 Here displacement is to be understood as a condition which “may come to an end when those displaced find a place to settle” but may also result in a more permanent sense of being displaced that “can be maintained over time and be reproduced through generations” (Bakewell 22).
- 3 According to Comellini, the trope of the promised land is particularly strong in the Canadian context and “the imagery of a Canadian Garden of Eden, metaphorically seen as a ‘promised land’, is shared by English and French Canadians” (151). Melfi herself, Comellini points out, repeatedly insists “on the fact that the goal of immigrating to Canada was connected to the idea of moving to ‘the promised land’” (151). The symbolic value of emigration for Italians at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> has also been stressed by Serra who argues that “America represented the idea of liberation from poverty, and a futureless life [...]. There were expectations and illusions that by accumulating and fermenting created the myth” (12).
- 4 According to Sulis, this image captures the “in-between” nature of migration, a condition of displacement that leads to the questioning of any given notion of identity, be it individual or collective (408,) and that, as such, can be seen as symbolic of our human condition (Melfi in Anselmi 19).
- 5 As Sarti points out, “in the early 2000s, [Italy] was the country with the highest percentage of elderly people in the world. Both families and public welfare were facing increasing difficulties in caring for the elderly and many families had (and have) resorted to private carers” (40), usually immigrant women whose status was not always legal.
- 6 Medaglia argues that the entire novel can be seen as Pariani’s homage to her mother and a belated effort to resolve those issues that had prevented them from understanding each other (137).
- 7 In her analysis of *Il piatto dell’angelo*, Crolla uses the metaphor of *vedove bianche* [white widows] and, by extension *figlie bianche* [white daughters] to emphasise the traumatic impact of migration not only on those who left their native land but also on those who, like Giovanna and her baby, stayed behind (465).
- 8 Inspired by Marianne Hirsch’s notion of ‘postmemory,’ the concept of trans-memory was coined by Agnieszka Bedingfield to explain how second-generation migrant authors handle first-hand memories through the process of transference, translation and transcription (Schultermandl 86). Such a process is clearly visible in all three case studies. According to Nyman, “what Bedingfield application of the term makes possible is a focus on the present rather than the past” (106). Bedingfield argues that “Blending of the codifying systems of the home/parents (the old country) and the outside (the new country) is a process of progressive substitution of the parental language by the language of the new continent” (Bedingfield in Nyman 106-107), but without completely erasing the parental language, I would add. Therefore, it is a useful tool to “bridge cultural differences and create new transcultural identities” (Nyman 94).
- 9 The emphasis on the body and the kitchen are also in line with Braidotti’s notion of neo-materialism which according to the philosopher is needed in order to challenge those unproductive nostalgic visions of the past and move towards a post-human ethics as multifaceted relational model that embraces the other. The body here has two main functions: it is a reminder of the finite nature of human beings, and it is a site of resistance. According to Braidotti, the ability to resist is what allows us to move on and avoid annihilation and to transform negative passions into positive ones (112-132). It is no coincidence that Melfi’s passage ends with the positive image of transformative power of food, and the pleasure of being able to relax and seize the day.

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